

THE BAYOU REVIEW

SPRING 2025

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THE BAYOU REVIEW

SPRING 2025

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The Bayou Review is a literary and visual arts journal that is published biannually by the University of Houston-Downtown. The journal welcomes visual art, creative non-fiction, fiction, poetry in English, Spanglish, and Spanish. We also accept translations into English and book reviews.

For submissions email, bayourevieweditor@gmail.com.
For further information visit our website, bayoureview.org.
Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors.

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CONTENTS

Editors' Note	11
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POETRY / POESÍA

<i>Antarctica</i> Sarai Argüelles	15
<i>Naranja</i> Sarai Argüelles	16
<i>Archivo de la memoria</i> Lorraine Caputo	17
<i>Nieve</i> Gerardo Cárdenas	19
<i>And You Hurried Here</i> Luanne Castle	20
<i>On The Misinterpretation of Darwin</i> Luanne Castle	21
<i>The Double Nature of Keys</i> José Chapa Valle	22
<i>We Come with Generations</i> José Chapa Valle	24
<i>Broken Seams</i> Claudia Chappelle	25
<i>L/O/O/K</i> Claudia Chappelle	26
<i>Time, in Quiet Color</i> Rachel Chitofu	28
<i>A Bloodstain on the Toilet</i> Kenya Coffman	29
<i>Defining Lines</i> Deborah H. Doolittle	30

<i>Robinson Jeffers Surrounded by Rhododendrons</i> Deborah H. Doolittle	31
<i>Jackson, Wyoming</i> David Dorantes	32
<i>Ruston, Louisiana</i> David Dorantes	34
<i>A través de mis lentes</i> Tahnee Farfán	35
<i>What Stays Behind</i> Tahnee Farfán	36
<i>Burned Fingers</i> Donna Faulkner	37
<i>Armchair Tales</i> Donna Faulkner	38
<i>Flashback</i> Kelli J Gavin	39
<i>Always Climbing / We Come from Mountains</i> Kristina Hodelín	41
<i>Cosmology</i> Mark Jodon	43
<i>dream inventory</i> Carella Keil	44
<i>Animal Voices</i> LaVern Spencer McCarthy	45
<i>Patterns</i> LaVern Spencer McCarthy	46
<i>To My Chickadees</i> Lindsey Morales	47
<i>The Full Pull</i> Gisele Phalo	48
<i>Treasury</i> Dimitri Reyes	50
<i>Young, with a Brush of Caution</i> Dimitri Reyes	52
<i>Blush</i> Ann Ridley	53

<i>Road Kill</i> Stephen Schwei	54
<i>This Hard Body</i> Stephen Schwei	56
<i>Buscando mi lugar</i> Danya Marie Serrano	58
<i>Model Immigrants</i> Pramod Subbaraman	59
<i>Calaverita para la embalsamadora</i> Thomas Tice	60
<i>Hazy Highlands</i> Thomas Tice	61
<i>When Thinking of Kokopelli</i> Andrena Zawinski	62

FICTION / FICCIÓN

<i>Geko</i> Mehreen Ahmed	67
<i>The Art That Cries</i> Karla Carrillo	69
<i>Milk Madness</i> Laura Eppinger	73
<i>Veteran</i> Sol Ignota	76
<i>The Cursed Wings of Icarus</i> Vincente Luzardo	79

VISUAL ART / ARTE VISUAL

<i>Butterfly</i> Danielle Anchondo	87
<i>Egyptian Goose</i> Danielle Anchondo	88

<i>Sunset in Hawaii</i> Danielle Anchondo	89
<i>One of Four</i> Seth Cornell	90
<i>Cielito rojo</i> Yvette Grutter	91
<i>Secret Garden</i> Carella Keil	92
<i>Childhood Dream Home</i> Abigail Marron	93
<i>From a Dream. Doubt</i> Nasta Martyn	94
<i>Girl and Fish</i> Nasta Martyn	95
<i>I'm Looking for Crystals</i> Nasta Martyn	96
<i>After the Dam Broke</i> Gail Plunkett	97
<i>Escapee</i> Gail Plunkett	98
<i>This Is Freedom</i> Gail Plunkett	99
<i>After the Game</i> Christopher Woods	100
<i>Linda's Walk</i> Christopher Woods	101
<i>Tree Blinds</i> Christopher Woods	102

TRANSLATION / TRADUCCIÓN

〈躊躇〉一寫一位40歲的單身女郎 柯柏榮	104
<i>Hesitation—For a 40-year-old Single Woman</i> Pek-êng Koa, translated by C. J. Anderson-Wu	105

〈佇烏暗中獨行〉 柯柏榮	106
<i>Walking Alone in Darkness</i> Pek-êng Koa, translated by C. J. Anderson-Wu	107
<i>Espectro</i> Alejandra Solórzano	108
<i>Specter</i> Alejandra Solórzano, translated by Mauricio Espinoza	109
<i>Para curar</i> Alejandra Solórzano	112
<i>Healing</i> Alejandra Solórzano, translated by Mauricio Espinoza	113

CREATIVE NONFICTION / NOFICCIÓN

<i>Anywhere But Here</i> Krysta Lopez	119
<i>Empty Homes</i> Cassidy Peavy	126
<i>Between Tongues</i> Shayan Rauf	130
<i>Pomegranates</i> Shayan Rauf	132
<i>Fleeing</i> Danya Marie Serrano	134

Contributors / Colaboradores	139
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EDITORS' NOTE

Editors' Note

The Bayou Review editors had a blast carefully reviewing and discussing all of the submissions sent this Spring 2025. *The Bayou Review* is a student-run literary and arts magazine at the University of Houston-Downtown that supports and publishes writers and artists from around the world. In this issue, you will find poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, translations into English, and art.

A number of these submissions made us laugh, cry, and really ponder many questions and issues. Throughout this journey, the editors have learned a lot about the “ins and outs” of the publishing world. We are committed to the whole process and all aspects of publishing a literary and arts magazine.

Our wonderful professor and faculty advisor, Dr. Lau Cesarco Eglin, facilitated our editorial team and is the reason why this semester’s issue of *The Bayou Review* was possible. With Dr. Lau Cesarco Eglin as our guide, we curated submissions, edited our contributors’ pieces, and designed and created the magazine. We learned how to design flyers, manage social media, and promote *The Bayou Review* at events. Teamwork and communication were integral to the operations of our magazine production endeavors.

Our decision not to have a theme for this issue resulted in dozens of contributions from talented poets, writers, translators, artists, and photographers with a diverse collection of literature and art that exceeded our expectations.

We want to thank our contributors for sharing their work with us and to our readers, both new and returning. We are honored and proud to present the culmination of our efforts: the Spring 2025 issue of *The Bayou Review*.

POETRY / POESÍA

Antarctica

Sarai Argüelles

I'll probably never make it to Antarctica
because I'm not a scientist, the pollution is ruining it,
I get seasick, and I hate the cold.
But, I'll read about and imagine it,
longing to experience it all in person.
Just be warned, I'll probably ask you to join me
on this epic journey
and I think you should humor me, just for fun.
Hopefully, the ocean lives and the ice stays.
Maybe we won't melt.
Regardless, I'll cry about it anyway.

Naranja

Sarai Argüelles

It's not about halves—
if it was, I'd share half of
my orange with you.

Archivo de la memoria

Lorraine Caputo

Entro a ese edificio centenario
por una pared que fue demolida
para que revele los recuerdos
de esa oscura “guerra sucia”

Los testimonios de los sobrevivientes
desparramados por el aire

Y los recuerdos que todavía
pesan

Siento esas presencias
esperando en bancos de cemento
doblados de dolor
en pequeñas celdas sin ventanas
nombres y fechas
escritos en el revoque
cuerpos arrastrados
por el laberinto de
estrechos pasillos

Los recuerdos
me sacaron
a empujones
de la entrada
a esa sala de tortura

subterránea
y a la sala al
final de la
empinada escalera

Oigo esos gritos
esos ruidos
golpe
golpe
golpean mi cabeza
contra paredes invisibles
palpables
resuenan a mi alrededor
desde cada rincón
de este
Archivo de la memoria

Nieve

Gerardo Cárdenas

nunca está realmente ahí
es un suspiro extinto
una transición al silencio
la nieve devora al tiempo
traza nuevas venas en la piel
muere como los sueños
entre el espacio imposible de los párpados
nieve en Houston
tormentas de fuego en California
un monarca enloquecido
una corte de idiotas
el mundo parece desgajarse
la nieve cae
con la indiferencia de la eternidad
con la dulzura de la muerte
la nieve recrea el silencio
por solo un instante
por un segundo solo es ella
su cántico helado
su reposo
al día siguiente que el mundo estalle
también nevará
para que vuelva
el silencio

And You Hurried Here

Luanne Castle

And here you are hurried, your baby in arms,
hurried to keep up with the phone company,
the tax department, your medical tests.
And outside the bee sighs and dies in the center
of a daffodil, a young kingsnake learns
the full circle of his perimeter guard.
And here you are hurried brushing your hair.
A few quick yoga stretches or not today.
You are too hurried to experience the awakening.
But to be hurried means forced to move quickly,
nothing adjustable by your own will or desire.
Perhaps you choose to hurry instead of to love
your husband and daughter who kisses the baby
until one day they will discover you are gone.

On The Misinterpretation of Darwin

Luanne Castle

after Justin Hamm's "Duende"

But who are the most adaptable
the ones who pull themselves
up from the rubble of new variations,
faces distorted by repetition,
by what they've seen in their lifetimes?
Not artificial or practiced, nor
capable of great strength.
Nor swayed by fragrance and frills.
To survive they must be willing
to accept the chaos of the always
changing. The broken patterns.
Not acceptance either, but
they must shape the pandemonium
in their own contorted images.

The Double Nature of Keys

José Chapa Valle

You scream in your chair,
swing your head backwards,
smash it against the wood.

Water beats in my eyes,
scrambles me
to carry out your will:
blueberries glisten
in a purple plate,
strangely ready
next to eggs with cheese.

Later, as we lay in bed,
I wonder where
you get the balls.
Do you think this
before you hurt yourself?

*Papi will have no choice,
he will bring me the box and the flame.*

Then
your hand in the darkness,
small, wet.
You move it in circles
over my face,

trace lines, triangles:
gentle geometry
says everything's fine
between us.

You open the door
through which I fall
asleep.

We Come with Generations

José Chapa Valle

Finding the words
is not the problem,
nor finding the right time:
there's plenty of awkward silence
within the music
of electrocardiograms.

It's just hard to ask for it,
to tell the nurse
we need a sliver,
something yours
from just after you got here.

Something to plant
in the yard where your mami
played hopscotch
and busted her chin,
wrote your name
for the first time
in oblivious, visionary chalk.

