

# Angel City Review



CPH 2023

# Foreword

Over the nearly ten years of this journal existence, it has grown and changed and taken breaks and grown then shrank back and repeated many of these steps over again. Being a volunteer run journal and a passion project that I started with some friends after a late night of sharing work and drinking, it will always hold a special place in my heart. Being able to share the work of writers both new and established in the same pages has been and continues to be an honor. Over the years we have done our best to be as inclusive and representational as possible. Through that process some of the issues started to become these massive tomes of unwieldy length. This not only caused a lot of work and delays in its creation, but it also made them so long that we worried that most people would not read the entire issue. This defeats the purpose of us wanting to share a wide range of voices that brings together great work that could be enjoyed from front to back. To fix both of these potential pitfalls, we will now significantly trim down the issues and stay closer to the sixty page range. We hope that with this more curated experience each and every piece can shine and that everyone that is in these pages will be proud that we are sharing their work. Thank you to all of our readers, contributors, and editors that have worked with us in the past. We hope to continue to be around for many years to come.

- Zachary Jensen

## Featured Artist

### CHRISTINE BLANCO

Born and raised in the Bay Area, Cristine Blanco is an interdisciplinary artist who works in sculpture, video and installation. Her works take environmental injustices, the precarity of resources, and familial story as her starting point. Inspired by her grandmother's home in the Philippines, she explores the impact of rising sea levels and considers how human connectivity and adaptation are essential to recovery and transformation. Through repetition, reenactment and reconstruction, Cristine processes and makes sense of a constantly evolving world by documenting personal and global changes.

# Angel City Review Issue 11 2023

Zachary Jensen: Managing/Founding Editor

Janice Sapigao: Poetry Editor

John Venegas: Fiction Editor

Simon Tran: Arts Editor

Gabby Almendarez: Editor

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# asian girl eulogy

BY JASMINE KAPADIA

in eighth grade, i begin to i dislike my body. not- not hate. i don't hate my body. dislike. or, i just wish things were a little more tucked in, a little sharper around the edges, a little smaller.

i wish i was a little smaller.

or, i wish i was a little more beautiful.

and it all comes back to this, in the end. like edgar allen poe said, a dead girl is a beautiful girl. or, all the beautiful girls are dead. in atlanta, georgia, there were eight dead girls. or, in atlanta, there were eight beautiful girls.

when i was ten an auntie told me i would never survive in taiwan. i was too loud. i took up too much space.

when i speak, the whole block quiets, a congregation listening in, straining to catch popped p's and airy s's.

i spin on the balcony and they go lightheaded, spill their drinks, forget their names, crash their cars. the sun bakes itself into my shadow, and the neighbourhood loses its breath as a collective. watching me, it is left knocked off balance: spluttering, gasping, undone.

i take up too much space.

again, we are where we started. this body of mine is too solid behind fabric. i should be more like a dream. my dresses should float in the air, display to passers-by the pretty ruffles.

girls are just hangers, remember?

i should be less of a person.

or, i should be more of a fantasy.

a good asian girl is quiet. knows her place. she is the china doll every asian boy wants to save.

she is the mail-order bride every white boy wants to fuck. on the very best days, she is dead.

in other words, a good asian girl is a beautiful asian girl is a dead asian girl is a fantasy, is a yellow fever, is a ni hao, is a "hey shrimp dumpling!" is a "yo soy sauce pussy!" is always girl,

never woman, always wrong type of body.  
a dead girl is a beautiful girl.

or, the only beautiful girls are the dead ones.

in atlanta there were eight dead asian girls.

or, in atlanta there were eight beautiful asian girls.

the bullets found their bodies and made showhomes out of them. the gunmetal vacuumed the floors, polished the door handles and pin-sol'd the countertops until everything smelled like rubbing alcohol. sliced up their names with clumsy american tongues, trying to fit them into their mouths.

the death of an asian girl is the most poetic thing in the world.

when she dies, two countries clap.

how long does a girl have to be dead until she is beautiful? is it when the ants find their way into her eye sockets? or when the maggots grow under her fingernails? is she beautiful then? what i'm saying is, will i ever be beautiful? because i'm trying. real hard. and i can play dead for you. i'll roll over, show you my stomach. wait for your knife.

when you gut me, make a show out of it. if i do a good job laying still, will you tell my mom i was a good asian girl?

will you mispronounce me beautiful?

**Jasmine Kapadia** (she/her) is an 18-year-old, Asian-American poet.

Jasmine is a 2021 Write the World Community Ambassador, a 2021 Santa Clara County Youth Poet Laureate, and a poetry editor for Indigo Lit. She has work in or forthcoming in *Superfroot Magazine*, *the Eunoia Review*, *Malala Fund's Assembly*, *All Guts No Glory*, and elsewhere. Her work has been recognized by ABC News, Poetry Society UK, and others. Jasmine has been nominated for Best of the Net. She has performed at rallies and book launches, and read on KQED.

When not writing, she can be found stanning Beyoncé, over-applying lipgloss, and (re)-binge-watching RuPaul's Drag Race. Find her on Instagram: @jazzymoos

# Wildfire

BY SHANA MIRAMBEAU

I used to love to play with fire.  
I would sway my fingers over candles and see how long they could withstand the flame.

My family thought it strange for me to be so enamored with the flicker of a lighter,  
the stroke of a match.

They would say, “we have to watch this one. You know how she is with those candles in her room.”

You came in wild that Spring  
All over without aim

On the day that we met  
Your eyes were of deer, big and bright, stunned by my entrance.  
To me, You were familiar- messy.  
You spoke as if you were the scholar on everything the occult and Tarot.

But, I was not amused

Instead

I felt as though I was walking through the murky of ocean.  
it became difficult to create and hold thoughts in your presence.

In southern California, specific bodies of land must be monitored. The desert winds, also known as the Santa Ana winds, come in during Autumn, our favorite and your birthday season , and can create “wildfires.”

We stayed up for hours talking about our joys, I read you my poems, you shared your drawings with me.

Every morning I awoke with a salutation from you  
It felt rare because I never had interest to carry conversation over text for long periods of time, especially with guys, but you were persistent.

I learned a long time ago to have “tough skin.”

Yet, I let down my guard with you.

I was at the point in my life that I just wanted to be soft, no more fighting.

I thought, “perhaps, he isn’t going anywhere.”

You sent me songs to listen to and shortly I followed suit.

All the hidden parts I never spoke of with others, you heard.

You were surprised by how much you shared with me, that you missed me if a few days passed without your eyes upon me, and I was overjoyed to have you see the part of me that men found intimidating.

Unlike the others, you did not fear my ritual: burning candles, incense, the tarot and holding rocks to get me through.

I used to love your kind.

And it was more than the Long hair or worn jeans on the verge of tatter,  
it was the purity of being, no matter how rare

The more unique, the better

The closer to my oddness

Boys: The allegory of my pain, yet the Archetype of my worship

I’ve seen wildfire take over land,  
Moving quickly through the brush-  
It’s Hard to contain

My belly gave me visions  
She warned me of your kind.

I could feel a past- life appearing in my present

# shadow work.

BY SHANA MIRAMBEAU

my mind announced you as the wild I had been seeking. And no one, but me, knew how deep that narrative was buried within.

Wild was the escape everyone experienced with me, I inherited it from my mother. Everyone came to her for her soothe in words, laughter, and herbal remedies.

I've learned we all have aches, me included.

I was awaiting my own turn at away- a chance to escape.

Into a hidden, a wilderness of sorts.

With every spell cast and candle lit, I remained in the place I knew would entice you. Your kind always liked a good story of “who is afraid of the dark?”

What I enjoy about the unpaved path is the freedom; what I despise is the hard labor of living, the dismissal of my body. There is so much to learn about standing guard against intruders.

It feels as though there is no parameter one won't dare cross.

In the “out here and over there” comes an active othering and there are seldom who stay.

They are simply tourists seeking an adventure. They will be the ones to boost how they were there.

There is always an expiration date.

I did not listen to my body's exhaustion.

The high of “us” was electrifying.

It was nice to have someone.

My mother came from a country of hurricanes: known to be the more intense storms that nature could produce.

Caribbean hurricanes begin in June, my birthday season, full of yemaya, mother, nurture of all who enter her ocean, and end in December, the winter solstice, a time when the veils are thin, lessons are learned, open your heart and third eye as ancestors call from beyond.

It's the hot and cold extremes that help create the danger in storms.

My mother didn't fear the earthquakes of California.  
I think mostly because she survived multiple storms with my father  
His rage could penetrate cities and leave all of us bewildered.

They say that Cuba has a tendency of holding up well against the hurricanes.

My mother left my father when I was a toddler.

I had to learn to fend for myself early.

You come to me because history has shown you that my skin is porous, and you can hide your secrets in me.

But I am no mammy nor mommy.

It's not just you,  
It's me, too.  
I have a history of my own

It seems as though all the women in my family have been rooted in chaos

My paternal grandmother was the daughter of Haiti: the first country to free itself from slavery.

She married my grandfather, the "man" of the house, the structure of authority and power-a provider?

His skin, inherited from his blond hair blue eyed mother, was a trophy.

Yet, he became a storm when the bottle touched his fingers and the liquid ran down his throat.

There are some stories told and many kept secret about the kind of father he was, but father always has a way of revealing his kin from time to time.

