

Spring 2017

## SEEDS - 2017

Jennifer Lee

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**SPRING 2017**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Seeds would like to thank Travis Trull and the NEIU Media Board for their support and assistance. Thanks also to Brett, Robyn, and Sean. Thank you to the Creative Writing Minor. Thank you to Larry Dean, Olivia Cronk, Jac Jemc, David Matthews, and Joseph Tinsaglia for the incredible events they created for Seeds. Thank you to the Council of Clubs and Student Leadership Development. Thank you to Dr. Paul Roll for being

# **SEEDS**

## **Literary & Visual Arts Journal**

A fantastically big thank you to all of the amazing artists, writers, and poets who contributed work to the journal this year.

And, of course, this journal would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of the entire staff and their families and friends.

Thank you!

### **Spring 2017 Edition**

### **Volume 9**

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## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Hello and welcome to the Spring 2017 edition of Seeds Literary and Visual Arts Magazine! Anyone involved in media might tell you, every publication feels as though it's a long time in coming. However, this edition of Seeds feels especially long in the making, and we're so pleased to finally be able to present the creative work of the Northeastern community to you.

Past editions of the journal have been sown with a theme. Not only do themes give a publication a collective flavor and unity, but they aid the creators by pointing them in a general starting direction. Few things are as intimidating or as daunting as a blank page, canvas, or screen. However, with this edition we decided to forgo the convention of a theme. We felt that not only could these pieces stand resolutely on their own merits, but also that eschewing a theme allowed the tremendous diversity of the Northeastern community to shine ever more brightly. And we believe that the diversity of Northeastern deserves to be highlighted as the incredible positive force it is, whenever and wherever possible, now more than ever.

With that gorgeous diversity in mind, we invite you to dig in to our latest edition. We know that you will find many pieces that you love immediately and return to again and again. We hope that you will discover many more that affect you in surprising and unexpected ways, and stretch your perceptions and opinions into uncharted territory.

We hope you enjoy the wonderfully creative work within as much as we have!

Thank you,

Jenn Lee  
Editor-in-Chief

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# All We Have is Time

M.F.

## **Journal Entry # 1 - 2/25/2018**

I don't feel like writing. They gave me this journal to prepare myself and collect my thoughts. I know what happened; I just don't want to talk about it.

## **Journal Entry # 2 - 3/07/2018**

I've given in. I hate to say it, but Sergeant Scott Brown was right. Without me, they would never know what truly happened out there.

It began in 2017, during the Dry Bowl Disaster. I remember watching women sell their boney bodies on the streets of New York, not for money but for food. Walking by children suffering from dehydration and no one took pity because it was a game of survival, the world had nothing left. Simply nothing left to do but to pray.

I was a young man, age twenty-five, and not to brag but I was pretty handsome with a gift of time. Ever since I was young child, I never needed a wristwatch as I had an accurate clock ticking in my brain. I also had a wife named Alana and a son named Martin. How beautiful she was; I still can smell her floral perfume when I think of her. Three other contestants and I were chosen by NASA to conduct a mission, as you know, to collect samples from another uninhabitable planet. I didn't even care that those scientists spent their whole lives searching only to be fifty percent accurate, but the fact was that I had no choice but to leave my family in those hard times. I know that year was tough on my marriage to Alana; she had been distancing herself from me and I knew why. I would too if I had no idea if my lover would return. But honestly, it had been more than a year, maybe even three years that she had been moving away from me. I just wish I could wake up next to her and see the same face I once knew. Her smile was quite beautiful and I miss it so much.

## **Journal Entry # 4 - 3/08/2018**

Today is the anniversary of the date I had to leave my home and join the others on the mission. I didn't sleep for even a couple of minutes that night.

I watched Alana sleep because she was so peaceful; she was near me and sometimes I saw a slight smile escape from her dreams. I was already packed from the night before, but I couldn't seem to get off of my mattress, almost paralyzed from what was about to happen. I recall hearing Alana cry quietly in the kitchen; I knew I didn't need that, not at the moment before my journey. As I made my way downstairs, my steps seemed to echo in the household. Martin hid behind his mother, only three years old and confused by this whole mess. Alana, still in her nighty, couldn't look me in the eyes, but I was okay with that. It was better if we didn't make eye contact. I couldn't help it though, I grabbed her in as she struggled, I told her, "I'll make it all better and we'll spend the rest of our lives together."

Finally, as if out of a movie, men in black suits greeted me at the door and called out my name then my code number, which I found ridiculous. Before I took one step outside, Martin screamed out, "You're a monster, how could you do this to Mommy?" Time for lunch, I'll come back soon.

#### **Journal Entry # 5 - 4/13/2018**

I HATE IT HERE! THEY TREAT ME LIKE AN ANIMAL! I SAVED THIS PLANET, UNGRATEFUL PRICKS!

#### **Journal Entry # 8 - 5/21/2018**

I'm calm now, well after a few injections. Being out in space has really messed with me. I can't sleep from what happened, but Sergeant Brown wants me to push forward. So here I go.

There were two women and two men recruited for this mission. I remember thinking of how jealous this would make Alana. She couldn't stand that there were any females in my presence. But really what could I do? There was Amy, also twenty-five, who was an engineer. She had this sweet smile that could brighten anyone's day. Mark, twenty-six, I had no idea why the recruiters chose for this mission as his mouth ran faster than his brain could process. And finally there was Tiffany. She was the youngest at age nineteen with one of the last careers in biology. The first time we all met was 1/7/16; I remember standing in a straight line in a nice warehouse in Texas. I watched as everyone stood so still, almost as if they were holding their breath waiting for permission to exhale. I wasn't that scared, actually pretty amused to watch the three others pretending to be someone else. Every once in a while someone would move and eyes would direct right towards them. Sergeant Brown, yes I know you're going to read this, but, I need to provide ALL the information, as you said. You walked in, loud on your cellphone seeming to have no care in the world, well besides the world ending, I guess. You stood right in front of us and said, "Holy damn, this is what I have to work with. Great!" and from that day on I called you Sergeant Toilet Paper, as I imaged wiping my ass in your face. Everyone one

on the team laughed about it.

It was exhausting, as that day was hot as hell, and everyone was already sweating from fear. Our first goal given by you: to get from point A to point B by working in a team underwater. We were given enough oxygen to last ten minutes and nothing more. That also didn't scare me, as when I was younger I practiced holding my breath in the bathtub. Entering that water made me feel pure, as the salt and sins fell from my skin after the long day of enervation. We had to attach a tube under water with minimal materials, and I used hand movements that everyone understood. Again, with my lovely gift of time, I knew exactly how to work this through. I handed Amy the wire, Tiffany the tube, and Mark the end pump to begin. Everything went smoothly until Amy slipped up. The wire she connected to Tiffany's tube got caught on her head mask, and instantly she began to panic. I went to let her know not to panic so she didn't waste her oxygen, but it was too late. We all had three minutes left to get out of the water, and she was on empty. Right then and there I thought someone would help her, give her oxygen or try to free her, but no one was there but me. I swam to her. Those five feet felt like fifty. I got to Amy's side, and saw her lips were almost blue. I waited too long. I carried her out, after an extra five minutes of holding my breath, to faces of shame on the pool room floor. Tiffany performed CPR, and I washed out my eyes. This was the day that I learned Mark had a loud mouth, telling me he did what he could and it wasn't his fault. Amy turned out fine, but I had begun to panic. These were the few people that I had to learn how to trust with my life.

### **Journal Entry # 9 - 5/23/2018**

I've been really tired lately. They keep giving me new medication since being out in space has caused my sleep schedule to go out of whack. But these pills are large and taste disgusting. If you're reading this, Sergeant Toilet Paper, get on that and make these at least taste better!

Getting back to it, I blanked through the whole processes of entering the shuttle. Maybe it was my fear kicking in after thinking about our first training, or that fact that I didn't look at my wife in her eyes one last time. It seemed to happen quite a bit. I lost sense of time, which I didn't understand. Maybe it was the lack of gravity or something. I felt like I was waking up out of a dream and into a nightmare. Once we went through our first push through Earth's atmosphere, we had two hours and two seconds before we would make our second shove. When I finally unclicked my seatbelts, I realized this was reality, hoping in some way I was still dreaming. Holding my head tall so I didn't show my fear, I looked around me. Everyone acted as if they were kids in a bouncy house, moving in all directions. I shook my head and tried to focus on the now. I examined my new surroundings. The metal shined like a clear river, and we had one window to do our observation through. Mark finally came down from his high rush and joined me in the examination. How was I going to restrain

myself from ripping off my own ears to keep from hearing his stories, one after another?

I blocked that out to concentrate on my own task: trying to keep my sanity. The two females became excited once you, Sergeant Brown, came on the radio. "Hello, my test monkeys." Yes, I'm not even joking. You one hundred percent just called the four people who were trying to save mankind test monkeys. You then told us to clean ourselves up as our last phone call to Earth was about to take place. Amy went first. Her husband, who I didn't expect to be toned and more attractive than myself, came on the screen with her son. After that whole year, she never told me about them, as if she were hiding it from me. Next up Tiffany's parents came up on the screen, and I saw her father had dementia. Again I knew all these things were private, but I couldn't look away. Mark's turn was coming and I thought then I would rip off my ears, but watched him talk in sign language to his five year old son. I thought so little of my team members and didn't know why they were truly there. Finally up to bat, Alana came on the screen, but something seems off. Martin's not even there. I tried to explain that I missed her. She couldn't make eye contact. Finally the screen froze. The whole world went blank, and in my empty head I didn't even get to tell her I loved her one last time.

### **Journal Entry # 10 - 6/1/2018**

We all unbuckled ourselves and adjusted to the new gravity against our skin as we went through the final pull to get to this new planet. Amy was the first to say something. She held me before the words I'm sorry fell out of her mouth. Mark gave me the nod, and Tiffany just hid from it. I couldn't bear this torture of sad eyes; I needed time to myself. In this whole shuttle, the only space I had to myself was the bathroom. I didn't want Amy to hold me as I thought of her naked on another man's body, and Mark never understood anything I ever said. Tiffany, was too childish to understand I needed space. I wish I had one last talk with Alana, but I had that coming to me.

Right before my thoughts met reality, red lights began to flicker. Getting once more strapped in to the most uncomfortable chairs, we all held our breath. It looked like Earth, which Mark said out loud. As we went through the atmosphere of this planet, we all noticed it looked just as if it was Earth, only if it wasn't touched by mankind. We all stayed close, gathering samples nearby. The ground seemed to be covered in moss, which is collected in jar labeled 3705. A flower-like form is collected in 5715 and water from a current nearby in 8336. Mark kissed the ground. I sat there watching everyone dance in excitement. After thirteen minutes of collections, Mark made the bright move to take off his helmet. What an idiot. But, as he thought, fresh air. This made even me excited, to smell this second Earth at its finest, untouched by man. I remember we only had thirty-two minutes and five seconds to get back on and secure ourselves before the shuttle automatically left without us. I warned the group,

and took my samples back to the shuttle. Seven minutes and three seconds passed, and everyone was on board but one: Mark. Mark must have not heard me. By this time, everyone was in a panic. I explained that I wanted to leave to find him, but I couldn't risk two lives over one and strapped myself in. Tiffany, in tears, understood why and kept quiet. The countdown began. I looked out the window to see if we could locate Mark, but I saw nothing. He was gone, and there was nothing to stop the pain in our stomachs from this guilt. I feel so empty without him now. Even if I wanted to rip off my ears from hearing him talk, he made me feel safe in this god-awful place.

I sat in the shuttle's bathroom thinking that I really needed Amy's smile at that moment, but it would have been faked. The red lights went on once more, but this time it wasn't for us landing but something else. Tiffany began banging as hard as she could. The panic in her voice made me run out to see what was wrong. One of the engines had failed, and Amy went out to fix it. I paused in a moment to think, and Tiffany screamed, "Go get her!" I rushed out into the empty space to see her holding a tool box on the side of the shuttle. I tried to get her attention, but I was sidetracked counting thirty minutes and three seconds before the shuttle's automatic push to head home. Amy just ignored me as she went on her way. I finally got close enough to grab her arm to try and pull her inside, but it wasn't fast enough. In my adrenaline rush, I can't remember everything, it was like a dream. I just recall fear falling onto her face as she began floating away. I couldn't save her. I couldn't do anything but get back inside and watch her body move in various ways. Twelve minutes later I'm strapped in the shuttle when the countdown begins. Poor Tiffany stared at the window, watching as Amy fell into the darkness; finally it clicked and she strapped herself in. This time we both didn't feel anything, only the tears falling from our eyes reaching the backs of our heads from being pulled by the shuttle. I couldn't save her; she got away from me. I wish I could go back in time and fix this.

### **Journal Entry # 12 - 6/12/2018**

The pills seem to be helping me sleep finally. Or maybe it's this journal you've given me. Talking about what has happened has helped. I still can't get rid of the image of Amy's face when I close my eyes. I'm still working on that.

### **Journal Entry # 15 - 7/03/2018**

I had two families to tell the bad news to. I had to tell Mark's son and Amy's husband. Oh god her son, I just couldn't anymore. Depression had set in. I was blaming myself, and I didn't want to go back. I wished I were the one left behind; I was nothing to that world anymore. Now I had to worry about Tiffany. She was young and had to know there was nothing that could have been done, but she wouldn't listen to me. We had one more push till we were home, and I kept having this strange feeling in my gut. It was not the pain of





"I'm finally done with my journal as you asked, Sergeant. I want to see my family! Let me see my family!"

Dr. Brown slowly sits on the squeaking cot next to Mcgovery. He puts his hand on his shoulder and explains soon enough after he reads the journal entries. Mr. Mcgovery, still uneasy, jumps up from the bed and walks towards the door. He paces back and forth in contemplation.

"I still need to tell those families. I still need to tell my wife I'm alive. I can't stay here for another year. The mission has to be over!" Mcgovery whispers under biting nails.

Dr. Brown stands up and directs Mcgovery to sit down, giving the nurse a nod to get the sedation injection ready. Soon enough replies the doctor once more as a nurse quickly injects the patient. "Finally, everyone rest up. Tomorrow will be his judgement," Dr. Brown explains to the nurses.

-Dr. Brown

Dr. Scott Brown

Patient report date: 2/30/2018

Name/Age: Wallace Mcgovery/ 25

Diagnoses: Schizophrenia & Post-Mortem Depression.

Dear St. Michael's Penitentiary,

I have been observing Wallace Mcgovery for over the last three months due to his prosecution. In the beginning of our program, Wallace wasn't applying our sessions to use, causing us to extend his visit. In my conclusion I've create journal entries to follow his story patterns to provide insight. I noticed his sense of self was preserved in the near future of which, when asked in person, he knew the exact time and date. Mcgovery's entries provided characters in which connected to his dead wife, son, deceased employee, and also myself. The file work you provided to me lists Alana Mcgovery, age twenty-three, found deceased in bath tub with indications of strangling on March 8, 2017. Homicide performed by Wallace Mcgovery, found with traces of scratch marks and Alana Mcgovery's blood. Son Martin Mcgovery not located. With that information I've collected Mr. Mcgovery's journal entries that indicate as prime suspect. None of the journal entries indicate the location of his son, Martin. Mr. Mcgovery's health has also shown signs of level two schizophrenia and post-mortem depression. I find this patient inadequate to being placed in the public due to his diagnosis. I will be able to provide health care and treatment to this patient and, if provided any information towards his son, will deliver as soon as possible.

-Dr. Brown

# Buffalo

Jenn Lee

On the bus today, I saw a woman with hands that looked like my mother's. Freckled, spotted. Pale translucent skin like the rice paper screens at the restaurant where we used to stuff ourselves on sushi. Long, strong, shaped nails stained yellow by decades of nicotine and tar.

I saw my mother's hands and I smelled my mother's smell. Acrid sweat and choking smoke carpeting that soft, powdery, absolutely-anything-but-floralness of my mother's hair and breath and skin.

I saw my mother's hands and the sight of her hands conjured her - sitting up in bed; downy nightgown at midday; legs folded beneath her, on top of the covers; paperback book with the cover bent back; Dove dark chocolate wrappers balled up into metallic marbles; cigarette dangling, threatening ash; half-drunk can of coke that will never be finished waiting on the table beside her, slowly offering its effervescence to the air.

On the bus today, I saw a woman with my mother's hands.

On the bus today, for three blocks, I was given a gift.

# For You

Michelle Bright

## **John**

"I still want to be with you, this changes nothing," she said. I sat there a moment and realized that it wasn't Charlotte who was embarrassed or ashamed, it was me.

Four months ago I met Charlotte in my history class. My professor wanted us to team up, and work together on a group project. He paired us together. I hated working with someone; I'd rather just work by myself. My professor made us count off numbers by two, and I found out I would be working with Charlotte. We agreed that with our schedules it would be better for both of us to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays after class.

Immediately I was taken back by how beautiful she was. She was definitely my type: short at about 5'3", light brown skin, big eyes, medium-length brown hair, and curvy. I didn't want to work with her because I knew this could be trouble, not only for me but for her. One thing to know about me: I was born with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) which the dictionary says is "a variable retrovirus that invades and inactivates helper T cells of the immune system and is a cause of AIDS and AIDS related complex." I've had it since I was born, so it's been twenty-six years. The virus doesn't turn into AIDS unless the immune system is damaged. I take three pills a day, and I have regular doctor appointments. Between school and my illness, having a relationship is out of the question. I have had relationships in the past that didn't go well. We would go out, have a good time, and I would let them know up front about my illness. They would seem okay with it, but it always ended the same. The "it's not you it's me" crap. I just figured if I just stuck to the project and talked about nothing personal, then we wouldn't get to know each other.

I was so sick of hearing that, so I just stopped dating for a little while. My sister said, "John you just haven't found the right person", but I don't think so. I'm not a bad looking guy: 6'2", dark hair, and I keep my body in the best shape possible. It's just always the same, so I'm focused on finishing school, and getting my degree in Business. I figured if I just stick to the project, no personal details about my life or about hers, we would be fine, but that's not at all how

things went.

One Tuesday, Charlotte and I decided we would meet in the library on campus to go over our project. We decided to meet on the third floor so we could get a table, and talk as well. I sat down first and Charlotte sat right next to me. Just great, she didn't have to sit by me. This was going to be a long study session.

After an hour passed, I told her, "We could continue on Thursday," and that's when she asked me where I was from.

Damn, nothing personal, I was thinking. "I'm from Highland Park. IL, I've lived here my whole life. What about you?" I said.

"I'm from Chicago too. What year are you?"

"I'm a senior," I said. "This will be my last semester here."

"That's great. I still have two years to go."

"Well I better go," I said.

"Okay, I will see you Thursday."

I gathered my things to go, and I asked her was she leaving as well. but She said she was going to stay for a little bit. I know I probably sound like a jerk because the questions she was asking weren't too personal, but that's how it starts. If I am honest with myself I was a little obsessed with trying not to like her.

When Thursday came I wasn't feeling well, so I went to the hospital just to be on the safe side. I emailed my professors to let them know I would not be attending class that day. I also emailed Charlotte to let her know we would not meet. She asked if I needed anything. I told her no, but thanks anyway. My doctor asked how the new medicine was working for me, and I told him okay, but I had some the side effects. I was sick the whole weekend, and lost a little weight in the process.

A week had passed, and we were getting to know one another. I found that I enjoyed her company. She was sweet and funny. I found out that she is the only child, she's twenty-four years old, likes to dance, read, and is close with her mom. She said goes to school full time and works part time on the weekends. Within that time frame, I asked Charlotte if she wanted to go get some coffee, or tea. She said yes. We talked more and more, I mostly asked about her, I was really intrigued. I came to the conclusion I was going to ask her out, and try this again.

"Would you like to go out sometime?" I asked. I was sweating bullets, I was so nervous. It seemed like she liked me, but I wasn't for sure.

"Yes I would love to," she said.

### **Charlotte**

He finally asked me out, I was hoping he would but I wasn't for sure. When we first started our project he seemed a little hesitant, but ultimately loosened up a bit. He still is a mystery, he doesn't really volunteer information about himself. It's usually me probing him for information. John can be serious at times until I make him laugh. From what I can gather he is a good person, but sometimes I feel like something is a little off. He doesn't really speak of future plans, and sometimes when I ask him a question he will give me this vague response. Other times he is a more open, I know he said he grew up in Highland Park with his mother, father, and sister. He said his mom died when he was three, but that was all he said about it. He just kind of left it real vague. He said he read a lot and liked listening to music. The first thing I noticed about him was his eyes, they were a deep blue ocean color, and once he spoke his voice was so deep and sexy. We've been working together for about a month now, and a couple times John missed because he was sick. I asked him did he need anything, but he would kindly decline every time. When he came back things went on as usual, but the only difference was he asked me out.

John picked me up at seven and we drove to this Chinese restaurant in downtown Evanston. We didn't have to travel far because I live ten minutes from the place. We ate, talked, and laughed. Afterwards we walked around downtown, and then he drove me home.

When we pulled up John walked me to my door and kissed me, it was slow and sweet. He told me to have a good night and he would call me tomorrow. After that night we have been hanging out for weeks, whether it's going to different book stores, or going out dancing, or mini golfing which was hilarious because he had a hard time getting his ball in the hole. I started really liking him a lot, we talk, we text, and kiss. Things were going fine until John didn't show up for class on Tuesday. We had been out that Monday and he didn't mention he would be absent. I texted asking was he all right, but no answer. I didn't start to worry until the end of the week when I didn't hear anything from him. I called. He never called me back and by the next week he still wasn't in class.

I started to think maybe he wasn't doing so well or that he didn't want to talk to me anymore. I was so desperate to find out what was going on that I asked my professor if he had heard from John, and he told me that he had, and that was all he could tell me. I assumed he was all right since he had heard from him. But that meant John didn't want to see me anymore. When I

got home I decided to text him one more time.

Hi John I hope things with you are well. I haven't heard or talked to you in weeks, if you didn't want to talk to anymore that's all you had to say.

Still no response. He has not responded to any of my texts so I just gave up. I stopped calling and texting, I did my best go on about my life but I was still hurt. I was starting to fall for him.

**John**

It's been weeks since I've been to my classes and seen Charlotte. I've been in the hospital, sick with flu-like symptoms. It's been so bad my oldest sister had to come down and help out. In a couple of days the doctor said I will be better enough to go home. My professors said I will be able to make up my work I missed. I saw Charlotte's texts and missed calls. I know it was wrong, but I just didn't respond to anything. I really liked her, or should I say I was starting to fall for her, but we don't need to be together. Things were going fine until I got sick, and after that I realized that it would be better to just end things before either one of us gets hurt. I'm sure she is upset, but she will be better off now that I'm out of her life.

Well I don't know what I'm going to do when we have class together. I guess I can just ignore her altogether. My sister came and went, and by Monday I went back to school and got caught up with assignments. Tuesday was the big day, I knew I would see Charlotte, it was unavoidable.

When I walked in the class, Charlotte was the first person I saw. Once it registered that it was me, she froze. I turned my head and went to my seat. I could tell she was looking at me, but I didn't look at her. By the end of class I was running out the door to avoid her, but Charlotte caught up with me.

"John where have you been, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm here aren't I?"

Charlotte looked surprised and hurt. "I can see that you're here, but I haven't talked to you and you've been avoiding me, did I do something?"

"No, Charlotte, you didn't do anything," I said.

"Okay then why have you been avoiding me?" This time she spoke really loudly, and a few people looked.

"Charlotte, I don't think is the place to talk about this." I couldn't just be cold to her. I was trying but it was too hard.

"Well then when can I talk to you?"

"Let's go to my car and talk."

I didn't think she would agree to come, but we walked silently to the parking garage. We got in the car quietly until she broke the silence.

"If you didn't want to be with me anymore, that's all you had to say. I mean I don't know if we were really together, we've only been hanging out, but it seemed like that's where it was headed."

"Charlotte this has nothing to do with you it's just me."

"So you brought me all the way to your car to tell me 'it's not you, but me' crap. John, seriously what is going on?"

I just looked at her, and she seemed real pained. I took a deep breath, and decided I would just tell her, no matter what her response was.

"The reason I missed classes was because I was sick, and I while in the hospital I figured it would be better to just end you and me."

She looked confused and said, "All right you were sick, I still don't get what that has to do with anything?"

She was really going to make me say it.

"I have HIV, and I was born with it. My mother had it, and it was passed to me while she was pregnant. I didn't think you and I would get as far as we did in our relationship."

She looked like she wanted to cry after I said it.

"I don't want your pity, if you don't think you can deal with this sort of thing you can just tell me right now."

"I still want to be with you, this changes nothing" she said.

I sat there a moment and realized that it wasn't Charlotte who was embarrassed or ashamed, it was me.

"I enjoy spending time with you, John, and I want to know more about you. I don't know a lot about HIV, but maybe you can tell me more."

"All right, what do you want to know?"





# SMOKE IT OUT

*Smoke It Out - Kurama Dragneel*

# From the Lover of a Dying Boy

Joseph Garstki

I often think back to the day when you first invited me into your hospital bed. Tentative, like playing with dangerous magic, I creep forward, placing an open palm onto the area beside you and lift myself up from my bedside chair. My body seems especially small next to yours as I stretch my legs alongside your own, emphasizing the difference in our frames. For months, I have found myself in this daydream, but now manifesting in reality, it chills my spine and scratches my fingertips. I reach out to your face—pale, weary, earnest. I cup your cheek, creating a sort of silence amongst the cacophony of hospital equipment ringing around us. On the verge of a terrible promise, your innocent green eyes, tragic but peaceful, steal me from thought. I'm leaning forward, forehead meeting forehead—my cold brow against your ever-feverish. My lips beckon yours, yearning to save you from your imprisonment. I offer my breath, the comfort of my touch, the rhythmic beating of my heart pressed to your chest. It feels transcendent, a moment of healing beyond words can describe. My eyes flicker like shutters until my head is on your chest, escaped by breath, belief, and clarity.