It's your bisabuela's
superstition:
we bury a piece
of your umbilical cord
in a place called home,
so you can always find us.

Broken Seams

Claudia Chappelle

I hate throwing away clothes, old or damaged.
If they are good enough I'll donate or,
try to sell them if that can be managed
or I'll keep them boxed on the closet floor.

Their potential is so clear, that I say
"I'll learn to make them useful again."
With the earnest intention that one day
my visions will make it out of my brain;

yet there they lay folded in a box
their utility neutralized abruptly,
now frozen in time like a broken clock
potential gone instantaneously.
Sadly because of something unforeseen
like the untimely rip of a big seam.

L/O/O/K

Claudia Chappelle

L O O K

At all of this creation
At all of this destruction
At all of this reverence
At all of this irreverence

At all of this life
At all of this death
At all of this existing without strife
Then you see graves are not the only place
with depth

The child's feet bound
The woman holding flowers encapsulated in stone
eternally trapped in her state of mourning
The hands of a degraded savior reaching out
The sad eyes of the sacrificial lamb found
in varying places and spaces throughout the graveyard
Hoping to save souls from eternal damnation
The symbol of life everlasting being a monument
in a setting of death

Still the cars drive by
and planes fly overhead
Man sweeps the waste away
ants crawl around and sprout out of the ground
while trees and grass still grow

However...

do not

forget

to look

L/O/O/K

* Inspired by *Recuerdos de flores muertas* (dir. Willie Varela, 1982)

Time, in Quiet Color

Rachel Chitofu

Oh, it's not that important
that I sometimes catch myself
in the act of not enjoying
the process—a stroke of blood-red blush,
like a broken finger maiming the cheek,
or the brush dragging too thin
across the canvas of my quiet mind.

The kitchen stool too high today,
but we were supposed to be enjoying the
steamed okra, weren't we?
Though the chair you sit in now
was my mother's—
and she can't speak for herself today,
her bones soft like silence,
still folding into what's left of this house.

The German shepherd glares,
but still chews like an empty clock,
time mangled and nimble,
a toothless little storm
stuck in its belly.

A Bloodstain on the Toilet

Kenya Coffman

am I more
than just the sum of every
low
more
than just the
splotchy red
spots on the rim of the seat
that point and laugh at me
that tell me I'm demonic
and unclean
Am I more than just a bloodstain on the toilet?
with no hands to feel You
no mouth to beg You
and no ears to hear
I may only be blood
red, splotchy,
disgusting
Yet You are with me still
holding my red and brown hands
shaping my darkened clots to resemble You.

Defining Lines

Deborah H. Doolittle

The loop of the leash, the swag of string,
leading up, up to your homemade

paper kite. Taut lanyards slapping
the hollow aluminum masts.

All those parallel rows that held
the clothes we wore all summer.

Convenient perches for birds stretched
between fence posts and telephone

poles. The reel pulls the hook back
along the rod. The fish that some-

times comes. The criss-cross path of shoe
laces. It's the string to pull your soft

hood close about your face. The same
commute you make. The smile that lifts

the corners of your mouth, makes curves
of your lips. Being two points in

one another's line of sight, but
not always the shortest distance.

Robinson Jeffers Surrounded by Rhododendrons

Deborah H. Doolittle

The fierce, snarling buzz of a thousand bees hovering over
the steep hillsides swarming with trees and these floweringshrubs
permeate the air like a second scent sent from above.

How else to announce our presence on this earth?
in these woods?

Trampling the mulch and mast underfoot, brushing past bunches
of these vibrant blossoms,

I stand thick with the bees that slide like fat drops of dew
from one petal to the next down the sharp incline of the hill.

No small wonder but in these everyday deeds. No small
victory and no surrender.

Nothing I've seen this side of Carmel can compare, nothing
nibbles at my sense of awe so completely like these bees with their
thimbles of sweetness. Nothing

compares to this simple saturation of my senses:

how sound swallows smell and how smell swells up from this scene
of pinks and purples and greens clinging to the grit and roots
of nearby trees,

except, perhaps, the sea. At fifty, Ovid must have admired them
in his exile, biding and dividing his time between letters
and poetry, which like the bees need to be fed.

Jackson, Wyoming

David Dorantes

*Cuando me abandonaste cayeron mil gotas
con un fuego gélido de mis ojos al mundo,
rezaba la frase que Bruna me escribió
en una tarjeta postal de Dublín gris.*

La postal cayó en un suave vuelo
de lo más alto del altar de discos viejos
cuando buscaba tonadas de Van Morrison
para calmar mis soledades de diciembre.

Antes de que aquel viejo trozo de papel
tocara el piso, el recuerdo de una giganta,
sus gritos, cantos, jadeos y los susurros
sacudieron mi casa de rocas junto al río.

Con la Takamine hecha astillas por el uso
yo aullaba versiones agrestes de Los Lobos
en la Grafton Street con mi tez de punk
y la mira puesta en el güisqui o los peces.

Entonces llegaste con tu aire de montaña
nívea, cauda roja, dos tatuajes de hachas,
ojos verdes callando la luz irlandesa
y creo que ardí con boleros de Los Panchos.

¿Por qué tocas esas contradanzas tan tristes?
dijo esa voz de avalancha cayendo al valle
con la que me hiciste pirata en tu posada
y náufrago desnudo en la Isla del Tesoro.

Una noche caíste tendida en el sillón
y antes de empezar a mirarte para adentro
musitaste un grave te amo que alertó mis
sentidos turbados por el vino blanco.

Jugar a la felicidad me pareció
una balada triste que no supe bailar;
así que nuevamente me disfracé de humo
dejando que la brisa me llevara lejos.

La única oración que ayer le escribí a Bruna
en la tarjeta postal de Wyoming soleado
decía en tinta gris, *no me até a nadie que
no pudiera dejar en sesenta minutos.*

Ruston, Louisiana

David Dorantes

Llueve.
compongo un blues.

Pasan sin mí
las noches sin ella.

Es música
hasta su ausencia.

Un acorde
cae en Sol menor.

A través de mis lentes

Tahnee Farfán

se cuelan realidades
que no sé si son mías.
Me siento en una silla
con todo el peso de mis sueños
y el de mis peores pesadillas.
Es como mirarme en al espejo:
todo lo que espero
y todo lo que temo
reflejado en tonos rojos,
como el lápiz de labios
de una chica que aún cree en todo,
que con un bolígrafo en la mano
desvanece sus miedos
y llena el papel de ilusiones.

What Stays Behind

Tahnee Farfán

Your love isn't love anymore.
It's residue.
I feel it stuck in me,
beneath my skin,
between the folds of my being.
Every nerve hums your name,
a static ache I never asked for.

I want to tear out every piece of myself
that remembers you.
Every kiss mapped across my thighs,
every bite blooming on my neck,
every whispered word lodged in my ears.
I want to scrub my skin raw,
rip out the molecules you touched,
burn the parts of me that
still moan your name.

Your love was a colonization,
an invasion I welcomed,
only to realize too late
you never meant to stay.

Burned Fingers

Donna Faulkner

An artery severed by a paper cut
my eyes pursued
every last word infecting my mind
I read in silence, but his voice enunciates
...the curve of her back...the silk of summer hair...

Every vowel a blow. Sweet Molasses, not meant for me,
giving my heart a good kicking.

Fire caresses the letter dancing with madness,
I fixate upon the blue flame nibbling at the singe.

The paper holds out toying with my patience.
I recall the first time he became suddenly abrupt.
Subtle the changes cackle & curl
smouldering parchment touching toes.

I see clearly his wandering eye confessions in black smoke
the letter cremates with a cough and splutter,
Ashes in my left hand
...the curve of her back ...the silk of summer hair;
scattered to the west wind

Armchair Tales

Donna Faulkner

Waiting
in the lounge
lodged coins in its pits
coffee cup scars up its arms.

From worn springs
and arthritic knees
a sigh
like an exhaled cigarette.

Its seat cushion
settled
a permanent indent
the shape of the man

sedating his nights
ten feet away
from a static TV
skipping channels.

Now all the crumbs
are cleared away
the armchair sits
an empty husk.

Flashback

Kelli J Gavin

It takes only one sight,
one sound—
even a scent,
and I am brought back
to a time when things were easy,
smooth.

It happens almost daily:
One touch will prompt me,
stop me in my tracks.
A hand on the small of my back,
a kiss to the temple,
those hands in my hair,
a lingering kiss,
an embrace where we never want
to let go.

Take me back
flashback
to a time when things were easy,
smooth.
I want it all back,
every sight
of you approaching for an embrace,
each sound
of you humming unaware,
your scent. I wish for it
to last on my clothing,

your touch—
I want it all
to flashback
to a time when things were easy.

Always Climbing / We Come from Mountains

Kristina Hodelín

Ayibobo
Up up up
Climbing up
But of course
This is natural
We come from mountains
Ayiti
We will always find a way up
They can't make us fall
We stand tall & strong
Always.

No
We don't eat cats and dogs
Yes
We eat diri djondjon, banan peze ak pikliz
And our herbs healing the soul
We are connected to everything
The earth gives us
All God provides
We won the revolution in 1804
And—you can't make us
think otherwise

You can try—
But you won't win
The loas protects us
The orishas against sin
The mountains protect us
The Taínos knew
Black people come together
Always creating
Creating
Creating
Something new

Remember
Remember
Ayibobo

Cosmology

Mark Jodon

Some things
actually can be
easily explained.

She wanted to be
the sun, and for a while
I could be Mercury.

But over time
I became Pluto
and then one day,

without notice,
I was relegated
to non-planetary status.

dream inventory

Carella Keil

a grandfather clock
a lamppost
a skeleton key
a live hummingbird
a lightning storm in an hourglass
parallel mirrors
an aquarium of seahorses
an unbroken silver thread
glass slippers
peacock feathers
a wishing well
a spiral staircase
a book of fingerprints
galaxies spilling over
a butterfly's womb
a dream blown in glass
echoes of a smile
a blade of grass from another world
a reflection of the moon
a gazebo
a dry inkwell
a seedless fruit
embers in a birdcage
a glass of salt water
curtains

Animal Voices

LaVern Spencer McCarthy

Coyotes, when they crave a raucous spree,
will gather on a hill and howl away.
Likewise, an alley-cat will often be
verbose with yowls and hisses night and day.
While monkeys gab and gossip in a throng,
a silly message often heard before,
wild elephants will bellow out a song
of triumph as they tramp the jungle floor.
We mortals think our chatter matters most,
superior to lower lives at best,
but we should realize before we boast,
indifferent, uncaring of the rest,
the animals, unique in range and tone,
regale the world with voices of their own.

Patterns

LaVern Spencer McCarthy

Years ago, my mother
learned how to repair sorrow
with squares of sunshine,
banished fear with swatches
of encouragement.