In Haiti they are known to experience the disasters of earthquakes and hurricanes.

They build their homes out of concrete, if they have the means, which can withstand the hurricane, yet leaves them vulnerable to the destruction of earthquakes.

I've been guessing it's more than how you rebuild. Sometimes, you must leave for true safety, if you can.

My grandmother's skin was beautiful and black like night.  
But many cannot see in the dark and don't come to help unless you're of day and white.

I am the one scared of my own patterns- this overwhelming history.

My relationship with men has been disastorrious.

In the past, if my body wasn't sliced into pieces,  
pressing down into bars,  
my sweet flesh grilling,

Can you hear me Sizzle?

I'm calling out to you, smell me!

Then, what was my worth?

My step-mother said I would learn the hard way.

You are wild and curious with Colonizer skin

Sometimes the history of your tongue shows itself  
I have to be careful that you don't strip me of my resources.

I took photos of the remains left by the Santa Ana winds. They stayed a little longer than expected this year, but still they left.

The roots of the trees were in conversation with the pavement they once lived beneath. They laid there, thick and grander than the sleet gray of sidewalk and towering over middle paths, streets and even natural soil neighbors.

I walked around the steep holes and there were varying lengths of roots , some tethered, others uprooted, yet many were holding steady.

What we leave; how we let go. What must remain is a mystery to be played out in bridges.

You count all the women you had and tell me that they all have lived along the foothills.

I wonder if that's all it was-a collecting.

But, you do not count me  
I was never your lady.

Somehow you called me your mentor, your council, your support.  
As if I am your personal altar.

I removed that dare of the name you thought you could brand me  
I stepped back from this space of sharing.

You were not different

You were and still are his- story

No ease son

I  
am  
A

real

woman.

Lately, I have become the verb of storm.

I move sometimes “angrily... [yet mainly] forcefully in a specified direction”  
reclaiming myself.

**Shana Mirambeau** is a multidisciplinary creative: writer, healer and creative consultant, whose work shifts between the layers of multicultural narrative and spiritual mysticism. She has an M.F.A. in Creative Writing with a Concentration in Documentary Strategies from the School of Critical Studies at the California Institute of the Arts, and a dual Bachelors of Arts degree in English and Women & Gender Studies from California State University of Fullerton. As active leader in the healing community, Shana leads workshops exploring multiple healing modalities and creative non-fiction writing. She is a Family Constellation Facilitator: a practice started by Bert Hellinger to uncover and acknowledge hidden trauma (transgenerational trauma), and facilitate healing through its expression and acceptance, thus allowing healing at a soul level to bring peace and resolution in family dynamics. Currently, Shana is writing a Memoir that explores the process of voice, self, spirit, and healing from trauma within the intricate frameworks of an immigrant Caribbean family in America. Shana Mirambeau resides in Southern California.

# tell the plantation i shoot back (after Darius Simpson)

BY LANDON SMITH

Florida backroads mumbling to the skin on my upper back  
Says it got some leather for me  
    if I don't keep movin'  
On the wrong side of a dusted train track,  
    you might find my solitary body  
sundown sheriff caught whiff of it  
and started unclipping holster

Not knowing in my left palm  
    I pack the souls of the fields  
    and in my right  
    I shoot back at cops

Balled fist ain't enough for the burden on my back now  
and ain't no compromise for the last breaths in my left palm  
    so I sing Blues spirituals  
    before you ask me why I choose violence  
I can't know peace yet  
not with this grass slicing my ankle bones, Unc  
Not with these worn-down tires still beggin' for freedom, Unc.

Read me my last rites now  
so I can tear the 1860s from my hip  
On behalf of the hands gripping my left palm  
I have no choice but to back alley the backwoods  
Bury disposition beneath Polk Country plantation fences

I might dance tonight, too  
Cut a rug one time for the ones who cut bondage from their left leg  
    to kick the bucket with their right  
I stare this plantation pig in the face knowing  
    to be invincible  
    is to carry the souls of the field with me

**Landon Smith** (he/him) is a father, a professor, a poet, half Mende and half Balanta & Fulani, the amethyst geode on your desk, Angela Davis' afro, Frantz Fanon's pocket notebook, Walter Rodney's fingernail, your favorite pillow. Landon thanks Black Freighter press for publishing his first book - *No Bedtime Stories of Soil*. Abolish all prisons and police.

# There is the friendship I have and the friendship I deserve

BY VON TORRES

July 3, 2020

A friend casually says  
China virus.  
They think it's okay.  
I feel dumbfounded  
anger radiating  
inside me.  
They say it again.  
The words we use  
are sacred and mean  
something.

Racism exists  
in those words.  
The downright violence  
encouraged on  
family  
friends &  
community  
looking like me.

A phone call seeking  
understanding without  
an apology happens.  
The silences we use  
are sacred and mean  
something.

March 16, 2021  
Chinese and Korean  
Women of Asian Decent  
Were 6 of the 8 Victims  
in Atlanta Shooting

Hyun Jung Grant  
Soon Chung Park  
Suncha Kim

Xioajie Tan  
Yong Ae Yue  
Daoyou Feng  
Delaina Ashley Yaun  
Paul Andre Michels

The names we use  
are sacred and mean  
something.

March 31, 2021  
A friend wonders why  
I haven't kept in touch.  
We schedule a catch-up.  
I imagine pain  
I'm about to reveal.  
My insides remember  
the heaviness of Anti-Asian racism  
in the friend's words.  
They were warned:  
something is wrong.

We outwardly pretend  
things are fine while  
my body feels hallowed  
by their lack of recognition  
that we're not okay.  
My body knows:

The friendships we lose  
are sacred and mean  
something.

**Von Torres** is a full-time instructor in the English and Reading Department at Clovis Community College. He received his B.A. and M.A. in Creative Writing with an emphasis in Poetry along with graduate certificates in the Teaching of Composition and Post-Secondary Reading. He was a 2016-2017 Sharing History Germanacos Fellow with the oral history organization, Voice of Witness. His teaching practices are guided by postsecondary reading and writing engagement, culturally relevant curriculum, the pedagogy of joy, and cookies. His poetry has appeared in *TAYO Literary Magazine* and *VERSES TYPHOON YOLANDA: A Storm of Filipino Poets*. He has also self-published two chapbooks: *HELLO my name is* and *“F” Sounds*.

# LOSS

BY NIJLA MU'MIN

The way loss comes at you. fast.

I taste time.

and all I can remember is walking through a crowded Juneteenth festival last year, with sweat on my arms and two long, unraveled braids. A turquoise tank top clinging to my body. My bestie by my side. looking at brown men in fresh linen and locs. All I want is another moment before our lives take us away from each other. and I am the last of the childless.

the way loss comes. I taste tears.

The last job was a year ago. I count each night. Next day, nothing. The last good sex was last summer when I took a shower with the man who dumped me hours before, at a beach. Then he plunged me into droplets, kissing me in the steam. *One last time*, I said as he apologized. Why did he always apologize during sex. That was the last time I felt. The thrill of ending. Now I'm pushing on all sides, empty.

The way loss comes fast. Announcing itself on a phone call. Telling me I lost a job I never had. because I was myself. And someone told 10 people I shouldn't be employed. The city changed. The people with it. I feel two years burrow in my stomach, tight and tug. And I do not know. I sing in the car, my own voice a cradle. I flirt in isolation, pretending the bed is warm with another person there.

The way loss laughs at you.

I look straight into it.

Nijla Mu'min is a writer and filmmaker from the East Bay Area. Her work is informed by poetry, music, fiction, and dance. In 2014, she was selected for the Sundance Institute Screenwriters Intensive, and she was the winner of the Best Screenplay award at the Urbanworld Film Festival, for her script Noor. Her debut feature film, *Jinn*, premiered at the 2018 SXSW Film Festival, where she won the Special Jury Award for Screenwriting. She's directed episodes of *Queen Sugar*, *Insecure*, *Swagger*, *Wu-Tang: An American Saga*, *All Rise*, and *East New York*. Her poetry has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *The Temz Review*, *Aunt Chloe: Journal of Artful Candor*, and was featured by KQED. She is a graduate of CalArts MFA Film Directing and Creative Writing Programs, and UC Berkeley, where studied in June Jordan's Poetry for the People Program.

# Loz Feliz for the Unhappy

BY NICOLE BIRD

The night was cool and my belly was full, having just devoured a plate of brioche French toast, syrup flowing over each pillowy piece of butter-enriched bread. I ate under the lone star of the city on an outside patio, the hum of conversations melding with house music at a low decibel, loud enough to be heard, soft enough to smooth the ambiance like cotton hugging thorns. The air smelled sweet with the new American cuisine, kale salads, and organic protein bowls, fresh tomato juice for bloody Marys, and piping Hot Toddies for all those who wanted a kick of warmth on this temperate night. I placed my fork and knife on the empty plate and laughed at a joke my friend made about something ephemeral and very LA, a pretentious marketing bro who thought Downtown was the only neighborhood that mattered.

I hugged my friend goodbye and she went up Hillhurst, back towards Los Feliz Boulevard. I made my way South, closer to Vine, towards a neighborhood where I parked. Parking was a source of existential dread anywhere in this city. But I managed to find a side street amenable to my vehicle. The night grew darker as I strolled farther and farther away from the main boulevard. With all my time in Hollywood, I had never felt unsafe in that neighborhood with all the streetlights, bright enough to dissuade anyone from instigating any kind of trouble. You had to seek a dark corner and an abandoned alley for that. But here, the lights dimmed and I found myself striding in shadow, picking up my pace just to get to my car. One more block and I would be there.