The first words you whisper, the heat of your breath, the sensation on my earlobes—the picturesque confession of a lover. No longer the gentle, worrisome friend making daily visits to comfort you during the grave illness, I have attached myself to your side, your lips, your heart and soul. I am in the place I have always dreamed, fantasized of being. Kind, angelic, dying boy, I am so in love with you.

You aren't getting better, and the doctors tell me you're running out of time. I can no longer offer you my breath, my heartbeat, my lips or my chest, only the meager comfort of my hand in yours. You tell me about the future, you tell me everything you want to do, what you won't be able to do. School in a far off land, volunteering for those in need—being ever the angel to others as you are to me. The thought shakes me as much as your death, the visions of a life outside of this hospital bed for the both of us. I see a world where you're no longer with me all of the time, where I am no longer your only visitor. When you get better, are you going to die? I ask myself as I run my fingers through your smoky black hair, feeling my passion for you turning into selfishness as

dark as the locks between my fingers. Leaning over your sleepy, smiling face, I begin to feel like a betrayer, ready to strike, hiding these worrisome thoughts from your innocence. Your death plays in my head over and over as I watch you, continually seeing your final moments from one second to the next. I cling to you, to this room, to this hospital bed where nothing exists except you and me. I tell myself to be prepared, that everything will be okay when you die, that you will live forever in my heart, always mine, and I will never need anyone else. When you die, you will never leave me, you will never break my heart or find that the world is bigger than this room, with many more people better than me that are willing to love you, and desperate to kiss you.

I tell myself that it's all okay as my vision blurs, as I feel the tense hands of the physicians pulling me off of you and out of the room. Our hospital bed becomes a cavernous abyss, violated by your seizing body, the screams of doctors for more help as faceless drones continue pouring over your poor, helpless frame. I see you engulfed in flames, as tall and gorgeous as you are, burning everything we made in that room, a symphony of light and beautiful destruction playing out before me. A weak, pained smile washes over my face as the inferno crackles and hisses violently. There is nothing for me to return to, only the ashes of the boy to whom I devoted myself. I will never return to this room. We don't belong here anymore. You're going to a better place, and when they ask me about my lover, I'll tell them about my kind, angelic dying boy whom I loved with all of my heart, how we are martyrs for each other's love in eternity. It's a beautiful story, and it's our story, so it's okay—it isn't the happiest ending, but it is an ending where we were both in love to the bitter end, and frozen in ash we will ever remain. I love you, my kind, angelic, dying boy.

I open my eyes and there you are.

Stable.

Over and over, the men in white coats repeat the word. Again and again they repeat it as the earthquakes at my feet become stronger and stronger, sinking the entire hospital beneath the earth.

Stable. You are stable.

All at once, my soul stretches and tears, I feel my body unraveling, breaking, burning in tall, gorgeous flames.

I was happy that you were dead.

# I'm So Tired

M.F.

I think about it every day. I wake to a dirt-filled thought that forms in the back of my head and slithers forward. It says "Why not today?" in a deep warming voice. I spend this time holding my eyelids shut, harder and harder, hoping to fall back to sleep. What could I tell it back but empty words? I say nothing as I hide it beneath the layers of my skin, contorting my bones to wave this white flag. I find it hard doing anything else as it acts like a starving snake inside my veins, whispering certain sins. I'm so tired, both physically and mentally.

Waking up every morning to this creature telling you why not, it hurts too much to fight it. The word "why" is carved into my weaknesses as my tongue a knife. But why? I question out loud as hearing it brings me a silence ease rather than underneath my clustered thoughts. Why fight this? I know it's natural, everyone thinks this way. Everyone at one point has thought about what I think about every day. Why not end it? End your suffocating pain? Why not end the bills I can't pay? Why can't I end my children from hating me? Why can't I end it and run away from it all? Why? What holds you back? This is what I repeat as my own national anthem. Your family? Your honor? Your friends? Your job? Your pets? Your lover? They would be upset, they wouldn't be able to go on. Then the deep taunting voice that I try to tune out clenches its claws in me once again. They would be fine, they don't need you, it'll only take a few months and their lives will move on. I'm so tired and pushing on is all I have as I consistently play tug of war between my thoughts.

I spend every day thinking of others as it helps shun out the provoking whispers from it. I think about what you are thinking. I'm thinking about why you think the way they think. I spend my waking hours absorbed in their lives without thinking of myself. Just to drive wondering why you are in a hurry. I come to school watching every interaction with the souls that surround me. I'm not just quiet, I'm reading you as it is wrapped around your neck.

I watch this creature dance in others' behavior. It pushes you to show your dark side. When my parents fight, I watch their lungs expanding with hatred echoing through long hallways. I cover my ears to pretend I don't hear while covering sheets over my face, hoping it won't look at me in the eyes. It's not like it'll go away and I can't do anything about it. I stand between this creature and my parents' love. While it holds me close to the floor and wraps its tail around my parents' tongues, I try to control it. Try to control the hatred as I've done for so long for myself. How much energy do I have? I know you have felt this too as I'm walking amongst you with a tender smile on my face. This is not because I'm happy but to lift your spirit. I see it next to you, the shadow of your fears. Haunting your steps as you look to the floor. Some might call it deep thought, but I see in a glance what covers my body and there is nothing I can do but smile. So when you see me, smile back even if it's pushed up through your heart. It shows it you're trying to win too, and that I'm trying to embrace it.

So give me a small conversation, I read into its red faded eyes. I'll find your strengths and your weaknesses and in that, I give you what you need. That conversation that you're dying for. That person to make you feel at home. I know how easy this creature can torture and I'm that person who let you feel like you, without its hawk eyes piercing for its next prey. I see how you need to be let free but the world around it holds them back when it intimidates your future. I watch as it tries to hold you and let you collapse beneath the layers of your skin. They hide but I'm here, it only matters what you let me see.

It comes to me in the night in my stress-filled day ready to keep me up until my eyes fail. It begins to provoke unwanted thoughts once again, but this time it's screaming. I'm so tired of being there without others being there for me. No one will read me like I read them. No one will take the time to see what I say and why. I hate you all for not trying, I'm suffering too! This time I don't try and fight it. It's right, I'm not worth it. In this creature's tight grip holding my body at night, I find it now my lover. The only one to be there even with all my pain. Always there when frustrated, always there when things go bad. It's there when others won't be. I find this blanket of depression the only thing holding me together. I'll soon join it in my peace as its words are now lullabies. This empty space that never ends, I'm looking at nothing. Every morning I wake up and ask why? Why do I even push forward when I already know my answer now? I just want to be forever at rest, I don't need this pressure. I don't need this pain. I want to join you now.

# Kill Or Be Killed

Grant Spathis

His footsteps pound the weathered concrete floor in front of me, thumping off the walls. I can smell the sickly sweet combination of sweat and gas station cologne coming off of him; I can hear his labored breaths, willing him to go faster. He won't. Not at his size. I've always loved this part. My heart pumping hard, excitement rising, begging me to finish it. But the chase is the best part, even if this chase is pathetic. I see him pass under a dingy, piss yellow light, hanging lonely from the ceiling. I raise my carbon pistol, custom made on the moon Eos, center mass. Should it be this easy? Stop thinkin'. Pull the trigger. The report booms through the tiny space. A shot that loud should deafen me, but after years of being a pro hitter, it don't even faze me. I pull closer. His eggshell shirt is stained in the armpits, stretched, threadbare. Blood pools under his chest, pumping out of the gaping hole with each heartbeat. I turn him over.

"I can...pay...you" he gurgles.

"If you can pay me, you shoulda paid the Brothers. They ain't nice like me."

"I just...need...more time."

"Well, you're outta time, kid."

"Never thought...a girl...would kill..."

"Shut the hell up."

I finish the job, but this time, I know something's off. Under his collarbone, a green kraken clutching a Viking helm. Where have I seen that before? It's a tip of the tongue thing. Fuck it, I'll figure it out later. Right now, I need to get

paid.

I walk out of the former laundering facility, having finished the money counter. This twin sun system shit really annoys me. All the sand gunks up my sinuses, but when the Brothers throw this much money at you for an overweight lackey, you take it. I light up a cancer stick, and plot out my next tat. I always get new ink when I finish a job, and this one will make number seventeen for me. Maybe a bloody bag of money?

I fire up my rusted out ship, hoping it'll turn over. Luckily, it does, and I pull up the Brothers on my holo-phone. Just my luck, they don't answer and I'm stuck on this backwater rock for at least another day. When one of those twin suns flare, trying to get a cross planet signal is pointless, and tonight is a big one. Guess I'll find some place to drown myself in Mars whiskey.

### ***Three Brothers Garage, Apollo, Andromeda System***

The young, female assassin, Jessa Bancroft, is visible on the screen. She doesn't have the typical build of a hired killer: short, slender, with intense blue eyes. Her arms are sinewy, tattooed biceps, with short black hair.

"Have you set the plan in motion?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Choi, our operative is on the ground and ready to execute."

"Good, inform me when the job is finished and we'll work out your payment."

The screen goes black, and the two men on the end turn to the man in the middle, the smallest of the three with darting, black eyes under a wild mop of thinning white curls.

"We shall play this out, and when we are done with this, we are done with him."

The man to the left chimes in, "But Alexei, the money is perfect." His anger rising with each word, he presses the attack, "We can make a fortune."

Alexei, knowing the third brother, Andrej, will support him no matter what he says flippantly replies, "Aurel, our business needs no more cash flow. We

do not have the reputation of selling our operatives out, and I will not gain that now, when we are so close to being done with this unseemly business.”

Finding a watering hole in these backwater asteroid belts is never a tough task, as the miners need somewhere to forget the fact that they live light-years from anyone willing to even give ‘em a tug. Walking in to the smell of stale beer and piss, I pull up at the bar. Being a hitter, I notice things in a place like this: the old-timer at the table nearest the door has a hand cannon under his jacket; two guys playing cards a couple tables down from him are stashin’ chips. Bars like this are the same all over this damn universe. Everyone tryna get a leg up, but all it really leads to is a beating or a bullet. I keep surveying the joint, and come across a face I know. What the hell is Bronsolino doing here, of all places? Not a soul on this rock can afford him, or me, for that matter. He’s a big name in my small circle, and there’s good reason. Built like a rock, with one of those scare tactic bearded and tattooed looks, Bronsolino lives up to his image. Last time we shot the breeze, his count was up to forty-two. Hell of a number. I loop over, whiskey in one hand, ready to draw with the other.

“Fancy seeing you here,” I mumble as I sit at his table. “What brings us both to this gods-forsaken rock?”

“Fuelin’ up, got a long flight back to Andromeda, and even longer from there,” he replies coolly.

I don’t trust him. “Well, shit. At least get a drink in ya, we’ll catch up while you wait.”

“Can’t, the top boy told me he’d kill me if I messed this one up.”

“Who ya workin’ for now? Been awhile since you were with the Brothers.” This doesn’t feel right. First, that damn kraken ink on the hit earlier, and now Bronsolino on the same rock as where I did money man?

“You wouldn’t know ‘em, he’s a far out exoplanet guy.”

Things keep piling up, and that ain’t good. I gotta be on my toes, but this whiskey is calling my name. I pour another glass, light a smoke, and keep him talking while I figure this out.



## ***Matsui Building, Eos, Andromeda system***

Mr. Choi hurries through the hallway, hoping to catch Mr. Matsui before his ship takes flight. He will appreciate hearing this before he leaves Bellona for Ceres. With perfect timing, Choi pushes open the door to the executive suite.

“Mr. Matsui, sir, I have some excellent news for you.”

“Continue,” Matsui doesn’t look up from his briefcase, but is intrigued.

“The Brothers have informed us that the trap is set, and their man is in place. She will be taken care of before you land on Ceres.”

“This is good news, Choi. Get the funds in order, and inform me of its completion as soon as you can. I will not accept failure in this endeavor.”

“Very good sir.”

I’m still tryin’ to get Bronsolino to open up, have a drink, but he’s a tough one to crack. This bar just keeps getting seedier and seedier, but I like it. The two ratholing at the poker table just got their asses kicked by the old-timer with his hand on the gun, and one of the Reaver crews just showed up. Whenever those guys are in town, bad things follow. I gotta get outta here, can’t be around all this with a fresh hit waiting to haunt me.

“I’m outta here, Bronsolino. Bad vibes are startin’ to pile up in here.”

“‘Til next time, kid.”

I meander outside and light another smoke, not looking forward to flying all the way to Vesta, but that’s where my money is and I mean to get paid. I unlock the car, and am enveloped by a wall of heat and power, flying backwards, as something rips into my abdomen, and everything goes black...

# Homecoming

DL Smith-Lee

I don't understand what kinda nutcase would wanna move to a town in the middle of nowhere, but everybody ain't right in the head I suppose. I hated Moreau. Most people in Moreau hated the place deep down, didn't wanna admit it but they did. They called the place Moreau after the French explorer who founded.. The settlers didn't start callin' it Moreau until after the man died. Nowadays folks are hightailin' it out of places like Moreau and makin' for the big city. Never been too interested myself, to be honest. A bigger town? Maybe. But Chicago? No thanks.

I guess folks like Tim enjoyed places like Moreau. The fresh air had to be nice. Tim said he was from New Orleans. We didn't get many Southerners out this way. He was from the city, but a Southerner no less.

"My family can trace their roots back to this town," he told me as I grabbed a Rubbermaid tote from the back of his jeep. "Thought I'd come check it out." Tim was stayin' at the local motel. Word spreads pretty fast when you're a stranger in a small town, but since my family only lived right across the road from the motel, I thought I'd lend him a hand.

Tim said he was descended from some French settler who lived here generations ago. The foundin' families of Moreau were all here, so we knew he coulda been from one of the founders.

He asked about my family. My daddy took a shotgun to his chin and blew his brains out when I was fourteen. Mama took it pretty hard. I started workin' at the market to help keep us afloat. Annie, my little sister, went to go live with our Aunt May. That's my sob story.

Tim didn't say much about his family. Not just then.

Later in the day, I invited him over for dinner to give him some do's and don'ts in Moreau. They were pretty simple actually:

1) Don't go strollin' through the cornfields. The farmers who own those lands don't take too kindly to strangers.

2) When in Rome, as they say, but you're in Moreau so don't try nothin' funny.

3) Stay away from the Hangin' House.

Of course, he had to ask why to stay away, and I had to give him an answer.

Supposedly Moreau, the explorer guy, had slaves. One of them slaves didn't like his master very much, so he plotted against him. Moreau had gotten real sick one day. The sickness lasted for about three days, then he died. The slave said he killed him, poisoned him most reckoned. The folks in the town had the slave hanged, right outside Moreau's manor. His manor was the place we called the Hangin' House, for the obvious reason. That place had been standin' for over a century now, they said. They said an ole widow lived in the place a few decades ago. She moved in the place, but nobody heard from her since. Folks around here don't mess with the place.

After I had finished tellin' Tim the story, he looked bothered. He didn't even finish the baked chicken and lima beans my Mama had made for him. I don't know what got into him, but he just thanked us and left in a hurry.

I shoulda known better than to go mentionin' local tall tales to a stranger. It made us all sound crazy. Truth be told we were.

Tim's Jeep was gone from the motel, but the innkeeper said he didn't check out yet. Somethin' in me told me he was gonna go to the Hangin' House regardless. And he had to pull this crap on the gloomiest day of the week, I

supposed. It was about to start rainin' cats and dogs. I guess he musta asked around about the location of the Hangin' House. It wasn't easy to find.

Out past the cornfields was the forest. Just before the fields end, there was a gravel road that led through the cornfield. It was at the edge of the forest, the front of the house facin' out to the cornfield. Just outside of it was the bare oak tree with branches that looked like broken and twisted fingers. They say that slave was hanged from this tree. The place was an ole Federal-style plantation house, like the ones they got down South. It was fallin' apart and was no good anyhow.

I remember when I was a kid I decided to be a daredevil. Me and my friends dared one another to go into the house. We were too damn chicken to try it honestly. I got the closest to it. I remember standin' in the cornfield, surrounded by stalks I could barely see over. I could see the top of the brick chimney, and the caved in roof and its mottled tar. I remember the whistles of the autumn winds that howled through the place, even from a distance. It was like a damn wolverine cryin' to the moon.

It didn't look any different then than it did as I parked my truck. The only difference was that I could see over the cornstalks. My height gave me a better look at that deathly oak tree right outside the place too.

I pushed through the corn, lookin' for Tim at the same time. His big black jeep was parked right outside the house. I didn't expect to find him on the porch starin' at the front door.

"Didn't I tell ya stay away from this place?" I hollered. He turned to me, but he didn't look startled.

"I have to stop it," Tim said.

"What?"

"Every man in my family died by hanging, whether it was an accident or suicide. They never died of old age. Ten years ago my daddy hung himself

because of this place. He said it would end with me.”

“Tim, what are you talkin’ ‘bout?” I asked.

“My daddy said the Hanging House was a burden on our family,” Tim explained. “If I don’t burn this place down then I’m next.”

I didn’t know what was worse: the crazy ass story he was spoutin’ or the fact that I was on the porch o’ the creepiest place in Moreau.

“And I’m going to do it from the inside,” Tim said, pushin’ the half hinged door open and runnin’ inside like he had a clue where to go. I ran in after him, tryin’ to stop him. I screamed his name as he ran up the stairs. I dunno why I gave a damn, but I did. I couldn’t let the guy get hurt.

I ran up after him. When I was finally at the top o’ the creaky stairs, it was quiet.

“Tim!” I called. No answer.

The howls from outside this place were nothin’ compared to the inside. I shook off a chill that tried creepin’ its way up my spine. A loud creak answered to every step I took.

At the first bedroom to my right, there was a window straight across from the door. Outside was a perfect view of the oak tree. It was directly next to the window, its twigs scrapin’ the glass. None o’ that was more important than the person that stood at the window.

She was old. Her white hair was almost to the floor, and the wrinkles on her face sagged helplessly.

“He couldn’t get away from it,” the old lady said.

“What?”

"From his fate."

I didn't like the sound of her words. The creaky whisperin' wasn't helpin' either.

"Tim is with his family now," The woman said, pointin' out the window. I followed the path of her withered finger to the tree. I know what I was seein' at that moment hadn't been there before. Bodies—loads of them—littered the tree, suspended by nooses like Christmas decorations. There had to be dozens of 'em. But there was one...I had to be wrong about. It couldna been Tim hangin' from that tree.

"It would end with him..." I muttered.

"And it did," the old woman said with a smile stretchin' her loose skin. "And now they all live here with me."

# *It Might Not be Much...*

Katharina Losacco

*Kids play in the street with skinned knees and bruises,  
Its not grass but hard concrete,  
It might not be much but it is ours.*

*Chipped bats and deflated balls smack against the pavement,  
HOME RUN!*

*Losing team has to buy the winners tacos,  
It's not to bad; Mr. Sanchez gives us a deal for a quarter each.*

*We can't afford drinks so we split 2 horc--hatas.*

*It might not be much, but we are satisfied.*

*Early Saturday mornings we are sent with grocery lists to the corner convenient,  
Grandma gives me \$20 for milk, bread, eggs and cigarettes.*

*Sometimes she adds a winning scratch off.*

*In the check out line we scrounge for change on the floor...sometimes it's  
enough for a pack of bubblelicious.*

*If we come back with all the groceries unscathed, grandma gives me \$1.*

*It might not be much, but it's the only grocery store we got.*

*At night we usually go to my house to play horse.*

*An orange crate is tied to a metal fence and the bottom is kicked out.*

*I usually win because I come up with the coolest trick shots.*

*We wager broken pixie sticks and half eaten candy bars.*

*I usually go for the snickers,*

*(I get to have the chocolate and the peanuts, more bang for the buck).*

*It might not be much, but for a moment we can be Michael Jordan.*

*Sometimes when it's hot we have a lemonade stand.*

*We usually steal the lemons from Patrick's grandma, while I take my grandmas  
sugar. The hose gives us water for the whole day.*

*Its not minute maid mix, but we only charge ten cents.*

*If grandma made enough money the week before, we would give a handful of  
popcorn with a purchase.*

*It might not be much, but we would always make enough money to get a  
screwball from the ice cream truck.*

*Kids play in the street with skinned knees and bruises,*

*Oh what a summer it has been.*

# La Doña

Eric Melecio

It's been a week since she arrived at the hospital. She wanted to go back home and eat normal food, rather than from a throat tube like an animal. She wanted to see her home and her family again. The relatives that were attracted to her home, a beacon for family business and reunions. She didn't like the loneliness and modernity that was the hospital. Rustic and classical was what she preferred. The distant past, a dreamy blur in her memory which she longed to return. And beyond that, she wanted to be back to her hacienda where she could control everything and watch everyone, even if it was from a wheelchair. To watch the world unfold and change before her because in a hospital bed all you see is people crying and family watching you get sicker every day, all eyes fall on you, and this, she felt, was no life for her.

She laid in the hospital bed like a vegetable, her eyes dry and burning because they no longer produced tears. Months were passing her by, no longer keeping track. She could no longer move, now completely paralyzed. She could no longer cry even though she watched her world in front of her crumbling. The doctor gave her many illnesses she could not pronounce that she did not care what she had anymore. A simple answer and when could she leave was all she wanted. But all she could do was listen to the machines that kept her alive. All she could do was watch her daughters and sons begin to complain behind drawn hospital curtains over having to take care of her, and over who gets what after that. All she could do was wait until her throat gains enough force, her tongue enough saliva, her spirit strong enough, and her body able to at least mutter two or three words. To say something to the outside world after being silent for eternal days. But her breathing was becoming weaker and slower every day. Sometimes she could not breathe, gasping for air. The words were becoming simple sounds, barely understandable mutters. She could not remember the last time people listened to her talk. She could not remember how to make words. Not only had she lost her body, but will soon lose people and her world because it was with her tongue that she was able to dominate and control the world around her.

"No, I don't care what happens. They should keep her alive," Castillo said outside her room.

"She deserves a peaceful death. Let her go naturally," a voice said. She



couldn't recognize most voices anymore. Only those who were closest to her.

"Nope. No, no, no. Nope. I won't," he said.

"And will you pay for her treatment?"

"Nope. That's someone else's responsibility. Not mine. Why should I?"

She loved her Castillo dearly. She wanted nothing but the best for him. She would have loved him the same even if he were the one to pull the plug. He was misunderstood. A recovering drug addict. A recovering alcoholic. Recovering from the harsh world. America had been cruel to him. She promised herself that she would not pass from this world until Castillo met a woman who could deliver him to salvation, and she knew it was only a matter of time. A woman who would take care of him as long as he lived. She spent her whole life trying to find that woman for him. Preferably a cousin or at least a distant family relative. A woman from her village where everyone to a certain degree is related and look alike and know each other. But word spreads like wildfire in the village, and nobody wanted Castillo in their house. Even the woman of the night would bring him back after days in some obscure town in the hills.

The doctor and Castillo entered the room. They were both worried.

"It's going to be just fine. The doctor here just needs more money to do his job,"

Castillo told her, grabbing her hand and leaning close to her.

He was tall and people called him Chango Viejo de Viente, but he looked like a young man with a bright future ahead of him. A long life that will redeem all of his mistakes. She wanted to tell him that, but her throat and mouth did not work with her. A mutter was the best she could do. And she wanted to fall asleep now, but before that, someone said a farewell to Castillo.

"Te los lavas, Changa. Wipe them good. You probably have something down there the way you scratch them."

She could not sleep all night after that.

Her daughters and other lost sons came. They were always by her side, and took turns watching her. Some with good intentions and still others wanting to be the first to know that she has passed. An inheritance war will happen after she passes, and she had to live longer. She didn't want the war to happen.

"How are you, madre mia," one of her daughters asked. They all looked and sounded the same to her now. Faces blending and meshing into one: they were

her face when she was still young.

She didn't want to talk or say anything. She had to save her energy and think of the right words. The right words that would save her family from destruction. The right words. Few clear words. Or at least understandable mumbles. Her ultimate answer to fix the world. But for now, she had to save her strength, so she made quick eye contact with her.

"What music would you like to listen to today, madre mia de mi Corazon?"

Her daughter turned around and fiddled with the radio. Nothing but Bachata jungle island music and barbaric corrido. She thanked god that she didn't live in America where they only played norteñas; all they do is reminisce and cry about not being in their native home. Cowards and ungrateful. Deceitful and slaves to their wives, all of them. She only wanted to listen to Rancheras and only if it was from her generation, like Jose Alfredo Jimenez, because their music sounded correct, calm, and graceful. Traditional above all else. There hasn't been that kind of music since she was a young woman. She wanted to throw the radio out the window and slap the daughter that tortured her with terrible music.

Hunger stabbed her stomach. She yearned for real food. The tubes became infected and clogged, the mush of food oozing from it. They had to remove the tube that gave her food. And it has been two days without food. She wanted to know when she could eat because they didn't tell her that. While she was battling hunger, the first battles began.

"Mira, Changa, I deserve these parcels of land because the paper here says my name on it."

