

THE BAYOU REVIEW

Fall 2025

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THE BAYOU REVIEW

FALL 2025

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For further information visit our website, bayoureview.org.

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The gray paper hummingbirds in this issue are a detail from Christopher Polanco's artwork.

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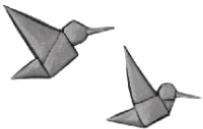
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POETRY / POESÍA



SCAFFOLDING

Aris Kian

Houston, you are the hardest lover to lose
and the hardest to love, still. Even the most weathered

of us have anchored in advance of your harshest
backhand, your wind-whipped September.

On mornings when I crack a window towards
some midnight escape, my neighbors intervene,

crooning ‘bout how good of a homemaker you’ve been.
How I could not begin anew without losing myself:

this scaffold, rusting. What traps me is the illusion
of progress. That a city could make a promise

or keep one. What cage I’ve become, from wanting
to be loved and waiting for it. You taught me my edges:

what rots when I am close enough to be used,
far enough always to be untouched.

AN ELEGY FOR LOT'S WIFE

Aris Kian

I don't blame you / for giving / your last look / to the city
that shaped you / that earth- / splitting sight before you /
became one // You are the only myth I know / banished
to the kind of earth / that clings to the tongue / until the
body curses / itself / into swelling / the same salt / in the
bread / you fed your husband's guests / who then blessed
you / with an open door / in only one direction // You were
asked to shoulder / an impossible ignorance / offered a
closed eye / holding / only the cries / and the sulfur / as
souvenir // You watched / the ruin / despite the promise
/ of farther cities // Reached with your eyes / towards the
rubble / you knew / Returned to it / in a blink / salt pouring
out of you / jagged as a sand dollar / covered in ash //
What did you see / the schoolhouse / your shrines / fire /
flies / the wheatstalk ablaze / as gold as you / the markets /
the melted faces / of men / who would have known / your
daughters / if your husband had / some god-given sway
/ Was your witness / your final act of giving / Were you
shocked by the light / Did anyone reach / for your hand /
before it stoned /

WE WERE WRONG ABOUT PLUTO, TOO

Aris Kian

Back then, I took everything I was handed.
Nearly gave my ring finger for a tea date
off Gulfgate. I was white-hot, ungrounded.
One pinch from pulled. Knocked off
my axis by this thumbtack of a man. He aimed
where it could stick, and I was all cork.
Somehow, he'd be everywhere I went:
that talk, that film. He knew too many things
I didn't and told me so. I believed this,
those days, a gift. He was the first I heard
toss the word organizer around his mouth,
and it landed like hard candy. He cut
his teeth on this kind of thing and wanted
to see the same craters in mine. Shined
what suns he stole from the women he'd orbit,
and by spring, I was blinded. Bought his stock
and held. He soon enough turned his face,
and I caught the side the rays never touched.
I'm talking flipped like a switch, and I stood
at the porch of his moons, mothlike,
waiting for him to show me he's home.
What Barnum & Bailey I threw
from his distance, bug-eyed and starving
for light. Just knew I deserved his winters.
Until the women I loved began to shiver
when they crossed him. When they clawed
his dim and dust off me. These stunted men;
they'll cling to the early claims of their name,
re-wear the shucked off glow of stars, stars

who rule the rooms they stumbled into.
Would you believe I mourned him? Thought
him a planet after all. That godsent grief.
I found myself staggering in all that dark.

MANUAL DE AUTOENGANO

Consuelo Cabrera

Cerré el ciclo con pegamento escolar.

Hice un ritual con velas vencidas y vino en cartón,
porque el cierre emocional es un mito caro,
y confirmé que el pasado arde... pero apesta.

Quemé recuerdos, tosí como fumador en rehabilitación,
y el olvido, muy digno, no se dejó enterrar.

Los amigos brindaron por “mi nueva etapa”,
como si vomitar menos fuera progreso.

Solo cambié de terapia y antidepresivo,
y ahora lloro con mejor dicción.

Avanzar, dicen, es soltar el pasado,
pues solté, pero aún sigo
arrastrando lo que queda del ego
con la dignidad en coma,
y el WiFi como única señal de vida.

LINGUISTICS ALWAYS BETRAYS ME

Jordan Moon

the rain drifts sideways, it's that kind of evening
when the umbrella you brought with you is nothing
more than a broken
wet stick of plastic-covered wood, snapped in three places,
just like your heart: you
confided in her what you claimed was a small fear but it was
actually a big fear
and she paused for a minute
then squeezed your hand tighter and said—no, asked—no, she
told you, “so do you wanna talk about it” and you squeezed back
and managed, “no.”

she and you, you and her, you both linger for a while and drift
in and out of kisses and laughter
all while unsure, you’re unsure, she says she’s “tired” but then
kisses you suddenly again, suddenly you’re wondering; you don’t
want to
be more, do more, expect more;

you don’t want to be more than she wants you to be,
you don’t want to do more than she wants you to do,
you don’t want to expect more than she wants to give

you whisper, “i heard ‘tired’ but then felt this”
and you squeeze and she squeezes
but hesitates, so you hesitate,

it’s all so difficult to decipher, she’s
all engineering and code and rules and solids; you’re just
a pool of intangible arts, softs-and-sweets, too emotional liquid mess

liquid mess, liquid courage, liquid in your hair, liquid
running down your face

—liquid liquid liquid liquid

semantic satiation: saying a word too many times makes it
lose

its meaning: maybe it'll work for your
heart, too.

love, love, love. love.

love.

VOLUME JUNKIE

Immanuel A. Garcia

There are very few places that I enter
where I can't find the light.

I mean the actual source
not so much that silver lining
regeneration of faith thing.

Because when I appear
so does my shadow.
And when I catch wind of
that mountainside silhouette
I shudder a little bit
when thinking of all the space that gets used up.

What square footage does my chest take away
when my breathing becomes true stories?
Are my hands pushing the limits of “at capacity”
by introducing myself to you?
Am I only handsome in an angled refraction
kind of obscure
midnight camouflage sort of way?

I come from a long line of room occupiers.
Volume junkies with so much anxiety
our blood conducts daily marathons
telling us with every machine prick and squeeze
just us how heavy
our hearts are at any given time.

My big-boned childhood taught me one thing
just how fragile of an earthquake I was
dreading the attention I knew could never wash over.

Because there was a loudmouth in elementary school
who didn't like the way my shirts fit
and there was school nurse in middle school
who would pinch at the flower petals of my body
and there was a high school football coach
who would corner me in the locker rooms
point to the field and then his wristwatch
telling me that if not for the love of the game
then for all the loved ones I'd be leaving
behind when I finally kicked the bucket.

I sat in a spiral for a long time
crushed when all I wanted
was to rest my head
on my crushes' lap
look up at them and tell them my plans of binge eating
until I could stomach myself
until the TSA had me on their radar
until the TSA and I could both agree on a future
where I started giving myself direct eye contact
more than just in the reflection of a clean plate.

