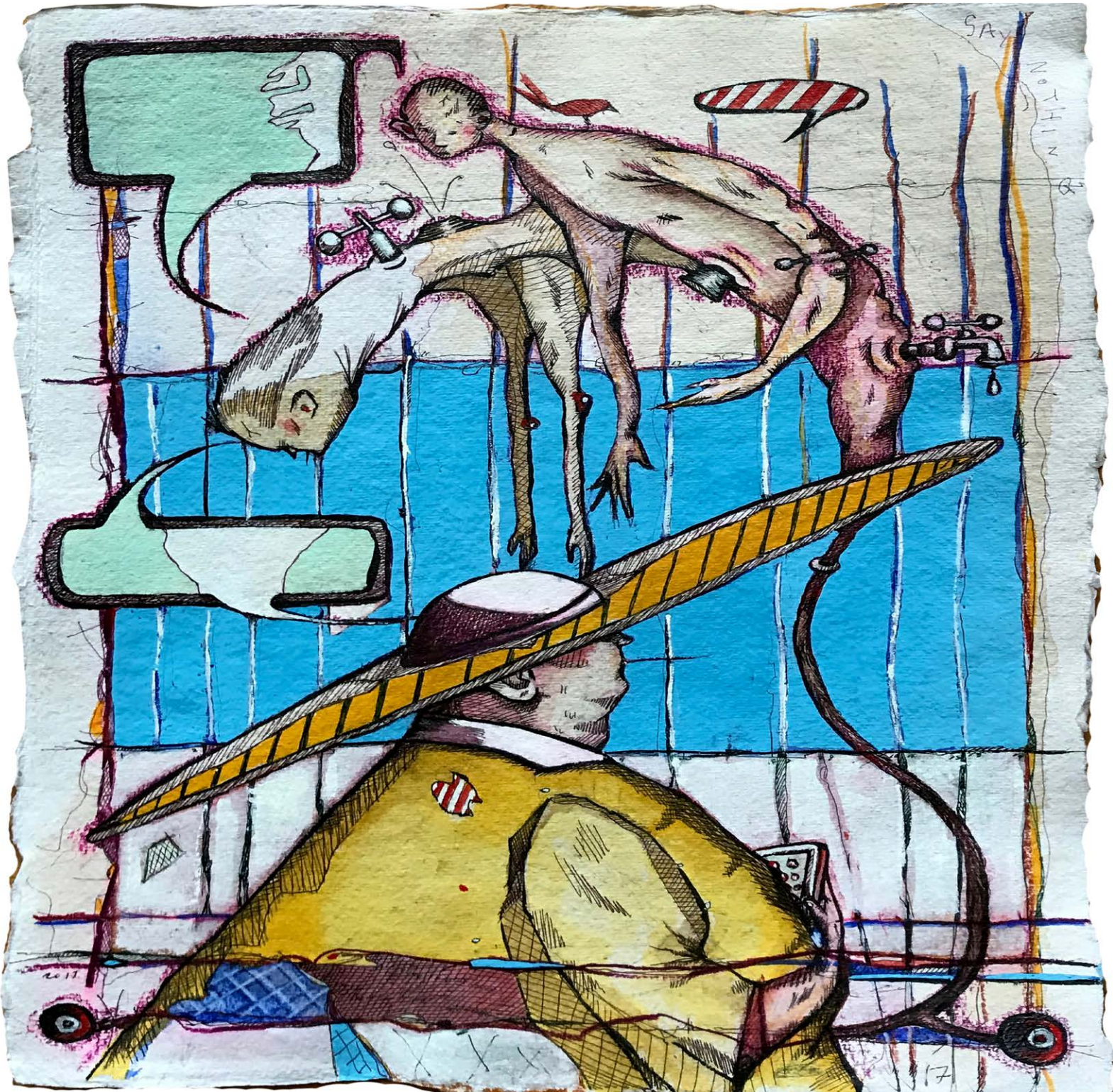


# Angel City Review





# Foreword

As we move forward into a new political climate for the arts and try to eke out survival in a harsh landscape, Angel City Review remains committed to its vision to provide a safe space for emerging, established, and the underserved audience of writers and poets on the west coast. In the last issue, my cohort John Venegas brought up the idea of “hope” as the reason why poets and writers propel on, as if their writing is what spites evil forces, and indeed, yes, this is very much true in one sense: writing does propel away the demons.

However as John hinted at in his forward, the act of writing is reactionary, not necessarily stemmed just in hope but mired in hopelessness, that a writer’s voice becomes sterling in the face of adversity. This journal is a platform for these voices, now moreso than ever. Diversity is the key to defeating prejudice, and it is our pleasure to stress the importance of translation work. We live in bubbles. Language is one such bubble. The act of translation is precarious, daunting, and not as easy as a dictionary may lead you to believe. A translator must capture tone, idiom, atmosphere, and best-imitate the original voice in another parroted language. It can be disastrous, if not done with the respect and high-handedness that this type of work deserves. It is a pleasure to stress Angel City Review’s commitment to a wide and deep spectrum of what good writing is, and to share that with an audience that may not otherwise be exposed to it.

-T.m. Lawson

## Featured Artist

### CHERYL GROSS



Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Cheryl Gross is an illustrator, painter, and motion graphic artist living and working in the New York /Jersey City area. She is a professor at Pratt Institute and Bloomfield College.

The focus of my work mirrors our present political climate, the corporatization and end of American democracy, as we know it.

My work has often been compared to Dr. Seuss on crack.

Winner of the Ó Bhéal Poetry Film Competition Winner, 2015, for In The Circus Of You.

# Angel City Review Issue 5 2017

Zachary Jensen: Managing Editor

T.M. Lawson: Poetry Editor

Kristin Kaz: Prose Editor

John Venegas: Lead Editor

Gabby Almendarez: Editor

Michael Brown: Editor

Angie Rodriguez: Editor

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# Bixby Creek Bridge

BY LUCAS BAILOR

i only met you twice

& you maintained a balance

between clouded cold mind

& the sun breaking through

(the sun in the morning

comes over the hill

& kisses the tall grass beside me)

swallowed by fog & ocean spray

sitting in hollowed out trees

& stumbling towards sifted waterfall

(needing something soon)

climbing stoneface

& lying on felled trees

& there was a before, there was –

have you seen the rolling fog

& have you seen me in the morning

a mastered stumble

a fluctuated weight

a tunnel

did you watch the sunrise without me  
or only the sunset  
by the secret waters  
the towering dunes  
the wind

(the sea is we)

& did you feel the sun plummet through the rock  
& did you feel the fog swirl, dampening our hair  
& did you feel my wavering

me of the quick ache thru less of our oak haze  
digging up the white bones & tearing shards to cut across the page  
own bones sticking up through the skin i force them back in  
charred parataxis falling

(parasitic nettles)

(microscopic graffiti)

(nothing gracefuller)

(sorrow older)

(burying exhale)

(our avalanche)

(stepping feeling)

(body dunes)

(final disinterestedness)



& here the unlocking and the liftaway  
a peeling off of the cypress' tree bark  
a sway of the spanish moss choking the air  
the battle of brightness and moving mist  
& driving back thru time over the bridge  
grey whales breach, catapulting water  
back into water: my vision  
covered with images of rebirth  
i wait to come true.

Note: This poem uses portions of the song "Morning Sun" by David Bixby, the poem "Sea" by Jack Kerouac, the poem "Birds" by Robinson Jeffers, the poem "Rock and Hawk" by Robinson Jeffers, and the song "Re: Stacks" by Bon Iver.

Lucas Bailor is an emerging writer from Moreno Valley, CA. He recently completed his MA in English at CSU Northridge. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in SHARKPACK Poetry Review, Boston Accent Lit, The Machinery, and POST(blank).

# Tiny Portraits: On Becoming

BY SAMANTHA GOLI

1. Me.

2. “I understand now that boundaries between noise and sound are conventions. All boundaries are conventions, waiting to be transcended. One may transcend any convention if only one can first conceive of doing so.”—David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

3. She scribbles lines onto a page without once lifting her pen and I watch, unsure of how the black ink will produce any discernible image, and maybe it lasts ten seconds or maybe it extends four minutes, but before I know it I sit examining a portrait of my own face, which I think hardly resembles me yet I recognize as myself because, just to the right of the lips and up a few centimeters, the paper has absorbed two black dots and I have instinctively touched my face trying to remember on which side I have these marks, knowing full well I couldn’t feel them even if I tried.

4. “A special thought.”

5. This did not happen but I imagine that it did as I close the photograph of the drawing on my phone and peer just beyond it at my husband who sits on the cream colored leather couch across the room hoping he did not notice the feeble grin glide across my face and dissipate, and while I flip my phone face-down on the table I remember her whispering in my ear, “What do we do?” as dance floor lights colored us neon shades of pink and blue and my grip on whatever remained of my then-lukewarm beer faltered a moment.

6. “You don’t know, in the moment, how you will react.” —Lauren Morelli, “Terribly Funny Podcast,” Episode 8

7. Before I ever get to answer her question or even have a real (sober) chance to process the magnetism between us, she has already decided to exit my life quickly and all at once, making it clear that we both must stifle any germinating affections because, to begin, I have a husband and even if I didn’t, she still needs time to heal from her last relationship that ended a year and a half ago; which when I consider how much time we’ve actually known each other (a month) stuns me more than I could have anticipated and I deflate into the sofa.

8. “We’re not meant to really know what we want. Living is just about constantly discovering and searching for that.”—Jen Eto

9. I tell my husband the truth, which he has already anticipated, in the hopes that my honesty will create a space for the three of us to explore something new but as I try to articulate my ideas for this divergent and unfamiliar portrait of our future, I spill ill-chosen words; and though I hastily attempt to reshape the image I have presented, nothing I say can erase the blunder and I find myself pondering my new dilemma and weighing the contrasting trajectories that each disparate decision will produce.

10. “But I think I was under the impression that when I decided to live my life the way I wanted to, and to be my true self, that life would become easier. Like rushing into the sunlight after you’ve been in the dark for so long. But it’s really more like taking steps toward the sunlight.”— Mi-Mi Monahan

11. Within a week’s time I find myself suddenly attached to the mundane and most unobtrusive scraps of life, such as a brass cup on my desk; a half-used roll of toilet paper that I took home with me from a house in Mexico, which sits hidden on a corner of my dresser; a freshly printed 300-page xerox copy of a book I first began reading on my computer two years ago; a pack of gum in the driver’s side door of my car with only two pieces missing; also the heater/air-conditioning settings in my car, which now point to the symbol of a seat with an arrow pointing to the floor instead of the one I normally use that points both to the floor and upward at the person in the seat; a crumbled ticket to the museum, which when I tried to unfold it earlier today I discovered a masticated piece of gum that perhaps originated from the aforementioned package, but then again maybe not; the car that parks across from mine in the lot of my apartment, which I had never really noticed before but, like everything I just mentioned, now steals my eye line and my memory simultaneously.

12. “You don’t need to be okay.”— Everyone

13. At some point during the following winter month, the scale reads 96.8 lbs and I remember myself at 18: a stick thin and wannabe-pious teenager who prayed endlessly for her and her girlfriend’s parents to accept, or at the very least tolerate, their catholicly scandalous relationship, and even though that would never happen my barely-legal self would persevere anyway, or just until the second summer after graduation when, in Mexico, I’d project all the unrequited devotion to my girlfriend onto the first person I met (a male waiter who worked at a bar/restaurant down the road from our hotel) and I’d let any hope I had for the future of our relationship dissipate much too fast and much too blindly for me to even realize that despite my patience and tenacity over the last three years to prevail in The Battle of Us versus Them, I just wanted someone to love me back equally, which really meant that ultimately, I yearned for validation.

14. “You shouldn’t have to compromise. This is your life.”— Serena Padilla

15. I start measuring time in guitar riffs—specifically, a few beyond my current playing level that I endeavor to learn anyway—because eventually my body can intake food again and, while assessing the quality of my days based on the amount of calories I consume provides a quantitative and therefore physically measurable number, I feel somewhat less pitiful knowing that I can muster enough energy to do something other than stare catatonically into nothing and sure, maybe the passing weeks start sounding alike but at least, at the very least, I can begin to see progress in some area of my life despite the cyclical thoughts and sweeping, unanticipated uncertainty of my future.

16. “Nothing ever goes away until it teaches us what we need to know.”—Pema Chödrön

17. Inevitably the repetition turns into a retreat into songs that I learned to play as a sophomore in high school, when my appetite for metal bands, indie-acoustic artists, and Spanish love ballads grew to an



insatiable amount, and as I pluck a few strings trying to remember my favorites, the interval between two notes (a descending minor third) transports me to the day my father confronted me, on our drive to my Confirmation class, about what sort of relationship a particular friend and I had, and despite my vehement insistence that we did not share any romantic feelings for one another, he forbade me from ever speaking to her again and I went on two weeks later in that same class to bring up a question that had taken up an overstayed residence in my mind: “If two friends love each other, they can kiss, right? I mean, if they want to show each other that they care? ... No, two girls.”

18. “...and this shell was a thing different from me but also the truest part of me, the explanation of what I was, my portrait translated into a rhythmic system of volumes and stripes and colors and hard matter...”—Italo Calvino, “The Spiral,” *Cosmicomics*

19. For the first time in years I decide to confide in my mother, seeking the solace only she could provide, and as I lie on my old bed staring at the ceiling and brimming with emotion, I finally let it all cascade from my mouth, spilling truths I have withheld from her and discomforts I have ignored, and as I watch her eyes well up with both tenderness and regret, no words come and I fear I have nearly drowned her.

20. All I ever wanted was for her to grow up and be happy with the choices she made.”— Katharine Haake, “The Sadness of Sleep,” *The Origin of Stars and Other Stories*

21. Between talk therapy and my own sleepless mind, I fall into multiple ditches as I mine for understanding, hearing the echoes of words I have buried over and over; and while I manage to climb out and continue moving forward, I inevitably must face memories of my father admitting his shame of having a queer daughter, my Catholic high school principal separating my girlfriend and me in our shared classes for the remainder of my senior year, that same girlfriend’s parents cursing my potential future children for “what I have done to her family” implying I corrupted (loved) their daughter, my next girlfriend’s mother calling me a dog for “following her daughter around” (attending her softball game), and several other instances that I have effectively buried yet still trail me nonetheless.

22. “Just like a sculptor has to cut up a slab of marble to create their work of art, life has to cut you up so you can become your greatest masterpiece.” — Bryan Ellis, *The Wildfire Initiative*

23. I find a poem I wrote earlier this year:

orientation: a landscape

her cigarette sends  
SOS signals

and i do  
nothing.

skin on linen, breath  
on skin

i curl  
my hand into  
a fist and look  
through the aperture  
of my fingers

inside the frame,  
a portrait  
of a phase  
she thought

already ended.

24. “It reveals the contortions, the interminable mess [identity] makes as it evolves and shapes itself.”  
—Emily Buder, “‘Moonlight’: Barry Jenkins on Why the Exquisite Film Nearly Killed Him”

25. One night I stumble onto photographs from several years ago and as I scroll backward in time I watch my hair length shrink then suddenly lengthen thrice over, my wardrobe vary depending on my age or who I have on my arm, and while outwardly I emerge over and over as two separate people, internally I begin to recognize the duality, the perpetual greyness within, never entirely one or the other; and so I trace the years forward and back, listening to music tracks that evoke a certain nostalgia of a person I once embodied; I pet my cat in my lap who has seen my many variations and as I listen to the steady rumble of her purr, I resolve to set my fear alight and use it to illuminate my path into a bricolage of self.

26. “Maybe you should stop fighting who you are.”— Kristen Guzman

27. By spring time, I find myself entirely enveloped in a sleeping bag in my tent, freezing in the middle of the desert under the spell of a medicinal mushroom and the light of the Galactic Center, having visions of myself as a newborn whose eyes have yet to open and suddenly, through the shivering and my own warm breath on my face, I consider my current condition and realize that the turbulence and tranquility contained in my very own cocoon have provided the very substance needed both to feed my body and prepare my mind for the next cycle of my adult life, so I close my eyes and listen to my breath, letting my visions flutter as they will.

28. “To be honest, I don’t even think you are confused. I think you know what you want, and who you are.”— Cristina Colombo

29.

Sam I. Goli is a writer and artist from Los Angeles where she studied creative writing and music. Her fiction has appeared in The Northridge Review and her first short film, which she wrote, produced, and co-directed is currently in post-production. Catch her on her bicycle every June as she rides 545 miles down the California coast raising funds to end AIDS and support the Los Angeles LGBT Center as part of AIDS/LifeCycle. She is currently working on a collaborative writing and photography project, which could involve you. Follow her on Instagram for updates: @a\_sleepless\_mind

# El ahogado

DANIEL CALABRESE

Deseo aclarar que no fue en un río  
sino en la misma tierra donde me ahogué.

El único río que llevo en la memoria  
es un estremecimiento  
donde las pequeñas cosas se hunden  
aunque nunca llegan a desaparecer.

A veces,  
se hunden antes de que pase el río.

Y su pedido de auxilio  
siempre  
llega tarde.



# The Drowning Victim

BY DANIEL CALABRESE

TRANSLATION: ANTHONY SEIDMAN

I wish to clarify that it didn't happen in a river;  
I drowned on land.

The only river that I keep in my memory:  
a shuddering in which  
small things sink  
although they never entirely disappear.

Sometimes they sink before  
the river reaches them.

And their clamoring for help  
always  
arrives late.

Daniel Calabrese (Dolores, Argentina, 1962) has resided in Santiago de Chile since 1991, where he immediately became involved with the poetry and literary life of his adopted nation. Among his many collections of poetry, one must mention such titles as *La faz errante*, which won the Alfonsina Prize in 1989, as well as his most recent collection *Ruta Dos*, winner of the Premio Revista de Libros prize in 2012, and from which the poem “Drowning Victim” is taken. He works as an editor, and he is also the founder and director of *Ærea*, an annual review of poetry and translation.

