

THE BAYOU REVIEW
Spring 2026

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THE BAYOU REVIEW
Spring 2026

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FICTION / FICCIÓN

DINNER'S GETTING COLD

Virginia Lonaker

“Dinner’s ready!” I call up to my daughter. “I made chicken enchiladas!” They’re one of her favorites, reliable enough to coax her out of her room. She’s likely curled tight beneath her oversized solid purple comforter, thumbing through the latest social media feed, cocooned in the glow of her phone that’s brighter than her mood. I give her five minutes before calling again. No one likes to feel rushed. “Your dinner’s getting cold,” I say, not shouting; my words hang measured and deliberate toward her closed door. I’ve given her enough time for her to recoup, and she knows she should make an appearance.

When she got home earlier, she slammed the front door with a look colder than the winter air outside. She dropped all her belongings haphazardly by the stairs, refusing to put them in their designated spot. She went straight up to her room, each step heavy, each one with a thump, as though she’d just been grounded. Her ponytail was loose, one off-white sock down to her ankle, while the other blue sock stubbornly stayed up to her calf. She paused in her bedroom’s doorway, her gaze cutting, daring me to say a single word before she retreated into her room. I know her better than she does, and I wasn’t going to be a contender against the attitude she’d brought home.

Deciding she’s finally ready to rejoin the world, she makes her way down the stairs, her steps lighter, almost floating. This time, her socks are off, and her ponytail

is gone. Her face is blank, except for the wide, smiling white rabbits that decorate her pajamas. As she moves toward the dinner table, she glances at her out-of-place backpack and sticks out her pinkish-red tongue in defiance of the day she's had. She plops into the chair without a word; her mood is heavy and unspoken as she stares at her food.

I'm just relieved she's here. I knew her favorite dish would lure her out of a place that felt safe and cave-like. Steam curls from the chicken enchiladas, rich with the scent of melted cheese and hot tortillas. I don't even care if our dinner is silent or one-sided until we've finished our plates. I let her settle in without pressing.

I face her, waiting for her to come back to life. She doesn't need to talk about her day, but to say anything. Her root-beer eyes meet mine, shimmering, ready to say something. I wait, every second stretching, as if both she and dinner were simmering down softly together.

* Content Warning: Suicide

CANDLES

Talia Servin

About eleven percent of fatal falls happen from heights between six and ten feet. You think about this on the ledge of your apartment window, which is roughly forty feet from the rain-speckled sidewalk. Umbrellas are bobbing below—not the vibrant ones you remember from college, but the dreary ones that adults buy because there comes an age at which people forfeit the desire to stand out in idle ways. Your bedroom lights are off. In fifteen minutes—less, now that you’ve wasted time thinking about it—you will be thirty years old.

In the morning, your best friends will arrive with cigarettes (which are abundant in France) and a fellowship (which is not). They suggested a celebratory escapade to the Eiffel Tower (over one thousand feet tall). You’ve seen it, of course, but never up close. This is a disgrace because you are less than one mile away from it and have lived in this place for nearly a decade. Your refusal to commit to the metric system is a disgrace also.

The night is silken, the sky like a bolt of fabric someone rolled out, the stars squeezing themselves through a screen of light pollution. *Light pollution* sounds like an oxymoron but isn’t. Misplaced light causes harm, that’s what *light pollution* means. And misplaced light—you hold your hair off your neck—can mean anything,

really. Get creative. It can mean toxic positivity or ruined Polaroids. It can mean the time your brother held a magnifying glass into a sunbeam and charred half an anthill. It can mean forest fire.

Fire. There are right and wrong places for fire to be. Forest: wrong. Candle: right. There is a birthday cake (periwinkle and showy with cursive letters) on your floor, next to the bed. The cake has a footprint in it but no candles, because the candles (all but one) are still in their box, atop a pile of mail, which is also on your floor. You crane your neck to look. You can't see the candles, because they are all on fire. They are on fire because you lit them (all but one). The mail is starting to burn.

This rain is unfortunately timed. Again, you think of your brother, who always seemed to be unfortunately timed, too. He is much older than you. Possibly you think of him because the time you've spent living here is equal to the time you've spent not talking to him. Adrenaline stirs up all kinds of things. Really, though, you feel quite calm. You figured this moment—because this moment has always been just an alphabet's length behind you—would be *more*. Maybe that's why you lit the candles. You're not too sure of anything just now.

Your stack of mail (bills: overdue, accounts: overdrawn) is a small supernova. Carpet blackens and wilts around it. Your most immediate failures are now the brightest spot in your whole apartment, and you laugh. Because it's *funny*. It's funny because your brother was The Problem, and you were The One We Never Have to Worry About, and now you are The One Who Set Her Room on Fire. This is *funnier*. You laugh again.

Someone peeks out from under their umbrella and sees you up on the windowsill. They look away. Possibly they think you are happy-birthdaying with wine and cheese, and there is a party inside. You stop laughing. Subversion of expectations is funny, but loneliness is decidedly not.

A thin layer of smoke hovers lazily about the room. Balloons drift through the haze, their ribbon tails wisping over the floor. Lost at sea.

You've had good times. You've been red-lipped and shitfaced, tipping backwards out of a backseat window. You've been sequined and dancing under a web of neon lights and bad music. You've been naked and wanting in a tangle of desperate limbs. You've tracked confetti over the floors (kitten heels, hardwood) and received spontaneous forearm ink from a side street (a cactus, no significance, *un tatouage pour vous, mademoiselle?*) and sobbed into strange shoulders that didn't know your name. Sometimes *you* didn't know your name, or you used different ones. Or you withheld it because a full glass or a full moon underscored the intimacy of identity and you were afraid.

The fire is taking its time, savoring every memory, every step that led you here. Rain has soaked the bottoms of your pajama pants, so you briefly dip back inside and take them off because you can do whatever you want. You climb back out wearing only a shirt. There's frosting on your left foot. The bottle of something (*gin, that's right, because—*) is on your bedside table, so you reach your arm in to get it. A moment like this should not be so quiet.

“Hello,” you call down to the steadily-diluting umbrella crowd, and your voice could be any voice belonging to anybody.

Someone glances up. You wave. The person sees you drinking from the bottle and wearing no pants. These things mean you are drunk (do they?) (are you?), so the person goes away.

“It’s my birthday,” you call again. It’s not *really* your birthday, not for another ten minutes or so. You don’t know exactly how long it’s been; you’re not wearing a watch.

You look at the bottle. To yourself: “It’s my birthday.” You peer over your shoulder into the furnace of festivity. It’s growing nicely. You pour the gin onto the carpet under the window.

If The Problem were here, if he could see you, he would feel responsible. Which would be unnecessary, because it’s not his fault. It’s not anyone’s fault. You’ve already tried assigning blame for the infinitely widening and withering chasm, you’ve tried defacing the people who raised you, you’ve tried recollecting, relocating, reframing. Responsibility is made-up. If something’s going to happen, it’ll happen with or without your knowing consent. It’ll find a way.

A greedy tongue of flame curls up and licks the curtains. Your heart stutters excitedly. *So soon? Alright.* You watch as the fire scales folds of intricate lace and weaving. People will begin to notice soon. They’ll contort themselves to point and stare and sing *joyeux*

anniversaire. At last, celebrity and celebration! At last, wonder!

The rain is letting up.

You remember the candle, the one you took from the box. It's in the breast pocket of your pajama top. You pull it out and—*this is going to look so cool*—light it with the burning curtains. The general brilliance of your room is capturing attention. Heads turn. Someone gasps (*Mon Dieu!*). Smiling, you hold the candle between your teeth—the cigarette you'll never have, because your friends aren't coming, because you don't have friends. You know half the city but you don't have friends. When you put it like that, it's sort of pathetic.

Punctually, the balloons rupture. The bed is on fire, the desk is on fire, your pants are on fire. Candle: right. Bedroom: wrong. Except, you did this on purpose. Yes, you are the one in control. You did this. Oh, glorious liability. *You* are The Problem. Now let them worry.

There is a pocket of blank space where the people have abandoned close proximity to the disaster. Someone has probably called the police by now. You are probably thirty. Will you leave this world how you entered it, kicking and screaming? Will you feel the mist at your back? Will you see the sky, or just the impression of it? So much is still unknown. The one certainty is that you will not *fail*. You won't be a *failure*. And you can live (die) with that.

You turn around, swinging your legs over the windowsill. The heat is flat against your face. The

world is on fire. You tilt the candle into your hair and then that's on fire, too.

When you relax backwards into open air, when your knees lift from the ledge, you think the room is full of people. You think your family is there and that one person who never hugged you but still might. You think they hung some sort of garland. You're missing it, you're missing the party. Confetti soles, disco fluorescents, bass thumping in your chest cavity. *Wait for me, I'll be right back.* Except you won't, which is a shame. *Rain, rain, go away.* Now that you're looking at it, the night is less satin, more velvet. You're covered in light pollution. Exiting how you entered. Ablaze.

It's my birthday, you think, falling. And your mouth tastes like wax.

TRACKING BATS

D. W. Davis

The night has turned humid, rife with ragweed and diesel. Danny nestles his head against the sandbag, eyes on the cloudless sky, stars passing steadily by overhead.

“There’s one,” Mac says.

Maybe he points, but Danny’s eyes move instinctively in the direction of the nearest streetlight. A dark form flits through its dim yellow glow. Then another, or maybe the same, circling back around.

“You think moths would learn not to fly there,” Mac says. “If they kept getting eaten and everything.”

The pickup hits a pothole as the streetlight moves out of their view.

“They don’t live long enough to learn anything,” Danny says, thinking it sounds right.

“Do they even have brains?”

“Everything has a brain. Everything living.”

Danny gives the obligatory snort, because he and Mac aren’t particularly close, they’re both friends of Gary, and Danny’s stepfather has been trying hard lately. Going to work on time. Coming home for dinner, smelling of oil and grease and nothing more. Still sips his whiskey of an evening, watching game shows and

then whatever movie follows, but the bottle empties slower, lasts him most of a week. Danny's mom calls these baby steps, but the way she says it suggests she really thinks they're bigger. Danny thinks sometimes things are exactly the size they appear to be, for better, worse, or nothing.

Another streetlight. Danny notices it first this time and raises his arm. "Over there. Three of 'em."

"Jesus. Didn't know they got that big," Mac said.

Danny is also impressed. "I don't think they normally do around here. But in Asia there's the flying fox. They have a wingspan of like five feet."

"Fuck. They drink blood?"

"They eat fruit, I think."

"Oh." Like this is a letdown—which, Danny can see, it sort of is.

A car speeds by them. Heavy bass permeates the night. Mac says, "I love this song, man," but Danny isn't even sure it is a song, not at this volume. It has been transformed into something physical, no longer heard but felt, reverberating deep beneath the skin. His teeth rattle as the truck bed shakes. He feels the metal reverberating against his fingertips, up his arms and into his spine. The stars dance and shimmer overhead. Danny closes his eyes and still sees them, still feels them. Then the car is past, and silence descends upon them again.

Danny wipes sweat from his forehead. He wonders if there is a destination tonight, or if Gary is only driving around. He wonders what Gary is thinking about. Girls, probably, but maybe other stuff. Not bats, Danny is sure.

Mac points out more. Danny says, “I used to make bat houses.”

For a moment, the only sound is the rumble of the truck and the twang of a steel guitar on the radio. Danny can feel Mac shift beside him. He waits.

“Bat houses,” Mac says.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Danny shrugs, figures that isn’t enough, and adds, “I dunno. They eat mosquitos. So.”

“You don’t think that’s weird?”

“I did a demonstrative speech on it. Seventh grade, remember those? I built a bat house in front of the rest of the class. Got an A.”

Mac huffs. “I did a golf swing. Used a sand wedge. Got a C. Like Mr. Snyder knows shit about golf.”

In the cab of the pickup, Gary adjusts the radio dial, cranking up an old Alan Jackson tune. It’s one of his dad’s work trucks, an old bench seat GMC with no satellite radio or aux input, which Danny thinks is

amusingly quaint. The eighteen hundreds must've been rough, Gary had said, within earshot of his father, who hadn't deigned to reply. Danny likes Gary's father. A man who's built a regional empire out of nothing but a high school education and elbow grease. Danny doesn't compare Gary's father with his own father, off somewhere on the West Coast. Such comparisons are frustratingly pointless. But he does sometimes feel Gary doesn't appreciate the accomplishments his bloodline has proven itself capable of. Danny can't imagine himself having much of a life without going to college, and doesn't even see one beyond that, either. Dreams are complicated and fleeting, difficult to define. Danny doesn't want to be anywhere other than here, but existence no longer seems capable of justifying itself.