And yet
I am still luminous.
Maybe wider than the Northern Lights
but a far better conversationalist.
Deeper
than my Grand Canyon thigh gap aspirations.
A walking ton
of fun
who sports an intense desire
to collect as many tidbits of Ireland as I can.

I am a Guinness fanatic
writing poetry on Superbowl Sunday.
I am a warmth tycoon
that'll hold you like hot chocolate
when the world is Everest everlasting on your shoulders.
My voice is a thunderstorm
but by vocal bravado alone
the kind that will keep
the basement dry and the power always up
I am a barricade of beauty boldly breaching
with some of the finest vibes you'll ever see
splitting the threads
of another pair of cargo pants during a game of charades.
Because my commitment to the bit
will always outweigh my affection
for the knife and the fork.

There are very few places that I enter
where I don't wonder if I am living
for the sake of a personal record.
I contemplate whether I live with my body or within it.
Maybe I'm simply chasing the sunlight
and biting at the sharp sandy air through asthmatic heaves

And maybe that's me.
An exhibition of trust falls into self-love.
A deathmatch between invitations and demands to change.
A brushwork dance that accepts
miracles move through me.

Tonight
I'm going home with a doggie bag of leftover apologies.
I'm not sharing with anyone.

TO ZULAIKHA

Jeannine M. Pitas

*Born November 26, 2021, Pittsburgh, PA, to parents who
migrated to the US from Afghanistan as refugees in August 2021*

At two, you run around the hospital
where your mother sits awaiting her appointment.
She wants to work here, I tell the nurses as I
follow you from room to room. Soon
you will be big. You will go to school, something
your mother didn't get to do, something you'd be
forbidden to do had your family not fled.
Soon, you will be interpreting for your mother
at these medical appointments, filing your parents'
tax returns by the time you're twelve. Eldest daughter
of refugees: this is your task. So, stay curious.
Dance and run and shout. In this culture you'll be
told again and again not to talk to strangers, but
I'm here to tell you that 97% of them are all right.
The first time I met you, I was a stranger, but your
father still put you in my arms as we rode the boat
across this city's rivers; he took our picture under
the bridge named for another immigrant's son –
Andrej Warhola, seeker of the sacred amid human
whims. Keep opening drawers in search of hidden
candy. Keep asking more of the world. I'm
tempted to say leave it better than you found it,
but that's not what I have done, and it's not what
my country did to yours. So I just ask you to
love it, and leave it as loved as you can. When
your sister was born you instantly wanted to
lift her. When you see me, you greet me with

a kiss. Your mother doesn't stop you, just smiles, takes a picture. Soon, you will know your origins, hear of the invasion, the twenty-year war, the abrupt abandonment, desperate compatriots clinging to a plane. Please forgive the land you should have been born on, this other land that took your family in only after helping to destroy your home. Let your anger be the handrail you hold for as long as you need, grabbing onto it each time you start to fall. You'll know when it's safe to let go.

NAVIGATING

Jared Taylor

As the sky parts with howling gusts, I love to watch the lakebed under the murky keel. The cracks lace its surface. As fish are rotting and festering through flaccid fennel, I'm smiling. As clouds breeze overhead, and the scent of morning dew weighs on me, I keep smiling. Yet, the bags under my eyes are weighed down by sloshing waves of salt. The salt's bitter. I know the lakebed will dry. I want to believe it won't. I want to believe the beams of sunrise can pierce wispy clouds, and in front of me there will be a shore. And so, I row my boat to shore.

[UNTITLED]

Ankur Jyoti Saikia

and there are frames that hold memories
and there are memories that wrinkle into smiles
and there are smiles that hold back our tears
and there are tears that bury our wounds
and there are wounds that mold our words
and there are words that hold within them worlds
and there are worlds that we carry in frail frames

DECISIONES

Carolina Naya

Sentir la noche en el pecho
los ojos sin fuego
la soledad de la azotea.

Quedarse ahí
en la membrana que encandila
y evita la humedad.

FÍSICA
Carolina Naya

La neblina difusa
invade la atmósfera.

Nos deja a tientas
perdidos.

Excusas para equivocarnos.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Kathi Crawford

I sit on top of our wood-grain
television cabinet.

My dark brown hair is cut
in a short 60s mod style.

I wear the washable wool,
checkerboard, smock dress

my mother made for me; a white,
button-down shirt underneath.

This moment staged by her
on black and white film.

Time stood still.

Here, I believe she loved me.

But can we ever truly know
what's in another person's heart?

This moment contained
in a kaleidoscope of images.

EXTENDED FAMILY

Shane Allison

After my father died, extended family gathered around the death bed with their phones, and began taking pictures of his body. His brother-in-law, the preacher, pushed me into taking one for myself, I deleted it the day after. That's not how I want to remember him. It's not as if I'll forget him lying next to his bed at home in a pool of piss, or getting to the hospital to be told he suffered a stroke, that it was much worse than high blood sugars. I will never forget, the neurologist showing me a scan of the brain bleed, that was much too deep to be operated on, or his coughing from the Glucerna being shuttled to his belly through a feeding tube, or watching nurses take vile after vile of my father's blood for testing, or the unforgettable frown on my mother's face as she stared, hoping he would open his eyes, or the constant visits from his primary care team urging us to have him moved to hospice. Every day in the ICU, every long walk down every long hospital hall, and bedside prayer over my father, feels like a camera phone memory that can never be deleted.

ÁLBUM DE FAMILIA

Ingrid Bringas

Es posible que me haya convertido en lo que no
debería estar en un álbum de familia.

Algo como un sillón roto, jamás
una persona venerable
alguien de humor oscuro
la que desaparece como una ola.

Y a través del tiempo como un álbum viejo
se difumina como lo ha hecho también
mi cuerpo. A ese álbum no
pertenezco. Al de las tristísimas fotos
adornadas con pájaros amantes.

A ese álbum no pertenezco
porque no hay manera
de permanecer como un poema
que se ha borrado.

THE FRUIT BETWEEN US

Rebekkah Nation

My mother and I
faced with the same fruit
I carved into inviting skin,
dug into it. My thumbs
ravaging for a pit.

I buried my teeth inside its flesh
sucked the pulp from its center
wincing at the bite of streaming juices
now well acquainted with the pores of my chin

and the crooks between fingertips
holding firmly, an object
estranged from its whole. My mother
cupped it under warm water
stroked the fuzz of its veil
as she did to my girlish skin
when I was still the size
to sit comfortably in an open sink.

She sculpted from it—its seed
divided it, its essence
intact. She aligned
its pieces across a paper plate

and presented to me a fruit
separated but not estranged,
peel still clinging to pulp,
my mother offered to me her fruit.

Its sister I'd beheaded
mangled
bruised
tore from it its entirety
to soothe a carnal instinct

but still I hungered.

My mother shared with me
her kindly cut fruit
in slices, breathing whole

I took three pieces and felt
full.

HABLA

Alina Lugo

Mi lengua es una extranjera en mi boca.
Estas palabras slip through my hands
like sand from unknown lands.
Me vuelve loca esta condena que me toca.