"Nope. You don't deserve anything. You don't even live here. I've lived here and lived with the old ones longer than you have. Go back to Gringo Land!"

"Wey, you wish you were there. What you wouldn't do to go back there. And I'm not going to say what you would do because mother is nearby."

"No. I don't care."

"You won't get anything out of this. You won't last a day without mommy and daddy. You're done. Nobody wants a chango like you living with them. And I suggest you start packing because I will see to it you never see our lands again."

They didn't even wait for her to pass. They sounded like children, fighting for everything. They needed a good slap in the head which is why she had waited for this time, had mentally prepared for it. It took her some time to get her thoughts ready. She had forgotten how to talk, her muscles now unfamiliar with how to

make words. She struggled until she said the first thing on her mind.

“Ham—hame.”

“Hungry. She says she’s hungry,” one of her daughters nearby said.

“We can’t do anything about it.”

She was disappointed in herself. She wanted to defend Castillo and stop the fighting. End everything right there and then. But the right words didn’t come to her. The right words never came to her when it came to her Castillo.

She remembered when she was still young and still called señora, rather than Doña. It was Castillo who was the one who rode the fine black horse they bought for him. He was the only one allowed on horseback at that time. He loved that horse, and would ride it everywhere he went in the hacienda. He supervised his brothers, calling them worthless, useless and ignorant donkeys.

“Why don’t you get off that high horse and work then,” one of his brothers said. She was watching him from one of the windows of his house. She saw her sons, who were working in the field, full of dirt. She was afraid someone was going to throw dirt at Castillo’s fine new clothes. He was dressed like a charro, looking like a decent aristocrat, while the rest were dressed like peons. She knew that a peon was not supposed to be trusted, and those sons she cannot favor because they were peons and liked to work for money. But Castillo wasn’t like that.

“I’m not working. That’s not why I’m here. My job is to watch all you cabrones, so you can get the job done.”

She liked his answer. She knew that one day, he would grow up to become a man who could control the lands and his brothers and sisters. She knew that he would bring peace to the family because she knew that deep down, he was good and not full of ambition like the rest who scratch the dirt for money. She saw him high on that horse, and thought that nothing would ever bring him down.

Control. It was the ultimate form of keeping the family strong. Control was when she had to pay the women who was cheating on his son to stay on the family lands and keep the affair with the worker a secret. Control was when she could summon the ones who lived in America with a groan of pain, and then lock the gates to the land so they would not enter, just to show them that they had a lot to do before they gained her favor again. Control was when her children were afraid of her, to the point that all secrets were put on the table before her.

It was when Castillo was not yet a man but no longer a boy when his brothers began to despise him. Valentin, her husband, gave him money to buy some milk. Castillo gave the money to his brothers while he climbed a tree to smoke that

disgusting drug. They never came back with the money. She learned later what her sons had done, and knew that they could not be trusted indefinitely. But she didn't know that then. She only saw Castillo sleeping in the barn, and told Valentin about it.

"Your son has spent all the money he was given on drugs and women," she said to Valentin.

"What?"

"He never bought the milk."

"Hijo de la chingada. I—" Valentin's face was getting red like a tomato.

"Chingalo. Give him a beating that he won't forget. Matalo." She was shaking with fury as well. Her vision blurred and all she could feel was rage.

"I didn't want it to come to this, but he forced my hand."

"He deserves it. Do it, so he wouldn't do it ever again. Fix him and make this right. Make him right."

She followed Valentin outside, a belt in Valentin's hand. She saw Castillo rolling a cigarette. She saw him and remembered his face when he was younger, and how he always wanted to play. She allowed him to play because she didn't want to take that childhood away from him. It was her first child and she wanted him to be happy.

She saw Valentin smacking the cigarette away from his mouth and grabbing him by the hair, and begin to smack Castillo in the head with one hand, while whipping him in the behind with the belt with the other. She cried for him to stop, but Valentin didn't listen. She cried as she saw her son kicking and also crying in the dirt, a cloud of dust rising from him while Valentin started punching him.

"Get up. Get up and face me like a man, cobarde!" Valentin said.

Castillo was crying, and she could see her other sons hidden in the trees and dirt, laughing. The peons would be in confederacy against him his whole life. And she was weak then to stop it all, and would be weak forever.

Around his early twenties, for some reason, Castillo decided to leave them. He wanted to go to America where he would be free, or at least that was what he said. She didn't believe anything he said. All she could feel was that same anger engulf her, an anger that she could not suppress whenever Castillo disappointed her.

"Why would you leave our home? It makes no sense. No sense at all."

"Mama, you don't understand. I'm leaving so I can find what I want in my life. I want to be free. Free from your nagging."

"What do you want? Tell me, and I will find it for you."

"Nope. I'm leaving." He gathered all his clothes from his closet.

"No, leave them here!" she said.

He pushed her aside and then went for his bags, his new black leather jacket moving and making noise. Valentin was not home, and Castillo's younger brothers stared from outside like stray cats waiting for milk.

Castillo went outside and took one of his father's trucks without looking back. She tried to stop him, begged him to stay. Dropped on the floor crying, throwing rocks as the truck pulled away from the hacienda. She saw her kids staring at her, one of them approaching her as if she were a lost dog.

"Get out! All of you. If any one of you are going to do the same thing as he did, then all you hijos de perra should just leave right now!" She didn't care about anything anymore and would become like a cold stone, neglecting everyone. The hacienda turned cold, everyone thinking that money was what could turn their hearts and stomachs warm again. They all left her eventually to find their own warmth. In her eyes, they were all fools who didn't know what they were doing. But she worried most about Castillo because his fate was home and not in some foreign land. She would not see him for another thirty years.

She could no longer phase back into the present, to being awake and feel the world around her. Rest was her constant state. Her eyes now gone, darkness, nothingness, was all that was left. No sound came to her either. Her heartbeat was the last thing that remained on earth. It was all that remained of her. She awaited God to come from the light, and deliver her from the darkness. Because when you are alone, the world now gone from your senses, all the people now gone and no way to talk to them, all you have are regrets and yourself. Her only regret was not loving Castillo enough and not saving him from himself, failing to be a better mother to him. She prayed to God that He would have mercy on him, and to punish her for her mistakes instead.

# La Niña Chiquita con Piel Color de Cafè

Carilla Amara

I am a Latina and as a Latina I am seen by the color of my skin: brown. I am a woman and as a woman I am seen as only a sexual object. As both a Latina and a woman I am always perceived as less than I am. I am never perceived as the person who I see myself as; I am never perceived as a person of complexities, contradictions, or potentials. I am merely un objeto that has been set aside by social standards and made to be non-existent. I have come to hate the perception of myself and what has become associated with it all.

When I was young I came to hate the color brown, because as a Latina, society only saw me as brown. My skin is not a shade of brown, my skin is a of shade olive but because I am Mexicana I am made to be as they see me as, I was made to be as they see all Mexicanos: as cafè. I have been socially constructed as a Mexicana. I do not get the same privileges that a White woman has. I do not get to be seen as a human being because I am not White.

At the age of 4, I became aware of what it meant to be a shade of what society considers brown. I became aware of how as a little brown girl I

was not the same as my White peers. I was forced to shun my Mexican culture while they were told to embrace theirs. I grew up speaking Español and in pre-school I was made to abandon my native tongue. Pre-school was the first time I was in an all-speaking English environment that did not embrace me for who I was, it was the first time I experienced racism because of the color of my skin.

I grew up in a neighborhood that was pre-dominantly White but the people in my neighborhood had always embraced me for who I was. Many of my neighbors saw me as a niece or a granddaughter regardless of my Spanish speaking status and my piel color de cafè. As a child that grew up in a pre-dominantly White neighborhood I had the belief that every one of the White race would be as kind as my neighbors were. In pre-school my belief was proved to be incorrect, I was made to feel less than by the White woman who would be teaching me that year.

While attending pre-school I often spoke Spanish but one morning the teacher told me I could not speak Spanish anymore. I was confused about why I was being treated that way by the teacher. The teacher who

had made herself appear better than I and that being because her skin was a shade of white while mine was a shade of café. Moments after my teacher told me not to speak Spanish I saw her playing with my prima who had red hair, a white skin complexion and freckles. My prima is both Mexican and Cuban, but because she does not look the "part," she was not treated as I was. As a child, I did not understand why I could not speak Spanish all I understood was that if I spoke Spanish yo sere castigada.

At the age of 4 I understood what it meant to be una niña chiquita con piel color de café in a White man's world. At the age of 4 my other peers were oblivious to the racism occurring in society, they were unconscious of their own privileges. At the age of 4 my peers were playing house while I was sitting silently fully aware of the fact that I did not have a voice in that class, that I could not speak aloud unless it was the broken English I could barely utter. At the age of 4 I was inexplicitly told that my voice did not matter; I was told by society that I did not matter.

Now I am 21 and I have trouble speaking my once native language. Growing up I was made to be guerafied, and in being guerafied I was made to forget the ways of my native language. While I still speak Spanish, I do not speak it like I once did. My Spanish does not sound like pajaritos cantando cielito lindo en la mañana, rather, my Spanish sounds like the choque of a saw meeting the bark of a tree as it prepares to chop it down, much like the teacher chopped me down when she told me I could not speak Spanish any longer.

At the age of 4 I unknowingly learned about institutionalized racism. I learned that there were racist policies occurring within my classroom. The racist policy that was put into place was the restriction of my speaking Spanish in the classroom, because English was the only language I was to speak in the class. At the age of 4 I experienced a state of double-consciousness; I became aware of the fact that I belonged to two conflicting cultures, which inevitably created a conflict within myself. In pre-school I learned to be two people: outside of the classroom, I was my Mexicana self, and in the classroom I was my guera self. The teacher aid only saw me as la chiquita Mexicana que no mas habla el Español but I was more than that, as a child I was aware of who I was and where I came from.

Being isolated in a dominant institutional space, such as school, at such a young age is something no child should have to endure. I recall wishing that I could be more like my peers. I saw how freely they all played and spoke with one another; meanwhile I sat on the sideline because I was the outcast. Because of my teachers, I developed a form of internalized racism. I wanted to be more like my peers; I didn't want to be la niña chiquita con piel color de café anymore I wanted to be la niña chiquita con piel color de niebe. I was 4 years old and I already felt inferior to another race that was socially made to be more superior than I was. I was 4 years old and I hated the color brown because the color brown made me less than those around me.

Today I still hate the color brown. But I don't hate any brown, I hate his

brown, specifically I hate the color of his dark brown eye's that are so dark they're almost black. I was 10 years old when I began hating the color of his dark brown eyes. I was 10 years old when I became aware of the fact that because I was a girl, society defined me as a sexual object. Not only was I already viewed as less than because of the color of my skin but now at the age of 10, I was made less than because of my gender. Being a female in this society meant that I was defined as a person by what was between my legs and what was on my chest. Even at the age of 10, when I was a child and had not yet blossomed as a woman, I was defined as un objeto sexual. At the age of 10 yo odio el color de café; el color de cafe que me hace recordar de los ojos que me persiguió en mis sueños.

It was an October afternoon when I first saw the color of his eyes. I was getting off the school bus after school. That day I got off the bus and saw a man with a ski mask on walking in the same direction that I had to walk to get to my abuelitas house. I remember how innocent I was that I had not thought anything of it instead I walked in the direction of my abuelitas, in his direction, as the bus drove away. As soon as I heard the bus engine get farther away the man in front of me stopped walking. I remember the way he slowly turned around like a predator that had just caught scent of his prey. I was innocent so I thought nothing of it until he came running towards me. I was frozen in place with my feet fixed to the ground. I didn't know why he was running y estuve confundida con lo que estaba ocurriendo. It wasn't until I heard the sound of his hoarse and deep voice calling out to me that I realized I was

in danger. I turned around and began running in the opposite direction. As I ran I began crying and could feel how cold my tears were as they met the cold brisk air and slid down my cheeks.

I ran across the street ahead of me and ran towards the block over. As I began turning the corner I was pulled back and yanked to the ground. I was yelling in between sobs in hopes that someone would hear me as he yelled at me to be quiet. As I yelled I felt like I was suffocating, because it didn't matter how hard I was screaming no one could hear me. It was like I was silently screaming into an empty room porque mi voz fue arrancada de mi garganta. As I yelled he tightly grabbed onto my arms and dragged me by the nearby bushes. I remember looking into his haunting brown eyes that had no hint of humanity in them. The brown eyes that looked so angry, so hungry as they pierced down on me through his ski mask. He pinned me down to the ground. As he pinned me to the ground my body began to fight him without my telling it to.

I remember the sight of him in his bright blue quilted jacket falling to the ground near me as I kicked him away, and the sound of his voice as he grunted in pain. I had gotten up and my legs began to run. I could hear him behind me running after me. I was running down the block towards Elston Ave and all I could think was no pares, sigues corriendo. I remember how much my lungs were burning from the weight of my book bag on my back that had been weighing me down as I ran. I remember running into Elston Ave. and not stopping. There was a loud echoing sound of tires screeching to a



halt and the sound of that same car's horn honking at me. I didn't turn to look if he was still behind me all I knew was that I couldn't stop running until I got home.

I finally made it home and rung my doorbell endlessly and was greeted by my dad. I had been sobbing and he looked at me and knew something was wrong. I told him about what had just occurred but even in telling him I could not muster up the courage to tell him the extremity of it all. Until this day my father just thinks a man followed me home. He doesn't know how hard I had to fight to get away from his tight grip. After telling my dad a version of what had occurred he took me in his car to go look for him, we never found him and we never reported him.

At the age of 10 I began hating the color brown, but not any brown, brown the color of a predator's eyes. At the age of 10 I learned what it meant to be a female but still I was unaware of what that had all meant. Now I look back at that day and I understand what had occurred and why it had all occurred. The man with the brown eyes thought that he was entitled to my body because he was part of the patriarchal world. As a man from the patriarchal society he thought that I, as a female, was going to be submissive to him; that I was going to give myself to him at his leisure. The patriarchy believes that "women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive," they believe that women were born to be submissive to men, to serve them and do as men want them to. I understand now that the man with the brown eyes was playing his role as a servant of the patriarchy and I was

the girl that got caught in his webs.

At the age of 10 I was unaware of the reasons as to why the police on duty were never called, or why the man had never been reported; now at 21 I realize the truth, as a woman, my voice does not matter. Although my dad went looking for him the fact that he never called the police, the fact that he never reported it, suggests that to him I was just telling a story. To my older siblings it was just a story. At the age of 10 I learned that I live in a patriarchal world and that I, as a female, do not matter like the male gender does. I'm afraid to imagine what could have occurred that afternoon; I don't know whether I'd even have had the chance to tell my story at all.

At the age of 4 I lost my voice to due to the color of my skin. At the age of 10 I lost my voice due to my gender. At the age of 4 my teacher told me I was not good enough because I did not belong to the white privileged class she belonged to. At the age of 10 a man with brown eyes told me I was a submissive sexual object because he was a man who belonged to the patriarchy. On both accounts I lost my voice because society viewed me as a minority, on both accounts I was portrayed as less than. Growing up as a Latina has not been easy because as a Latina I represent more than one minority. I have had to undergo so many painful things because I am not White nor a man. Growing up I was never aware of the reality behind why I was treated the way I was now as an adult of 21 years I understand why.

# La Pantera Rosa

Eric Melecio

His full black moustache shined in the sunlight, his eyes and smile looking shyly at the camera. Brown work pants and work boots were smeared by grass stains. He looked tall and skinny with his pink shirt, and stood leaning back against the landscaping dump truck. His hair was unruly, looking like someone who, with a shower, was planning on going to a disco. He unbuttoned the top of his shirt to reveal his bare chest. He was 18 at the time during Reagan's mid-80s and his fellow workers know him as La Pantera Rosa, the Pink Panther. His family called him Joel.

"Another, tu, Joel?" Antonio asked behind the camera.

"Nah, that's enough. When it comes out, send it to my momma."

"Hehe, so she can miss you more?"

"And so she can see my truck."

"Sure. She'll see the Lima name in the door. She'll think you became Italian after coming here." Antonio laughed at his own joke.

"I'm going to tell her I work for government," Joel said. "FBI y CIA."

"They'll send you back if you even find them," Antonio was checking the camera.

"I wish I could be part of them so I can buy a brand new car every year. Government employees always ride a brand new car every year. Like in the movies, wearing clean suits and lentes de sol."

Joel and Antonio climbed back into the landscaping truck and pulled out of the neighborhood and into the next suburb with La Sonora Dinamita playing in the background. Antonio was his brother in law, and was nearing his mid-twenties. He had a family and apartment where Joel also lived and helped with the rent from time to time.

Joel continued to think about a government job as a secret agent. He thought about the cool guns they had, but above all he thought about the new cars they would get every year. Brand new with the factory seal still on them. He thought about all the women he could pick up with all that. Only in America. What a beautiful country. In Mexico, he had to climb a tree just to get a banana.

As the truck pulled over, Joel tried to

snap out of his daydream by finishing it. He would quit his job as a landscaper and tell his boss, Lima, that he found a job as a secret agent and that he had cars and women to pick up from all over the world.

His mind came back to the suburbs and the grass. He scowled at it all. His back was starting to hurt from hauling and pushing the large lawn mowers all day. And he smelled.

"Thirsty?" Antonio asked as he went to the back of the trailer.

"Yeah. After this, I'm getting a six pack." Joel and Antonio were now in the back, staring at the trailer's large door.

"We have some in el cooler. The client gave us some, remember?"

"I don't like those ones. That's gabacho beer," Joel said.

"You think Americans discriminate?"

"No. Most are good people, especially the old ones." Joel started to pull down the huge door so they can begin to pull out the machinery

"You know, back in Mexico, I worked a lot of land. Had some cows too," Antonio said as he began to pull at the large lawn mower while Joel got the leaf blower. "Grew a lot of alfalfa. Nice land. Mexico is a nice land."

"They have better women here."

At the end of the day, Joel was sweating all over. He couldn't wait to go to the parking lot and cool over with

beer. Take a shower after and maybe find some entertainment somewhere or go to sleep. There were more rules in America, but he felt free. He felt like Clint Eastwood, roaming free and doing whatever he wanted, whenever. Back in Mexico, all he did was milk the cows for his parents and then milk the local village girls. He wasn't even the milkman. In America, he actually got money when he worked. Joel was going to save enough money to buy his very own truck of the year someday. That was something he couldn't do in Mexico.

Maria, Antonio's wife and Joel's sister, spends her whole day cleaning the house, making food, and taking care of her children, and sometimes the neighbors' who were friends of Antonio. She couldn't disobey or say no to Antonio because he was the husband. By saying no to his friends would be like saying no to him. Joel felt pity for her sister, but he knew they were womanly ways and that he was just a brother who shouldn't interfere in other people's marriages.

"There are cockroaches in the apartment," Maria said from the kitchen as the men were back from work.

"When did they get in?" Antonio said. He stepped inside, but left the door open because Joel was taking off his boots although Antonio would always leave it open. He walked in, cakes of dirt trailing behind him, taking off his boots in the living room where the TV was. Maria followed him.

"I don't know, Antonio. I don't know where they came from." She had both arms in her hips, glaring at Antonio who

was not even looking at her.

The apartment was small and it smelled like cigarettes. The air felt sticky most of the time.

"Well, we'll just have to live with them. I have my side. And they have theirs." He rested in the couch. Joel never cared about or listened to the arguments. A man was supposed to tolerate a women's constant nagging. His parents were the same way, except that his dad had a gun, so the arguments never lasted long.

"You don't want to know how they got in?" She folded her arms now, looking at him.

"Ni me interesa."

"Just watch TV and sleep in that couch. And then off to bed. That's all that interests you."

"Hay Maria. No me tes chingando. I come back from work, driving Lima's trucks all day and cutting grass nonstop. I can't even hear from one ear sometimes because of the loud machines."

"If you could just fix one thing or two in this place we might not have these problems."

"You're worse than the machines. Chinge y chinge todo el dia. Make something to eat already. Do something useful." He sat up on the couch, watching the TV. He wasn't going anywhere. His whole body's smell dominated the small room. Joel walked in, closing the door behind him.

"Joel, ya viniste. Look, we have cockroaches again," Maria said.

"I heard you guys from outside while taking my boots off."

"It was probably Antonio who let them in. He never closes the door or fixes anything here. He doesn't even like to clean himself."

"I know who brought them here," Joel said.

"Who?" Antonio asked.

"It was Chona."

"The fat lady? Our neighbor?" Antonio got up from his chair, now interested in el chisme while Maria went back to the kitchen, leaving the men alone.

"Haci es. She was probably jealous of the clean apartment and smuggled them here through her panties."

"I don't believe you."

"Yeah, la gorda. When she was here yesterday, I saw cockroaches coming from her hairy legs."

"Ya ni la jodes."

"I saw it with my own eyes. She kept scratching herself down there so more can fall off," Joel pretended to scratch himself in his crouch. "One of the small ones went back up to her, reminding him of the jungle maybe."

"Joel, I'm about to eat. No more stories," Antonio said. He went over to the kitchen. "Maria, where is the food?"

"There is no food. Not until you get

rid of those cockroaches," she said from the kitchen.

"Antonio, Tengo un doce, Sol beer downstairs," Joel whispered.

"You're still a kid, Joel, but I have to wake up early to drive Lima's trucks to the dumps." Antonio went back and planted himself in his chair in front of the TV.

"The rest of us our downstairs. I'll save you three just in case." They heard the sizzles of meat and spices landing on the hot pan now.

After sharing a doce with the men from work, Joel and his brother decided they weren't drunk enough to forget about work. They went into a bar where they played Mexican music and enough familiar faces. The bartender was nice enough to let him in. Joel drank so much he lost count how many he had. He wasn't keeping count anyways, but he still kept thinking about that new truck he had seen at the dealer. It was a green Chevy with silver streaks running across its body. That's all he knew and he wanted it.

"Don't you ever think about getting married," his carnal, his brother, said.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I mean settling down. Having kids."

"I don't think about it. I don't want to think about it." Joel looked at his brother, who was already losing his balance. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" his brother asked.

"I made fun of you for milking and taking care of that cow when we were living with our pobre Mama y Papa. I joked that you were going to marry that cow one day. And then, you married a cow."

His carnal laughed. He knew how to take a joke. His brother married a woman who looked like a cow and gave him the same amount of problems of a cow. He didn't want to end up like his brother. He was having a good time in America, and he didn't want a woman weighting him down, telling him what to do all the time. CIA agents are lone wolfs; they don't deal with cows. They drive fancy new cars every day, have an office, don't work a lot under the sun, are clean, and have all the women.

The bartender got a certificate for them for drinking the most beer out of any customer. They put their names on it. Joel thought that he was going to be famous, and all of Chicago will see him now. He was now definitely going to visit that dealer on a Sunday to see if the price dropped on that Chevy. If it did, he'll buy it the next day or whenever it's open.

Sunday was a day to relax and go out. Sunday brought new opportunities. A new start. A new day. Sunday is a day of transition into a better more hopeful life. Maybe someone in the family will win the lottery or maybe Papa will send them money. Sunday is a day to go out and search for any signs of what is to come. It is God's day, a day of luck, a day where you find a twenty dollar bill on the sidewalk, a day when something goes right.

After Joel took a shower, he put on his

best shirt, his leather vest, white jeans, cowboy boots, and his cleanest hat. He sharpened his moustache. When he looked in the mirror, he thought he saw Clint Eastwood staring back at him, ready to take down some bad guys and make a lot of money. Pulling himself away from the mirror, he dug out from his drawer his switchblade and a rabbit's foot. He went to a corner of his room and rubbed a deer's hoof in his hands. Today was the day he was going to buy that green Chevy. It was a rainy Monday and the landscapers had the day off. Sunday they had to work on an extra job.

"Try and get my good side," Joel said to Antonio while Antonio tried to get a good angle with the camera, wanting to get Joel and the truck in the same picture.

They were in one of those dealerships that had banner flags all over the place, and a sign that said "used tires, cheap." Joel put one hand on the Chevy's side view mirror and put a foot on the streamer, like they did in one of those cowboy movies.

"I'm going to tell Mama this one is mine," Joel said.

"You keep telling her all these trucks and cars are yours, she won't believe you when you actually buy one," Antonio said, a flash coming from the camera.

"I'm going to buy this one right here. Every time I come here, the price drops just a little. It was really low yesterday and now it went up. The sticker never lies."

"How are you going to buy it?" Antonio asked.

"Let me borrow your credit. You're a citizen already."

"Sure," Antonio said, giving him the picture. "It will be nice to have a truck."

"It'll be mine," Joel said, looking the photo over, taking special care not to touch the actual picture.

"Not on paper it won't."

"I'm getting it anyways. One day, I'll take her down to Mexico to Mama's and show it off. Then I'll buy her a new truck too."

Antonio chuckled a bit. "Let's go to the dealer then."

"Right now?"

"Yeah, unless your backing out now?" Antonio said.

"No, I'm not afraid of anything. Vamonos."

Joel didn't know what Antonio and the dealer were discussing in the office. But he didn't care either because he was finally getting a new truck. Numbers were thrown and papers were signed. More talking. The dealer was Puerto Rican and knew some Spanish. All throughout the deal, they felt like they were on a car ride, ignoring all the fancy stuff about warranty, guarantees, insurance, and coffee.

"The price on that truck is a little high, but because you two are my

friends and I had a really good time talking with you all, I can give you a small discount," the dealer said while shuffling papers.

"Ok," Joel said, crossing his legs to look important. The chairs looked fancy. The dealer said they were reserved for important customers. Joel felt important.