Danny sees more bats but does not point them out. They are everywhere tonight. Their ubiquity does not detract from the satisfaction he feels in seeing them, but there is no obligation to point all of them out, especially if Mac is incapable of appreciating them the way Danny does. Beauty and wonder are always there for those paying attention.

"Bat houses," Mac says again. His voice is flat. There is no judgment.

Danny nods, the back of his head rubbing against the sandbag. He does not feel the need to elaborate. He watches the stars and the streetlights and feels the rumble of the pavement against his back. It is a placid summer night and he takes it all in and tries not to let it go. It will disappear of its own accord. For now, he smiles. For now, he is here, and it is enough.

FOOL

Grace Tschlis

There is a clown on the train. I am counting my breaths and staring at the ceiling, but there is still a clown on the train. He is sitting, legs crossed at the ankle, four seats to the right, and across from me. His red lipstick is smudged and his blue wig is drooping slightly over his ear. He is scrolling on his phone silently. As we roll to a stop at the next station, a young boy and his mom hop on. The boy screams in excitement at this serendipitous meeting. His mom asks if the clown will take a picture with her son. No, I want to scream. *Something is wrong! Don't go near him!* But I stay quiet, frozen in my fear. How pathetic of me.

My phone buzzes. My sister, the eldest, the smartest, the overall best.

Are you coming??? Where are you??

I bounce my leg up and down to convince my body it can move. I cannot let this clown prevent me from texting my sister back. She would not believe me. I set the carefully wrapped bouquet of tulips in the empty seat next to me. The florist kept asking me what was the occasion. Why tulips? Aren't the tulips so beautiful? Yes, I replied. *So beautiful.*

On my way! I type.

My phone auto-corrected to add an exclamation point. Unfortunately.

A teenage boy begins to watch a March Madness game recap video without headphones. I am delighted by the distraction, until, the clown looks up. He is looking for the source of the noise. He is now wearing glasses. Large, rectangle wire-trim glasses. I did not notice them before. His nose looks so familiar. Short and petite. A nose I have seen before.

I think he is going to say something to the boy. I am sitting between this teenager and the clown. I could switch train cars. I could put in earplugs.

Does the face paint stain his glasses? How often does he clean them? I wonder.

The clown settles back into his seat. The train rattles north. I try to relax.

My sister texts back. **Hurry please! I can only delay for so long...**

Moving as fast as I can, I reply.

Dad is pacing in the back alley.

Go join him, I type. But then delete it. **Will b there soon,** I write instead.

The clown pulls out a cigarette from his jacket pocket. The blue and white striped jacket is full of cigarettes, apparently. A different kind of magic trick. My mom would have liked him. The self-confidence it requires to ride the train in full clown makeup. She would have said that we needed to be more like him. She would've looked at us sternly, pushed up her glasses, and said that us girls need to fight a little harder in this life.

He doesn't light the cigarette, just rolls it between his index and middle finger. He sighs deeply.

I attempt to smooth out the wrinkles of my black dress and comb through my hair with my fingers. Two weeks ago today, I visited my mom in the hospital, to say our goodbyes. An intense dread has lived with me ever since. Death comes in threes. I am praying that I am lucky enough to mourn only one death. It is more than enough for me. My sister doesn't believe in this superstition because she doesn't believe in any superstitions. She is a lawyer and says she doesn't have time for my theories. As a barista, I have plenty of time.

My mind once again wanders to the clown. God, how I wish he would get off the train. I look out the windows of the subway car and see only black. Defund all clown schools, I think. We've had enough.

I wonder if this clown has ever been to the coffee shop where I work, dressed up in costume or otherwise. What would he order? An iced matcha? Perhaps a single shot of espresso and nothing else.

My sister has told me five times in the last two weeks that I am not mourning correctly. That I seem distracted, like I'm living far away on some distant planet. I tell her I will do my best to cry more in front of her. She rolls her eyes. I am very much the youngest sibling. Dad is taking it the hardest. He doesn't deserve to see his only daughters sobbing harder than him.

The train stops in the middle of a tunnel.

“We are standing momentarily waiting for signal clearance,” the automated voice says.

The clown barely registers this announcement. He pulls out a makeup wipe and starts erasing the bright paint from his cheeks. The red and white residue blend together, creating a surprisingly nice shade of pink. However, the red paint around his eyes is thick and stubborn. Blood appears to be pouring from his eyes. He looks cadaverous. I am sweating through my dress.

We are moving once again and I rub my forehead. I can hear my mom reminding me to breathe. Everything will be okay. You and your immediate surroundings are not on fire. I am so distracted by her voice, I almost miss my stop. I hop out of my seat and step onto the platform. The clown is right behind me. I trip over a loose piece of tile and someone’s long arm prevents me from falling forward. I feel a hand on my shoulder. The grip is firm but tender.

“Are you okay?”

I turn around and see my mother. Her dark brown eyes and long hair, the way it was before the chemo. She is smiling and wearing the pearl earrings I gave her for mother’s day. For a nanosecond, I feel peace, and the world that has been moving 100 miles a minute since she died, slows for me. I blink and my mother is gone. The clown has removed his hand from my shoulder and is waiting for my response. I cover my mouth to stop from screaming. His nose is small, dainty. My mother’s nose. I wiggle from his touch and run up the stairs, pushing aside an elderly woman carrying her large shopping bag. I keep running and do not look

back. I finally feel the cold air on my cheeks, and I realize I left the tulips on the train. A stranger will find the bouquet of my mother's favorite flowers. I hope they place them in a pretty vase on a windowsill with lots of natural light. I hope they are appreciated. I keep running.

THREE STARS: THE BLUES

Christopher Stolle

Vega (of the Lyra cluster in the Milky Way galaxy) purports to be a falling eagle but looks like a smudged cerulean disc. I don't think discs can fly without manual propulsion. We visited last week and we couldn't find a decent hotel, settling for a dimly lit hostel with dirt floors. Our food was good but never hot. We took a sightseeing tour and constantly felt underwater. Our voices changed and we didn't regain our normal locution for more than a week. I can't totally dissuade anyone from visiting, but there are better destinations out there. While I'd put Deneb (of the Cygnus cluster, also in the Milky Way) on the list of more stellar beauties, we found conditions there unbearable. It was so hot, the sweat of the sweat of the sweat couldn't last a second. We felt like exploding raisins, turning into the mushiest of the mushiest. I tried my best to not look like windshield splatter. There are no indoor settings, thus no cooling systems, because, we were told, that would ruin the aesthetic. It doesn't want to forfeit its magnitude ranking, which I guess one wouldn't want to lose in this competitive universe. But the absolute worst place we visited was Altair (of the Aquila cluster in the Milky Way), which is a puckish, sinister little blot of disaster. It's supposed to be one of the brightest celestial bodies to exist, but even with our high-powered craft and the most noble of all navigational systems, we squandered more than a dozen landings because of blinding luminosity. What's worse, once we finally settled, we were instantly jolted about from the thin rotation. We had no advance warning about this. We also

didn't know about the severe oblation, which we hazily noticed on our descent despite overcast conditions (which my father's ancient astrolabe could not predict either). This pillar of heaven shook our foundations and turned us into shallow craters. We returned to our craft immediately and we headed home. Sorry for this long review, but I wanted to warn everyone to not take the Summer Triangle trip in winter.

SPIDERS

Terry Sanville

Gary sat in his control booth and stared at his computer monitors. Other light displays blinked on and off in a rhythm that seldom varied or faltered. From his elevated soundproof perch he looked out onto the dimly lit assembly floor. Silver and yellow machines reached their pincer-like arms toward their prey, touching it at their assigned spots. Sparks flew, then the line moved on to the next station. The welding room seemed to be operating to spec.

He had just started his midnight shift, the coffee in his cup still warm. The streamed music from some unknown band playing K-pop proved only moderately annoying. He reached for his tablet and opened the file of his latest purchase, a spy novel where Argentinians had infiltrated the CIA. Gary read with one eye on the tablet and the other fixed on the displays, a talent he'd developed while working for Sundial Motors for the past three years.

Strange shadows danced among the spiders, the nickname he'd given the welding machines. The contraptions with their jointed arms reminded him of the hairy tarantulas he used to play with as a kid in Arizona, freaking his mother out. Three rapidly blinking red lights disrupted that memory.

Out on the floor, Units 2, 7, and 12 had frozen in the down position, sparks flying as their spot-welding tips continued to carry current. The line had automatically

stopped. Gary hit the kill switch. All units returned to their upright positions, power to the robotic welders extinguished.

Damn. Third time it's happened, he thought. At least it'll keep the techs awake. He picked up the phone and punched a button.

"Yeah, this is Gary on Line Delta. I've got three welders malfunctioning. I've stopped the line."

On the other end, Alfonzo chuckled. "Same shit as before? Damn, Gary, what the hell are you doing?"

"Sitting here thinking about your mama. Just bring your crew and fix it. I've been down three times already this month."

"On our way."

"Bring me a roast beef sandwich from the machine, will you?"

"Will do. But how can you eat that shit? It's been in there since Christmas."

"The magic of processed food. Just bring it."

"Okay, it's your guts."

Gary hung up the phone and returned to reading his spy novel. The hero had just apprehended the gorgeous Argentinian mole in the CIA and they were having sex in the back of an old Bradley troop carrier. Looking up he spotted Alfonzo's four-member crew tending to the

malfunctioning machines. Alfonzo glanced at Gary's booth and saluted, grinning.

In the background, one of the technicians worked on Unit 7. Without warning, its metal leg silently swung wide and slammed against the tech, sending the poor woman sprawling. Alfonzo spun around and stared then grabbed his radiophone.

“Gary, what the hell. Didn't you kill the power?”

“Yes, the whole line is down.”

“Something's really messed up.”

“Yeah. Be careful. Those spiders can throw a mean punch.”

“Spiders?”

“I'll explain later.”

Alfonzo joined the rest of his crew and helped the injured woman to her feet. She looked badly shaken, bent over, holding her right side. Another crewmember helped her through the exit door, on their way to the emergency EV and a trip to the nearby urgent care facility. With such a small human crew staffing the plant, the company had shut down its in-house infirmary years before.

Alfonzo joined Gary in his booth, laid a green-looking roast beef sandwich on the counter.

“How is she?” Gary asked.

“It got Eleanor in the ribs. She’ll need x-rays for possible breaks or cracks, probably be down for a few days.”

“Have you ever seen anything like this happen before?”
He pointed to the assembly floor.

Alfonzo nodded. “Two weeks ago, same shit over on Line Alpha . . . and a month before that on Line Kappa.”

“Any clue what’s going on?” Gary asked and suspiciously eyed the sandwich.

“No clue. All the units checked out. But tell me, did you notice anything before the malfunction?”

“Like what? The board was totally green . . . until it wasn’t.”

“No, I mean out on the floor?”

“Only some shadows . . . kind of weird.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Why? What’s up?”

Alfonzo grinned. “Barb over on Line Alpha thinks those shadows are the ghosts of past auto workers, coming back for revenge after being fired when the plant went robotic.”

“Really, that makes a good story, but no sense.”

“Yeah, that’s what I told her.”

Gary played along. “I can see why the ghosts would be pissed. The company laid off hundreds, maybe thousands, over the years. That’s a lot of psychic anger. But why take it out on us?”

Alfonzo shrugged. “You ever wonder how any of this is going to work? Is anybody looking at the big picture? If machines continue to replace people, what are folks going to work at?”

Gary sighed. “And who’s going to buy the cars if industry becomes automated? And then there’s AI and all the service and processing jobs that’ll be lost. The cost of doing business may drop but so will the customer base.”

“More rich dudes, more unemployed workers, lower wages, and no money for retraining.”

“I’m glad I’m working now.”

Alfonzo frowned. “Don’t be too sure about that.”

“Why? What have you heard?”

“Management is testing AI programs in their Louisville plant that’ll replace all monitoring functions and quality control—you guys.”

“Ah hell.”

“And it won’t be long before they have robots repairing robots.”

“And the Chinese will still do the work cheaper. How do you feel about going to work in Shanghai?”

Alfonzo frowned. “My family would hate it. So much for bringing manufacturing home to the good ole USA.”