Cuando hablo se me va la onda
ya nunca más to return.
So, I lament, I yearn.
¿Cuánto tiempo hasta que le responda?

Yet, I must learn that my biggest concern
should be que el silencio cuesta
y los segundos se extienden en años
that get tossed into the pyre to burn.

Contesta, contesta, dale tu respuesta,
que los vocablos sean tus peldaños.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Veronica Tucker

In Yiddish
my grandmother's lullaby
was a cradle of vowels.
In English
it became a warning
to shut the windows tight,
to keep illness from seeping in
with the night air.
I sing it anyway,
knowing the melody
holds both meanings,
that words live longer
when they do not agree.
Even silence needs
two tongues.

RIVER MOUTH

Veronica Tucker

The current gathers voices
in the pull of silt and salt,
fish weaving silver alphabets
through the dark.

I kneel by the bank,
my hands entering the water
as if the river might
speak back.

Instead, it carries off
the names I whispered,
braiding them into a tide
no map remembers.

UN JARDÍN QUE PERDIMOS

Teresa Korondi

*No repararíamos en una flor tan pequeña —
salvo porque en silencio trae
el pequeño jardín que perdimos*

—Emily Dickinson (traducción: Eva Gallud)

1

¡Como si fuese un regocijo aborigen
aquej troncal de plumas!

Si hay un árbol
que cree en los ancestros
y planta su pie
para que crezca desde el suelo
¿por qué no hemos de creer

en esa corona de follaje
que está adherida a la planicie?
Parece colocada ahí
como un olvido pronto para el recuerdo
o mejor dicho la memoria

Es vital
—para creer—
esa avenida humana
que despeja el tiempo antiguo
donde cada país es un trazo a mano alzada
con trinos

de miel y engarces
Un reino de butiá tal vez

propio de algún pájaro roble
que mañana será herencia
de una manera de hierbas

Entonces
un insecto tornasol
frenará la mirada detenida en el aire
en esta tierra de gigantes
para respirar
con la memoria de los árboles

2

Igual lugar que era ausencia

El mismo perro
mismísimo del tiempo
en el ladrido del parque

En las copas de los árboles
las criaturas de igual aire

Los árboles
siempre altos venerables
con su brisa espontánea en los ojos puestos

Otro espacio vegetal atravesado
por la maternidad de la tierra
un poco húmeda
plañidera de cielos

De nidos caídos entre ramas
esplenden espejos confusos

El poema parece también el mismo
Lánguido vibrante en el pulmón

Erguido y vigilante
espera su momento de volver sobre el vacío
toda su mismidad

El poema sabe cada paso que ejercita el cuerpo
cada nota de zumbido
cada quien
en la estrofa de lugares de ardor y hojas vencidas
Confunden la estación también las plantas
Crean que es otoño a falta de agua

3

Cuando escribo el dolor en el brazo
como diente de león que tritura el músculo
el dolor va hacia la pierna atravesada
por el remo que cruza el río inventado
Después llega al filo de la almohada
al dormir con el calor y el miedo

Cuando escribo el dolor el universo
mancha
despluma las flores
arranca sus versos inanimados
i-ma-ni-nados
ida-mi-nanos

Toca las letras
agrede la campana de este edén

Luego aplaude lo salvaje del dolor
de una tierra menguante
donde duermen semillas
y abono de muertos

Destruye lo conocido
rearma el mundo vivo

4

*Ahora, más suave, brisa.
Casi entiendo lo que dicen los árboles.*

Pero un poco, apenas.

—Lázaro Álvarez

Cada piedra en su lugar
todo despejado una vez más
Disparos al aire
mientras miro hacia los pájaros
rodado cuadro a cuadro donde giro
y la cámara se enlentece
como el sonido seco del sicomoro y el chopo
que dialogan su lenguaje

También se despejan y deshojan
de la página donde planto
mi propio cuerpo
al acecho del viento cenizo
o de la tierra

En la sala de estar esperan

Espatifilo Maranta Kalanchoe
inundan de pasión la mirada amante
techo que se abre
al resto del día gran inhalación

También en el lobby
un bambú bambolea su cintura
lado a lado

La vida de las plantas,
paso a paso el camino,
la misma atmósfera secreta.

SUNDAY WALK IN NEWRY

Stan Galloway

rain that says something nobody else says

—Frank McGuinness

Empty streets, closed shops
silent but for the rain
lightly keyboarding on puddles
speaking lost words
untranslated but true
telling the sparrows
where hawks roost
piercing the wind's bluster
with cotton pills
glazing windows
like doughnuts
with the sweetness of acceptance
acknowledging the rightness
of humans walking in the hush
deaf and illiterate to the raindrop's
(sub)text.

KRAMATORSK ELEGY

Stan Galloway

For Victoria Amelina

Over pizza along a busy street
you laughed and planned a future
hearing the whistle and slam of
words shooting from the tongues

 lips

 teeth

of poets protesting assault
jumbled into

 p

 u

 b

personal
anatomies

 c

GALVESTON

Lakshmi Sunder

A year ago, I was just a child. So afraid of

jellyfish, so in love with that sea.

My best friend plunged into Galveston waters

and in the worst recesses of my mind

I thanked the Lord it didn't get me.

Promised to piss

in a cup for her if she so wished,
to fight the acid with acid, an old wives' tale of flushing out a jellyfish sting
with urine. A myth, it turns out.

In this beach town,

us girls were children
of texture. Our skin
stippled with sand,

somewhat getting into the places of
our bodies we were not usually allowed to talk about—

texture, too, in the sun kneading
its light into us, petaling back
the pink flush of our cheeks.

This year, Texas law has sunburnt the ozone,
and there is sand in places sand should not be. Jellyfish, too—
they wreath beaches, they writhe in the belly
of the gulf,
stinging more little girls than ever.

Inside my belly now, something jellyfish is swimming.
I feel:
the liquid lining its body, the skin that gives easily, that primordial
pulsing.

I piss in a cup now for myself, dipping in the plastic wand, and pray
to the Lord that two little lines won't make me cross
entire states this summer,
make me abandon this sea.

LISTEN, UVALDE

Andrea Rosales

Madres rushed on bare feet
to their children. They tried
to enter broken buildings;
scattered with ashened
faces.

Padres no longer recognized
their bodies stained
red that once surged in
their veins when they
played.

La familia prayed to breathe
their breaths into their chests. No
response from their children
because no one chose to hear
them.

Los hijos' cries for help were blocked
by fear. Adults exchange children's
pleas for rescue for one more
day of routine and being in
school.

Los hermanos hurried to pick up
their hermanito or hermanita only
to find that they picked up
air.