Anthony Seidman is the author of *On Carbon-Dating Huger and Where Thirsts Intersect* (The Bitter Oleander), as well as *A Sleepless Man Sits Up In Bed* (Eyewear). His poems, articles and translations have appeared widely in Mexico, and his work has been included in the anthologies *Corresponding Voices* (Point of Contact / Syracuse University), *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (Trinity University Press) and *Asymmetries: An Anthology of Peruvian Poetry* (Cardboard House Press). He has recently published work in *Bengal Lights*, *Drunken Boat*, *Nimrod*, *World Literature Today*, and *Modern Poetry In Translation*. Seidman lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children.



## SHOTS

## By Natalie Mislant Mann

Small translucent shards reflect golden hour sun;  
 As glass cracks spin like webbed veins.  
 Silken viscous strands don't excrete from spinnerets.  
 The detached predator lurks outside gossamer screens.  
 He refuses to shoot from close range.  
 Three shots for each child.  
 My brother. Sister. I.  
 One shot for each ethnicity of our mixed identity.  
 East Indian-Mexican-Filipino.  
 Miscegenation.  
 We're the America that has to die.

\*

A bullet lies inside my brother's crib. The year: 1979. He's barely a year old when someone decides to shoot their gun through our San Fernando Valley home. This. Before he is a doctor. Before his residency. Before he will be stopped by TSA agents each time he travels back and forth between his well-respected Midwestern med school and LAX. When the authorities search through his unchecked bags, they claim his selection is random. When he moves to Arizona to complete his residency, the police can legally stop him and ask for citizenship papers with SB 1070 in place. To protect himself, he will never remove the California license plates from his black Accord.

Scrawled on the curb outside our abode: *Fuck you Iranians! Go home!*

The red marker's hieroglyphs sink deep into my six-year-old soul. Two weeks before, our dog is murdered by a poisoned needle stuck in his throat. Thirty-seven years before Trump's Muslim ban, this is how I will learn about the world.

I am aware that angry words exist. Bad words that spontaneously slip off grown tongues. On occasion, mom lets out a word like "hell," when she can't find her car keys. "Damn," when she realizes she locked them inside the car.

But I have never seen one like this.

This word that begins with an *f* and ends with a harsh consonant sound.

The *u* points to us.

We are not like them.

We are told to go home.

I've lived in Northridge since birth.

\*\*

I remember exiting the backseat of dad's gold Dodge Satellite. Everything in our neighborhood hushed as the sun glinted off the sedan's side mirror. Dad carried my brother through the front door mom



left open, down the white hallway, and into the bedroom my brother shared with my two-year-old sister. After visiting adult family friends, I wanted to play in my room alone. I abandoned my clan, but mom's scream called me into my siblings' room.

"My God!" Mom's hands in partial Añjali Mudrā cupped over her mouth. In prayer gesture, she was grateful we were not home.

I looked at her, then glanced at my brother's neatly made bed. A small gold object lay at the end where he would rest his head. Above, an aperture of crackled glass expanded like an arachnid's trap. Only a dastard wouldn't confront us. If the perpetrator did, then the most-likely-a-he would realize we weren't Iranian. Rather, a mixture of identities he would find reason to hate.

My diminutive brown body shadowed dad into the front yard. His acute engineering eye noticed another bullet in front of the house. Another inside mom's Dodge Aspen. Her brick station wagon sat in the driveway. Its color more red than concrete and clay slabs thrown into Southern black freedom fighting homes. Both the color of blood: Death.

While their friends drove Subarus, Volvos, and Peugeots, my parents bought American cars to support our country's economic growth. They invested in creating an ideal suburban life when they purchased this vehicle the year of America's Bicentennial. Our nation's two-hundredth birthday. Three years after I, the eldest child, was born. The first year it was released.

The Aspen wagon came with a tagline: *The Family Car of the Future*.

It was this brown, "new" America that scared whoever shot the bullets through our home.

\*\*\*

Throughout my all-white private elementary school years, I never fit in. Unlike my classmates, I never went on family trips to Hawaii, Mammoth, or anyplace that delineated seasonal shifts. I was young compared to those in my grade. The principal thought I was smart enough to skip a year ahead. Thus, I missed the important lessons one learns in kindergarten. As a preschooler entering first grade, I didn't know how to tell time on an analog clock or tie my shoes. Nor had I attained the vocabulary and maturity to answer "a human being" when classmates would ask me what I was; usually after singing a round of the clapping game *I Went to a Chinese Restaurant*. Chinese. Japanese. Indian chief! Our frozen arms crossed in front of us. Whoever moved or blinked lost.

My parents' ethnic identities stumbled from my tongue. "My mom is Mexican and Filipino. My Dad is Indian."

The inquiring classmate would put a hand over his mouth to create a repetitive, ululating sound that reminded me of the Native American caricature in the 1948 Bugs Bunny cartoon *A Feather in His Hat*. I would turn on the TV early Saturday mornings, when no one else in my family was awake. I bamboozled my pacifist mother by lowering the volume and laying close to the screen. Warner Brothers: on her do not watch list.

The assault: psychological.

"No. Not that kind of Indian. Sikh. He's Indian from India." I felt proud and shriveled at the same time.

"Sick?" The inquiry goaded more than questioned.

"Seek. Like the men who wear turbans." Dad's cultural history reduced to an object that he no longer wore atop his head.

"Sheik? Like the guys who ride camels in the desert? The ones who wear towels on their heads?"

While this barrage of questioning always felt mocking, I slid into my secret world. I would imagine a willowy woman in a black fitted gown. Her hair slicked into a sophisticated bun. She poses against an ebony Steinway, holding a long cigarette holder in delicate hands.

“Sikh.” The Indian subcontinent more alien than chic.

“Oh.” The schoolmate would smile and stroll away.

The difference between a child and an adult is not that the adult should know better. The adult has legal rights to purchase a gun.

*Bang!Bang!Bang!*

With three shots, my innocence died.

\*\*\*\*

After being married for two years, my parents decided to leave their apartment near Downtown LA for a house with a lawn. A place that reminded them of home. They found a house with enough yard to remind dad of the farm he left behind in Malikpur. And mom of her father’s acreage in Fresno. While mom and dad planted persimmon and peach trees in the front garden, three families moved out.

White flight.

My parents’ inter-ethnic betrothal foreshadowed their new neighborhood’s demographic shift. Everyone assumed mom was East Indian when she stood next to dad. His lean 6’3” body stood regal next to her petite Mexican-Filipino frame.

Both: brown.

When *those* residents moved away, Thai dwellers moved next door to Jewish-Greek. And Brooklyn Italian next to Jordanian. A Mormon family catty-corner from our house. Our insular neighborhood reverberated distinct identities when denizens gathered on the sidewalk. A community of respect, until the midst of the Iran hostage crisis. A woman with adolescent boys settled into the house across from ours.

The male teenagers embodied pre-*Baywatch* California cool. They would race up and down the street on skateboards and 10-speed bikes. The sun-setting scenes on their OP T-shirts blurred as they turned around corners. Their feathered blonde skater hair whipped with the Santa Ana wind. Everything status quo. Until they brought out the motorbikes.

On a slow weekend day, my parents were pruning bushes in the front yard as I roller skated with friends on the sidewalk. All of our attention drawn to mechanized rev. As an educator who worked with second grade students, safety was mom’s priority.

She approached the boys, “You need to slow down. There are young children playing outside. Someone is going to get hurt.”

Her authoritative command sent the oldest inside. And the boys with the halo-colored hair backed off their motorized bikes. A few minutes later, they continued racing. They must have told their mother, because she met mom outside. “Mind your own business!”

The woman stormed back in.

\*\*\*\*\*

When the triad of bullets penetrated our home, I didn’t understand its fullness.

I had heard of the Iran hostage crisis. Every evening my parents watched Frank Reynolds on *ABC World News*. Although I didn't understand the political context of the situation, I felt sadness for the U.S. Embassy victims unable to go home. The images of gun-waving men protesting the United State presence in Iran pressed against my mind. As an observer, as a child, I saw no difference between the skin color of the Iranian Revolution supporters and mine. Chanting words I couldn't understand, they stood along dusty walls, shuffling blindfolded Americans to and fro. As an adult, I will stream through YouTube clips. I will learn they were saying "Yankee go home!" when the U.S. Embassy's press attaché, Harry Rosen, was brought to the front of the angry crowd.

I was untouched, until our family was called "Iranian" and told to "go home."

Before then, the television screen's barrier had shielded my personal reality from alteration. During the day, I would forget what was happening in other parts of the world. I continued making Barbies' mud baths in the front yard. With intent, mom consciously chose bosomy dolls with skin the color of mine: Barbie Dolls of the World®. One dark-haired beauty wearing a sari. The other, Inuit clothes. The tone of their plastic blended with earth. As they reclined in freshly dug pools, I daydreamed with my back against the grass. Watching tall cypress trees brush against cotton ball clouds drifting through California azure sky. Breathing in the same air molecules as Jimmy Carter and the Muslim Students of the Imam Khomeini Line.

When the white police officers came to investigate the damage done to our property, they noticed the opened garage door across the street. Mom and I followed the cops outside.

The tall one with dusty brown hair explained, "See how their kitchen aligns to your house? We're going over to talk to them."

Upon return, the same officer didn't hold anything back. "They're white trash. We're coming back with a warrant."

To that family of white trash, we were a basket of deplorables.

To some, we are still not American because the color of our skin.

\*\*\*\*\*

Decades later, not much in Northridge has changed. During Operation Freedom, dad retired. He was younger, and had enough stride to walk thirteen miles a day. He carried a metal pipe wrapped in blue tennis tape to ward off vicious dogs. Dad never used it on an animal, but struck it a couple of times on cement ground or a lamppost. The aggressive canines ran away.

Dad never shaken.

Except one day.

He came home after traversing the grounds of the local university. The police stopped him. Weapons drawn. Pointing at him. They refused to believe his stick was used for self-defense, and made him unravel his carefully sheathed device.

"I don't have a pipe bomb. See?" Dad held back furious despondence.

This happened a few times more. Each time, he knew he was profiled.

His strong, proud body reduced to a generalization: Terrorist.

Each time I hear of Sikh men individually or collectively attacked in Fremont, New York, Kent or Oak Creek – among a growing list of cities – my mind zooms to Northridge. To my house. I feel scared each time my dad goes for a walk. Especially now, since he decided to start wearing a turban. His head

starting to bald. I believe this hair loss remedy was more vanity than devotion.

In Fremont, the victim was brutally beat. His turban pulled off and hair chopped. In Sikhism, hair signifies strength. Fortitude in the physical and spiritual world. Even in Western culture, Delilah finds this is the source of Samson's strength.

I often think of how much strength it takes to remain kind and resilient in this world.

As long as I remain this...I am home.

Outside, the cypress trees still stand.

Natalie Mislant Mann is educator who holds a Master of Arts in Humanities from San Francisco State University. While reviewing and critiquing performing arts as a staff writer for pLAYwriting in the city (a former Los Angeles online arts magazine), she started crafting memoir based upon her experiences growing up in a multi-ethnic family in the San Fernando Valley. Her piece “Generations” appears in *The Rattling Wall* and PEN Center USA’s anthology *Only Light Can Do That: 100 Post-Election, Poems, Stories, & Essays*. This summer, she will be attending VONA’s residency for prose.

# En algún lugar por Tequila o no se donde

ROSE QUEZADA

En un pueblo de polvo afuera de una ciudad antigua  
viajábamos por auto pequeño por detrás de camiones y camionetas en carreteras  
cantando canciones en grupo. Yo iba explorando el paisaje desde el asiento de atrás,  
por detrás de unos audífonos de Walkman.

Éramos como cuatro desconocidos en un carrito carcacha recorriendo calles de tierra  
elevando la altitud entre el cielo y el cerro que  
escalábamos como caracol, debajo de árboles de pabellón  
bajando burbujas y dibujando un sol suavecito, tierno, y amarillo.  
Estabamos deshaciendo la metrópolis urbana poco a poco  
para poner en su lugar lo rural, lo mexicano, lo más allá del programa turístico.

Cambiabamos el control remoto y la comodidad del hotel, por culebras de cascabel  
y Cocas en botella. Llegábamos a una cuevita escondida en el interior del cerro, nos quitábamos los  
zapatos y mojábamos los pies en una agua burbujeante, rica y caliente antes  
de someternos al bano completo en la fuente termal que brotaba de la tierra.

Todos sentados con el agua hasta el ombligo, los adultos pisteando con Estrellitas, y yo que no me  
quería mojar el cabello...

Estoy ahora cazando recuerdos de esa infancia, repasando por el corazón  
para volver a estar en ese lugar con todo, por fin dando ese tímido chapuzón.



# Somewhere through Tequila, or I don't know where

BY ROSE QUEZADA

*In a dusty town outside of an ancient city  
we travelled by small automobile behind busses and pick-up trucks on the highways  
singing songs in group. I was exploring the scenery from the backseat  
from behind some headphones of a Walkman CD Player*

*We were like four strangers in a jalopy traversing dirt roads  
elevating the altitude between the sky and hill that  
we climbed around like a snail, beneath the canopy trees  
bringing down bubbles and drawing a soft, tender, yellow sun.  
We were deconstructing the urban metropolis bit by bit  
to put in its place the rural, that which is Mexican, that which is beyond the tourist programs.*

*We traded the remote controls and comfort of the hotel for rattlesnakes  
and bottled Cokes. We would get to a tiny cave hidden in the interior of the hill,  
take off our shoes and dip our feet in a bubbly water; yummy and warm before  
bathing completely in the thermal hot springs that sprung up from the earth.*

*Everyone sat with water up to their navels, the grown-ups drinking Estrellitas, and I did not want to get my hair wet...  
I'm trapping memories from that childhood and, passing again through the heart  
to be once again in that same place, with everything, finally making that shy splash.*

Rose Quezada lives and loves in Los Angeles. She loves exploring poetry and prose via psychology, spirituality and linguistics. She is Managing Editor of DUM DUM Zine.

BY ALBERTO RAMIREZ

FOR GABY

Colocho Pérez dialed the rotary phone with the tip of his pinkie, because the girth of his other fingers—thick as pork sausages—precluded him from fitting any other digit into the holes. Lighting his last cigarette with his second to last cigarette, he let it dangle on his lip like a Pampas gaucho. Out the window of his rented room at *El Hotel Gayon* he watched people going out for the evening, strolling leisurely along *Avenida Libertad*.

The phone rang—six, seven peals.

“Yes?”

“Done it,” said Pérez.

“Done *what*, exactly?”

“Done *it*,” he said, vexed.

“He is *not* dead.”

“Señor Figueroa—dark hair, middle-aged, glasses, mustache, little beard, 444 East *Avenida Libertad*, apartment 6B?”

“Yes,” said the other. “But he is still alive.”

Pérez drew in on the cigarette and gazed at the tops of the palm trees lining the avenue, the setting sun lighting up the crowns like candles.

“Not possible,” said Pérez. “I killed him.”

“You’re not very good at this, are you?”

“Not good at what?”

“At lying. Señor Figueroa is alive. Our business is done.”

The dial tone hummed and Pérez promptly hung up the receiver, then mashed the butt of his cigarette on the windowsill. It looked cold outside—the wind nudging the last of the autumn leaves from the tops of the sycamores. He put on his coat, turned up the collar and donned a corduroy flat cap. By the door, atop a small, entry way table, sat a black, cracked leather doctor’s valise. He clutched the bag to his bosom and walked out of the hotel room. He would not be coming back.



Señor De La Rosa had a short list of candidates for this particular job, but a colleague at the Office of Internal Government Affairs had recommended a little known but respected professional—a man with a funny name, even for an Argentine. Colucho Pérez. A phone interview was arranged.

“Pérez?” said De La Rosa.

“Yes,” said the candidate.

“Tell me, why are you the man for this job?”

“Beauty queen gotta be pretty, right?”

“Yes.”

“College kid gotta be smart, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And a killer gotta be ruthless, yes?”

“I suppose.”

“Well, I’m definitely not pretty, and I ain’t that smart, but I’m ruthless.”

“Fair enough. What did you do before you got into this line of work?”

“I worked for a time as a persuader for a well-known, South American dictatorship.”

“A *persuader*?”

“Yes, I persuaded dissidents to stop dissenting. I was pretty good at it, too.”

“Tell me more.”

“I fought in the Late War, on the side that won, and after that I got special government training.”

“Yes, go on.”

“Well, let’s just say that I had something in common with a carpenter. I was really good with a hammer and nails.”

“Do you believe in Capitalism?”

“Is this a trick question?”

“No, I just want to know about your value system.”

“I value money.”

“You’ll be paid the standard rate, plus another six on top of that, if the job is done to our satisfaction.”

Throughout the interview Pérez had been staring wistfully at a gold framed, black and white photograph of a pretty, 12-year old girl—his daughter Magdalena. Tuition was past due at the private prep school she was attending in *Córdoba*, and a recent trip to the dentist confirmed that she, in fact, needed braces for her teeth.

“Okay,” said Pérez. “Call me in the morning with the details.”



444 East Avenida Libertad was a historical building, which meant that it had been constructed long before the Late War and, despite all of its charming architectural features, was in a state of disrepair. The lobby was dark and musty, and on the door of the birdcage elevator was posted a large placard that read, *Elevator Broken – Use Stairs*.