"And in five years, when you get tired of the truck, you can bring it back and sell it and we can give you a brand new one at a discount too."

"Expect me every year," Joel said. He puffed his chest in pride.

"You have a wife?" the dealer asked.

"No," Joel said.

"Good. Then you won't have anybody yelling at you for buying a man's truck."

"A man's truck. Can I take it now?" Joel said.

"Not today." The dealer started talking about money down and other official stuff. Joel couldn't keep up with him, and he was ashamed because of it yet it all felt like irrelevant information. Right now, he felt like he was the president himself. He was going to get something that would belong to him.

Joel came back home past midnight without Antonio. For celebrating, he had four women, two on each side. He was about to enter his room when he saw his nephew watching the TV. He patted his something year old nephew in the head and told him to go to his room. Then he entered his room with

the four women he bought with his own money.

"Now, who wants to hear about my new truck again?" Joel asked the giggling women of the night.

He was driving one of Lima's trucks, working with Linillo this time. Linillo was a man who didn't have luck with the girls and was always drunk and clumsy. He was the family's closest friend in this new country. They were both smoking and arguing if it was going to rain. Linillo wanted it to rain. Joel also wanted it to rain, but he was having fun making Linillo mad by saying that it wasn't going to rain.

"Don't you want to go home, Pantera."

"Mira, Linio. I have women waiting for me back at my place, and I know you have your mula to get back to. But someone has to work Lima's business."

Joel raised the volume of the radio to drown Linio's insults. It was Los Bukis playing. The song was about a deformed man who wants his lover to love him the way he was. He lowered the volume down and told Linio the song was for him. He raised the volume up again, blasting the Mexican song inside the suburbs in the early morning, before Linio can fire back.

An old lady came out of her house while they were taking out the machines from the trailer. She yelled at Joel for half an hour. Joel didn't know what to do or what she was saying. He could only make out the words Mexico and music, musica. All he said the whole time was sorry and nodded every time she stopped yelling and stared at him

for a while. Then she went back inside her house and her head appeared from a window every five minutes. She looked like a ghost peeking out like that.

“What did she say?”

“She wants you to put fertilizer, Linio.”

“Where?”

“Inside. She wants to see you personally to show you where to put it.”

“Hijo de la—”

Joel yanked the wire of the lawn mower and the engine of the machine blew away Linio’s words. They worked, each to their own task. Linio mowed the lawn while Joel blew the leaves and trash from the lawns. Lima owned the entire bloc. Joel drove Lima’s trucks all over Cook County. Everywhere he went it was the same: the Italians owned the trucks and machines while the Mexicans worked the houses. It was a steady job that payed good money. Better than nothing compared to where he came from.

“Che! Nice to see you. Bueno. Commenzemos?” Joel was welcomed by Lima with a powerful handshake and an abrazo.

“Lima. Nice to see you,” Joel said.

Joel had been invited to Lima’s house. They went in the backyard to talk about some things. Lima was a balding man with spectacles. He was Italian that many of his workers looked up to. They wanted to be like him one day. Joel respected Lima and put on

his best posture. Joel pitied for the great man, as he was nearing old age, yet was still important and paid his workers on time with cash.

Lima had his usual gray suit on. He told Joel to sit.

“Agua?” offered Lima.

“No thank you.”

“Quiero hablar about what happened yesterday, hayer.” Joel, and the other workers, liked Lima’s attempt of speaking some Spanish, throwing some Italian when his Spanish began to fail. Joel viewed him with respect for this, and was eager to help him in his Spanish. Lima used them as key words used to bridge his main ideas in English.

“Wha happen?” Joel was learning some English, and sometimes understood Lima.

“Musica in the houses no bueno amigo. No much ruido. Radio, turn it down. Quedito.” Lima liked to talk with his hands, throwing them here and there.

“Ok.”

“Tu eres bueno trabajador. I don’t want to fire you. Correr te.” Lima put his right hand on Joel’s shoulder.

He went on about other things Joel didn’t understand. Joel lost his attention when he realized Lima giving a long speech about something in English, throwing Spanish and Italian and looking at Joel for reassurance that he understood what he was



talking about. Joel smiled and nodded, repeating the Spanish word for him, repeating English and Italian words for Lima. Joel felt like he was at church, only hearing the preacher but not really listening. Joel looked at the clean house and wondered how much money he had. He wondered how long it took him to accumulate the money to buy his trucks, trailers, equipment. How many hours did he work to get what he has? At what age did he stop drinking? At what age did he stop being young? He wondered at what age he got married and bought a large house that served as his headquarters for his landscaping business. He wondered how old his children were, and what they did with their lives. He wondered if Lima had any family in Italy. Joel's mind started to wander back into Mexico.

He was milking the family cow, pouring the bucket of milk to a gallon and bringing it to the back of the truck. He told his brother to finish milking the cow because he wanted to wash his greasy hands. He stopped milking the cows all together when his brother started to take over that responsibility because Joel started to get lazy and not milk the cows for hours. Joel hated the cows because they smelled and they would squirt milk when their utter where lubricated. He hated kneeling over them and milking them all day, and not getting a cent for it. Papa would tell Joel that he gave him the finest clothes and fed him and that that was enough. The women would think that Joel was some famous actor because of his flashy clothes. He didn't even have to talk to them to get their attention and people started calling him the Pink Panther. Papa even bought him a truck, but Joel was not satisfied. He wanted

more to it than just that. He wanted his own money and buy a truck that he wanted, and shake the car dealer's hand after. As soon as Antonio and Maria were headed to America, Joel went with them.

"Joel?" Lima said.

Joel came back to the large green backyard. He looked at a smiling Lima. Joel weakly smiled back.

"Yes?"

"I have a job for you. It's muy importante."

"Ok."

"You see those flowers? Flores?" he pointed in a corner of the yard.

"Yes," Joel saw las hastas and small bushes.

"I want you to plant them. Plantar. Over there," he pointed to another corner of the yard. "And there too. Can you handle it?"

"Yes, Mr. Lima. I do it right away. Don worry."

Joel stood up, shook Lima's hand, and began his work. When he finished the job, Lima was gone and he never came back outside, so Joel went back home. He couldn't wait to drive his new truck. He couldn't wait to pay it off and call it his own. What a free country.

# Lamia

Jenn Lee

Lucius held Lily's sticky little hand in his own. The scent of popcorn and fried dough hung heavy in the late-summer air. Neon tubes flickered as rides twisted and spun above the asphalt. Tin music jangled off of rusted metal. Thrilled screams rose and then plummeted, swirling in shrieking eddies around the carnival.

Lily pointed at each new attraction they encountered. His sister bounced on the tips of her toes, tugging at his hand, her whole body leaning at a forty-five degree angle as she towed him along the fairway. A steady stream tripped through her lips, narrating their path: "Corn dogs, elephant ears...pink cotton candy! I only want to ride the white horse on the merry-go-round because it looks like Pegasus, you know, from 'Clash of the Titans?' You think if I won a goldfish, Mom would let me keep it? Hey, there's the Tilt-a-Whirl! C'mon!"

Lucius had stopped. His baby sister pivoted on sparkly purple plastic sandals. She used both of her hands to yank on his one, drawing on what little weight she carried, but he stayed put. Across the constant river of people flowing down the main thoroughfare, he saw a woman. And she saw him. Buzzes and bells, shouts and laughter and the piping calliope — the unceasing clangor of the fair faded beneath the roar of his own pulse. Her stillness infected him.

He forded the fairway, Lily protesting in his wake. The bodies of strangers buffeted him, but he absorbed their impact, allowed himself to be pushed downstream a few feet, before correcting the course, propelling himself and his sister across. Dry grass, dead and brown, crunched under his feet when he stepped off of the pavement. The woman's eyes like jam jars of honey in a kitchen window — liquid and luminous — reeled him to her. She did not blink.

The woman wore white. A sweet summer dress with a hem that brushed her knees in the breeze, the cotton reflected the rainbow flashes of lights. A crimson bar of a belt nipped her waist.

Lucius stopped a bare few feet before her. He opened his mouth to speak, and she lifted her hand and laid her three middle fingers across his lips, silencing him. At his side, Lily wriggled and bucked, but he held her fast. The woman leaned

into him, nudging her muzzle just below his jaw. Her tongue flicked out and she pulled in a deep breath. Goosebumps sprouted over his skin. He swayed toward her, pulled by gravity, but her hand dropped from his lips to press against his chest. He stilled.

The woman lifted her head. She opened her mouth, tongue curling up to her palate as she sniffed. Her head jerked to the side and her shoulders rounded as she contorted her body to look down at Lily. Her palm stayed firm to Lucius's chest and he stared ahead without seeing. The woman's torso slithered back and forth in a subtle ess. A fat, plump tear rolled down the side of Lily's nose. She yanked on her hand and tried to pry her brother's thick fingers off of her.

Coiling over the girl, the woman stroked one finger across her cheek, downy as a peach in August. Cupping the child's face with the barest hiss of a touch, she guided the girl's head back. The woman's eyes flared, tumbled cabochons of amber before a flame. Lily shook. The movement spilled another tear. She trembled once more and calmed.

The woman sucked air deep into her lungs, inflating her chest to twice its former size. A wind rose, billowing the skirt of her dress and sending her hair ballooning around her head. Her mouth opened. Her jaw unhinged with a wet double pop. Lips curled back, stretching and splitting, shedding as mandible descended and mouth became maw. Scythed fangs snapped down, and dripped pearls of milky venom. She arched over the girl, mouth working in boneless undulation. Throat pulsed and bulged with peristalsis. On an aching sob, the woman swallowed Lily into salivating darkness.

Lucius woke, slowly surfaced, shaking his head to clear the fog. His hand hung empty at his side. His sister was nowhere in sight. He whipped his head around, scanned ride lines and booths and clusters of families. Panic bubbled in his veins. He called out for Lily, his voice pitching ever higher into desperation.

Outside the glow of the fair, bunched in shadow, the Lamia cried from unblinking eyes.

# Mr. Boss

Sumaya Aman

The word “corporate” gives me a rash.

I’ve never been the kind of person to wear business attire to her high profile job six days a week, yet that’s the exact job that I managed to get hired for. I knew I wouldn’t be in it for the long run. I just needed a way to make some money to pay for this or that. So when Mr. Boss gave me a huge smile as he told me I was hired in his office on a Tuesday at 8pm, I thought YES! This is it, the answer to my prayers! This is how I’ll pay for school and get my degree in journalism and go into publishing like I’ve always wanted. This will allow me to do everything I’ve been wanting to do for the past four years!

I can finally buy my professional camera!

I can finally pay my parents back..

I can finally finish my Bachelors’...

I can finally live.....

This job is all about money. I’ll never forget what Mr. Boss said after he told me I got the job. He said, “Money doesn’t solve everything, but it definitely solves most of it.”

No, Mr. Boss. No.

I really thought that the thing stopping me from achieving all of my dreams was the lack of money. I never said it aloud, but I always truly thought that having more moolah would solve it all. There’s a lot that I would have done to earn that money, because I knew that with it, I would accomplish my long term goals. But I had to start somewhere. Well, this job quickly turned into a nightmare.

There was another thing that Mr. Boss said to me on the third day of the job. I was in his office going over my sales for the day and he mentions money again. I made more in those three days than I made in two weeks at my previous job. So

naturally, I was giddy. He asks me to picture the ten people that I spend the most time with in my life. Figure out the average of their incomes, and that is most likely what I will make for the rest of my life. I remember just looking at him, staring, actually. It really made me think on the drive home that night. It made me think of all the most amazing, sincere, and intelligent people out there that are driving cabs or working in factories because their lives turned out that way. I thought of my life and the people in it. Sure, I could make a lot more sticking with this job, but I would miss graduations, vacations, reunions. I would get to buy stuff for my nephews and nieces but never get to see them enjoy it. My nephews from across the country would have come to visit, which doesn't happen often, and I'd be working ten hours each day that they were here. No, Mr. Boss. I'm not going to want to be a part of a circle of rich people. In fact, I think the people in my life right now are the greatest. And I don't think Mr. Boss will ever realize that what he said to me that day was probably the number one thing to make me want to quit. Of course, he had this smile on his face as he said it like he thought he was really inspiring me to work even harder. But hearing that made things more clear for me than ever.

Imagine you're at a new exciting job and you last six months. For the first two months, you're buzzing with the excitement of a new atmosphere, glad to be there and even more glad at your glorified bank account. For the next two months, you begin to think to yourself, "So...is this what my life is going to be now?" Sixty-five-plus hours a week. Say goodbye to my family, to my friends. This isn't just a job, it's a lifestyle. And by staying here I'm agreeing to live my life by their terms, not my own. In the final two months you begin to feel like you can't stay at this job anymore. As a friend of mine put so eloquently, "The only thing you get from a job like that is money, but they drain every other aspect of your life." Yes.

The different stages of your six month job: excitement, doubt, quitting. That entire process was what I went through, but jammed into one week. I went through an incredible high, straight to an incredible low. It all hit me at once, on my fourth day on the job. I was losing bits and pieces of myself already. I felt my personality slipping away like beads off a broken piece of thread. So the very next Tuesday I sat in Mr. Boss's office, at 8pm, and I quit. It isn't worth it. Money doesn't solve everything.

The whole experience opened my eyes and I've realized that's what it was supposed to do. I'm not a business type of gal, I'm just not. I don't fit in the world of commerce. And I don't want to, even if it works for some people. I've rediscovered the value in doing the things that make you happy. The most important things to me are my religion and my family. If I have that, I don't need much else. Things will fall into my path, as they will fall into yours. But if you don't have your values; the things that you would put before anything else; the things you would sacrifice anything for...you really don't have anything.

# Non-Place//Non-Person

Katrina Underwood

I live and work in a place of un-permanence. A place of transition. The airport; a city constantly in flux, no actual population, no stable citizens. I speak the language of customer service. Let me know if I can help you find something. What are you searching for? Souvenirs, playing cards, Tylenol, gum? I am, like you, seeking things. Seeking a place that I have not yet found. A place made-up in the corner of my mind. Made with more time and care than a lightbulb brownie but perhaps just as satisfying. Where do I come from you ask? My place? My place is strip malls and alley cats, green lawns forgotten, airplane-size alcohols, super-size people running short on time. Time to think, time to breath, time to remember the values that rooted their beliefs that fueled their dreams

sometime ago.

I live in a place that is not a place. It's a stop off the highway. It's a sneeze on the map on the way to somewhere.

My place is home to the first McDonalds, Bill Murray was impressed.

# ON Music

Jenn Lee

That music important to you at eleven, twelve, thirteen...it never stops being important.

I first heard the album *Ten* in September of 1991. I was eleven. My friend Beks brought it over. Beks embodied everything I wanted to be. At thirteen, she aired her opinions and politics loudly and without apology. She wore flannels and torn jeans. She proclaimed her queerness and identity with a rusty zippo cribbed from her dad shoved in her back pocket, her chin thrust forward, ready for your hit. She played third base and bass clarinet. She was herself, unashamed and unafraid. I was a lot in love with Beks.

She brought over *Ten*. We climbed the creaking, cobwebbed ladder to my attic. The air, thick with dust and dirt and heat, swirled around our heads before settling on our shoulders. Producing a tinny, battery-operated boombox from her patched-up backpack, she let me slip in the CD and I took pains to not smudge or scratch it. We listened to it ten times in a row (Beks wanted to stop after the ninth, but I couldn't say no to the symmetry and I guess she couldn't say no to me, though I didn't see that then). Our t-shirts stuck to our backs and tugged at our necks. Drenched with sweat and caked in the must of boxes of old photos and chipped china plates, I felt fully human and beautifully imperfect.

For the first time, music made me cry. With that first hormonal catharsis, Eddie Vedder's voice plugged straight into my gut. Beks cried, too. Tears carved tracks in the dirt on her cheeks and the humidity fogged up her glasses. I'm sure I looked just the same. I hope I did.

That music important to you at eleven, twelve, thirteen...it never stops being important. At least it hasn't for me.

# Passing Traveler

Sharon Gantepalli

There's a small rural village in Andhra Pradesh, India called Chapalapalli that cannot be found even in the most recent and detailed of maps. It is overwhelmingly underdeveloped and there is no electricity, let alone, running water. It is primarily a farming area and has been denied resources in terms of technology. I was sixteen when I first went and when I did, I thought to myself that there was no other place in all of India, in all of the world, more authentic than here.

The specific location where I am familiar is split into two areas. Greenery and housing. The greenery is farm land and it goes for miles and miles. Long blades of grass dance in the arid breeze and farmers pace along the edge glistening with sweat on their dark brown skin, naked except for a lungi tied intricately around their waists. The anticipation of the summer monsoons are farmers' answered prayers and allow for the arid breeze to be visited and for crops' thirst to be quenched in the summer months. Surrounding the flat land are trees reminiscent of weeping willows separating the farmland from the housing. The line of trees stretch for miles and create a wind tunnel for the women and children in their homes. Within the

neighborhoods, naked children run and play between the houses with khol and kajal lining their eyes and marking their bodies to ward off dhruшти or "evil eye." They walk nonchalantly beside calves meandering along the shade and between bales of hay and neither run from or pester the sacred animals.

Women and young girls can be seen cooking and preparing meals for the men out in the fields. They can be heard yelling across homes with no walls to barricade them in or out to joke, laugh, and discipline the little boys, even those who don't belong to them. The sense of community, established centuries ago, remains intact and everyone's mother is everyone else's mother. Saris wrapped around their bodies and draped over their heads provide a tribal colorfulness often ignored in Indian cinema and pop culture. And as the village is so far south, the elderly's skin has darkened to an almost blue-black and have become leathery, showing decades of erosion and life. The children's skin are still smooth and unblemished but are covered in dusty sand and dirt and hay as they jovially run, play, and laugh around the women.

I laid on a cot underneath the



willow's shade with a bottle of lemon soda and when I inhaled I could smell and taste the earth. The closest thing to real earth. It hadn't been tainted and I didn't want to think that such a place could or would ever be. This place that couldn't be pointed to on a map...I didn't want anyone to find it. I didn't want the plague of colonization to turn it into...anything. Anything other than...this. It was mine. It was my own. A secret between me, and the earth, and God.

Me. This lucky, privileged suburbanite who had luxury to return to. This was my escape, while it may as well have been their trap. They looked upon me, this American girl that dripped of wealth and certainty, everything they could only dream of having. But I sat there silently burning green with envy, wishing that this day would never end, that I would never have to leave this beautiful simplicity, and that they could take my pixelated reality. It was a false wish though. Perhaps I only say I wished for it because I knew it would never come true. I am a guest, a passing traveler. This place is a home they have never left behind and likely never will. They have been bound by an impregnable caste system and while I live in a land of endless possibility and opportunity, they are all too unfamiliar to even scoff at such a concept.

Alas, once I've marveled in my little paradise, I would leave with my memories and never look back but the long blades of grass will die and be replaced with new blades of grass dancing in the same arid breeze while the disciplined boy-children I saw playing will grow up to be farmers pacing along the same

edge, glistening with sweat on their dark brown skin, naked except for the same lungi tied intricately around their waists, anticipating the same summer monsoons their fathers anticipated to visit the same arid breeze and quench the same thirsty crops. Within the same neighborhoods, their naked little boys will run and play between the same houses with the same khol and kajal lining their eyes and marking their bodies to ward off the same dhrushti. They will walk nonchalantly beside the calves meandering alongside the same shade and between the same bales of hay and neither run from or pester the sacred animals. The young girls, wives to the farmers, will soon be mothers to more young girls and yell across the same homes with no walls to barricade them in or out to laugh at the same jokes and discipline their little boys, even the ones that don't belong to them. Their saris will be wrapped around their bodies and draped over their heads to provide the same tribal colorfulness often ignored in the same Indian cinema and pop culture. The elderly's skin will have darkened to the same blue-black and the little children, still smooth and unblemished will be dusty with the same sand and dirt and hay. And underneath the same willow tree will a passing traveler lie on a cot in this place that cannot be found on a map.

# Peggy and Dave

Cheryl DeWolfe

The photo was tucked into the back pages of an earmarked copy of *Leaves of Grass*. It was not the sort of thing that Susan had expected to find among her Mother's belongings but then, this weekend had been full of little revelations. As she looked at the photo, she recognized a much younger version of her mother, Margaret. She wasn't in the center of the photo; she was standing back, partly obscured, but smiling.

Susan didn't recognize the couple dancing but realized that they, or the moment must have been important to her mother. She turned the photo over. On the back it read, in her mother's script, "Peggy and Dave, first place." She flipped through the book, back to front to see if there was anything else hidden in its pages but found nothing. Trying again from the front, she noticed an inscription:

"For my Maggie, for dreams of revolution and for summers yet to bloom, with love, Dave."

Susan wondered if it was from the same Dave who took first place with Peggy. She realized she would never know for sure but it meant something to have even a glimpse of her Mother's life so long ago. She slid the photo back into the book and tucked the book into the bag of things she was going to keep. She pulled the next few books off the shelf, leafing through each one as she continued to sort and pack her Mother's belongings.

# Sigh No More

Jenn Lee

“So? What do you think?” Trent stood on the dock, arm flung out in a grotesque imitation of Vanna White’s classic gesture. The idea of Vanna, all done up in a spangled evening gown, displaying this clunker of a boat as some great prize, popped into Marissa’s head and she laughed.

Trent’s arm dropped. He took two steps toward her. “Are you laughing at me?”

She swallowed and shook her head several times, retreating. “No, no, of course not. I’d never...” She cast about for something safe to say. “I was thinking of something else.”

“Daydreaming again.”

“Daydreaming again.” She nodded. “I know you don’t like that. I’m sorry. It’s just such a lovely day...my mind wandered.” It was a lovely day. The sun rode high in a blisteringly blue sky dotted with mounds of whipped-cream clouds. Bright citrus scents from the Lemon Shake-Up stand drifted off the boardwalk. The air shimmered with a greasy sheen from years of built up fry-o-later oil and suntan lotion. Marissa continued to shrink in on herself under Trent’s glower.

“I’m doing this for you, you know. Because I thought you’d like it. You’re always sighing over those stupid cruise commercials—”

“I do like it.”

“—and my cousin is doing it for you, too. Lending us his boat—”

“I’m very appreciative.”

“—so we can take our own private cruise. I thought private would be better. You can wear whatever you want and not feel like you have to keep up with the other girls. You could even wear that bikini you packed without worrying that anyone was judging you for it.”

A familiar pit opened up in Marissa's stomach. "That's very...thoughtful of you."

He watched her for a minute, and she held still and quiet, averting her eyes. Trent placed his hands on his hips, snorting, "You're welcome, Marissa."

"Thank you, Trent."

"That's my good girl." He moved in and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead before darting onto the boat. It bobbed under his weight. "Grab your bags and hurry on up here. Let's get going. Don't want to miss the tide."

Trent disappeared below deck. She blew out a slow breath and willed her stomach to unknot itself. She reminded herself that he was actually doing a nice thing here, and he did it, at least in part, for her. He was trying, anyway. Besides, a vacation was a vacation. At least they were out of that sagging ranch house they shared upstate.

She tried to see the boat through fresh eyes. The few splotches of paint that still clung to the hull told her it had once been some combination of red, white, and blue. She bet it had looked tacky. Trent's family specialized in all things tacky. Of course, they all thought they possessed good taste, but then again, did anyone think their taste was terrible? What if she was the tacky one? As she scanned the water line, Marissa came to the boat's name, the one clean part of the boat, the one bit tended to.

#### The Master Baiter.

Her eyes closed briefly, and she pinched the bridge of her nose. Then she heaved their bags up and over the side. They landed on the deck with two dull thuds.

"Babe," Trent poked his head out of the hatch, "careful with the woodwork. You need to learn to respect other people's stuff." He vanished again. She leaned over the side and examined the deck. It looked pickled. Marissa sighed and boarded the boat.

\* \* \* \* \*

She stepped carefully over a few poles tipped with various hooks and spears and tried not to think about the trip she'd pictured. She didn't think about stretching out on one lounge chair in a long line of lounge chairs, reading in the sun. Instead, she mopped the deck while Trent fished because, "Do you really think the captain swabs his own deck? Really? Come on, babe. Use your head." Nor did she think about getting dolled up, how she'd have worn her little black dress (bought special for the occasion), kitten heels, and pearl choker to dinner; the lobster and champagne she might have dared to order if it had been one of those all-inclusive packages. Trying to cook meals in the miniscule galley kitchen kept her occupied. All of her mind

focused on attempting to turn the puny, garbage fish Trent caught into something edible, and she was too busy whacking her elbows against the walls and her knees against the cupboards to brood over what she'd imagined when he'd said "cruise."

The nights, however, made up for the lack of dreaming in her days. Crammed into the upper bunk — the bunk so small it fit into a cabinet and needed to be unlocked and pulled down from the wall before she went to bed — Marissa let her mind drift. It was the closest she got to sleeping. Trent snored in the bunk below hers — the bunk that was always a bunk and never a cabinet in the wall — while his stinking sweat dried to salt in the creases of her skin. Awake and staring above her at the flakes of blue paint on the ceiling, she lay on sheets so stiff they crunched when she moved. She fancied herself in a cabin of her own, a swanky suite with an excess of room for both her and Trent, where they sprawled on a king-size bed piled high with featherbeds and down comforters cloaked in silky duvets. Making love would not require her to contort herself and then climb up to a separate bunk. They could stretch out, limbs tangled together as they murmured and laughed the way they used to after sex.