My shoulders shifted upwards in an effort to shield myself. As a woman, it was normal to be afraid, basically all the time, driving, walking, living, breathing. But this felt more visceral – a real fear versus a metaphorical one based on societal sickness and with a sigh of relief, I spotted my car. Cross the street and I'd secure safety.

Just as I approached the black sedan, I saw two men, faces obfuscated, black shirts, no details other than towering figures, tall, dwarfing my petite frame. I kept walking, my car reachable within a few steps. I gripped my keys in my hand, holding one between each knuckle, makeshift weapons taught by Instagram videos.

They'll keep walking. I'm just going to my car and they'll pass me, I'm sure of it, I told myself, but as I drew closer, they held their gait, making their way straight for me. They sprinted in my direction and I took a harsh breath, realizing in that moment how much smog sat suspended in the air.

I rounded the front of my car and unlocked the door, leaping into the driver's seat. One of them reached inside and grabbed the collar of my favorite shirt made of soft chambray, ripping it at the seams. Through the darkness, I saw his gritted teeth as he attempted to snatch me from the seat.

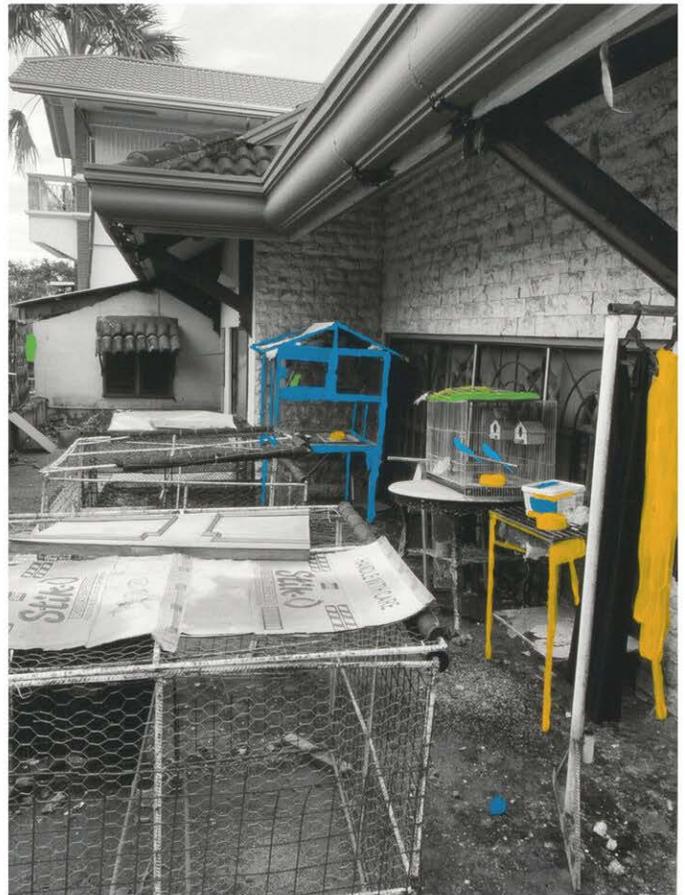
Holding the keys in between each finger, I jammed them into his wrist and heard a guttural growl, blood bloomed on his pale, white skin. I took my chance and slammed the door shut.

Thank God for automatic locks.

I shifted the car into drive and with swift moves, screeched onto Los Feliz Boulevard.

My stomach turned and I pulled over, threw open the door, and vomited the contents of my stomach, watching the beautiful brioche French toast splash onto the pavement. I never ate in Los Feliz again.

**Nicole Bird's** work has appeared in the *Ariel Chart International Literary Journal*, *Monadnock Underground*, and *Granfalloon*, among others. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in both 2021 and 2022. You can read more about Nicole at [nicolebirdthewriter.com](http://nicolebirdthewriter.com).



# Return to Sender

BY NICK KUNZE

They came for the dead rock star. They flew in for her, shaping their entire vacation around a single night in Room 202. Her room cost almost double the honeymoon suite, despite being an unrenovated queen with poor fixtures and a dripping faucet. This grunginess, the feeling of entering a time capsule, was half the sell. They asked if it was the same mirror she looked in, the same sheets where she slept her last, the same flickering lamp she used to pen those final, haunting, half-finished lyrics, written on hotel stationary now encased behind glass at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. My only answer was raised eyebrows and pursed lips. Their imagination did the rest.

The policy was clear: two nights max. But this did not stop them from begging for longer, from sliding an envelope of cash across the counter, giving drawn-out explanations with desperate eyes. “Ma’am,” they’d begin. “Miss, listen,” they’d plead. They wanted to write their first album, wanted to drop acid for a week and search for her soul on some higher plane, wanted to give birth in the bathtub and name the child after her. I said no every time. She did not belong to them. She belonged to me, as I belonged to her.

Her photograph was framed in the lobby, directly across from the concierge desk. Eyes closed, lips nearly kissing the mic, her face blown-up larger than any guest. The shot was from her final concert, a sold-out show at the Hollywood Bowl the night before she died. They always peered over their shoulders while checking in, searching her face for signs of disapproval.

They were tatted and gage-eared, pooling cash, too young to have been fans while she was alive. They were sage-scented mystics, asking about auras and unusual smells. They were former groupies turned pedestrian by age, wearing worn-out concert t-shirts over conservative khakis. They were die-hard fans who came annually, their night booked a year in advance. Only one thing was certain: they were here for her. For Eve.

She died at 28. Just missed the club, people said. She’s no Janis, no Jimi, no Amy, no Kurt. In my opinion, this only added to her mystique. She was no joiner. Even in death, she had no interest in being grouped.

Born Evelyn Malinowski, the eldest daughter of third-generation Polish Americans, Eve was raised in a nothing town two hours west of Chicago. Muscle Memory was born in the Malinowski family basement, Eve ad-libbing to melodies performed by her high school boyfriend and his two best friends. In interviews years later, Eve admitted that the group only formed to occupy the boring winter months. The fame, she felt, was incidental.

In 1994, Muscle Memory appeared, one minute unknown, the next everywhere at once. The world, still sore from the death of Cobain, found his seeming successor in a 5’2 Midwesterner hiding behind dark bangs. Their sound, a marriage of anthemic 70s rock and the

grunge of the age, seemed both timeless and brand-new. Eve's lyrics pointed to a feeling of loss, which her detractors claimed was unearned by an artist so young and unscathed by the world. For her fans, this sense of mourning was the point. Eve was a normal, everyday American, and she still felt broken.

She was 23 the year of her first tour, her thin figure almost hidden behind the mic stand. For five years she oscillated between super-stardom and fringe, too popular to be ignored but too idiosyncratic to fall squarely in the mainstream. Then, somewhere in the early hours of April 25th 1999, lying in the dry bathtub of Room 202, she died.

My father found her. At 10AM, Muscle Memory's band manager asked for a key to her room, the tour bus idling on the curb. The band had stayed with us before, the hotel a long-standing boutique in the hills near Hollywood. My father accompanied the manager up the elevator, the manager grumbling and checking his watch while they ascended. At the door of 202, three polite knocks from my father were followed by less polite shouts from the manager. Then a key in the door, a turn of the lock and a tenuous step inside.

The bed was unmade. Her bags were unpacked. The bathroom door was open, lights on. She was not visible from the doorway, her tiny frame entirely sunken in the tub. It was only when my father walked into the bathroom that he saw the crown of her head.

The manager sobbed on the mused bedsheets while my father called 911.

In the following days, musicians sent statements of lament. Bill Clinton's press secretary gave condolences during a conference. Fans held vigils, playing her albums out their bedroom windows all hours of the day. Traffic was stopped in front of our hotel, a mob of candle-holding mourners lining the block.

Eve's death was an anomaly compared to your average celebrity obit: there had been alcohol and weed in her system, but not enough to be deadly. No cuts or bruises, no long-standing medical condition. She was just dead, with a pen and a few sheets of hotel stationary beside her in the tub. The official cause of death, announced by a coroner clearly uncomfortable with the microphones and cameras crowding the front stairs of his office, was a "Sudden Cardiac Event."

A suicide or overdose could be placed in a narrative. A fitting, if tragic, finale. Even a drawn-out struggle with disease or a fiery, unexpected crash could be framed poetically. But this? It defied easy narration.

The media obsessed over one aspect of the story: why the bathtub? It was the sort of detail that inspired conspiracies and sold newspapers. After years of investigation and fan theories there is still no answer, although I am glad it happened in the bathroom and not the bed—it is much easier to clean melted wax and cum stains out of porcelain than cotton sheets.

After her death, the hotel no longer belonged to my family. We merely kept it. Watched it. From that night onward, it belonged to Eve.

On a Sunday in May of 2018, Eve's sister waited at my check-in desk. She had not rung the bell and was standing quietly when I exited the back office, her eyes roving the lobby, her expression flat. Even though she was a few years older than me, I couldn't help but feel my age in her presence—she had her sister's youthfulness, the same pale skin and wrinkleless features. Only her eyes showed her age: they were alert, perpetually narrowed.