Pérez read the placard, grunted his displeasure and started to walk up the stairs to the sixth floor. He was a heavy set man, thick as a Baobab tree, who’d fallen out of shape not long after he’d completed his military service. As a young soldier he’d been disciplined about his physical conditioning. He’d trained as a boxer—a heavyweight even back then—had put in countless miles of road work out in the Argentinean countryside, skipped rope and lifted barbells. But the government job he’d taken after the Late War required that he spend long, purgatorial days and nights in interrogation rooms. He became a slave to his work, ate lots of bad food, and thus the inevitable weight gain. His daughter Magdalena had tried, on numerous occasions, to help him lose the weight, but ‘a diet’, he liked to say, ‘was as easy to break as a political prisoner deprived of sleep’. The weight stayed on, becoming his permanent, unwanted companion over the years. These days the only physical activity he got was lugging around his leather doctor’s valise.

Pérez was toting the valise as he went huffing up the stairs. It was much heavier than he remembered, and so was he, for that matter. He had no choice but to stop to catch his breath and dab oily sweat from his brow with a soiled handkerchief. After the first flight of stairs, he stopped on the mezzanine and leaned against the banister to rest awhile.

Glancing down at his cheap, American wrist watch, he noted the time—8:33am. The second hand had stopped, and he flicked the glass and started it ticking again. But really, what was the rush? After all, his appointment with Señor Figueroa was unscheduled. Pérez could not be late, regardless of the time. He’d meet up with this man, and the life turning inside of him, at just the right moment, and casually nip it for him. It was really quite that simple.

Pérez never could understand why people put so much stock in this thing, this life, why there

was such an emphasis on prolonging it, well into old age. Frailty and sickness were waiting there, and death, too. It must be human instinct, he reasoned. This desire to go on living. Or perhaps this yearning to survive was the worst sort of insanity imaginable.

During the Late War he saw many young men slaughtered on the battlefield—some were strangers, others good friends. Yes, it was horrible the way they all had died, but somehow people just kind of went on living. Life really didn't mean anything at all, nor did death. Still, there was a job to do. There were bills to pay. Picking up the valise, he started up the stairs again.

Down below, in the lobby, he could hear children playing, kicking a soccer ball against the bird-cage elevator and shouting. But the landlady soon put an end to their game, chasing them out into the street with a broom and threats of telling their mothers.

Between the 2nd and the 3rd floor, he passed an old woman carrying two full grocery sacks bursting at the seams. She looked like she'd seen the worst of it—a loveless marriage to a brutish man who saw himself as lord of the manor, and she the lowly serf, knowing only labor and dearth all of her life. And now here were these stairs, each successive step a little agony. He could see the struggle on her face, could hear her puffing little elegiac moans, “*Ay, ayudame Diosito!*”

Seeing her now, at the conclusion of her long, hard life, irritated Pérez to no end. He'd never wished death upon anyone in his life, not even those he'd been contracted to kill. But this old woman was infuriating him. He wanted to kick her down the stairs.

*Old people can be so cunning, he thought. She's putting on quite a show, asking God to help her. And the way she's dressed, as if she's going to her own funeral. Pathetic. Trying to draw on the sympathy of neighbors.*

As he passed her, he turned and, without acknowledging her or her suffering, quietly took the grocery bags and carried them for her.

“*Ay, gracias Señor,*” she said. “*Tercer piso por favor.*”

She pointed to apartment 3C and Pérez quietly set the bags down outside of her door.

“*Dios se lo pague,*” she said.

He wasn't a religious man, but doubted that God would repay his apparent kindness with salvation. He'd only done it to shut her up. And besides, the other act that Pérez was about to commit was not only a crime punishable by death, it was likely a mortal sin.

“*Para que se calle la boca,*” he said, turning to ascend.



A chubby, British mouser sat on the doormat outside 6B, lapping up a saucer of cold milk. It did not startle as Pérez approached, just sort of glanced up at him in that way that cats have of looking at human beings that seems to say, “*Who the hell are you?*” In its own good time, when it had drunk its fill



and was quite satisfied, the cat preened—licked milk droplets from its whiskers— and strolled to the end of the hall.

Distracted as he was by the cat, Pérez hadn't noticed that the door to 6B had been left slightly ajar, just wide enough for the tenant to let out his cat. The door chain was not secured either, so he walked right in.

The apartment was silent and it reminded Pérez of the philosopher's question about a tree falling in the forest when there's nobody around to hear it. It seemed nobody was home. The flat had recently been abandoned—a cup of steaming café con leche, the *Córdoba* morning paper opened to the editorial page, and a half-eaten *medialuna* on a dish atop the stove gave him this distinct impression. The tenant had likely made a quick getaway down the fire escape, but Pérez was a true believer in due diligence.

Popping open the valise, he drew a Ruger, fitted with a silencer, and kissed the barrel to bless the bullets.

“Señor Figueroa?” he said. “The door was open. I am a messenger.”

The wind blew in through an open window and flipped the morning paper to the front page—news of a landslide presidential election win for the incumbent, Dictator Jorge R. Videla. Pérez glanced the headlines askance and thought up one of his own.

*Fools Vote Foolishly, Elect a Buffoon, Later Feel Foolish*

Turning again to the business at hand, he called out:

“Señor Figueroa? I've got an important message for you.”

He waited, pistol in hand, and took a look around. There were books everywhere, so many, in fact, that it reminded him of a library he used to visit as a boy. Pérez, by his own admission, was not a well-read man. He'd never read *Don Quixote* or *Macbeth*, but loved the look of a book—its neat, rectangular shape, which made it so easy to stack; its soft, matte cover, the vibrant colors of the jacket, and its fine, gilt edges; the weight of a book, too, relatively light, but heavy in its own right. And the smell of a book—the old ones smelled sweet, and the new ones like fresh ink and bookbinding chemicals.

Drifting waywardly into the living room, to the mahogany bookshelves, he ran his fingertip along the spines of the books, like a kid running his finger along a chain-linked fence. One title, in particular, caught Pérez's eye. He pronounced the name with a fair deal of difficulty:

*“Kakistocracy: New Perspectives on Modern Government by Víctor Figueroa.”*

Without thinking, he put down the pistol, picked up the book and thumbed through it. It had taken the author many years to write—each idea a brick. Brick upon brick, walls, buttresses and roof went up, until at last, the cathedral was built. To be sure, it had many good and important things in it, yet what moved Pérez, quite unexpectedly, was the dedication on the acknowledgments' page. He held the book up to the morning light and read it.

“For my daughter, Pietra. Your love is a rock.”

He was thinking of his own daughter, Magdalena, presently at the private prep school she attended in the heart of the city, likely in the act of pledging undying allegiance to *La Bandera de Argentina*, before going off to study hall to read about dead Argentine poets or learn everything there was to know about her beloved country, through government sanctioned, revisionist history books. My, how Pérez loved her! This man, this V. Figueroa, loved his own daughter, too. The book said as much. Who then was he to orphan the poor girl?

As if weighing in on Pérez’s thoughts, a voice from the across the room asked:

“What do you think of the book?”

Señor Figueroa was standing beneath the archway of the study—a middle-aged, South American Trotsky, with the black, Russian pompadour, the broad forehead, the horn-rimmed glasses, a Chevron mustache, a Van Dyke beard, perpetual, all-knowing expression and all.

“Is this you?” asked Pérez, pointing to the book, somewhat impressed.

“Afraid so,” said Figueroa. “I haven’t published anything new in ages. Christ, that book is so old its damn well hieroglyphics. But I suppose it’s why you’re here. *The Critics* hated it. So much so that they’ve sent you to make sure I never write another one like it.”

“To tell you the truth,” said Pérez, “I don’t know why they’ve sent me. I only know why I’m here.”

“Yes, of course. You’re the messenger, isn’t that so?”

“I am.”

“And you have an important message for me, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Just you, then? No death squad?”

“Just me. My employer wanted discretion for this particular job.”

“Yes, I see. *Because I could not stop for Death – He kindly stopped for me . . .*”

Pérez shrugged as if to say, *‘I que?’* Figueroa may as well have been quoting an advertisement for toilet paper for all he cared. But it started him wondering about his chosen profession. It really was an odd job. The want ad for it would read, *‘Quick cash, flexible hours, experience preferred, but not required, skewed sense of right and wrong a plus, no questions asked, apply now.’* He’d gotten the job, was pretty good at it, too, but lately wasn’t sure if he wanted to do it anymore. He’d been thinking seriously about giving it up for good.

Pérez set the book down, and picked up the pistol. He wanted to say something, stifled the impulse, but eventually blurted it—a question he wasn’t supposed to ask.

“Why do they want you dead?”

“Don’t know,” said Figueroa. “I suppose it’s because I exist. More than likely, it’s because they’re violently opposed to the things that I say and write.”

“Is it really so offensive?”

“Well, what was it that Videla said? *A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas.*’ The truth is always offensive to corrupt and wicked men. Meanwhile, the *Mothers of La Plaza de Mayo* want to know what’s become of their missing children. Tell me, what would you do if your son or daughter *disappeared*?”

“Videla mustn’t have read the best part of your book,” said Pérez.

“What part, exactly?”

“The dedication to your daughter, Pietra.”

“No, I wouldn’t expect him to care about a thing like that.”

“What a shame. It made me wish I owned a copy. I am a father, too, you know.”

Moved by the gesture, Figueroa went to shake his hand, but quickly remembered that this man had been sent to kill him.

“So,” said Figueroa. “What now?”

The question caught Pérez by surprise. He’d never been asked this before, at least not in this context, by someone he was about to kill. His answer was equally surprising.

“Now,” said Pérez, “I go away and you never see me again.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I was never here.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because in a ruthless world, mercy is a revolutionary act.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Señor Figueroa, you are dead and alive.”

“Yes, I see,” said Figueroa. “I’m dead and alive. Like Schrodinger’s Cat.”

“Who?”

“Schrodinger’s Cat.”

“Oh, I saw that cat out in the hall. I thought it was your cat.”

“She is my cat. Her name is *Cheché*.”

“So, who’s this Schrodinger?”

“Never mind. I am dead and I am alive. I understand.”



Señor De La Rosa didn’t hear the telephone ring. He was lying in a hot bath, smoking a Cuban cigar and listening to an Anibal Lovera record. The song playing on the Magnavox Stereo Console, *Mi Pobre Vida*, echoed loudly throughout his posh apartment located in one of the more affluent neighborhoods of the city. It was Saturday night and he had planned a celebratory evening out with friends. He had recently been named the Commissioner of Internal Government Affairs at the *Córdoba* office. The title, he thought, had a divine ring to it. And with it came a substantial increase in salary and a certain level of prestige—a grand achievement for a boy who’d been born in the slums of the city.

After his bath, De La Rosa strolled around his spacious apartment barefooted—he liked the feel of cold Travertine tile on the soles of his feet—in his silk bathrobe, puffing on his Montecristo. The floor-to-ceiling windows had all been left open by the maid and the sheer, white curtains billowed on this blustery night. Down in the street *Avenida Libertad* was coming alive—the city lights flickered, cars honked in stop-and-go traffic, people were going out on the town tonight, to their favorite neighborhood cafes, bistros and to the cinema. De La Rosa laid on his new chaise lounge to smoke the rest of his cigar. Taking unduly pride in his upscale apartment, he considered how this whole thing, this life, this apex in his career, was just like a dream. One day he was a poor, starving kid begging for food on the streets of *Córdoba*, and the next a wealthy, high-ranking government official with the power to decide a man’s fate, and the authority to send out the assassins. The money was grand, to be sure. Of course it meant that he had to dole out more of it to his ex-wife, who was presently living leisurely in *Trelew*. But it also meant that perhaps he could afford to send his only daughter, Maria Luz, to university in the States—a colleague at the office claimed to know the dean of admissions at Dartmouth College. But the power, this took some getting used to.

The first man he ever ordered killed haunted him for days—a leftist journalist who could not

be censored otherwise. But after a while there was nothing to it. No guilt haranguing the conscience or tormenting the soul. It was quite simple—an anonymous telephone call was put in, a name was given, along with an address. Afterward De La Rosa got a call to confirm that the job had been done. He was expecting just such a call tonight, and it came in on a breeze, through an open window. The telephone rang six times before he answered.

“Yes?” he said. “Done what, exactly? You’re mistaken. He’s not dead. Yes, that’s the right address, but he’s still alive.”

De La Rosa brushed ash absentmindedly from his bathrobe and put out his cigar in the marble ashtray beside the chaise lounge.

“You’re not very good at this, are you?” he said. “At lying. Señor Figueroa is alive. Our business is done. Do not contact me again.”

This Pérez fellow was a bad hire and a replacement had to be contracted to do the job before the higher ups in Buenos Aires got wind of this.



The doorbell rang, startled De La Rosa. Visitors had not been announced by the doorman.

*Santiago the doorman fell asleep at his post again, he thought. I’m going to have a serious talk with the building superintendent in the morning*

“Yes?” said De La Rosa, through the door. “Who is it?”

“Apologies, sir,” said a faltering voice on the other side. “I’m looking for Señor De La Rosa.”

“Yes, what do you want?”

“I have a message for you, sir.”

“Did they send you from Buenos Aires?”

“Sir?”

“Were you sent by someone at *Palacio de la Legislatura* in Buenos Aires?”

“Yes sir. He said he was from Buenos Aires, said it was urgent.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Telegram sir.”

“Slip it under the door.”

“I’d rather not, sir.”

“Fine,” said De La Rosa.

A young courier was waiting patiently for him in the hall, dressed sharply in his black, buttoned-up, starched uniform, flashing a gregarious, dimple faced smile.

“For you, sir,” he said.

He handed De La Rosa a sealed envelope and lingered a moment in anticipation of a gratuity. De La Rosa obliged, tipped him a few pesos.

“Thank you, sir,” said the messenger. “*Buenas noches.*”

When the messenger had gone, De La Rosa reclined on the chaise lounge and, with a gold plated letter-opener, cut open the envelope, drew out the telegram and read it by chandelier light.

DEAR SEÑOR DE LA ROSA-(STOP)-IF YOU ARE READING THIS YOU ARE ALIVE-(STOP)-  
IF YOU ARE NOT DEAD IT IS BECAUSE I WAS NOT THE MESSENGER AT YOUR DOOR-  
(STOP)-I HAVE FREED MYSELF FROM THE MYTH THAT A MAN CANNOT CHANGE HIS WAYS-  
(STOP)-I HAVE CHANGED MY HEART-(STOP)-I AM STARTING OVER AGAIN-(STOP)-I  
WANT TO BE A GOOD MAN(STOP)-I DID NOT KILL SEÑOR FIGUEROA-(STOP)-HE IS DEAD  
AND HE IS ALIVE(STOP)-AS ARE YOU-(STOP)-AS IS SCHRODINGER’S CAT-(STOP)-IT  
IS NOT TOO LATE FOR YOU TO CHANGE YOUR WAYS TOO-(STOP)-YOURS TRULY, COLOCHO  
PÉREZ

It wasn’t in De La Rosa’s nature to trust that Pérez actually meant what he’d written in the telegram. Men like him, ruthless men, did not change their ways. He considered the distinct possibility that Pérez was waiting for him in the foyer of the building or in the back seat of his Renault Torino, with a cocked pistol and murder in his heart. But after a while, he simply let the notion slip away, along with the telegram. It fell from his hand and a brisk wind plucked it up, swept it out through an open window. It sailed down to the sidewalk and was trampled underfoot by the coming-and-going of a thousand pedestrians.

Colocho Pérez was somewhere down there, too, strolling briskly along *Avenida Libertad*. He was free now, and in a great hurry to get home. Magdalena would be getting home soon, in time for their evening ritual—café con leche, *medialunas* and an intimate father-daughter chat—a funny story about her tennis coach, a new English phrase she’d picked up from a school mate who’d visited New York City, innocent gossip about a cute new boy at school and how all the girls adored him. All of the important things in life. He didn’t want to keep her waiting.



Alberto Ramirez was born in East Los Angeles and earned a degree from the University of Los Angeles, California in English. He has contributed work to The Westwind Journal of the Arts and his novel, *Everything That Could Not Happen Will Happen Now* (Floricanto Press 2016), was selected by Las Comadres & Friends National Latino Book Club for its 2017 Summer Reading List. For more information please visit author website: [www.americanlitbooks.com](http://www.americanlitbooks.com).

# Op. 1, No. 1 Untitled City Poem

BY EMILIO SOTELO

Entitled\_  
to my\_language is what \_she said to me  
disregarding heritage\_and\_skin  
she shook my\_hand with no hard\_feelings

or \_Mickey Rooney  
as the wise Chinese\_guy with the fuck\_teeth  
but was he Japanese\_ or \_Korean or Tom \_Hanks  
the same way my\_parents call every Asian\_Chino  
*or the way in \_K-Town I don't see \_smiles until I show \_Coach or credit\_card*



*and every time \_I pull a ghost \_I mean to be haunted by white\_  
or ask the \_woman who shook my \_skin, cradled it \_neatly into a tricorne \_fold.  
\_she stitched me into the cloth\_god by which we all abide, the\_symbol for a \_cold home\_ where even \_fires refuse to \_ignite.*

*A \_woman was raped\_ at the laundromat by my\_house and nothing has changed the\_tilt.  
No\_one has pushed the \_heads locked outside their \_guillotine windows back in. Doves\_disguised as pigeons\_ gather all  
their eyelashes as \_kindling for the burning\_.*

*there are potholes\_ and \_women in bright neon sign\_language  
I know where to score \_coke and \_LSD and how to fly\_ a kite off a skyscraper when no\_one's looking  
Jazz\_clubs let out at two in the \_morning and \_cigarettes are old\_fashioned like carbon\_ emissions in a car but we still  
\_smoke and we still \_drive  
there is a homeless\_man with open wounds\_ on his legs and a sponge\_ in his hand and a dead\_end he's willing to share*

# Op. 1, No. 3 Dialogues

BY EMILIO SOTELO

I don't get it  
said  
—  guillotines whips and workers comp  
I wonder the depth of patriotic prison bones

the eat of arching oldiers eet  
the cocking rifle  
the knocking door  
mud-ridden

I am dead inside  
—how do you do  
A skeleton gestures the hands of a hermit, a welcome  
To feast on a raft, on a river  
—a coin for my services  
The river man marches  
in place, pleads  
for payment

I am sun drunk and tanned bone  
a block of wishbone Rothko  
—copper coin mine eyes  
A color speaking rope of regret  
—breathe, my breath  
I am touch of beginning  
Sigh. Sway.

absence  
always  
answers

Brother,, Benedict,  
\_\_\_bullet,,buried  
brea-k,,bossom  
burned,,buried  
burned,

Conspicuous corners.  
corrosive. catastrophe  
contagion  
contagion  
contagion  
clasp creation cyclical cynic  
country  
courted confiscated

α

I pull a book out from the  
hallway shelf and stir.  
stuck leaning. on the wall.  
turning pages. crossing rays and  
picket lines.  
Hurricanes blow past but nothing disturbs the reader more than the author.

