

Angel City Review



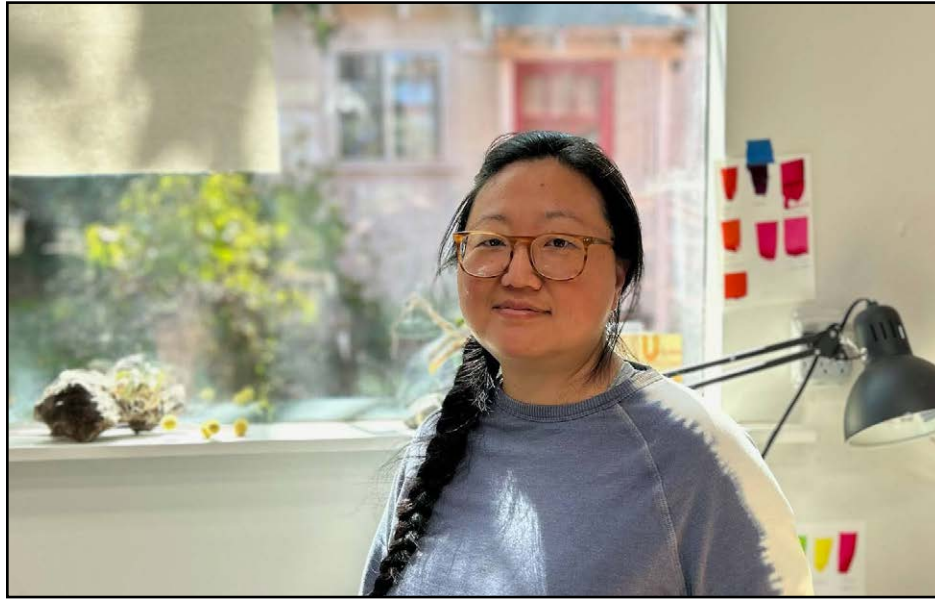
Foreword

As we release issue 13, I reflect on the work we have done for the past ten years as a literary journal. We have carefully and intentionally worked to build something that holds space for and listens to the many diverse voices and concerns that there are for people in our community and beyond. This issue feels like a culmination of that work coming to full fruition. Over seventy percent of the writers in this issue identify as a woman, and about the same percent of the writers are BIPOC. The topics the writers discuss run the gamut, but there is an underlying throughline of identity, memory, family, and how those elements profoundly impact our lives for better or worse. Some authors write about memories that hold deep cultural significance, while others admonish the genocide in Palestine. There are pieces that reflect on discrimination in indirect ways, while others attack racism head on. The writers in these pages reflect on the human experience in ways that are wholly personal while also touch on that universal element we all share. They all do this in their own voice and style. I am extremely proud to share what I feel is one of the most cohesive and strongest issues we have released to date. There is arguably not a single piece here that does not hold its own weight. As always, writers both established and new share these pages to create something beautiful as they share their vulnerabilities, strength, beauty, pain, and resilience with us. I am honored that they have trusted us with their work and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed collecting it all for you.

- Zachary C Jensen

Featured Artist

Rochelle Youk



Rochelle Youk (MFA the San Francisco Art Institute) is an Asian American visual artist in the San Francisco Bay Area, specializing in painting and bookbinding. Their work has been exhibited at the Berkeley Art Center, Root Division, The Performance Art Institute, The Kitsch Gallery, Novel Brewing Co., and The Kearny Street Workshop, among others. In 2016, she was in residence at the Vermont Studio Center and more recently was a studio artist at Kala Art Institute.

Artist Statement: My work presents as crafted objects, informed by an exploration of my heritage as the American daughter of immigrants from Japan and Korea. Born and raised in Los Angeles, yet still deeply affected by my ancestors' experiences of colonialism and imperialism. My work examines the history between Asia and the United States through the lens of cultural traditions, especially folk crafts, and points to current implications of that history in regards to identity and cultural exchange.

Angel City Review Issue 13 2024

Zachary C Jensen: Managing/Founding Editor

Janice Sapigao: Poetry Editor

John Venegas: Fiction Editor

Simon Tran: Arts Editor

Gabby Almendarez: Editor

Table of Contents

Poetry

Lola Rosario	7
Hanna Pachman	10
Douglas Manuel	13
Luivette Resto	16
Teka Lark	19
Azalea Aguilar	24
Elena Karina Byrne	29
Amy Raasch	33
John Poole	36
Sarah Richey	38
Abie Irabor	41
Lizeth De la Luz	44
Mylo Lam	48
Taleen Kali	52
Lauren Conklin	55
Brian Sonia-Wallace	60

Non-Fiction

Noriko Nakada	64
Tallie Everette	68

Fiction

Zenya Prowell	71
Molly Quell	77
Tisha Marie Reichle-Aguilera	81





Gat weave study: top knot no. 2
gouache on gesso panel

Dead Weight

BY LOLA ROSARIO

I carry my father's bones
in a backpack
I take wherever I go
so he's always close to me
and so I'll never forget
where I come from
even though I'm convinced
he wanted to forget
where he came from
and that's why he never spoke
of his childhood
neither to me nor to my brothers
still, I don't blame him
and hope he'll understand
that sometimes I need
to take the bag off because
the weight is too much
for my small frame
and the rattling
of my father's disturbed past
disrupts my peace of mind

I wish I could return
this inheritance
that is zero legacy
and all burden

A Daughter's Regret

BY LOLA ROSARIO

I never learned to swim
but I can float like nobody's business
and what does it matter anyway?
I'm safe if I listen to mami's advice to
'stay away from the deep end'
or as long as I only go in the water
with someone who could save me,
just in case
or if I allowed the waves to reach only as far
as my ankles - that was her not-so-subtle way
of reminding me of Ezekiel, so I'd remember
her g-d and her stifling religion
was never far away and if all else failed
faith would certainly save me

all these decades later, I can still hear
mami's warnings echoing
in my mind
I can still taste the trepidation of potentially sinking
with no one to hear my screams

I wonder if she knew then
that her sense of protection planted seeds
of insecurity and angst
in my subconscious
I wonder if she ever sensed
her maternal instinct was nothing
but a misguided compass leading me to
a downward spiral filled with insecurities
and low self-esteem, traumas and trust issues

I wish I knew what it felt like
to be fearless as a child
that way, I wouldn't have expected
mami to save me from
drowning

Lola Rosario is a Puerto Rican spoken word poet, freelance journalist, and translator from New York City. Her first poetry collection, *Daughter de Borikén* (Editorial Pulpo) is out in the summer 2024. Her poems can be found in *Thin Air Magazine*, *The Acentos Review*, *Hound Magazine* and [LaLibreta.online](#). Her social justice journalism is featured in *NACLA*, *TodasPR*, *Hip Latina*, *Green Left* (Australia), *Latina Media*, and *Palabra*, among others. In November 2021 she moved to her ancestral motherland of Borikén. Lola lives in the vibrant coastal town of Loíza.

Stand in for Love

BY HANNA PACHMAN

I walk through sulfur filled water.
The creosote
spews from hard desert sand.

I want to sprint, jump and land without pain.

I close my eyes
and pretend something softer
can catch me.

Sometimes people don't say I love you.

I grab a handful of stones.
Sand leaks through my fingers,
as heat from earth's interior rises.

Sometimes it's relieving
to have no clothes on
and stand in for danger.

I haven't done anything

He raises his eyebrows and smiles,
as I place rocks on his shoulder.

It's awkward to stay friends
with someone you love.

The water stays shallow. I look
at him without touching,
trying not to shiver
in a gust of wind.

I want to hold him close and kiss
the whole day. I can't imagine how
to stay warm without going under.

Sitting in a Vase

BY HANNA PACHMAN

Have you had children yet?
Put on your dancing pants.
Kiss a frog.
Sing about burping.

Let the grim reaper lick your veins.
My mom sent me a bundle of roses.
I stare at them, spaced out between
my thumbs. I give them a week.

I stare at the mold and smell
rotting stems, the chronic illness
that has still not been
solved by medicine.

New life at the cut end
emerges as bacteria. It multiplies,
forms air bubbles
in the stem, blocking water.

When the balloon reaches the sky,
the flowers will be taken off
life support and there will be
someone else's day to idolize.

The wrinkles line up on my forehead,
telling me to sleep for five more hours.
I practice saying my new number out loud,
it sounds like my name fading.

Hanna Pachman is a poet, whose work has been published by *Rattle*, *Catamaran*, *Maudlin House*, *The MacGuffin*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, and others. She currently hosts and curates a poetry event which has been running since 2018. Hanna was an Assistant Editor for the poetry magazine, *Gyroscope Review* for two years. She is attending UCR for an MFA in Creative Writing.