Moving slowly through
the days, she reinforced our
childhood with patterns of care,
taught us the difference
between right and wrong.

Stitch by stitch, she seamed
us into a world that would
never unravel—a mother who
was able to work happiness
into threadbare days—a mother
who patched our faults
with perfect love.

To My Chickadees

Lindsey Morales

To my sweet chickadees, my busy bees
whose laughter and love fill our home.

To funny faces and sticky fingers,
chicken nuggets and softball dingers.

To swings and play sets,
playgrounds and sandpits,
toothless smiles and gummy kisses.

To curly Qs and squeaky shoes.
To trips and falls, and sobby boo-hoos.

To your ultimate ups and disastrous downs
and, oh! my goodness, those baby sounds.

To my harmonious highs and lackluster lows,
to the endless collections of those little ties and bows.

To all three chickadees,
to you guys, my honeybees.

Next thing you know, you're off
to unlock life's hidden keys.

The Full Pull

Gisele Phalo

That evening,
I ran to the closet
to grab that precious doll.

My daughter ran up to me earlier. She
was demanding:
Where's my baby?

The same question burned through
my mind years ago.

That morning
I ran to my car
to grab time.

My mother sat inside the clinic,
waiting.
The dentist, pulling
teeth.

She joked about the pain, the blood, the sutures
It had to be done. For her
health.

A decade earlier, I cried.
My mom held my hand

when I went to the clinic.

A man whispered prayers for me as we walked by.

There was no pain, blood, or stitches.

I remembered demanding:

Where's my baby?

Treasury

Dimitri Reyes

Call me the brownest currency (1 cent out of 100)
and watch me turn copper into nickel.
Patina'd until I can make the alchemy
of dollar green is my hope.
I am a little shit. Currently nothing
but a unit passed from one hand
to the other where my apartment's
still another empty pocket.

Even the ants can overtake me
under their feet. Inferior I be
as I'm hoisted above their head,
100x the amount. Brown is where
brown I am, the brownest of
presidents among a cabinet of silvers.
Who am I but the stink of copper,
one manufactured to resemble
earth? Life, yes, but always
beneath another's feet. Left
behind at registers and sidewalks alike.

I wish to be as loud as brass—
in appearance, not volume.
It was the bleach of silver
that changed our value.
God bore penny. And plenty.

Named each of us a gift of luck
when we find ourselves face up.
Where if you could notice
the millions of our faces,
we'll be worth something more.

Young, with a Brush of Caution

Dimitri Reyes

Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary
is okay as long as you read it in a poem.
Away from the mirror in your friend's basement
feels the farthest from her cause of death:

a car accident several blocks away around
the bend on a park wedding day years ago
can feel merely hours when names are
uttered. So we clamor loudly, clapping

and laughing to fight the requiem of twisted
metal and body. Lovers star-crossed only
by inertia and chance. Car meets tree
the sum of too fast on the wrong day. At this age

we already know it's never a good time to die
when we remember *her* absent of *him*. It's
what we are used to, though. Seeing a body
absent of another, time and time again, even

if in love. And the heart is there like a phantom
limb, even if it's absent of another's beating.
We think this is what we're to learn, it's horror.
To play a game so close to murder, we move
through danger like ghosts.

Blush

Ann Ridley

Dog-eared and sublime
Real and remembered
This love is a tender bite
Into a peach, teeth pit-hitting never
All sweetness all breathless
All open blooming under touch

I ramble down your spine
Suck down sweetness growing
See your sightless smile
Pleasure never ceases

Swaying turbulence
Graceful muscles tense
You are effervescence
Then you stop to hold me
Movement has new meaning
Stillness even in breathing

Road Kill

Stephen Schwei

VI

When it turns, it turns,
a hard 180.
The injured animal
curls into itself
and puts up a hard shell,
armor against the world.

V

The boy inside the man
craters into depression.
His life began at 15
when he finally took charge
in every awkward way he could.

IV

He waits for one touch,
a trace of love,
a flash of understanding,
redemption or forgiveness.

III

How could his parents
have treated him so cruelly?
It had to have been more than alcohol.

II

He weeps into his pillow,
denying he's even sad.

I

The deep wounds are raw and festering.

This Hard Body

Stephen Schwei

What is it about the human body
that makes it so difficult
to live with?

It's nearly impossible
to keep in balance,
with so many chemical reactions
and emotional turmoil.

You can work on the external
features and add fuel regularly,
but eventually, the parts start to fail,
the heart, liver, kidney,
or even the brain.

Cancerous rust can eat from the inside.

Others witness the wear and tear.

There are so many possible
points of failure.

And yet the species is resilient,
adaptable and fine-tuned.

We've survived the onslaught
of endless microbes,
withering catastrophes,
and our own senseless follies.

We design workarounds,
patches, and replacement parts.

We create more bodies

to give it a try
and prolong our existence
as a species.

We hope to be one animal
that never becomes extinct,
propagating and adapting
flourishing and surviving,

even as so many members
continue to succumb
to our frailties.

Buscando mi lugar

Danya Marie Serrano

I don't fit in anywhere,
but you say I fit in everywhere.
Am I a unicorn?
A chameleon?
What is home?
When a physical base,
like a chimera—eludes me.
You say look within.
So, I try to live a life ascetic
to see if the picture clears in poetic technicolor.
I find my native language—quieted for decades.
Yet like a distant friend, she rekindles
a place in the heart of my thoughts
and whispers,
“¿No recuerdas quién tú eres?
Tú vas a resistir la tristeza
de tu soledad
porque eres un colibrí que coges
fuerza simplemente al vuelo.”
I try to fly with iridescent grace,
but even hummingbirds need a landing place.

Model Immigrants

Pramod Subbaraman

That's what they called us.
We were better than the others
better educated, better employed
better moneyed, better behaved
there was never any trouble;
our skin color was always a problem
but all those "better" qualities compensated—

until they weren't.
They used the word "P****t."
It was a slur. It was meant to offend.
It was designed to show us our place,
that no matter what we did, how well we fitted in,
how much we contributed; we were never welcome.

I recall Jewish friends telling of their experience,
how it was never enough.
The danger of being "too assimilated"
when you "take" the jobs that they want,
the incomes they covet,
when you live the lives they see as their birthright,
when they see you where they once were and
where they want to be again...

... you become foreign again

Calaverita para la embalsamadora

Thomas Tice

Para la embalsamadora, that sacred night was for respect.
That night was dark, and it was time for bed.
Just like La Muerte, she strove to resurrect.
She worked con amor, her duty to the dead.

And watched La Muerte, who walks in shades of red.
Al norte del río Brazos, she's the best.
But Holly fell from chair to crack her head,
for formaldehyde is kept up high above her arms and breast.

"My servant Holly, you are my most blessed."
"But my lady, my duty is undone."
"What would you have me do, my dispossessed?"
"Con permiso, I'll finish before the sun."

But Holly lied and hid among the shrouds.
La Muerte searched the morgue, but her calaverita was hidden
in the crowd.

Hazy Highlands

Thomas Tice

the clear moon shines bright
in the mountains, transforming
man to maniac.

When Thinking of Kokopelli

Andrena Zawinski

as sun slips behind ponderosa pines
and Sangre de Cristo Mountains,
soft winds perfumed by burning juniper and sage
crossing the thousand-year-old Taos Pueblo,

I imagine the feathered flute player
Kokopelli, carefree and scattering the seed
trinity of squash, beans, and corn as a wandering
shaman sowing notes for rain to bless them,

Kokopelli singing, bringing fertility and happiness.
I wonder what the dancing storyteller would think
of his image now on tees, skateboards, necklaces,
magnets, outdoor gear, and beer in a new prosperity,

I ask myself could he prance downwind of uranium mines
hidden in Navajo woodlands, wonder could he toot his flute
in a warning to hikers, hunters, the wood collectors
deaf to Geiger counter's ticking tunes of gamma radiation,

their invisible particles breezing by the sweet berries
and roots along trails. I worry that if Kokopelli's image
were emblazoned on GE's Church Rock Mine recruitment ads
local tribes might work again in the mines

where children have played in the abandoned pits
to their demise. I grieve for lives lost by ancestral
first victims of the Manhattan Project's atomic
Trinity blast, and for all the uranium miners

who coughed with the stink of ore on their clothes
as they turned to skin and bone, radiation seeping
into them, their water, soil, vegetation, and homes,
metallic odor of fumes slipping back in on the wind.

FICTION / FICCIÓN

Geko

Mehreen Ahmed

On this munificent moment when my son was also born the very same day that I was born at a different time in a different year where coincidences as such no matter how rare occur except that unaware of this occasion when mother and son celebrate the birthdays together on the same day which may seem a little odd growing up as my son is unable to elevate this feeling instead he is embarrassed acutely conscious that he must share his birthday with his elderly mother to whom he owes much still ashamed of celebrating his birthday together with me though noted that nothing we can do to change this fact which are stranger than fiction as the cliché goes true but this fact of our birthdays is not a cliché by any long shot as his friends tease him unnecessarily of something beyond us that on this premise my son promises to have nothing to do with celebrations anymore trust me even if I want to we don't really get to make the rules when such rules are imposed upon us from above like coincidences like so many other rules which we cannot either make or break such is the day when my beautiful boy is born and such is the day when my mother's beautiful girl is born but as it turns out we continue to live our lives regardless of these highs and lows how true is it that in the oneness of being mother and son further binds both through the same birthdays only to be separated in death perhaps not even that not even death can separate us as the days of the birth can never be separated to be ever remindful of mother in sickness or in health year in and year out that mother and son have the same birthday but hopefully not the same fate as residents of a struggle street where I am born on a torn blanket and

a hole in the roof over me where rainwater drips even to this day but I change that life by settling in with a good man who then changes everything except the birthdays which isn't a stigma on its own but such small things hold unfathomable powers over mental health destroys lives like birds which are small and insignificant but together they can fly to a significant harm with fatal consequences bring down aeroplanes with a single big hit or even house geko for that matter brings significant damage to electric wires as they hide unseen eating away wires and such without compunction to anyone's knowledge the same way such little incidents house pests perpetuate who are never house guests obviously but they remain in the house seemingly hidden and uninvited causing unseen trouble like our birthdays a significant occasion makes insignificant because of some nuisance value the harm it can cause in someone's life holds such vital powers which are not within our control as our ties to birthdays may seem like a small event perhaps like some inconspicuous tiny geko or insignificant flock of birds causing massive harms such unwarranted guests namely 'fate and time' who house themselves in our lives we cannot get rid of them who in many subtle ways tell us that they are our guests diligently chewing us away bit by bit until sunrise and sundown they chew us a bit more.