I recognized her immediately. Not from her frequent media appearances, or her minor, tangential fame, but from the photo that hung behind her. It was like seeing Eve grown, an Eve that had exited her hotel room on April 25th, ready for the next leg of her tour. Sarah.

I first met Sarah alongside the rest of the world, watching my father's hotel on our family room TV. Twelve years old, I remember sitting with my brother on the couch, the first time in my life I'd wanted to turn on the news. We watched Sarah, trailed by cameras, make the tearful walk from her high school's side entrance to the family car. Now, twenty years later, she'd outlived her sister by a decade. She ran the Eve Foundation, a charity that funded public school arts programs. Like me, she had built a life off what Eve had left behind.

"Welcome. How can I help you?" I asked, presenting the hospitality voice I'd perfected at the age of fourteen while working the phones. Although I gave no indication, I knew why she was here. The letters.

For years she'd written me letters. Some were handwritten personal pleas, while others were typed legalese on law firm letterhead. No matter the format, the message was always the same: Stop. Stop using my sister's legacy, stop monetizing my loved one's death. There was no legal issue, so the letters were always appeals to our shared humanity, or my sense of decency, or whatever guilt trip she could conjure.

I ignored them all.

Now she stood in my hotel, her frown framed by a photograph of her dead sister. "I need to talk to you," she said. Her voice was pleasant, soft, nothing like Eve's gravely contralto.

I'd imagined this meeting many times—mostly anxiety dreams of Sarah beating me, stabbing me, Eve's face my last sight before I joined her in death—but now that it was happening, I was frozen. I fell back on routine, using the same words I'd said endlessly throughout my career. "Do you need a room?"

"It's about Eve." She knew me, had probably watched me age in staff photos and snapshots from news articles over the years.

I waited for her to continue, my caretaker's grin static. I hoped, hopeless, that my cheery blankness would break her courage and turn her away, or that it would enrage her and push her

to cruelty, so I could hate her.

“I know this is your livelihood. But she, my sister...” A speech she’d likely recited hundreds of times in the last few days died before it could begin. “The thought of all these people in that room, making a... an event of her...” She stopped again, choosing silence over tears.

I understood her request. The lowest point of her family’s history had become my tourist attraction. But celebrity does not belong to any one person. She could not control her sister’s profiteers any easier than she could wrangle the sun.

“I never wanted to see this place. I refused. But I decided... If I came in person, I thought I could show you how much this means to my family.” She took a deep breath. “Stop. Please, stop.”

“Room 202 is a cultural artifact and an important part of music history,” I began, reciting the blurb I gave whenever music journalists or curio magazines called. I sounded robotic, like an automated phonenumber listing options. “The room is not about her death, but instead is a celebration of her life. The-”

“Don’t.” *Don’t lie to me.* She remained soft-spoken, almost wistful in tone.

Again I waited, holding Sarah’s gaze. Why wasn’t she angry? I had spent decades being berated by guests for the smallest infraction—pinky-sized mirror smudges, overly hot showers, ice machines dispensing ice too fast or too slow—but now, finally deserving of rage, Sarah would not deliver it.

After a few moments, she reached into her purse and removed a scrap of paper, which she placed on my desk.

“I’ll be in town all week. If you decide to... if you want to talk.” She hesitated, her palm covering the paper. Then she slid it forward and withdrew her hand. A phone number.

She stared at me for a few more seconds, hoping for some action on my part. I remained still, willing my brain to be silent.

Without another word, she turned and walked out of my hotel.

I took the slip of paper and returned to the back office, comparing Sarah’s tiny, neat handwriting to my mental image of Eve’s loose, looping letters.

I imagined them together, Sarah and Eve. Eve was already a rising star when Sarah was a child, Eve on tour while Sarah sat in class. Did they have normal Christmases together, experience meaningless sibling spats?

Looking at the phone number, I was struck by an image of my own sibling: my brother, nailing the plaque onto Eve’s door.

I ripped the note in two.

The next morning, I found a Ouija Board under Eve's bed. This was no Hasbro toy. The board was old and heavy, made of real wood. Its painted alphabet was bright white with black trim, and two angels, harps in hand, floated in the upper corners. Holding the board, staring down at its chips and imperfections, I wondered what questions had been sent into the ether, and what answers, if any, Eve sent back.

I personally cleaned Room 202 every day, a routine that was part superstition, part ritual. At 11AM, right after check-out, I'd wheel a maid's cart to the second floor and see what gifts the guests had left for Eve. Trinkets on the bedstand, roses in the bathtub, bound bundles of hair tucked under the mattress, handwritten letters taped to the walls. I tossed it all, turning the room over like a paranoid spy searching for bugs. By 11:30 the room was refreshed: towels replaced, sheets switched, incense ash wiped off the bathroom counter.

My cleaning done, I sat on the edge of the bed. I had more work to do around the hotel, much more, but I remained seated. Sarah sat beside me, silent, her pleading eyes never blinking.

If you didn't know better, it could have been any hotel room, although one slightly run-down and with outdated fixtures. This had been my older brother's decision, to not cover the walls with photos of Eve or leave a life-size mannequin lying in the tub. "This is a tourist attraction that can't look like a tourist attraction," he said at the dinner table in the weeks after Eve's death, eyes excited. "This isn't Disney World. It's sophisticated. Refined."

My brother, only nineteen at the time, took on Room 202 as a personal project. He knew if he didn't, no one else would. Our father was a successful hotelier because he was, to his core, courteous. He would never come up with an idea that profited off something so morbid. It was only my brother who saw the potential in Eve's death. He decided what stayed and what left Room 202, he developed the newspaper ads, he contacted the Hollywood bus tours. Only two months after her death—"Enough time for it to not look insensitive," my brother claimed—Eve's room reopened, a small black plaque underneath the number on the door. The plaque read 'Evelyn Malinowski, 1971-1999.'

From birth, my brother was the heir apparent, destined to run the hotel with the same attention and care as our father. Starting in middle school, every day he'd step off the bus and shadow our father, observing his bookkeeping and unobtrusive manner. This would be his world, his burden.

I worked at the hotel too, but only out of a mix of obligation and convenience, manning the front desk ten hours a week for spending cash. I was never meant to stay. I did not want to kowtow to the rich and rude or spend my adulthood scrubbing neglected tiles. My own vague ambitions revolved around one thought: anywhere but here. I had dreams of other cities, other lives. I thought I could use my quiet attentiveness to be a journalist, perhaps, or a photographer. I never pursued these potential interests. It was enough to hold them close, a lifejacket buoying

me from sinking into a lifetime at the hotel.

A week before my twenty-first birthday, my father already two years in the grave, my brother collapsed, dead, while investigating a strange smell in Room 303. The doctors said it was a heart attack, basically unheard of in someone his age. A freak occurrence. My brother, so long behind the scenes, made a brief jump to the headlines—two random deaths in our hotel, a floor and a decade apart. It was taken as further proof that the hotel was haunted.

The hotel, my inheritance, sat unmanned. My Junior year at UCSB was deferred. I would defer again, then withdraw. I remain with no certificate past a high school diploma. I stepped into his role, the hotel never closing. A magic trick: my brother in the chair one second, me in his place the next.

The day I returned, my brother's plans waited on his desk—a manila folder filled with typed documents, handwritten notes, hasty sketches and contractor's blueprints. His ten-year plan for the hotel. The pages within were still being reworked and edited in the hours before he died, the chemical smell of his black Sharpie still lingering on the paper. He did not make a will, but this folder was certainly his last testament. Grief-ridden, I opened the folder and followed its instructions.

My brother never left the hotel. He wandered the halls with me, watched while I scrubbed the sinks, reprimanded the lackluster bell boys and unfastidious maids by my side. He floated over my shoulder while I ripped Sarah's phone number in two. *Keep her out*, he whispered. *Eve is ours.*

My father's hotel. My brother's hotel. Eve's hotel. But never, never mine. Yet I am the only one still there, trapped by ghosts.

Still seated on Eve's bed, I finally stood. I had paperwork to finish, renovations to monitor. How long had I been in Room 202, watching the past play out on the walls?

I grabbed my maid's cart and headed for the elevator. The Ouija board, buried under banana peels and paper cups, left with me.

When I saw Sarah again, she was alone on top of the city. She wore exercise clothing—black on black, tight to her thin frame. Facing away from me, I watched her watch the city wake.

She had not returned to the hotel in the two days since she'd made her plea. I'd begun to hope her visit was a one-off and that Sarah would become just another specter haunting my halls. But here she was, at the peak of my favorite hike at 9:00 a.m.

I took Tuesday morning off every week, not arriving at the hotel until 1:00 p.m. I would snooze my alarm exactly thirty extra minutes, silently enjoy a coffee and yogurt while leaning against my kitchen counter, then ascend Runyon Canyon, a hike that began a few blocks from my Hollywood home. At first it was cathartic, an activity only for me, but over the years it

transformed into just another routine, a box to check-off before I could call the day complete. I'd climb, stare out at the smog-coated city for a few unreflective moments, then head back home for a shower before work. Watching Sarah, I could not recall the last time I'd taken off two full days in a row. I could not even remember the last time I'd done a different hike.

Did this woman know my schedule? Maybe this was an ambush, a chance to attack me without the protection of my lobby or the shield of my uniform. I knew everything about her sister—did Sarah, somehow, know everything about me?