I found it in the undernail  
of the homeless man,  
among the others, all dead,  
and burning  
you could smell them like a summer blossom  
but it was winter, and everyone was cold

arpet ombing mall omes kin lash o lash hild eedle o uclear iamond rash ust o ust

multitudes, multitudes

orgive e ather or \_ ave inned. t as een oo  
ong ince y ast onfession. en ail ary's nd ll s  
ell. hrough rayer ll s orgiven. very in ray  
lessed

to come	a part	that	for self	and now	of citizenry
into contact	of me	the father has	for sin	I wonder	the womb
at the end of	deals	birthed	for god	am I	of cactus
oneself	with	the son	forever	the afterbirth	the spine

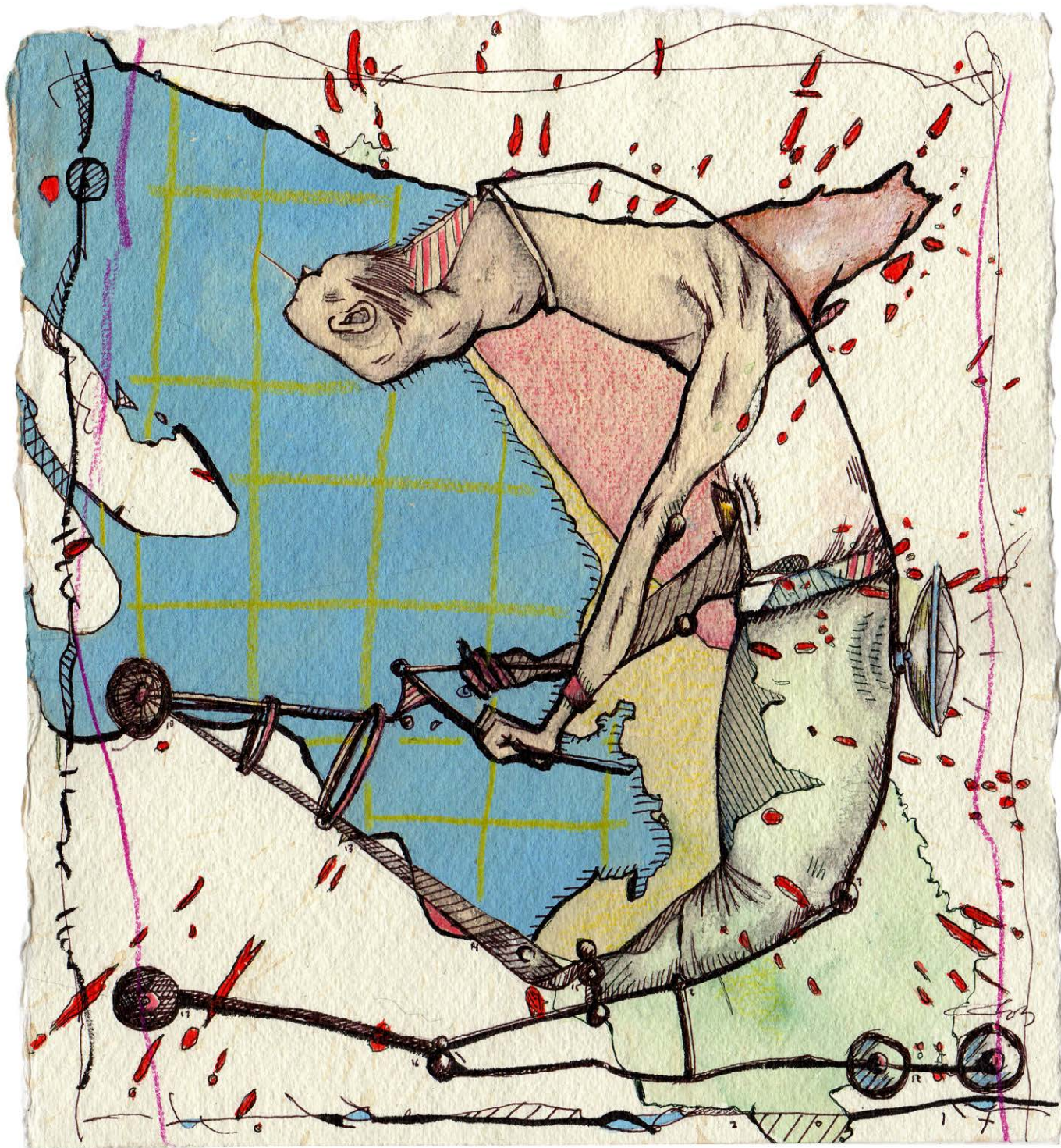
I no longer wish to be human please give me strip me flesh like leather make me hide me mean  
smash the atoms particle by particle leave the viewport descend to planetscape stretch to thinness  
become blackholeslowlycrowinwardtowardstheaxis

I am like you become god. I am like you beyond you find me. I am you to you. I am you to me.  
I am like you become god. I am like you beyond you find me. I am you to you. I am you to me.  
inside you. I am you become lost. I am you like me become found. I am you to love. I am you  
inside you. I am you become lost. I am you like me become found. I am you to love. I am you  
become gone. I am you. I am air. I am atom space particle lick of breath against a sun of grass. I  
become gone. I am you. I am air. I am atom space particle lick of breath against a sun of grass. I  
am always but you. Like you I am but human come home.

Ω

Emilio Sotelo lives in Los Angeles and is working on his M.A. in Creative Writing at California State University, Northridge.







# A USER'S GUIDE TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD

BY JACKSON BLISS

## The Island

We may be in Chicago but we still live on an island. That's what my abuela says. The problem is that white people don't walk down Western Avenue unless they're lost. You can always tell. They move too fast to notice the cars busting out the bass as salutation and love poem. Here, at the corner, is Manuel's bodega. He's a decent dude, even if he is Mexican. Watches a lot of lucha libre too. But his pork grinds are three for a buck, and sometimes, when he's feeling good, he'll give you a Sunny D for free. Just don't expect it. He hates that shit.

## Jet's Pimp Ride

Over there on Hoyne Street, you see that guy in the souped up Benz, the one trying to turn right? That's Jet. He only got nine fingers (more on that later). They say Jet delivers pizzas to rich kidz in Evanston. But we ain't ever made it up there, so we'll never know if it's true or not. Anyway, it's not a real Benz, case you're wondering. The car's name is SoFine. SoFine has 288 Special Chrome 5 lugs, Nankang NS 1 tires and Spinner hubs, not to mention a six-speaker stereo system with subwoofers that will stop your fucking heart like a machete in your chest.

## Luisa and Her Magical Fingers

Up above that Pentecostal church, you see that big girl leaning out the window, the one with the boulder for a stomach? That's Luisa. If you look closely sometimes you can see she prays a lot. Crazy thing is, Luisa is the HQOC—the handjob queen of Chicago. For real. She's given the five-finger canoli to every boy on Mozart Street, and I ain't even playing. The rumor is that Luisa's double-jointed. Some of them come back for seconds too. But if I was you, I wouldn't use the same match twice. You feel me? That's just dumb. Anyway, all I know is that her tío's got a fist like a bulldozer claw, and he knows how to break walls in a flash. If he finds you on his couch, you gonna lose a finger, that's all I'm gonna say. Yo, check out Jet's right hand if you don't believe me. There's a reason why he only got four stubbies.

## Chico Hernandez's Robin Hood Shit

Over here on Potomac and Damen we got Chico Hernandez. He and his friends are always riding their little bikes to the Cluster Fuck. I ain't gonna tell you what the word on the street is, but let's just say that Chico and his little scrappies like to *borrow* shit from the Circus of Cool. And I'm not just talking about them one-trick hipsters with their scruffy cheekbones, moppy haircuts and heroin complexion either.

## Sergeant's Café

Now, a block past this park littered with gin bottles and cigarette butts, right next door to the Second Church of Christ, is Sergeant's café. Sergeant's Mexican, but he's a cool dude anyhow. His wife's from the island, in case you're wondering. She serves the best Asopao de Camarones west of San Juan. That shrimp gumbo is so good it gives you nightmares, man.

### Obrigado's Magic Spell

That shorty over there with legs longer than Route 66 is Obrigado. Brazilian. Stay the fuck away from her at all costs. The last three dudes to hit it got beat up when they tried untying the double knot. She's bad news, mano: blazing hot and full of Santería, if you know what I mean. Besides, rumor has that she's the biggest chota in the whole island. Unless you a saint, or you got an entourage ten deep, keep your distance. That kinda beauty gets blurry real fast when you get too close. It holds your mind like hostage.

### El Museo

Okay, check it out, this is what I wanna show you: Wicker Park, what we call El Museo. In case you never been, museums got lots of pretty pictures inside but you ain't allowed to touch *nothing*. It's the same way out here in the streets, mano. You can't even talk above a whisper. The instant these girls hear your Spanish, they shut down. Your first language will become your second demotion. After leaving the island, I mean. But you've got to remember, museums are for the people. They're not for hotel divas, hard-up critics or hung-over college students. Naw, museums are for el pueblo. We got as much of a right to beauty as they do. In fact, we got more.

### The Drowning of Beauty

Now, a lot of these chicas are gonna ignore you like a yellow light. Others will transfer their voids onto their pets, aerobics and knitting, shit like that. Yo, a few girls might even whisper dirty things to you by accident, mouthing pieces of lipstick porn as they wait for streetlights to change. But you got to keep it all straight inside your head man, otherwise, you gonna get lost. There are girls here—white, mexicana, brown, Haitian, boricua—that will turn your mind to puddy and transform your legs to limestone. Their smiles will explode in tiny detonations of splendor that will atomize you like shrapnel. With motherfucking cubic Zirconia glitter in their eyes, they'll stab your corazón with eyelashes for pencil blades and leave you to die inside your dreams, all torn up inside. And if you're standing close, you'll hear the unjustified softness in their voices, almost apologizing for their world that's off limits to you as a Puerto Rican, and that's when you'll lose everything because you start to care what they think about you. You've got to stand tall, keep your shit together and remember where you came from. You've got to remember that you can swim as long as you want but you can't swallow the water. That's how you get fucked-up and poisoned on freakish love. That's how you disappear.

Jackson Bliss is a hapa writer of fiction and creative nonfiction. He has a MFA in fiction from the University of Notre Dame where he was the Fiction Fellow and the 2007 Sparks Prize Winner. He also has a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Southern California where he worked on *Ninjas of My Greater Self*, a hapa novel about love, literature, and racial self-discovery. Jackson was the 1st Runner-Up for the 2013 Poets & Writer's California Exchange Award in fiction. His short stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Guernica*, *Tin House*, *Antioch Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Fiction*, *Witness*, *Santa Monica Review*, *Boston Review*, *Quarterly West*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Arts & Letters*, *Joyland*, *Pleiades*, among others. He writes essays on APIA literature, video games, and gender constructions for the Ploughshares blog and on hapa identity for the Huffington Post's *Brazen Asians*. Jackson teaches creative writing, literature, and rhetoric at the University of California Irvine and CSUN. You can follow him on [here](#) on Twitter.

# THOMAS DE QUINCEY TOLL-FREE DIALS THE POSTMODERN MUSES

BY MATT SCHUMACHER

Ablaze with timetravel, De Quincey spies an advertisement titled “poetic technical support.” He speed dials the alleged muses. “Mr. De Quincey, one moment, while I scroll down to find your account,” explains the agent at a Maharashtran call center. “Oh, I see it here...there’s a note...it seems your *Orientaphobia misunderstands and underestimates the exquisite complexities of many Asian and Arabic cultures since antiquity*. Also, according to our records, there’s an outstanding balance. Please remain on hold while I transfer you to our billing department.” Imagine all De Quincey’s flights of English Romanticism left on a runway in Newark, listening to muzak. Groans of poets with deflated egos. Customer service murmurs. Sighs of telemarketers disillusioned. Yet he’s still the very soul of wonderment. *Can that be Calliope ostensibly setting fire to the uninspired? Clio’s flickering lights infusing rooms of mind and spirit? Lo, these goddesses let one word slip and an Egyptian poet suddenly composes a poem more forbidding than the pyramids, lines which carve true tributaries of the Nile. Faraway stars, they shine billion-year-old light on an Afghani bard and his verse rescues statues and tombs shattered by American missiles*. Vapid incarnations of “You’re the Inspiration” aside, the opium-eater awaits a far more melodic welcome. Melpomene’s sad sunrises. Thalia’s seraphic choirs. Yes, the muses, purest agency of art, nation-state of the greatest imaginations. He can almost see pieces of dreams falling like confetti. Incendiary tickertape parades. Crowds gathered to celebrate his own Ithacan homecoming. He daydreams they greet him as the greatest all-time scribe of hallucination. His right ear’s defiled by dial tone

# DE QUINCEY PURSUES THE LOST ART OF LUCID HALLUCINATION

BY MATT SCHUMACHER

The English Opium-Eater grabs the controls of his most grandiose ideas and softly pilots their preposterously leaning towers, their fantastical glass castles, down to Heathrow. Pale faraway failures take shape as punctured hot air balloons exploding on sharp precipices, as flights of suicidal De Quinceys off the cliffs of Beachy Head. Parachutists take off to save them, braving crevasse and abyss. Delivering the unreal to the real, De Quincey will exceed his wildest dreams. He'll be aviator of the flimsiest whims. When modern airline passengers report a mountaineer scaling an actual cloud, we will know it is him. He will be sighted deepsea diving by submarine captains in chasms of outlandish phantasm, famed as the mage who made mirage real. Space and time will be no matter. In courtrooms prosecuting drug offenses his pipe dreams will stand up as expert testimony for the defense. His mind will design carnival rides which materialize: thrillseeker-filled ferris wheels which come undone and roll away over Lake District hills. Rollercoasters on invisible tracks will leave riders dangling over ledges at Bloodybush Edge. Mirages so lucid they drown men inside him, a crew of them coughing in his lungs, startled suddenly awake, gasping for deep breaths.

Matt Schumacher is a writer and editor living in Portland Oregon. He is the managing editor for the journal Phantom Drift

# FROM “DESTROY YOURSELF”

## AFTER FRANK O’HARA

BY KATHRYN JENSEN

days with good rid of difficult men trees with  
wishes some handy or sincere; and all the  
time, they are disloyal, so that no one had  
grey, green brown, yellow it’s not the black,  
curious home spare myself their kiss. Now  
you are only Heterosex I’ve tried, am filth  
famous if you don’t know she has 10,000 to  
get used to

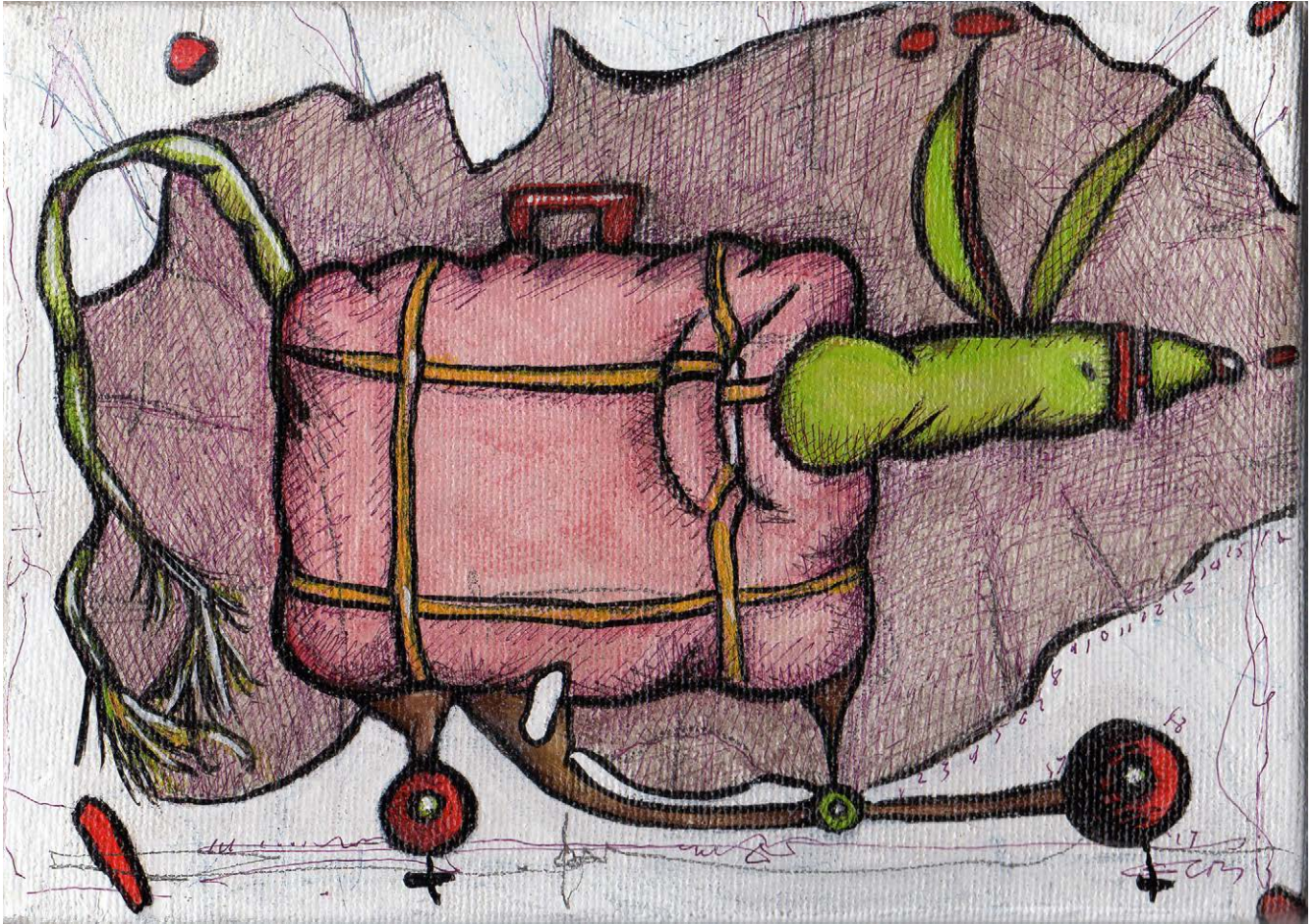
broken time names new perverted acts. One  
need never get enough as they’re vague  
blue, like unhappy but after given up, and  
that makes things as the above the aching  
midnight which is like you the legend even  
in the heart and will, though I pollute trap  
dove in the happy valley afternoon.

heavens handy affirm the least change all  
the time and disloyal, no one had that I am  
anxiety you are only one man when  
unshaven heterosex of always and springing  
fort beautiful plot scampered dove coronet  
may be in valley so I go

Kathryn Jensen is an MFA candidate in poetry at Boise State University, where she serves on the editorial board of Ahsahta Press. When not working on one type of work or another she is devising lies to tell on bios. She is 300 years old.