The Art That Cries

Karla Carrillo

The oil painting of a garden called “El jardín de Eva” stares back at Maite, whose brown eyes could have pierced a hole through it. As labeled under the painting, the artist, Gabriel Barrientos, was a childhood friend Maite loved growing up. As children who once played in his grandmother’s garden, they now lived isolated from each other. The times they spent in the garden—the times when Gabriel would find a daisy and rest its stem on Maite’s ear, the times when Maite would push him around his grandmother’s bushes—made them forget about their young troubles. One of the many troubles they both had to face was the reminder that Gabriel did not live with his grandmother, and the endless drive back home. Every August, he’d leave Maite by herself.

Maite remembers why it was a privilege to see the painting in a bright white room showcasing his art. It was not because it was painted by her beloved companion, but because, while the departing visitors at the art exhibit whispered their admiration for the vibrant colors of the oil painting, she could smell the daisies from it. She could remember their white petals falling past her cheek and the aroma of the fresh flowers dancing around her nose. It’s as if the garden had emerged in this lonely exhibition. She wonders why there are no other spectators in the room.

She turns over her shoulder to see another painting done by Gabriel. Or is it a mirror? She couldn’t see herself in it due to its opaque finish, but she saw her silhouette mimicking her movements. She walks towards the art piece, passing through the studio light rays that illuminate

the white room. As she gets close enough, her complete figure—the silhouette of her dress shirt and pants, short hair, and slim arms and ankles—reaches the top and bottom of the frame. She notices no change.

She always remembered Gabriel had unusual ideas. Whenever he, as a child, had asked if she saw the reflection from the raindrop resting on one of the bushes, she would lie and say yes. He never stopped talking about the reflection from the raindrops each time it rained, and she wanted to please him as well as make him shut up. He always had an eye for detail, an eye that gazed upon intricate things she was never able to notice.

She traces her fingers on the edges of the art frame, looking for a way to illuminate or reveal the piece. She can't believe that the piece was simply meant to be gray. As she steps toward the side of the piece, she notices a green, glowing light reflecting from it. She returns her gaze to "El jardín de Eva," illuminating with much brighter colors than before. Rays of chartreuse grow larger as she approaches the painting once again.

Maite takes a closer look and finally notices what she hadn't figured out before. The vibrant colors weren't enough for the painting to shine brightly; it was the raindrops in the painting made of glittered epoxy that made the rain on the glossy painting shimmer. She then notices one raindrop shining brighter on the white petal of a daisy. Oddly, the painting of the daisy starts wilting out of the canvas. Right as it succumbs to gravity, Maite holds the small flower. With devoted care, as she remains starstruck by the cleverly shimmering raindrops, she places the flower above her ear.

After turning back around, she was startled by her sudden reflection in the mirror across the room. Her appearance, strikingly beautiful with her now visible pink pants and white dress shirt, her short wavy hair, round glasses, and her plum high heels, reveals itself in a way she had never seen in all her years of living. Roaring applause shakes the mirror and startles her. Maite hesitates a moment before approaching the mirror. Her reflection dissipates to an image of an audience clapping for her. In awe, she then hears a familiar voice.

“I want to thank the curators and the staff of the museum for making this happen,” said the mature voice. “Ever since I was a young boy, I’ve always wanted to be a painter. Colors and shine always attracted me in a way that only one person was able to understand. That is why I have, before you, a piece I call *Maite*, who I’d like to call my first love.” Whips of air from the clapping make the mirror tremble again as Maite avoids shedding any tears.

“Maite was a young girl who I spent every summer with until the age of 16 when I moved from Virginia to California. Maite was a friend, an artist, a noble daughter, and, sometimes, a girl who loved to argue. Maite wanted to be a lawyer while growing up. She was inspired by her mother’s story of immigrating to the States and wanted to help her follow her dreams. She instead studied psychology in college, as far as I know.” A moment of silence fills the room, and the head of Gabriel Barrientos finally appears in the mirror. She steps back from the mirror, startled by his eyes piercing through her with no reaction. She sees his eye twitching and hands shaking, a common motion he does when he’s nervous.

Gabriel snuffles and continues, “Her untimely death was something I never thought I’d have to prepare for. I’ve dealt with many losses in my life: family members with whom I’ve cut ties, the apartment I’ve had after moving out, and many paintings by muggers who don’t appreciate art. But this one, Maite, was a different pain I felt. I hadn’t seen her since my move, and I never once told her that I loved her, that I admired her resilience to make things happen, that I would do anything to see her again.” As soon as she hears this, Maite drops to her knees and wallows in regret. She also should have told him she loved him and would be home with him soon, wherever that was.

She hears snuffles from some spectators from the other side of the mirror. Meanwhile, Gabriel continues, “Because I wasn’t sure what she would look like, I decided to take an educated guess. I painted her to have the most professional outfit I can imagine. I also painted her to look like I last remembered her: with short hair and round glasses that complimented the wonderful sepia skin she had. And lastly, I painted her in the light. When you walked in here, ladies and gentlemen, you only saw gray. I like to imagine an alternate world where she was able to see my paintings, and if she was there to see this one, this painting would glow...like she did. She had always been my light in a world full of darkness.”

As Maite sobs on the white floor, the applause returns, later softening, and the frame eventually stops trembling. She smiles through her tears and looks straight into Gabriel’s eyes. He looks back at her and unknowingly says his last goodbye.

“Thank you all for coming.”

Milk Madness

Laura Eppinger

With you, I go into labor under the dark sky of a new moon. Now I can track your age in weeks by the lunar cycle.

We bring you home, our newborn with the perfect O-shaped mouth, which latched so readily to me the first time that our nurse did a double take. It's not normally this easy, she wanted me to know.

Every room in this house is set up to welcome you, including the spider plants that peek out from every corner, soaking up the sun and ever reaching out for more. They are all offshoots of the original owned by your great-great-grandmother. We were gifted one thumb-sized seedling during the month we bought our house, and it has gone wild these past five years. It had babies, who then had babies, which continue to make tight buds and white flowers and more mini spindly greens, each of them greedy for more space and more life.

In your first week here, you grow a pound when the goal was only one ounce per day. We supplement the food I make with formula when I simply can't keep up with your needs. Feeding you is ecstasy against my skin, make no mistake, but my arms never stop shaking from holding you in place. You're still hungry, even after a full hour, lips pursed and gulping. But this is no problem, we love to nourish you, and we know that Fed Is Best.

You are two weeks old and a pearly moon glistens through the window. By now, the thing the disapproving Internet chorus warned us about has come to pass: too used to the bottle, you lose patience with the breast. Forget how to attach, so I pump and pump my own cream and fats. Lots of men online want me to know that I am selfish for all of this, but they don't see your full dumpling cheeks and delicious chubby tummy. You grow faster than my spider babies, and that is saying something.

But really, it's the nursing dreams that had to stop. Rising for the middle of the night feed, I swore every time that you were deep in the bed with me, lost within the sheets. (You are, of course, swaddled on your back in the bassinet beside me. We follow Doctor's Orders!) More than once I was convinced I'd been nursing twins. I screamed, cried at these visions of phantom babies sunk beneath me; when I stopped putting you against my chest, the waking nightmares ceased as well. Something about that connection drove me wild when unconscious (and maybe in waking, too).

You've been home six weeks, and a chalky full moon sits above us, illuminating the February snow.

When your pink circle mouth isn't sipping, it coos. I sing what you sing back to you: Whoa, hello! Oh, oh, oh!

Our feeding routine works well enough, but I CANNOT pump in the same room as you. No matter how sated you are, no matter how unresponsive in deep sleep, when the machine whirs you will moan and stir. You can smell it in the air, my milk, and it drives you wild. I call it Milk Madness and must always siphon off a few doors down.

I'm sure the anonymous comment section horde could list all the ways I am doing this wrong, but sustenance seeps out of me, under the sun and then the stars, the sun again. Sometimes it leaks through my shirt and onto my knees, especially when you cry but also as you sleep.

I put down my phone and stretch out your legs. One kick then another. I reach up and out with your arms, sprawling like spider vines sent by our ancestors to show us to spread and thrive.

Sure it makes us “lunatics” by definition, but I teach you how to howl our never-sated hunger at the moon.

Veteran

Sol Ignota

On a dusty piece of aged parchment is a letter, addressed to a lover. It reads as follows:

To the face I see only in my sweetest dreams,

Today, I write from a mournful fortress. On its mossy cobblestone haunches, it sits low in a backcountry bog, surrounded by thorny brush and broken steel. After a dozen-mile march through hell and knee-high water, our company was assailed not by our enemy, but by the acrid stench of the swamp surrounding our new lodgings, swollen with rot and battlefield viscera.

To speak God's truth, my heart, we've been losing this war horribly. To meet the armies of the east, our king has sent forth a gaggle of bastards, malingerers, and milksops, hardly fit to tend a stable, let alone see a battle line. As I write to you from our makeshift mess hall, I find myself in a shroud of nocturnal silence. Seeping out of the pores of the handful of men that remain in our company is the reek of pure anxiety, each keeping his mouth shut and his ears open, listening for our foe's next ambush in anticipation dire. This glut of adolescent mediocrity I've shared my company with is now but a crew of ghosts, ghastly pale, and humbled by screaming horrors.

I apologize for beginning what's meant to be a love letter by weaving such a dour image but my respect for you compels me to present the truth in its unadulterated form, grim as it is. We will meet our enemy within the

next twenty-four hours, that much is certain. Our sole remaining scout, lacking his left eye, can't tell us when exactly, but we all know they're swiftly approaching.

As I look around to see myself surrounded by cold steel and colder men, I look desperately for a bit of refuge. I've found it in your kind face, as I remember it. When I shut my tired eyes the clanging sounds of weary soldiers pounding haphazard repairs into their metal armaments transform into something else; a rosy heart on an overcast day.

I'm certain you remember that gray sky, the frowning faces of war-weary townsfolk, floating 'round the city like specters. I wore the anxiety of my inevitable deployment on my face, deep-set wrinkles on my brow. As I peered into your father's shop, I saw a blaze illuminating a set of warm, amber features. Next to a beacon of fire roaring out of a thousand-degree furnace, I saw you dripping with sweat, laboring over hot iron. The way the muscles in your arm flexed as you braced for another swing, the thick, swollen veins on your forearm tightening, the petite grunts you let escape your lips, with each round of exertion. My recollections end on our first instance of eye-contact, yet I cling to so many others. Such as, when I first felt your overworked, callused hand on my own, the first meal we shared together, the way we, like field mice, snuck behind your father and my sorrowful betrothed, and the first kiss we shared.

The way I felt your lips push into mine in the dead of night, far away from prying eyes, is a memory seared into my mind, likely to remain with me till the day I die. We only ever kissed once, and though I cherish it, that fact fills me with melancholy. The thought of feeling your lips

again is the only fading bit of hope I have left to cling to. When I look to the horizon, my heart searches desperately for your sunny face, freckles dotted on your tanned skin, warm, tender, morning light gracing your beard. Yet, my mortal eyes see only death and waste.