Gary bit into his green roast beef sandwich and frowned, his stomach taking a turn. He wondered if the emergency EV would be back in time for another trip to the urgent care center where a human medical technician *might* still be working.

OMEN AT SUSURRO DE ORO

R. G. Silas

The Texas desert is a ruthless landscape of ineffable madness and death. Vicious wildlife hunt and feast on the drifting and isolated prey. Harsh winds tear the flesh, gorging on the blood and bones of humans and animals alike. A terrifying void of endless hunger stalks the vast wildernesses consuming all in its path.

David Ortega was the sheriff of Susurro de Oro, a town outside of El Paso. It supplied troops and goods for the Mexican and Civil Wars. Now, in times of fragile peace, the forgotten military town mainly served as a hub for silver mined from the nearby mountains. As a veteran of the Battle of Laredo, Sheriff Ortega was grateful to be stationed in a quiet, remote town. It was early spring of 1872 when a plague, worse than the horrors of a war, flooded the town.

The animals first sensed the black tide on the horizon, barreling against the breeze. The felines were the first, caterwauling like an overwhelming chorus on top of rooftops, barrels, and wagons. The canines yelped and howled, running indoors and cowering beneath beds. The horses ejected their riders off saddles and bolted east with mad haste. The pigs from the town's only hog lot flattened the wooden pen and raced out of town. The chaos shook the townspeople on Main Street. Sheriff Ortega burst out of his office, hearing the commotion from outside his door. An unnatural chill coursed through his body. He turned, looking towards the outskirts of the town.

“Sandstorm!” he yelled. “Everybody inside!”

Vendors abandoned their stations as they rushed to hide in the nearest building. Standing in front of his office, Ortega watched the dance hall girls patrolling the street rush back inside the cathouse. Every building had its windows quickly boarded and barricaded. Doors slammed shut with wet towels; blankets stuffed into door gaps.

The sky was now a deep brownish red like a wound. The black wave was getting closer, swallowing everything in its path like a swarm of locusts. The winds turned fiercer. A pair of high-pitched whinnies and a scream of frustration grabbed Ortega’s attention.

“I know! I know!”

A portly man was hunched over the hitching post in front of Cassilda’s Saloon. The man was holding his hat, attempting to keep it from flying away, while trying to his horse’s reins from where it was attached. The door of the saloon slammed shut; leaving the man struggling in the face of the storm.

“Phil! Get inside here!” said Ortega, waving him over. “Leave the goddamned horses!”

“I won these fair and square, Sheriff!”

A flash of green and yellow flew above him, knocking his wide brimmed hat loose from his hands and out into the storm.

The first parrot was blind with distressed feathers and a cracked upper beak.

“Squawk! In the air, a form that was like a man, yet not a man!”

The second parrot, with more black than green feathers, hopped around with its only leg and stated.

“Squawk! Swifter than leopards and fiercer than wolves!”

The horses kept screeching. Phil was still trying to free them. The horses were going mad with fear, trying to rear back on their hind legs and tugging from the post. Cursing, Ortega retreated to his office and pressed his weight against the door, locking it. He rushed around the jailhouse, locking and boarding the windows.

Setting a wet rag at the door gap, he heard the horses through the raging winds and sands. The screeching grew louder and turned guttural. Ortega sat with his back against the door, clamping his hands against his ears. He tried to ignore the horses being eaten alive. The whinnies grew to demonic shrieks. The violent wind charged through the town. Bursts of people’s screams echoed then became muffled. He did not know how long he trembled against the door. When the winds turned still, he opened his eyes.

The parrots were still squawking. Pressing his ear against the door, he only heard silence. Getting on his feet, he noted that the windows remained unbroken. Ortega closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

A thick blanket of hazy darkness hovered over the town. Dense air coated the town. Ortega gasped and pressed his hands into his eyes. Hot tears slid down his face. He grabbed and lit the oil lantern from inside, closing the door behind him. He began to walk, surveying the town through irritated eyes. Entire roofs had vanished and caved in, leaving wreckage to the town. Discarded pieces of balconies and broken glass littered the main street.

The town was as silent as a ruined church. The sun, now a forgotten memory. He stopped in front of the remains of Cassilda's Saloon, setting the lantern by his feet. The hitching post, now two small wooden stumps, and the large sign of the saloon were gone along with the front side of the building. There were no longer sounds of drunken laughter, piano bursting with lively music, shouts of celebration and cries of despair over a game of cards. Ortega noticed an irregular shape, buried in the sand, next to the stumps. Prodding with his boot, the sand shifted, revealing tattered and torn horse reins on top of dried-up bones.

“God Almighty...”

A crunch of sand a few feet away made Ortega turn and draw his pistol. He blinked rapidly, steadying his pistol with both hands. A man fully coated in sand stood in front of him. Dried blood streaked down the man's eyeless sockets down to his mouth, while more trailed from his ears down to his neck. Trembling arms stretched forward and fingers extended, the man groped and waved at the open air. His mouth gaped open making strange grunts and moans.

“hyy...hyy...”

“Phil?” asked Ortega, holstering his sidearm.

The bloodied man kept staggering blindly forward, mouth wide open. He poked at his bleeding, exposed gums and the empty space on the floor of his mouth. Ortega attempted to grab one of Phil’s hands. He released a distressed scream and waved his arms erratically, almost falling over. Ortega grabbed and steadied Phil’s arms. The wounded man whimpered and crouched to his knees, trying to cover his head. Ortega mirrored him and guided Phil’s trembling fingers across the six-pointed brass star on his chest. Phil straightened up and wrapped his arms around Ortega’s body, speaking more with his throat than mouth.

“eh-wiff...eh-wiff...”

Ortega hugged him back. Phil cried tearless sobs to his chest. Ortega pressed his waterskin to him. The man whimpered, holding the heavy leather in his hands. Ortega removed the wooden stopper and leaned the tip to Phil’s bloodstained lips. Phil grabbed the jug with both hands and drank greedily.

An ear-splitting screech made Ortega turn his head. Ortega leaned his mouth closely to Phil’s ear, hoping he’ll hear.

“Stay here! I’ll be right back!”

Standing on his feet, Ortega felt Phil’s hand gripping and pulling the bottom of his dark blue vest. Shoving

Phil's arms away, he grabbed the lantern and ran in the direction of the scream. Phil lunged forward and fell, crying helplessly as water spilled out of the waterskin.

Ortega ran towards the center of town. An unearthly howl in the deep shadows made him freeze. He raised his lantern higher and pointed his pistol forward. The footsteps of a large company drew closer. He pulled the hammer back, scanning the darkness around him. The scourge of the storm appeared several meters above him. A monster pale as sunken fog. Emaciated skin highlighted the skeletal figure's torso. In place of eyes, dark and narrow slits occupied the space. A singular, jagged hole in the center in place of nostrils. The behemoth's torso was a crooked fissure of skin stretched over gums with an endless void in the center of its gaped mouth. Beneath the torso were numerous, gaunt horse legs each longer than the previous.

Ortega emptied his pistol. The bullets passed through wind and sand. A sudden shriek boomed across the area. He dropped his gun and lantern, sand snuffing out the fragile light. A chorus of agonizing screams erupted in his head. Tortured souls captured and eaten alive from the desert pleaded for death. The sheriff turned and ran. The screams followed him like ghouls. Through the blurred and filthy fog, he ran. For how long, he did not know.

After days of walking, Ortega reached Fort Worth, on his hands and knees, barefoot and naked. His skin was dry and rough like ruined leather. Lips shriveled and cracked with flaming red and sunburnt eyes. His hair was frayed and pale like straw; tongue dried up like a lump of clay. A six-pointed brass star cradled in his right hand.

Ortega tried asking the Rangers of the town for help. All the responses he received were words of ridicule, jeers and threats of losing his badge. No one believed what had happened to him; and realizing the devastating circumstances of his situation, he disappeared; not to be seen again. Some claim he went mad and became destitute. Others claim he rode out west trying to outrun the monster that he claimed he saw. Susurro de Oro was never seen again after that storm. When you gaze into the abyss of the chasmal Texas desert, the abyss gazes back and hungers.

RULES

Raelynn King

Rule number 1: Do NOT open the door. Ever. It will try to trick you. You will find it where you would have sworn there was never a door. It can take the place of another door in the house, making you think it is safe to open. Be watchful. Do not let what knocks in.

I stared down at the dusty, and yellowed, paper in my hand. When we had moved into the house, I knew we would stumble across little tidbits of items the past residents had left behind, but this was not quite what I had in mind.

“Hey, I just finished moving the kitchen boxes out of the garage, and into the kitchen, and the garage boxes out of the kitchen, and into the garage. What’s next?” Aaron asked as he entered the living room, sliding up behind me to rest his chin on my shoulder. “Watcha got there?”

“Something the previous owners left,” I told him, handing the list over. “Here look at these.”

He took it, straightening up as he read. I could see him mouth the words as an incredulous look grew on his face. He suddenly burst out laughing. “What is this?” He fluttered the list at me, grinning widely. “Rule seven says to ‘avoid the Whistler at all costs,’ and rule ten says we need to ‘hide under the bed if you hear a child screaming, but never hide there if you hear a woman laughing.’”

“Don’t laugh!” I admonished. “Some kid probably worked really hard on that list.” Aaron rolled his eyes, but I kept going. “This was probably something they needed to do to process having to move away. They wanted to scare someone else like they were scared.”

“Baby, don’t psychoanalyze what is obviously a mid-level attempt at a prank.” He looked back down at the list of rules and snickered. “Where did you even find this?”

“There’s a small wooden door near the floor next to the mantel.” I knelt down and showed him the small opening. “I thought it was so you could adjust the gas for the fireplace, so I figured I should check, but then I found the list in an envelope, and a box.”

“A box?” Aaron perked up and came over to kneel next to me. He peered into the hole and saw the black metal box still resting where I had found it. “You didn’t try to open it?” He pulled it out before I had a chance to stop him.

“Hey!” I shouted as I slapped his hand away. “What if that’s someone’s dead pet?”

“Who buries a pet in a little cubby hole?” he asked.

“Who writes a creepy list of rules to spook people and leaves it in the same hole?” I replied.

He examined the box a little closer. “It has something written on the lid.”

I looked down and our heads came together as we read the five words scrawled across the top.

Open when rules are broken.

“Should we open it?” Aaron asked with a devilish smirk.

“Not in here!” I shrieked. “Who knows what mold spores are locked inside.” I took the box from him and moved away to place it on the windowsill. “Let’s focus on getting the rest of the boxes sorted. We can open it outside later.”

“As my baby commands!” He jumped to his feet, giving me a mock salute before following me out into the hall.

“Let’s unpack the bedroom boxes and actually have somewhere to sleep tonight.”

“I really like that plan,” Aaron said as we climbed the stairs. “Only thing to add is we should get something delivered.”

“Agreed!” I grabbed his hand as we walked down the hall to the bedroom door. I went to open it.

“Wait, I thought you said you wanted to finish the bedroom?”

I stopped and turned back to Aaron, frowning. “I do. We are.”

“No.” He shook his head. “The bedroom door is over

there.” I followed his finger to see a door just a few feet down, almost identical to the one I was about to go through. The only difference was the handle. The bedroom door had a brass knob and the one in my hand looked like it was iron. I glanced between the two, confusion growing.

“I don’t remember closing the bedroom door,” I said out loud.

“You’re probably tired, let’s just finish up so we can eat.”

I stepped back and took a closer look at the door in front of us. The more I inspected it, the more differences I found. The whites were two different shades, the bedroom door was shorter, and wider, just by a few inches.

“So what’s this door then?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Aaron said as he walked past me. “Probably a closet or something.”

“There’s not a hall closet on the second floor, though.”

“Baby,” he said, his tone reaching exasperated levels. “Focus on the bedroom.”

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

We jumped at the sharp sound. My heart pounded in my chest as I stared at the door.

Bang.
Bang.
Bang.

It was softer now, but the random door rattled with each percussive noise.

“What is that?” My voice came out slightly strangled as I took a step back.

“That’s gotta be some type of plumbing system closet.” Aaron stepped closer towards the door, frowning. “That’s going to be a problem.”

“What water system is kept in a closet and bangs around?”

“I don’t know, baby.” Aaron rubbed the back of his neck. “The old house kind?” He placed his hand on the knob and began to turn it.

“Wait!” I jumped forward and grabbed his wrist. He jerked at first, but then started laughing.