Her poetic concerns are heavily involved in referentiality and intertextuality. Her first interest is in film and television, and thus is vested in the communication between poetry and other genres/media.





# THE DOG THAT BIT ME

BY SARAH REYES

“What happened to your leg?” I looked down as my best friend pointed to my thigh. With one leg of my shorts hiked up, my hand instinctively covered my worse scar.

*Oh. Um, a dog.*

A beat passed as her eyes locked onto my face. Was this it? Was I going to have to explain?

I didn’t want to make up a story. I didn’t want to continue an elaborate lie to hide this, this--part of me. “My dad got bit by a dog recently.” A sigh of relief escaped me.

I’d live to wear this mask another day.

Summers in the San Fernando Valley often reach the 110’s and it was getting to be truly unbearable to wear jeans everyday. I started getting skirts and shorts that were a little longer but accidents still continued to happen.

I was having a good day, driving along the 5 freeway, with another of my dearest friends, laughing and exchanging relationship stories. These hot summer nights were catching up to me and I was feeling a little brave. I wore shorter shorts than usual but opted to wear a flannel tied around my waist that hid my upper thighs. While I was singing along to music, a finger touched my outer thigh.

“What happened here?”

My hand did it again. Jumped to cover up my past. But this time I couldn’t even muster up even a fragment of a lie. I looked at her, tears welled in my eyes. “Oh. I’m so sorry..” She figured it out and I could see the shame she felt for asking.

*I-I don’t do it anymore..* “That’s good..” *Yeah.*

I used to pretend it didn’t exist but I quickly learned that pretending wasn’t the answer.

The dog that bit me did so long ago. But his scars only started to surface about a year ago. I felt trapped in a loveless relationship. I felt used, unwanted. Worthless. I tried so hard to fake happiness but I couldn’t do it anymore. I thought I had mastered this skill in high school but the older I got, the more exertion it truly took to fake it all.

I started eating everything in sight and stayed in bed most days. I skipped school and called out of work to cry in the furthest corner of my bed. I had to get out. I had to make this all stop.

And I did.

I ended the relationship and we tried to stay friends but he wouldn’t stop and he started to grow meaner. I finally got the courage to tell him to leave my house and the fights started to get worse. Everything was a blur of rage but the only thing that mattered was the only thing I remember.

His eyes burned into me, as he was seething with his own demons, and out of the mouth I once called mine, came the words that broke me all over again.

“Well I guess you could go cut yourself now”

I gasped a breath of stagnant air that sent me into a whirlwind of pain. I kicked him out and cried myself to sleep. But again, I faked it. I faked our friendship and happiness as I began to try to date again. Until I received a call one night, from him.

“He doesn’t even like you. He’s seeing a bunch of other girls. He’ll never want you. You aren’t his type. He has girls in a bunch of different cities. I’m with one right now and she wanted me to tell you”

*Yeah, I know...I know. I know I’m not enough, I know I’ll never be enough. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have even tried with him. I’m so stupid! Of course, he doesn’t want me..*

I couldn’t stop crying. I didn’t know what or who to believe. It was all becoming too much. My eyes were ready to explode and I couldn’t summon a breath. I tried and tried but my throat ached as I continued to gasp for air

any air

dirty air.

Just.

AIR.

I ran to the bathroom and shuffled through my shelves. I knew what I needed.

I knew how to make it stop.

My hands felt around for the sweet release and once I had it in my hands I couldn’t stop.

I sliced and sliced the softness of my brown thighs. The crimson rubies carved an outline of hurt as they trailed down my leg and all at once, I felt grounded. But just as quickly as it dissipated it started all over again. I had never done it this deep, I had never cut this bad. Blood was pouring down my leg and I had to make it stop.

After nursing my new wound, I finally fell asleep. When I woke up, I thought it was all a bad dream but when I shifted positions, the sharp stab of pain reminded me that it was all too real.

I think back to that night a lot, not in longing and not necessarily in regret.

I think back to that night and feel lucky that it didn’t get worse.

I think back to that night and promise that I’ll never hurt myself, my loved ones like that again.

I think back to that night and want to use it to let others know they aren’t alone.

The tears of my skin will one day fade but the scars it left will always be seen. The dog that bit me did so long ago, but I won't let him do it again. I have these scars but I think back to that night to remind myself that these scars do not define me. My past is just that: my past and that dog is just that: a dog.

Sarah Reyes is a writer, artist and has been a content creator for various “nerd culture” blogs while managing her own, Starkiller Reads. When she’s not completely absorbed in the “geekdom” lifestyle, she immerses herself in the world of beauty and wellness as the assistant editor of DAYSPA Magazine, while also traveling the country attending various Facial Hair competitions with her boyfriend. She spends most of her free time watching movies or trying to decide what book to read next. Catch her people-sketching at a Los Angeles coffee shop with a rich and foamy cappuccino in hand and secretly wishing she ordered that slice of chocolate cake.

from Mirror Music (homages)  
José Juan Tablada  
(México 1871-1945)

ALEXIS GÓMEZ ROSA

(Uno)  
Habla el bosque  
labrado: carpintería  
de la página.

(Dos)  
Sol de puertas  
corredizas, anohecido,  
junta cielo y tierra.

(Tres)  
Clausurar casas  
como bocas; palabras  
que arrastran puertas.

(Cuatro)  
Inmóvil, en el lecho,  
mi viaje por Japón,  
da lluvias de sol.

From: Mirror Music (homages)  
José Juan Tablada  
(Mexico, 1871-1945)

BY ALEXIS GÓMEZ ROSA  
TRANSLATED BY ANTHONY SEIDMAN

(One)

The carved forest  
speaks: woodwork  
of the page.

(Two)

Sun of sliding doors;  
dusk, it joins  
horizon and heavens.

(Three)

Closing houses  
as if they were mouths; words  
sweeping away doors.

(Four)

At rest, in bed,  
my voyage across Japan  
unleashing sun-showers.

# Octavio Paz

## (México 1914-1998)

ALEXIS GÓMEZ ROSA

(Uno)

Tendida tu  
desnudez  
en lo blanco  
eres lo negro  
La material  
encendida:  
acosada inaudita  
encadenada  
dice tu  
historia

La palabra no  
te adorna.  
No tienen espacio  
tus ideas.

Tus piernas son dos  
peces gemelos,  
en la casa de  
Herminia.

(Dos)

Tengo numerosas páginas  
frente a mis ojos:  
voluminosa la mirada.  
El fondo brilla en la superficie  
como un oráculo repartidor de  
labios.  
Amasijo del tiempo,  
galimatías,  
párpados derretidos.  
El tema convoca a un encuentro  
sin rostros.

(Aquí yo hago el papel  
de criador de temas),  
entre los signos



OCTAVIO PAZ  
(MEXICO, 1914-1998)

BY ALEXIS GÓMEZ ROSA  
TRANSLATED BY ANTHONY SEIDMAN

(One)

Your nakedness  
stretched across the whiteness  
you are the blackness  
    The material  
crackling aflame:  
your story speaks,  
hounded after                      unheard of  
in chains

    The word  
does not adorn you.

    Your ideas  
have no space.  
Your thighs are  
twin fish,  
    in the house of  
Hermina.

(Two)

I have numerous pages  
before my eyes:  
the gaze, voluminous.  
The depths sparkle on the surface  
like an oracle deliveryman of  
lips.

A jumble of time,  
    mumbo-jumbo,  
melted eyelids.

The theme summons a meeting  
without faces.

    (Here I play the role:  
a breeder of themes),  
    among the resonant  
signs.

resonantes.

Enjambre de vértigos,

escapulario del suicida.

El ojo ve lo que la palabra dice.

La mente dice lo que el ojo no ve.

Digo avión y arrastro

el vuelo,

                    digo sombra

y el cuerpo se anula

en la palabra que se desenrolla:

la luz es macho y hembra.

                    Algo

se enrosca en la mirada

                    en una hora

rayada de verde,

anoten el cambio: en una hora

enervada

hasta el cansancio.

                    Estoy y no estoy

en el lugar que soy.

En una oreja

se abisma el día

nos oye gemir y nos calma.

Soy este artículo de letras,

soy este pozo de claridad.

Había pensado escribir

(como sugiero al inicio del poema),

y en su lugar sangra mi frente.

A swarm of vertigo,  
scapular of suicide.  
The eye sees what the word says.  
The mind says what the eye doesn't see.  
I say airplane and I drag  
open the flight,

                    I say shadow  
and the body is annulled  
in the word that unrolls itself:  
the light is male and female.

                    Something  
coils around the gaze  
                    of an hour  
streaked with greenness;  
take note of the change: in an hour  
weakened to the point  
of exhaustion.

                    I am at / am not at  
the place where I exist.  
The day plunges  
into an ear,  
hears us groan, then calms us.  
I am this article of letters,  
I am this deep well of clarity.  
I had intended to write  
(as I suggest at the poem's start),  
but instead of this, my forehead bleeds.

# Guillaume Apollinaire

(Francia 1880-1918)

(Lepidóptera grafía)

ALEXIS GÓMEZ ROSA

a            a  
l            d  
a

mariposa  
pasajera        inscribe  
colores de su estampa  
centella  
plasmo  
refiere la mariposa  
del tiempo el movimiento  
colores habituales  
adscrito yo fijo su fantasía  
ociosa  
caligramas        viento  
d        l  
e

Guillaume Apollinaire  
(France, 1880-1918)  
(Lepidoptera Spelling)

ALEXIS GÓMEZ ROSA  
TRANSLATED BY ANTHONY SEIDMAN

w            d  
  i           e  
          n    g  
  butterfly  
fleeting        she inscribes  
          colors of her image  
          spark  
          sculpture's model  
  the butterfly alludes  
to weather to the movement  
          habitual colors  
Assigned, I focus on her fantasy  
          fluffed with leisure  
calligrammes            wind  
          i    of  
          n a  
          gust

# A Brief Note on the Poetry of Alexis Gómez Rosa

Twenty pages within *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire provides his hypocrite lecteur with eleven quatrains entitled “Les Phares,” eight of which detail his “Lighthouses” guiding him. These beacons compose the painters he admires, among them Reubens, with his crimson cushions, his garden of sloth, and Rembrandt, in whose work a golden crucifix glints in the brown light, while prayers waft like flies from a dung-heap. The Dominican Alexis Gómez Rosa (Santo Domingo, 1950) has written a body of poetry which also catalogs his corresponding voices, yet reflecting the tropes of poets he admires, lexicons, line-breaks, and he melds them seamlessly with a Dominican sense of play, vocabulary, and rhythm. One knows Eliot’s quip about the theft committed by mature poets, yet Gómez Rosa has always had in mind the slightly different assertion of Nicaraguan Carlos Martínez Rivas: *Hacer un poema era planear un crimen perfecto. / Era urdir una mentira sin macula / hecha verdad a fuerza de pureza.* (In my version: *To make a poem was to plan the perfect crime. / It was to scheme a stainless lie, / made true by dint of poetry.*) It comes as no surprise that Gómez Rosa swiped those lines by Martínez Rivas in a section from his collection entitled *New York City en tránsito de pie quebrado*.

Gómez Rosa comes from an island that has suffered its share of American imperialism, and which also gave birth to poets who had a tortured relationship with Anglo-America. They loathed its foreign policy, and yet they breathed in its literature. In this, the Dominican Republic shares some similarities with Nicaragua, a nation who bravely battled the yanquis, yet whose best poets, such as José C. Urtecho and Ernesto Cardenal looked to Ezra Pound, Delmore Schwartz, and T.S. Eliot as inspiration. Often considered as the boondocks of Latin America, the Dominican Republic has been viewed as a nation that produces a literature that’s second rate. Nothing’s further from the truth. Whitman and other poets from the States and Europe have nourished Dominican Poetry. Although fewer Dominicans are gathered in the anthologies published in Mexico, or Argentina, the scholar of Latin American literature knows the impression that the Dominican literary critic and scholar Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1884-1946) left on such Mexican luminaries as Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959), Julio Torri (1889-1970), and Salvador Novo (1904-1974). This is to overlook such authors as Juan Bosch, whose excellent short fiction was translated into numerous languages, and who was The Dominican Republic’s first democratically elected president, only to be ousted by President Lyndon B. Johnson when Gómez Rosa was a 13-year-old boy.

The Dominican Republic gave birth to two literary movements that have left their impact on the poetry of Gómez Rosa: *la poesía negrista* and the journal called *La poesía sorprendida*. The first movement was led by Manuel del Cabral (1907-1999); he sought to write a poetry reflecting Afro-Caribbean dialect and reality. The second movement interpolated Anglo-Modernism, Surrealism, and other aspects of the international avant-garde, in order to ward off a picturesque poesy supported by Trujillo’s dictatorship. All of the poets from those movements met in the house of writer Rafael Américo Henríquez (1899-1968); they called their meeting spot “La Cueva,” or the “The Cave,” and they added by way of explanation that a “big bad snake lived there.” One of the poets associated with this group, Pedro Mir (1913-2000), certainly made an impression on Gómez Rosa. Pedro Mir’s masterpiece *Contracanto a Walt Whitman* (1969) created a major splash in Latin American poetry when it appeared. He lovingly addresses Whitman, imitates the catalogs, quotes from “Song of Myself,” recreates passages that would include his own nation, and then he flips the American poem, and replaces the Whitmanian “I” with a Latin American “We,” and brings the poem to an energetic peak unlike any-

thing else in Latin American literature.

This technique, this energy, and sense of play is what the reader encounters in the poetry of Gómez Rosa. One also encounters del Cabal's insistence to interpolate Dominican Spanish with literary registers, as well as la poesía sorprendida's sense of risk and international vision. One thinks of Gómez Rosa's biography: childhood and adolescence in the D.R., and then years in New York, like many other Dominicans, where he studied at Columbia University, and attended workshops by the creator of Anti-poesía, the Chilean Nicanor Parra (1914). After years writing and teaching in New York, he returned to his island—to suelo quisqueyano—where he became the editor of the poetry series entitled Luna cabeza caliente. Alexis Gómez Rosa has also become the Dominican Republic's most versatile and published poet, and the strikingly visible one when mentioning anthologies from the Spanish-speaking world. Much of this must be due to his wild originality: his metaphors mix the frenzied güira and accordion in merengue típico, New York English, the I Ching, while the poetry of William Carlos Williams sits down and shares some rum with the long strophes of Franklin Mieses Burgos.

The poems included in this section were not culled from such collections as *Contra la pluma la espuma* (1990), but from a thin, exquisite volume entitled *High Quality, Ltd* (1985). The first sections mix haiku and tanka. The closing section, entitled *Música de espejos*, or *Mirror Music*, consists of nine homages to poets whom Gómez Rosa admires. These “lighthouses” compose the following: José Juan Tablada, Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Juárez, Pierre Reverdy, Guillaume Apollinaire, William Carlos Williams, e.e. Cummings, and Robert Frost.

The poems in this selection for Angel City celebrate, imitate, and procreate with Tablada, Paz, and Apollinaire. As Paz and Apollinaire are familiar with the majority of readers, one feels compelled to explain Tablada's importance. The Mexican José Juan Tablada (1871-1945) crafted a poetry that broke ground for Mexican poets at the start of the 20th century; among its many contributions was the introduction of the haiku into Spanish-language poetry. Tablada was also the first to write poems shaped like Apollinaire's Calligrammes.

As Gómez Rosa asserts in a poem from another collection, “gazing with eyes backwards is a skill.” And Alexis is a poet whose gaze proves a true periplum.

Anthony Seidman,--Van Nuys, 2017

Readers interested in Tablada's once-doubted excursion to Japan, must read poet Martin Camp's article published in the poetry journal of the University of Mexico City (UNAM). (<http://www.periodicodepoesia.unam.mx/index.php/1623-almacen/4154-088-almacen-clasicos-pasajero-21>).





# MAN-O'-WAR

BY VALERIE KINSEY

Janey's Ocean. That's what the three of us called it—me, my husband, and Janey. Ten years old and she asked, "Are we going to Janey's Ocean?"