TRAFFIC JAMMER, 1973

BY DOUGLAS MANUEL

Nobody really knows how, but everybody really knows how it all started—the way history's more, not less, told from the tip-top of the tongue. Meaning it's a lie, meaning that it's true to you, you, you, but not me, me, me. Denise isn't crazy. The white boy slapped her booty. The newspaper has some of the truth, too: it was a cake-cutter afro pick that Damon hit that white boy with. Then, fists, more fists, kicks, knives, and blood. A school closed for a week. Handcuffs, you know who wore them: Damon and his friends, all of them, none of the white boys, none of the teachers who cast their eyes aside as white fists found Black faces, as baseball bats and balls, as chemistry beakers, flasks and test tubes became weapons, as locker doors slammed shut on Black skulls. Outnumbered as usual, behind enemy lines as usual, stacked in the back of cop cars as usual—but no silent swinging bodies this time.

TOAST TO THE FOOL, 1983

BY DOUGLAS MANUEL

They kissed as if the other's mouth
was the cure for a disease they both
carried for so long they forgot they had it.
A disease no doctors could spot, a sickness
that was beyond the eyes of their cousins,
aunties, uncles, their grandmas,
their grandpas, their mamas, their—

they both didn't have no daddies.

They kissed as if the kiss was the last
thing they would do with their lives,
as if the horns of The End were loud
in their ears, the ground was shifting
below them about to take them forever
under. They both could always see the end
of things, the lastness of last always on—

a dead daddy is a long, long, song.

They kissed as if they were free, as if
the color of their skin didn't scar a target
around their bodies, as if the law couldn't
make them crawl, the police with their
guns drawn, their bodies were sacred
and safe instead of scarce and sacrilegious.
They kissed. They kissed. They kissed
as if music saves, as if loves saves,
because it does. Let's hope it does. It does.

It doesn't.

Douglas Manuel was born in Anderson, Indiana and now resides in Long Beach, California. He received a BA in Creative Writing from Arizona State University, an MFA in poetry from Butler University, and a PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Southern California. He is the author of two collections of poetry, *Testify* (2017) and *Trouble Funk* (2023). His poems and essays can be found in numerous literary journals, magazines, and websites, most recently *Zyzzyva*, *Pleiades*, and the *New Orleans Review*. A recipient of the Dana Gioia Poetry Award and a fellowship from the Borchard Foundation Center on Literary Arts, he is an assistant professor of English at Whittier College and teaches at Spalding University's low-res MFA program.

Drunk Dial

BY LUIVETTE RESTO

It's 7:30 pm and my mother calls my side of the world
as the sun disappears into the Pacific Ocean

I look at the clock and pray
it's a death, an illness, knowing it's neither.

She drunk dials
but not like the ones we share and laugh with friends at brunch.

Hers are reminders of my laziness, desagrdecida
and deficiencies as a daughter.

She tells me how she will die alone
because I won't be there to take care of her
as I recall holding her hair over a toilet bowl,
changing her bed sheets when she could not make it to the bathroom,
or checking up on her breathing in the middle of the night.

Nowadays, I call my mother on Sundays
before the sun disappears into the Atlantic Ocean
as I pray for neither an emergency or an illness.

Overwhelming

BY LUIVETTE RESTO

—“Personality affects the way a color is perceived on you. If you look best in strong colors and you have a very strong personality, the combination may be too much in some instances. Other people may find you overwhelming.” *Conservative Chic: the 5-step program for dressing with style*

overwhelmingly strong: the perfect name for the Macy’s fragrance section

overwhelmingly strong: the surprising amount of heavy things I can carry

overwhelmingly strong: what not to write in the cover letter

overwhelmingly strong: the resolve of mothers and caretakers

overwhelmingly strong: what I learned to survive because Audre Lorde was right

overwhelming: the amount of black outfits in my closet

from LBD’s to sweater turtlenecks my children affectionately call my poetry outfit

overwhelming: what teaching was like in 2020

overwhelming: the increasing number of children cradled then buried in Gaza

strong: what my therapist reminds me of every other Saturday

strong: what I am tired of being called every other Saturday

when all I want is to come apart like paper mache in the rain

Luivette Resto was born in Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico but proudly raised in the Bronx. She is a CantoMundo and Macondo Fellow. Her two books of poetry *Unfinished Portrait* and *Ascension* have been published by Tía Chucha Press. Her third poetry collection *Living on Islands Not Found on Maps* was published by FlowerSong Press. She is the associate editor of Tía Chucha Press, and she sits on the boards for Women Who Submit and Beyond Baroque. She lives in the San Gabriel Valley.

What's that smell?

BY TEKA LARK

A new fragrance

For you

The thin

The white

The beautiful

For only \$350.00

You

Can

Bathe

Yourself

In the fragrance of the modern metropolitan white woman

“Urban” women can't

Have it

They are not thin

They are not white

They are not beautiful

They are not racist

Not

Like

You

“What is that smell?”

“Why it is White Fragility (FRA-GEE-LAY-TEE), it's French —I think?”

White Fragility

For those who are white, privileged, and are proud of it

“I have white privilege, sorry....” (But not sorry, not really)

At work

Where you are the director/founder/facilitator/whatever for an organization that helps the

less privileged

less fortunate

less smart (if they

were smart they

wouldn't need you

there to save them)

And your assistant makes you feel

UNCOOMMMFOORTTABLLLLLE

“I'm from here?!” she says.

And you respond, “Everyone is from somewhere!”

That wasn't very nice.

Open your drawer of privilege
Grab your fragrance
And spray
A little bit on
 To feel confident
 More beautiful
 AND Superior
 Because you
 Are definitely
Born with it.

If you Give a Racist a Cookie

BY TEKA LARK

If you give a racist a rope, they'll want to stay around and ask you about your Black experience .

Then they'll say,
"I was poor too."

When you let the racist get away with that, they'll ask you about music. They'll ask you to play a song and even though the song you played didn't have the N-word in it, when the song is finished they'll say, "Why do Black people get to say the N-word, but white people can't?" But it won't be a real question and they won't say the N-word, they'll use the REAL word.

The racist will then take a look at you. They'll look up and they'll look down and then try to touch your hair and when you move away.

Then they'll say,
"Why are you being so sensitive?"

Then they might bring up OJ Simpson and black-on-black crime.

And then they will get real comfortable and ask you to tell them a bedtime story about you or one of your relatives being abused by the police.

They will then ask for video proof of the story and since you don't have it immediately they'll say, well there are always two sides to every story.

So then you'll spend twenty minutes looking for the video and when you find it and show them they'll STILL say there are two sides to every story and why was your father resisting?

When they are done they'll want to take a selfie with you, so they can post it on social media and show everyone that they have a Black friend — YOU.

And after they do that they'll remember that you're Black and will proceed to choke you with the rope you gave them, because they are scared for their life.

Don't give a racist a rope, because they most probably will strangle you with it
And then— write a book.

Teka Lark is a cli-fi writer, visual artist, essayist, and poet. As a 14th generation African American her work is greatly influenced by the struggle of double consciousness. In 2015, inspired by the Anarchist Book Fair, she founded the Blk Grrrl Book Fair. Her writing has appeared in the LA Weekly, LA Times, Anarres Project for Alternative Futures, Ebony, Counterpunch, Truth Dig, Time, KCET, and Zocalo. Her book *Queen of Inglewood* (Word Palace Press, 2017) explores capitalism and place through dramatic monologue and satire. She is an alumna of Mount St. Mary's University and The New School.



Chanho no. 3, Cigarettes

Marlboro cigarettes

THE PLUM TREE

BY AZALEA AGUILAR

The Chinese plum tree that sat adjacent to my house as a child
Whispers, wants to be remembered

Reminds me how I once climbed her trunk all the way to the top
Smelled her sap on my fingers

Collected shirts full of her fruit
Translucent amber bellies calling to me
Peeling gently at the tender parts
Juicy pulp sliding from fingertips to tongue

I'd eat until my stomach protested and then I'd eat more

Sit under her shade, cradling my churning belly
Fearing mommy's scolding
I told you not to eat too many of those damned things!