“Oh come on, please don’t tell me you’re actually taking that note seriously?”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. He was right. This was silly. Still, I held his wrist in my hand as the hairs on my neck stood on end. A nervous feeling settling deep into the pit of my stomach, like I was doing something I shouldn’t.

“Let’s leave it until tomorrow,” I offered. “It can wait until then, right?”

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Aaron sighed. “I’m not going to wake up tomorrow to thousands of dollars in water damage.” He gripped my hand and gently pulled it away from his wrist. “Just stand behind me if you’re really worried.”

I swallowed my worry, as I stood aside, and it stuck in my throat. I watched as Aaron turned the knob and opened the door. He squinted his eyes and peered in.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I grabbed the door and pulled it further aside to look at what was inside. There was nothing but darkness, so thick I couldn’t see past the frame.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Aaron muttered as he leaned forward and used his hands to feel along the wall. “There has to be a light switch somewhere around here.”

Then the door was ripped from my hands, slamming shut as Aaron was sucked into the darkness. I heard a scream from the other side and threw myself against the door, yanking on it, trying to get it to open. The knob wouldn’t turn even as I wrenched it with all of my strength.

“Aaron? Aaron!” I screamed. I stepped back and began to kick the door, slamming into it with everything I had. “Answer me!”

I tried the knob again and this time it turned. I wrenched it open to find Aaron standing there smiling.

“Aaron, what are you doing?” I screamed as I threw myself at him.

“You were completely scared!” He laughed as he held me. He kissed the top of my head before pushing me back. “Come on, let’s go get some dinner.”

“What about the noises?” I asked as I followed him down the stairs.

“Don’t worry, love. I think it will be fine now.” I hesitated for a moment as I came to the last step. He kept walking towards the kitchen, and as he moved he began to whistle. When he realized I was not following, he turned to look at me, raising an eyebrow in a silent question.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Then I smiled. It felt tight, and wrong. “Give me a second,” I said as I took the final step off the landing. “I left something in the living room.”

He shrugged and stepped into the kitchen.

I walked into the living room and stared across at the box on the windowsill. My hands were cold and clammy as I walked over to it and very quietly opened the lid. Inside lay a rusty knife. It was chipped along the edge, and the handle was cracked in several places. I picked up the knife and found a piece of paper, far older than the list I had originally found.

Rule 0: Do whatever you can to stay alive.



**TRANSLATION /
TRADUCCIÓN**

[UNTITLED HAIKU]
Miguel Avero and Leonardo de León
Translated by Jona Colson

Terror intenso
narcisa el agua vio
su propia cara.

Intense terror
Narcissus, the water saw
its own face.

[UNTITLED HAIKU]

Miguel Avero and Leonardo de León

Translated by Jona Colson

Mastico el fruto
y emerges en mi mesa
la boca sabe.

I chew the fruit
you turn up at my table
my mouth knows the taste.

DRAGĂ FATĂ, DRAGĂ BĂIAT

Ioana Nicolae

Împreună sîntem un test cu dungi rozalii.

Împreună sîntem faianță și chit. Scîrț, scîrț, sapă pe undeva o furnică, scîrț, scîrț, și nu doare. Coacăzele-s diluaten mentol. Cu gura căscată mă repartizez pe luni de-nceput, luni de sfîrșit...

Cu gura căscată îmi fac un cocoloș din timpane. Nu știu ce-aș vrea, încă nu pot... Îmi iau de mîncare de parcă aș înfuleca în ascuns pumni de var. Sînt doar sastisită, mă culcușesc în tricoul turcoaz. În furca pieptului duc un nor cu zăpadă. Spre abdomen aranjez dulăpioare cu cărți. Cochilii și melci mărunțiți atent cu ciocanul. În casele de marcat lîncezesc vînzătorii...

Colecționez deja prafuri și spaimă. Îmi decupez fața din plastilină, pe creștet îmi așez o bulboană. Înot de parcă aș fi vineție. O pungă de plastic cu alge, plancton...

Și iată ce-aș vrea: să beau litri de lapte; să-mi pun în loc de țeastă tratate; să-nghit calciu, magneziu, și boala să fie o vază spartă demult; să nu mă poticnesc de propriul stomac; să fiu primitoare și blîndă cu oscioarele noi; frica să nu mi se schimbe în gazdă; să nu ajung o bluză în noptiere de școală; să fiu cu adevărat curajoasă; să nu intru în panică; să te-aștept cuminte și cum se cuvine...

DEAR GIRL, DEAR BOY,

Ioana Nicolae

Translated by Clara Burghelea

Together we are a test with pink lines.

Together we are tile and grout. Squeak, squeak, digs an ant somewhere, squeak, squeak and it does not hurt. Currants are diluted in menthol. Open-mouthed, I distribute myself in beginning months, end months...

Open-mouthed I turn my eardrums into lumps. I am not sure what I'd like, I still cannot.... I buy food as if I were secretly wolfing down fistfuls of whitewash. I am just troubled, I snuggle in the turquoise T-shirt. I carry a snow cloud on my breastbone. I lay out little bookcases down my abdomen. Carefully hammered shells and small slugs. Sales clerks mope around cash registers...

I am already collecting dust and fright. I cut out my face from playdough, I place a whirlpool on my head. I swim as if I were purple. A plastic bag of algae, plankton...

And here is what I'd like: to drink gallons of milk; to swap my head for treaties; to swallow calcium, magnesium, and for illness to be a cabbage cracked open a long time ago; to not stumble over my own stomach; to be kind and welcoming to new little bones; for fear not to become a host; not to become a blouse on school desks; to be really brave; not to panic; to wait for you like a good, proper woman...

Mir a zis că da, mai departe e asta, și palma-i era deja burta mea plată.

Îmi ceri mere acre și roșii răskoapte. Ca să poți veni, să-ți reamintești...

Greața-i un pachet de piulițe și poate un cimitir de mașini. Icnesc de parcă nu mi-aș găsi cerul gurii...

Spre șapte săptămîni inima-ți bate de o sută cincizeci de ori pe minut... Ai nas, ai gură, peste ochi pleoape. Te ndrești spre un început prăfos de schelet. Ai un culcuș aidoma unui 11 pumn izbind în mulțime. Ai fost sămînță de pară, ești boabă de strugure. Corpul se alungește în răbdătoare viteză. Minut de minut creierul crește cu o sută de mii de celule nervoase. În miliardele nașterii vei fi aflat tot. Și-ncet, încet vei fi uitat. Brațe și picioare din muguri, camere-n inimă, schițe vagi de plămîni. Ai reflexe, te miști, o apuci poticnit spre pereții călduți. Ești acolo, începi să fii dintre noi...

He said yes, this comes next, and his palm was already on my flat belly.

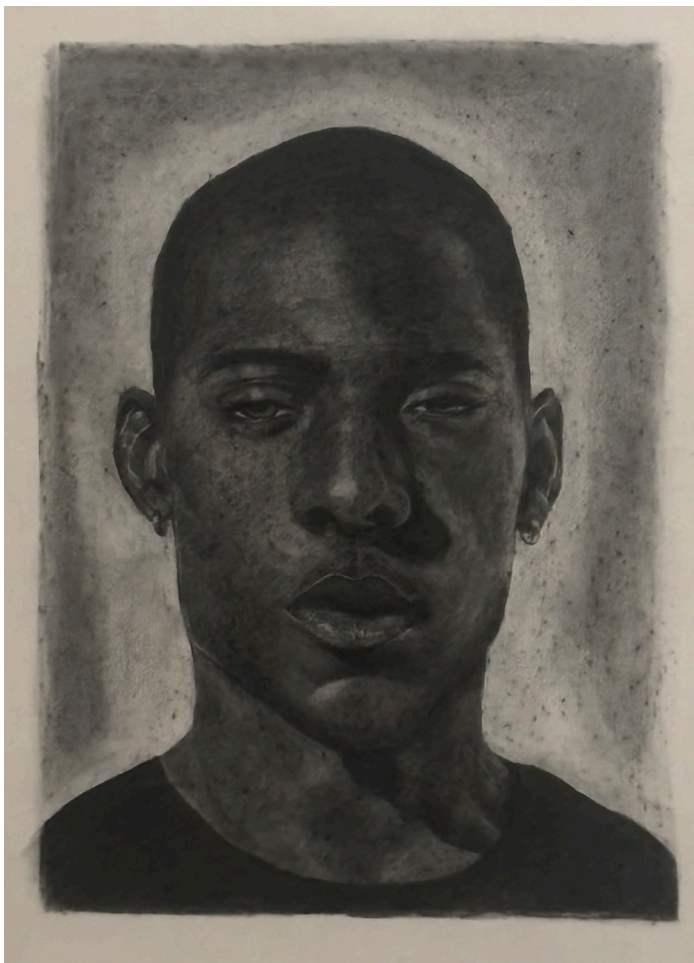
You ask for tart and overripe apples. For you to come back, to remember...

Nausea is a packet of nuts and maybe a car cemetery. I throb as I cannot find the roof of my mouth...

Towards seven weeks your heart beats one hundred and fifty times a minute... You have a nose, a mouth, eyelids over your eyes. You are heading towards a dusty beginning of a skeleton. You have a nest like a fist punching the crowd. You were a pear seed, you are a grape. The body is expanding at patient speed. Minute by minute the brain grows a hundred thousand nerve cells. Within the billions of births you will have found it all. And little by little, you will have forgotten. Arms and legs of buds, chambers in the heart, vague blueprints of lungs. You have reflexes, you are moving, you stumble through the warm walls. You are there, you are beginning to be one of us...