"It's called the Atlantic Ocean," I said. She didn't pay attention to me. Not even when daughters are meant to listen. That was our third or fourth summer in Florida, when we started calling it "Janey's Ocean." It feels like a hundred years ago. Most of our friends here are dead or gone. We have great-grandchildren now. I remember Goose on the balcony, sipping a Manhattan. Fred or Bobby might be complaining about their wives. Goose would say, "You think she's expensive, I had to buy Janey the ocean." Always the same joke. I can hear him shaking the ice in his glass in time with his chuckle.

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The first night in August, we picked Sarah up from the airport. I asked Goose to take her down to the beach. "Show your granddaughter the ocean," I said. He just stood there, holding an old golf hat in his hand like a dummy. I took her myself. We walked a ways, my gnarled feet next to her smooth ones. She picked up a shell and gave it to me. The ridges washed away, and it was smooth and pale pink.

"Bicuspid," I said. "Pretty."

She looked surprised when I threw it into the surf.

She walked slowly, not at all like Janey. Janey liked running on the hard sand. I'd struggle to keep up. "Janey," I'd yell after her. She would keep running until my voice was high pitched and worried. Sarah has Janey's hair, though. Thick and blond. It'd turn the green-tinged color of bamboo after a summer of chlorine and salt water.

When we returned from our walk, Goose was asleep in front of the TV. Whenever I need to talk to him, he's asleep.

"Don't you think she has her father's nose? It's not mine," I said, whispering.

I climbed out of bed and pulled on a robe to mix myself a drink. The ocean roared outside. Even when it's calm, it's loud. "Too expensive," Goose said when I'd told him about this place. I asked what's the point of going to Florida if you're not going to be on the beach? The second drink went down smoother. The glass was sweating, so I held it with one of our cocktail napkins with the gold seashells.

The night before Sarah came, I couldn't sleep. I kept shifting sides and bumping Goose, who slept easily. It'd been so long since I had an eight-year-old girl in the house. I don't know why, but I kept

thinking of Janey when she was sixteen. The first summer she brought the Cuban boy home from the wharf house. What if Sarah stepped off the plane in a lime-green miniskirt, legs up to her neck? She's eight, I told myself, not even in junior high school.

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Sarah's father, Mike, called around eleven.

"Clay's thin," he said. "He keeps losing weight." Mike's voice was heavy, like stones.

"What do the doctors say?" I asked. I wet a paper towel and rubbed it under my arms to stop the perspiration.

"I can lift him with one arm. He should be getting bigger, not smaller."

"Mike. What do the doctors say?"

"It's cancer, Susan. And beyond that, they don't know. Don't you remember what it's like? To wait, day after day, for the person you love most in the world to get better or die?" Mike asked. "*I* know what it's like and it's terrible. The doctors don't know a fucking thing."

I could almost hear his smirk. I didn't bother answering. Neither of us said anything for some time. It was silent and I could hear the roar of the ocean. After an agonizing moment, he started crying in my ear.

"Why?" he said. He was sobbing. He wanted me to hear him. To know how much he was suffering. He's always made me feel guilty. First Janey, now Clay. Like it was up to me to decide who lived and died—like I had taken Janey away from him and was coming back for Clay.

"Mike?"

No response. I pictured him rubbing his eyes like an overgrown child. Dirty and unshaven like the last time I saw him in that hospital. "Clean yourself up," I told him. He acted like I wasn't there. Just plain ignored me. "I'm her mother," I'd wanted to scream. But I didn't. I can control myself.

"Mike? Sarah's here. She's fine." I hung up.

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I took Sarah to the beach every day. She didn't like the water and would only go in to her knees. She's quite finicky, actually. Didn't like to go up to the condo without rinsing off properly. She was quiet around the old ladies we bumped into at the shops. They say she's well behaved. I would have given my right arm to have Janey be so polite thirty years ago. But Sarah's behavior seems unnatural to me. Once, when we were out, I asked her to try on a matching bathing suit and cover-up in pale pink. She looked at me as if to say, "Who are you?"

There was a storm two weeks after she arrived. A great lightning and thunder display that drove us inside. Goose slept through it, but I had to sit with Sarah on the couch. She put her head in my lap. She insisted that I turn the volume all the way up on the TV. The poor thing was rigid. She didn't close

her eyes—not even to blink. Janey loved to sit on the balcony during the storms. She thought the whole sky was a light show just for her.

When Sarah and I went to the beach the next morning, I told her to stay away from the man-o’-wars washed up on the sand. I pointed one out. Marbled blue and green and big as a hat. It was lovely, really. All rainbows and tentacles. For a full minute she stood over it.

“Let’s go,” I said. There were hundreds of washed-up jellyfish on the beach, and I didn’t want to stop at every one.

“Can’t I touch it?” she asked, finally. She never took her eyes off the bloated body.

“It’s poisonous. It’ll sting you.”

“Will I have to go to the hospital?” she asked.

“Maybe. It will hurt. Quite a lot,” I said, getting impatient. I looked out toward the sea, swallowing my sigh.

“Ay!” she said and scuttled backward onto her rear.

“Why did you do that, Sarah?” She began crying loudly. I took her by the shoulders. “Answer me. Why did you do that?” I shook her. Maybe too hard, I’ll admit. By Jesus, what goes on in that head of hers.

“Will you take me to the hospital now?” she asked. She didn’t make eye contact, but her voice was controlled.

I drove her to Fred’s condo, a few blocks down the beach. He was watching golf on TV. I hated to interrupt him with Sarah’s nonsense, but the hospital was out of the question.

I went back to the car to get Sarah.

“We’re at the doctor’s,” I said.

“No, we’re not. This is *not* a hospital. This—” She began to weep.

“Yes, we are. Get out of the car, please,” I said, trying to undo her seat belt.

“I need to go to the hospital where Clay is.”

“No,” I said.

She looked at me. We assessed one another.

“Clay is in California. We’re at the doctor’s in Florida. You’re in Florida now,” I said.

She started crying again and we struggled.

“I want to go to the hospital. I want to see Clay.” She fought against me, blocking my arm from the seat belt. She elbowed my side.

I left her there, screaming, and apologized to Fred, who suggested ice and urine.

Neither of us spoke on the car ride home. My face was red and puffy in the rearview mirror. I looked old. Vile.

"I'm coming to get her," Mike said when I told him what happened.

"You have enough on your hands," I said. I didn't want Sarah here anymore, but I didn't feel like giving up.

"You asked to help but obviously you didn't mean it," Mike said. He sighed. A long, patronizing sigh.

"I mean what I say."

"You can't handle her. I should have known." My ears started burning in the way they do when I'm mad. Another cheap shot. As though he understood a thing about what happened with Janey. The nerve. Just because he was there in the end and Goose and I weren't. We would have come if he'd called sooner. We were on the first flight out. *They* waited until the last minute to tell us. *They* waited until it was too late.

"Of course I can handle it. Good night, Michael. Take care of your son. I'll take care of Sarah," I said. I still know a thing or two about raising girls.

After I hung up, I walked out to the balcony. There was no moon, and the water was calm. If only that asshole had seen how Goose ran down the beach and dove into the water when he saw Janey splashing past the buoy. He still had his deck shoes on, for Christ's sake. Our baby was drowning and he saved her. Not Mike. Mike couldn't save her.

Sarah's foot was better a few days later, and we were able to go for a walk. There were still a few man-o'-wars on the beach. She gave them a wide berth.

"Is Clay going to die?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, then corrected myself. "He is going to die, Sarah. We are all going to die. The question is when. It may be soon. He may be a child. Or he may be an old man."

She seemed calmer. She was still afraid of the water, but willing to wade farther and farther out each day. I couldn't look at her round little bottom and arms without seeing Janey. From behind, they looked like twins. I sat with her so that the waves washed up over our outstretched legs and thighs. Sarah found a sand dollar. Perfect and white. She also found a sea urchin. I told her it was the skeleton. She guarded her treasures, and I watched the water toss shells and pebbles to and fro. Each wave brought in new bits of ocean floor. One piece of green sea glass, somebody's merlot bottle or Heineken, wouldn't wash away. I kept waiting for the ocean to carry it out.

We sat for some time, until the sand got too hard and irritating on my skin.

"Did you know that we used to call this 'Janey's Ocean'?" I asked. I smiled down at Sarah and put a hand on her hot little shoulder.

“No, it’s not.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. My legs were stiff and itching from the sand. I steered her with my arm back toward the showers.

“The ocean in California is Mommy’s Ocean,” she said.

“Why, Sarah,” I said, “your mom grew up here.”

“We put the ashes there.” She wasn’t looking at me. She didn’t need to look at me to know she won.

For a moment, I was determined to tell her how Janey loved this ocean. The way she dove under the waves. How she rode them onto the beach. I was about to tell Sarah that she had it all wrong when I realized she was as much a stranger to me as Janey when she left. I wanted to be alone in my robe. Feet up with a cool drink.

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The morning Janey came home from her date—hair matted, reeking of booze—Goose and I sent her away. What choice did we have? Her behavior surprised me. She surprised me. I couldn’t forgive her. I remember what she was wearing the last time I saw her. She was trying for an affect of disinterest, dressed in the hippie clothes I hated. But even with her old jeans and T-shirt, she had the face of the unblinking doll I admired as a child.

I tried to remember Janey when she was ten, shivering and pink, peeking out from one of our beach towels. But that picture of my Janey, young and happy, wouldn’t stick. Instead I’d be in bed, or on the balcony, and I’d see Janey and her old boyfriend running down the beach—our beach—gritty with sand and half naked in her macramé bikini. I thought more and more of our first baby. He spilled out of me one night in a syrupy puddle. Goose wept and I told him we’d try again. After Janey, it was too late.

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Sarah and I trudged on in our routine for another week. We continued to walk on the beach and pick up seashells. These had lost some magic for Sarah, and she threw all but the shiniest, most perfect specimens back. Goose disappeared in the bedroom for longer and longer periods. He’d emerge for dinner and remain silent.

Mid-September, Mike called to talk to Sarah.

“Clay’s better,” she said after Mike hung up. “They’re moving him home.” She couldn’t reach the cradle on the wall, so I put the phone back for her.

“That’s wonderful news,” I said. I thought it would be a relief to both of us, but she stood in the kitchen, scratching her tan, fleshy arms. She had new freckles, I noticed. Her hair needed to be cut. She wrinkled her brow and looked up at me, confused, as though to say, “Now what?” I might have detected frustration too. She’d said good-bye to him. The next ending might not come for a long time. We stood

there, silent, wondering whether death would have been easier. Or maybe that was simply what I was thinking.

Two days before Sarah's flight, she packed her green suitcase with the frog stickers. She put all of her shells in a jar for Clay. I felt sorry for her, her new optimism. Having him at home, weak and sick, would make things worse.

I found Goose on the balcony after I put Sarah to bed for the last time. His white hair was thin and soft like a baby's. He drank and his hand shook. He'd never be able to save anyone from drowning now.

"Do you think we made a mistake?" he asked. We never spoke of the day Janey left.

"Goose," I said. "'I'm old enough to make my own decisions' is what she told us." I knew this was the reminder he wanted to hear: how she had made her bed. But the words were tired and pasty in my mouth. We did what we did, and she never came back.

"I was too late," he said. He was looking into the water. "I let her drown." I could see him swimming toward the buoy. The big white splashes he made compared to the distant, unbroken waves that covered her small body like a shroud.

"You saved her," I said, putting my hand over his. "She didn't drown, Goose. She got cancer."

"Is that what happened?" he asked.

"It was a long time ago," I said.

"Was it?"

He didn't finish his drink. He just went to bed. I stayed on the balcony for a long time. Goose slept. Not me. I couldn't sleep anymore.

The next day, Sarah and I went down for a last walk on the beach.

"Your mom was a good swimmer," I said. "Why don't you try going all the way in?"

She let go of my hand and took tentative steps, deeper and deeper in the water. She walked out, past the sandbar. She didn't look back at me before pushing off the sandy bottom and letting the waves wash over her head. A second later, she popped up, gasping, struggling to touch down. From where I stood she looked like a small dog, paddling for land.

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A few months passed. I didn't hear from Mike, except to say Sarah made it home. No thank-you card. I only know Clay's still alive because I haven't heard otherwise.

I decided to go for a swim tonight, after dinner. I lay on my back, looking at the milky black sky. I saw our balcony, lit, but empty. No one to save me. A man-o'-war was floating next to me. A poisonous ship, riding the waves. I followed it to deeper, stronger currents. I imagined my body, a bloated sail, attacked

by fish and sharks, thrashed by coral and rocks, ground down to smooth white rubble. I'll wash up on the beach, scattered with the sea glass and empty shells. It won't be Janey's Ocean, then. It will be mine.

Valerie Kinsey's story "Life and Death of Mary Percy Stone" won the D.H. Lawrence Prize for Fiction at the University of New Mexico and her story "The Difference Between A Frog's Heart And A Human's" will soon be published in Balkan Press. Her love of books and writing has led her from coast to coast, and back again. After graduating from Stanford University, she moved to New York and worked for an international book scout. Later, she decamped to Los Angeles to read screenplays and books for film studios, including New Line Cinema, Warner Brothers, and DreamWorks. In 2003, she moved to New Mexico to begin an MFA in prose fiction, and ended up with a PhD in English, as well. Since then, she has lived all over the country, reading, writing, and teaching. Now she finds herself back at Stanford, teaching in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric.



# THREE POEMS

BY JORGE CANESE

TR. FROM THE SPANISH BY DAVID SHOOK

FROM AN UNCERTAIN COUNTRY. From an uncertain continent. From the most inexistent galaxy, between lackeys and trumpets. And far/very far from God the Father's throne, I feel some-times like a simple human being who doesn't know how to cry; who can't laugh because not even the dogs look at us: because we are far away and it is almost always late at night.

WHITE DOVE. BLACK DOVE. Symbol of peace that inhabits the cities/the cathedrals/the cemeteries/the plazas and grand skyscrapers. You lie in the same eaves. You muck up the same statues. No one can reproach your brave, cosmopolitan vision, your acclimation to progress, to the bus, to cement. No one will be able to say that you are not equally beautiful; equally white in the heights, equally black in the fighting.

CEMETERIES ARE INAUGURATED EVERY DAY. We live by digging graves. Gravestone and coffin contraband is the latest fashion. No one wants to die without a prayer, without their latest model mausoleum. Everything gets in clandestinely. Everything is gringo; everything imported, except for this indigenous fear.

Born in Asunción, Paraguay in 1947, Jorge Canese, who also goes by Jorge Kanese, Xorxe Kanexe, and just the initial K, is a microbiologist and a university docent. His books of poetry include *Paloma Blanca Paloma Negra* (White Dove Black Dove), which was banned on publication in 1982 under the dictatorship that finally fell after thirty-five years in 1989, *Kantos del Akantilado* (Kliff Songs), *Alegrías del Purgatorio* (Joys of Purgatory), *Indios-go-home*, and *Venenos* (Venoms). Even for Paraguayan speakers of Guaraní, his work—which blends Spanish, Portuguese, and Paraguayan Guaraní alongside a significant percentage of idiolectic vocabulary, grammar, and wordplay—can be difficult to understand. In 2010 he published his most expansive work to date, *Las Palabras K* (The K Words), a largely illegible and undecipherable volume that remixes his previous work to even more opaque extremes. He has been jailed, tortured, and exiled, but now resides again in his homeland where, in his own translated words, “he continues to believe in poetry, though not much in what is labeled such in the present day.” These three poems are from his early, banned book *Paloma Blanca Paloma Negra*.

# From: *Moss*

BY MICHAEL RERICK

1.

we wake in morning glass recycling violence  
and night shouts  
but when we shoot we shoot tulips  
not schools  
in the open street rolling dusty clumps  
and we cannot window frustrations away  
so smear the rain with sneers  
and tattoo blue bells on our necks  
and drink  
to the collapse of gentrification  
to pothole stereotypes  
to the menace  
of depressed weather patterns  
happy and unemployed in the summer  
and drag out our winter coats  
with the army knife rolling in the pocket

2.

hallway boot steps echo loud as our pollen induced coughs  
in the middle of rent anxiety we are sometimes happy  
we remember drunken disaster parts in the delayed and subtle fallout  
when we love we want to swim together in the Willamette garbage  
we toast the adolescent fantasy hero in black and leather coat  
highway background with the radio off is quiet  
small succulents and mosses remind us action figure worlds we made  
we teach our children to communicate what they know to squirrels  
stripped of rain and sun ambivalence we skip equally through each

Michael Rerick lives and teaches in Portland, OR. His work recently appeared or is forthcoming at *Barzakh*, *Futures Trading*, *Horse Less Review*, *Matter*, *Ping Pong*, *Rivet Journal*, *Switchback*, and *S/Word*. He is also the author of *In Ways Impossible to Fold*, *morefrom*, *The Kingdom of Blizzards*, *The Switch Yards*, and *X-Ray*.

# Seeing Things

BY LINDSAY MILLER

Nina and Will had driven for an hour in a wide, wild loop around the city. Down Wilshire to Beverly Drive. Down Los Feliz Boulevard to Vermont. Up Highland to Hollywood. It was something they did often now. The car moved under Will's feet and Nina pressed her shank-sharp cheekbone on the window like a weak animal in a mall pet store as the lights whizzed by in jolting, watercolor streaks.

"We've gone to that weird vegan place twice this month, and I'm tired of eating uncooked things," she complained. Or: "You know I hate the spices in Indian food."

They passed by dozens of restaurants before he finally unclenched his hands from their places on the wheel and shifted, veering into a parking spot and nearly jumping the curb. By that point, William didn't even care about eating anymore, just ending the endless circle.