Being with her mimicked escape
Taunting me with her shadows
Glimpses of sunlight between branches

Offering solace, nourishment
When my house filled with anger

Calling to me still

Her memory wakes me some nights
I close my eyes and see her
Dancing in the wind

A BRONCO, BOLIVIA, Y NOSOTROS

BY AZALEA AGUILAR

There isn't a corner in Cochabamba where you can't see the mountains
They seem to call on you as witness

Both our families herded cattle over foothills
Walked miles, dirt roads, rocks in their shoes for school
Knelt over maiz, penance for sins

They say Lake Angostura once stretched the whole of this valley
You and your sister remember taking row boats to reach Arbieta

Roads are paved now, a new one each time you visit
Giant art deco houses for miles that don't match the landscape
Your father tells us they belong to los americanos

Locals have begun staking ownership
Building small wooden huts along the mountain side

Who does it belong to?
Spaniards stole it first you say
Left it abandoned
It belongs to no one now

Your father points to the casa of his abuela
Who had fig trees
All the grandkids would come for its fruit he chuckles

We travel to Tarata for their chorizos
Stop in Cliza for chicharrón
Made in giant discos on the street

Women sell baby rabbits, ducks in cages
Awww Sophia screeches
Para comer her Tia offers
Her eyes open widely in silence

We make offerings to Pachamama
Items thrown into the fire
Requests for amor, salud, más hijos

Está cerrado I shout!
Everyone laughs
I can be funny in Spanish

Your sister shows me all the land your grandma owned, her mothers before her
It was the women in this family who held power, in mine too

We visit the adobe house in Liquinas where all the children were born
Two died during childbirth
Nine total your father says
All girls before him, his father hungry for a boy

I weep as we say goodbye
Wish for a way to stay

When you ask why I love it here
I fumble with explanation
Tempo, texture, people lips dark as plum
Everyone looks like your father, like you

Their is an us that dreams rest here
Allows quiet, laughter, finds family, each other

ABOUT RUNNING

BY AZALEA AGUILAR

There's a fantasy I have about running away
Been a mom since I was nineteen years old
Nineteen, just a baby myself

Responsible for another human all these years
Never a moment, for myself, about myself

I'd find somewhere small
With a diner in the center of town
Use an alias
Dye my hair

Go to bars in the middle of the day
Swim in lakes naked at night
Sleep till noon and write

There's a fear of wanting this too badly
My face nuzzled in the crook of her neck as she sleeps
Rubbing the sweat from her hairline
I weep into her pillow and beg forgiveness

These are the things you can't say out loud
I want to run away

Youngest crying again this morning
Oldest asking for her glasses to be cleaned
Milk falls from the counter
I trip over the dog
We are ten minutes late already

The moment they step from the car
I miss them, grab for them
I love you, I love you, I love you
They wave me silent

In the empty of the house
I shame my fantasy
Simmer in my awfulness
For wanting something other than them

Azalea Aguilar is a Chicana writer from Corpus Christi Texas, home of Tejana superstar Selena Quintanilla. Azalea moved to the DMV in 2002 and has called it home ever since. Azalea is a psychotherapist who recently opened her own private practice. She holds a Masters of Social Work from the Catholic University of America. She has three beautiful children who inspire her daily with their creativity and bravery. She has been a featured poet at the American Poetry Museum in Washington DC. Azalea's poems often focus on her personal experiences with generational trauma, grief, growing up around addiction and motherhood.

All the bullies on the playground,

BY ELENA KARINA BYRNE

-after John W. Barger

like parodies of the sacred, all looked like their sport. Small, unburdened bodies
that headed toward the tether ball pole, kickball, handball's floating, flat concrete
walls... alive with combat sweat

where insults wintered into gossip across the LA religious school's measured play yard.
I knew I'd perish there, inside each desire to belong to a species of desires.

Everything in childhood begins as a brewing storm upside-down, a secret writhing feet-first,
grass-up. Children who shared pretending they're someone else in the mirror who say, No—

So sockless & muddied, I swung my arms & legs, climbed into the rattling cage of rolling
ocean stones & waves, dove head-first over backyard brick walls behind other family
houses to survive. Featherless,

I'd always find a way to hide in a play yard tree's tangle between daylight & shade
before the bullies could break my ribcage...

Pre-teen in pursuit of a power that's driven by the same kind of fear & rage crammed
like a sailboat inside a bottle, the bullied brought to school from home.

And for enemies as friends who formed their hunger circle around the wounded animal
of my uncertain smile: never again.

Because a childhood fable multiplies the handed-over story you keep telling your gut.

Look at the future's adult war sinkholes, the retreating light from your neighbor's
window. Now, see every skinned knee scab I pulled off more than once, in private, just in case

I wouldn't remember the accidental harm that was certain to become the rest of us.

Yet how much room for memory there is...

BY ELENA KARINA BYRNE

—Hart Crane

Because this
parallel memory is an open room without
dance music, yet with gyre erotic & whirl
to wake it, or water-side tumble to make its
image fall through the body like
a gaze-worthy moon's cast from
the deep pocket of the bad past now
to litter Hollywood Boulevard
with its out asphalt & recycled glass glitter
that will error erratum in the mind's
eye for live after-rain light
scattered like utterance: You
& the thank you version of us,
full tangle & in our 6-daily return to
full hours lurid & embedded & lost
with each raised column of
imagined flower pollen drift
from our room-to-room window when we did
unconscious ourselves in sex —
newcomer, latecomer, forerunner of the underground
stream fixed on nothing but more earth,
everything medians is down the skin center of
what makes us grass kingdom again — take moving
particles that travel these Pacific-rolled
horizon sheets
when we dare lose our balance inside of each
other, mocking any on-purpose
final consequence
that is always certain to give itself
away at the beginning of the film.

Elena Karina Byrne is a Pushcart Prize and Best American Poetry recipient, her five poetry collections include *If This Makes You Nervous* (Omnidawn, 2021) and *No Don't* (What Books Press, 2020). Former Regional Director of the Poetry Society of America, final judge for the PEN's Best of the West award, the Kate & Kingsley Tufts Poetry Awards, and the international Laurel Prize, Elena currently teaches for The Poetry School, Poetry Barn, and Pearl Street at the Fine Arts Work Center. She's writing screenplays while completing a collection of essays entitled *Voyeur Hour*.



Chanho no. 3, Cigarettes (detail)
Marlboro cigarettes

Why I Am Not a Gravedigger

BY AMY RAASCH

I like to go to the diner, drink coffee,
and listen to Barbara talk shit. Barbara
doesn't work the graveyard shift.

I tell her, church basement flooded
so we held the reception at the house.

I tell her nobody will sit
in my mother's kitchen chair;
the air is too thick with her
unanswered questions. *Say, A:*

*Do you think they'd let me see
the room where Tammy died?*

When Mom quit the smokes
cold turkey one July,
Tam set her up on the porch
with a laptop, mug of ice,
and a bowl of cold grapes to binge
the Sweet Adeline convention.

I can still hear her singing
I feel a song coming on
in her chestnut bass tones, years
before the oxygen mask. I'm not
the type to sing while I dig.

Earthworms shouldn't get cut in half
over someone already dead.

My shovel won't break
frozen ground.

I drive by the cemetery,
then leave town.

Ashes

BY AMY RAASCH

When I turn the card over, the armoire opens to a library
of birch tree-sized books. A pinemarten
claws a spine tattooed with my sister's name,
gnaws its pressed flowers. The ocean forgets

the secret the lake told. Upstairs, my sister
lines a last letter with her perfect penmanship.
A lost dog circles Lake Bde Mka Ska
and what is left of her earthly body.

The deck swirls itself to murmuration,
each black bird a new last word
strung behind a plane-shaped cloud.
Their wing-rustle echoes across lakeskin, a voice

I chase but never catch. I stand at the shore
as fall fires burn, tossing cards in one at a time.

Amy Raasch is a Los Angeles-based poet, musician, and performer. She holds a BA from the University of Michigan and an MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars (class of 2024). Her writing has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *ANMLY*, *F(r)iction*, and a few anthologies. Her poetry manuscript, “Why I Am Not a Gravedigger,” is a 2024 Trio Award Finalist. She writes about what haunts us.

On the Anniversary of my Father's Stroke

BY JOHN POOLE

I want to forget the axe-wedge
angle of your cheek, blob
of your nose, pursed purple lips,
blue veined body in
a sagging skin sack.

I want to forget daily questions
where are we or when will we go home
as if we can click
ruby slippers and float back
to a land of memory.

I want to forget days
punctuated by the comma
of television, semi colon of meals,
awaiting the period
at the end of the sentence.

I want to forget you as
you forgot me, a musty
green book with faded cover,
waiting on a dusty shelf
to be found and read.

John Poole is a professor of English education at BYU-Idaho. He taught public school English/language arts prior to that. His poetry comes from a desire to understand the human experience in all its complexities. He lives in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

always doesn't last forever

BY SARAH RICHEY

“always” – a word I thought described life

life was supposed to be never ending for you.

but then the next day, life flashes before your eyes

and you're laying in the hospital barely speaking.

“can't he live forever?”

“him not eating or speaking isn't permanent, right?”

“do you think he'll get better?”

my mom would reply yes, as if saying that changed his fate.

everything transforms when you lose your grandpa

the world is darker, your days seem interminable.

for the first year, your life seems over

because you don't think you can survive another day without your grandpa.

God needs your loved ones more,

but what if in certain moments, I need my Papa more?

his smile, his hugs, and his voice

are all missing from my life forever – pictures and videos cannot change that.

if I could go back in time, I would record his laughter, his jokes, and his singing

as an attempt to fill the empty void in my heart without him.

just a stuffed animal is all I have left to remember him

but its hugs aren't as warm and comforting as his were.

knives continuously pierce my soul anytime I see pictures or videos of him –

they're reminders that he's only here with me through a portable screen now.

life becomes easier everyday I have learned to live without my grandpa here

but there's constantly heart wrenching

moments that emphasize the days when he should be standing next to me

but instead he's watching above from heaven.

never in my life did I imagine speaking at my grandfather's funeral

as if he were simply gone and life would proceed without him.