I wish I could evade my fate, but as I remember, my father always told me cowards don't get to choose how they die. My heart wants to muster up enough bravery to flee this place, this doomed battlefield. I wonder if my weary legs could carry me back to our motherland where I could be with you, my dear, once again, and together we could run off. Depart from this war and our woes and simply exist together until God takes us home. However, I lack the faith in myself to accomplish such a thing.

I'm sorry, my love. I pray you find a protector elsewhere, one who can carry not only his own, but your burdens as well. If this message reaches you, I pray you cherish the fact that I loved you with all my heart.

Addressed to my beloved Jeremiah

*Adjacent to the yellowed text, is a marble white placard.
It reads as follows:*

Letter to a Distant Lover
Unnamed Author
13th Century Britain

* Letter found in Northern England, buried deep beneath a bed of wildflowers and mugwort. Its author is an unnamed soldier.

The Cursed Wings of Icarus

Vincente Luzzardo

I looked out the window of my room to gaze at the only view I've known for the last three years. I knew the churning greenish-brown bayou so well I could have recited its trees, rocks, and dead yellow grass from memory. Two thick brushes of trees lined either side of the bayou, a home for all sorts of wetland creatures. Luckily, my seventeenth-floor apartment window allowed an unobstructed view of the water and only a fraction of the humid air that all native Southerners have grown to despise. I looked down at a turtle slowly crawling back home, the outline of its shell bobbing under the surface before shooting off like an arrow underwater. I wondered if the turtles and fish had ever looked back up at me too.

My daydreaming was interrupted by the rattle of the dog's collar from across the apartment. I felt the blood in my veins turn icy. Somehow, despite my dad's debilitating agoraphobia—the same sickness that compelled him to confine both himself and me into this shabby apartment—he had gotten the unbelievably stupid idea to adopt a stray dog he had seen wandering around outside. He had made some claim about the thing's blue-black fur being an omen, like he had ever been a spiritual man. We had to take it in and care for it. It was a black Labrador mix, with a splotch of white across its chest. Despite all his love for the thing, Dad had neglected to give it a proper name. We simply referred to it as “the dog.” I was fine with that, because a creature without a name is unloved—and that's exactly what the dog was. Not on my dad's behalf, of course. I was even beginning to think he loved the dog

more than me. Naturally, the day that he chose to buy a forty-pound bag of dog food over a birthday present for me was when that suspicion was confirmed.

I looked away from the window, every muscle in my body still, trying to hear where the thing had gone. I heard claws against the old hardwood grow closer, then further away as the dog passed by my room. My muscles relaxed. This past week has been some of the hardest of my teenage life. Adopting the dog had made my dad's life exponentially better, yet it had made mine twice as hard. It growled and snapped at me when I tried to go near it or anything it deemed its territory—which included all areas of the apartment besides my room. Its teeth had grazed me a few times, never drawing blood but hurting just enough to swell my resentment. Luckily, due to my dad's VA checks, he was home most days to feed and walk the thing so I didn't have to. I doubt either of them would even let me even if I tried.

I didn't know how much longer I could live like this. I was being made an unwilling prisoner in this already living nightmare. Sure, I could have left whenever I wanted to, but where would I go? My dad was all I had, and vice versa, I couldn't do that to him. Besides, I'd never seen Dad so happy. Just the other day, he went and checked the mail with the dog. Usually, the mail was a weekly affair that required a day of mental preparation and a personal escort to the mailbox. Yet he had gone up and went like it was nothing, leash in hand. He had even started taking the thing for walks along the back of the building, near the bayou. I had been resolute in getting rid of the dog after the first few days, but I couldn't ruin this for Dad. There had to be another way to make this bearable—just until he was well enough for me to leave.

Once I was absolutely certain the thing had returned to my dad's room, I got up from the window. My limbs were stiff with nonuse. I knelt and threw aside the covers that obscured the view of the food stores under my bed. Empty. I had expected them to last me at least until tomorrow morning when Dad would be taking the dog for its daytime walk, and I would be left to restock without fear. I miscalculated. I wouldn't even have anything to eat for dinner tonight unless I bit the bullet and made the trip to the kitchen.

I waited until I could hear my dad's snoring from the other room before I started to prepare. I made sure the parachute I fashioned from old bed sheets was still under my pillow, easy access should this mission go sideways. I had thrown it together while Dad was away, utilizing the novice sewing abilities I learned from a few of his books and my mom's old sewing kit.

I thought of her sometimes. What would she think of all this? I grabbed the old wicker basket that used to be hers. My memories were scarce. She passed away when I was young, too young to remember whether her death had been self-inflicted. "She was sick, Icarus, she's in a better place now. And she misses you very much," I remember Dad telling me, crouched down to meet my eyes, his face the portrait of feigned strength.

This mission would prove to be a test of patience and will. I pushed aside the memories of Mom and opened the window, just in case I had to grab that parachute and make a run for it. The ridiculousness of this situation was not lost on me. How was I taking so many precautions just so I could avoid a stupid dog? What had my life come to?

I then made my way back to the door and opened it just a sliver, making sure the coast was clear before I opened it completely.

I was just about done filling the basket when I heard the dreaded jingle of the thing's collar. Fuck. My body stiffened. I tried to listen to see where it had gone, but I didn't hear a single sound after that—neither claws on the hardwood nor the dreaded chime. I turned around slowly. To my utter horror, I was greeted by the silhouette of the dog, its throat rumbling with a growl. The rays from the streetlight outside caught in its eyes, making them glow a sickly kind of yellowish-green.

I tried to slowly back away to my room, but it was too late. I got as far as my bed, setting the basket down gently as it watched me from the doorway. I only had enough time to grab my parachute and run when it started barking. I made a sprint for the window, not knowing if the thing was advancing on me. I scrambled to secure the parachute over both my shoulders. In that moment, it dawned upon me that I had never tested this out beforehand. My heart hammered in my chest. I knew now wasn't the time for second guessing; I had to act or else I would die in this crappy apartment, my feeble memory from three years ago my only remnant of the outside world.

The windowsill ejected from under my feet as I flew from the window. The thing was still going crazy, paws up against where I had just been standing. I felt the linens balloon and catch the wind, relief washed over me. I was finally free. I rejoiced in my newfound freedom until I felt the dog lurch forward and tear holes into my parachute—my beautifully made wings. The book I read on aerodynamics and gravity would soon betray

me. I plummeted downward into the trees, snagging and snapping a few branches and bones. The force had shaken me free from the homemade parachute-wings and sent me diving into the muddiness of the bayou. I broke the surface and cracked my skull against the hardened clay at the water's floor.

I felt the current pull me away, the motion of the fish tails tickled me as they swam along. I heard the plunge of the turtles as they dove back into the water. My body wasn't my body anymore but just another part of the bayou.

**VISUAL ART /
ARTE VISUAL**



Butterfly | Danielle Anchondo



Egyptian Goose | Danielle Anchondo



Sunset in Hawaii | Danielle Anchondo



One of Four | Seth Cornell



Cielito rojo | Yvette Grutter



Secret Garden | Carella Keil



Childhood Dream Home | Abigail Marron



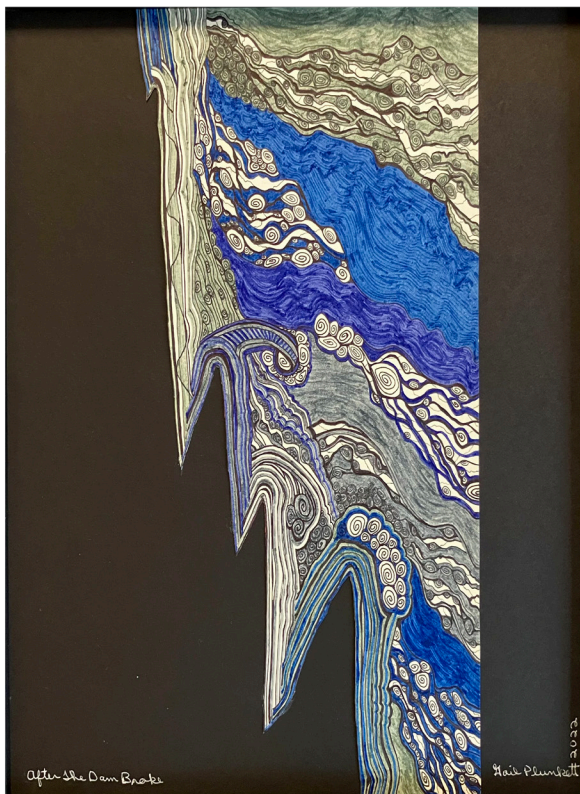
From a Dream. Doubt | Nasta Martyn



Girl and Fish | Nasta Martyn



I'm Looking for Crystals | Nasta Martyn



After the Dam Broke | Gail Plunkett



Escapee | Gail Plunkett



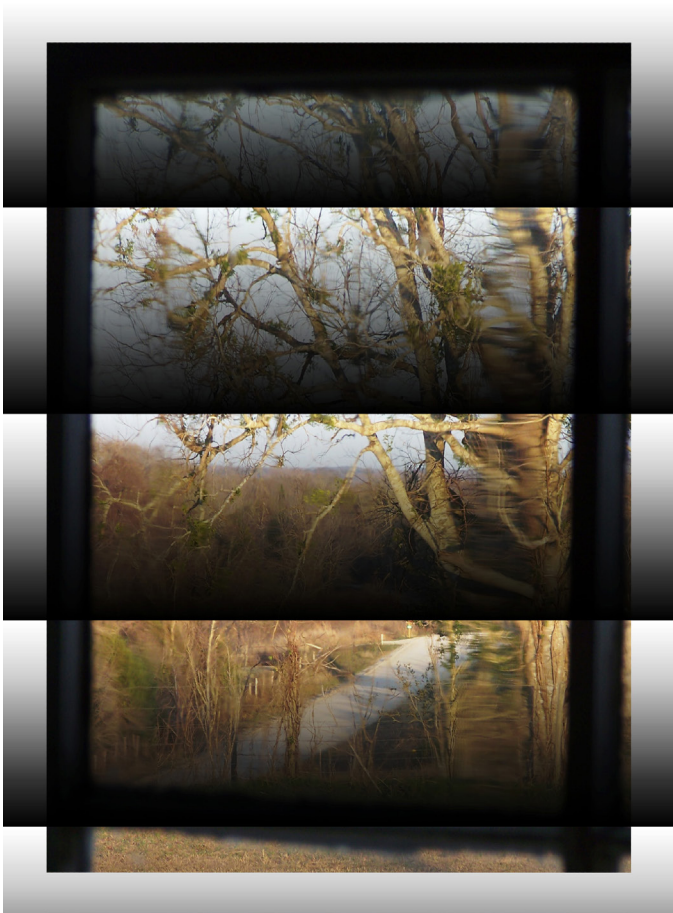
This Is Freedom | Gail Plunkett



After the Game | Christopher Woods



Linda's Walk | Christopher Woods



Tree Blinds | Christopher Woods

TRANSLATION / TRADUCCIÓN

〈躊躇〉——寫一位40歲的單身女郎

柯柏榮

我聽見一曲望春風
以德布西的節奏
佇妳心房門口
躊躇
蠕跼的詩句開始趑趄起來
提煉高分貝的低音，數想融化
冰封之春
燒燙的喙輓
結冰的眉心
妳拄出航的烏目睭
予淡淡藍光收束。俯頭。測量
若欲若毋的長度
「我已經過了幻想的階段」
妳的聲帶悠然，微微仔搐
我摸著一粒
過黃的子宮內
有成形的悲傷，輕輕
踢跂

Hesitation— For a 40-year-old Single Woman

Pek-êng Koa

Translated by *C. J. Anderson-Wu*

I hear a song of longing for spring
in the rhythm of Debussy
hesitating at the door of your heart chambers
curled-up verses start to leap
extracting high-decibel bass, dreaming of melting
the ice-locked spring
burning cheeks
frozen brows
your newly embarked black pupils
bound by a faint blue light. Lowering your head. Measuring
the distance between intimacy and isolation
“I have passed the stage of fantasies”
your graceful vocal cords slightly tremble
I touch
an overly ripened womb
with forming sadness inside, gently
kicking.