CARBON

Titan Lightfoot Carrillo

black is the color of the dark of the night of the truth that eludes and yet still remains then what does that make the wild black dog the stray black cat the deadly widow spider and the oil-slick scorpion the city built on peaches and railroads the square the stones the diamonds dyed red the death that swept through nations the rice the beans the rubber the asphalt and the vast unknown ocean what becomes of all the shades we cannot see but know exist if black is the color of the dark of the night



TRANSLATION / TRADUCCIÓN



DISCURSO III

Úrsula Starke

Deja que las moscas entren deja que coman mis demonios
deja que las moscas sacudan su polvo infecto deja que
las moscas naveguen y se derritan en un esplendor de
espíritus que esta pieza ya está llena de espíritus deja que
las moscas entren el desafío es posarse en mi mierda y
salir mariposas azules brillantes eternas como todo lo que
tengo en esta cosa lo llaman corazón yo lo llamo cosa no
importa sigue siendo el mismo vacío perpetuo deja que
las moscas bailen con mi sombría y se apesten de la peste
de mi sombría deja hombre que las moscas mueran antes
que yo yo quiero velarlas y tú me traes flores después.
Blancas.

DISCOURSE III

Úrsula Starke

Translated by J. L. Kercheval and J. M. Pitas

Let the flies come in let them eat my demons let the flies
shake their infected dust let the flies navigate and melt in
the splendor of spirits this room is already full of spirits
let the flies come in the challenge is to land in my shit
and emerge as eternally gleaming blue butterflies like all
that I hold in this thing they call a heart I call it a thing it
doesn't matter it keeps on being the same perpetual void
let the flies dance with my dismal gloom and stink from
the stench of my gloom please let these flies die before
me I want to mourn them and you can bring me flowers
later. White ones.

حتى لا ننام

Souad Zakarani

أخاف أن أغمض عيني
يا أماه ،
رموشك تطرح سؤالاً بعد سؤال
في عينك حديث لا ينتهي قوله
تنثاءب الكلمات في فمي
فقد سكنت فيه بما يكفي
انطلقني أيتها الأنفاس
أخرجني مني
ربما أستطيع التنفس
بسجِّدٍ متحررٍ من الأكفان
هل لنا أن نرتّب البيت مرةً أخرى
قبل أن ننزع؟
هل لنا أن نصوّره للذكرى
و نخزن كلَّ ضحكاتنا، بكاننا، و صراخنا
ثم ننزع؟
أيتها البحر المترافق أمامنا
كعناق خجول
في عالم ليس لنا
هل لك أن ترسل صدانا إلى المحيطات المجاورة
على حوتاً عملاقاً يضرّب قاعدة المحتل؟
هل لنا أن نبتدعُ أبجدية جديدة
للخوف والألم و البيت
حتى يصل العالم ذلك
الصوت الرمادي المستمر فوقنا
طيران طنان ،
هدير الصواريخ
فوق الأخضر، فوق الدمار
فوق شاهد قبر
مكتوب بفحم بيت محترق.
ألف مرة ترتشف العيون من السماء

SO WE DON'T SLEEP

Souad Zakarani

I'm afraid to close my eyes,
O mother,
your eyelashes raise one question after another.
There's a story in your eyes—speak it.
Words yawn on my tongue,
they've lived there long enough.
Arise, O rubble,
come out of me!
Perhaps I could breathe,
with a body freed from shrouds.
Can we tidy the house one last time
before we're displaced?
Can we photograph it for memory—
store our laughter, our tears, our screams—
then leave?
O sea, stacked before us
like a shy embrace
in a world not ours.
Can you send our echo to nearby oceans
so a giant whale strikes the occupier's base?
Can we invent a new alphabet
for fear, for pain, for home,
so the world hears
that gray, continuous sound above us—
buzzing planes,
roaring rockets
above green, above ruin,
above a gravestone
scrawled in charcoal on a burnt house,
A thousand times, the eyes sip from the sky

و نحن نبحث عن دفى
يحتويانا ، بهدوء أريد أن أنام
تحت شرفه بيتنا
حيث يدغدغني نسيم النجوم.
أريد... أن أغفو.
حلمت بأنّ قائدًا ما يتحدث، ويقول
هل تسمعيه يا أمي؟
أراكم تقرحون بإطعام العصافير.
و تضحكون أثناء اللعب في أرجوحة الجنة ،
تشع اللوان قزحية في نوم ملوّن
كزجاجة ترتج، فتختلط الأحلام
يا أمي، أقسم أنني رأيت
يحمل كفناً واحداً في غزة
أجساد ثلاثة شهداء.
أصبحت جسداً منهاكاً
متقلأً بين بالجراح.
أريد أن أسمع نبض الشمس
أو نبض القلب... تلك الإسفنجية
التي أصبحت قاسية،
هكذا نمشي نحن على ريش،
حتى نصل إلى قمة التعب
وضح النهار ونقول:
سوف نحيا هنا .

while we search for warmth
to gently carry us to sleep
under our balcony,
a seamless sleep that tickles the stars.
I want... to sleep.
I dreamed of some leader speaking—
do you hear, mother?
I see you laughing, feeding the birds.
I see you playing on the swing of paradise,
iridescent colors glowing in a rainbow slumber,
like a bottle shaken—dreams all mixed inside.
O mother, I swear I saw it:
One shroud in Gaza holding
the bodies of three martyrs.
I became a worn, wounded body
groaning with pain.
I want to hear the heartbeat of the sun—
or the heart itself... that sponge
which has grown hard.
That's how we walk—on feathers—
until we reach the peak of exhaustion
in full daylight and say:
We shall live here.

TRADUCIR UN POEMA

Xel-Ha López

I

Traducir un poema.

Hay un poema que quisiera traducir pero no puedo. En su lugar hago otro. El poema es sobre el ruido de los pájaros y el ruido de las lenguas, los acentos floridos de un momento feliz como cualquiera. Es domingo y la gente se ama donde puede. El poema habla también de los parques, pero no en todos lados existen estas cosas. Imposible traducir y no perderlo.

Hay quien tiene mucho tiempo libre para conocer los nombres de los pájaros que nombra, hay quien tiene mucho tiempo libre para entender la belleza del lenguaje. Mañana otra vez camino a casa se me ocurra quizás alguna idea.

Lo leo y lloro por esta encrucijada: el parque es un autobús blanco donde también cantan.

II

Existe también otro poema intraducible.

Un niño aprende a hablar por la grieta de un diente perdido. Silva sin quererlo como un ave. Los sonidos de las palabras son nuevos. Una ventana otra vez se cerrará algún día. Por ahora está bien recordar que no siempre tuvimos las palabras.

TO TRANSLATE A POEM

Xel-Ha López

I

To translate a poem.

There's a poem I'd like to translate, but I can't. Instead, I write another. The poem is about the sound of birds and the sound of tongues, the flowery accents of a moment as happy as any other. It's Sunday and people love each other wherever they can. The poem also speaks of parks—but such things don't exist everywhere. Impossible to translate it without losing it.

Some people have plenty of free time to learn the names of the birds they name, some people have plenty of free time to understand the beauty of language. Tomorrow, on my way home, perhaps an idea will come to me.

I read in tears at this crossroad: This park is a white bus where they sing as well.

II

There is another poem, also untranslatable.