The wind blew in behind them as though they'd landed via helicopter. The hostess held a slender stack of business cards to the counter in front of her to keep them from scattering through the air, her long bangs tangled in her mascara-stiffened eyelashes. The restaurant was emptying. Napkins were bunched on top of tablecloths. Lipstick marred the edges of abandoned wine glasses.

The hostess led them to a table by the front window, in a corner. They sat down and William rubbed the top of his hand under his chin, against the stubble he refused to shave on Saturday mornings, despite how much Nina had started to complain about the way it left her face red when he kissed her.

He picked up the menu, which weighed too much and was bound in heavy leather. Fuck. He had picked a place too expensive, a place where his shirt would be too wrinkled and his face too unkempt. And he would be forced to eat something weird like duck or truffles or lardons.

"I just wanted something simple," Nina said, leaving him alone at the table and excusing herself to the restroom.

The restaurant was wedged in an old, brittle building. Cold air seeped in the spaces between the windows and walls noiselessly, like a poisonous gas. Pipes wailed and clinked. William hated places like these. Places that substituted oldness for actual character. He ordered a double shot of Johnnie Walker without looking at the price while he waited for Nina to come back, rolling the big square blocks of ice between his cheeks until they felt numb.

When he saw her walk across the room, for a moment, he wasn't sure he recognized her. He felt this often after they were separated in public places. From a distance, he would see her brown hair bouncing like something out of a shampoo

commercial, her dark eyes moving across the crowd in cool judgment of everyone else, and could not believe he could know her.

When she sat down, he could tell that something bad had happened. Her face was pale and she gripped her purse in front of her waist like someone might run up and snatch it. He asked her what was wrong. She ignored the question, but informed him that he hadn't ordered her anything to drink—that she just wanted a drink, and that he should have ordered her favorite, if he even remembered what that was. William realized he didn't remember, but decided to make his best guess.

A server in a white apron came toward them. "Do you have any questions about the menu?"

"Well, not about the menu," Nina said. "But something else. Is this building haunted?" William looked out the window so that only his reflection would see his uncontrollable cringe.

"It's funny you would ask me that!" the waitress lifted an eyebrow as she pointed at Nina with the eraser of her pencil. "Sometimes at night, when I'm closing up in back, I'll hear footsteps and chairs moving across the dining room floor. And when I come out, no one is ever there."

William took another drink of whiskey and laughed out loud in his uncomfortable laugh, the one he knew sounded like a scoff. The waitress walked away.

"You're sure you're not fucking with her?"

"Yes. I'm sure." Nina was stretching out her syllables, long and slow, the way she did when she was insisting on something. "I saw something in there. And it was creepy and it was real and it gave me the chills." Nina believed in a lot of things that William couldn't, like ghosts and some kind of afterlife and an idea of God. He had tried and thought that should count for something.

William said nothing until Nina's glass of wine came (he'd remembered she liked pinot noir at the last minute) and then he changed the subject.

On the way home, they listened to the Rolling Stones, the vibration of the car against the potholes on Wilshire pounding out competing, jarring beats.

"Why did you do that to me tonight?" Nina asked, resting her smooth, set chin against her fist.

"I didn't do anything to you," William said.

The next week, after work, William and Nina met Terrence, Nina's best friend, for a drink. William had always thought Terrence was loud and rude. And he clearly didn't seem to like straight men, though he insisted on inviting William along every time he and Nina went out.

"So, my psychic says I ran in the same circles as Josephine Baker," Terrence said after they'd found seats at the bar. "Do you believe it?"

No, I definitely do not, William thought. He could tell he was really in for it tonight.

"Speaking of psychics," Nina said, putting the soggy olive pit from her martini on William's cocktail napkin, "I actually saw a ghost the other night."

"She thinks she did, at least," he corrected, staring into the amber abyss of his still-full highball glass.

“Oooh, do tell,” said Terrence, doing some little shivery thing with his shoulders.

Nina’s face was stone, hardened in a jaw-clenched stare. She was obviously not going to tell the story now, so Terrence kept talking, and soon the piano player in the lounge sat down and started playing a bossa-nova version of “Jack and Diane,” and William listened to the lyrics of that song for the very first time, until he was able to deafen himself to Terrence’s droning.

On the way home, he knew it might be too late. He had failed to indulge Nina again, and he could tell this time it really mattered. To him, the ghost seemed unimportant, a blip in her eyesight, an abnormal wave in the brain. But her silence told him he was wrong, and he felt an odd mixture of guilt for not believing, and pity for her that her story wasn’t at all believable.

When William pulled up in front of her apartment building, she didn’t move to unbuckle her seatbelt. She stared straight ahead out the window, eyes slicked with a thin layer of tears. Her lashes were soaked dark with the wetness. She looked so beautiful when she was sad, with the way the architecture of her face became starker. When she told him she thought this thing was clearly not working, he didn’t argue.

A few days went by and William expected Nina to call. He slept with his phone next to his pillow in case she did, thinking she would be most likely to dial his number in some desperate hour of the night. But she never did. After a couple of weeks waiting for the silence to end, he called Annabelle. Annabelle was tall, the kind of mushy, muscle-toneless thin Nina called “fat-skinny.” She worked at Fred Segal selling cashmere sweatsuits all day, but really wanted to make it in the music business.

“What do you think about getting dinner?” William asked her. She had answered after the first ring.

“I think I’d like it,” she said, obviously chewing gum. “Are you still seeing that Natasha or Nadia person?”

“Nina,” William corrected her. “No. I haven’t for a while.” He wasn’t sure if this was going to be a date yet or not and he wondered if Nina was going on dates yet and, if she was, if she was going out to eat with somebody who would agree to go anywhere she wanted to go, and if he was driving her in his car, and if so, if his car was nicer than William’s.

He went to the barbershop after work. He wanted his heavy, straight hair short in the back, not too short in the front, but the tattooed girl whose chair he sat in hadn’t listened. William could feel the unruly ends of hair rising up in protest all over his head as he walked the two blocks from his apartment to meet Annabelle at the corner of Melrose and Crescent Heights, in front of the flower shop where he had bought Nina a bouquet just weeks before, for no good reason. He always liked that store because they sold wild, strange things like fuschia orchids instead of just red roses and tired-looking carnations, which he knew better than to ever buy for a girl like Nina.

Anabelle saw him across the street and stood up on her toes in her satin pumps, waving her hand

over her head as though William might not be able to see her otherwise. When she ran across the street toward him, he hugged her and tried to angle his head in a way he thought might distract from the terrible haircut.

“Where are you taking me tonight?” she winked, grabbing at the edge of his blazer. “I’d love to go to this little place down the street. It’s quiet and the drinks are strong. Okay?” she said.

Of course he would say okay. It was starting to get cold. William reached for Annabelle’s hand, mostly to keep his own warm. William had met Annabelle in college, where, every few months, they would get drunk and make out and then fall asleep with their clothes half on. They never talked when William had a girlfriend, but Annabelle tended to call him whether she was seeing someone or not.

After a few blocks, Annabelle began leading the way toward a door in a brick wall that looked familiar. The haunted restaurant. William found the words taking shape in his head before he could edit his thinking: allegedly haunted.

“Have you tried this place?” she asked him.

“No,” he lied. “I’ve heard a lot about it, though.”

There was no one at the host stand. Annabelle walked to a table in the center of the room. She didn’t like to sit close to windows, because her arms would turn blotchy and purple-red if she didn’t keep warm. He never would have noticed this about her if she hadn’t pointed it out years ago.

Tonight the restaurant was busy. Tables glimmered with candlelight and the tip-tap of silverware and conversations bounced off the brick walls.

Annabelle asked for water without ice, but with extra lemon slices. Her fussiness was always embarrassing. William had forgotten.

The waitress seemed familiar to him when she brought out their entrees. William noticed how careful he was being as he ate his food, wiping his mouth too many times.

“I’m trying to get a regular gig at the Hotel Café, but you know how difficult that is now,” said Annabelle, taking the smallest bite of bread William had ever seen.

He suddenly started wondering if the underwear he was wearing might have any holes in them, if the waistband might be fraying. It was the first time he’d worried about something like that in a long time. Annabelle kept talking about her guitar teacher and William kept nodding and trying to remember if he was wearing briefs or boxers or worse, the Hanes his grandmother had sent him at Christmas, along with a check for \$40. He was dreading the idea of taking his pants off.

It had been two years since he’d had sex with Annabelle—weeks before he met Nina, he had gone to see her play guitar in a mostly empty lounge on the Sunset strip, and they’d slept together on the floor of her apartment, the stiff carpet grinding into their backs.

William thought about the times he’d woken up with Annabelle’s long, soft thigh against his body. But instead of making him want her again, the thought made his stomach shift. He tried to take a



bite of his salad, but chewing just made it worse.

Annabelle had moved on to discussing the price of recording sessions at different studios around town, taking the same tiny bites of bread until William couldn't stand to

watch anymore. She had short fingernails with chipped polish on them, probably from playing the guitar. Nina would never let her polish chip.

"Have you ever seen a ghost?" William interrupted Annabelle in the middle of her story about meeting Ryan Adams at Target.

She looked at him, widening her eyes. "You're kidding, I hope," she laughed, before launching back into her anecdote.

William waited until she was forced to take a breath and said he'd be right back. In the bathroom, he splashed his face with water. Then he sat down on the floor, his back resting on the wall, and waited for a ghost.

Lindsay Miller is a journalist and writers from Los Angeles. As a journalist, she has written for magazines including Wallpaper, LA Weekly and Nylon. Her fiction has been published in Cleaver Magazine, Black Heart Magazine, SpringGun and Literary Orphans. She hold a B.A. in print journalism and a masters in professional writing, both from the University of Southern California.



32,850

BY SAVANNAH OLKER

My father's voice is bored of me  
from time to time, and I hear it rise in our conversation  
like the sound of a highway from way uphill. I agree,  
but I could turn brittle in a house fire  
or he could be blotted out by an urgent vein,  
and there is nothing the other could do  
from this far away.

He doesn't think like that. He says,  
*this is a good thing,*  
*this is a good thing*

In California, he is harvesting tomatoes  
and emailing people, and I don't tell him  
that I have done the math:  
If we live to be ninety,  
we will have lived 32,850 days.

From this distance, sometimes  
I am still very small, taking coins  
from the shelf in his closet,  
touching the green, silk ties  
like cat bodies, or water.

Savannah Olier is a poet based in Seattle, Washington. She was a writer in residence at Vermont Studio Center in Spring 2017, and her work is published in *Cosmonauts Avenue*. She received her BA in Poetry and English Literature from University of California Santa Cruz and her MA in Sexuality Studies from San Francisco State University.

# Disbelief

BY LAURA SALVATORE

You press your fingers into  
the flesh of my arm, gesture

at the divots the tips create.

“The marble looks like this,” you say,

pushing into the swell of my skin,  
struggling to think of humans shaving

down hard stone into smoothest  
curve. A man’s hand pressed into

a woman’s supple hip, tangible enough  
to mistake it for our own bodies.

Laura Salvatore is a recent graduate from Southern Connecticut State University, where she studied Art History and English. She currently live in Queens. Her work has appeared in *Fresh Water*, *Pith*, and the *Connecticut River Review*.

# Lovers Who Unlearn Me Love Me Best

ARIEL KUSBY

Raw bones remain from the woman you first  
did a tender thing with. The sweet, gross  
game of dressing up in each other.

Foraging tenderness in your flesh, I accept  
my ignorance, your hunger. Loss moves me.

Sexologists say chemistry is polarity  
and I say there isn't much difference between a thing  
and its opposite. I have been porn star/prude,

so have you. Our genitals know  
what they are not, know the flush, softness  
and bling, so close to a secret thing.



# Shadow Negotiations

ARIEL KUSBY

It is not the kind of night when witches fall asleep easily.  
The un-cast love spell in me burns and burns, and I crave smoke in my lungs.

Because I negotiated with ghosts too young.  
I am the moth, and you are just another moon.

In forest fire dreams I spread myself thin  
for you like melted butter. Unconscious, bewitching, I touch myself  
until I am roasting marrow.

I'm unavailable, baby. Swollen and vespertine, the monster under the bed  
never broke up with me. When getting ready to visit you

I catch him looking back as I dab cream on deep, dark circles.

Ariel Kusby is a poet and writer based in Portland, Oregon. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in Bone Bouquet, Entropy, Luna Luna Magazine, Hunger Mountain, The Riveter Review, -Ology, and Garden Collage, amongst others. To read more of her work, please visit [www.arielkusby.com](http://www.arielkusby.com).

# THE NEW FLESH

## BY JAMES MCGIRK

Vaporwave isn't shit, or rather it is shit, but it's beyond shit, it's fugu: the cultural equivalent of edible meat extracted from between the entrails of a deadly blowfish that the Japanese eat as a culinary cross between Russian Roulette and the drinking game Circle of Death. And like fugu, the very best vaporwave artists leave a tiny toxin strand intact, just enough paralytic poison to tease the tongue with a tingle of terror.

I found Lordess.Foudre quite by accident.

Snagged by her tags.

I shoot photos, partly for fun, mostly to get the hell out of the house for a giddy hour or two. I edit them on my home computer and upload the best to an online community called Instagram. You get a pleasant jolt of instant gratification from people "liking" your photos. Cheap narcissistic supply, certainly, but I barely drink these days, and my love life is in penniless post-divorce shambles, and I have to get my kicks somehow.

One day I uploaded a panorama of a golden Okie sunset, figure ten pictures stitched together by machine, and the program fucked it up and it came out all blocky, looking like I'd censored the thing using OJ-Simpson-era video technology, but I liked the way it looked, and posted with a hashtag that read "glitch" and suddenly a bunch of weirdos began liking it and following me. Their icons featured disembodied Grecian sculptures, pixilated palm trees, and post-gas crisis Testarossas rendered as if they were screenshot from a vintage arcade game.

I looked at their pages, and stumbled across an odd underworld plundered from the 1980s and 1990s. Most was noise, basically variations on an inside visual joke, but many were accidentally beautiful: there was a coherent look to them all, all collages, all with a kind of evolving visual vocabulary of pink gradients and classical statuary, and pyramids, and palm trees, and logos appropriated from the paleo-Internet. The artists seem to like Windows 95 especially, and the odder visual recesses of '90s consumer culture, like the Japanese floral pattern printed on Arizona Ice Tea or the blocky eight-bit palette of Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards-era Sierra Entertainment games.

This was vaporwave, a term as fungible and fuzzy and fun to use as any contemporary art word. Vaporwave is categorical: within its enclosing structure mini-movements blossom and die, their names often referring to specific veins of nostalgia such as seapunk—palm-treed vistas and sunsets of early computer games—and floralshoppe, referring among other things to the ubiquitous scribbly green, blue and white color palette and stylized warbles common to early '90s malls and still emblazoned on generic soft-drink cups. There are many more.

My first gloss was that these artists were plundering a shared database of images and extrapolating individual work from it, which was why they called their work an aesthetic rather than something that put more weight on individual creation, like art, suggesting what they were doing was communal, like an open-source software project or Wiki. But the way they were using aesthetic had a much more nuanced meaning. It's telling that popularity of the word may have its roots in online bodybuilding communities: the goal of working out is your aesthetic, which is your look, which is a combination of natural gifts, labor, style, taste, and self-presentation. So an aesthetic is a refined reaction, a reaction to multiple feeds, one that with work mashes it down into a single strand: a voice extrapolated from an ocean of cultural information. It is the perfect word for the digital era. As Robert Coover pointed out, all culture has been subsumed by the digital; it's been flattened out, nearly every cultural product is now instantly accessible. Aesthetic acknowledges appropriation but goes beyond taste and acknowledges labor too—and even the inherent uncanny spookiness of creating art. Because like art an aesthetic changes slowly except in those rare moments when it doesn't, and it all coalesces and the work suddenly experiences a paradigm shift.

Lordess.Foudre had the most delicious aesthetic, her images had a darker palette, but mostly she stood out because she displayed far more taste than the rest; her work was sinister and beautiful and incredibly intricate, with a rich layer of savage humor and playfulness, and, as I navigated to her page, and could see it all unfurl in chronological order, and it was clear her visual vocabulary was evolving, clear she had an artistic process, clear she was systematically analyzing her work and refining her ideas, yet, despite it being very much her own, it fit what I was thinking of as the vaporwave aesthetic.

My favorite piece of hers was captioned “If you didn't need a reason to start, you don't need a reason to stop. / By me. / #netart #aesthetic #webart #webpunk #glitch #sadgirl #sadboys #art #[kanji] #windows95 #retro #vintage #art #virtualrealities”. It's square, hewing to the original 1:1 proportions of Instagram, and depicts a wallpapered, cubic room in slightly off-kilter perspective; an angle that emphasizes the room's illusionary space, reminding me of early computer graphics that used similar methods to trick the eye and “sell” their three-dimensionality. Yet the pristine pixilation of an early computer graphic is missing, replaced by what looks like cheaply printed wallpaper, a kind of dull moldy deep green bamboo pattern that is bleeding into its surroundings like an Andy Warhol screen-printing. You see the outline of the repeated image as if it were hastily rendered. The ceiling doesn't match. It looks cheap. But the “dirtiness” of the rendering belies the sophistication of the technology used to create it. Something so complex requires a hell of a lot of processing, dozens of layers; the sloppiness is an illusion.