〈佇烏暗中獨行〉

柯柏榮

我佇烏暗中獨行
烏色的風，正摳倒掬
離經的喙口，吞落了然
日頭是無鹹泔的冰

我佇烏暗中獨行
白色的鍊，前揍後春
蜇扁的靈魂，絞尾手冷
我是一隻有體無翅的鷹

我猶原佇烏暗中獨行
金色的光，梳喉粧咽
藝術的音波，加溫提煉
聲帶是新出爐的弦

我猶原佇烏暗中獨行
綠色的肥，暝栽日種
阿母的話，致蔭臭賤
我是一蕊化身的蓮

Walking Alone in Darkness

Pek-êng Koa

Translated by *C. J. Anderson-Wu*

I walk alone in the darkness
Black winds whip to the right, slap to the left
Numbed mouth swallow in vain
The sun is tasteless ice

I walk alone in darkness
White shackles beating me front and back
Crushing my soul until my hands and feet turn cold
I am an eagle with no wings

I still walk alone in darkness
Golden light soothes my throat
Artistic soundwaves, warm and refined
Turn my vocal cords into new strings

I still walk alone in darkness
Green fertilizer nourishes me day and night
My mother's words shelter me from being humbled
Until I become a transformed lotus

Espectro

Alejandra Solórzano

porque la vida es breve y tú también estás sedienta.

—Adrienne Rich, trad. María Negroni

Para Kōan

Por las tardes
un fantasma,
la silueta de un pájaro pequeño
inmóvil
visita a la gata.

Tras la ventana
el arcano señala con su pico un signo
que ella deberá descifrar.

Ambos se comunican
a través de una cortina que respira con
dificultad sin saber confundida,
cuál de los dos es el espectro.
Desde la mesa
observo el acto.
Desconozco su lenguaje
la severidad compartida del silencio entre
ave y gata.

Specter

Alejandra Solórzano

Translated by Mauricio Espinoza

because life is short and you too are thirsty.

—Adrienne Rich

For Kōan

During the afternoon
a ghost
a small bird's motionless
silhouette
visits my cat.

On the other side of the window
the arcane bird's beak points at a sign
that she must decipher.

They communicate
through a confused curtain that breathes
laboriously without knowing
which of the two is the specter.
From the table
I observe the act.
I'm unaware of their language
nor the severity of silence between
bird and cat.

Lejos
el río tararea una canción
más borrosa cada vez
y me desplomo con ojos vendados,
trato de aferrarme
a unas notas absurdas, disonantes.

Me derriban,
temo los presentimientos que los gatos
guardan.

Si ella no descifra el signo
quizá sea arrastrada como yo
hacia donde todo
es desmembrado
y entregado sin prisa
al olvido.

Far away
the river hums a song
that fades by the second
and I collapse with blindfolded eyes,
trying to cling to
some absurd, dissonant notes.

They knock me down,
and I fear the premonitions that cats
hide.

If she does not decipher the sign
she may be dragged just like me
to the place where everything
is dismembered
and slowly surrendered
to oblivion.

Para curar

Alejandra Solórzano

Te desangrarás en odio
sin auxilio de nadie
expuestas al sol
tus manos desalojarán sus líneas al mundo
sin más indefensión que el presente.

Tu cuerpo
será embestido por el agua hasta que
 envenenada de dolor exilies
tu corazón
sobre *la marea más alta* del desdén.
Bestias insomnes lamerán tus ojos
escudados por la noche hasta despojarlos de
 la sal.

Por algún tiempo aborrecerás al Sol sobre las
 cicatrices
de todo lo que te habita.

Sin testigos
tu corazón azotado una y otra vez contra la
 piedra
amará cada muerte anterior.

Tu corazón
bufón viejo y sereno

Healing

Alejandra Solórzano

Translated by *Mauricio Espinoza*

You will bleed out in hatred
and no one will come to your aid
exposed to the sun
your hands will surrender their lines to the world
no more helpless than the present.

Water
will crush your body so much that,
poisoned by sorrow, you will banish
your heart
beyond *the highest tide* of contempt.
Sleepless beasts will lick your eyes
shielded by the night
until they are stripped of salt.

For a while you will hate the Sun
upon the scars
of everything that dwells in you.

Without witnesses
your heart beaten again and again against
the stone
will love each previous death.

Your heart
(serene old fool)

sentado frente al incesante banquete de su
carne de su miedo.

Después de algún tiempo
una noche descenderás desde las negras
dunas del mar nocturno como si
la voz de una madre
te convocara al sereno deber de curarte.

Dormirás sobre la escena en que fraguaron el
crimen de tu ánimo
despertarás una vez más
en la hora en que rompiste *la envoltura del*
engaño.
Desde el reino de tu silencio, observa
el catafalco de su bondad.

Lejana a su urdimbre
escucharás la jerga
el cortejo de su vacuidad
con que procuraron ensuciar tu sueño.
Danza de migajas y roedores

Alumbrado por la obsidiana
la boca de tu corazón pulido por las mareas
arrojará una delicada bolsa de terciopelo negro.

Adentro
espera.

sitting in front of the ceaseless banquet
of its flesh of its fear.

After a while
you will descend one night from the black
dunes of a nocturnal sea as if
a mother's voice
summoned you to the serene duty of healing.

You will sleep within the scene where your
spirit's crime was forged
you will wake up once more
at the exact time when you tore *the wrapping*
of deceit.

From your kingdom of silence, observe
the catafalque of its kindness.

Far away from its scheme
you will hear the jargon
the courtship of vacuity
with which they tried to tarnish your dream.
A dance of crumbs and rodents

Illuminated by obsidian
the mouth of your tide-polished heart
will hurl a delicate purse of black velvet.

Inside
it waits.

CREATIVE NONFICTION /NOFICCIÓN

* Content Warning: Self-harm

Anywhere But Here

Krysta Lopez

I hardly ever get to go anywhere on the weekends. If I do, it's to my Aunt Norma's house or church. My body was filled with excitement, thousands of crawling ants inside my skin, making me anxious to be out of the house. The bus ride to the UIL competition was the longest ride I had ever experienced. My elementary school classmates were eager to be able to go on an outing that didn't require their parents or money. I stared intently at the back of David's head. David and I have been in the same class since Pre-K. We both continued to glance out of the window, watching as the scenery changed. Chain-link fences became wood, brown dried grass became green and manicured. To nearby people, we probably looked creepy, dozens of eyes peering from the windows of the yellow bus, windows opened all the way. We stared in amazement at what a life without lack looked like. As the bus rumbled on, David and I hurriedly went over our notes. We had done Music Memory for the past three years. Although this was only an elementary level UIL competition, the competition was going to be ruthless.

As we entered the building, my eyes immediately fixated on the floor. The shine was incomparable, waxed to perfection for feet to be dragged over it. My classmates brought in grass and mud from their shoes, I shuddered in disgust. This school was too clean for us. Our teacher,

Mrs. Stanton, ushered us into the rows of lunch tables situated by the windows. As we sat down, I looked over the list of music that would be on the selection played by the judges. Truthfully, a lot of the music sounded similar, it was like the composers of the century teamed up together and decided to plagiarize each other's work. Mrs. Stanton could tell by my disgruntled face that I needed some extra guidance. She hobbled over, her huge thighs brushing the backs of other students as she tried unsuccessfully to glide down the aisle to me. The other kids snickered as she walked by. Without even hesitating she continued, her breathing was heavy, her chest rose furiously as she attempted to utter a word. She gave up, instead began to fan herself with a makeshift fan made of folded up papers. "Ok, dear," she finally mustered, "I can see that you are second guessing yourself. Don't stress too much about this. This is your third year in this competition, and I believe that you will do just as wonderfully as you did last year," and with that quick affirmation she hobbled off.

Our team was called into a classroom. I follow the waxed tile down the hall, counting the squares on the floor. I choose my seat in the front closest to the judges. I sigh, taking a deep breath in and out. I've got this. I attempt to shake off any unexplained jitters that have somehow entered my body. The judge proceeds to read from his manuscript, a long list of procedures and rules. I stare out of the window. The sun is beaming in the sky, dark clouds are floating from one side to the other. I'm brought back to reality by the judges stating, "And now we will begin, Music Memory." A woman's voice from the black boom box announces sweetly that this composition would be number one. The competition proceeded; the time that had dragged on the bus ride seemed to fly by in this classroom. Selection after selection played on. I imagined

this is what happened in a club, the DJ playing song after song to mindless dancers. Suddenly, a chime woke me from this daze, and the judge smiled, rising from his seat at the front of the room. "Great job guys, this is the end of the competition, your teacher should be very proud of all of you. We will have your scores within a few minutes." I sighed in relief. We were ushered out of the room single file and back to our original places in the cafeteria. Others from our room had already gathered there waiting for the other teams from our school to finish. Mrs. Stanton was beaming with pride, her forehead filled with perspiration. It seemed that not long after sitting back down our judge came back beaming from ear to ear. His comb-over pasted to his forehead, the little hair he was managing to save screaming for help. "Mrs. Stanton, I would like to inform you that your students have taken 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place in the Music Memory competition!" My heart swelled with pride, tears filled my eyes, yet anticipation of what I had earned kept me plastered to the bench.