She turned toward me, and her look of surprise convinced me that this encounter was a coincidence. However, it was one she planned to take advantage of. She approached, her eyes never leaving my face. I stood my ground, preparing a professional smile.

“Hi,” she said, casual, like we'd planned to meet. “It's beautiful up here.”

“It is,” I agreed. “I do this hike every week. It's my favorite view of the city.”

Sarah looked over her shoulder as if to appraise my choice, taking in the sprawl of buildings below us.

“Eve ruined LA for me,” Sarah said, turning back. “I could never come here without thinking about what happened. Plus, she always complained about LA. She couldn't stand that there were no seasons. She said it explained everything wrong with the city. But being here now... I like it. Not a single stranger has spoken to me in three days here. I'm surprised by how much I like that.” She looked embarrassed by her admission. Or maybe she was embarrassed to be confiding in me, the stranger who would not let her sister die in peace.

I nodded, still smiling like a concierge. I imagined my professional smile sliding away, transforming into an intimate grin. But what smile was that? Who was the last person to slip under the veneer, I wondered, the last person who wasn't a potential guest?

“I know what I said the other day,” Sarah continued. “And I would prefer to not have Eve be part of... your business. But I understand this is your livelihood. And I've read about the room. I know it isn't some haunted house attraction. I don't think you're a...” She searched for the word. “A vulture.”

Then, I wanted to ask, what do you think I am?

Sarah broke eye contact for the first time. “I wish I'd come earlier. Years ago. I can understand how after all these years it's hard to change. With enough time, anything can become ordinary.”

I felt lonely in that moment, deeply so, a feeling I had become so familiar with that I'd stopped recognizing it as anything but my normal state of self.

“Would you like to stay in her room?” I asked. “Fans and other guests have found it cathartic. They say they feel very close to her afterwards. To Eve.”

Sarah frowned. “I’m not some fan. I’m her sister. Would you want to spend time in the room your loved one died in? Would that be something you’d like?”

I regularly entered Room 303. I would unlock the door with shaky hands, like a relapsed smoker lighting their first cigarette in years. Then I’d stand in the doorway, imagining the smell that had brought my brother here—it turned out to be a bag of uncooked meat, spoiling deep under the mattress—and what he’d thought of while his body swiftly shut down. Did he know he was dying? Was his final feeling fear, or just frustration that his schedule was being disrupted? In my many visits to 303, he never told me.

I wanted to say all this to Sarah, to scream “I was abandoned too!” But I only lowered my gaze and mumbled, “You’re right. Stupid idea.”

“It’s okay,” she said, the edge already gone from her voice.

I stammered for a few more moments, trying and failing to wipe away my embarrassment. She watched me, curious, like a renter finally stopping to observe the foliage that had been creeping up their apartment’s side wall for years.

She reached out and touched my arm, silencing me. “Really. It’s okay.”

I nodded. How pathetic must I have seemed, for her to comfort me?

She withdrew her arm and, out of words, began to descend the hill. I stayed at the outlook for three more minutes, watching the slope of the trail instead of the view behind me, then headed home.

That afternoon, I stole Eve for myself.

In the moment, being in the lobby when Eve’s guest arrived seemed like a coincidence. But looking back, I’d been floating around check-in all day, shirking duties, finding any excuse to return.

The moment the man entered, I knew he was there for Room 202. His nervous energy, his too-tight black jeans, his lack of luggage aside from a backpack. A local, here for a night alone with Eve. While he checked-in with Marla, a long-term employee, the man nearly bounced with excitement. Watching him, I felt myself become, briefly but sharply, a madame selling flesh.

I stepped forward when he withdrew his credit card.

“Hello, sir. I’m the manager,” I said from the wrong side of the desk. He turned quickly, like a teenager caught sneaking in drunk late at night.

“Hi,” he said, eyebrows raised, ready to deliver either benevolence or bullying.

“What brings you to Los Angeles?”

The initial surprise gone, he smiled. “I’m here for Eve.” He said this like he was about to pick up his prom date, and not sleep in a dead girl’s room.

“I’m so sorry, sir, but Room 202 is booked for the night.”

Marla, bless her, stayed quiet.

“I booked weeks ago.”

“I understand. We’d happily rent you another room free of charge as an apology. We’re terribly sorry for the inconvenience.”

“No. This is unacceptable. I’m staying in Room 202. I am staying in-”

“I’m sorry, sir,” I cut in, “but as I said, that won’t be possible.” The shadow of my brother grew and flickered behind me, enraged, unable to believe what was happening in his lobby.

The guest railed against me, threatening bad reviews. I only responded with stock apologies and a fixed grin. “Bitch,” he finally said, waving me away with thick fingers. “I’m never fucking coming back here.” Then he stomped out of the lobby.

Marla looked at me, confused.

“Keep 202 empty,” I said.

Marla nodded.

“I’m running out. Back in forty.” I had a bag to pack.

I had not slept in the hotel since I was a child. Back then it was a treat, the easiest way for my father to fill my bored summer months. He’d tell me to choose a friend, choose a room and enjoy a parent-free night away. Alone with the cable TV rumbling and room service cooling on the bedside table, we’d pretend to be adults: bored businessmen or feuding newlyweds, vacationing out-of-towners or international travelers. In our playacting, we were never locals. The hotel was always a waystation, a brief stop. It was never our forever.

At 8:00 p.m. that night, my shift over, I went to Room 202.

I changed into sweatpants and a t-shirt that featured Snoopy and Woodstock. I watched part of a singing competition on the television. I walked around the room, read a few pages of a mystery novel, mixed then didn’t drink a gin and tonic from the minibar. I pretended what I was doing was normal.

After ninety minutes, a realization struck: I was wasting my time. I had not commandeered Eve’s room to act like it was nothing special. I was here for the dead rock star. What could I do but play the part?

I sat on the bed, put in my headphones, navigated to Spotify and began playing *Return to Sender*, Muscle Memory’s final and most acclaimed album. Staring at myself in her mirror, I

sank into those iconic, rumbling first notes. After twenty seconds of building drums and bass, she emerges, voice soft, like a whispering in my ear. “It doesn’t end, it doesn’t end, it doesn’t end,” she croons. Then the guitar crashes in at full force.

A confession: Despite how prominent Eve has been in my life, I have never been a fan. The lyrics are haunting and the melodies are memorable, but it always felt like her music was made for someone else. While girls my age were sobbing over her death, I could only feel the vague, collective sadness that accompanies the passing of any cultural icon. As a teenager, thoughtless and cruel, I’d even joke, “Why couldn’t Stevie Nicks have died here instead?”

Now, her music surging in my ears, I yearned for Eve. I willed her to appear, spectral and ever young, and tell me what to do.

I was usually prepped for bed at this time of night, with wave sounds on and eyes closed by 10:00 p.m. Tonight, I would stay awake. I would wait for Eve. What sort of spirit appears at 9:45?

Two songs passed. Three. ‘Return to Sender,’ the album’s head-bobbing title song, came and went. I felt nothing. No presence. By song six I was restless, but I did not remove my headphones, interrupting Eve mid-riff. I was determined to stay the night, even if all I left with in the morning was embarrassment for believing in the ghosts at my own haunted house.

The album ended and I queued up Muscle Memory’s first studio release, *Dropped at Birth*. Success and silk sheets eventually softened their sound, but their debut was raw, full of jarring notes and rageful lyrics. I turned the volume up too loud, drowning out the hum of the mini fridge, the whir of the fan, the flickering self-doubt tapping at the back of my skull. Forty minutes later, I moved on to album number two, *Doctor Doctor*, their most maligned release. Then I repeated my out-of-order trilogy, returning to *Return to Sender*. By 11:30, I was flat on my back with my head on the pillow, straining to stay awake even with the music at full blast.

*This is a waste of time.*

I sat up. My headphones slipped from my ears, the sudden silence hitting me like a shock of cold water.

*There is nothing to find here. There is nothing wrong.*

Those were not my thoughts.

*Leave.*

It was my brother, still the same age as when he died. I saw his dark, coiffed hair, which took three minutes of gelling and combing to wrangle from its morning mop. I saw his neutral, attentive expression, ready to disarm abuse or humbly receive praise. I saw my brother, the hotelier.

*Do not destroy my legacy. Do not change something you do not understand.*

I came to Eve's room in search of one ghost but I had found another.

I wanted Eve to appear beside my brother to state her case. She would materialize, eyes sleepy like in every interview and photo, and ask me to shut and lock her door for good, to turn this room into a shrine without worshippers.

But Eve did not appear. She was not here, not spending time in a drab hotel room waiting for her former fans. Her legacy was elsewhere. Only my brother remained, trapped, his business unfinished.

*This will never be yours. You are a caretaker, nothing more.*

Listening to his cruel words, words I'd heard whispered daily from the walls, I was struck by a question I'd never considered. Why had only half of my brother survived the transition to the afterlife? The flawless manager still visited me, but where was the man beneath the uniform? Where was the brother who, after too many beers for a Tuesday night, would imitate the day's most bothersome guests for my entertainment; who would proofread my high school essays while mocking them, my embarrassment the price for perfect punctuation; who planned our father's funeral while still running the hotel; who stayed up late with me, crying softly while I sobbed? Why had I only conjured the part of him that scared me?

*This will never be yours. This will never be yours. This will never be yours.*

This ghost, perhaps, was not even half of my brother. Maybe it was none of him. Maybe it was just a specter of a memory of a child's impression of a hardworking, driven man.