**VISUAL ART /
ARTE VISUAL**



Halo | *Keri Manuel*



Gary Piano | *Bryson Gamble*



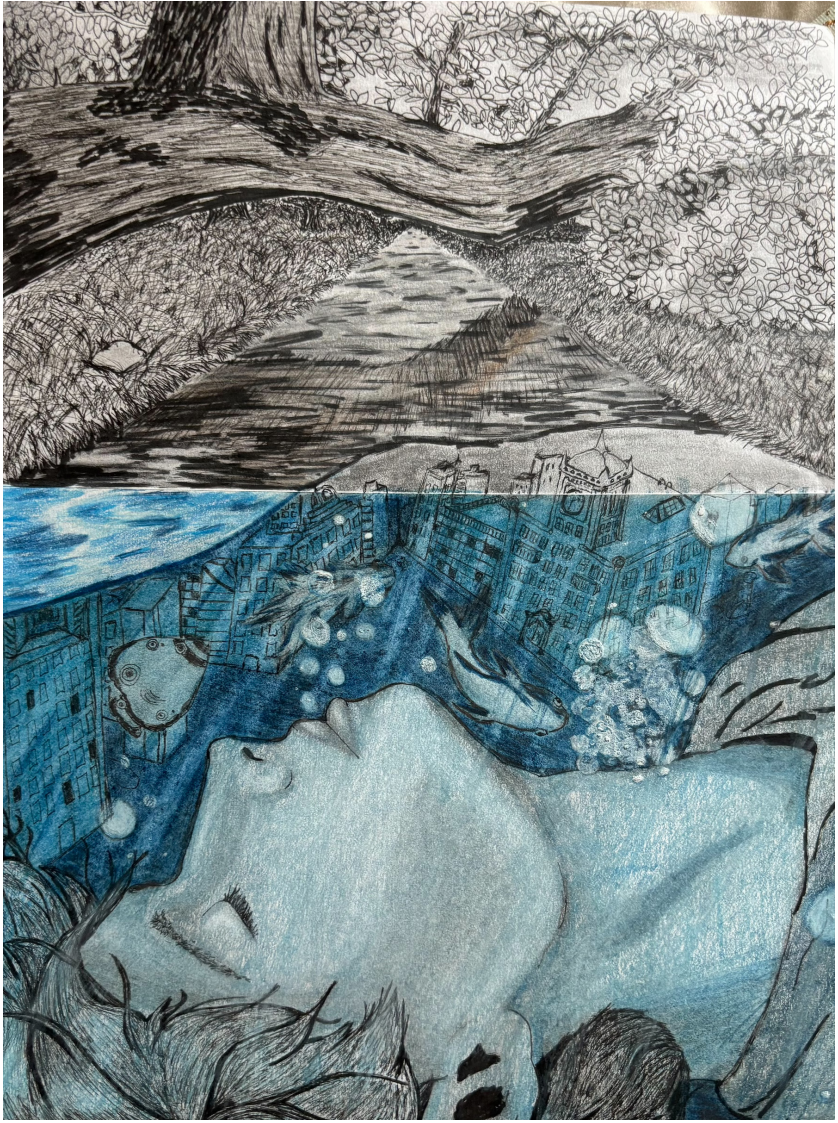
Curtain Call | *Bryson Gamble*



Sunset | *Bryson Gamble*



Houston | *Jonathan Borthwick*



Between Two Worlds | *Maria Trujillo*



Pinky | *José de Jesús Beltrán*



Sisterz | *Sabri'A Price*



111 | *Sabri' A Price*



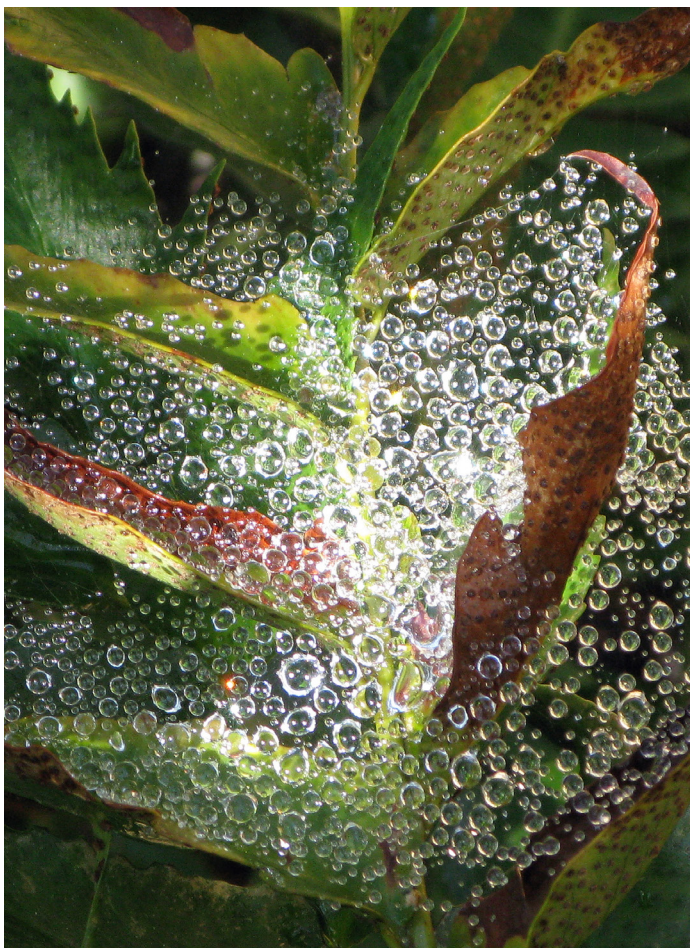
Yellow | *Artesia Luna*



Dragonfly | *Artezia Luna*



Besos en la ciudad | *Gonzalo Gómez Gaggero*



Spider Web & Water Drops | *Roger Camp*



Angel on Horseback | *Roger Camp*



Boots on a Fence, Hwy 67, Texas | *Roger Camp*



Trail en San José | *José Alonso*



Arco en Cárcavas | *José Alonso*

The cárcavas on the coast of Rocha, known as the “Valley of the Moon,” are millennia-old geological formations of erosive origin, characterized by deep cracks, trenches, and natural gullies in reddish and gray tones. Like the solitude of the place, the small villages and the people who inhabit them, these structures—around 140,000 years old—were shaped by water and wind.

Exif: Nikon D750, Tokina atx-i 11-16mm at 15mm, ISO 3200, f/3.2, 15”. Pano photo from 21 sectorized shots.



Rancho Blanco | *José Alonso*



Rancho Polónico | *José Alonso*



2019 | *Constantino Martinez*



Rainier's Mountain | *Constantino Martinez*



Brick and Mortar | *Constantino Martinez*



**CREATIVE NONFICTION /
NOFICCIÓN**

APOLOGY

Haley Leo

Southwest Flight No. 3260

10/2025

Leaving New York was a gut wrenching break up. One of those devastating situations when the couple really does love each other, soulmates even, but they could just never get it right. Regardless of their deep love for one another, ultimately, they wanted different things in life and grew apart. They hurt each other unintentionally, out of their own selfishness, and it just became too much. I was too immature for New York. She was so far ahead of me. She was sharp-minded, born to be a dancer, and answered her own questions. I was always switching paths; I cared too much about how I was being perceived; I was anxious to my bones. Her confidence and open-mindedness made me question my worth; it made me insecure. I told her I would always love her and care about her. She told me she would always be there for me, if I ever needed her. I knew that she was just being kind, and I had pushed her too far, but I told myself she meant it. "It's not *goodbye*... it's *see you later*." My emotional nature of being an only child can't handle the idea of saying goodbye for good. Goodbye to me, is too closely related to death. It's hard for me to separate the two. *What do you mean we're never going to see each other again?* So, I trick myself and settle into... *maybe, in a couple years, once I get myself together, we could forgive each other and start fresh? Imagine how beautiful that would be; all of this time apart, all of my naivety that's turned into growth, would be*

worth it. I wanted to be rewarded with a reunion, and a happy ending. I think about her everyday, the good and the bad.

See, when I was having a good day, New York would amplify it. We would meet each other with the same hyperactive energy. We'd go out until 7am, starting our night on the Lower East Side, and ending it in a warehouse in Bedstuy. But, after a while, those highs would never gracefully float down. She would light them on fire and flush them down the toilet, leaving them to drown with the beastly rats in the sewage systems. New York made my bad days unbearable. There was no trust, and everything began to feel impossible. I was constantly haunted by a phantom of doubt. I know it wasn't her intention, but New York sometimes made me feel ugly, lazy, lost, and unlovable; as if I wasn't smart enough, polished enough, or cool enough. These feelings began to drown out my common sense. I took advantage of the 4am closing times and drank to mute the demons; I could still see them, but I couldn't hear them. With the help of my very fun but very toxic friends, Whiskey and Ginger, I would get bursts of hope and security; but those moments were knock offs and short lived.

As much as I feared her sometimes, or rather, feared disappointing her, I looked up to her too. New York is a muse; she's breathtakingly beautiful and complex. She's hot and cold. She's unapologetically herself and shameless. She can be a ruthless bully if she smells fear, always helping me dissipate into my spirals of self pity. But then, very kind *when she wants to be*. I know it must sound like I'm blaming her. But of course, it takes two to tango. I know that she wanted me to step

up and keep up. My unhealthy coping mechanisms; how I would try to drown out my anxiety with anything that gave a brief illusion of serenity, it frustrated and confused her. I became a snake that was eating its own tail. And she hated snakes. She knew I was holding myself back and running from my problems in all the wrong directions. I think towards the end she gave up and finally realized that I couldn't escape myself; that our relationship just wasn't working anymore.

After a painful conversation with my parents, and a grueling fight between my head and my heart, I decided I needed to leave. I still cry thinking about how hard I looked for that fire that I needed and wanted so desperately to be placed underneath me, but I know now that I was looking in all the wrong places. I resented the fact that the fire was most likely back in Houston, under the piles and piles of my baggage that I strategically left behind. I always knew I would have to deal with that at some point, but naively, I thought maybe New York could help me sort it out. It took 3 years for me to realize that that wasn't her job.

I left in 2017, almost 10 years ago. I've only been back once to see her since. I was excited to show her how much I've changed, how much I've grown. I was ready to own up to my mistakes, share my 8 years of reflections; tell her I wanted her back. Although she greeted me with open arms, like she said she would, that first glimpse of her caused my anxiety and the phantom to return and swallow me again; I felt like I had never left. I felt scared. I had the heartbreaking epiphany that even though I finally had unpacked my Houston baggage, I abandoned another huge mess in my beloved New York. I felt an unexpected, confusing

sensation that I took advantage of her. Even though she could be so mean to me, I know she always wanted the best for me. I ended up spending most of my time being nocturnal with Whiskey and Ginger. It was as if I couldn't face you sober, in the daylight, and look you in the eyes, New York.

Looking back, I'm confident that I made the right decision by leaving when I did because if I didn't... I don't think I would be anywhere right now, if you know what I mean. We say we still love and care about each other. I haven't let go of the idea that maybe in the future, once I get myself together, once I forgive myself for being weak and giving up, we can reunite and it will all be worth it. Maybe in another life. Maybe, even for just a moment, it was just the right people at the wrong time.

Nonetheless, New York, I'm sorry.

LA DIGNIDAD NO SE QUEDA EN EL UNIFORME

Brenda Domínguez Díaz

Trabajo en un lugar donde los regaños no siempre llegan como correcciones, sino como gritos. La voz del dueño puede llenar el espacio y detenerlo todo por un momento. No es solo el volumen, es la forma: la humillación pública, el tono que no busca enseñar sino imponer. Aprendí a quedarme callada, no porque no tenga voz, sino porque entendí que responder ahí no cambia nada. El cuerpo sigue trabajando; por dentro, una se protege como puede.

No me avergüenza trabajar. Lo que pesa es tener que recordarme, una y otra vez, que mi dignidad no depende de ese lugar. Hay días en los que el cansancio no viene de estar de pie tantas horas, sino de escuchar palabras que no deberían decirse así. Aun así, sigo yendo. No porque crea que merezco ese trato, sino porque tengo metas claras y responsabilidades que atender. Este trabajo sostiene, por ahora, algo más grande que el turno del día.

Estudio mientras trabajo. Sueño mientras limpio mesas. Entre pedidos y silencios, pienso en clases, en libros, en un futuro que no se construye solo con paciencia, sino con constancia. Mi pasión por seguir estudiando es lo que me mantiene firme cuando el ambiente se vuelve pesado. Sé que este trabajo no es el final del camino; es un tramo incómodo, pero temporal, un puente que cruzo con los pies cansados y la mente despierta.

Hubo un momento que me marcó con claridad. Tenía un día de descanso, un día que no me correspondía trabajar. Sin embargo, me dijeron que, si no iba, me quitarían días de mi horario. Frente a esa advertencia, acepté. No porque quisiera, sino porque el miedo y la necesidad pesan cuando se depende de ese ingreso. Accedí sabiendo que no era justo, pero entendiendo que, en ciertos lugares, el descanso se vuelve negociable y el agotamiento se normaliza. Ese día comprendí cómo la manipulación puede disfrazarse de obligación y cómo el miedo aprende a obedecer.

A pesar de todo, no he perdido lo más importante. No he perdido mis metas. No he perdido el deseo de aprender. No he perdido la certeza de que merezco un espacio donde el respeto no sea un privilegio, sino una base. Este trabajo me ha enseñado qué no quiero repetir, qué no quiero aceptar como normal y qué tipo de persona quiero seguir siendo. Y aunque a veces el cansancio pesa, sigo caminando con una convicción intacta: mi dignidad no se queda colgada en el uniforme cuando termino el día.

THE ATM EPISODE

Tabitha Stone

There's a junkie on *Breaking Bad* who looks just like my mom. Is that an awful thing to say? Of course it is. But that doesn't make it untrue. It doesn't look like her now, but it looks just like my mom "in the thick of things," as we say.

My sister says she doesn't want to watch the show because one episode made her feel weird. I immediately know the episode, the scene, my stomach hollowing out the first time I watched it. The feeling I used to get when we too were in the thick of things. We share a disquieting silence.

It's not just the hair, though it's definitely the hair, a curly mess dyed red and matted into a clip not unlike my own. It probably just so happens to be the nose, bold and Italian with a little cleft in the middle, the way it sits over the chin, not unlike mine. The teeth (although to be fair they all have those teeth), the scabby skin. But more than that, it's the musculature. The shape of her arms, strong but with a quality I can't describe. Pale white crusted tan. Those skinny, skinny legs.

I have questions—*If all junkies look the same, do I even know what she looks like?* I feel a glimpse of the mother lost to me, of the me lost to her. Is everyone with a former tweaker for a mom watching this show and thinking *ohmygod, that looks just like her?* But actually, it's probably just the characteristics she captures, the mannerisms and the details. Good acting, like she

studied, and it just happens that these mannerisms and details are being performed by an actress who looks just like my mom. Could have happened to anyone but it happened to me. I'm always looking at this stuff as something happening to me.

This whole thing could have been that one first line—

There's a junkie on *Breaking Bad* who looks just like my mom. That's enough.

That's enough.