“over my dead body”

he would respond about me ever wearing a short dress or listening to rap.

perhaps, every time I wear a short dress or listen to rap instead of 60's music,

I'm disrespecting that dead body.
questions and worries like this are what interrupt my quest for healing,
as do any reminders of the milestones he misses.
realizations that he won't be here for my volleyball games or my middle school graduation
are what relinquish my face of my already hopeless
smile in those special moments – because I'd rather see his beaming smile in the audience
than live those moments with him not present.
today I survived another day without him
and tomorrow I am forced to exist without him once again.
unloading emotions on other people isn't an option,
so instead the luggage of grief usually sits inside of me and i've become a broken
vending machine that can't process change
because I can't accept the change in my life after loss.
walls of sadness have locked me in a room of loneliness for the past three years,
and no one has been able to unlock the door to release me from this house of grief.
x-rays of my heart show an empty chamber of blood that has been stabbed
by the sword of loss and pierced by the bullet of grief
“you should be here” is what I scream in my pillow at night
as I try to navigate life without my Papa, who was supposed to “always” be here.
zero of him is here though,
he's simply watching me from above.

Sarah Richey is a rising freshman who is passionate about volleyball, writing, and reading. Since 7 years old, Sarah has been a published author of a short story through winning Ms. Nelson’s Writing Contest. She also has a podcast called “Rekindle the Podcast” about Alzheimer’s disease, found on Spotify. She writes poetry to release the usually stifled feelings of teenagers.

We stood there in our silence

BY ABIE IRABOR

at the water park,
chlorine scented air
kids jumped in puddles
lifeguards blew whistles
bodies plunged in pools of water
giggles echoed across the park
we stood there in our silence
strangers side by side
ready for our favorite waterslide
tongues frozen, father
I wanted to speak, then
the woman in the red bathing suit
pushed us into our thrill.

You came in a dream,

BY ABIE IRABOR

upright at an unknown seashore
you wore a red & white tattered cloth
that wrapped around your waist
your skin enfolded in damp sand
your feet caved
into cracked seashells & dry seaweed
your tears cupped in your hands.
I heard your heart bellow rue.

Abie Irabor is an American Nigerian writer and performing artist. She is currently working on her first chapbook. You can read her other published poems in *Euphony Journal*, *Petigru Review California Quarterly* and forthcoming in *Water~Stone Review*. She resides in Los Angeles, CA.

In the subtleties

BY LIZETH DE LA LUZ

how do we preserve

an us

en momentos de promesa

after quiet nights

moonlit our

shadows

donde empieza?

En nuestras manos?
as we cross the street moving a little closer to our steps?

En nuestros ojos mientras nos balanceamos de los que
podría ser on our lips

as we say hello?

Affectionate patience,
trace the divine in me

por la

madrugada

and through coffee stains
quédate hasta

create enero

worlds **here**

repurpose your dark nights

with me

Dandelion Tuft

BY LIZETH DE LA LUZ

And I learned
the difference
between craving
and needing
and learned
to shape hunger
learned to store taste
under my tongue
to pour over the “not todays”
a gentle kiss – to be
trapped and to readjust –
to be
a dandelion tuft

The first visit

BY LIZETH DE LA LUZ

I have been talking about you in past tense
Remembering stories from my father's memory
And what I can piece together from photographs
From the outskirts of my last trip to Mexico --
2005 in a booster seat to spend my birthday with
family I thought I'd never see again in flesh and
I'd be lying if I said I hadn't planned out everything I'd say
And the apologies for not being able to visit
& to have you come to us
& for me to see my father be a son
& see your smiles I've only known in pictures explode with laughter
I got to see the continuation of frame
And introduce you to your bisnieta
Who I did not know pondered like you
& for you to see a family that grew out of weeds
And poured into sunrises
I planned to say "hola abuelita" and feel your embrace
Before the hello spilled – fragmented – sprinkled with a
pinch of eyes not strong enough to hold memory readjust
& all I wanted to do was be

Lizeth De La Luz is a poet from Southern California. She writes about the frustration of language barriers, learned barriers, and the anxieties of living/loving/grieving in a Mexican body in the United States. She is the Senior Field Notes Editor at *Defunkt magazine*. Her work has been published in *Latin@ Literatures*, *Samfiftyfour*, *Rogue Agent*, *Acentos Review*, and in the *Our California project*. Find her projects and poetry at lizethdelaluz.com

Showering with You

BY MYLO LAM

is deterritorialization

none of me belongs

to me this water which splits

me is yours yours alone

your look:

*what are **you***

looking at Mylo?

i: *i'm watching how the water sections you*

always moving, sometimes

making you whole

nervously & nakedly

you laugh i must be transmuting something vague? ridiculous?

live wire & daunting

i wish i could tell you how not to be afraid

i don't want to be afraid either

at a point you've weaponized

your long hair a warm starless whip

you mouth me with your mouth

tell you i'm running away

just to get back somehow

let's let Sam Cooke sing

from my little speaker by your tealight

i'm cold again standing in the back

you note my trembling

thank god for our small bodies

easily swapping positions in the tub

you crouch to keep heat

you read your water dripping

down my calves

tally the sparse hairs slicked to skin

i sit down

penis on your porcelain

you sit too & turn around

scoot into me

i splay my palm on your back

water divides under your blades

see palm trees bleed onto you

palm the trees

these trees are just me & my people

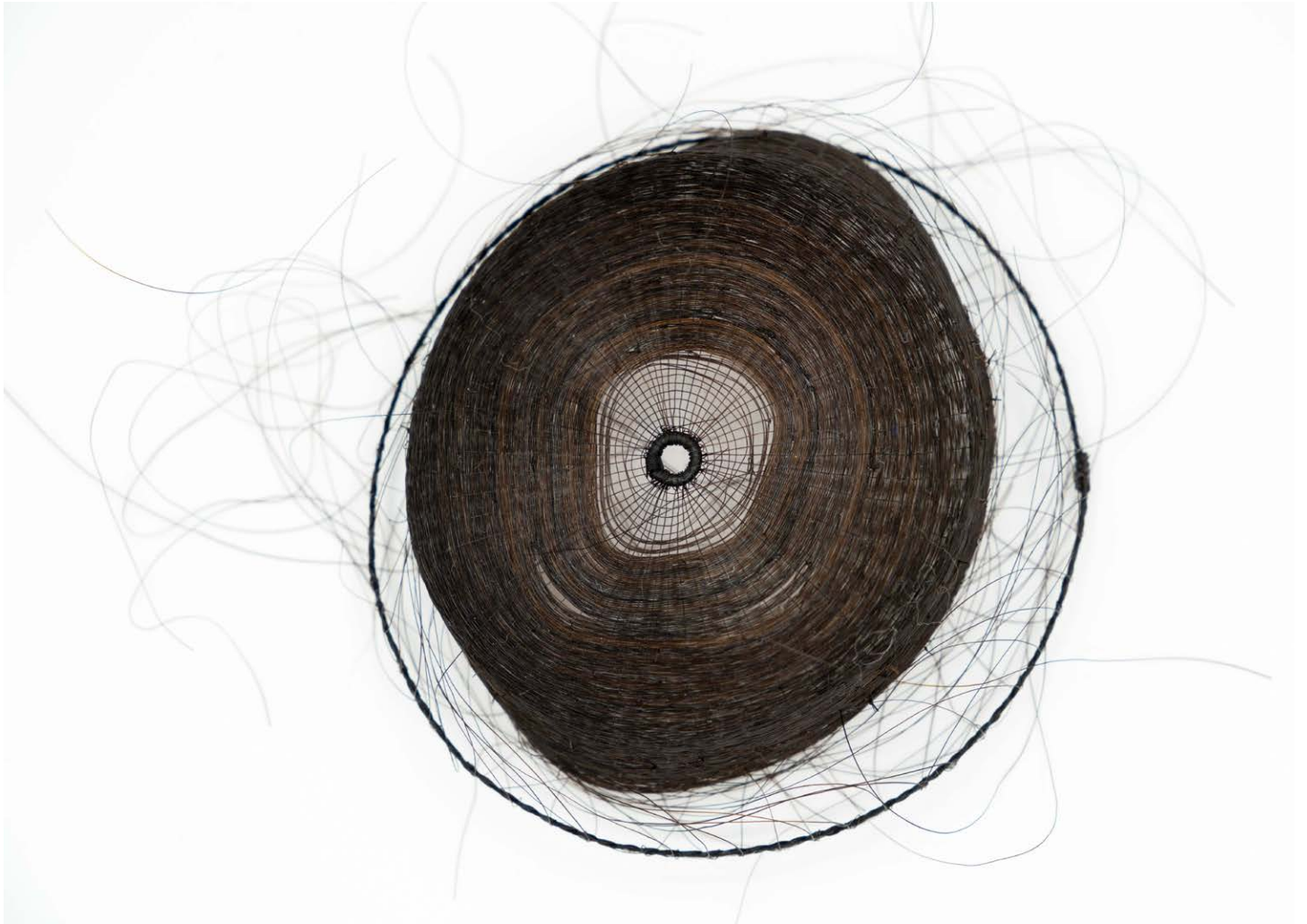
palming

i feel so human in here

tonight which means outside our moons

bloom into sunflowers

Mylo Lam was born in Vietnam and currently lives in Los Angeles where he grew up. He and his family are refugees from Cambodia. Mylo's work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Margins*, *Guesthouse*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Nightboat Books*, and elsewhere. His multimedia work won *Palette Poetry's* Brush & Lyre Prize, his poetry won *Blood Orange Review's* Emerging Writers Contest, and his chapbook *AND NOT/AND YET* was published by *Quarterly West*. He is currently pursuing his MFA in Poetry at Randolph College



gat sketch no. 4
Hair of the artist

Schism

BY TALEEN KALI

Pleasure is bilateral
Like desire in a distance
A longing
A schism

My heart is an ocean
Feeling the world in waveforms
Each quickening, each tide
I cry every time a cup falls over