In their cabin, a porthole looked out on endless miles of swelling waves that sparked the moon. So far away from the land, the night sky would echo with starlight. If they decided not to sleep right away, maybe they'd get dressed again. She might pull on one of those long, soft gowns that gathered under the bust, effortlessly chic. In one of the countless restaurants or night clubs or bars that populated the ship, she would slip onto a stool and let Trent, handsome and relaxed, buy her a drink with a paper umbrella in it, while a lone guitarist in a Hawaiian shirt and braids strummed a bossa nova.

A singer stepped up to the mic and began to howl and moan. Her rasping, smoky voice better fit a torch song than the island jazz.

Marissa shook off her fantasy, but the song remained. It drifted down the hatch to caress her ears. A woman sang up on deck. Someone else was on their boat. Marissa bolted upright, hitting her head against the ceiling that hung only a couple feet above her mattress. Trent huffed, and she held her breath. His bed creaked as he rolled over, sinking into rhythmic snores once more. Rubbing at her throbbing head, she inched to the edge of the bunk and lowered herself to the floor. Her toes brushed against the rough, pitted surface before she settled down on her heels. She stole up onto the deck, but any noise she made was lost in the groaning boards, the squeaking rope, the splashing waves: all the sounds of a boat at sea.

Topside, the melody grew louder. Wind tossed salt and spray up against the side of the boat. It misted her skin and she shivered. Marissa walked the perimeter of the small vessel, searching for the source of the singing and found nothing. She saw no other ships nearby. She saw nothing nearby.

Words flowed out of the song, ground out in the gravelly alto of the secret singer,

but the language remained unidentifiable. Without understanding what the voice sang, Marissa still felt the yearning sadness of the singer. The pressure of tears built behind her eyes. An aching awareness grew low in her belly and pulled her forward. With her arms wrapped around her middle to ward off the chill night air, Marissa shuffled up to the bow.

She searched the horizon. The breeze died away and the sea smoothed to glass. A few yards out on the port side, a head broke through the water. The moonlight illuminated what appeared to be a woman with a soft face and wide-set eyes, her long hair trailed in waves around her. Their eyes met and the woman called to her, sang to her in husky, rum-soaked tones. Marissa blinked heavy-lidded eyes and leaned over the rail. Her arm extended to the singer, who lifted her own arm in return. Opalescent scales enveloped her skin from knuckles to mid-biceps, glittering in the light bouncing off the water. The movement revealed one breast. The scaleless flesh that met the air broke out in a profusion of goosebumps. The creature spread webbed fingers, long and graceful and tipped in curving claws. Marissa's own fingertips stretched out. One leg came up off the deck as she fought for every last bit of length she possessed. The singer smiled and Marissa's chest swelled with joy.

"Babe?"

Marissa teetered on the railing like a lever on a fulcrum before she caught herself. She kicked out until her toes found purchase on the deck, and she hauled herself upright. Trent stood half out of the hatch, squinting in sleepy confusion. His head tilted back on his neck as the singer rose up in the water.

"What the hell? What the fuck is that thing?" He stumbled out onto the deck, shouting, his attention focused on the woman in the water.

Marissa turned and craned her neck until her mouth fell open. She smiled. The singer loomed over the boat, fifteen feet above the sea. The scales trailed below her breasts and knitted together over her belly. Her upper body and torso matched Marissa's in size, but below the flare of where her hips should be, a tail extended down deep into the water. Marissa braced one hand on the railing and reached up to her.

"Get away from my girl, you freak! Babe, get the fuck away from that thing!"

The singer hissed and shrieked at Trent, displaying a wide and mobile mouth filled with scythelike teeth. Marissa turned. He brandished a long pole topped with a wicked-looking blade, threatening and jabbing at the creature. Marissa raised her hands to stop him and ward him off.

"That's it." Trent took one hand off the pole, holding it out to her, but kept his eyes locked on the creature. "Come to me, babe. Come on. Good girl."

Marissa's brow lowered and her chin dipped. She ran at him, closing the few feet between them. Her shoulder lowered, she landed a solid hit to his lower ribs. The air wheezed out of him and he lumbered backward. His head connected with the door to the hatch in a sickening crunch. His fingers relaxed and dropped the pole as he slid down to sit in a boneless heap at the base of the doorway.

She turned and watched the singer sink down to match Marissa's height. Taloned hands rested on the railing as the singer tilted her head and waited. Trent groaned, pulling Marissa's attention once more. Crouching down beside him, she picked up his spear, gripping the pole close to the blade. She placed one hand on his shoulder. He rolled his head up at her. Trent lifted a hand, pawing at the air as he kept trying and failing to touch her.

She shoved the blade of the spear up under his ribs. His eyes widened and he convulsed, gurgling. She turned away.

Marissa returned to the singer with a giddy laugh. The creature mimicked the sound, down to the exact arpeggio of her pitch and rhythm. Marissa set her hand over the singer's. Her flesh was cool, water beaded on her scales. Close up, the darkness of her hair gleamed the deep red of black cherries. Marissa ran her hand up the creature's arm. Scales rippled under her touch. Marissa's nerves bubbled like champagne. Leaning in, she pressed her own mouth to the singer's. She tasted of salt and a buttery sweetness.

Marissa wrapped her arms around the singer's neck. Her limbs circled Marissa's waist with a pacific gentleness. With a kiss, Marissa's mermaid slipped her off of the boat and carried her down into the expansive depths of the sea.

# The Cleansing

Trudy Leong

## ACT 1

### SCENE 1

*(Against the backdrop of a moonlit beach (Stage Left) and lake waves (Stage Right), the loud rumble of waves diminishes just beyond Stage Right.)*

MATTHEW ENTERS FROM STAGE LEFT.

*(Matthew is young. He steps out into the water as if intent on drowning himself.)*

NOAH ENTERS FROM STAGE LEFT,

*(Noah is Asian, twenty-something. He races from the shore into the lake to grab Matthew.)*

NOAH

Come back, stop! Do you hear me? Wake UP!

*(Noah pulls Matthew toward the shore. Matthew, who might also be Asian, continues pressing out to the open water. He seems awake, but does not sense Noah. Back on shore, Noah shakes Matthew to rouse him to no avail.)*

NOAH

I am sorry, Friend.

*(Noah aims his fist at the man's face, has misgivings, and slaps Matthew so hard that Matthew falls sideways. Noah catches Matthew.)*



MATTHEW

What in--? Why am I here? And why am I all wet? Why are you all wet? What happened to my face? It feels like someone struck me.

NOAH

Some guy hit you in the back and tried to rob you. He's gone now. I scared him off.

MATTHEW

What?

NOAH

Everything's OK.

MATTHEW

The guy hit me in the back...of my head?

NOAH

Yeah.

MATTHEW

But the back of my head doesn't hurt. It's my face that stings.

NOAH

*(Tightly.)* I bruised your face.

MATTHEW

He bruised my face?

NOAH

Yes.

MATTHEW

I don't remember anyone hitting me.

NOAH

It's amnesia. I hope you don't have a concussion.

MATTHEW

I can get a concussion from a blow to the face?

NOAH

Sure, as long as the injury is to the head.

MATTHEW

Amnesia is forgetting. I'm remembering...clearly

*(Matthew's voice cracks and lowers.)*

...what I want to forget. I keep hearing what I want to forget and remember.

*(Noah strains to fathom what he thought he had heard from Matthew and what he hears from the opposite direction, the lake.)*

MATTHEW

Are you sure that amnesia causes only forgetfulness?

NOAH

I'm not sure...*(softly)* of anything.

*(A lilting, mournful rendition of "Santa Baby" drifts from the lake. Noah's face softens as he glances toward Stage Right and the voice he loves.)*

MATTHEW

I can't keep a Christmas tune out of my head, "Santa Baby."

*(Noah stiffens.)*

*(Matthew notices Noah's preoccupation.)*

MATTHEW

Do you hear her, too?

NOAH

What did you just say about amnesia?

MATTHEW

I forgot.

NOAH

You should get some rest and be careful not to get struck in the head for a while.

MATTHEW

I feel like I should go home, just thank the Lord that I'm still alive and leave it at that.

NOAH

Whatever you like. I agree with you.

MATTHEW

*(Matthew offers Noah his hand.)*

I'm Matthew.

NOAH

I'm Noah.

MATTHEW EXITS, STAGE LEFT

*(Noah squats and holds his face. When he lowers his hands, he is crying. A woman's sobs arise from the lake.)*

TASHA ENTERS FROM LOWER STAGE RIGHT

*(Tasha is young, Asian, and wearing a blue cocktail dress. She emerges as if from the water. Her figure is blurry, a dull shimmer, like a wavy mirage.)*

TASHA

Noah!

*(Noah swallows and wipes the tears impatiently.)*

NOAH

Tasha, I am so sorry I left you that night.

*(Tasha sobs.)*

NOAH

We never fight. I don't know why we argued that night.

TASHA

It was the one before me who made us argue, so that one of us would remain behind, alone at the lakeside.

NOAH

I was so jealous.

TASHA

You were livid.

NOAH

We should have known! We discussed this when we analyzed the line from "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year."

TASHA

"There'll be scary ghost stories."

NOAH

You said you always feared the veracity of our folk legend of drowning victims having to find a substitute to free their souls. And I left you! How could I have neglected you? I deserve to be the imprisoned one, Tasha, for succumbing to jealousy and evil.

TASHA

I am evil. I have to entrap a substitute.

NOAH

I am evil. I'll free you.

TASHA

No, absolutely no. I could never kill you.

NOAH

I can free you and free myself from guilt.

TASHA

I'll never forgive you.

NOAH

I don't care. I won't let you stay trapped.

TASHA

There will be others.

NOAH

You do not understand, do you? You could never kill. That's why I happened upon here to save Matthew, so that you do not have to kill.

TASHA

I want to touch you.

NOAH

I'll come to you.

TASHA

No, let me come. Perhaps this time I can step out from the water snare.

NOAH

Tasha.

*(Tasha can move to about 12 feet from the lake's edge. Noah rushes into the water.)*

TASHA

Be careful.

*(Noah and Tasha face each other and try to touch, neither one able to feel the other.)*

TASHA

As long as I can think of you, I will keep loving you.

NOAH

*(Noah feels as if he is touching Tasha, but he cannot.)*

I will free you.

TASHA

I give you my word, Noah. Though you free me, I will wish that I never share another lifetime with you. If you become trapped because of me, I would have to repay you. You will trap me again in my self-loathing for having hurt you.

NOAH

In another lifetime you will forget.

TASHA

You're wrong. Our souls remember everything.

NOAH

You're forcing me to neglect you...again!

TASHA

As long as you love me and remember me, you nourish me.

NOAH

I'll visit you.

TASHA

No, I do not know how powerful I might become. The urge to find a substitute is great. I have to control myself even now.

NOAH

You could not hurt anyone.

TASHA

I think I could.

MATTHEW ENTERS FROM STAGE LEFT

*(Tasha catches her breath.)*

Oh, no. It is because you are with me, Noah. Otherwise, I would have detected a third soul here.

MATTHEW

I heard you. I hear you. I sensed something was not right.

*(Matthew unzips the top third of his windbreaker to reveal his clerical collar.)*

You see I am a priest. God guided me here for a reason.

*(Matthew heads into the lake.)*

NOAH

Hey, don't, Matthew. You're committing suicide. You'll damn yourself.

*(Matthew slows, turns slightly around toward Tasha and Noah.)*

MATTHEW

I might already be damned. I was having a beer and searching for meaning in my life with a cool walk at the lake. I always want to help, but I always fall short. I'll free you, Tasha. Maybe because I am a priest, I will be able to resist ensnaring a substitute.

*(Matthew lowers his gaze from Tasha. His face and ears redden.)*

TASHA

I recognize you, Matthew.

*(Noah grabs Matthew.)*

NOAH

I remember you, also.



*(Matthew squirms for a bit, then hangs his head.)*

*(Noah releases Matthew and turns from him. Noah reddens, too, livid again with jealousy.)*

MATTHEW

Did I provoke your fight?

NOAH AND TASHA

Yes.

MATTHEW

Tasha, you were caroling with the Salvation Army bell ringer. You were singing "Santa Baby."

*(Noah winces but begins to calm.)*

MATTHEW

I doubted my vocation ever since I met you and reproached myself for my folly and my...weakness.

NOAH

You were ill-advised but not foolish to become infatuated..

MATTHEW

It wasn't infatuation.

*(Noah could laugh now.)*

NOAH

I knew how you felt.

TASHA

You infuriated Noah.

NOAH

You're making me believe in God, Matthew. I believe that He sent you here. Don't sacrifice yourself. You'll be trapped.

MATTHEW

No, God will always be with me. If it is time to free me, He will free me.

TASHA

You'll become an evil spirit, like me.

NOAH

Perhaps Tasha can find a criminal for her substitute.

MATTHEW

Beware the reach of evil, Noah. It is not for you or I to judge or wish ill upon anyone.

*(Noah flushed.)*

NOAH

Why don't you think about it first?

TASHA

Yes, go home and return next week if you want.

MATTHEW

Is this the way you two banter?

*(Both Noah and Tasha blush and pain at the memory.)*

I am sorry for reminding you of your loss. You see, I always fall short.

TASHA

We all learn from our mistakes. You can learn from yours and persevere.

NOAH

I think God meant for us to become friends, not for you to sacrifice yourself.

TASHA

When Noah is not jealous, he is very reasonable.

MATTHEW

This feels right...what I must do for you.

TASHA

Is my evil trying to lure you?

MATTHEW

I do not think so.

NOAH

We must have been good friends in another lifetime.

TASHA

In many lifetimes. Let's promise--

NOAH

to meet again...

MATTHEW

in another lifetime! I never believed in reincarnation.

NOAH

Father Matthew—

MATTHEW

Yes, Son.

NOAH

Son? You're about my age, in your twenties!

MATTHEW

I am forty. I lived a good life and die among friends. For what more can a man or soul ask?

*(Matthew heads toward the lake. Noah grabs him. Both trade blows. Tasha tries to intervene. She cannot touch Noah. Matthew inadvertently strikes Tasha. All three freeze and waver. Matthew uses the opening to knock out Noah. Matthew grabs Tasha and lowers her hand from her face. He feels her face, bruised from his blow.*

*A green shimmer emanates from Tasha into Matthew. Tasha trembles and disappears. Matthew, a specter enveloped by green, separates from his lifeless body in the receding tide.*

*Noah stirs. Matthew gazes expressionlessly at his friend. To Stage Right, into the lake, Matthew moves, as if walking, but his gait fixed as stone, his legs, shape, and soul imprisoned by the water.)*

NOAH



# **The Illusion of Choice: or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Subjugation\***

Sean Carey (2017)

There is no question that, in our modern era, the driving force in all of the developed and much of the developing world is capitalism. Capitalism became the dominant ideological machine in a postindustrial world and consumption is the fuel for that machine. Racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression are all due to an imbalance in power between “groups” and have existed long before our current culture of competitive, conspicuous consumption. But, the dominant hegemonic power in a capitalist world uses the hierarchical model of industry and its methods of mass reproduction, which present the illusion of choice to society and creates passive consumers that are complicit in maintaining the status quo. A minority group that “seems” to have its needs met and its attention occupied will calmly accept if not unknowingly endorse its own subjugation. While in a capitalist society the hegemonic groups’ power and status are derived from wealth inequality, the fact is that inequality itself breeds inequality. So racism, sexism and most other forms of oppression are still perpetuated.

Inequality stems from one or only a small few voices dominating all others. If the marginalized group is aware that their voice is not in the public sphere, they are likely to fight against the dominant group, which will then have to maintain

power by force. And if the dominant group allows the voice of the minority to be heard, it could result in the minority gaining power. But if the dominant group were to give the impression of a true "dialogue," the minority would remain passive and the dominant would maintain their power without any force. While "different" sides of the dialogue are presented to us in the media, this access to "rational conversation" has, in actuality, been taken away from us by the illusion of choice. This techno-industrial-hyper-consumptive world we live in distorts our freedom into a manufactured and controlled set of choices. The assembly line method of mass production, with its uniform design and cost effective interchangeable parts, dominates the modern world, including the production and dissemination of media. Because of this and the "free market" system, we consumers are presented unique yet mass produced, personalized yet purchasable by anyone, options offered to satiate our *individuality*, keep us distracted, and ultimately maintain the status quo. In addition to the media offering us many "different" versions of the same thing, media uses the concept of "branding" to gain our unquestioning trust. For those consumers/citizens/humans that may not blindly "trust" any one brand they can still be fooled by the illusion of choice. There will always be the option to purchase the "other" mass produced product that merely presents a different side of the same coin and appeals to us using the same play on emotions. Its purchase or endorsement gives us a false sense of power and ownership and its "uniqueness" also represents another badge on our sash of individuality, which widens the gap between the "others" and our "chosen" group, furthering inequality.

The media has profited greatly by adopting the methods pioneered by the industrial revolution. By using and reusing cookie-cutter scripts and stock characters, the entertainment industry negates innovation and provides the audience a familiar, comfortable, and "safe" product every time. By repeatedly avoiding complex characters or themes, the audience's critical thinking skills are dulled from lack of use, and their aversion to diversity is heightened from lack of exposure. This "interchangeable-parts" method of storytelling not only creates an unquestioning, passive consumer, but it creates an unquestioning passive citizen and member of society. We are witness to the very real consequences of a society that has little critical thinking ability and feels safest when things are homogeneous.

The result of this thought leads to much more than just mediocre and repetitive movies and television. Maintaining the status quo means perpetuating inequality, the division of society, and keeping the dominant hegemonic power in near absolute control. Much of this propaganda is targeted to young children, which indoctrinates them with the “free market” mentality, thinly veiled by the concept of individualism. Mass media is an industry that uses the capitalist tools of mass production to churn out drivel that keeps our minds occupied, our butts in the seats, and our wallets forever open. Television, films, and the music industry is constantly copying and reproducing the “hits,” so even if *one* media conglomerate makes a “smash hit,” *all* of the other media conglomerates do well because they are furthering the same messages of capitalism and maintaining the status quo.

Okay ... we all know that the entertainment industry gives us hundreds of “different” versions of the same thing. But, I can make it cross those class lines if I try ... Right? I just need to start acting like I’m upper middle class and eventually I’ll make it there. WRONG. A consumer that decides to purchase a product of his or her own “choosing” is given a sense of agency. In reality that sense of agency is mostly derived from the freedom to “decide” to spend their money or not. Goods marketed to different groups may appear to be different and a group may ascribe a certain status or power to such purchases, but because of how the power is structured in our capitalist society, consumption of almost every kind will fuel and reinforce the power of those most entrenched. We can investigate how marketing to and for a suppressed group does not necessarily give them an actual “place at the table” and it is really meant to extract from them and maintain power. Although the purchase of high-end goods may make a consumer feel better and help to eliminate stereotypes about being “lower class,” “lazy” or “unemployable,” the items mostly depreciate in value, do not add any real wealth or assets, and their being stuck in debt helps to ensure their permanent place on the lower rungs of society. One could argue that eliminating stereotypes can be a boost socially and lessen the severity of inequalities, and that wealth is not the sole determining factor in gaining equality. But, in a capitalist society wealth and power are interchangeable, if not two words for the same exact thing. The fact that gaining one (wealth or power) does not automatically mean you will gain the other in every case doesn’t apply here. Because when that wealth and power are long standing and deeply



entrenched, as they are in our capitalist system, one automatically and reflexively comes with the other. A cursory glance at the rapid and exponential growth of wealth and power in the post-industrial highly consumptive world clearly illustrates the reciprocal reinforcement of wealth and power. By the same token, inequality and lack-of-wealth (e.g. poverty, debt) are equally reciprocally reinforcing in a capitalist society. The poor *do* stay poor and the rich *do* get richer.

In looking at the massive scope and influence of capitalism on our society, it seems permanent, overwhelming, and that it has always been there. Conspicuous, competitive consumption, however, is an outgrowth of the fairly recent (in terms human history as a whole) industrial revolution. Because of this our attention is awarded to, and our ideologies are derived from, a world of commodities. Even if an individual partakes in the consumer marketplace as little as possible, for instance, only buys food, shelter, and occasional clothing, the consumptive ideology is so pervasive that he or she will still be dominated by it. Besides the "illusion of choice," and because of the nature and effect of advertising, the consumer is shown other illusions, like that of social mobility. These illusions are constantly pounded into our brains by the nauseously overwhelming amount of advertising that we are subjected to. Aside from the obvious effect ads have in encouraging the consumer to consume more, these simplistic and hyper short ads appeal to our base emotions and leave absolutely no time for critical thinking or reflection. Add to that the innumerable amount of ads that we are exposed to on a daily basis, and it is no wonder the consumer is left dulled, dazed, drained and therefore very likely to remain passive. When the consumer buys the products attached to fulfill our basest needs and most simplistic emotional needs, like food, sex and "perceived" status, they will feel content that the system works, and are unlikely to look past their own comfort level.

In cases where the consumer is not necessarily made comfortable by all of their purchases, they are at the very least occupied. If the consumer does not condone or endorse their marginalized role in society they may be too busy shopping and watching bad TV to even notice. This goes hand in hand with the power that the consumer "thinks" they have just because they possess the money

to purchase or *not* purchase a particular product. The consumer then feels *they* are responsible for their need to consume and therefore the blame lies solely on themselves, and not the system as a whole. Who would blame a system that allows you to buy anything you can afford? If you work for it, you can achieve the “American dream,” and we all know it’s possible because the media shows us so many examples of people living the “good life.” Again, who would blame the system? This mentality permeates all of society including our government. The concept of the “free market” states that the marketplace dictates if something is good or bad by deciding to purchase or not purchase something. This takes all the onus off of the government, the corporations and the media themselves and puts it solely on the consumer who has grown up in world where he or she, and everyone around them, is exposed to over 3000 ads per day. Because the marketplace and its ideologies have replaced our previous cultural and social references, such as family, community, and religion, we have little to no other references by which to judge the ideology of consumption. Because everything is a part of this culture it becomes naturalized and blends into the background. It then becomes nearly impossible to see consumption as something that can influence and affect inequalities. We are so enveloped by this consumptive culture that we literally cannot see the forest for the trees.

The post industrial age is the consumptive age. The ability to produce, reproduce and distribute products cheaply and easily brought with it a sense of egalitarianism. If you work hard enough, you can afford to buy the same thing as anyone else. This individualistic approach further removed people from their communities and removed the public good and social conscious from their consciousness. Image-based emotionally charged advertising brings with it an unquenchable amount of desires. Movies, TV and the internet have dulled our sense and critical thinking skills and raised our sense of apathy to an epic low and high respectively. We are forever chasing the carrot, if we get it there will always be another carrot, and if we can’t quite grasp it we are too blind to see the stick. We then blame ourselves for our lack of achievement. Who needs to rule with a “big stick” when you can just use it to dangle the possibility of *anything* and the illusion of *everything* just out of reach? Most people are, indeed, swept up in the

illusion, but what about the others? What about those that know we are being lied to, taken advantage of, subjugated, and even know that we are complicit in our own domination? I offer another question in response. If the prisoner can see the bars and stone walls, does that make him less imprisoned? When the bars and walls are so high, wide, and have been there so long that they might as well have always been there, it seems as though they are permanent and indestructible. The only hope is that *any* awareness might allow the prisoner to see the weak points in the prison and possibly with time and more awareness be able to exploit them to, not only free themselves, but to take down the whole structure itself.

worker

at old age, taking the form of diseases and addictions. Pain will be classified as

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*\*Adapted and distilled from an academic essay of the same name also by Sean M. Carey, 2016*

# The Labor Worker

Eric Melecio

Being a worker in today's world, contrary to popular belief, can be a very complicated lifestyle that requires a cool head in order to survive in a complicated system. Of course, there are many kinds of workers, but the workers I will be focusing on are labor workers who do not require a high skill set to accomplish jobs. A worker may also own a sole proprietorship; nevertheless, they may still be workers due to the fact that most keep working even as their job title may read "owner" and very few ever leave the field of work. My goal then, similar to what Machiavelli did in *The Prince*<sup>1</sup>, is that I will try to best instruct in how to live as a worker.

The first people I shall address is those who have been born and raised a worker. If you have worked as a child, then you should have no problem with holding any profession requiring low skill labor. You must remember though that one day, you will grow old and your bones and muscles will hurt constantly because when you are young nothing hurts. You have not accumulated enough pain, but the pain that you accumulate over the years will come and haunt you at old age, taking the form of diseases and addictions. Pain will be classified as

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<sup>1</sup> In his book, Machiavelli instructs the rising prince in how to govern his lands. His sources come from his own personal experiences with nobles and leaders of his time, as well as historical figures. He examines their faults, mistakes, and downfalls as well as victories. I try to do something similar here, but with my sources coming from the experiences of labor workers that I know, as well as other famed stories that rotate in the family kitchen table. Not all the advice mentioned here are mine, as some, if not most, are from the tellers who have told these famed stories that rotate in the family kitchen table. These stories are originally labeled as gossip. Most, if not all, of the advice and instructions in this paper is derived from the Mexican School of Parental Philosophy, or at its extremist version, Mother Philosophy. The advice is naturally for men (not enough source information for women).

physical, as well as spiritual (shame, sins, etc.). Speaking about accumulation, accumulate wealth. Save. Have a backup plan, especially before you reach fifty. A life savings is advised, but emergencies will occur which will cause you to deplete your savings. If this happens, then I am deeply sorry for your bad luck. <sup>2</sup>But such things are inevitable, which means you will have to also rely on close friends and family or your employer to help you in your hour of need. If you have kids, you may also rely on them but do not pursue this as a reliable fallback plan as your children might succumb to nervous breakdowns due to the pressure. Children also tend to disappoint and hate their parents, but feel free to give them ultimatums and wake up calls, and remind them how hard life is. This will assert your authority over them, but be aware that this authority is only temporary like all things in life. Most of your employers will see you as a valuable asset to their team due to your natural talent for tedious routine work, your ability to listen, and your endurance. You may ask for a raise, and they may be forced to comply. Nobody wants to lose a valuable worker, but eventually you will be replaced and branded as a ticking time bomb for other employers. For people coming from Mexico, if someone asks if you are a United States citizen, tell them that you are. Tell them you have a workers visa if they ask for proof. Any worker will see that work is never ending. You might think of setting up your own business. Don't. The employee earns more money than a business owner unless you're willing to sleep for only four hours and expand your business to the point that you forget what your kid's names are (or if you don't have kids, you forget to call your mom for twenty years).