THE DANGER GUY

Tabitha Stone

The scene—my dad, alive, down by the barn, his maroon bathrobe, the four in the morning moon, his Ugg boots, my dog dead in a shoebox, the see-through chain link that separates his yard from the other yards. He digs a hole, Gorilla Glues her tag to the fence above the hole. He's worried about the neighbors thinking he's burying a body, which technically he is, I say. He's worried about the little black dog, who is lonely and getting fat. He calls me at work to tell me all this, to ask me what I would name it if he got another dog. He says it has to be a name you'd be willing to run down the street screaming in the middle of the night if you have to.

And oh, my dad, his dad jeans, his dirty work boots, he stomps, he's annoyed, he yells *Danger, Danger*, because that's what my sister named the little black dog. And there, he is huddled by the gate he escaped from, chasing my dad down the street shaking with exhilaration. Dad scoops him up roughly but carries him like a baby. *One day I'll stop chasing you*, he explains to the dog. *I'm just gonna let you run away*. He says the neighbors probably think he's paranoid, nuts. *Here comes the danger guy again*, they say. Danger is excited to see him. He pees a little bit.

PIG LATIN EXORCIST

Shree Parker

In my early twenties I had an exorcism performed on me. It was surely a natural addition to the timeline of events unfolding. Finally in a new, stable home, things were meant to be calm after years of feeling unrooted and being constantly on the move. Even with all that now behind me, however, I began having nightmares which came with such intensity that I'd startle awake in terror, my chest constricted and limbs held in a numb, cold lock—sensations that did not fade quickly.

Sometimes it was haunting figures looming, but never quite coming close enough to be regarded as, well, a *spiritual* problem. Shadows, after all, can be hard to grasp. It quickly began to feel unfair, though, that I couldn't just relax and so I wondered if I was simply waiting for permission to do so. But waiting on permission from who or what, I couldn't say, when I'd reached adulthood and could make decisions for myself. There was no pressing reason to be feeling so out of sorts, and so it made no sense.

The worst nightmare that I had was of a shadowed man in my bed who I automatically reached for in confusion. What turned, this thing—this night voyeur, cut with a burning gaze through my sleep state as sharply as a dousing of cold water. The specter of them surely came from the bleakest pits of hell conjured, I thought, and I felt from them a mix of pleasure and malice as they sat there, uninvited; a phantom weight pressing against my side as if it were a true, solid form.

Afterwards, their fiendish aura was left lingering as an unwanted memory that I wanted to purge and never feel again. The vision had felt invasive, as if peace and comfort were something rare and not easily experienced without some heavy toll paid, and the price not readily known. Worse, I wondered if it was a mirror of something deep in my psyche that was wrong. And yet, it was almost a joke when I spoke about it aloud to a group of friends I was just getting to know.

“I think I need an exorcism,” I’d said offhandedly.

“I can do that,” someone then quickly replied by chance. He was a clean-cut man in his thirties with bland suburban charm and a convincing degree of both parts interest and seriousness in what I’d brought up. I’d cast the lure, they bit, and soon a day and time was set to go to this man’s house for what seemed to be a promising spectacle for everyone, myself included. After all, why not? And at that point, I was open to anything when sleeping each night had begun to put me on guard as if anticipating oncoming threats.

When he answered the door, he was dressed normally, so his appearance gave no hint of what exactly was going to transpire. We were all curious and eager, however, while being quickly led up the stairs of his childhood home that seemed to have been built sometime around the 60s or 70s. It had in it all the aesthetics to match: from poor lighting, exposed wood beams coated in ancient dust, to garish carpet that held the traffic resin of many prior decades.

We were then asked to follow him to what looked to have once been a child's bedroom (maybe his own, or a sibling's). It was, however, now an empty room with blacked-out windows and looping forest wallpaper. Large coy deer, almost life-size, peeked cautiously at us through tall painted trees which were oddly shadowed. He then told us it was where he did his rituals, and I wondered exactly what sort of rituals this guy did—this guy who sold pool tables and pinball machines to bars for a living.

As instructed, I soon sat down in the middle of the room on the scratched solid wood floor. Meanwhile, the others took to their corners and the exorcist in question retreated to a closet before entering a small, attached bathroom. We'd caught the passing glimpse of other robes and costumes in his closet, but they were not easy to quickly identify. From the bathroom, he then returned in crisp white priest's robes with an incense burner in one hand and a brass holy water dispenser in the other.

This was a moment where I, myself, had to exercise the sobriety and discipline of someone far less ridiculous, far less easily amused than I. It was a feat. My eyes were wide, unblinking, and I had to bite my tongue to not burst out in hysterical, fitful laughter. The burning frankincense wafting around the room didn't help, but I endured, and when my eyes searched the faces of the others in the room, I could tell they were undergoing their own trials of not breaking their composure during what was proving to be a very odd, yet riveting evening.

He began and performed his ritual, lashing at whatever demons clung to me with cold smacks of holy water

(blessed straight from the tap, perhaps?) and waves of wafting smoke which gripped and choked the air while he shouted whatever it was he shouted. They were words in English and Latin, or maybe it was *Pig Latin* for all I knew, but I didn't move a muscle and didn't let on to the riot of entertained surprise and stupefied emotion roiling inside me, still begging to come out, yet remaining blessedly contained.

When it was finally over, I got up, nodded, and thanked him while still straight-faced before going downstairs again. The finale to the evening was when he showed us all, rather proudly, an antique medical skeleton that he kept in his downstairs bedroom closet. An erotic swing bolted to the ceiling above his bed was also visible in our peripheries, but we pretended not to notice it with much the same sober composure as before. He was not a *real* priest, obviously, and yet, somehow, I slept peacefully for years after.

TRYPANOPHOBIA

Ashley Grossman

Needles frighten me to the marrow of my bones. The sharp, thin tube of gleaming silver makes my blood boil and freeze horrifically at precisely the same time. Needles are an invasive, sharp, and unyielding force to contend with, something I have never been able to conquer. That tiny, thin, hollow rod that makes my pulse quicken with a sick, primal fear. There's no escaping it this time. I have to inject myself. This medication will make the pain and strife in my life go away. These drugs will fix me, make me lose the weight that is slowly killing me. But the needle... It shines in the light, a menacing glare that makes my muscles tense painfully with the urgent need to run far away. I've never needed to inject myself before. I couldn't even look when other people did it to me. Now I need to do it to myself every single week for the rest of my life.

I have always been haunted by needles. My first memory of a needle was sitting in a dimly lit room, with a nurse who handed me a plush bunny. Its fur was pristine, white, and so very soft in my hands. Its plastic eyes reflected back at me the scrunched-up face that was my own fear settled into my features as I knew what was coming. The seat under me was made of a hard plastic, with an arm attached that would keep me locked, confined, stuck in that cold chair. The sterile air smelled of alcohol, the kind that you make surfaces clean with, the kind you only ever smell in a doctor's office. I wanted to stay in that chair, to make it easy

for the doctors to run tests. I wanted to be able to do this. To stretch out my arm and let her stick that godforsaken device into my arm and allow the crimson blood that fueled my life to flow from my body into little vials.

“You’ll be alright, dear. It’ll only hurt for a moment.”

Her voice was light, sweet, a ray of sunshine in this dim little room. As she prepared my arm with an iodine wipe, the smell stinging my nose, my face turned away, tears began to waterfall from my eyes. A shadow moved, and eyes opened from the darkness. I screamed. A primal fear, a sound that made the nurse flinch and wrench herself away from me, wrench the needle from me, eyes wide with a mixture of shock and concern. Eyes that kept staring. The walls were too close to me. The chair had locked me down. I couldn’t move, but the eyes were everywhere. Eyes everywhere. Staring me down. I couldn’t escape. The darkness was closing in, a monster with sharp teeth and claws that would plunge into me and leave me bleeding out. Its claws scraped against the walls, carving deep gouges. Its bloodred eyes stared into mine, waiting for the moment to strike. It opened its jaws, the glistening silver teeth—no, needles—were ready to sink into me. I don’t remember what happened after that. I only remember that paralyzing fear, and the monster that wished to consume me, to bleed me dry and leave me for dead.

Four times they tried to retrieve my blood. Four times that monster hunted me, shamed me, terrified me. Back then I could escape, scream, have the nurses stop trying to take my blood. Back then the needle never

touched me; the monster never touched me. But now I have to face it.

The plush white couch envelops me as I hold that thin syringe in my hand, the orange cap that had protected the needle laying on the end table next to me. The needle catches the light, boasting of its length and sharpness, of the way it has been made to pierce me. Alcohol pervades my nose, prodding at my memories, making my pulse quicken and my breaths come shallow and short. I need to do this. I have no choice. I rub the alcohol wipe on a spot on my belly, sterilizing my skin, making it clean and fresh for the invasive stab that will come. I pinch the skin, preparing both my mind and my body for what is to come. I will have to watch. I will need to watch myself do it to ensure nothing went wrong. I need it to go right. It can't go wrong. What if it goes wrong? No, I can't think about that.

My hands trembles, the adrenaline coursing through my body making me feel as though a monster is after me, attempting to sink its needle-like teeth into my skin and tear me to shreds, leaving me as a bloody, gored mess on the floor. Malice leaks from every shadowy part of this creation. It wants me dead, it wants me to suffer, it wants to let every needle it has sink into me and leave me for dead. As it prowls closer, the room closes in. Those bloodred eyes bead in on me, its claws rip at the carpet, tearing away at the fibers. I will die. If I do this, I will die. The needle will kill me. I can't do this. I can't kill myself. With trembling hands, a shaky breath, hearing that is filled with static, I gently slide the silver metal rod into my pinched skin.

There is no pain. Not even the sting that usually accompanies the stick that nurses had done to me in the past. The air clears, the static leaves me, the monster slides back into the shadows. I can hear the hum of the fridge, gentle humming as it cools its contents, a reminder. Gingerly shifting my grip on the syringe, I press down on the plunger, pushing that lifesaving medication into my body. No pain, no sting, no danger. The couch is beneath me, comforting me with its soft fabric that holds my body. I gently slide out the needle, a strange sort of satisfaction at the ease at which it leaves me. It is almost a pleasant experience, apart from my own mind pushing me to the brink of breakage. The worst part of this has been that monster, waiting, prowling, poised to strike. It hasn't been the needle. That is, in its own strange way, the best part. I loose a hollow laugh, the adrenaline still pumping through my body, making my fingertips tingle.

I have a distinct feeling that injecting myself saved me from that monster. If I didn't have the willpower to do it, it would have done far worse to me than a single needle prick. I can still feel it, lurking in the shadows. It seems for now that it has bowed its head to me, respecting me, but waiting for the next time that I will need to inject myself with my medication.



POETRY /
POESÍA

SIGNS OF LIFE, ATACAMA

Timothy Dodd

Telescopic tongues and this taste for interplanetary investigation flick up into the driest air. Without

cloud cover, light pollution, radio interference, humanity's newest eyes extend their pantheon

of powers, search, scrutiny—observatories for the scoop on existence. Like Mars, they say,

there are places on earth that hold neither creature nor beast, no matter how hype or hungry. But it is

home, we say: nothing is missing, devoid of life. All that's hoped for beyond is also here within.