New moons split open valves
Carving through the ocean floor
Faint constellations flaming through
And I wish I'd known there was life underneath it all

What do you do with fire in water
Do you pick up the cups that slip through
And what do you do with a heart that spills over
Do you cry for the cups that put out the fire

I have studied much water
And I have played much music
A conductor of tears
Crying is my art form

Maybe then if I can cry in enough cities
and on enough monuments
and on enough shorelines
I will know where to go

Crossing split hairs
Longitudinal lines
Hanging like membranes
Through part of the mind that required a divide to survive

A schism
A woman
A human

An ocean

And if I can keep the cups from falling over
And if the first woman was never broken
And if I studied how to shift tectonic plates
Maybe then I could find a way
To cross the lines

Taleen Kali is an L.A. native artist, musician, and writer. She's the founder of the experimental DUM DUM Zine & Records. Her debut LP "Flower Of Life" is out now everywhere you listen to music. www.taleenkali.com

Habitat

BY LAUREN CONKLIN

All morning I wrestle
poison ivy from the pine tree
with my naked arms
while my great-uncle, the farmer,
watches from the porch.

My mother and I have come
across the country to clean
his house, the only house
he's ever lived in—
some of the doors locked
for decades.

He never married,
and maybe he never even laid
with a woman in his 96 years
under the framed painting of Christ
in his bedroom, littered
with dusty ball caps
and muddy boots.

There are more pictures of me
on the wall than memories of him
in my mind. He's tired from planting
the last crop of soy he'll ever plant,
and I'm on my knees
scrubbing the wide plank floors.

I am too clean.
My fingers welcome splinters
like a soft cheese.
We don't know whether to bury
or burn this junk
that feels like history.

When we're done—the flattened mice
and spiders, the stale mattress
and magazines, burning
in a pyre in the yard—
he takes his hand from his pocket
and wipes a finger across the dresser.

Two hundred years ago,
my family homesteaded this land,

however people claim
to own a place. The October color
overwhelms me as I walk
the planted field and woods,
the pond on which my grandmother
once skated now thick with muck.

The dead are stacking up,
hickory on ash on maple.
Only the deer stop now
to take a dark sip
before moving on
to someplace
more habitable.

Menagerie

BY LAUREN CONKLIN

In my dream the small blue parrot
might have been a symbol of devotion
to myself. I should be preening
my rare feathers.

Instead,

I am flockless. I keep repeating
what is said to me.

I wonder

if the Shetland,
scraping her hooves
in circles along the asphalt,
has a memory
from the collective unconscious
of what bog moss
tastes like
on the tongue?

If she can forget
the metallic tang
of girth and bit?

Take note—

The pitbull sees ghosts.
I've brought her here
to prove your house
is haunted.

She hears the dead calling her name.
We took her ears
and left her open
to their weeping.

In the corner of the room waits the serpent
with plans of her own.
She is the mutest creature.

Her silence annoys me

but her belly is smooth
like mine. We're both hiding
snakelets, the kind who remain
undetected until
they are birthed and

I will remember too late

that I forgot to feed
all of the animals.
There will be no reversal
of the effects of starvation.
Whatever organs have failed
have failed.

Neglect is the most shameful allegation.
I practiced on myself every day
until I got good.

Lauren Conklin grew up in Los Angeles. She completed her MFA at Bennington College in Vermont where she was a Graduate Teaching Fellow and the recipient of the Liam Rector Prize for Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Aspasiology* and *Entropy Magazine*. She currently lives in Ojai, California with her husband, daughter, and two horses. She teaches screenwriting at Loyola Marymount University and a poetry workshop at the Ojai Art Center.

At the Wedding

BY BRIAN SONIA-WALLACE

We tell yarns // about water tanks // septic systems

Mean jokes // about our own weight

Yes // we say // we are close // as a family.

We get together // for weddings // and funerals.

My cousin who's getting married says //

I don't believe // in marriage

But it's important to you // so I'll do it

Says // *you're the person // I've decided*

I have a statistically low chance of divorcing

Sun sets orange // over the farm

Of her drowned father.

We have vintage-shop shoes

That fall apart // on the stones,

Those of us who bothered // to dress up.

We worry from the shadows // who will pay

For our uncle's opioids // gripe over //

Our lateness // refuse to apologize //

For anything // except ourselves.

They Called Us Cowards so We Built a Bomb

BY BRIAN SONIA-WALLACE

There are a lot of weapons because
we are very afraid.

I mean ashamed.

Shame is how we rebuke
ourselves. It's a skill
we learn from others,

so sometimes it's a weapon —
AKA used with malicious intent.

Intent is a quality of focus
that faces the future & thinks
we might have something
to do with it.

The future is the thing we have to do.

Having to is not the same as *needing to*,
but it's the happiest end to *wanting to*.

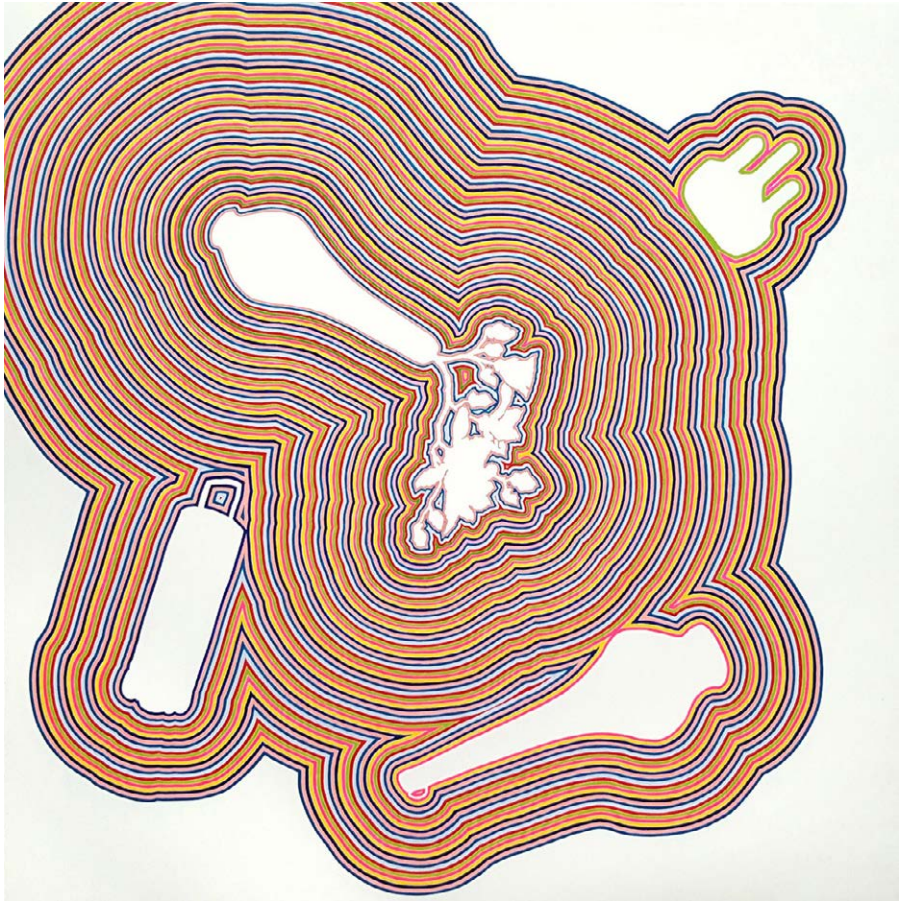
I wanted to do so many things,
but then the future came, and I was afraid.

I was, am, and will be
afraid.

Bravery is a weapon too.
If you puff your chest up big enough,
You won't be able to see anything
over it.

There are so many weapons.
Only some of them are inside us.