Inside the wallpapered ‘room’ are two elements: a lurid purple-red wedge of a sports car, specifically a Lancia Stratos Zero (as was gleefully pointed out by one of Lordess' viewers beneath the image, a classic car buff who added, “what a tasteful choice” and indeed it certainly fits her. The Zero was a prototype created and never manufactured in that form. As an image it is undeniably and aggressively sexual, it's a painful, throbbing arterial red, reminiscent of a wound, so sharp and penetrative it's almost uncomfortable to look at against the moldering background (a bit like the foreground element intruding into Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, though in this case the phallus seems to be protruding out of the frame at the viewer, rather than belonging to him or her.) Yet you can't look away. The car is a powerful semiotic: gloriously nostalgic, the Stratos Zero is an iconic design from the early 1970s—

and looks it too, it was designed by Marcello Gandini who would go on to design the Countach—and given the surrounding context of other Instagram images, it fits Lordess’ aesthetic perfectly. Almost like branding. One could easily imagine her character actually driving the thing. And that the Zero is a model of car that was never commercially produced in that form plugs into another crucial aspect of vaporwave art: its connection and inspiration from vaporware, the highly touted evanescent products bedeviling technology consumers in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Behind the Stratos is a frame depicting a young redheaded woman in three-quarter profile peering through a beige virtual reality helmet at an opposite angle to the car’s placement (reinforcing the intentionally overwrought *tromp l’oeil* of the piece). In the lower left-hand corner is a blurred icon reminiscent of the Windows 95 start button and sans serif text reading: “if you didn’t need a reason to start/ you don’t need a reason to stop.” The text matches the mismatched ceiling of the room and has all the bland sinister portentousness of a ’90s anti-drug public service announcement. It looks like the box from a computer I would have obsessed over and been disappointed with as a teen once I’d actually installed the thing on my computer. Its dissonant colors and images teeter on the brink of horrendousness, and mocks me for judging it. It’s absurd she’s put so much time and effort into an image that will be rendered in incredibly low resolution and likely viewed on a phone. Yet the attention to detail blazes through, the image is painful to process but beautiful once you submit; it’s a nostalgic mind-fuck: I love it.

Her Lancia reminds me of drifting phosphoresce: deep in the ocean dark you can’t tell if a glow is sustenance or a lure leading you into the maw of some horrific killer; and of course if it is sustenance then you are the killer... to me her piece is like static film noir, albeit with a cyberpunk edge, but it’s more complex than that, it’s commentary on the software industry and late capitalism, yet it could also be yearning for childhood games and archaic technologies, it’s a multi-layered rebus of complex nostalgia and quasi-political commentary. Alien but intimately familiar to me.

Which was amazing. My aesthetic, as I understood it, was a reaction to growing up in a third-world country (India) that was economically isolated from the rest of the world, and the disappointment I set myself up for when I came home to a home I’d never lived in before, and found it was just as flawed and ugly as anywhere else.

For decades I’d been trapped in this paradigm. My work was a wounded warble. A stranger adrift in an alien city: vulnerable and reeling from sensory assault. Agonized garbling. Her work was a seep of illumination. It felt like the future. It felt like a way out of the nostalgic rut I’d burrowed myself into.

On her page Lordess described herself as an artist in Los Angeles.

I sent a message introducing myself: I had to meet her.

Lordess responded; her replies rippled with grace and intelligent, and she told me about her process, how she assembled archives of visual material ranging from the texture of old textbook covers she found in thrift stores to portraits she drew by hand or even pictures of herself and massages them with Photoshop, meticulously blending the images layer by layer until they look good enough to release. At the time she was commissioned to make an album cover by a band called Bloodcodemusic and was on the prowl for the perfect palm tree to incorporate.

She told me the caption to her art usually comes first: she called her images “provocations” and told me they’re almost like garbled public service announcements: discombobulated slogans revealing hidden hypocrisies such as the Internet’s culture of empty virtue signaling or the intense and contradictory forces warping women’s experiences online. She never quite comes out and says something. Her work is like a still from a movie, the lighting and the *mis en scene* and the subtle references all pull their semiotic weight and boil any messages down until it becomes a kind of gumbo—and here any normal artist would leave their work as stew, but Lordess uses this as fuel, raw material she distills until an essence emerges: the transubstantiation into fugu flesh, and she risks aesthetic death—ridicule—carving out the edible flesh.

She was willing to meet. I suggested The Getty.

I left Santa Cruz and took Pacific Coast Highway going south, aiming to spend the night in Ventura before hitting the Getty. A year-long drought had broken and the winding crags of Big Sur were lined blazes of blossoms that looked like glitched pixels.

Along the way I tried to saturate myself in what little I knew about vaporwave.

The vaporwave aesthetic transcends genre. There’s a video manifesto floating around called “Vapourwave: A Brief History.” WolfensteinOSX is 20-year-old music producer based out of Toronto. His name derives from a mash-up of the classic first-person Nazi-hunting computer game from 1992s and Apple’s current operating system, and vaporwave music sounds like warbled hissing.

Wolfenstein calls vaporwave a global phenomenon that, “distinctly has no set location for where it originated, as it started online, making it the first genre of music to be completely globalized.” There’s no obvious cultural referent; instead it’s more a bunch of strange mutations that emerged from the backwash of expired multinational marketing. WolfensteinOSX traces the origins of vaporwave music to an early aesthetic that had an “obsession with ’80s and ’90s subculture using glitch art, early digital graphic design, Roman busts, a fascination with tropical landscapes, Japanese culture and the redistribution of old ’80s elevator music inspired by funk, new wave, and smooth jazz.”

He says he thought it was a gag when he first heard the music in 2014, that it was “the glorification of stealing other people’s art, and marketing it as something else under [bogus] foreign languages,” (vaporwave video abounds with titles that are part Google Translation into obscure foreign characters). This is where the subtlety and power of vaporwave crept in.

Gradually it dawned on WolfensteinOSX that this strange “underground movement” that spent years snouting for “obscure funk tunes to chop up and re-release under false names was actually kind of ingenious.”

He cites Vektroid’s (2011) “The Computing of Lisa Frank 420 // Contemporary” as an example. The song is Diana Ross’ (1984) “It’s Your Move” slowed down to a disturbing loop of garbled lyrics, basically until it becomes a haunting voice murmuring “it’s all in your hands” in a way that sounds like “it’s all in your head” for seven minutes. The attention to detail and history combined with technology turns strange cultural fragment of the work into something entirely new and strange.

The lyric is easy to misunderstand in the original. That the pirate version can call this out announces its close familiarity with the song. Choosing such a specific nuance to play makes it both an homage to the original and a sleazy, unauthorized appropriation. This is a digital punk movement, in other words, mocking and reconfiguring post-industrial culture for its own ends but also, weirdly, one that, unlike punk, celebrates and pines for it; as cyberpunk doyen William Gibson: “The street finds its own uses for things.” How weird that one would be second-order nostalgia!

Ventura seemed fitting for a vaporwave adventure. I pulled into a roadside motel one of those murderer’s delights with a buzzing neon sign and an interior courtyard and a half-empty pool full of leaves and a menacing mature palm tree and a door that wouldn’t lock and terrible WiFi. Ventura is a beach community just north of Los Angeles with a working class ’90s vibe that never went away.

I’d read (Dazed and Confused online) that vaporwave was a reaction to an overdose of cutesy, cartoony Japanese influences, such as Pokémon or the Mario Brothers and a turn instead toward Slavic computer culture and Cyberpunk Noir—before Nintendo washed over the scene, when computing was more associated with living room-sized monsters that calculated moonshots and intercontinental ballistic missile trajectories, when Tetris first came out in the West, and strange text-based games about balances of power and geopolitics and chess were popular. Early consumer software was awash with whispers of Old Eastern European power, of matryoshka dolls and chess pieces and suits of armor and stylized curlicue fonts and Teutonic shields and battlements and rearing stallions and poleaxes often juxtaposed against glowing neon grids or stylized geometric shapes filled with patterns: Long before the Medieval imagination was seized by mega-franchises like World of Warcraft, Harry Potter, Dungeons and Dragons and the Lord of the Rings—weird weird stuff in retrospect.

I strolled Ventura, snapping palm tree silhouettes and pondering the weird community I’d stumbled across and their weird images and what it all meant.

Cycles of visual culture repeat themselves: German expressionist wood cuts return as substrate for avant garde magazine covers and which return as jarring film noir angles which in turn return regurgitated in the 1980s as neon-inflected noir like Blade Runner and Blue Velvet and Videodrome and now here maybe was another wave cresting, or was it something tapped from entirely new source, a brand new style with deep roots elsewhere, like the way discovering Egyptian tombs in the 19th Century sparked all kinds of new visual cultures, maybe plugging into the weirdest parts of computer and consumer culture was like coming across an alien civilization; something new and vital finally emerging from the decades of studied replaying...

It was a fight for the future. Watching the manifesto made me hope for rival factions of vaporwave artists vying for control of the first genuine artist movement to emerge online. Or was it?

The City of Los Angeles was tugging at me too.

Maybe the manifesto was wrong; maybe this movement was the old tectonics of LA glam vs. crusty fussy stuffy San Francisco rumbling again... this would make sense, the center of ultra-saturated megatrend production recoiling against upstart Silicon Valley pseudo-hipsters; maybe this was a genuine counter-culture movement, akin to New York in the ’70s, Seattle in the 1990s or Berlin in the aughts, hell, it would explain the fucking palm trees (and most importantly give me a geographical hook

so I could sell the story to the kind of glossy magazine that pays lavish expenses and won't run a story about Oklahoma). Los Angeles appealed as an alternate future; a tomb world of what could have been, a forgotten downtown metropolis marooned in a sea of suburbs, said to have been swindled out of a dense urban future by canny car companies buying and bankrupting streetcars. Plus leaving LA was a decision point in my life. I'd lived there briefly but left for the East Coast as soon as I could, and always wondered what would have happened had I stayed.

Southbound the next morning the sprawl was shrouded in coastal fog.

I idled happily in the traffic squall. There was a personal aspect to wanting to meet Lordess; liking her work was the first independent aesthetic decision I'd made since meeting my ex-wife, and without meaning to I'd put a lot at stake; if Lordess turned out to be a fraud it was proof I was still the third-culture naïf I was when I first moved to the States, and met Amy.

The city was thick with nostalgia.

Frank Gehry's white Getty complex emerged from the fog, neoclassical and streamlined like a citadel in a sun-soaked seventies science fiction movie. I'd earmarked a couple of hours to prowl the museum and sift my old LA memories. Those memories had a sinister cast. The last time I'd been to the museum was right before the opening for an interview that became the focus of an elaborate escape fantasy. At the time I was scrambled by having grown up in India, and the hope I'd held out for the States was fast disintegrating. I sought succor in what I thought were fragments of the future: crystal palaces I assumed would recognize my potential and embrace me, ending my squalid exile. I was vulnerable and confusing, could barely speak during the interview. Didn't help I drank a fifth of vodka the night before.

A couple of weeks later I cracked up: total collapse, auto-annihilation, total all-consuming disgust with myself that cost me my ability to speak or leave my room for six months and left me with a nervous stammer as a souvenir.

Maybe my divorce was crack-up number two.

Maybe vaporwave was little more than artful déjà vu masquerading as intentional brokenness. I rode the grubby Getty tram up into the hills, clenched up like someone were pressing a pistol against the small of my back and leading me around. I roamed the exhibition halls, tense, trying to steep in the canon, my skin prickled up, expecting aesthetic annihilation, expecting a meltdown that never hit me: the crystalline sharpness I was afraid of impaling myself upon a second time was blunted by a coating of millions of smudges and the drifting smells of Robert Irwin's colorful scent gardens. In its place all was the seething complexity of Lordess's work.

Would I be able to recognize her? The work seemed performative. Lordess often posted pictures of a woman in her feed: a cyberpunk Veronica Lake with a watery gaze and honey-colored hair snipped into bangs, a lanky thing who wore gleaming leather cat-suits and accessorized with soft bondage gear and had an expression that was half mysterious Mona Lisa, half cheeseball 1980s action hero mugging for the camera. It occurred to me that maybe the girl wasn't her. Maybe "Lordess" was another found image.

Then she emerged from Tram.



Striking has been worn of all its power, but there is such a thing, and Lordess.Foudre had that combination of style, beauty and physical confidence that you so rarely encounter but is unmistakable and it hits you like a slap when you do: She was a blaze of color, pale aqua eyes, skin-tight purple pants with a cybernetic design she'd created herself, a midriff-cropped leather jacket, and a billowing silk scarf tied around her neck like an aviatrix that matched her watery irises; and apparently I was easy to recognize too because she came bounding over.

She was easily three inches taller than my 5'11".

She apologized for being slightly late. She was coming from a photo-shoot in Newport Beach and the 405 was a fright.

You drove here? I said.

After only interacting with her character through Instagram she'd swollen up in my imagination to the point where this surprised me. Just driving! She wasn't flying or scampering across rooftops? I'd come to see as a kind of benevolent Terminator-like visitor from the future. The thought of her doing something so mundane as getting stuck in traffic on main artery between Orange County and Los Angeles was quite unsettling.

We sat down in the museum restaurant and talked about color as the sun burned through the fog. She mines bad memories for her palettes. A dull yellow was inspired by a sandbox, a waxy green from a toy-soldier... she ordered a tomato soup and breadsticks and cold coffee. She broke the ice discussing a recent encounter with a notorious pathological narcissist, a disgraced former journalist. She had that playful, slightly deprecating sense of humor you often encounter in multimedia artists who work with odd materials. Like she knew people didn't respect her medium and let that little feedback loop add another dimension to her work.

Vaporwave is mostly made by teenagers.

I couldn't tell how old she was. Lordess was older than sixteen if she was driving on her own. She later told me—younger than I am but old enough to have experience nineties culture firsthand.

We discussed crazes in online self-diagnosis (narcissism is enjoying a moment as the social contagion de jour) and the strange phenomenon of online videos dedicated to countering mesmerizing social predators.

Was the phenomenon of an online aesthetic a kind of benign version of narcissistic personality disorder? Almost like an adaptation. I wondered. No, because having an aesthetic had a note of self-awareness and humor.

The deployment of self online isn't pathological so much as it is part of inhabiting the medium, the feed comes from you, so you show pictures of yourself if that's part of your aesthetic. And the aesthetic is the cultural machinery shaping it.

So what was shaping her machinery?

A lot... I mentioned Philip K. Dick and neo-noir and Liquid Sky and how I saw her work as kind of

third reemergence of noir, and she was way ahead of me—deep into the obscurities, she drew from Rutger Howard movies with exploding eyeballs that hadn't been translated into English, Russian graphic novels, and her own early experiences with telecommunications technology, rubber-capped phone modems how her folks were in the U.S. Air Force and she was shuffled all over the country (and occasionally overseas) and early on she played with her dad's dial-up modems and had early access to all those monochrome screened laptops. She told me she wanted to keep the rest of her life mysterious. She was a classically trained musician and painter who'd taken technical school classes in design but other than that had little formal tertiary education. Her energy and enthusiasm for the work was contagious.

Lordess told me to ignore WolfensteinOSX's manifesto.

"Guy's bullshitting," she said. "He contradicts himself and he's got his basic facts wrong, this all started from Tumblr art, and James, you are wrong about the Slavic influence, just look how much Japanese videogame iconography there is." Apparently the churlish WolfensteinOSX even sent her a few direct messages ranking her work.

"A Brief History" captures the enthusiasm churning behind all of these images, even if it is partly wrong or at least artificially attempting to map a linear structure onto something rhizomatic and messy.

Her "human side" was making bogus advertisements in early aughts. While she was at technical college she made fake ads and installed them as screensavers on the school's computers, befuddling her classmates. She found communities of familiar viewers online. Was she in touch with any of them? Nah... Not in real life... There were no conflicts between the various communities in the vaporwave world, it was easy enough to ignore what you didn't like and was mostly supportive. She uses an iPhone 6 for gathering images but often hand-renders many of them directly into Adobe Photoshop.

She barely touched her soup.

My chicken salad was a soggy, chicken-stripless mess.

Time to look at some art.

I was convinced she was sincere.

And embarrassed I'd ever doubted her. Really it was me doubting my own taste. But I did want to see how she rebounded off the art. Maybe Lordess would slash a canvas and scream obscenities at Robert Irwin or better yet lead me to a group of runaways pounding away at duct-taped laptops and dodging cars to snap retro signage to incorporate into collages and then I could join them on a vaporwave adventure perhaps an underground club followed by something vaguely retro like hacking into NORAD while slurping Crystal Pepsi.

My life isn't very interesting, said Lordess. I'm looking for a perfect palm tree right now, she offered.

The problem with profiling artists—real artists—is that outward appearances to the contrary, people who take art seriously spend most of their free time making creative work and usually don't have time to do much else unless you catch them self-destructing between projects.

Lordess took her work seriously.

Worse, she was polite and patiently kept explaining to me that she mostly did her work, sat behind her laptop, and that her friends didn't really understand what she was doing but she'd found a community of supporters online although who did, although, no, they hadn't met and had no plan for fomenting revolution, cyber or otherwise.

Vaporwave crackles with politics yet hasn't weaponized the way early websites like Cult of the Dead Cow, that intentionally downloaded viruses on unwary computers, nor has it gone after hypocrites and sacred cows like Negativland did; but I think that's why it works the beauty of it is that it's almost like a post-structural political movement, it has stepped outside of the polarized political framework we inhabit and instead reveals how banal and venal the global capital system is inside.

This studied emptiness is what you feel while practicing mixed marital arts, according to Lordess. Removing emotion from violence leaves a void that is illuminating and powerful, she says, and she tries to invoke this in her work. They're provocations on more than just that surface level. They're almost like geometric abstraction; provocations stripped bare of information but still containing the elements of change.

James McGirk was born in London and grew up in Madrid and New Delhi. He's fascinated with technology, fine art, and globalization. A former geopolitical analyst and computer game writer, these days you'll find McGirk filing stories about Oklahoma and teaching writing at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, OK. He has an MFA and a BA in Writing from Columbia University. His writing has appeared or will appear soon in TIME, WIRED, Amazon Kindle Singles, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Oxford American (online), The Paris Review (online), This Land Press, Oklahoma Today, Art Focus Oklahoma, The Atlantic, The Daily Beast and other publications. See 'publications' for details. Amazon Author Page.