HONEYMOON

Alyssa Box

the rain has found us
stuck in the quiet buzz
in the mire
in the mud
sunk to our knees
in eulogies and sacrament
this is the body
this is the blood
this is
every
single
cent
stacked
babel-like
in the jar
waiting to be spent
scratching toward the sun
the shattered-glass sea
reflecting off hands entwined
my thumb dances over
the mole on your first knuckle
the one you hate
the one i love
through salt-speckled stone
arches lined like
soldiers at ease
with ramparts of olive trees
and we pour the wine

its velvety cherry sage
and hint of woodsmoke
watch it drip
down
the
curve
of
the
glass
and lie spent
among the breadcrumbs
just as satiated
and sanguine
as we are

AUSTIN, I LOVE YOU, BUT YOU'RE BRINGING ME DOWN

Alyssa Box

there is no such thing as closure in this city,

just ipa drinking hipsters, arthouse grindhouse drafthouse
film majors, friend of a friend of a friend who heard from
john who heard from mindy who heard from kat who
heard from aaron that you fucked that girl in the front seat
of your rusted out toyota when i was out of town

just concrete spread like ash across foreheads hungover
egg-salad sandwiches with blue powerade only fake ids
summer heat rolling like spliffs in overflowing ashtrays
coffee tables covered in stickers that have never seen a
clorox wipe and designated party shoes

just clock in clock out fifteen-minute smoke breaks by
the dumpster timed down to the second on a ten-dollar
walmart watch one pair of work appropriate pants that
forever smell like smoked brisket and creamed corn and
marlboro smooths

just sunburns rugburns bruises on knees from straddling
boys in lawn chairs duct tape pasties last minute sixty dollar
minimum sixth street tattoos of old-fashioned clocks set
to two in the morning bad drinks good bouncers no coat
a hoe never gets cold

just first loves real loves epic loves muted strangled to
wheezes by gas bills electric bills raised rent out-of-pocket
pest control iou tabs at the gas station across the street at
the dive bar around the corner no groceries no money no
sleep

just cheap beers cheap vodka cheap whiskey two weeks'
notice three hour waits for the free mental health clinic
cocktail waitressing at strip joints positive results from one
night stands emergency funds emergency calls emergency
surgery

just men with rings on riverbanks men introducing you
to mom and dad and stepdad and sister and little brother
shitty bug-infested second floor apartments with great
light and great views if you stand on tippy-toes and turn
your head just so

just heartbreak humiliation like so much road rash whiplash
pneumothorax like acid vomit like gut punches broken
toes broken tailbones styes scraped knees blistered heels
sensory deprivation seeing black and white and red red red
red

just attempted reconciliation no consent all sleep all drunk
all stupid all trusting like stray dogs stray cats dont look at
me like that you know i'm allergic to conflict dont say that
say dont say bye dont say sorry stand at the door and watch
me drive home

just whens and wheres and hows and buts what were you
wearing and packing my shit in liquor store boxes fished
out from dumpsters and running running running from
you from your hands from your ghost from myself from
the eyes the eyes the talk the chatter

just bittersweet snap shots thrift store sweaters stored on
bookshelves twenty-four hour coffee shop skinny-dipping
in the greenbelt first apartment mattress on the floor last
apartment behind the barbecue joint things i'll miss for the
next ten years.

MY BED
Danny P. Barbare

I'm not tucking in
the corners, nor smoothing
the wrinkled
sheets, I am
not wiping off all the crumbs,
folding down the edges,
or fluffing up the pillow,
because I believe
death is a made bed
and not all it's cracked
up to be
a mattress and box springs,
but unmade, I'm alive.

SITTING IN THE CATHEDRAL

L. Ward Abel

A disc of air
settled over the middling city
perched on a fall
line's edge.

We sat inside on
hewn before my father's time
and we faced idols, no,
statues carved, maybe
in Avignon or Milan.

Stained glass
in an attempt to retell
the colors of morning and dusk
made trumpet sounds.

We knew the fog to come
would live in arroyos
covering graves down the hill
on resting green saddles
until the names of the living
and the gone
would merge.

VIRAL I

Deborah Diemont

A woman in China, a young grandmother and retired factory worker, has left her husband to take to the open road. Admirers, women of all ages, track her journey and note where she stops each night. They bring her dumplings. She sleeps on top of her car. She says she feels safe there.

How did the algorithms know I'd buy a wrinkle-reducing cream before I noticed wrinkles? That my waist had expanded ever so slightly? When did *creative* (n.) start replacing *artist*? Isn't *concerning* (adj.) supposed to be *disconcerting*?

VIRAL II

Deborah Diemont

The cuckoo in Grandma's clock
reprised old tunes to chirp. *Again! Again!*
We heard our names,
close range & distant sounds.

We bought a clock on Overstock
& found new bebop melodies to spin.
We'd take them in
to sing as rounds.

Do-re-do, re-mi. A flock
of black-capped chickadees
swooped through the den.
A galloping picked up.
The horsemen pound

the roof, the walls, the floor, the yard, the block,
the neighborhood, state & land. As I drift off to
sleep,
out of bounds,
out of bounds

WEIGHTLESS
Emiliana Rico-Toro

imagine, if you would,
a movie scene
soft piano holding your hand as you walk, barefoot
into a windswept land meant only for children,
the grass stroking your painted toes
behind you, your shadow
a friend
weighed down by the burning sun, sweltering
stitched seamlessly to your feet
carrying your cargo like a pack horse through the desert
they grace you with
a heavy smile
as you look back to the forgotten trail, the memories
fading, feathers falling out of a weary corvid's nest,
retreating like a battle lost
evening settles softly and
you
stand solitary amongst the pitch-black sky,
and with a breath long kept, eyes searching for
the light, the light—
its silhouette almost unseen,
a cottage
rimmed with roses, creeping with ivy
sits restfully, homely, safe
the door ajar, it welcomes
beckoning you in and
the light, the light
bringing your shadow back from the darkness

the both of you enter, take a seat at the table
drinking in the feast, eyes glistening
once sated and full,
the dance
overtakes you, a dizzying
swirl of sensation
and your eyes dart around the room
mesmerized
tantalized
by the shadow, whose shoulders have lifted.

DARK GEOMETRY

Diane DeCillis

Each day the angles
lengthen their reach—
unseen
until they graze the edge
of sight.
Not silence—intent.
A black squirrel, fur quick and gleaming,
plows through yellow leaves
bright across the yard.

The hawk hovers—
its shadow widening,
a practiced shape.

Some shadows fall from wings,
others from orders designed
for those easy to seize,
soft enough to break,
their absence barely counting.

The hawk descends—
wings folding the light inward,
the squirrel caught
in that dark geometry.

I pound the window—
another witness
behind another wall.

My cry absorbed
into the barrier between
seeing and saving.

They vanish into blank sky,
that black tail
still
swinging.

MATTER AND WITNESS

Diane DeCillis

Planck said *matter is born of mind, not mind of matter.*
The universe waits for an eye to open.

She stands facing you, arms folded
into ledges, eyes dark as rain-soaked windows,
defiant—the way she looks toward a closing door,
that jarring click dislodging time,
hours scattering like ash.

Beside her, a trench coat huddles on the floor,
collapsed weather of a man.

*

Quantum physics says *even the smallest particles*
come into being only when observed.

Here she gathers presence—crossed legs,
elbow on knee, chin cupped in her palm.
Her hair spills in long brushstrokes of shadow
across her shoulders. Her coral sweater glows
against a chalk-gray void. She measures the sky—
clouds swelling, cumulus towering.

In the corner, the charcoal trench coat
drapes ghostlike over a teak chair.

*

Teilhard said *matter is spirit*
moving slowly enough to be seen.

She shifts into three-quarter profile,
gaze tilted to the periphery,
hair stirred by imagined winds.
She knows the rising thermals—
invisible columns of warm air,
too slight for thunder,
yet rearranging the atmosphere.

A trench coat spills from a red metal chair.
Present, though not within reach.

like matter before the first eye opened—
breath before a body takes shape.

WALKING ROTHKO'S FIELDS

Diane DeCillis

Think of your life as layers—
the thin ones, the private ones.

Lay them on the canvas in colors
that invite your gaze.
Let them be informed by emotion—
say, grief.

The brush grows heavy
with risk—
tears thinning the pigment.

Imagine your body as pigment,
dissolving at the edges, releasing colors
the flesh can no longer hold.
Think of desire not as red—arterial, expected—
but as a glow unmoored, an ember without ash.

*Step closer—
eighteen inches from the surface—
so you are not outside looking in
but inside the picture,
your breath mingling with the paint's breath.*

The canvas is no window,
no scenery—
but a stage you enter,
a realm where light performs

and shadow answers,
where a rectangle bears feeling
the way a throat holds sound.

And more layers—
coaxed thin washes of oil,
translucent films of pigment,
each a sheer veil over the last.

*I begin with the weave,
raw cotton drinking
the first skein of color,
then layer upon layer,
edges feathering into ambiguity
until the surface hums
with inner light—
as if lit from within
by some buried sun.*

The eye, invited to burrow,
to tunnel through shifting planes—
plunging into cobalt's current,
grazing rust's warmth—
until form dissolves
and what remains is sensation.

Da Vinci knew this: sfumato—
transparency over transparency,
the refusal of the hard edge,
the way form loosens
so essence can pass between.

The paint hovers—
drawing you in and out,
above and below the surface,
the air grows attentive, awake.

SAVING TIME

Michael Owens

I was maybe ten or eleven
when I started collecting it.
At first, I kept it in an envelope
but it piles up, you know,
pretty soon the envelope was too small.
I tried a jar kept in the closet, but it was so bright,
that's why this box was selected and placed
in the drawer beside my bed
kept safe day and night, available whenever
I had some to save.

Most days nothing was saved but sometimes
if I drove fast I could save a minute or two.
Once, when I was drunk
I saved five minutes getting to work.
Running a red light has saved a bunch
and not marrying Eileen saved me so much.

Life is like that when you think about time
and what to do with those minutes you save
by cutting corners.

Now it happens, I see my end of days.
I need a lot more time, so with cautious expectation
I opened the box, planning to use all that time
I had saved.

I reach in and feel around to grab a few:
my hand comes up empty,
I never saved any time,
no matter the risks I took.

MILES TO SOLITUDE

Rebecca Ferlotti

We screech
toward red—
street flashlights flickering,
synchronized swimmer cars turn
in opposite directions,
the radio fades.

I take one hand
off the wheel, search for answers
in your freckle constellations...
why you don't make plans,
why you never use
matching potholders.

MIDNIGHT
David Romanda

Samantha gently nudges
her husband awake.
“What is it?” he says.
She’s quiet a moment,
then says, “I keep dreaming
about making love
in a crowded restaurant.”
She’s on her back, in bed
beside her husband,
staring up into the darkness. “At first,
the dream scared me. All those people
watching with half-eaten hamburgers
or spaghetti or salad on their plates.
Knives and forks.
Hairdos and eyeglasses.”
Another pause.
Darkness.
“And now, I like the dream.
I mean, I think this is what I want.
Making love
in a crowded restaurant is what I want.”
“Everybody wants that,” her husband
says sleepily. “How about you?
You want that?” she says.
“Not me. But others do.”
He turns on his side,
his back to her.
“Just go to sleep.”

SATIATED
Anastasia Olloque

I am so hungry, I want
to be devoured, savored
mole by mole
taste
syrup sweet spit
salty sour skin
lick until the plate is clean and I am full,
having consumed me, I become you
finally, briefly, neither
lost nor made, only moved
to shit to dirt to grow
another fruit, so ripe, so sweet
cut up, splayed on a plate
ready
to be yours once more
full once more

YOU, YOU, YOU

Anastasia Olloque

chose me, meaning me as what-
ever you needed, meaning me
always available, all the ways
to avail you, to
veil me
from the truth, your true self—
selfish, hellish, you relish
your greed, a need
to have someone
to prove you're light
that deserves to shine and be
a sun, the sun, the son,
a name to whisper after
every plea, pleases you:
a touch to the chest,
the sole heart, my sol
weighed down by the way
you need me, you
love me
you love you

YOU'RE ICE
Anastasia Olloque

It must always begin with me
slipping and sliding and falling,
knocking my head, scraping my
knees and red raw palms, but I
am kerosine persistent, where
once I couldn't even stand on thin
frail ice, with every step I hear a
new crack until I know for a fact
that with one final jump your ice
won't stand a chance, doused and
snuffed, I can finally
float.

ALEINU

Jordan Davis

I want a certain feeling
when I dive into a book
and that's on me—

to know I'm with someone
who notices and feels,
and lifts their head now and then.

It's a race, erased,
the competition banished
by the naming of a winner,

predictor of animatronic
simulation time. Lifelike.
A mechanical Turk.

Give me the mistakes,
they'll do. Or overpower
me with brilliance—

I like that, too.

ESSENTIALS

Sanjeev Sethi

The draft we insufflate is political.
So are our reverberations to civic
stimuli. Silence has implications.
It slants towards the saddle.

Party politics is not for everybody.
Write a poem. Sing if that is your
chord. Or contribute with kindness.

If there is nothing material to share,
smile a hearty smile at someone on
a perch lower than yours. Be alert
to the machinations of the State.

IN OTHER BOOKS

Sanjeev Sethi

Let my future lines continue to pulsate
with newer angles and newer hooks.
May the forthcoming stanzas be sharper
with richer turns and kinder tempers
to self and surroundings.

Let my poems inhale sacred flowers.
Let them emit fragrance
to my dead areas. May the voice be
as sincere as scars and
as honest as intent.

NO/KNOW NOTHING

John Soden

I don't know, I wouldn't know
what to do. I strain my eyes
over the keys, flex the cells
of my mind to ask one question,
AI would you please...

All I want is the answer, but the questions
all now elude me. Stunted
through years of Chat Bot.
Crafted and chained fast to a wall.