For those who have not worked ever in their life, then I recommend you don't be a manual worker. For you to be qualified as a good worker, you must have ten years of experience under the sun, must obey all types of humiliating commands, and must have the thirst and endurance of a camel (physically and mentally). If

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<sup>2</sup> This section is especially helpful for undocumented citizens who live in America who may not be able to receive the same benefits as an American citizen and must also rely on translators to help them with the documentation process.

not, you will be seen as some desk jockey who got lost along the way to his office. Many of the workers will be hostile towards you because you don't seem to be doing anything right. You're slowing them down. They will ask you the following questions: You went to college and now you're here? How is that possible? What are you doing here? What the hell are you doing? How much are you making? Ignore them or answer them with lies. Never tell them the truth, keep your head down, and try to follow instructions from the boss. Use logic to best solve problems. Go to the gym once in a while and workout. When you get back from work, try to laugh as much as possible. Watch TV and go to sleep early. Cry. But don't cry in front of people, just cry to yourself. Your body will automatically do this for you during your sleep due to tired <sup>3</sup>muscles. <sup>4</sup>Find another job if possible.

I personally do not recommend drugs and alcohol. If you do them, have a strong will for self-control. The one in charge will see that you've been drinking on Sunday, and will look down on you for coming with a hangover on Monday. If you use drugs, they will know as gossip spreads like wildfire in the workforce. Drug users, from addicts to casual users, will be seen as trouble makers and outcasts. Try to keep a conservative outlook. Marriage is especially encouraged, but owners prefer loners as they make efficient workers who are not distracted by things not relevant to work. If you are about to throw up in the middle of the job, keep working. Your body will eventually get used to the work as muscles tend to learn the routine and motions of the job. I strongly recommend having <sup>5</sup>faith in something, especially in God, but not to the point of being a fanatic. <sup>6</sup>If you are tired, pray. Praying is only as good as your faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as muscle spasms.

<sup>4</sup> Also see *The Farmer*, which includes *The Poet Farmer: Poets who Turn to Farming/Ranching* where I advise to steer clear from the same fate as Don Quixote de La Mancha.

<sup>5</sup> Faith that things will change, either by a god or a promotion in the workplace.

<sup>6</sup> It was said that Joan of Arc did not cry as she was being burned at the stake. She prayed to God all throughout the burning, feeling no pain, toasting very comfortably. Her faith was strong enough to carry her painlessly into the afterlife.

# The Tribe and the Spirit

DL Smith-Lee

Among the mountainous peaks of the Else Lands is where Letty lived among her Tribe. Letty's mother kneeled in prayer before the statue within the shrine as Letty watched from the threshold. This was customary, once at noon and once at midnight. The noon sun had set itself high in the clouds as the overcast skies obstructed its rays.

The shrine Letty's mother prayed in was just steps away from the register of their family's business: the only local convenience store for miles from the Else Lands. No one lived here, too afraid of the rumors. Letty found it silly since all one had to do was respect the Spirit.

"Anybody home?" A man's voice called from behind Letty. He stood about six feet tall and wore black jeans and a holey white t-shirt, revealing opaque skin beneath. Letty walked to the register and greeted the stranger. He was clearly not from the Else Lands, just another foolhardy passerby out to poke his head in on the "others".

He slowly approached the counter as if expecting Letty to jump over and ravenously maul him like the savage that the Outsiders claimed the Tribe to be. He looked around cautiously as Letty impatiently awaited him at the counter.

"How are you today?" He said. His voice had lowered as if communicating with a rabid dog. Letty sighed.

"I am fine today sir." She answered flatly. "What can I do for you?"

"Would you happen to know of a lodge anywhere nearby?"

Letty immediately knew this was a setup; he was here on an agenda.

"There is no lodging for miles sir. The other side of the mountains has some."

"But I'm nearly out of gas." The man said persistently. No one stayed in the

Else Lands but the Tribe. Outsiders never came to this place, only those who dared to challenge the Tribe's beliefs.

"There is a gas station less than a half-mile down the street sir." Letty was getting annoyed, and the man's tone had slightly risen from its earlier tranquility. If this Outsider disturbed her mother's prayers, Letty would be highly upset, as would the Spirit.

"There is nowhere here to stay?" The man asked with a slight smirk which only frustrated Letty even more.

"These are the Else Lands, no one lives here but the Tribe. You would be making a mistake attempting to stay here sir."

"I hear the water is poisoned in these parts," he said to Letty. She tried subtlety with him, but he was making it particularly difficult.

"There is no poison," she said. "Only our Spirit, people do not respect our water."

Letty knew all about men like the one who stood before her. His smugness gave him away. He was one of those people whose arrogance preceded them. He would try their water, though Letty wished she could warn him away.

"Letty!" A stern cry came from behind her making her heart jolt to her throat. Her mother's tight grip jerked her arm around to face her. "You never speak of the Spirit with Outsiders." Letty's mother scolded with an Earth-tone finger pointed in Letty's face. Her mother turned to the Outsider.

"Sir, we are hospitable to your kind, but if you wish to disturb our peace, we will contact the authorities."

"I come in peace," the stranger said with his open palms at level with his blotchy pink face. "I will not disturb you."

He bowed before turning to walk out of the store. A part of Letty told her that the man's curiosity wasn't satisfied. He would return, they always returned.

As the midnight moon rose the Tribe lit their candles beneath it. They stood barefoot on the rocky shores as they had every night. When midnight struck, they all went to their knees and bowed their heads. Letty knew the Spirit watched over them at that moment. The Spirit was their mother. She'd expelled the Outsiders from the Else Lands to let the Tribe live in peace.

Letty could hear her whispers as she bowed her head to the Vast Lake. The rest of the Tribe had to have heard the whispers too. Outsiders would



never understand the bond between the Tribe and the Spirit, but they didn't need to so long as they stayed away from the Else Lands.

The next day as Letty stood before the counter of the convenience store, the stranger walked through the door again.

"Good morning," he greeted Letty casually with his hands stuffed into his pockets. She noticed he hadn't changed clothes. Letty did not greet the man back.

*Why must they be so insistent?* She thought.

"We got off to a bad start yesterday, and I wanted to apologize. I'm sorry. My name's Kevin, what's yours?"

She hesitated for a moment. She stared into the man's bright blue eyes as they met her anxiously.

*Just like the last one,* Letty thought.

"Letty," she said monotonously, refusing to tear her eyes from the man.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Letty. I'm here looking for work," the man said.

"No one will hire you here Kevin; you shouldn't stay here."

"I don't understand, why?"

*Just leave already,* she thought. Letty's mother had finished her noon prayer, emerging from the beaded curtains of the shrine entrance. Her mother's dreadlocked hair fell to her waist, decorated at the tips with shells that washed against the shore, blessings from the Spirit. Seashells had no business in this mountainous region, especially since they only existed in the marshes that remained of the waters on the Outside.

Letty's mother stared daggers at Kevin. He greeted her, but she only met him with a silent glare. Letty swallowed hard, just wishing he would heed her warning and get on with his life. But that would never satisfy him, she knew it.

He picked up a candy bar from the shelf and took it to the counter in silence. Letty rang up the candy bar and Kevin paid. He still stared at her with those bright blue eyes. A scruffy beard had developed under his chin since yesterday. His features would have been described as handsome on the Outside. Letty truly thought he was attractive, just as much as the last Outsider had been, but such thoughts were looked down upon.

As Letty handed Kevin the candy, she held it firmly as he attempted to take it.

“Please just leave,” she whispered, knowing her mother probably heard her. Kevin just stared back at her, eyes blazing into hers. Letty released the candy and Kevin turned and walked away.

After midnight prayer that early morning, Letty couldn't sleep. She laid wide awake in bed wondering if Kevin had left or not. She gazed distantly out of her window, out to the Vast Lake. The moon shone against the waters clear surface as the waves beat against the rocks, but Letty could see another light. She was almost sure her eyes hadn't deceived her, they looked like the headlights of a car. In the lights she, could make out the naked pale figure emerging from the waters. Letty's heart dropped at the sight, and she rushed from her house without her mother's permission.

She arrived at the shore in just enough time to catch Kevin as he put his clothes back on.

“What have you done?!” Letty screamed, horrified. Kevin's eyes widened at the sight of her.

“There is no water on the Outside,” Kevin replied simply. “I haven't bathed in a long time.”

Letty shook her head, running her hands through her dreadlocked hair.

“But you know what the waters mean. Why couldn't you just leave here, Kevin?” She asked. “Now you've upset the Spirit.”

“What?” Kevin asked confusedly. Letty's entire body felt like water at the memories of the horrid disfigurements of the Spirit's wrath. It was her fault. It was all her fault.

“I'm sorry Kevin,” Letty said, before running swiftly back home.

The very next day, almost as if on cue, Kevin burst through the door of the convenience store. Letty already knew what to expect.

“Letty, I don't know what's happening. It won't stop.”

Letty stood silently at the register biting back her tears. She watched Kevin's once pale hand as the blackness crept over it gradually. Her mother was in the shrine praying once more. The dark rings around Kevin's eyes told Letty that the Spirit would not wait long.

"Please tell me what's happening!" Kevin demanded.

"I'll tell you a story," Letty whispered, staring distantly. "Long ago there was a Medicine man who loved an Earth Sprite dearly. So dearly in fact that he was able to learn her true name. Human organizations came many centuries later, polluting the Earth Sprite's lands, killing her and drying up her waters. Her Spirit found a way to irrigate the waters from the Outside, and she blessed us with her water. But with her death came the price: Whosoever shall use her body without paying homage to her shall pay with their own. Her Spirit may only be appeased by the utterance of her true name."

"Letty please," Kevin begged. "Letty, please don't let me die."

"There's more," Letty said flatly. "A man of your height with eyes like yours came here last year. He learned our secret and uttered the Spirit's true name but she'd grown so angry she took his life anyway. His face had been disfigured and battered beyond recognition along with nearly every male in the Tribe, my father included. Each one of them simply uttered her name and passed the plague onto the next hoping she would spare them, but my father didn't. He accepted his death. You remind me of the Outsider who learned our secret."

Tears streamed from Kevin's eyes.

"He was my brother."

Letty had no words. There was nothing more she could say.

"Please don't let me die, Letty," Kevin begged, grabbing Letty's shoulders. "I only wanted to know what happened to my brother. Please, I didn't mean it."

This had been exactly what Kevin's brother had done. She'd given into those sky blue eyes as they drew her in before and she'd uttered the true name of their Spirit to save him. Letty's lips parted as her mother emerged from the beaded curtains, watching patiently.

"I'm sorry Kevin, but you should've left here." She said. Kevin released her, crushed. He backed away, not noticing the shadow behind him that towered above his head. Letty and her mother didn't flinch. They simply bowed their heads to the Spirit. Kevin swirled and instantly froze before the massive shadow.

They didn't raise their heads to see; they simply listened to the Spirit's retribution. Kevin made no cry as his bones cracked beneath the Spirit's weight. Never again would Letty make the same mistake she had before.

# Vanilla

Katrina Underwood

## ***Lemon Cheesecake, Raspberry Crunch, Pistachio?***

I gazed upon the ice cream options. Luckily there are still five people ahead of us in line. One of the kids has his face so smooshed up against the case I can see a small circle of condensation forming around his mouth. I have always been awful at making decisions. However, this is not true of Nancy, my date. She knew what she wanted before we even walked into Wow Cow Creamery, "Bubble gum and mint chocolate chip, they are my two favorite flavors, it's what I always get," she said confidently, no hesitating tone. How could someone be that sure of themselves? I envied Nancy for being so certain in what she loved. Even if it was as silly as bubble gum ice cream. I didn't know what I loved. I didn't even know if I liked Nancy. There was nothing in my life that was routine enough that I would claim it as my favorite.

## ***Coffee, Peach Caramel, Cinnamon Bourbon?***

I exhaled moving up a few spaces in line. Luckily there was a women with long blonde hair accompanied by a shorter brunette. They both insisted on sampling every option before they made their commitment. Over and over again the teenager behind the counter with the paper soda jerk hat and black bow-tie continued to hand the women tiny spoons of varying flavors. They would then try and asses, resulting in either an enthusiastic eyebrow raise or crinkling of the nose while simultaneously pointing to another flavor with a glitter coated nail.

## ***Lemon, Peanut Butter, English Toffee?***

Nancy began telling me about her dreams and goals. She was going to be an elementary school teacher because she loved working with kids. She found their honesty a relief from the adult world. You'll never meet a child who lies she said. She had already been offered a starting position at a school near her small town, Willow Spring. She wanted to stay close to her family, especially her little sister Pamela who she called Pammy and her dog Sue who she called Suzie. She smiled with each word, everything seemed so effortless for

Nancy. Nancy looked at me expectantly, as it was now my turn to tell her about my linear dreams. My goals, my life plan.

### ***Cookies and Crème, Key Lime, Rocky Road?***

I told Nancy I was going to be a teacher too. I tended to mirror other people's dreams when I felt under pressure. I tweaked it, changed the fine details. I told her I was going to be a high school history teacher. I was very against standardized testing and wanted to work from within the system to change the system. Don't know exactly where I heard that, but it sounded good. I dropped author's names, said how I wanted to teach Howard Zinn's, *A People's History* and radicalize the classroom setting so there was more hands-on-learning. Luckily, I had gotten pretty good at making up stories on the spot from my series of first dates. I didn't mention that I changed my major four times at three different universities. Or that I read and wrote adamantly and watched documentaries but never re-read or re-watched anything because what if I got hit by a mini-van in the Target parking lot or ate one too many pesticide ridden strawberries, what a waste of time it all would have been to re-do anything. No, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with the ideas that lined the walls of my mind like peeling wallpaper but that would be saved for me.

"Next in line, can I take your order?"

"Yes, I have made up my mind."

# You Are Here

Nick Pecucci

## **1. *How am I driving?***

Today I am in St. Louis, a city 296.7 miles from my home. The sky is cocooned in a bedsheet of silver, the low clouds floating off to their next destination. The streets are empty in the aftermath of rain. My friend's Jeep nestles comfortably into a designated parking spot. I am the last one to unbuckle my seatbelt.

(My mother stuck at a freight train.)

When I was little, I used to take Beanie Babies on trips for companionship. Now I bring books. I have not crossed time zones. It is 7:12 P.M. at both my current location and my home. My finger follows the irregular heartbeat of a line diving southward across my holographic map.

(My father horizontal in a hospital bed following minor surgery.)

A distant female voice tells me I have arrived at my destination. The voice's accent is set to British.

## 2. *Why would you go anywhere else?*

I do not know if I am like others, in that I can only comprehend an unfamiliar space by comparing it to my own home.

The streetlights in St. Louis cast a calming glow over the city. The lights surrounding my home are sporadic and leave dark pockets of nothingness along the avenues.

St. Louis is a place of transformation. At sunset, I sit for dinner at the outdoor patio of a side street diner, the restaurant nearly indistinguishable from the town homes and apartments engulfing it. My home is in a recycled state of disrepair. The location of a defunct movie theater was bought out to make room for a second movie theater. I recall the burnt-out K of the Burger King across the street from my home, which flashes a red ING into the black night below it. I often sleep in the nightlight of the abandoned suffix. ING.

The air in St. Louis carries a vague smell of old books and bacon. My home does not smell like anything.

Sometimes I feel as if I can only experience through juxtaposition.

### 3. *What drives you?*

Ephemera. The restaurant is lined with sheltered memorabilia. Comic books sit behind glass cases. Beatles lunchboxes. Wrestling figurines. Objects designed to be collected. My eye catches a Creamsicle-orange baseball card of Roger Maris as a Cleveland Indian from 1958 and I find myself thrust down into the trap door of memory: this is the exact same restaurant my family visited during my first trip to St. Louis ten years ago.

(My parents divorced five months after we arrived home.)

Music. Vintage record sleeves are dominoed along the walls. Buddy Holly. The Ronettes. Ritchie Valens. Other smiling, gel-haired icons from the early years of rock. Wurlitzer jukeboxes cast a neon glow from the upper tier of the restaurant. My Viewfinder gaze is soon blocked by a tattooed waiter whose blue hair juts out in horns from the top of his head. He takes my order in shorthand on a yellowed pad-and-paper. My fingerprints shine under the fluorescent light as I hand the laminated menus back to the waiter. I have to catch myself from staring at his blue hair. Green Day's "Welcome to Paradise" begins to rain from the house speakers. Release date: 1994.

(The restaurant smells like what I imagine the 1950s smelled like.)

Fingerprints. They are spread out in every direction like compasses on the un-Windexed glass. North, south, east, west. Some of the prints are more smudged than others. I consider the legacies of those who reached for the ephemera before me as I rest my hand against the glass, staring mournfully at the rows of protected baseball cards.

(I need the Roger Maris for my collection.)

Reflections. I attempt to take pictures of the mementos, but the ghostly image of myself mirrored in the glass dominates each snapshot to the point where the objects become the background and I become the foreground. I tell my smartphone that I am sure I want to delete the selected photos.



#### **4. *Been injured at work?***

The City Museum is lined with screaming children and signs that say YOU ARE HERE. The ceiling is a jungle gym consisting of thin wires and plastic tubes. I am tempted by the prospect of a bird's-eye view though I know I have long outgrown the desire to climb. I walk irregularly to fit into the narrow passageways. I must bend at all times. All sense of direction fades from my internal compass. I am lost in a children's museum.

One hallway leads to a funhouse mirror which fires an eight-tiered reflection of myself around the silent room. No two of my reflections are staring in the same direction.

Somehow I am convinced to enter the ball pit. It is the City Museum's most popular attraction, according to my friend's Yelp app. The attendant instructs me to wait for his signal before beginning our allotted five minutes in the ball pit. I nod affirmatively even though I am taller and many years older than he is. I feel a twinge in my shoulder as I swing down into the pit; my head strikes an erratic metal bar. There will be a welt. My friends and I dwarf the other pre-adolescents in the ball pit. We are skyscrapers in a nascent city. It is difficult to balance atop the miniature globes of red, yellow, and blue at my feet. I struggle like a baby as I walk, slipping and falling three times amongst a strong cough of plastic. The attempts are futile. I give up, deciding to crawl to the other side of the floor. I wonder if others are watching through the ropey cage of the pit. An uneasy thought: now I am the one being observed from a bird's-eye view. The pit becomes an arena even though nothing has changed. I feel silly, but alive. The attendant raises a hand, shouts *go*.

# Poetry

## Little Mexico

I live in little Mexico  
where the ground always rumbles when we sleep.

The outside  
is a dirty brown color.

The inside is home to  
Sandra Cisneros.  
She lives in a bookshelf with Cervantes by her side.

We explode within the walls.

The hallways smell like curry and tortillas.  
The neighbors don't speak to each other,  
and the dogs stay inside.

Little Mexico welcomes all.

It hides us well for we  
are dark with shame,

Little Mexico is my future,  
the walls have told me so.

But my children and my children's children will  
live to know little Mexico no more.

Elisa Galvan

## Another Night

Another man lost to the carnage of a firefight  
Is another sleepless night I pray with all my might.  
Never informed of the premise of our presence,  
But rifles and uniforms energize our essence.  
Enemies are faceless; lives and names unimportant,  
Their nature not known, but nonetheless abhorrent.  
In a world of kill or be killed, I beg forgiveness,  
To keep my own life, I must in turn be vicious.  
My finger caresses the trigger anxious and steady,  
Awaiting the signal for a force that strikes deadly.  
The cue is taken as swiftly as the other's life,  
While sobbing over the carcass is his bloodstained wife.

Another night of heinous and gory dreams,  
Each sleeping and waking moment pierced by screams.  
Bombardments from mortars and bullets cascade,  
This macabre scene only death can evade.  
Another brother falls out, his gasping breaths finite,  
Hoping against hope that our side is morally right.  
Some are kept alive by either courage or fear,  
As the question looms how we will escape from here;  
Alive, but scarred with eternal haunting visions,  
Or splattered and scattered through fleshly divisions?  
Hear me, for I beg you not to cry or feel pain,  
Even if I am never to return again.

Another night of torment for the crimes I have done,  
Another nightmare beholding a butchered loved one.  
I long for vile memories to fade to black,  
But instead, they punish, torture, and attack.  
Boots covered in blood and dirt, shined for the glory  
Night and day living in terrorized purgatory,  
Possessed by trepidation; fear drips wet from my veins,  
Wounds dissolve into scars, but the agony remains.  
Stars and stripes decorate caskets as our comrades rest,  
Adorned with a blue cord and medals upon the chest.  
We do not fight because we desire to kill,  
But we take the fall so that you never will.

Another prayer unanswered, lost in dead silence.  
For honor and country, I've committed violence.  
Those I've done harm unto I neither know nor hate,  
A sentry and avenger was simply my fate.  
For the sake of family, for the sake of love,  
Please grant me forgiveness for my cruel deeds thereof.  
I'm referred to as hero since they don't understand,  
How noble is a hero with clean blood on his hands?  
War may be done, but battles rage in my conscience.  
I walk your streets a murderer anonymous.  
Forgive me for protecting lives that were at stake,  
And if sleep won't set it right, forbid me to wake.

Becca Peterson

## “Bedrocks”

Stars glisten as we speak  
Shining in between what we're meant to be  
I believe in my own dreams  
Especially the ones where I'm alone with you  
And now I'm all alone with you

Here, I lay out all my fears  
And hope they disappear by tomorrow  
But you, you listen and you're near  
The reason why the clouds are making room for two  
The stars, they want to gaze at you, too

Amber skin is a shield that protects me  
From your wish, my desire will stay within  
If I could multiply the nights that let me win  
I'd still do nothing  
Cause I'd rather have these bedrocks with you here

High, higher than above  
But not so in between a distant memory  
Oh, I'll stay as constellations find a way  
To realign the signs that tell my mind  
Tonight is something more divine

Amber skin is a shield that protects me  
From your wish, my desire will stay within  
If I could multiply the nights that let me win  
I'd still do nothing  
Cause I'd rather have these bedrocks with you here  
Midnight's rushing in  
It's time for me to go  
Before we stay here

Complicating fate  
Is a move I cannot make  
But I still see you  
As I let tonight slow down

Amber skin is a shield that protects me  
From your wish, my desire will stay within  
If I could multiply the nights that let me win  
I'd still do nothing  
Cause I'd rather have these bedrocks with you here

Steven Cristi

## Broken September

As ice, it forms on fire's glowing ember  
The coal it burns winter's fury and fears  
Dancing in the light of a broken September

The sunbeams scatter, shiver, fondly remember  
the cinnamoning skies, its gleaming gold tears  
as ice it forms on fire's glowing ember

I dream in haze of sweet and summer endeavors  
Upon my skin the apricot sun it smears  
dancing in the light of a broken September

Infusion sharpened tonguing bold, this weather  
It brings its frozen kisses - - warmth disappears  
as ice, it forms on fire's glowing ember

The backward storms they race to fall forever  
As tumbling snowflakes glisten, frost appears  
dancing in the light of a broken September

A redding rose, it blossoms, bringing pleasure  
The hopeful autumn heat interferes  
as ice, it forms on a fire's glowing ember  
dancing in the light of a broken September

Dawn G. Swanson

## Chai Tea Latte

Mi abuelita brewed fresh café in a ceramic pot  
everyday.

It was essential when enjoying eggs con chorizo,  
and impossible to forget while eating tostadas for lunch.  
During dinner the café was brewed while  
the children slept and the adults could talk.

When the dark roasted café matched mi abuelita's skin, she knew it was ready.  
Sometimes she would match it to my skin  
and the café came out a little smoother, a little softer.

She made café con leche for me when no one was looking.  
She thought I was old enough to drink café.

She said,  
one day I could make my own café,  
just like hers  
dark and strong.

But the ceramic pot has not been filled for some time.  
It sits on top of the fridge.

Mi abuelito drinks tea in the morning now,  
he warms his water on the stove.

I drink Chai Tea Latte.  
It's not café,  
we don't drink café anymore.

Elisa Galvan

## City Sins

### I – Invisibility

People occupy every city block  
distancing themselves from  
dirty sins.

The sins of those  
we wish not to see - -  
The ones of invisibility.  
This is where the sins begin.

People do not see those  
who are - - empty.  
The ones who we deem - - nothing.  
They want to be seen.  
They want to be heard.  
They have stories to tell,  
as their lives boil underneath  
your veins.  
They embed their faces, baking the  
blackened earth in your eyes.  
See them!  
Hear them!  
They are people whose lives were  
scorched by fears - loss – disasters –  
sins – tears.  
Their lives were once like yours and mine.  
And now they are - - nothing  
And now they are - - invisible  
The city eats them up  
and we burn our eyes.  
It's easier not to see them - -  
those of invisibility.