The bus ride back was filled with laughter, joyful celebration, and the sounds of clinking medals against skin. I peered over the seats to see our school come into full view. I scanned the parking lot for my grandma's car. My eyes continuously hovered over each car, hoping that somehow hers would appear. Nothing. I exit the bus worried that somehow my freedom on this Saturday had managed to slip my grandma's mind. As I was mid thought, my aunt appeared before me. Her signature short bob swayed in the wind, her son Aaron in tow behind her. "Krysta Marie, I'm taking you home." Something wasn't right. Her voice sounded somber, her eyes vacant. She was so good at masking her emotions. I nodded and followed close behind. "So did you win?" My little cousin asked. "I got 2nd place," I huffed, suddenly the thought of

my prize seemed meaningless to the ominous signs that pointed in the direction of bad news. The dark clouds had somehow followed us back to our side of town. My aunt stared at the floor of her car. We rode in silence. I wished I was anywhere else but here.

We arrived at my grandma's house. The sight of her cobalt blue car calmed the millions of ants that continued to crawl inside my skin. "Hey, is my mom here?" I asked. My aunt got out of the car and continued to stare down. We entered my grandma's house; the bar door bumped my back as I attempted to slip inside after my aunt, who seemed to have been moving at double her usual speed. My grandma was sitting at her usual spot at the kitchen table staring out the window. She seemed smaller, fragile almost. Her face looked flushed. My stomach turned. "Grandma, where's my mom?" Her mouth turned upward like she tasted something bitter and cleared her throat. "Sit down, I knew that her being with that viejo was going to end badly." That was her name for him. She never addressed him by his name. She rose from her seat, her frame only reached 5 feet on a good day, but she was full of strength and wit. She had been a migrant worker in her younger days, her frame strong from the endless days of laboring in the fields, picking fruits and vegetables. Her eyes were a cloudy blue, they seemed to peer inside of me, murking my thoughts. "Your mother did something so stupid, very stupid. She didn't care about you or anyone else." My eyes widened. "Well, what did she do? Where is she?" My grandma grimaced again. "Luis!" she screamed. I could hear my grandpa's footsteps drawing nearer. He entered the kitchen standing behind my aunt, who I forgot was still even in the room. "Luis, I can't tell her, she is only a child." My grandpa thought on this for a moment, looked at the floor and shook his head. My grandma bit her lip

and shook her head, her gold earrings shook violently with her face. “Your mother tried to kill herself.” I stared at the floor; something must be very interesting about it for everyone to stare. The hunter green linoleum edges peeled upward ever so gently, exposing the brown wood boards that covered the floor of the kitchen. “She isn’t dead,” my grandma interjected, breaking me from my trance, “They took her.” “Took her where?” I asked weakly. “To a hospital in Houston, we are going tomorrow.”

The rest of the evening and night was a blur. My grandma and grandpa did not attempt to make small talk. They whispered in the other room to each other. My grandma asked several times if I was hungry. I wasn’t. I threw my medal into my drawer and laid on my bed for the rest of the evening. The ants that had crawled within my skin the entire day continued to march up and down my insides, this time it wasn’t a nervous jumble of marching but an organized troop pulsating, the consistency made me even more anxious. They never explained to me how she did it. I was scared to see what she would look like. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I begged my mind for sleep but received nothing.

I woke to the noise of movement outside the door. Sunlight filled the small window in the room I shared with my mother. I realized that this was one of the first nights that I had slept without her. I always dreamed of the day when we would move into our own house, and I would be able to sleep in my own room, but the thought of that now seemed weird. I could hear the thump of my grandma’s rolling pin bang against her cutting board. As I reached the entrance to the kitchen, I smelled a strong woodsy odor. I met my uncle Freddy’s gaze. His perfect haircut was trimmed just above his ears; his outfit was

perfectly creased in all the right places, and his huge watch shimmered under the light of the cheap lightbulbs. “What’s up girl?” I smiled weakly and proceeded to fill my plate with beans and bacon. I sat down and, without uttering a word, began stuffing my face as if I hadn’t eaten in days.

Shortly after, we piled into my uncle’s huge truck. I knew where we were going, but I wanted desperately to be anywhere but here. The aroma of my uncle’s cologne was making me motion sick. I stared out of the window, praying desperately for something to keep my focus off puking. The highways of Houston were foreign to me, endless loops of road intersecting like a spider’s web. At my seat in the back, all I could do was wonder what the hospital would be like. Would it be like in movies? The thought made a shiver crawl up my spine. Just as my thoughts were getting the best of me, there it was, in all its glory. Astroworld. The looping roller coasters were just as they appeared in the commercial. My eyes widened, and I longed to be able to get off the truck and enter the place where happiness blossomed. The flags flapped lazily over the theme park; people entered joyously. My heart dropped into my stomach, and tears welled in my eyes. Why couldn’t I be there instead? I wanted to have fun. I forced the tears back and coughed to choke back the emotions that selfishly entered my mind.

The outside of the hospital seemed like any other. The parking garage attached held an eerie feeling, the sensation of nausea overcame me once more. My uncle parked his truck nearest the entrance to the elevators. We all exited the truck and looked at each other in bewilderment. I felt so bad for my grandparents; they stared uncomfortably at each other. I don’t believe that they ever thought

they would be visiting any of their children in a mental hospital. My grandma held onto her shawl that draped around her small shoulders. The red color reminded me of blood, another chill crawled up my spine. We entered the elevator, my grandma, my grandpa, my uncle, my aunt, and me. The elevator dinged, once, twice, a final time to signal we were on the 3rd floor. We filed out of the elevator and came upon the welcome desk, only this welcome desk was not so welcoming. The two secretaries that took their place at this desk were not inviting. Both of their faces mixed boredom with disgust.

The time had come. I would come face-to-face with my mother. We were ushered into a room. The walls, the ceiling, and the floor were white. Not just any white, a shockingly translucent white. The walls were able to mirror back a reflection. I sat in the chair provided for me and stared at the tile. Not a speck of dirt or dust covered the floor. The grout of the tile was the cleanest I had ever seen. I smudged my Converse against the tile, wanting to make it dirty, wanting to create a skid mark and destroy the perfection. Just then the door creaked open, my mother entered the room followed by a burly man in white scrubs. Her face seemed aged, sunken, yet she wore a smile on her face. She sat in the chair across from me, and that is when I saw them. Taped up on both of her forearms was gauze, not white like the floor, the walls, or the nurse's scrubs. Red, stained, and repulsive.

Empty Homes

Cassidy Peavy

I could not spend the night in my childhood home. I used my freshly cut key to unlatch the aging lock. I could not help but notice the peeling of the teal paint lining the plexiglass door was more noticeable than it used to be. The tarnished gold door handle felt oddly unfamiliar in my hand. The knob was smaller and turned easier than I remembered. At least the noise the door made when it closed still sounded the same. If I had not heard it a million times, it might have made me jump. The light switch to the exterior lights was still in the same place but didn't flip off as easily as I remembered; I didn't care very much, but I was glad she left the light on. I took my single bag and blanket into my childhood bedroom and let them fall onto the bed. There was more cat hair than I remembered; I watched the small puff of air bring the strands to life, forcing them to arise and dance back down onto my clean blanket. I plugged my phone charger into the same main outlet I used when I last lived here. This outlet was more worn than the others scattered around the room. The inner plastic was stained a light yellow, and the outer cover had a little crack decorating the top right-hand corner and specs of light blueish gray from when we painted the room. The gray headboard had claw marks from the cats despite the tan scratching post near the window looking brand new. The sheets were not the exact ones I used growing up, but she never changed her tastes, considering they were the same light teal Egyptian cotton she has always preferred.

The sheets reminded me of the connotation she had when, in my teens, I replaced the baby blue sheets she liked on my bed with some cheap black Walmart sheets that I wanted. I tiptoed across the bedroom and quietly pulled open the closet doors, afraid the empty house would hear me snooping. I only searched for a second when I discovered the scratchy black material neatly folded and strategically hidden behind layers of pastels. I pulled the black cloth from the hiding spot it had been living in and dropped it down onto the cracked wooden desk. Another poof of cat hair tickled my nose, and I told myself I would have to hit this room with a quick dust and vacuum combo in the morning. I stripped the old sheet off with ease, considering she, as usual, hadn't gotten the edges completely over the corners of the mattress. I pulled the fitted sheet over the corners and spread my palms, arms, then body across the fabric, smoothing out the wrinkles and settling my body into the dead center of the bed. The position felt comfortable, familiar, too familiar. I forced my body back off the bed, standing in admiration of my black sheets, knowing that she would hate to see them back on the bed.

I brushed my teeth in the sink she bathed me in so long ago. The once white sink was stained, and the faucet had more watermarks than silver. The same bar of ivory soap remained in its usual spot by the window. I showered in the same unusually deep tub where I learned how to wash my hair. As her bizarre minty eucalyptus conditioner sat in my hair, I ran my finger along the caulking between the dirty blue tiles, following the same trail I used to trace when she bathed me. My finger had to take more turns than it used to because the tiles had spent the last twenty years caving under their weight, and it was finally starting to show. I dried my feet on the familiar cream mat and my

body with the same pale blue towels she had kept there for as long as I could remember. I wrapped my adult body in the child-sized towel that had easily engulfed my frame just a few years prior. The shelf in the hallway was lower than I had remembered, and as I walked past it, I felt a sharp, stinging pain in my foot. I peered at the source of the pain; a small dark splinter invaded the pad of my foot. The unwaxed hardwood floor had given me splinters my entire life. I only noticed then, as I struggled to remove the invader from my foot, how long it had been since the last time I felt that specific pain. I realized I had not had a splinter since moving out of this house. I wanted to curse as I hopped on one leg back to the bathroom, but the smell of the ivory soap that was placed into my mouth over and over again for my language as a child reminded me to watch my language. She was not there, nor did she still hold the authority to punish me, but I still stayed silent as I removed the splinter.

Darkness consumed my bedroom when I hit the light switch. The room was so much darker at night than I remembered. I peeked through the window and noticed the streetlight was out. I considered turning on the hall light like she did when I was young and afraid of the dark, but I decided against it because I was an adult now, and adults do not need nightlights. So, instead, I wrapped myself in the scratchy teenage sheet and my soft adult comforter. The comforter smelled like fabric softener, something she would never use because she hated artificial fragrances. The rosey aroma of the comforter stood out in the scentless room and made me hate the smell. The house was calm and quiet. The silence contrasted with the busyness of the night that I remembered. There was no television background noise or typing from the office; even the loud hum the air conditioner once made had fallen silent.

I lay there on the scratchy sheets in the too-dark room, surrounded by a too-quiet house, and realized that I could not do it.