In that moment my brother vanished, his unspoken words deafening one moment, gone the next. I was alone. Alone expect for one sensation, one memory: Sarah's comforting hand on my arm.

I awoke on top of the sheets, lights on, the chord of my headphones pooled around my neck. When had I fallen asleep?

The clock read 6:30 a.m. I rose, showered and changed into my uniform. An hour early for my shift, I exited Room 202 to begin the day.

I dug her number out of the trash, pushing aside yogurt cartons and unwanted receipts. My arm resurfaced, the two halves of paper rescued from the bottom of the can. I dialed from the office phone—she would not ignore the hotel on her Caller ID. After six rings, she answered.

“Hi. This is Sarah.”

“It's done. Your sister is no longer going to be a part of my hotel.” I said this in my own voice, without my hotelier's lilt. My tone lower, my words less clipped.

“Won't that hurt your business?” Her voice was not infused with gratitude, like I'd

dreamed. She sounded skeptical.

“Don’t worry about that.”

A pause.

“Thank you for letting me know,” she said, still suspicious.

I waited, hoping my silence would push her to say more. Our first conversation, reversed.

“How much longer are you in LA?” I finally said, worried she would hang up.

“My plans changed. I’m on my way to the airport now.”

With nothing else to say, I tumbled back to my script. “I hope you enjoyed your stay.”

Click.

Sarah, like her sister, was gone.

Even though we no longer advertised it, people still came for Eve. Any internet sleuth could find the correct hotel name and room number. Middle-aged men still asked for Room 202 with feigned casualness. Superfans still made their yearly pilgrimage. If the room was open, I would rent it to them. However, it had lost its mysticism. No more special rates, no more months-long waiting list, no more black plaque on the door. My part in the performance was finished.

I no longer cleaned Room 202, nor had I entered it since my overnight. Whenever I passed its door, however, my eyes were drawn to the imprint of the removed plaque and the discoloration of the wood beneath.

My brother’s visits also ended. Freed from his glare, I wondered how my true brother would react to this fearsome version of him I created. If he saw me cowering before his memory, I think my big brother would have laughed, poked at my belly and said, “Doesn’t life make itself hard enough?”

Unless there is a conference or other event, I take the whole day off every Tuesday. On my first free day, the first in years, I did not hike. Instead, I got in my car and drove north, up the PCH. I passed Santa Monica and Malibu, the sun peeking over the mountains to my right. I did not leave with a destination in mind, no final beach where I would park my car. I simply drove, the day empty, and waited for inspiration to strike.

**Nick Kunze** is a writer based in Los Angeles. He majored in Creative Writing at UCLA. This is his first publication.



# The Cell

BY ELANA KLOSS

Theodore Hedriech lay in the dark and loosened his eyes for some sleep. He curled up his body and drew in his knees.

If there was any fate at all, what was his?

He fell into dreams where cotton skies drew open. And, beneath gray lids, cast himself into a world unfettered. Here, the air tasted blue. Here, God could not speak. Theodore peeled away from the rot of his cell and sank in the night.

On the walls wild images pressed. Illusions of golden pheasants flew over and petals of violet swirled. Cracks veined up the ceiling, curling shapes into red poppies and mums that swayed their limbs so that just the thin layer of night separated him from the cold Tower of Elm.

In the shadows a vision of his sweet Rosemary appeared. The curve of her face and the rouge of her cheeks, this hallucination alone brought such deep pleasure that in his unconscious drift, a smile rose and thinned up his face.

Birds and sun, fantasies and truths, all this together erupted a joy that kept Theodore blushing and warm through the night. His eyes rolled and struck, darting in a terrific frenzy. Close enough, one could see the violent jolt of his pupils. Fervent and crazed, the rest of his body lay silent in the plot of his bunk.

Beyond his cell the bright moon swayed. She brushed over sleeping birds and nestled by freshly dampened willows. A quiet breeze rolled over the prison.

Then the day arrived.

It moved up Theodore's face and washed down the walls. 12,918 lines glimmered by the side of his bed, marking his days in the cell. Rows by the dozen paraded the walls, forming an exquisite organization of neatly etched lines. A shriek of delight leapt his breath. "A magnificent display!" he choked.

Theodore rolled over, lifted his copy of *War and Peace*, and pressed it firmly against the wall. With a paper clip in hand, he used the spine of his book to measure a line next to the others. His dry hand teetered against the cement, and his skin hung from his knuckles; this would mark his last one. Marveling in its completion, he sighed. He dropped the paper clip and stepped back from the wall.

Morning poured between the bars and, with the clank of metal, opened. Bluebird skies

flew open, just as he had dreamt, and one foot led the other. He smiled into the light.

**Elana Kloss** received a BFA in Fashion Design at Otis College of Art and Design and attended a short story writing class with Ron Darian at the UCLA Extension Program in 2021. She works designing and sketching for a small fashion company and is also a board member at Active-Plus, a nonprofit that provides wellness programming for children in underserved areas. Elana was born in Alaska and has a passion for figure drawing, and classical music and dance. Her work has appeared in *Literally Stories*, *Sortes*, *The Penman Review*, and *Isele Magazine*

# Time Exposure

BY LYNNE T. PICKETT

Petra could feel Mr. Ears nipping her heels, she could feel his rapid, panting breath against her bobby socks. Mother hated it when Mr. Ears followed her every step in the kitchen, but Petra found it fun and comforting. “Oh, yes, Mr. Ears, I know you love sausage too.” Petra tried to balance her wooden tray, with her two glasses of milk, three sausages, and her biscuit she almost drowned in lemon-mint jam.

Her dress shoes were a little slippery, the bottom of the shoes only worn once. Her mother had frowned at her this morning, wondering out loud but not actually asking Petra, How did you scuff those brand-new shoes? Petra sighed, she wanted to remind her mother that she had slipped at church last week, and that was why her left knee was black and blue, but Petra knew not to speak to her mother; she wouldn't hear her, since her mother was too jittery about going to Horton's Department Store.

Petra's heart skipped with joy when her mother said she could go out to the patio and eat her breakfast alone, before they were to leave. Outside, she set the tray down on the tiny white-and yellow-flowered table her grandfather had made for her when she was six. Of course, now being ten and long-legged (her mother constantly complained that Petra's clothes needed to be replaced too often, and why couldn't it be she fit into her older sister, Aida's, hand-me-downs), the table banged against Petra's knees as she pulled the blue stool closer to her breakfast tray. Now she would probably have another bruise on her other knee, she sighed again. The sun was becoming warmer and warmer. Petra squinted as she looked toward the sun, she thought she could see the outline of the moon trying to hide in the bright blueness of the sky.

Mr. Ears wagged his tail for a sausage. Petra honestly could not bear to part with any of the sausages; she reluctantly tore a tiny piece and gave it to him. Well, that was for the best anyway, sausages were not good for dogs, especially small cocker spaniels. They were delicate animals. Isn't that what the veterinarian always told her parents as they frowned at the bill?

Petra chewed up the rest of the thick sausages before Mr. Ears looked up again and then with great joy licked off all of the lemon-mint jam from the biscuit. She reached for her milk, the now overhead sun was making the milk in the glasses sweat. She drank up quickly, one glass after the other, desperately not wanting her milk to become warm. She only liked milk when it was icy cold. Often she would wake before the sun rose so she could tiptoe downstairs and put the milk jug in the freezer. Right before Mother would start to make breakfast, Petra would place Mr. Ears at Mother's feet, annoyed, Mother would bat away Mr. Ears while Petra placed the milk back into the refrigerator.

Petra twisted her legs together under the table as her bangs flopped into her face, escaping

from the thin gold barrette her mother insisted on, she rubbed her fingers on the outside of the empty, perspiring milk glasses, and with her damp fingers, smoothed her hair back quickly into the barrette again. It was quite clear that her mother would not be very pleased with messy bangs today. Petra squinted her eyes again, but the sun was too bright, the thin outline of the moon was now well hidden.

The kitchen window squeaked open, and her sister Aida yelled, “Come on, let’s go!” Petra pouted, feeling her small, too thick lips protruding. Why couldn’t she have nice thin lips like her sister? How could it be time to go already, Petra hadn’t even eaten her biscuit she was saving for last. Her mother pushed her sister aside in the window. “What are you doing? Do you want us to be late and not see the moon?”

Petra stuffed the biscuit into her mouth as her mother left the window. Dutifully, she jumped up, sending the milk glasses tumbling off the wooden table and shattering as they hit the flagstone patio floor. She scooted backward before the splashes of milk ruined her Sunday dress. Mr. Ears began to whimper and cry, she turned and scooped him in her arms, checking for bloody paws. Petra began to whistle uncontrollably, no cuts, she surmised. What was Mother going to say about the broken glasses? It might make them late.

Aida opened the porch door. “Come for your sweater.” Petra kicked the broken glass aside and picked up the tray, shooing Mr. Ears inside.

Petra could feel her legs shaking as she walked toward the impatient gold flashes of Aida’s rimmed pupils. Even the outside of her pupils were lovely.

“Oh, stop, I can not stand it Petra, you whistle like a dying bird.” Petra took a deep breath and nodded. She would stop; she was afraid Aida may walk closer and notice the broken glass. Petra felt tiny droplets of perspiration forming under her bangs. A sweater? Why must she wear a sweater over her dress too? Petra set the tray down on the kitchen table. Her mother was pacing back and forth down the hall near the front door with the new white button-down sweater in her hand.