### II – See Them! Hear Them!

I see a woman – slipping  
into bitterness.  
Her mind turning inside-out.  
Unraveling stitches exposing  
forgotten memories.  
Blistering winds rise from lies,  
as the moonlight spills upon  
her eyelids.

I see a woman whose fears  
spill through and crack  
her skull. She bleeds ash out  
from crusting lungs.

I see a woman finding  
comfort in a black woven cloth,  
covering her imperfections –  
giving warmth to her face  
in a cold winter storm.

I see a woman  
looking up towards the sun.  
Her soul is  
melting and crawling,  
inside broken - - shattered dreams.

I wonder why her beauty  
is hidden in the cracks  
upon the sidewalk.  
Life tramples upon  
her loneliness - -  
her invisibility.



I see a man with eyes  
so crystal green. Walking down broken,  
bending streets. Hands bleeding, feet  
cracking,  
sweat shrinking on tired, brittle bones.

I wonder why he cries tears that  
redde and blister through sand paper  
skin, while his mind wanders like a  
feather blowing in the wind.

I wonder why this man screams  
underneath a tunnel of forgotten dreams.  
His personality exploding like blistering  
puddles on icy sidewalks, as he curses  
God just for living.

He falls to his knees and wraps himself in  
crumbled burnt paper as his shadow  
drowns in drunken fury.  
I wonder who he was or could have been  
before he slept on iron  
plates breathing the corrupt breath  
underneath the rotting city.

Dawn G. Swanson

## “Conversations With Myself”

little voice  
pin your words on Me

bitter noise  
get away from Me

I have a conscience  
He speaks with clarity

You better watch Him  
without, I'd rather be

it's easier this way, I think  
conversations with myself  
I prefer anyway

little Boy  
You're numb out there

play it coy  
You'll never learn from there

hurry up  
They're moving on

just pick Me up  
And follow

it's easier this way, I know  
conversations with myself can't hurt Me  
it's easier this way, I know and I hope  
conversations with myself  
I prefer anyway

is it true You're suffocating Me?  
oh, just so patiently  
I'm a living catastrophe  
waiting helps and hurts like hell  
someday You'll thank Me, and love Me, embrace Me  
it's too hard to tell  
can this be over?  
no, I'm taking over  
move aside all Your time, all Your mind, all Your crime  
and kill the vibe  
I am your lawyer, judge, executioner  
I sentence four years of "think of her"  
as You jump ships with no lips, only to trip up  
with no thoughts, only false hymns to God  
there is no one to save You or lay your head down  
You don't have to call, cause I'm always around  
making old pals and French gals cover your frown  
cause the end of this hall won't ever reach your sound  
I don't wanna make a winner, not a sinner  
will it kill Her if I open up Our drying wounds?  
I don't wanna make it better, have You ever met a fella  
who could sing it like the way I do?  
it's easier this way, I know  
conversations with myself can't hurt Me  
it's easier this way, I know and I hope  
conversations with myself  
I prefer anyway

Steven Cristi

**Death  
Adores a  
Haiku**

I feel the worry.  
They are acting way too nice.  
My friends are NOT nice.

With hesitation,  
my curiosity wins.  
“Just tell me who died!”

Scoppie died last night.  
We still don't know what happened.  
Of course it was drugs.

Back to the basement.  
At least I look good in black.

Jokes are not helping.

Grace Leonard

## Glowing Medallion

You are a pervert  
You prod me with your broken light  
Breathing your warmth into my bones  
lusting after your round golden body

You are a slutty tease  
You dance around my room  
You paint my body with a medley of colors

Lurking and spreading across my floor  
You try to ravish me  
I bend in sequence with you

You mock and flirt with obscurities  
You flaunt your exquisiteness  
I fuse with you  
Opening the cumbersome wrappers I lie  
underneath

Dawn G. Swanson

## He's a Doctor

He likes to learn about uncharted territory  
The outer, the inner, and the inner most core.  
Discoveries of a system you and I have.  
One's tippy top to their toes: training to specialize his radar—  
To tell you what's wrong, a diagnosis of sorts.  
Revolutionizing his family's way of life  
Going to school, seeking higher education, pre-med, med...  
He claims there were sabotages along the way but all  
I hear—all I see  
The advances to what he knows he wants to be.  
Rising past any expectations even those he sets for himself;  
A record of his accomplishments and celebrations stored  
In my android phone.  
Massive migraines, all-nighters, many energy drinks later  
A widespread grin highlights his face  
Momentum—on his way to be.  
Believe me I tell him: it will take a lot of hard work  
For anything one wants in life.  
The way I see it: he is a Doctor and I...

Am the Writer.

Ikara Jekro

## Homesteading

Poetry has always been a place  
I could visit and rest for awhile  
in the quiet early morning hours  
under street lamps and waning moonlight,  
beside vacant parks and darkened storefronts,  
in a fit of emptiness with nowhere to go  
but with a need to be somewhere.

I could till the pages like virgin soil  
digging my fingers into the lines and the ink,  
pushing them down to my knuckles  
before pulling up the words, the expression.

I could build a house out of the lies  
I tell myself; it would stand tall  
and just as true as I wanted.

I could build on the bedrock of dreams,  
heavy and half remembered,  
filling in the missing pieces  
with half truths and open interpretation.

But I would still leave, eventually,  
no longer hungry but never full,  
burning down another temporary home  
no matter how sturdy the foundation  
by turning the page and forgetting;  
I feed new with the old.

Poetry is never a familiar place.

Josef Venable

## If I don't

If I don't share my thoughts, please don't judge me

If I'm silent when you need me, please forgive me

When I retrieve to the darkness in my head, do not look for me  
When I stare at red sunsets  
don't disturb me

If I cry in your presence just hold me

When I say I love you

Trust me

Homesteading

Poetry has always been a place

I could visit and rest for awhile

in the quiet early

under street lamps and waning moonlight,

beside vacant parks and darkened storefronts,

in a fit of emptiness

but with a need to be somewhere.

I could

digging my fingers into the lines and the

pushing them down to my knuckles

before pulling up the words, the expression.

I could build a house out of the

I tell myself; it would stand tall

and just as true as I wanted.

When I say I love you

I could build on the bedrock of dreams,

heavy and half remembered,

filling in the missing pieces

with half truths and open interpretation.

Trust me

But I would still leave, eventually,

no longer full,

Elisa Galvan

burning down another temporary home

no matter how sturdy the foundation

by turning the page and forgetting;

I feel new with the old.

Poetry is never a familiar place.

Josef Venzke



## In the Air

We often seek, and yet never find  
A means for us to gain some peace of mind.  
Well-thought solutions come costly,  
The rest impact only softly.  
In a world of injustice as replication  
We breathe in the air of our own subjugation.  
Desperately searching for fresh wind to inhale,  
Battling a vile atmosphere to no avail.  
The toxicity festers in our lungs by the minute,  
And we blame our system, not the disease within it.  
Some wear gas masks and proclaim ignorance,  
Diagnosing the sick as vociferous.  
There's no other option for human inhabitance,  
Cleansing our poisonous air is our sole defense.

Becca Peterson

## Incident at the Courthouse

One a bright, sunny day in the middle of July,  
I ventured to the courthouse to settle a matter.  
I encountered an old man and his wife passing by,  
With values aged or unkind; perhaps the latter.  
They exited the building as I entered it,  
So I held open the door for them polite-like.  
But rather than thanks, the man gave uncensored spit,  
Turning up his nose, he bellowed at me, "Dyke!"  
Taken aback, I knew not how I should react,  
I said nothing and gave his disdain no encore.  
But if again I cross paths with this man of no tact,  
I would surely hold the door for him once more  
Because I was taught to respect others in the long run,  
And I won't compromise my character for anyone.

Becca Peterson

Becca Peterson

## Inhale

She named me after her favorite month in the year.

She said that May preceded the warmth and the sun and it left behind the cold and the loneliness. I simply enjoyed hearing her say my name.

Her voice was firm, but when she sang she transformed into someone different. Her big brown almond eyes began to glisten and the sound of her voice carried throughout the house.

She would light a cigarette, inhale deeply, exhale, and begin to sing. She sang me lullabies in Spanish every night before going to bed.

When she would forget the words she would hum in my ear. Her soft fingers would push my untamed hair off my face.

“Te amo, te amo, mi dulce bebe, te quiero hoy y siempre mi dulce bebe”.

Elisa Galvan

## Kindness to a Child

I am a child.  
Like anyone else  
I want to be heard,  
And not just seen.

I have much to say,  
Much more to give  
But I am told to go away,  
Let people be.

You have an opportunity  
To make an impression in my life,  
For the actions you take  
Will impact...who I AM TO BE.

I watch you and I see  
How busy you are.  
Everyone wants your time  
But today, you save it for me.

When you give me your time  
My world stands still,  
When you stop and listen,  
To the words I have to say.

I share with you my thoughts  
As I look into your eyes.  
My heart knows you are listening,  
For you did not look away.

Your choice is simple  
And cost you nothing to give,  
To show me how important I am  
And not walk away.

With compassion and understanding  
You showed me love.  
I know now that I matter to you,  
Not just today, but all ways.

For there is no greater gift  
That one person can give,  
Than to show kindness and love  
To a child, every day.

Loni Strach

## Libra, November 10

Heed the Scales' worth,  
Announces Blue Earth  
Despair's raft mariner  
"Ye fear!" laughs Tears-Spinner.

Adapt, depths of the sea,  
Adept, Death's threaded keys.  
Voted the masses  
Foamed populaces

Extends the temblor,  
Glassy sands tremor  
The blue storm bows:  
Old truth crushed, now.

Trudy Leong

*"While the first six signs of the zodiac focus on the individual, the last six focus on the individual's contact with others and with the world." The author does not follow astrology.*

## Pace 250 Dempster - Eastbound

out the bus window a forgotten food container lies  
the kind that has multiple compartments so that none of your food  
touches each other  
it used to be a vessel  
it could have held all kinds of things  
basmati rice with naan and chicken masala  
black bean burger with sweet potato fries  
falafel with tzatziki and hummus

probably not though  
perhaps it was eggs, sunny-side up with two pieces of greasy  
sausage  
leftover from a break-up brunch  
now look, the container is flat  
as a pancake, along with any remaining afterthoughts

Katrina Underwood

# What makes NEIU Special?

## U and I



What are **Scooby-Doo's** favorite chips?



What does an astronaut say when he hasn't had anything to eat??

Man... I'm **STARving**

If college students were eggs, they would always be

**"EGGxhausted"**

What is a selfish person's favorite type of bagel?

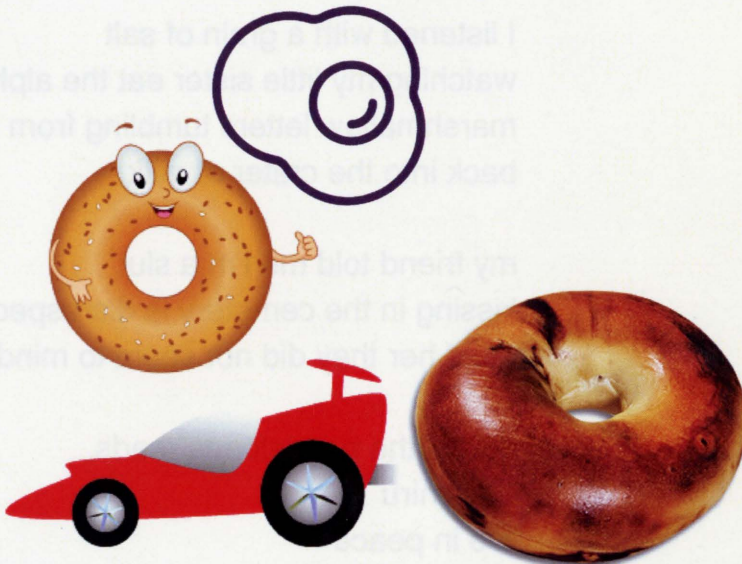
The **"sesaME"** bagel

What kind of bagel do pilots like to eat?

**"PLAIN"** bagels

Which bagel would most likely win in a race?

The **"RASIN"** bagel.



## Pace 250 Dempster Street - Westbound

a customer tells me about her week long  
no carb, juice cleanse

I imagine my face looks similar to that of people cornered  
cornered by pamphlet pushing, word of God preaching  
Catholics on the bus  
praying for my stop

in front of me a man in a wheel chair wheels  
out of Check n' Go with his non-broken leg  
while a little girl in front of me complains about the snow  
holding an iPhone up to the window announcing to her Mother,  
"I am only taking pictures of trees!"

don't mistake kissing for commitment mama said  
thighs rubbing together as she hustled about the kitchen  
dicing onions, dishing lived advice

I listened with a grain of salt  
watching my little sister eat the alphabet  
marshmallow letters tumbling from her superman spoon  
back into the crater of milk

my friend told me I'm a slut  
kissing in the cemetery is disrespectful to the dead  
I told her they did not seem to mind

one of the headstones reads,  
žít v míru  
live in peace



none of this makes me feel anything  
I'm sorry, I know you have come to this  
to feel something  
to find something  
but my brain is full  
maxed out  
overloaded  
it can no longer compute

nor make sence of the scenes that surrounds it  
it is taking a break  
gone fishing  
on holiday

no inspiration  
words of wisdom  
fortune cookie knowledge  
or otherwise  
better look elsewhere

Katrina Underwood

## Spinning Wheels

\*  
art is love  
\*  
only love heals  
\*  
in love, perhaps,  
the greatest gift you can  
give  
is freedom  
\*  
I found something  
more valuable  
than all the gold in the  
land  
\*  
in the mind of wonder  
there is no impossible  
\*  
in the foolish mind the  
universe speaks in  
symbols  
e v e r y t h i n g  
remains meaningful  
\*  
I remain loyal  
in this world!  
\*  
the artist is a missing link  
to pleasures forgotten  
in times of mindless  
motion  
\*  
one learns to create, to  
have faith  
maybe because  
and in spite  
of all the pain  
\*

some reduce you, some  
leave room for your  
answers  
\*  
the least you think of it  
the less it can harm you  
the less real it becomes  
\*  
if I stop loving  
if I stop creating  
if I stop dreaming  
I die slow  
in a pain you can only  
fathom  
if you have been in my  
shoes  
\*  
if you ever need me  
I am next to you  
dancing in the snow  
playing in the sunshine  
\*  
the challenge is to be  
a man who cares  
in a world that may not  
\*  
when you loose fear  
you begin a flight  
to death  
where it all ends and  
begins  
\*  
I am channeling more  
and more  
and more  
stashing my visions  
in dreamland  
\*

there is another order  
they want to destroy  
it is beyond their  
understanding and  
calculations  
\*  
words bond me  
\*  
health is wealth  
\*  
I am not lured by fame  
nor money  
I enjoy freedom  
\*  
corporations rule  
the land with toys  
while emptiness swallows  
beauty  
\*  
I must learn  
I don't know  
\*

Patricio Rizzo-Vast

## Sonnet 4 Her Eyez

Daylight, short lived, quickly approached dark night.

The chills bestowed sadness her eyes ignite.

Neither dusk nor dawn the heavens do tell,

Piercing optics in me ablaze like hell.

I'm caught betwixt God, man, and the Devil.

Street lights, inner light, sin, and rose pedals.

Alas! I have fallen back to the earth.

For I refocus my eyes towards her own.

They are illuminated by her phone.

Eyes peer down to flashing lights, it is dark.

Her iris a shade brighter than a tree's bark

Sclera white like a caged elephant's tusk

Pupils tell a story I have to trust.

I feel fortified like a French bastille

Christian Cambray

## Supernova

You were a supernova, burning ever so bright,  
The fatal flaw is they die much too young.  
As they perish, give a powerful light,  
Then dispersed memory remains among.

You were a supernova, impacting numerous lives,  
None of which given time to say goodbye.  
You've gone away, but memory survives,  
Just as loved ones plagued by the endless 'Why?'

You were a supernova, your hope obliterated,  
Future's fate had you horribly misled.  
Reparations were sadly belated,  
And remain forever unheard instead.

You were a supernova, left your mark in the cosmos,  
The world bore its cruelty onto you too.  
On its morose jokes, you felt overdosed,  
And ensued what was your final adieu.

You were a supernova, going out with impact,  
In hidden tears, and agony that sears.  
As your final act, you signed that contract,  
And taught to us that we must face our fears.

Becca Peterson

## The Space Between the Eyes

it seems as if at the end of the lane  
one finds cruelty  
greed

and variations in the theme of neglect

and yet  
day by day  
I choose  
to love you

Patricio Rizzo-Vast

## The Symposium of the Poor People's Campaign

Somewhere in America Martin Luther King Jr.  
met Bert Corona, Corky Gonzales and Reies Tijerina.

They sang corridos and listened to Jazz.  
Corky made Tamales and King drank café.

During their time in America they learned a whole lot.

King learned the meaning of

¡Si Se Puede!

And Tijerina invited Malcolm X por ser su comrade.

And every night they glanced at the sky shouting,

¡Si Se Puede!

¡Si Se Puede!

¡Si Se Puede!

¡Si Se Puede!

¡Si Se Puede!

Elisa Galvan

## Uneducated

I missed my Spanish grammar lesson en Mexico.  
The one where we learn where all the accents go.

There is no flare in my words and  
no emphasis when Spanish  
flows out of me.

The missing accents are in my attitude,  
my skin and my strength. There they live  
waiting to be used some day.

Elisa Galvan

## Wax

I can't sleep at night, my body tightly entangled with thoughts of you.  
My bones, fragile glass to your name creates an uncontrolled  
earthquake underneath me.

Begging God to let me rest. I can't continually confine my suffocating  
pain,

If only I could close my eyes without seeing you, forever hunting my  
actions.

I would be able to move without fear.

I've named you after the tumor.

It's below my neck

Above my breast

It's named wax, as read upside down and backwards.

This plastic heart paces between cement lungs, safely hidden.

Recently replaced by all you took from me.

You can find them inside of a box,

Wrapped in old love letters and tears from oceans of memories.

The key in a loosely swinging in your fingertips.

I never asked to be control.

But how easy it is.

You've taken everything,

Besides my lesson.

Fool me once, they say "shame on you"

Fool me twice, they say "shame on me"

Fool me three times, and I just say "Pass the whisky".

Three discarded calendars have wasted always since we last talked,  
Your voice created my coffin of tough luck.

I trusted you would keep your promise,

That you'll pretend to be here.

All I have is your phone number and fingers crippled inside my ears.



Fine, I'll get your unattended attention.  
I'll find a broken blade to match this broken heart.  
I'll cut you in my flesh replacing every love note,  
With the appointment you never made.

My eyes dangle in the crowd for your face in every man I dare to  
love.  
I'll teach them to walk like you, talk like you, laugh like you, to feel at  
home.  
Only left with too many names to count.

I played this interaction time after time inside my head like the  
perfect ending to a movie,  
and it didn't end up like this.  
Crusted heart still coved in bruises, opened by petty dirt filled fingers  
Almost healed,  
It's not time but memories that can't be destroyed.

I'm still with my other lover,  
He'll watch me try to cut my throat and I won't tell him why.  
One last goodbye to stop the weight on my chest,  
One last "I love you" and I can put this fear to rest.

M.F.

## **Yo Soy Chicana (*I am Chicana*)**

Baptized in the hands of my mother  
And denounced in the eyes of my father  
the bastard child of two countries

Of Mexican heritage  
AND American quality

An educated misfit

The dirt beneath  
your fingernails,  
Silently hidden  
awaiting eviction.

Yo soy Chicana

The voice of the Dreamers  
A force against disbelievers

Created from the whispers of rebels

Growing in the womb  
Of the Ghetto

Missing a 9-digit number to validate my existence

Rereading the definition of justice  
“giving each their due”  
Understanding WHY justice is past due

Breathing in the pollution of racism,  
reimagining the world with myself in it

Yo Soy Chicana

I pay for the crimes of your mother and father  
with my brown face  
I smile

I am the neglected child of America  
The insubordinate leader of the silenced

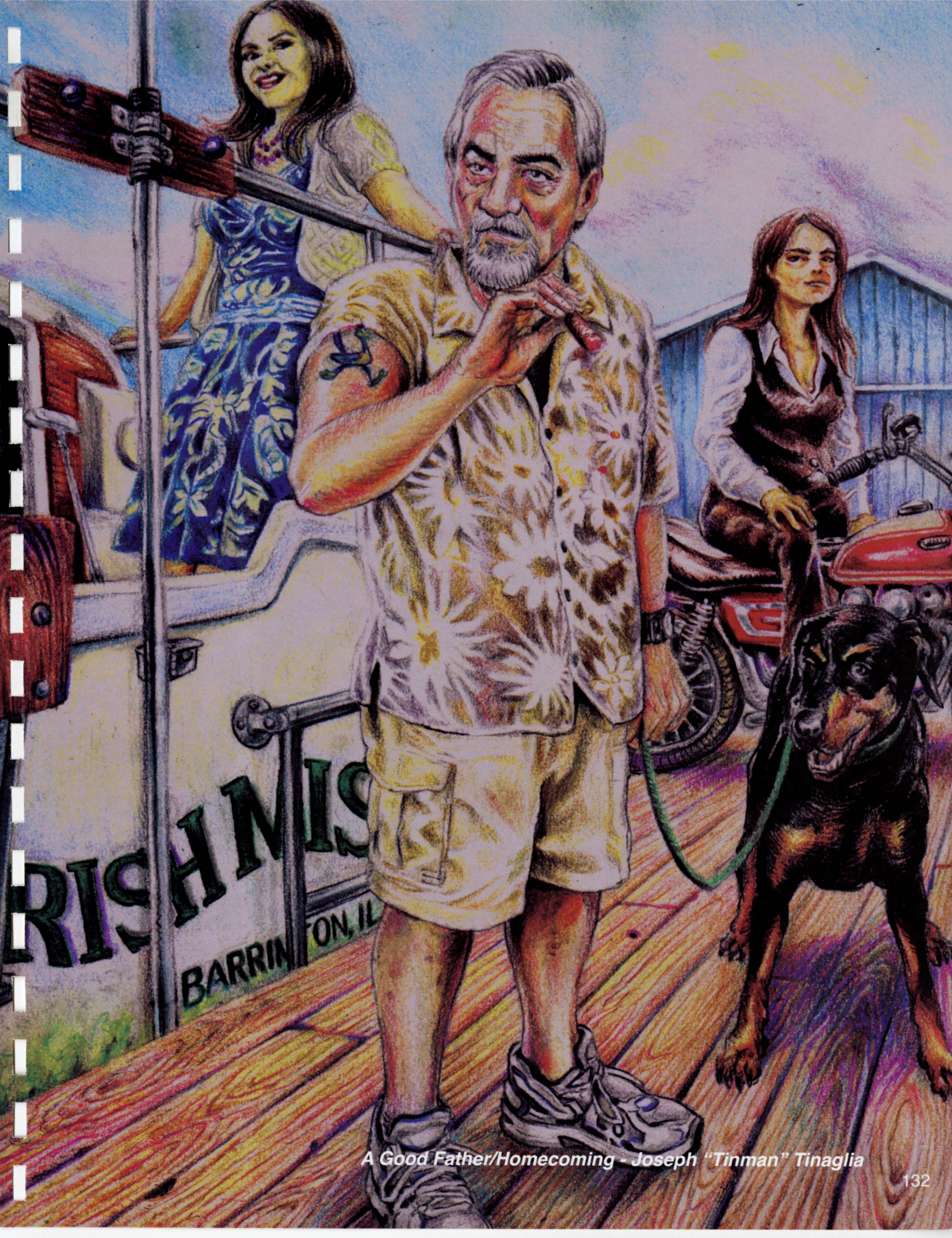
I exist outside the box  
titled American

Yo Soy Chicana.