I could not stand the horribly wrong familiarity surrounding me. Everything felt right and comforting, yet so wrong and uneasy. Everything reminded me of her, and everything whispered her absence in my ear. I stared at the open door to my bedroom. The door had stayed open every night I slept here. I usually closed the bedroom door at my own house, but it did not feel right to close this one. I stayed staring at the door. The open blackness of the hallway beyond it made me think about the billion times she stood right there and wished me sweet dreams with slight warnings of bed bugs and the boogie man. Eventually, my brain forced my body out of the bed. I gathered my blanket into a pile in my arms and stole my keys from the hallway hooks. I made my way to the front door, not bothering to put my shoes on. The door's familiar squeak screamed at me as I descended the single step out of the house. I tossed the blanket in the back seat of my car, my body following, landing atop the soft fabric. I exhaled deeply as I sunk my body into the stiff seats. I had never been in my own backseat before. My surroundings were entirely foreign, and I appreciated the unknown. My unfamiliar environment relaxed me, the soft street noise from down the block lulled me, the gentle glow of the moon comforted me, and finally, I was allowed to forget the empty home in front of me.

Between Tongues

Shayan Rauf

Two different figures dance on my tongue. I think in one way and by the time my lips start to move, it's an entirely different thing. What do you do when no language can do your thoughts justice? What is the language in which you feel? Can you translate it? The flavor is lost in translation. The taste of intensity is watered down when crossing over. The heat of the words on my tongue burns the roof of my mouth.

My mother taught me everything I needed in order to learn more. I remember the thick cardboard children's books and how she'd read them to me over and over again. I remember the colorful letter magnets scattered across the lower half of the fridge. I remember the writing books filled with dotted letters and the chunky Crayola markers. I remember the foam puzzles and the soft building blocks. I remember the soft, comforting melodies of nursery rhymes.

I discovered a song with lyrics strong enough to make my ribcage hurt. I rush over to my mother and place my headphones over her ears, eagerly waiting for her to react in a way that would align with my thoughts. But that's not what happens. She smiles, hands me back my headphones, and tells me it sounds nice. Nice? She did not understand. I look into my mother's eyes; they're desperately searching my face for clues. She's trying to translate my words into the language she understands, but it's not the same. I cannot make her feel what I feel. I want to share the experience with her. I know she wants to

share it with me too. So, I sit down with her and pick apart the lyrics. I convert them to words she can feel.

The language she taught me is the same language she does not feel. She loves me so much that she taught me something she herself does not understand. She began from scratch and ended up giving me the ingredients I needed to create my own dishes. Because of her, I can understand the language between tongues.

Pomegranates

Shayan Rauf

I remember watching my mother crack open pomegranates, her hands working with precision. The knife would slice through the skin, a faint cracking sound would be heard from within the fruit, and the deep blood-like juice would run down the sides of her hands, tracing the lines of her fingers, dripping onto her wrists, and often staining the fabric of her clothes. She always complains about the mess they make. She'd toss the precious seeds into a bowl and then sprinkle a pinch of salt over them. She'd watch as my father shoveled bite after bite while she began to slice into another one for herself. There was never any acknowledgment of the labor of love that had just taken place.

The act of opening a pomegranate seemed violent in its intimacy. There was something almost primal about it. The way the skin resisted, the way the fruit fought back as I pried it open, the fear of being exposed to the pomegranate's pulse, the seeds clinging to their home with an almost desperate grip. I would dig my fingers into the tough ring, feeling the membranes, the pulp, and the stubborn seeds. It was as if I was pulling them from their safe space, tearing them away from the one and only place they had ever known. The crimson stains on my fingers seemed to mark me as guilty. Of what? I didn't know. The mess that followed, the relentless streaks of red across my skin, was impossible to wash away. It clung to me, as though I had given a part of myself over in the process.

A pomegranate is like love in so many ways. It holds within it all the complexities of the heart. The sweetness that leaves you dumbstruck, the bitterness that coats your tongue, and the spaces in between that are neither joy nor sorrow, but something that consists of both. The seeds do not follow a single code. Some are soft and sweet, while others are sharp and tangy. You can't really understand it until you taste it, until you are stained by it. It requires you to be vulnerable, to peel back layers, to get your hands dirty. In the end, you discover that love, like a pomegranate, is something that can never truly be tamed, never fully contained. It is both fragile and defiant, worthy and feral. It is worth the mess.

* Content Warning: Suicide

Fleeing

Danya Marie Serrano

My abuelo put a bullet in his head the day before I started 3rd grade. I was back to school shopping with my parents at Alameda Mall when it happened. Miguel, a family friend, came to tell us the news. We were sitting in front of a fountain under a glass skylight at the center of the mall when he found us. I was eating around my Baskin Robbin's pistachio ice cream focused on reaching the cone when Miguel whispered something in my father's ear as he simultaneously pointed his index finger towards his temple. I remember seeing my mother collapse against my father as her body went limp from the blow. I remember her wails coming deep from within a place she has kept locked away since. She grabs one of my sticky hands as we all stumble out of the mall and into the light of day. Drops of green goo fall rhythmically on the pavement. I do not cry. I keep walking. I want to run.

My abuelo fled from Cuba in 1961 after having all of his material possessions taken away from him. Departing on a small plane as an exile, he headed towards Jamaica with his wife at his side, and my mother scrunched up on the armrest between them. He had worked as an electrician in Santa Clara, Cuba, a place known for its tamarind trees and now Che Guevara's Mausoleum. He was quite the handyman repairing televisions and other electronics for people all over the island. He was also an anti-Castro

political activist at a time when speaking out against the Cuban government meant risking arrest, torture, and execution. My abuela told me that shortly before leaving Cuba, my grandfather was contacted by some of the more prominent townspeople to repair a water line at one of Castro's speaking events. Instead of fixing it, he busted the water line and fled. He and his family were gone by the time shots were fired behind their house days after the event.

My mother recalls the prickles of the horsehair mattress and the humid air in the room where they slept when arriving in Jamaica. She remembers the government food handouts consisting of peanut butter, Spam ham, and milk powder when they arrived in Miami. She remembers learning English by watching television in a single-room apartment she shared with her parents and her two sisters. She remembers sitting outside for lunch at school because she was not allowed to sit in the cafeteria with her English-speaking classmates enjoying their hot lunches. She remembers all of this but hid it from me until I turned 30.

My mother majored in English at the University of Puerto Rico. She became a teacher and went on to obtain a master's degree at the University of Houston. When I was six years old, I would sit with her in a large auditorium in Farish Hall as she would take notes, and I would color and pretend to listen to the professor. In those days, she regularly read to me before bed and told me stories about how she spent entire summers in Puerto Rico, playing at the beach, running on the sand with her father by her side.

I have been running all of my life. I think it started when I was five years old and my abuelo taught me how to hit

a baseball and run around the bases. I spent my childhood and adolescence running on a softball field. At nineteen, running became a ritual. At thirty-five, I ran my first half-marathon and at mile 11, sweaty and exhausted, I saw an image of my abuelo pushing me forward. In that moment, I think about the frozen lime slushies he'd buy me at Astros games. I think about his library consisting of books of all genres—pieces of a puzzle of the man he was—a man I never really knew—a man I could never solve. Nearing the finish line, I continued to run until I could hear his laughter as I recalled the last full day of his life when I saw him release all of his multi-colored pet parakeets from their cages as they flew toward freedom.

I fly across the finish line, begin to walk, finally slowing down long enough to cry.

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Luanne Castle's stories and poems have been nominated for Pushcart, Best of the Net, Best Microfictions, and Best Small Fictions. She has published four award-winning poetry collections. Her hybrid memoir-in-flash will be published by ELJ Editions in December 2026. Currently, she lives with four cats.

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Laura Eppinger (she/they) knows that the Jersey Devil is real. Laura’s work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize as well as Best of the Net.

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Donna Faulkner was born in England and lives in Rangiora New Zealand. She's been published in *300 Days Of Sun*, *Windward Review*, *Havik*, *Fieldstone Review*, *New Myths*, *Bacopa*, and others. Her poetry collection *In Silver Majesty* was published by erbacee press, 2024.

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Sol Ignota holds a BA in English and writes fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. A lifelong writer, Ignota frequents subject matter including but not limited to: modern ruin, love lost, religion, and internal strife.

Mark Jodon is the author of two full-length books of poetry, *Miles of Silence* (Kelsey Books, 2024) and *Day of the Speckled Trout* (Transcendent Zero Press). He is an iconoclast artist and also serves on the board of directors for Houston Performing Arts. Mark lives in Houston, Texas.

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Pek-êng Koa (柯柏榮) is a poet in Taiwanese language, he also teaches poetry writing in Taiwanese language. Having been imprisoned for 17 years with two charges of robbery, Koa's poetry is often about incarceration as he started learning this long-repressed language and writing with it during his time in prison. Throughout his writing career, Pek-êng Koa has won 37 literature awards.

Krysta Lopez is a dedicated mother of two and the daughter of a single mother. She is currently pursuing a degree in Secondary English Education at the University

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Vincente Luzardo is a senior at the University of Houston-Downtown. He is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Technical Communication. He primarily writes horror fiction and dark fantasy. In his spare time, Vincente likes to crochet and play with his black cat named Raven.

Abigail Marron is a student at the University of Houston-Downtown majoring in Fine Arts with a minor in Spanish Interpretation. She is currently working on expanding her artistic skills with acrylic paint and digital editing software. After graduation, Abigail aspires to work as part of the animation industry or in graphic design for magazine publications.

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LaVern Spencer McCarthy has published twelve books of short stories, poetry, and two journals. Her work has been published widely in anthologies, magazines and newspapers. She is a life member of Poetry Society of Texas and lives in Blair, Oklahoma.

Lindsey Morales is a passionate mother of three, wife of a military veteran, and a dedicated forever learner. She has devoted most of her time, outside of raising her three children, to volunteering, diving headfirst into photography, and falling in love with storytelling. Lindsey

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Cassidy Peavy is a creative writing major with a passion for writing creative non-fiction, poetry, and thriller fiction. She enjoys exploring difficult themes, many that resonate with people of a similar age and background. She is always working to deepen her writing and desires to elicit deep emotional responses from her audience.

Gisele Phalo is a native Houstonian with a passion for writing and family. When she's not immersed in her cli-fi series, she's exploring her creativity through drawing. Always balancing work, family life, and her artistic pursuits, she thrives on storytelling that blends the personal with the speculative.

Gail Plunkett is a self-taught visual artist and writer working in Houston. Her inspiration is the experimentation and discovery evident in ancient rock and cave art, folk art, and outsider art. She is currently working on a series of painting delving into the endless possibilities presented by circles.

Shayan Rauf is a senior English major at the University of Houston-Downtown. They enjoy writing creative nonfiction. Rauf likes to think that writing is a great tool to calm the mind and express emotions. Rauf is constantly working to improve their writing and engaging in new genres. They are excited about their journey as a writer and all the possibilities it may hold both academically and personally.

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