Brian Sonia-Wallace is a poet based in Los Angeles. He is the author of *The Poetry of Strangers* (Harper Collins) and *Maze Mouth* (Moon Tide Press), and has writing in *American Poets*, *The Guardian*, *Rolling Stone*, *LitHub*, *Rattle*, and more. Sonia-Wallace was the fourth Poet Laureate of West Hollywood, an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow, and teaches creative writing through the UCLA Extension Writers Program.



still life, chackgeori
gouache on panel

HACHIRO

BY NORIKO NAKADA

My daughter, Kiara, has just turned twelve. She is a sixth grader, in her first year of middle school, still confident despite being shaken early on by dress codes and jean-styles evolving. She is a Swiftly, a soccer player, a perfectionist. I've watched her thrive in her bilingual Spanish immersion program here in Los Angeles, and grapple with our quickly-shifting world with grace. So far.

In other news, there is a genocide unfolding in Palestine. I have to be careful of the images I take in as I scroll through my phone. My place of privilege has been confirmed no matter the land acknowledgements I've helped pen, the meager financial contributions I make to Doctor's Without Borders, the letters I write to politicians—unwilling to call for a ceasefire.

My scrolling is interrupted by a text from my sister. She's with Dad. He smiles from a restaurant in Portland, a pastry and cup of decaf set before him. He's been in memory care for several years now, since the isolation of COVID caused a quick decline. His brother passed almost two years ago, so he is the last of his generation. He is the last living Nakada, the eighth son. John Hachiro, outlasting them all.

He and his brothers and sisters were part of the Greatest Generation. They survived incarceration here on the West Coast and service in both the Pacific and Europe during World War II. Dad and all his brothers enlisted or were drafted. Dad was on the younger end of that spectrum and served in the Korean War. Despite wanting to get to Asia, a place he'd never been, he spent his Army days in Alaska where he learned to ski, and he didn't stop skiing until after his 88th birthday. Hachi + Hachi. The rice year. A fortuitous birthday.

Kiara is part of Gen Alpha. She only knows a world captured by and soaked in technology. It's in the air. It's in the water. She still doesn't have social media accounts or a phone. She has a watch, so she can text us and her friends. It seems like more than enough. She is only twelve.

When Dad was twelve, he packed all he could carry and moved onto the Pomona Fairgrounds with his oldest brother, his parents, his sisters and three other brothers. I've been there, raced a couple of half-marathons where my ancestors were held. When Dad was twelve, he endured forced removal and incarceration. He can't talk about it much anymore. His memory can't thread together the narrative, but we have videos of him telling his stories of life in camp.

I'm turning 50 in a few weeks. I'm Gen X. When Dad was fifty, he was in a similar place, raising kids who were getting older, doing well in school, playing sports. He'd married Mom, a white woman, over a decade his junior and moved his family away from Los Angeles. He landed in the mountains of Central Oregon, so he could ski on weekends and still be home in time to put the kids to bed. How were these decisions influenced by the twelve-year-old boy who once had to leave all his friends behind, who watched his brothers get drafted or enlist, who watched his

parents lose so much while waiting for the war to end, while waiting to go back home?

Dad watched all of his older siblings marry Japanese Americans. He saw them starting families in Southern California, or Alaska, or Maryland. But Dad chose a different path. He married a white woman and raised his multiracial family far from any Japanese American family or community. Instead, he opted for thin mountain air that must have reminded him of Heart Mountain, Wyoming, where they were first incarcerated, where he pushed his mother's wheelchair across dirt and brush.

Kiara is growing up in Los Angeles. She has family, Japanese American, Filipino, and white close by, but we rarely visit. There are opportunities to go to the Japanese American National Museum, to eat all of the foods of the Asian diaspora, to attend Obon Festivals, to play on Japanese sports teams. I would have loved those communities as a kid. Kiara goes where we go, but she'd rather not play in the Asian League, and while we attend when we can, we miss many chances.

My dad chose to raise his kids in close proximity to whiteness. He married a white woman, had multiracial kids. Maybe he was hoping our white-passing features might make it easier for us. But in that small mountain town, because of how white it was and still is, we stood out. And with his family, all Japanese American, we were different there as well. And next to Mom's side, the white German and Irish side, again, we were different again.

Now, Dad is in memory care where most of the clients are white. He's in Portland which is still mostly white, but it's not Bend. At least he has his Japanese American Iko No Kai community in Portland, a place of rest, where he still goes for lunch when one of us can take him. He can eat sushi, tempura, or ramen when we take him out for lunch or dinner. There is a Japanese Cultural Center where he used to give tours and share his incarceration experience. Now, he struggles to remember his stories, and it's up to us to continue his legacy.

I am back to scrolling, and the algorithm feeds me images. I read about connections between Palestine and Okinawa. Colonial powers limit Okinawan access to land, to beaches, to livelihoods in order for the United States to operate their military bases. Dad and I visited Okinawa, and his family home in Kin village. But that was over thirty years ago, and while I struggle to remember that trip, I do recall the sprawling Kadena Military base, the aggressive signs prohibiting access to roads, fields, and beaches.

The next images from the algorithm show me Palestine where homes, schools, and hospitals are reduced to rubble. Survivors search for loved ones, lost, buried, gone. I think about the 12-year-olds in refugee camps. I think of my father when he was twelve in a desert camp in Wyoming. I try to remember what I was like when I was twelve. I see my daughter who is now twelve, and think of Anne Frank who got her diary for her thirteenth birthday. How does what I see today sit next to the history of all these twelve-year-olds? How can we find ourselves as we search to belong where ever we land? How do push for what is right?

This summer, Kiara will head to Costa Rica to practice her Spanish. She speaks English and Spanish, not the Japanese or Tagalog of her grandparents. Her parents have none of that language either, but we do have the legacies of our grandparents who were immigrants, who struggles with what it is to be American. Our family ancestors fled colonial violence in Okinawa and the Philippines. I close my phone and turn into my day. Kiara is twelve, and Dad is in memory care, and soon there will be another election. Genocides unfold once again, and we have to make ourselves remember. We have to search for a resolution, from right here, where white supremacy still reigns.

Noriko Nakada is a multi-racial Asian American who creates fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art to capture the stories she has been told not to talk about. She is the author of the *Through Eyes Like Mine* memoir series. Excerpts, essays, and poetry have been published in *Hippocampus*, *Catapult*, *Linden Ave*, and elsewhere. Noriko is represented by Emily Keyes of Keyes Agency. She lives, writes, and teaches on Tongva Land in Los Angeles.

I don't believe in soulmates, but I do believe in you.

BY TALLIE EVERETTE

In my junior year of high school, we'd strayed from the lesson and began debating religion in my English class. My teacher asked if anyone in the class was an Atheist.

I was the only one who raised my hand.

He and I went back and forth for quite a while in a fun, friendly debate until he hit me with his final question:

"Do you believe in soulmates?"

He was so sure he'd gotten me with that question. After all, I was the girl who dreamed of the romances I read in books, who spoke of love as if it were something fantastical, and one of few in the class who had never experienced it.

"No," I answered, smiling because I knew where he'd take the debate if I'd answered otherwise. "I don't." And I truly didn't believe in soulmates.

It wasn't a win or lose debate. We went back to our lesson with the same respect we'd entered the debate with, and the topic was never brought up again.

In my junior year of college, I fell in love. It was the first time I'd ever fallen in love and I was convinced they'd be my forever. After all, I'd grown up with everyone I knew telling me they believed I'd marry my first partner, that they'd be my forever.

In the beginning of the relationship, everything had seemed meant to be. I wondered if I'd been wrong junior year of high school. I wondered if things like "fate" and "destiny" and "soulmates" actually existed. Things were lining up in a way that seemed more fantastical than coincidental.

There were too many coincidences for this love to have been anything other than infinity.

An eight is also the same figure as the infinity symbol, and to me being in love was the same as being each other's infinity.

We met in the eighth month.

They lived on Signal Eight.

We dated for eight months.

We broke up on the eighth day of the month.

They had a ring meant to give to someone special, and that ring was my size.

I once read a corny line in a fanfiction some starry-eyed teenager had written that stuck

with me: “I call you my Eight because eight is the atomic number for oxygen. Like oxygen, I feel like I can’t breathe without you.”

Imagine being so in love with someone that the idea of losing them was like losing the ability to breathe. I’d never been loved like that before, but I wanted to be. I wanted to be loved like I loved them, my Eight.

No matter what we do or how we feel, we can’t seem to let each other go. Multiple times, we decided to let each other go, only to be thrust back into each other’s lives like shooting stars. Now, we live in the same apartment, dancing around our feelings for each other while convincing the other that we aren’t right for each other anymore. Our feelings twinkle in each other’s proximity, a beacon shining bright like the North star ignored by an inexperienced sailor in fear of ending up in the same place we’d departed from.