Petra could not understand all of this nervousness. Who goes to see the moon during the daytime on television? Couldn’t she look up and see the moon every night if she wished? Besides, she just saw it this morning—what was there to see? If there was so much more on the television, why couldn’t Mother just turn it on, Father received one for his holiday bonus last year. Why did Father care if they went to the department store to see it, and why must they be all dressed up too? Petra found grown-ups, including Aida, who now seemed to think she was one too, so bothersome.

Petra sucked in her cheeks and began to whistle as they walked out the door. This time, though, no one told her to stop her whistling, because her sister and mother were busy adjusting their hair and clothes as they walked hurriedly to the bus stop. Petra hated riding on the bus, the

smell of gasoline, and the bumpy, padded seats in warm weather stuck to the back of her legs. Petra kicked the ends of her shoes across the cement in annoyance.

Why did Father have to take the car so early? Why couldn't he have waited for them? All he had to do was open the doors and let the people in the store, but Father left even before breakfast. Last night, he repeated over and over, did they realize he was the one who hired the artist who made the display for tomorrow? Even after dinner, he pulled out the newspaper to read it and repeated the word "promotion" over and over so many times that Petra imagined him as the big gray parrot at Mr. Broetzmen's pet store. Her father hadn't eaten any of his schnitzel, and Father loved schnitzel, and last night they even had boiled potatoes and cabbage, his favorite. He moved it around on his plate in circles the entire dinner. Mother grumbled words as she cleared his plate and said tomorrow night, he could make his own dinner.

Petra watched the thin shadow of Aida moving in front of her. Aida was so tall and long; her steps were five of Petra's. But why didn't she fit in Aida's hand-me-downs if Aida was so much taller, did she grow later? Maybe it meant she would be taller than Aida. This made her smile as she huffed her air in and out, trying to keep up with Aida and her mother.

The sidewalk was very empty, Petra thought; the street had less cars and bikes or people walking their dogs. Petra then stopped short, her heart beat quickly, did she close the door to the patio? What if Mr. Ears wandered out and cut his paws or maybe even his tongue trying to lick up the bits of milk on the jagged pieces of glass? Petra felt tears rising along her lashes as she rubbed at her left knee. They were walking so fast, it was making it hurt. Aida turned around and waved at Petra like she was directing the traffic in the main square, she found Aida a commanding force, which made Petra start to run.

Petra could feel her eyes burning with tears as she blinked them back, she should take much better care of Mr. Ears, Father said he was her responsibility. Petra burped up the greasy sausages, she should also have given, poor, Mr. Ears a bigger piece of sausage. A bus was chugging toward the bus stop. Oh no, it was one of the old buses, probably without air-conditioning. Petra tugged at the arms of the cardigan sweater her mother insisted on her wearing, pushing the material upward toward her elbows.

Petra's foot stepped onto the stairs of the bus. She counted six people. Why did these six people need to see her new sweater? She waited a few minutes and then pulled it off. And, yes, there was no air-conditioning, and the windows were barely opened. Happily her mother had not seen her take the sweater off; her mother was looking down at her wrist at the new watch her father bought for Mother's birthday last month. Her mother had not smiled when she unwrapped it and frowned saying it was too expensive. Father's face had wrinkled tightly, like the bulldogs that barked at Mr. Ears, as he rose out of his chair. "What, am I not the new assistant manager and can I not pay for such a watch for my wife?" Mother nodded and said thank you, but Father stormed off. How strange, Petra thought, why would they fight about something so

silly as a new watch.

A boy across from her with hair that flopped over his eyes was also wearing a sweater over his button-down shirt, was he going to the same place? He could use a barrette too, she smiled to herself. Petra pulled her feet back and forth across the bus floor, he probably was, who else would wear a sweater in this heat, that must be the boy's father beside him, also staring at his watch like Mother. Petra tried to catch the boy's eyes to see if he, too, thought all of this excitement was just silliness.

The boy finally looked up, but his eyes moved past her as if she wasn't even there. He had a very serious expression, as if the headmaster at school had just told the boy he was in charge of the classroom. She was sure the boy was the type who wrote down the names of those who did not behave. Petra had a strong urge to bite him, maybe just a little, like Mr. Ears did; nipping him on his ankle. She began to feel her lips protruding as she thought about how she hated tattletales.

The bus jerked back and forth as if it might stop running. Her mother began to dig into her purse; she had the look of a squirrel frantically trying to retrieve a buried nut. Aida was whispering, something about the tickets Father had given them.

The bus pulled up to Horton's the outside was all windows, the top large gold lettering. Petra tried to see the art display her father spoke about, but there were only mannequins in the windows, wearing dresses and suits with their plaster hands frozen in the air as if they were waving to the people along the sidewalk.

There was a long line in front of the door, and as they approached, her mother pulled out the tickets, counting them quickly. Aida pointed to the front door, Father was waving them in, why had Mother worried about tickets? More adult silliness. Her mother turned around as if she heard Petra's thoughts as she grabbed Petra tightly by her wrist. Petra started to shake, her mother's voice was low and ominous, like she was a vampire in one of the late-night movies on television. "Put on that sweater, your father paid a lot of money for you to look nice today." Petra shrunk back; maybe Mother was going to bite Petra, just a little. Petra pulled the sweater on, the fibers beginning to cling to her sweating arms.

As she began to walk forward to Father, she could see the boy behind her. She glanced toward him. He was looking at Petra with a curious expression. She could see his eyebrows arch upward—did he hear her mother? Petra's face felt as boiling hot as her legs had felt from sitting on the plastic bus seat. She stuck her tongue out at him. Her mother turned around. Petra dropped her head and pretended to cough. Mother pulled her forward as her father ordered, "Go in, hurry."

Petra could see Father was also overheating; little beads of sweat clung to his chin. Petra smiled up at her father. In his dark blue suit, he looked very important. Others in the line,

including the boy, probably thought he was the owner of the department store.

Inside, the air was cool. She wanted to skip and run in the coolness. Her mother dropped her hold as Petra walked past rows of shoes. She stopped cold, seeing, twice the size of the monkey bars in her school, a large steel structure that looked like a squashed version of the Earth. Inside of it were twelve televisions sitting on top of each other, like a brick wall of televisions, hanging over a desk in the middle of the steel bars was a smaller, silver, rotating globe. On top of the desk was a record player and a telephone.

Were they going to be able to talk to the men who her father, reading out loud from the newspaper last night, said would be up in the sky? Petra wanted to get in front; she definitely wanted to be able to talk to the men. She would ask them if they could see the buildings and the people on Earth. The milk in Petra's stomach began to swirl uncomfortably.

Everyone was circling tightly around the large silver bars as they stared at the fuzzy-screened TVs. She could see her father chatting with several men. Oh no, she took a deep breath, she needed to go to the ladies' room. She reached up and pulled on the leather band of her mother's watch. Nothing. She tugged at the side of Aida's dress, but the two of them seemed hypnotized, their eyes, just like everyone else around her now, watching the man in a suit talking; creating an echo from the twelve versions of him.

The picture switched, and like she was looking through one of Mother's sheer scarves, she saw the image of a man coming down on a ladder, from the top of a rocket, in a large white suit that puffed out like they had stuffed it with pillows and on top of his head a big helmet. The front of his face looked like he had placed a mirror around it.

Petra plunked herself down on one of the bars of the steel globe structure and crossed her legs; it was the only way to stop herself from having to pee. Maybe the telephone on the desk was going to ring soon. Had her father convinced the man standing in his strange white suit to talk to them?

So if that was the moon the man was stepping down on, why wasn't it shiny and bright? It looked like a sandy beach, just like the one they went to last summer. The bumpy holes were larger, but they were almost like the ones that clams spout water from below the sand.

Everyone began to whisper and make sounds as one of the men placed a flag in the moon. She remembered in school the last few weeks before summer vacation before they got out that the United States rocket was going to the moon. Yes, Petra recognized the flag, she liked flags.

Maybe the phone reached the United States, not the moon. Who was going to call them? They would never hear it ring if everyone kept talking. Petra leaned closer. She thought about slipping underneath the bar and going to the phone, or maybe she'd walk right up to the

televisions to get a closer look at the sandy beach.

Petra started to slip. She tightened her hands on the bar as she instinctually wrapped her feet around the lower bar. She could feel her body spinning. She squeezed her legs, scrunched up her feet, and pushed her arms until she was upright again. What would her mother and father say? She was terrified to see her parents' eyes, but there was no one looking at her; they were still looking at the televisions. Petra looked around, suddenly realizing she, her mother, and her sister were the only ones who weren't men or boys. Why weren't there any other ladies or girls? She plunked herself back down on the bar and sat, how strange, she thought, when a man with a large camera clicked her picture. A second later, everyone began to move away as the man behind the desk in the suit appeared again, talking on the televisions. What happened to the telephone call? Her mother and sister began to leave, walking away. Did they forget about her? She ran after them and then she walked by the boy from the bus; he doubled over and began laughing. She wanted to cry, she wanted to scream, she kicked him and ran. She ran down the hallway; she ran down an aisle of dresses. She ran past men's ties and dishes and frying pans. She ran past the door that said "ladies' room." Tears were now rolling down her face. At least now she could pee. Petra couldn't believe that rotten boy saw her fall and that he laughed at her.