Elisa Galvan

# Visual Arts

Elisa Galvan



*A Good Father/Homecoming - Joseph "Tinman" Tinaglia*

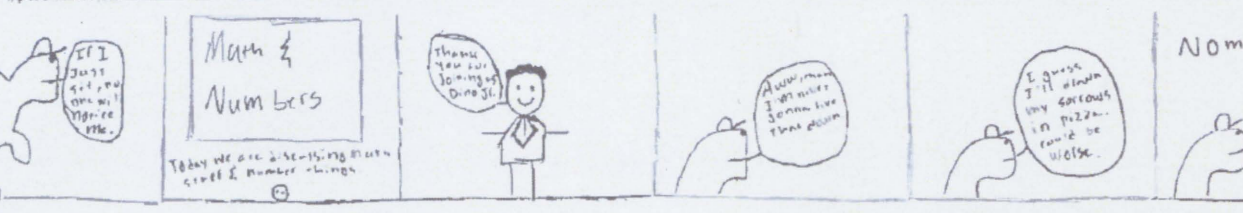
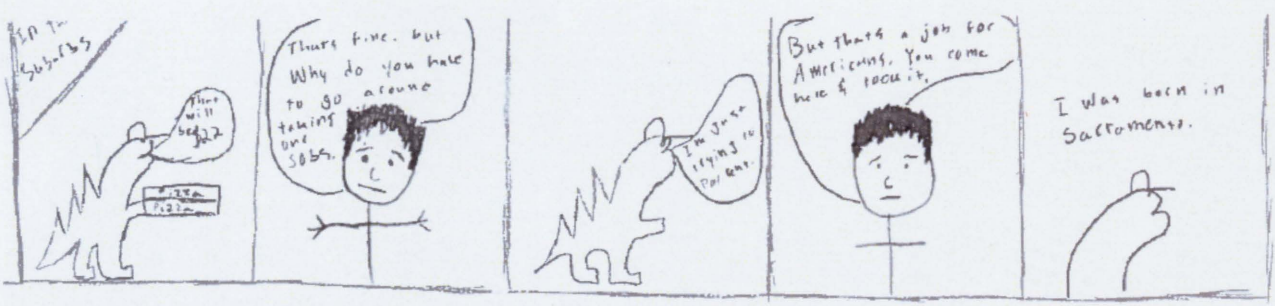
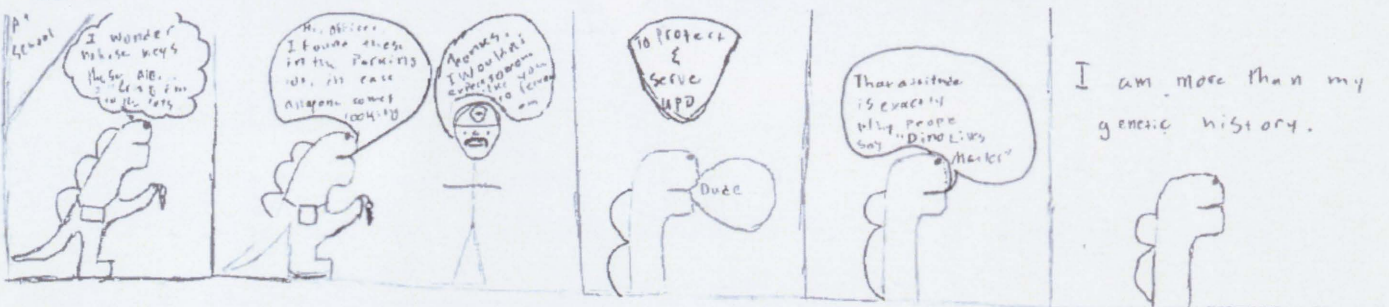
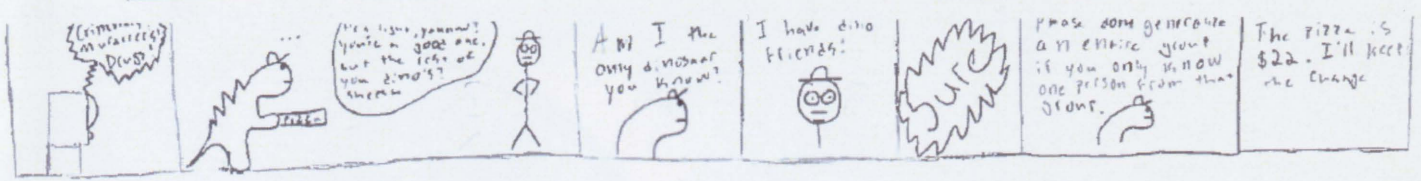






*Boy Scouts Makeshift Windchimes in a Chicago Park - Sumaya Aman*













*Cassandra Causey*

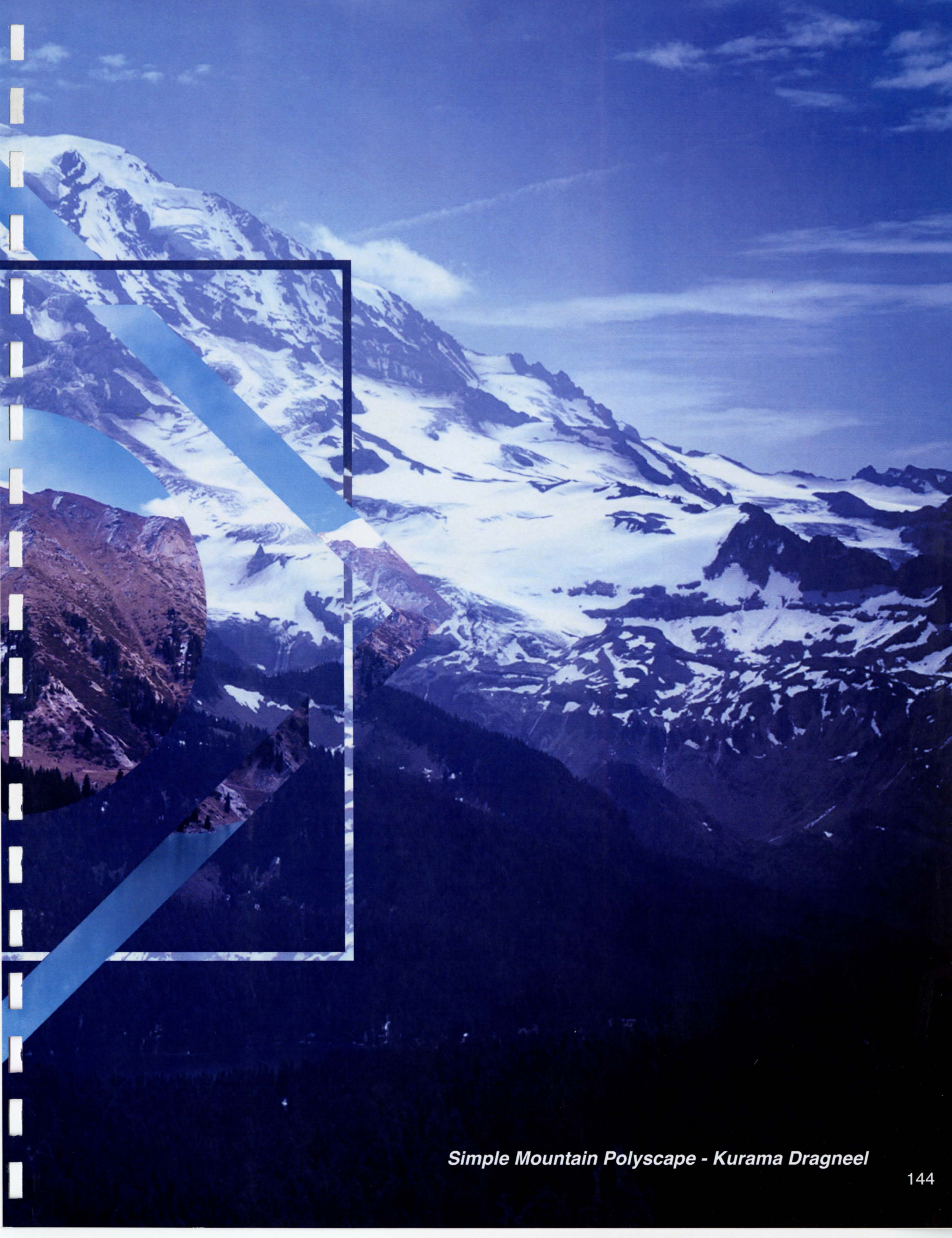




*Rushmore Tin - Anonymous Submitter*

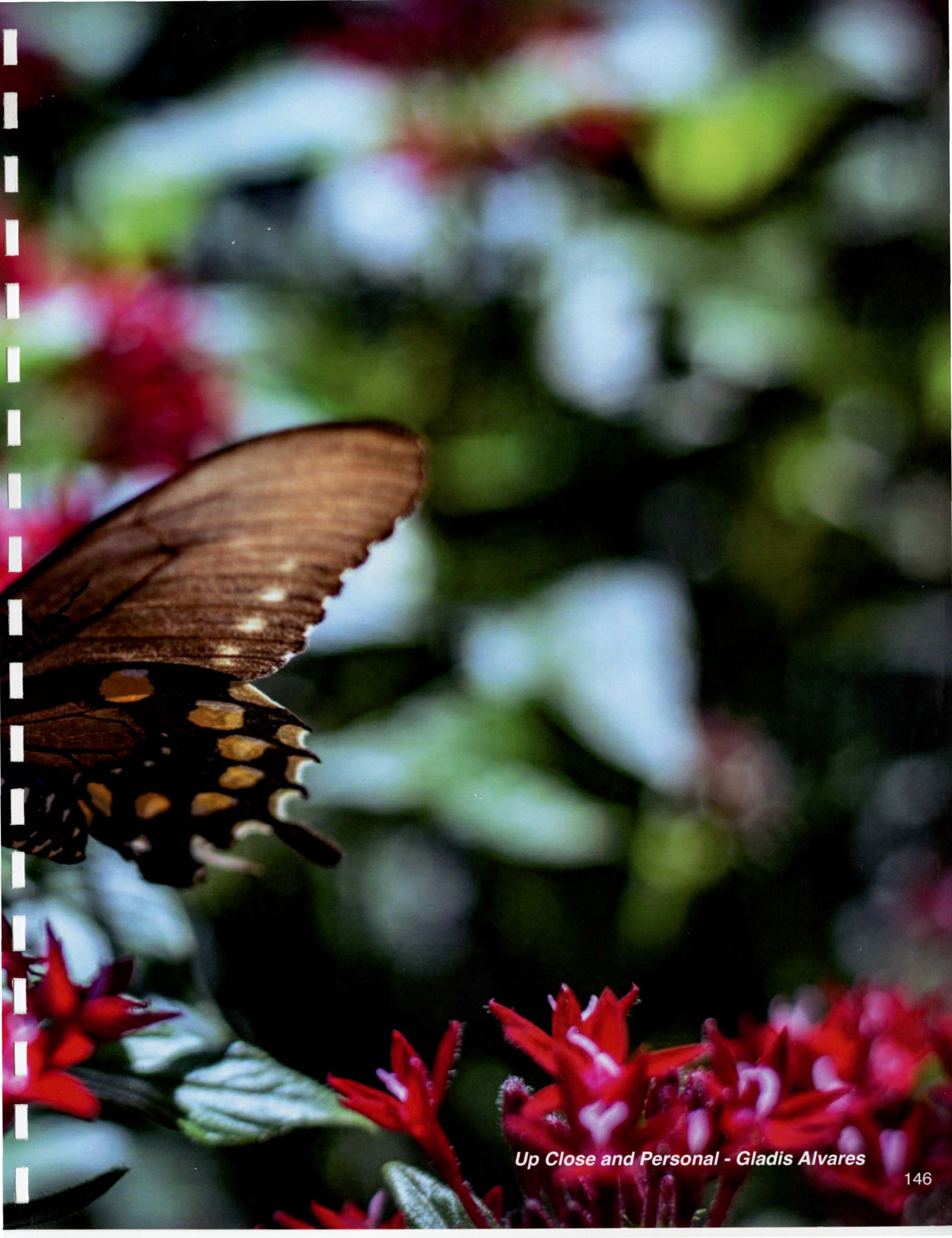


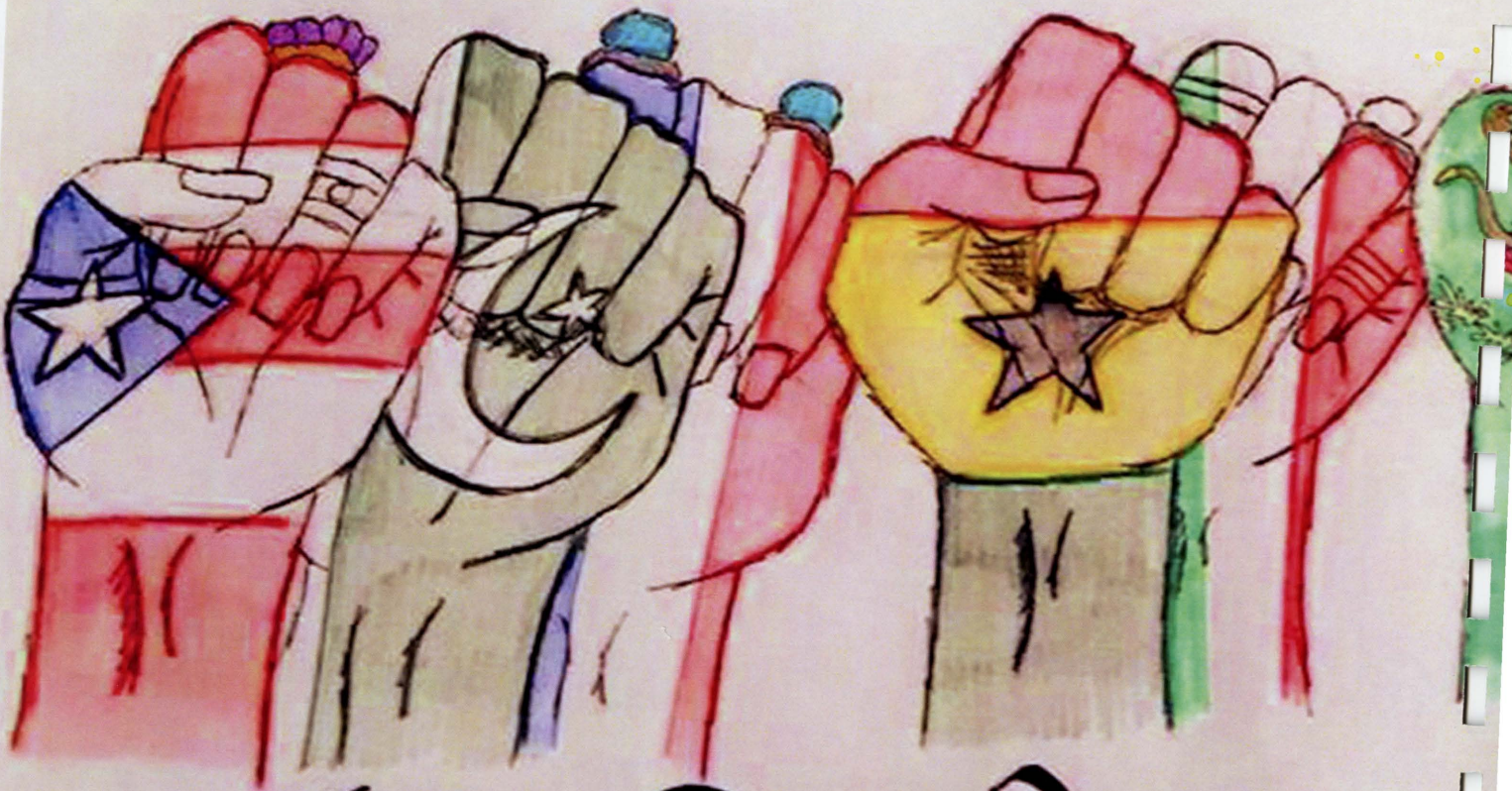




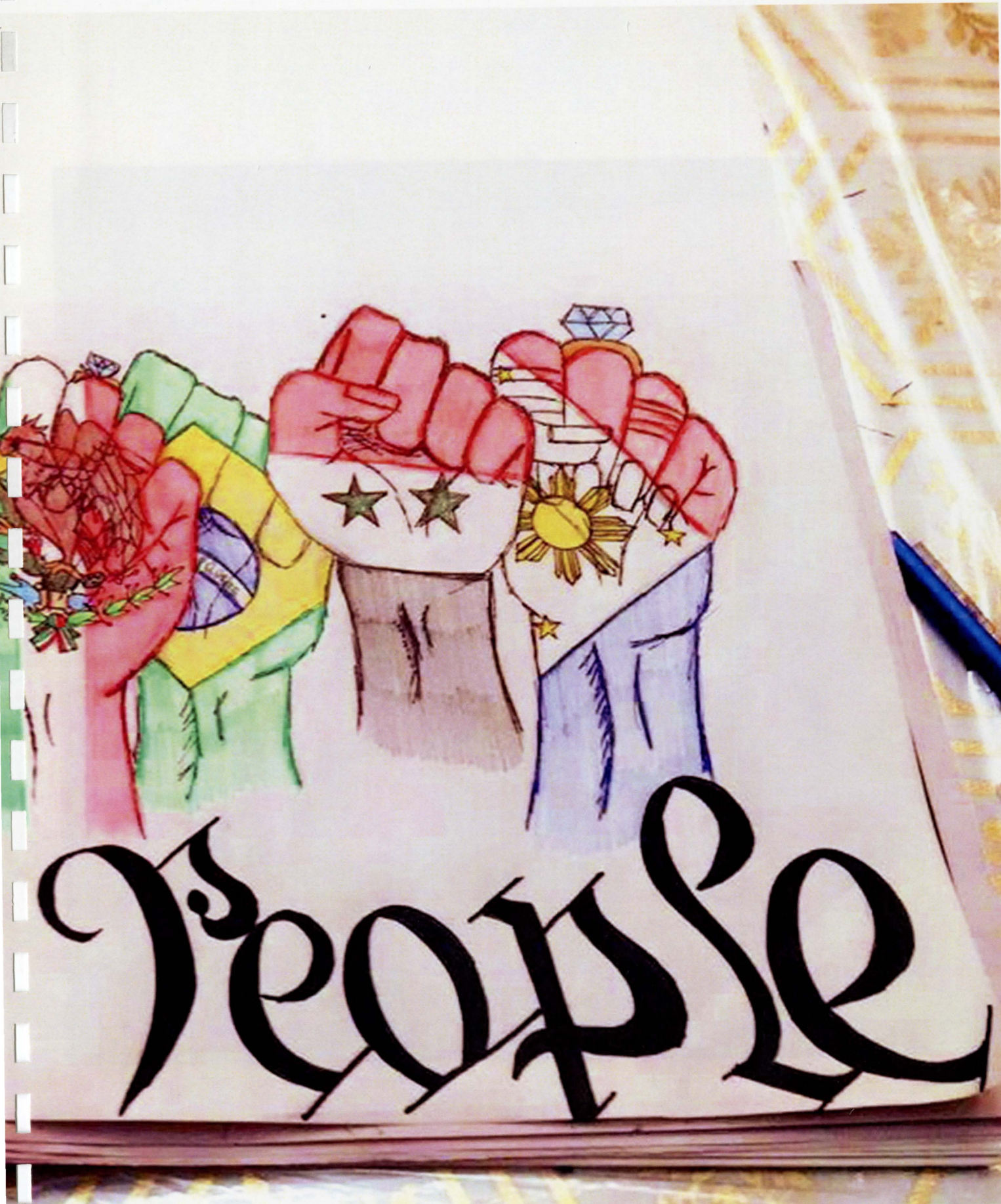
*Simple Mountain Polyscape - Kurama Dragneel*







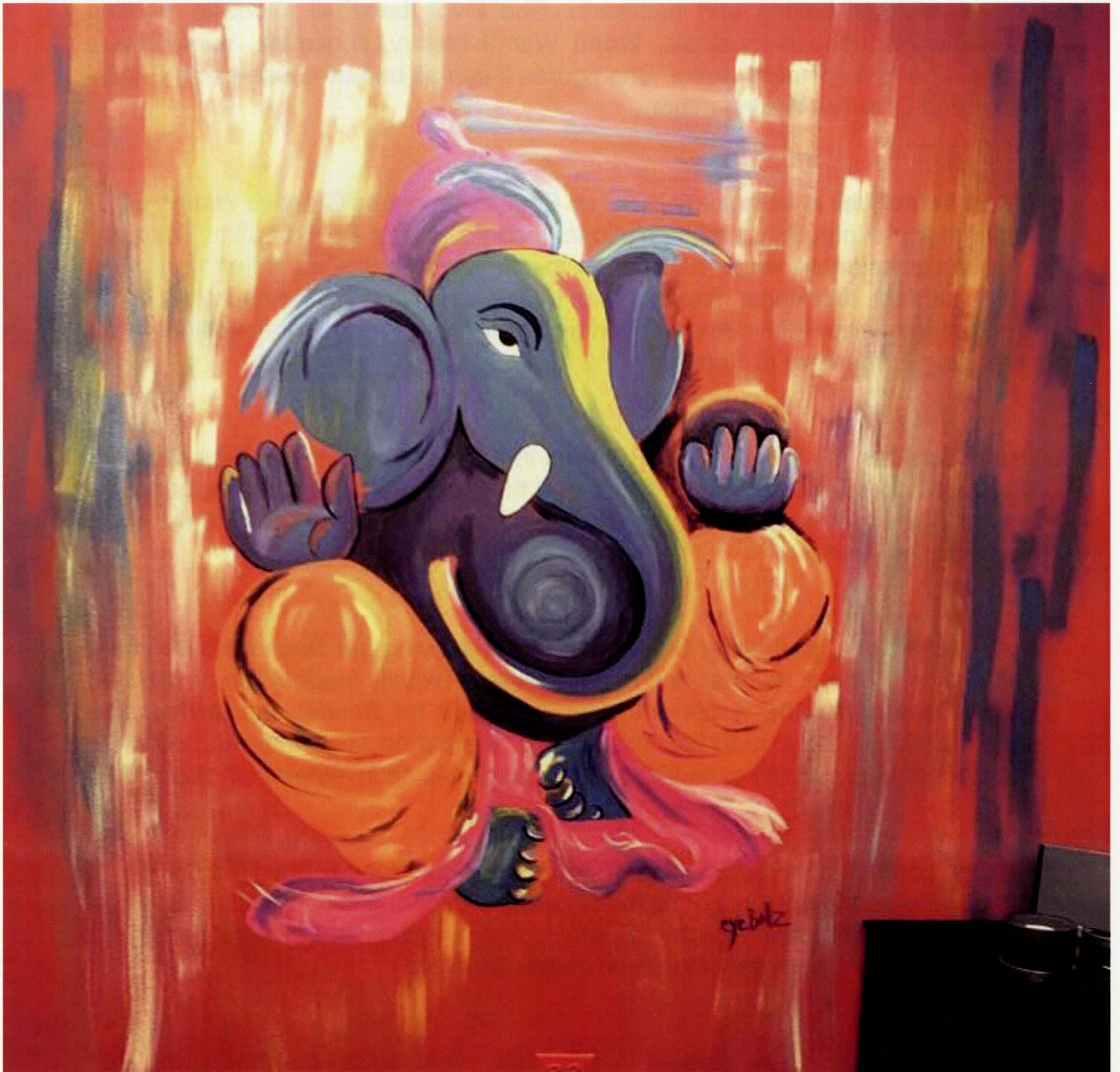
We Be



*We the People - Samantha Hernandez*



Jennifer Lee is our Editor-in-Chief for Seeds. She has studied theater, anatomy



He enjoys various artwork including abstract drawing, graphic design, and photography. Therefore, to express his creative side, he currently work with Seeds as the Graphic Layout Designer, putting the whole book together. Seeds is very grateful to have him on board.

## Staff Biographies

**Jennifer Lee** is our Editor-in-Chief for Seeds. She has studied theatre, anatomy and physiology, baking and patisserie. She loves baseball, Godzilla, knitting, dinosaurs, Sondheim musicals, World War II history, chocolate, superheroes, space, and reverb-heavy guitar. She figures it can all be put to use as an English major and Creative Writing minor.

**Airam Velasquez** is a Senior at NEIU an English major and Creative Writing minor. A member of Alpha Psi Lambda National Incorporated, a Co-Ed Latino Fraternity. She is a passionate writer who draws inspiration from life as a first generation Latina student. Working in the realms of higher education, she encourages others to write their voice. With determination and a big heart she has gracefully been the Managing Editor here at Seeds.

**Grant Spathis** is a Junior at NEIU studying Secondary English Education. He loves hip hop, comic books, the Bulls, and the Cubs. He is also a member of the university student run newspaper, *The Independent* and the current (best ever!) Secretary at Seeds.

**Rut M. Ortiz** is a graduating Senior at NEIU, achieving her Bachelor's degree in Economics. Rut is a reporter and editor for the university student run newspaper, *The Independent*. She is currently the Treasurer for Seeds; she is dedicated and determined to extend her knowledge, "there's no such thing as too much knowledge. Learning is key to living life because it is an investment in yourself."

**Sarahy Lopez** is the Social Media Coordinator for Seeds. She is currently an undergraduate at NEIU, majoring in English and minoring in Journalism. She lives in Chicago with her two lazy cats, Reginald and Graymalkin. Believe it or not, she enjoys Chicago's bipolar weather and deep-dish pizza.

**Rich Xue** is a graduate student in Chemistry, working on his thesis research. He enjoys various artwork including: abstract drawing, graphic design, and photography. Therefore, to express his creative side, he currently work with Seeds as the Graphic Layout Designer, putting the whole book together. Seeds is very grateful to have him on board.



**Sumaya Aman** is a Senior at NEIU set to graduate December 2017 as an English major and a Creative Writing minor, Sumaya rapidly became a part of the wonderful English community, having only joined the campus last semester. She was a recipient of the Spring 2014 English Merit Scholarship and currently works at the Center for Academic Writing. Sumaya's hobbies include: writing, baking, writing, photography, writing, painting, and writing.

**Diamond Barnes** is twenty-five years old and she is a graduating Senior in May 2017 achieving her Bachelor's degree in Psychology. She is actively involved in six organizations on campus where she holds different leadership positions. She is also involved in many NEIU community service groups.

**Trudy Leong** majors in Business Administration and will graduate in Spring 2018. She serves as the President of the Business and Management Club AWeSome Achievers Who Serve. She won the COBM Student Advisory Council Outstanding Leader Award for fundraising in Fall 2016. She is the Founding President of The SLAM Open Mic Poetry Club, which won the Trailblazer Award in 2016. Her poetry appeared in the Journal of Modern Poetry 16 and 19, addresses inclusivity and humanity as woven in the tapestry of the Universe and Truth.

**Alex Graff** is an Art major at NEIU. She has an interest in bugs, aliens and people in that order. She is currently the Visual Arts Editor for Seeds and highly encourages everyone to submit their art to the Journal.