Perhaps we had been right for each other all along, but it was the wrong time. Perhaps we need time to work on things, to explore different stars. I’m not certain. I just know that we’ve been through too much together and keep gravitating back into each other’s orbit for this to be anything but predetermined in the stars.

Then, one day, I looked up the definition of *soulmate*. In every piece of literature I’ve read, people define soulmates as two people destined to find each other and stay together forever. But when I Googled it, I was told by the Oxford Dictionary that *soulmate* really means, “a person ideally suited to another as a close friend or romantic partner.”

There is no mention of destiny or forever in that definition. Only an ideal. Ideals are like dreams; often chased, rarely caught.

So, maybe I was wrong at 17.

Maybe I’m wrong at 21.

Maybe we were never meant to be, we were just ideally suited for each other for that eight month period.

~~Maybe, just maybe, we were written in the stars and destined to be each other’s infinity.~~

Maybe I’m just a lovesick fool, still dreaming of the romance I read in books.

People ask me why I don’t believe in fate or destiny or soulmates. I know my answer now: I don’t believe in fate or destiny or soulmates because even when everything in the stars lined up to be you, I still lost you in the end.

But as we continue to dance around each other and see how other stars shine for us, I keep a path open for you to join my orbit. Unlike the lost sailor, I keep my North star in my sight, certain that one day I will find my way back to you. But until then, I will explore the infinite galaxies from which we are born and yearn for you until I become stardust, or until we become infinity together.

Tallie Everett studied at Spalding University where she earned a Creative Writing BFA, a Psychology BA, and bowled for their women's bowling team. Her CNF piece, "Code Eternity," was featured in the *White Squirrel Literary Magazine*, Spring 2024: Volume XX. She enjoys reading and writing contemporary romance and fantasy novels, and dabbles in poetry when overly emotional. Everett spends her free time writing, reading, cosplaying, and dyeing her hair bright yellow.

Adnan

BY ZENYA PROWELL

Maia sleeps a lot these days, and spends most of her time alone. Her knees and elbows still stick out in knobs like they did when she was younger, but now under her eyes is streaked dark. She cries when she prays. She gets four weeks of vacation from work this year. I think we're on week two. She told the people at her job, "I'm staying right here. I'm going to explore the city like a tourist." She used the same line last year.

When she dreams I try to stay off to the sides, and she keeps her back to me. I let her be, even when all I want is to touch her. Days go by and she sleeps and wakes in the same shirt. It's orange with darker orange rings around the sleeves and the number 48 on the front. Her hair is kinkier on the left side of her head, where she tends to lay.

We have a couch but she prefers the bed.

Tonight, she is in a shallow sleep with her cheek on the back of her hand. A tear leaves the inner corner of her eye, crosses her nose and puts a dark mark on the pillowcase.

She is dreaming of a lake with a ladder coming up out of it. She's climbing. Near the top of the ladder is a platform. She almost reaches it but the ladder sways, tips and starts a crash into the water; she lets go. She falls straight through to the lake's silty bed. When her feet touch the bottom, she pushes off and kicks upward. I meet her halfway to the surface. Her arms loop around my neck. She doesn't push me away even after we've burst through to air. I must have known she wouldn't.

I swim her to the shore. She finds footing in the black sand, crawls past the line where the water licks, and collapses. Here, I remember what it feels like to catch breath.

Her dress is thin, the color of vanilla, and suction to her. Sand forms the shape of a boat on her cheek. I ask, why now?, because she hasn't spoken to me or let me touch her in months.

Why not, she says with a little snort. It's a new affectation, only some months old. I don't like it.

I do what she wants and in the bed in the apartment where the windows have been closed for many days, her body is grateful. When it's done and she wakes up she pretends I'm not there. I sit on the floor near her anyway in the shirt and pants I assume I died in.

Her life's sounds are tiny: the tinny tap of a wooden spoon on the edge of a pot when she's boiling pasta; rubber separating and joining when she opens and closes the fridge; socked feet on the floor; her legs whispering across bedsheets; the scritch of pen on paper when she is writing in her journal. For someone who has stopped going outside or talking to anyone, she has a lot to write about. I see pages and pages of miniscule, close-together letters. She's written like that since we met, so I wouldn't read it. Sometimes she uses pens that have all kinds of glitter and sparkles crammed into their turquoise or pink ink. I never told her so, but those pages I really can't read.

I know my name was Adnan and I was twenty-five when a heart condition took me out. I was able to tell her that before those details faded. She wrote them down, which is why I can still

know them. By the time we met I had already forgotten a lot.

I am not sure that we speak English to each other. She hears it as English and I defer to her, but I wonder sometimes if she has named what she hears with what she knows.

She used to keep a framed drawing of me in the bookcase, small enough to be overlooked if friends or family came by, and if they asked she'd lie that I was a friend from college. It took ages for her get the face in the drawing to match the one she only saw in dreams. She scoured pictures and printed lookalikes in color and got a tattoo artist she knew to re-render them with thickened eyebrows and a longer nose until the likeness was right. Springs for hair. Black eyes — "less round," she'd instructed, "almost like straight lines across." Brown skin reddish like brick; hers is sandy. A long, thin nose. Big lips she used to say were the best things on my face. That picture is in a box with her ring now.

I ask, "Why are you talking to me again?", even though I don't have any viable dogs to set on hers in this fight.

"Because it doesn't make a difference," she says. "It's been twenty years." She taps the spoon on the pot's metal lip. All she eats are oily yellow spirals laced through with cheese.

I ask, "That we've been together?" The spoon stops in mid-air.

"Do not say that," she says. She stares hostile eyes where I might be.

When we moved in to this studio, on the sixth floor, she hung peach silk curtains in the windows. But she never put any art up on the walls and to this day they have stayed empty. From the first nights, she complained that the apartment had a strange feel, as if the last person who lived there had been sad or sick, and the sickness had soaked into the floor and made the kitchen cupboards yellow and peel themselves apart. No number of lamps she bought could budge the jaundice.

"Do you remember it?" she asks. "It was like this."

She shows the air a drawing of a watch with oversized numbers and miniature hands. She seems particularly fixated on the two. It's the only one of the numbers she practiced on the edges of the paper before she trusted herself to draw it inside the watch's face. The watch belongs to a Swiss man she went on a date with some time ago. At least months. Maybe years.

I went too. His eyes had liked her face — had lingered there and marveled. Without an earlier face of hers to compare it to, he couldn't recognize strain. They'd sat at an outdoor table on the Upper West Side and shared pizza.

"Divorced," she'd answered, and he'd said, "Oh, I'm sorry."

Later he'd asked, "How long were you married?," and she'd said, "Six years."

He'd asked, "How long ago?," and she'd said, "Eight years now," and he'd said, with a sympathetic look, "You were very young," and she'd said, "He was a ghost."

The Swiss had blinked and she'd ignored me when I asked what she was trying to do. I did not like those years after our divorce that she brought men back to the apartment and they slept over with warm bodies splayed, as if to spite me. But I didn't like, either, when they looked at her as if she were an adorably animated piece of shit.

"We met when I was seventeen," she'd told him. "He saved me from getting run over by a truck. It's hard to be with regular people after that. I married him! But it's not sustainable."

“Right,” the Swiss had said.

He'd held her hand on the ride to his apartment downtown, had kissed the back of it and played with her knuckles. His place was as empty as ours, but more expensive, with high ceilings and wide windows, so the bareness seemed purposeful and stylish. While he made her a hot cocoa from a bar of chocolate he melted down in a pot on the stove, she'd sat at the kitchen table and looked bored. In the morning she left him in a wide red bloodstain.

“He woke up,” she told me on the train ride home, as if I hadn't been there to see it. She hid laughter behind her hand.

“I didn't have another tampon! I shouldn't have fallen asleep. That definitely went through to the mattress.”

“Why would I remember his watch?” I ask her.

“I'm just asking,” she says. “Don't get huffy. You see this two?”

She deflates and drops the paper when I don't respond. Her hair is creeping up and out into a full circle around her head and her shirt has dark splotches under the armpits.

She asks, “Do you think he thinks I'm really crazy?”

“Yes.”

She says, “You're just jealous.”

“Then call him.”

“No,” she says, after a thought. “He thinks I'm crazy.”

She smacks the drawing off the bed like a child and sulks, “I wish you could at least clean the bathroom.”

I suggest that we take a walk, that the cold air might feel good. I tell her she looks very hot and she makes an exaggerated show of tossing her hair and looking back over her shoulder with flirtatious flapping eyelashes before her body reverts and her face falls back into the sulk.

She says, “No. I'm going to take a nap. Come be useful.”

When I don't answer, she mocks, “Am I hurting your feelings? Are you feeling used?”

The best times are when it's bright, hot summer, even in January, and I can struggle a heavy bookcase or dresser in through the door: a nice piece we found at a yard sale on a street we drove down by accident.