I wish I did know but now nothing
is known to me, all the known
objects descend dark into a cave where
the opaque world of knowing.
But now I know nothing as all my past
adventures went through keys and on screens.

Oh, to touch grass and feel the ideas
as they form. The ideas
as they form overtime
giving deep roots,
patience, no nothing,
follow as we break
the wall and ascend
out of the darkness.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LOVE

Meghna Yennu

must be examined under a microscope.
We must ascertain the authenticity. *We must*
demonstrate the reproducibility. *We must*
perform under surveillance, *perform*
our surveillance *for*
the pleasure of the *others*.
We must become *voyeurs*
of ourselves. We must dissect, *digest*
regurgitate. 2000 years from *now*,
we'll have learnt it all. Yesterday, *you*
said we've discovered all there is to *know*.
It will have all been recorded in *records*
that no longer exist. The more you *magnify*,
the less it makes sense. I count my breaths in *spaces*
of twenty-five, *but*
but no time has passed. Birthday, height, eyecolor, *but*
do you fall to the ground when *you*
laugh? The more you remember, the more I *forget*.
The more they talk about it, the less I *want*—
to know. Run systems diagnostics, *check*
if it's working? Are you watching (wanting) *me the way*
I want you to?

TIME IS GREEN

Sarai Ventura

thoughts resurfaced yesterday night
the green of envy
seeing around me those so far ahead

“what have I
done?” held colors
up to the light, “this is why
I see this way,” or “that is why I
shouldn’t,” no growth
will come from comparison,
from belittling my genuine success,

where shame sits, pride could
replace; others shine while I
dwell on ivied time, I can’t
bend or slow it down, or pick up
to their pace;
I’ve accepted green.
I will mold it, make it mine,

green like this ink, green like spring,
green that blooms, I will
grow my own garden

[SIN TÍTULO]

Viviana Abnur

puertas adentro
la mirilla
la uva
y su perfume de verano
desojándose
en el paladar
la lágrima
mora sola
la noche entera

TRASMALLO

Viviana Abnur

más frágil que la memoria
el olvido
la red que tenso firme
de orilla a orilla

más frágil que la red
el agua
que estalla contra el hilo
y se desune
para avanzar

tormenta
en el silencio del agua
pude leer
el silencio de los pájaros

LA COCINA

Britney Molina

In loving memory of Rafael Rodriguez

Not where he would lay and sleep.
Not where he would sit, relax, and watch TV.
Not where he would spray his loud cologne.

His home was a specific [room],
where the smell of ajo frying in a pan rooted from.
Its signature scent plaguing the house,
the whispers from his heart
translated to the sizzling chicken.

At the dinner table
I watch as he moves in his favorite room.
Every move reflecting his experience and passion.
His whistles echo across the house,
A house he made his own.
A house he took pride in.
A house with doors he opened to anyone.

A coca de dieta in place of a remedy.
(Never letting me forget that he knew I loved it)
He had a fix for anything
that could be prepared in la cocina.
Un tecito to make an upset stomach feel comforted.
The tea was powerless
but the hands that crafted it were potent.

An incandescent smile,
so trusting that it knew of no caution.
Cocinar as a way to say I love you.

(I love you)

I'm sorry I didn't *say* it to you.

His brown, wrinkled, and storytelling hands,
dice up onions for a loving recipe.
A dish he would serve hot and carefully,
simply excited to share his sazón.

Listening to him whistle
Would make me turn off any song.
What I'd give to hear such a pleasant melody again.
What I'd give to smell the overuse of garlic.

NATURALISTS

Kristin LaFollette

My grandfather is a gardener,
his house a delicate blend of
tomato vine, mint, and damp soil.

Cultivation is part of my family's architecture,
seeds buried deep in the vaults of our bodies,
 yet my mother and I saw persimmons
in someone's cart at the grocery store
and neither of us knew what they were.

We wanted to know and recognize the plants,
 their shapes and stems,
so we visited a medicinal garden—
The place was named after a doctor who believed humans
 were overburdened by blood,
so we gave some of ours up to the ground,
an attempt to connect root to bone.

As we walked the pathway in the June heat,
we read the names and descriptions on the cards,
collected the information like apples—
 pitcher plants, waxy and open like trumpets, for digestion,
 bell-shaped foxglove for the heart,
 snakeroot, flowers like shredded coconut, for coughs.

The next time I visited a garden,
I only thought of my mother & couldn't wait to tell her
about the poppy seeds and branches of sweet Annie I was gifted,

how it felt like my hand folding into hers
as I placed the bits
in my pocket—

LITTLE BOXES

Kristin LaFollette

It should have felt like more of a loss,
but my body had readied itself for years,
seemed like it was always meant to be
a quiet and
slowly unfolding house.

At the hospital,
I thought of Marie Kondo,
how she encourages folks
to give up items that no longer “spark joy.”
As if I were a guest on her show,
I offered all the parts and items and medications
I no longer needed
to the trash,
thanked them for all the times they helped me or
at least
didn't hurt me.

It used to be that bones were removed from graves and
placed in ossuaries to make room for the remains of the
newly dead.

I thought of my own body in the same way—
with the unjoyful parts removed,
I had made space for other things:

sutures to keep everything else in,
each stitch like a raised pill in a blister pack,
a phlebotomist's needle to remove the excess blood,

a bowl of milk to hold the shape,
keep an organ-absent abdomen
from collapsing in on itself—

SLANTED SISTERHOOD

Emmelin Kraft

slanted notes drumming in my head
echoing her words
a childhood bearing weights with silent pricks
written all in dead crimson ink
a useless feeling of kin

the piano and violin cry together in melancholy
arms extending, mirroring childish runs
two pairs of cheeks flushed with giggles
framed by fragments of nostalgia

but mother's attention slithers in sweet words
draping me with dresses and frills
I, her mini doll in her charade
while my sister huddles in her corner
alone

I stare back at my sister, afraid
of the same fate:
the bloody trail of betrayal
while her eyes scream:

*if your heart holds no true remorse,
I have no sister to name.*

STUPID QUESTIONS

Emmelin Kraft

Would you still love me if I were a rock?

Why would I love a rock?
Typical of him,
Always asking stupid questions like that...
But to answer the question—

Yes.

Grass blades dance despondently
to the breeze. My eyes fixate beyond
Knees crouching over a bouquet of lilies:
Your name
chiseled into the unyielding marble

Yes I do.

FUNERAL RAIN

Diane Webster

Rain falls on Mom's funeral;
the cover we ordered to shade us
from 95-degree sunshine huddles
over us as we sit near her casket.
The family scatters
like hungry kittens wanting
to suckle
mama lying out of reach.

Each holds an umbrella;
waits for prayer to end this day.
Rain falls on Mom's funeral
while cousins tip umbrellas
so water runs down my aunts' necks,
and we laugh quietly, briefly.

Mom would have loved that.

HOLDING ON

Diane Webster

After flood waters recede,
grass grasps the fence rail
in an effort to pull itself
to higher ground.

Roots dangle in the air
like a little girl's feet
as her father lifts
her high overhead.

Grass dries
maintaining its grip;
grass dies
into brittle wisps,

and it releases the rail
in fingertip struggle
until it blows away
like strings

untethered



**CONTRIBUTORS /
COLABORADORES**

L. Ward Abel's work has appeared in hundreds of journals (*Rattle*, *Versal*, *The Reader*, *Galway Review*, *New English Review*, *Main Street Rag*, others), and he is the author of four full collections and eleven chapbooks of poetry, including *Green Shoulders—New and Selected Poems 2003–2023* (Silver Bow, 2023) and *The Teller's Road* (Bottlecap, 2025). He is a retired lawyer and teacher of literature, he writes and plays music, and lives in rural Georgia.

Viviana Abnur nació en Buenos Aires en diciembre de 1964. Publicó, *Agosto*, *Delta*, *Flores y velas*, *La perezosa*, y *Rash*. Integra las antologías *Animales distintos: Muestra de poetas argentinos, españoles y mexicanos nacidos en los sesentas*, y *Poesía argentina por Palestina*. En 2010 recibió el Premio Nacional de Poesía Adolfo Bioy Casares.

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Danny P. Barbare is an award-winning poet. His poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net. He loves writing in free verse. Over the years, he has studied with several poets laureate of South Carolina and North Carolina. He has been writing poetry for the past 45 years. He lives with his wife and sweet dog Oliver in Greenville, SC.

José de Jesús Beltrán is a 45-year-old Mexican immigrant that moved to the US at 7 years old. He grew up in Sun Valley, California where he took a year off from school in pursuit of a career as a family man. After which, he made the tough decision of moving to Houston in search of better opportunities. His hopes for the future are to see his children flourish in their respective fields and to continue enjoying his year off.

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Cleveland, Baltimore, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Cristóbal de las Casas are among the places **Deborah Diemont** has called home. She has three books of poetry: *Wanderer*, *Diverting Angels*, and *The Charmed House*. Her poems have been read at Syracuse Stage, in conjunction with the plays, *Espejos: Clean*, and *National Pastime*.

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Raelynn King is a librarian and writer near Houston, Texas. She enjoys writing horror, fantasy, and science fiction. She started a local writing group and works with other writers regularly to explore the craft and find a respectful community to grow their skills.

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Virginia Lonaker is a former preschool teacher who began her higher education journey at Lonestar-Cy-Fair. She later transferred to University of Houston-Downtown as a full-time student to pursue a degree in Secondary English Language Arts. She enjoys writing fiction and unapologetically loves pineapple on her pizza.

Artezia Luna is a Houston native with a passion to learn photography and become a well-known photographer. She started this journey as an outlet to help overcome her anxiety and grief while trying to capture beauty in everyday life. Her favorite things to capture are flowers and animals.

Keri Manuel is a visual artist who primarily uses dry media such as charcoal, graphite, and colored pencils. Her work explores themes of Black familiarity using texture and detail to evoke memory, emotion, and

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Constantino Martinez is currently a student at the University of Houston-Downtown, double majoring in Computer Science and Control and Instrumentation Engineering with a minor in Sustainability. In his free time, he enjoys capturing photos from his travels with his family and pets. Constantino's photography places an emphasis on landscapes and city life, and he enjoys posting them on his Instagram, @tanti.nef.

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Shree Parker resides in Houston, Texas. She often writes fantasy and speculative fiction inspired by history and myth, while dabbling in other genres like creative nonfiction and poetry. Her interests also range from watching period dramas to drawing, crafting, and crocheting. Currently, she has many writing projects in the works.

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Christopher Stolle has many roles: partner, uncle, son, music aficionado, baseball enthusiast, and, occasionally, writer. His writing has been published by Indiana University Press, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Coaches Choice, *Roe River Review*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Flying Island*, among many others. He lives in Richmond, Indiana.

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Maria Trujillo is a Houston-based artist whose work grows from personal experience and emotional reflection. Through various mediums, such as ink, watercolor, and acrylic, she explores identity, healing, and the tension between outer strength and inner vulnerability. Her art reflects lessons she's learned through resilience and the ongoing process of self-discovery.

Grace Tschlis lived in Texas for most of her life, but now resides in Chicago, IL. She received her MFA in Creating Writing & Publishing from DePaul University in 2024 and her BA in English Literature from Midwestern State University (TX) in 2020. Her work can be found in *Crook & Folly*, *They Call Us*, and *Raging Opossum Press*. When she's not reading or writing, she loves baking and watching stand-up comedy.

Sarai Ventura (she/her) is a Psychology major at the University of Houston-Downtown. She loves to listen to music, spend time with her family, and cuddle up to

her dogs on rainy days. Born in El Salvador and raised in Houston, she hopes to bring this unique perspective to all the work she does. She loves to embrace her heritage and looks to bring inclusion and awareness to the mental health field.

Diane Webster's work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *New English Review*, *Studio One*, and other literary magazines. Five micro-chaps have been published by Origami Poetry Press. Diane has been nominated once for Best of the Net and three times for a Pushcart Prize. She was a featured writer in *Macrame Literary Journal* and *WestWard Quarterly*. Her website is: www.dianewebster.com.

Born in Queens, NY and raised in Houston, **Meghna Yennu** is interested in speculating new futures through multiple mediums and disciplines. Meghna works at the cross-section of humanities and the sciences, and has been published in magazines such as *WILD GRAIN*, *INCENSE*, and *Wisteria*. Meghna can be found hopping through local Houston cafes and consuming copious amounts of Vietnamese coffee.