She washed her face in the sink to take away the puffiness from her tears. She didn't want to leave and then she remembered, there were no other women who were watching the televisions. Would they lock the store, not know she was here? How could her mother and Aida walk away without her?

Petra slowly opened the door, afraid she was completely alone. A hand landed on her arm and she screamed. Her father put his hand on her mouth. "Petra, what is wrong with you, yelling, and why would you walk away from your mother? I've been looking everywhere for you." Petra could feel her heart in her throat, was her father taking her to apologize to the boy?

Her father began to whistle. "Well, now I found you, we can have custard in the dining room with Mother and Aida." Petra began to whistle too. "Petra, isn't it exciting? Tonight you will look up and see the man in the moon, yes?"

Petra nodded and as they rounded the corner, Petra pulled her father's sleeve and begged her father for bus fare. "What is this? You love custard."

"Please, Father, please, I need to see how Mr. Ears is. I don't want anything. I'm old enough. I can get home."

Her father laughed. "Mr. Ears is fine. Custard first, guess what, today your father is now the general manager. What a day to remember, your father's promotion and men on the moon."

Petra gave up and nodded as they walked to the dining room. Her father walked them over to a man in a fancier suit than Father's. "Mr. Horton, this is my youngest, Petra."

The man smiled and extended his hand to Petra. Next to him stood the boy in the sweater. “Ah, the same age maybe as my grandson here. Say hello, Horst.”

Petra felt her cheeks pucker up again as she tried to make a whistling sound, but nothing happened, she continued to try to whistle until her head became lighter and lighter, as if it could float like a balloon, up and away, out of the building, to the sky, higher and higher, all the way to the moon.

What were the words Horst was saying? She really did like custard. It was all too bad, no custard; her father would lose his new job. Mother would probably have to give back her watch to the department store. At least she could give back this sweater.

Petra blinked back the stars forming in front of her eyes, her continual attempt at whistling starting to make her lose her ability to stand. Maybe Father would not lose his job if she fainted. Mr. Horton would then forget all about his grandson’s words and how she had kicked him, since they would be having to rush Petra to the hospital.

She felt the hand of her mother, tight on her wrist. “Petra, stop whistling, how embarrassing, Aida is right, you do sound like a dying bird.” She was making sound? “Tell Mr. Horton thank you for buying us custard today.” Petra bowed.

Mr. Horton bowed back. “A little songbird, I see.”

Father’s face was bright red, oh no, Petra would run away if she could move. Mr. Horton threw his arm around Father as if they were the best of friends.

“What exhibit shall we do when the capsule comes back to Earth, Frederik?” Mr. Horton scooped up his grandson next to him and released Petra from her mother’s hold as he pulled her other arm toward him. She was staring into the boy’s eyes, Horst’s eyes. Horst turned to his grandfather. “A large papier mâché capsule, with toy boats. Won’t they be in the ocean when they land?”

His grandfather nodded. “What do you think, Petra?”

“A big speaker for when they call us on the telephone. Why didn’t they call today?” Everyone stared at her. “The telephone by the television screens. Next time make sure it’s working.”

She whispered to her mother, “Can I go eat my custard now?” Her mother’s mouth was wide open; her mother wasn’t whistling, but she looked like she needed to. Petra ran toward Aida at the counter on a stool. She might as well eat the custard quickly before Horst said everything. She jumped up to the seat and began to dig in when someone grabbed the spoon and the custard. Horst smiled at her.

He then whispered, “This is payment for me not telling you kicked me.” He began to whistle cheerfully. Now forever, Petra thought, she would look up at the moon and think about this rude boy and no custard. And then she slipped off the stool and bit down on his ankle, just a little bit.

**Lynne T Pickett** graduated from Syracuse University, NY with a broadcast journalism degree, she also holds a post graduate certificate from Circle in the Square theatre school, NYC. Her fiction has been published in several literary publications online and in print. Lynne was recently nominated for a Pushcart prize for her story, Pick a Side. She lives in Los Angeles where sometimes the sky's too bright to see the moon, but of course; it has to compete with the stars on Hollywood

# My Last Visitors

BY CONNIE WOODRING

“Do you want to see the Chaplin?” the warden or guard or who-the-hell-is-this asked me.

“No, I am not a hypocrite. I may be crazy, lazy, hazy or a summer day but, no, I am not a hypocrite. Not like you would be if you were in my shoes. See, I am free, and you have this rotten job for 20 more years and you are very sad, I can tell. Not about my circumstances, of course. You could care less about all these prisoners in here. No, you are worried about if you’ll get laid tonight, if your wife is screw—”

The man spit out, “Now just be quiet.”

I was told to shut up, even as I was walking to the electric chair, for God’s sake!

“I thought death row prisoners got to say whatever they wanted to. In the movies the guys always say profound things like ‘I should never have robbed that bank’ or ‘Here’s to ya, kid’ or ‘Somewhere under the rainbow I buried the loot.’ I should be able to have my last words heard by everybody in this damn place! I came in alone and I will leave alone. I want to eat my last meal over again because I threw up. Will there be visitors when I die?”

“Yes, the usual media, prison representatives, protesters, friends and relatives. Your cousin, Tilly, is here.”

“What the hell is she doing here?” I was amazed and angry. “Why can’t I die without visitors? I don’t want anyone protesting my death.”

“It’s the rules. No one dies alone here.”

“Is Frank, my husband, that adulterer, wife-beater and reprobate, dead yet? I want to die just like he dies, so I can feel every suffering sizzling cell of his wretched body. I want to make sure he doesn’t get off free and easy like he has all his miserable life.”

“We’re not allowed to discuss other prisoners, but honestly, I don’t know.”

“He’s never going to die. He’ll just live forever and torment the next dumb dame that succumbs to his ugly troll looks and clothes that make him look like ‘The Incredible Shrinking Man.’ Do you know he tried to kill his father when he was 16? He vowed he’d never be like his old man if he could just kill him. His father knocked him out cold, and that was the end of that mission. I had to pay my whole married life just because Frank couldn’t kill his father. He took all his anger out on me. No one ever believed that he beat me up. The cops said, ‘She’s just loony,’ and left the house.”

I didn't want to see any visitors except Sybornag my spirit friend. No, she's not a hallucination no matter what that therapist said. I knew she could help me come back to life.

"Hiconc' gyat mageghj kidem."

"It's easy for you to say I'm supposed to have positive thoughts about everyone as I walk to the electric chair. Did you have positive thoughts when you died?"

"Kihjohn gyouin."

"Well, maybe if I come back a thousand times like you have, I won't remember my first death either, or any others, for that matter. It's really difficult to feel compassionate towards Frank. He's arrogant, mean and, well, you know him better than I do, probably. Since you've been around for a thousand years, you've met a lot of guys like Frank. Did you ever marry one, though? No, you're too smart for that!"

"Mihoc 'Fern' guh bela?"

"What do you mean, did I really kill Fern?" I was getting annoyed at her questions and commands, but then I was the one who summoned her. She probably had more interesting and deserving people to visit than me. My body shuddered at what her question implied.

She repeated the question with a soothing voice. It sounded like water trickling over rocks in a brook with a frog croaking every so often.

"I told the police the whole story, and so did Frank. About Fern, my husband's lover, how we killed her and buried her in the cellar more than 25 years ago. If it wasn't for our sewer problem, no one would have ever found her. Everyone believed me and Frank---the police, the judge, the psychiatrist. Everyone thinks we are both of sound mind and quite capable of murder. I really tried, but in the end, when it counted, nobody thought that I was crazy. If they did, I wouldn't be facing the electric chair right now."

"Mih juk iofg."

"What do you mean you saw the whole thing, and you don't believe me?"

"Guh juiknm jongi!"

Sybornag seemed to be singularly annoyed at me. I felt I was being scolded by the most important Mother of the Universe.

"Okay, I admit it. I never killed Fern. Frank stabbed her in front of me. Why? No one will ever know except Frank himself. But I wanted to kill her, and I wanted to get away from Frank's cruelty. Our plan worked. All we had to do was get me committed to the state hospital, and if the crime ever was discovered, I'd be free because I was crazy. No one would suspect Frank, our

up and outstanding community bank manager. Now I am going to be free forever from Frank and everything else. I don't care if he actually stabbed her first, or that she was dead by the time I got in my stabs. I guess I'm dying for desecrating a corpse. I wanted her dead, and I have no regrets about that. I have no compassion for her. She wanted to steal my husband away from me. I'm the only one who can do that! Do you hear me, Fern, in whatever dimension you exist now?"

"Juong hi jihknon!"

"Yes, you are absolutely right. I need to come back a few more times. Can I just come back as a German Shepherd just once? I want to bite Frank in the ass!"

The warden asked, "Do you have any last words, Mrs. W---?"

"Yes, sir. I just wish everyone was as crazy as me."

Sybornag laughed hysterically and touched my head lovingly with her bony hand. As the straps were put around my head and wrists, a great white and turquoise light filled the room, my head felt like it was filling up with cotton candy, and that's about it.

**Connie Woodring** is a 78-year-old retired psychotherapist who has been getting back to her true love of writing after 45 years in her real job. She has had many poems published in over 40 journals including one nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize. She has had seven excerpts from her yet-to-be-published novel, “Visiting Hours,” published in various journals.