A child learns to speak through the crack of a lost tooth. He whistles unwillingly like a bird. The sounds of the words are new. A window will close again. But for now, it seems good to remember that we didn't always have words.

III

Es el tren que atraviesa las ciudades.

La gente hace gestos o apunta con sus ojos, pero no saben que ninguna flecha es silenciosa. Yo sé que hay algo en el llanto de los niños que incomoda. Yo sé que hay algo en el grito de las madres que incomoda. Yo sé que hay algo en la ausencia de los padres que incomoda. La mitad del tren está cansada o va escuchando en sus auriculares una lista de canciones favoritas. Los niños son blancos y rojos por el llanto, una mujer negra dobla un ticket del mercado.

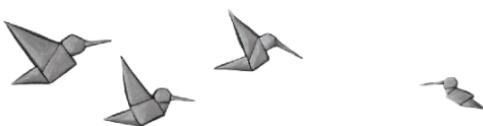
La vida pasa más rápido que las estaciones. La mujer se levanta y dispone, sobre la carriola, frente a la cara de ambos niños, dos barcos. Las aguas se calman. El pitido de la puerta anuncia que la siguiente estación no está tan lejos.

III

It's the train that crosses the cities.

People gesture or point with their eyes, but they don't know that no arrow is silent. I know there's something in the whining of children that's annoying. I know there's something in the yelling of mothers that's annoying. I know there's something in the absence of fathers that's annoying. Half the train is tired or listening to a playlist of favorite songs on their headphones. The children are white and red from crying, a Black woman folds a grocery store receipt.

Life moves faster than the stations. The woman stands and places two boats in front of both children in the stroller. The waters calm down. The door's beep announces that the next station is not far.



VISUAL ART /
ARTE VISUAL



House in Napier | Rachel Turney



Grasshopper's View | Belinda Subraman



Wild Things | Belinda Subraman



Look Closer | Clarissa Cervantes



Alert | Clarissa Cervantes



Where Did My Dreams Go? | Christopher Polanco



The Dreamer's Path | Christopher Polanco



Dare to Dream | Christopher Polanco

Where Did My Dreams Go? shows a little girl reaching for birds she can't quite touch. That feeling of your dreams being so close, yet still just out of reach.

The Dreamer's Path portrays the hopeful and determined journey of chasing your aspirations. This painting is the active pursuit of finding the dreams that were questioned in the first piece.

Dare to Dream is the culmination of the entire journey—from longing to pursuit to liberation. It's a celebration of trusting in your own dreams and the freedom you find when you believe they can lift you higher than you ever imagined.



Deep | *Clarissa Cervantes*



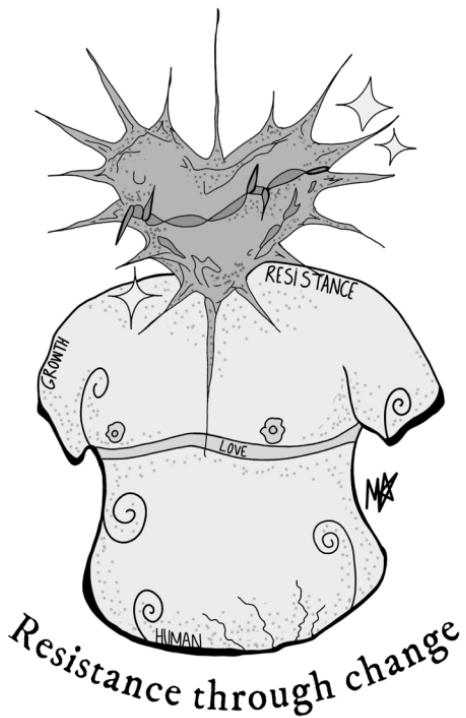
South for the Winter | Abraham Leija



Flora | *Tex Reyes*



[untitled] | *Melissa Irish*



Resistance Through Change | Mateo Aragon Hernandez



Quiet Evening with Bluebonnets | *Denise Prater*



CREATIVE NONFICTION /

NOFICCIÓN

HOW TO BECOME A PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR IN SEVENTEEN EASY STEPS

Rachel Stout

You may believe that becoming a Principal Investigator for a grant is an arduous process that involves many years of devoted in-depth study, long hours, possible crushing debt, an intense application process, pressure from your university employer to produce funding, and management of a feckless group of students, but I'm here to tell you it's possible to become a PI without any of those things, simply by following the easy steps below:

1. Neglect your education. Earn an associate's degree and then stop. If possible, arrange to start a new job during a sub-prime mortgage crisis, making the idea of taking on student debt an especially unattractive prospect. Be intimidated by the college transfer process and put it off. You can deal with that later. Believe that part time work does not allow you to have enough additional time to take classes.
2. Be taken in by a terrible boss because she treats you nicely sometimes, like making you full time. Do not question her treatment of other employees. Think that being regularly yelled at is simply the way that employment is, despite it not being how you were treated as a part-timer. Don't be concerned about the 400% turnover rate.
3. Become trapped by your lack of education. Discover that there is no place that you can go that will pay the bills and allow you to stay in your field. I hope you paid careful attention to step 1, because it really pays

off here in step 3. Otherwise, you may be tempted to leverage your education to leave for a less toxic work environment, like many of your coworkers. This is not conducive to becoming a principal investigator.

4. Successfully implement what are, in retrospect, several insane projects* on impossible timelines. (It will later turn out that you have received very little official credit for these, although you are widely known to be the person that knows things in your department.) At least one project should expand to fill all available time, limiting the resources left for your department's core functions. Allot ample time for breakdowns in either your car or your boss's office during the implementation of these projects.

*Such as a ~~five~~—~~twelve~~ sixteen summer camps.

5. Become your boss's target. Get in trouble on a repeating three-month cycle. ("Like clockwork," according to one coworker.) Begin to suspect your boss is setting you up to be written up six months out of every year. Join the union.
6. Despair of ever being able to leave. Wonder if you've been deliberately trapped. Ideally the above steps should take approximately ten years to complete. Additionally, at this point, you should strongly relate to ads on podcasts in which the characters express how they could "really go for a knee surgery about now." Work yet another 50-hour workweek.
7. Be only vaguely aware that there is a grant application being put together by your team. However, during this critical step, it is vital that the grant be in an area that you are knowledgeable in (despite the fact that your input was not requested for the proposal), and that it

be offered by an organization that calls every grant program manager a principal investigator, regardless of the type of grant. If any letters are placed before you declaring your support for your boss to become the principal investigator, ensure to sign them. Someone may remind your boss that you have expertise in the area of the grant, and if you are asked to become a co-investigator, you should sign that letter too.

8. Ideally at this point, your boss will have arranged to be temporarily assigned to a special project not located at your office, leaving your team in the care of another manager who does not have the time or the inclination to micromanage or yell at staff. If this new boss is also puzzled as to why you and a coworker have active write-ups, so much the better. (Although this step may be considered optional, its execution does make the subsequent steps easier.)
9. Realize that your new temporary boss has much more reasonable expectations about what work it is possible to do in a given amount of time. Breathe a sigh of relief and come up with a lot of cool ideas for improving the department with your coworkers. Attempt to develop psychic powers allowing you to get your coworker to stop expounding on them in the meeting where it is announced you're getting your old boss back.
10. Burst into tears in front of your union rep at the idea of working for your old boss again.
11. Write a 1200-word complaint letter to your boss's boss during your lunch hour. Remind him that your team is responsible for performance on no less than four grants, and it'll be a little hard for that to happen if you've all quit. Convince most of the team to sign it. Email it to him at 8 PM on a Friday. Ignore messages from your

old boss at 7 AM Saturday morning trying to figure out what the heck is going on. Enjoy your Saturday.

12. Spend all day Monday putting together the binder of evidence you promised your boss's boss in the Friday email. Spend Tuesday morning stressing out. Spend Tuesday afternoon in a meeting with your boss's boss and refer to the binder of documentation liberally. Spend several hours being interviewed by the Office of the Inspector General. Notice the binder you made now sitting on her desk.
13. Nearly forget about grant paperwork until your department grants manager mentions that making edits to federal grants is a complicated process and she needs your resume. Question whether any grantor will want someone as their PI that only has an associate's degree. Be assured that your continuing work and interest in the subject of the grant makes you a perfect fit, and that you really should have been the PI all along and that it'll be an excellent opportunity.
14. Consider the possibilities of this unexpected development as a result of your complaint letter. Listen to your coworker rejoice as your old boss's name is stripped from the federal grant paperwork and she is indefinitely suspended.
15. Get a new, better boss.
16. Be subpoenaed to testify against your old boss.
17. Become the Principal Investigator.

Title taken from *How to Make a Peanut Butter Sandwich in 17 Easy Steps* by Bambi Edlund.

THE QUIET INHERITANCE

Aiyana McRae

My neck is growing tired as I lie across the counter, head in the sink. I'm trying not to move too much, despite the stinging evidence of submission to my itchy scalp before perm day. I don't want my mom to crucify me for getting water on the floor or the white chemical substance known as "creamy crack" in my eye, so I'm as stiff as a board. Perms got that nickname because Black people have become addicted to it, like crack in the '80s. I've been getting these since the 3rd grade, and I'm 10 now, so I think I can handle a little pain. Besides, everything should scab up within a few days.

I can tell that I'm about finished as the overwhelming odor of egg and science experiment is rinsed away and replaced with the familiar aroma of clarifying shampoo and Olive Oil brand conditioner. I can see the bottle with my eyes closed: green lid and label with a yellow, goopy substance inside that would keep the crack from snapping my hair off. Mom lifts me up and wraps the towel around my head, after admiring her work, of course.

Mom says I was overdue this time. Says she'd wanted to wait "as long as possible" before this relaxer so that I don't have too much new-growth by the time Easter comes around. I was ready, though. I was itching for my beauty fix. The ponytails and buns were getting old. I always love to wear my hair out because it's long. Having hair down your back is practically a badge of honor for a little Black girl, especially dark-skinned ones like me. We have an unspoken advantage over other girls our color. The boys we like might not tease us at recess. Some might actually admit that we're pretty, instead of questioning our whereabouts when the teacher turns the lights off on

movie day. My hair is my special thing, so I love that my mom takes such good care of it. She moisturizes and styles my straight, stringy tresses, as she applies the Pink hair lotion. “Your hair is so pretty,” she says, knowing that I get it from her. I love my mother.

#

Summer has ended, but it’s still hot and humid in Houston, so there’s no point in taking a flatiron to my head any time soon. Any of the natural girls will tell you that winter is “silk press season,” anyway, so I’ll wait for the days when the sun sets sooner to hear the glorious sizzle of a straightener temporarily take my curls away. I was with my dad in Georgia all summer, so no one has seen me since two inches and three hair colors ago. It’s so healthy and has been growing at speed since the most liberating and gratifying moment of my teenage years: my big chop. My French teacher, Mme. Stell, attempts to compliment me on the burgeoning of my mane. “J’adore tes cheveux,” she says, “but you need to leave it alone. If I had your hair, I –”

“So?” I retort with an almost polite smile. No teeth. I’ve never been a fan of unsolicited advice or shoulda-coulda-wouldas. For some reason, the people with short or thin hair have this unrelenting fear that they will die if one of the long-locked ladies whom they have designated as representatives of the Black race cuts her hair or does anything to compromise the health of it. If your hair is not long, you still can’t cut it because, one day, you just might wake up and give Rapunzel a run for her money. It’s so odd. No cutting, no bleaching, no dyeing. We use microfiber towels and cotton t-shirts to dry our hair to avoid ripping one strand from its respective follicle. We wear satin scarves under our satin bonnets, and we shan’t forget our satin pillowcases for added protection. It’s like

we've got something to prove. The world must know that our hair does grow. The strangest part is that I don't think anyone cares but us. I kinda care. I mean, I watched YouTube videos on how to properly maintain colored natural hair all summer at my dad's. I won't be shamed out of treating my hair like my mood ring, but I figure the least that I could do is nourish it. There wasn't much else to do that summer but stare my sisters in the face, anyway. That monotony makes me all the more relieved to be back at school.

I make my way to second period and secure a seat in front of my best friend. We're jazzed to have a class together! She has fresh box braids, and her parts are faultless. She's like me. We seldom let others touch our hair since we've become old enough to be trusted with it ourselves, so I know that the moon had to have beat her to bed this morning. Her meticulousness is one of the attributes that I admire most. She reaches through my forest of green curls to massage my scalp while her long, acrylic nails clack against each other. I can smell the Prada Candy on her wrists. That's her signature. "Your hair is so healthy," she says. I grin a little.

#

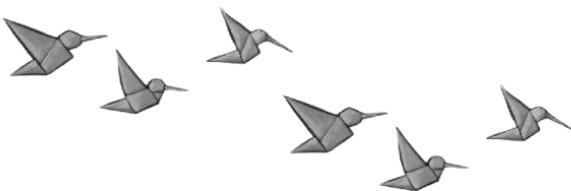
I walk into my mom's home office with my thick, dark afro cradled in my arms. My hands are still warm and buzzing from holding the clippers for what felt like hours, but I know that it couldn't have been because the sun is still peering at me through the blinds. I'm standing silently, fighting off nervous laughter like I never have before as I wait for my mom to feel my eyes on the back of her neck. She finally spins her chair around, mouth agape, and we nearly die of laughter.

This is my most impulsive decision to date. Before her virtual meeting, I was out back doing breaststrokes, so I know that she did not expect to behold a baldheaded daughter immediately after. I didn't feel like dealing with my hair once I got out of the pool, so here I am with pounds of Black-woman's-gold resting on my flexors. Maybe the monotony of quarantine is changing me, or perhaps I just don't care so much about hair that I know grows back every time. It feels somewhat like a game to me, just making decisions about my hair that I was not even allowed to comb for myself, once upon a time. She motions for me to come closer, moving her hand back and forth in front of her face as if she's in church on a hot day with no A/C and no church fan in sight, the corners of her mouth nearly hugging her ears.

One time, my little sister was sitting at the kitchen table after church. I think it was Easter. She was about 3 years old and not quite old enough for a perm, and by "old enough," I mean her hair was not strong enough yet to survive the creamy crack. Her hair could withstand a hot comb, though, so she got to show off her length a little on that Sunday. No one could hear the gentle snip of those cursed safety scissors, as my sister sat silently and cut all of her long pony tails off, but once we saw her hair, barely extending beyond her array of colorful ballies, we knew what she had done. My mom screamed a shrill, horrific, dramatic scream when she saw my sister's hair on the floor, 4 whole feet away from her head. My sister was in trouble, and I don't know if she'd even understood why. Even now, I'm not quite certain that I understand, either. I don't wish to recreate that moment, but I have to know what she thinks because the shocked laughter has dwindled down to nothing, and the silence is entirely too loud right now. As she pokes at my scalp, I watch tiny pieces of hair fall from my shirt to the floor. "So?" I say, crossing my fingers that she doesn't reprimand me for this

impromptu hair decision. She reaches for her phone and then looks at me. “You look so pretty,” she says. “Now back up. Let me take your picture.”

FICTION / FICCIÓN



POSTCARDS FROM VIETNAM

Tejaswinee Roychowdhury

Saigon was about to fall, Calcutta had begun to move on, and the latter's rallying cry was lost in Ma's prepubescent translation.

Uttam stared at the crude scribble from years ago. He ripped the page off his diary of incomplete ideas, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it across the room, before getting off his study chair with an aggression that knocked it down. He stood still for a solid five minutes, looking at the helpless chair lying on the ground until he felt a sudden pang of hunger. It was as if all the meals he had skipped in the last few weeks since Ma died demanded acknowledgement all at once.

The refrigerator was empty. Uttam slammed its door shut, grabbed his keys, and a pack of his trusty Wills Classic. Americanah would be open this time of night despite the humidity and the impending monsoon's romantic facade, beneath which lay Kolkata's water-logged streets and convoluted traffic jams. Especially as India's boys had been battling it out on a cricket pitch on the other side of the world, which had half the city caught in a frenzy littered with gully expertise and otherwise dormant patriotism. He stepped into the street and lit up a cigarette.

Memories tumbled around inside Uttam's sleepless, nicotined head as he sat in the corner booth and chowed down on a particularly greasy burger, washing it down with a giant glass of coke. His school records had a Paritosh Ray down as his father. But there was never a photograph of him in the house he and Ma shared with his maternal grandparents, much less any mention of the man. When he did get curious, as any kid would watching

other kids being cycled around and dropped off at school by their fathers, Ma never gave him a straight answer.

“He has gone to Vietnam.”

“Why?”

“He loves Vietnam.”

“Doesn’t he love us?”

“He loves us every day.”

“When will he return?”

“Amar naam, tomar naam, Vietnam. Romantic, isn’t it?”

My name and your name is Vietnam.

Once after school hours, Uttam plucked the courage and walked up to Acharya Sir unlocking his bicycle from the stand, because though only his 6th grade math teacher, Acharya Sir was fabled to know everything. The ever-present horde of boys around him lent credence to it.

Uttam discovered Acharya Sir was an animated storyteller. He learnt all about Vietnam, which Acharya Sir said was “only the tip of the iceberg.” They walked side-by-side till that big gulmohar tree where the roads diverted to take them to their homes. The next day he would gift Uttam beautifully bound Bengali translations of *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, and soon, Acharya Sir’s house full of books would become Uttam’s sanctum.

Unlike Acharya Sir, he could never embrace the communist philosophy entirely, and after about three steady years of its overconsumption, Uttam, unbeknownst to Ma,

began telling Acharya Sir that she needed him to come home straight from school and focus on the 10th board exams the next year. Acharya Sir smiled lightly under his moustache every time and never objected. Uttam visited him once after the 12th board results with a small box of jolbhora sandesh from Putiram Sweets, thanked him, sought his blessings, and quickly left.

As a clinical psychology student, Uttam would quietly decide that his political inclinations were a mere manifestation of a deep-seated desire to know his father and the man's mysterious affair with Vietnam. He would also decide that Ma had birthed him out of wedlock. Everything from his childhood was textbook shame. Besides, he had long made peace with his family skirting around any mention of his father and never getting to know his father's folks.

Then, Ma died in her sleep.

For as long as Uttam remembered, she liked to sleep after lunch and only Malati mashi¹, now limping and in her 70s, knew how to prepare the bori with palong shaak without which Ma's everyday rice, masoor daal, and charaponar jhol would remain incomplete. Mary di, her nurse of two years since the dementia diagnosis, found her still warm and made the call to Uttam who immediately rushed over from his hospital rounds.

As is ritualistic after Death's departure, the house swarmed with people for a few days. Uttam took the frail Malati mashi back to her village with a promise to transfer her stipend every month until she died. Her son

¹ Malati mashi works as a live-in maid known as a "whole-timer" in India, doing light household work for Uttam's family.

and his wife weren't thrilled with her return but beamed once they heard the money would keep coming. Uttam wondered on his drive back if he had made a mistake, but he knew that he could not handle the responsibility of the ailing woman. He took advantage of the new quiet to scavenge around like a little pup lost deep in grief but familiar with it.

Earlier in the day, Uttam walked into Ma's room again.

This time he picked up her favourite jewellery box carrying roses carved into the wood and smiled a little because a sharp slap did not flick his wrist away. He had imagined Ma's belongings would one day pass down to his wife, but that flame died when Amrita met him at Bolai da's tea stall and curtly ended it without a sip of tea. He looked for something to feel but found nothing other than a string of women willing to knead themselves into his flesh. So, there was no wife, and Uttam stared at Ma's old jewellery, all metal and stones, unsure what they were individually called, until he realised a tiny bit of old paper from under the red velvet bottom was staring back at him.

Hidden compartments in furniture were no longer a detective fiction trope as matted-out colourful visuals identifying Hanoi, Ha Long Bay, and Saigon climbed out of the jewellery box lining and arranged themselves on the triangular geometries of Ma's cornflower blue bedspread. The yellowed backs of the postcards carried unfamiliar Bengali handwriting—elegant in fading brown ink. *Amar naam, tomar naam, Vietnam.* And dates. No stamps or signatures or even a sender's name.

It was easier to think Ma had repurposed a political slogan into a declaration of love because she was ashamed of her truth, or unaware of its origins, or both. Comforting,

even. But Acharya Sir used to talk about men who were gunned down, men who went missing, and men who went into hiding to escape political persecution, their families dedicated to keeping them hidden no matter the social cost. *Naxals*. The final postcard was dated sometime in the late nineties.

Uttam stepped out of Americanah, his stomach full and empty. He didn't know how to frame everything in his mind; fatigue rose from his gut and spread through his bones.

Back home, he fell into a deep sleep for the first time since Ma's death.

MOSAIC CORPSES

Sandi Johnson

The flowery periwinkle curtains in Ma's bedroom remained the liveliest fossils within the room. Not the circle of mosaic crucifixes hanging like a halo above her bed. Not the knotted, dehydrated leaves unreturned from a few Palm Sundays prior. Not the mopey gray sunrise uncovering a picture of her mom we printed for the funeral, sitting on the nightstand. Not the grieving clutter of Knights of Columbus funeral bulletins. Surely not Ma's malnourished body, barely roused by daybreak. Yet, the purplish periwinkle of the curtains relentlessly smiled in flowery blossoms.

Restlessness, urine, and menthol rubbing alcohol cloaked her bedroom as though its past life were an embalming room. Blankets of gibberish yanked and tugged her mind, cursing and swirling her into berserk conversations all night while her mom's picture vouched just out of her view. With only a shallow trace of punctures on the gray walls, photographs of grandkids had long been unhitched because they solicited her to chatters instead of sleep. For now, they remained buried under her bed in narrow plastic containers along with leftover crafting supplies.

Above, on the nightstand, flat water hung in a glass with clutches of coconut oil fingerprints around its neck, faintly chilled from a mocking frigidity. Yet as stoic as the room seemed, the periwinkle curtains fragranced vitality like bloated plants after a storm. Slightly pink petals crested by woven red linings gave kisses of endearment to my worrisome hands as they tore apart the curtains each morning. Strands of silk cotton rubbed between my fingertips to ease my trepidation. What if today was the day Ma didn't wake up?

That burden was never unclothed from my shoulders. I was her caregiver, daughter, and mom on bad days. Ma's six younger siblings from her mom's second marriage and their thirty-something kids, her own nine cousins and all their own kids, too, had abandoned her to my solitary care after her diagnosis. Discolored like mold over stained glass, their lack of repayment, gratitude, or grace for years of sacrifice and salvation during their schooling years, marriages, parenthoods, divorces, and bankruptcies smudged my leniency in our lives. Gradually, phone chats of weekly greetings plunged into brief calls for birthdays and Christmases. Lively calls soon became monotonous to sustain as her speech looped. In no time, she was weaned from their lives because not even a ghost of theirs remained in hers. Dementia gifted the same threadbare recollections. And when a nonchalant call squeezed through, I assured with promising agreements to deliver their fawning, but like black dirt, they rashly fell aside from Ma's mind.

Ma and I couldn't be bothered, and our etiolated life wouldn't have been swayed either way. Similarly, I too, was deserted by a childless, six-year marriage and three siblings who retreated to other states, lives, families, and responsibilities. And when the State of Texas favored a three-piece suit with a polyester tie and fancy lawyer over a frumpy housedress and hand-me-down knit sweater, Ma and I busied ourselves with sustaining her life. Birthdays and holidays settled into any other day of grooming, feeding, and strolling routines.

On good days, we crafted mosaic crucifixes with rubber molds she had bought years ago from a German vendor at a Winter festival. That day, her memory wasn't wilted, so she celebrated the start of a new hobby with those purchases. Over the years, she pressed cheeky clays

into the rubber molds to plaster on the entry walls of her home. During a molding session, when my own faith faded as sinisterly as her mind, Ma's faith was still robust throughout, and the crucifixes were a testament to that.

“Why do you believe in crucifixes so much?” I finally ruptured.

Ma's mouth, face, and hands refused to flame my frustration. Sunlight wrapped her shoulders and arms like a vestment. Coconut oil on her umber skin and gray hair highlighted specks of silver. She persisted in forming the clay into the mold while her white head of tight finger curls remained bowed.

“Tell me, huh? We’re stuck in this hellhole with no help from your family. Yet you still don’t believe we’ve been abandoned by both your family and your Lord?” I lectured her about every sacrifice she wasted. Every school fee or rent bill she paid for many of them. Social events and weddings she hosted or traded away for free childcare. The thousands of birthday, Christmas, and Easter cards handwritten in cursive. Cards and personalized crucifixes for celebration or dejection.

“Yet, you still believe in these things?”

I reached over to pull her hands’ attention from her work, but she girdled my wrist before further disturbance.

I was petrified.

Ma spoke in an angelic voice, “I have faith, my sweet child.”

“Same difference,” I rebelled as I unfastened my wrist.

“When you have faith, you rely on trust, and when you believe, you rely on knowledge. Where many go wrong is believing God’s knowledge is commonsense.” She continued to mold until the finishing piece; then, she advised, “Sit, my child, and have faith with me.”

Each mold she completed in thin glass shards and firming clay showed her indebtedness in her Lord’s nailed body. Meticulously, she pressed downward on the shards with her fingertips as her long unpolished nails left indentions in the clay like shallow tombs.

The hymn “I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart” electrified her excitement as she molded rainbow colors. Similarly, the hymn “Here I Am, Lord” confided her prayers as she molded hues of reds, blues, or violets. With each new mosaic, Ma resided in the company of her Lord.

While some danced with a jubilee of colors in every room of the house, one of the crucifixes above her bed hovered in distinguishing violets and amethysts, sistering her periwinkle curtains. She had molded it during Lent, a hymn imbued within it.

Routinely this morning, as I opened her flowery curtains like I had wrought every morning, I hummed “I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart” to rekindle her spirit. On good mornings, to initiate our routine from across the room as she faced the window, she would mumble along from nightdress changing until breakfast.

Today wasn’t a usual good day, though I still hummed. The periwinkle curtains gave a stiff part when I wrenched them open to bury their waistbands behind brass clasps entombed outside the window frame. As I turned to greet her, the grayness strolling down resembled the lifelessness

on Ma's face. Instead of continuing to hum, I hurried to her and decided to sing closer to her face, hoping to resuscitate her with her Lord's help.

After a couple of rounds, I retired my faith and sat on the cold floor next to her bed, yet my lips and heart began to sing "Here I Am, Lord." As the hymn ended, valiant sunshine broke through the opened curtains, shattering the grayness with colored rays. I lifted my eyes to see if the warmth resurrected her, but her body remained still. Beneath a halo of crucifixes, she became a mosaic corpse.



CONTRIBUTORS / COLABORADORES



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Mateo Aragon Hernandez is a trans Latine artist born and raised in Houston, Texas to two immigrant parents from El Salvador. Mateo has aimed to create art not only centered on the uplifting of his community but also discussing topics most would avoid, in hopes of being a voice for those who can't speak for themselves.

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Rachel M. Stout graduated from the University of Houston-Downtown in Fall 2024 with a degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. She enjoyed all her English courses and wishes she could have taken more of them. She is currently attending grad school and looks forward to having time to write things other than homework assignments!

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Lakshmi Sunder is a third-year student at Northwestern University. Lakshmi enjoys writing fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction about intersectional identity and dystopias that reflect reality. She has been recognized by the YoungArts Foundation, the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, *The Adroit Journal*, *The Common*, and *The New York Times Learning Network*.

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