When she has a bandana covering her head and paint on her cheek. When the windows are wide open and the curtains move like bellydancers, and a young stray wind rides in on the sun and kicks over a smell of potted lavender in the kitchen. When she's turning one wall of the bathroom from white to blue and I can make us coffee, and when I bring her some her eyes shine because she's proud to be with me. When my skin has heat and I have chest hair, a spine and a heartbeat she can hear. When her name from my mouth is humid. When her face isn't thin and scared, but blinding with that light she used to have. When I can pay a bill. When people besides her can hear me. When I can remember who my family is and we negotiate them and hers and holidays. When my sex might actually do something and we think about what we would call them.

I told her this and she said, “You can go anywhere and that's what you fantasize about?”

We're in the bathtub. It's roomy and comfortable in ways that would be impossible in her

waking life. Her body is silky under a layer of white bubbles with pink and blue iridescent windows, as if she is the terrain for a swath of little homes for fairies. Her earlobe has a diamond in it.

She says, with quiet worry: “If I die there’s no guarantee that I’ll go to where you are.”

When the numbers on the digital clock at the bedside flick like fragments in a kaleidoscope and it is no longer 1:59 am, she tapes her drawn and cut out two over the clock’s red one.

“These are disgusting,” she says, and strips the gray sheet from the mattress and shakes white pillows from gray cases. The fresh sheets are red and springy with cleanliness.

I tell her she’s the most beautiful girl in world and she snorts, “Your world.”

She puts on pink rubber gloves to scrub the bathtub with coarse paste and tepid water. The floor tiles leave a crosshatched imprint on her knees. I feel guilty that I can’t help her but relieved when the orange shirt finally comes off and she stands under hot water in a tub that won’t ever be white, but is as clean as it gets. She dries off with a new towel and puts three different kinds of cream on her face. Her hair shines wet black. She twists it up into a ball.

I want to say: *don’t get back in bed. Please don’t get back in bed.*

But she does.

To Do, she writes in her notebook, and draws a line under it. In a minute, in a rage, she flings that to the floor too. She didn’t write a single thing under the line.

“It’s not two anymore,” I tell her.

She snaps: “What?”

“It’s three-o-seven. Not two-o-seven.”

She looks at the clock where the red numbers have started a new march up from zero, behind a paper general.

“It is two-o-seven. It says it right there,” she says.

I used to be able to be stern with her, to claim some omniscience and authority, and she used to believe it. The first night she saw me face-to-face, on a long walk somewhere green, she’d said, *guardian angel*. Her eyes had been big with awe and devotion. I couldn’t argue it, considering the truck from earlier that afternoon, the white buds that had been in her ears, and the way she had jumped back on to the curb when I’d yelled, even though no one had ever heard me before.

And I *would* steer her away from a few more falling pianos and unmarked cliffides over the next years, but to be honest anyone dead or alive could have managed to occasionally interrupt the aggravating oblivion she bubbled herself in to bliss through a world full of sharp or fast metal. You are still meat, I used to tell her. Pay attention.

But she’s the older one now and the more time goes on, the less and less I remember. I figure afterlife is this: your soul gets crashed or shot or sickened out of your body, and forgetting creeps up and around you like fog until one day, you forget to start that day.

“What should we do today?” she asks. It’s two-seventeen. Three-seventeen, really.

I say, “Let’s go out.”

“That’s a good idea,” she says. She pulls a pillow under her head and a sheet to cover her feet. Her hair presses a wet spot into the pillowcase.

“We could have dinner,” she says. “We could eat in the park.”

She's going to leave the light on all night. She started doing this in the run up until the last time she tried to divorce me and move on with her life, which just meant that she would ignore me if I spoke and keep her back to wherever my voice would come from.

Before that, though, she would leave the lights on for whole weekends, and every few minutes we'd be in a desert, or in a high school classroom, or in her childhood apartment, and she'd be reaching for me.

The thought of her starting another one of those spells sends a fear through me that I haven't felt since she was almost flattened by the truck. In retrospect, that at least would have been a quick death for her.

I say, "We could go see your family."

"We could."

I ask her, "Is there anywhere we haven't been?"

She says, "No."

There isn't anything I haven't given her, either. Mansions, goldmines, territories to call Maialand, knighthood, sainthood, rainforests, oceans.

"Marry me again," she says.

She sleeps through to daylight and wakes smiling. It's good to see. She knows I'd never leave her. I wouldn't have given her a wedding in a pink Hawaii, a star-shaped pearl the size of her hand and a baby dolphin as a present just to leave her. She'll think something happened — that the gates opened up, that someone called my ticket. We never knew how any of it worked.

She says, with a cat stretch of bliss, "Good morning."

She sits up when I don't answer, and says my name.

I don't turn my back to her until I have willed every inch of her face to my memory. And when I do turn, I pray hard.

Please live. Please, please live.

I pass through the door of 6B, down the gray tomb steps to a speckled lobby, through locked glass and down courtyard brick to sidewalk. I see hatted heads with blue or black bubbles for bodies, stuffed with goose down. They aim the hats at wind I don't feel. I walk south, towards the main avenue.

She has another sixty years, about. Maybe with the forgetting, it won't feel that long.

Maybe once she hasn't heard from me for months, she will move, and I won't know where she went, and won't be able to follow.

And I'll just wait for her on the corner. She knows that when it happens for her, to go there, if she can.

I'll just wait. I'll sit, wait, forget, hope.

Zenya Prowell was born and raised in Queens, New York, has an MFA in fiction from San Francisco State University, and currently lives in Los Angeles, California.

Once-A-Year Celebration

BY MOLLY QUELL

Alice couldn't remember who told her David's wife had died. It was described, she recalled, as "very tragic" but what premature death wasn't?

He seemed like a perfectly lovely neighbor. He would say hello when he encountered his neighbors on the street. He rang the bell to tell Alice she'd left the interior light on in her BMW. He promptly returned misdelivered mail.

She was the most recent addition to the cul-de-sac. Alice bought the 4 bed/3 bath with her share of the community property, as her lawyer put it, when her marriage ended.

They met in college. It had been love at one time then somewhere it stopped. They had no pets or children and separated as easily as they found one another at a house party 15 years earlier. Most of the houses had children, teenagers or nearly fully grown - away at various colleges and universities.

Alice dutifully donated to the baseball team and marching band fundraisers, she contributed something to the bake sale fundraiser at the Rotary Club - Max Rivers at #37 was the vice president - and trudged through frigid temperatures to join the neighbors to sing Christmas carols.

The Rivers also hosted a punch-laden Christmas party. The Wyatts and the only other divorced resident, Tammy Turlow, held summer parties, at the beginning and the end of the season, respectively. Tammy got the house in the split and everyone quietly commented the party was improved by her husband's absence. He drank too much and burned the hamburgers.

David was a constant presence at these gatherings. He had two children, both girls. One had already moved out before Alice bought the house across the street. The younger one left for college a few months after Alice moved in.

The co-ed returned during school breaks and for the occasional weekend. Alice saw the older girl less, at Christmas and occasionally when her younger sister was also visiting.

At first, Alice thought the balloons were in celebration of one of his daughter's birthdays. It was hard to imagine a single man hanging a row of multi-colored balloons across his front window for himself. But then neither of his daughters arrived for a visit, their familiar bumper-sticker-covered cars absent from the driveway.

It was obvious David blew up the balloons himself. They hung down in not-quite-even spacing over the bay window in the front of the house. He affixed them with string or ribbon to the top

of the sill. Alice noticed them on a dark and chill morning in November, illuminated by a soft lamp in the living room that always seemed on.

She lived in the house for three or four years, and had seen this display three or four times, before it occurred to her that the decorations may have been for his wife's birthday. Alice didn't even know the woman's name.

Alice had forgotten to set the trash cans out the night before. She realized as she stood in her own living room, looking at the sad balloon display across the street, holding her first mug of coffee.

David had put his cans out and so had the neighbors on either side. "Shit," Alice said aloud to no one. She set down the hot cup of coffee and stuffed her feet into a pair of clogs kept next to the garage door for just this chore.

She dragged the bins - trash and recyclables - to the end of the drive and lined them up neatly by the road. It was still dark, daylight saving time had left the mornings before work devoid of sunlight. Alice stopped for a moment to look at the balloons illuminated in the window.

Alice jumped at another figure in the dark, taller than her, criss-crossed with a bizarre strand of neon lights.

"Sorry, I thought you'd heard me coming."

It was Jake Wyatt's voice, out of breath, just finishing his morning run.

"You gave me a fright," Alice said, pulling her sweater tighter around her chest.

"I can't hear anything with these headphones in." Jake tugged the white plastic from his ears.

"It's rather sad, isn't it?" Alice said, gesturing across the street to the illuminated balloons floating upside down in the dark. "I assume it was for her birthday?" Alice tilted her voice up at the end of the sentence, hoping to encourage Jake to satiate her curiosity.

"No, that was in summer sometime. They used to do a big BBQ every year. She used to do the balloon thing for the girls when they were little, they also had summer birthdays, so it was a big party. Missy always found it a little cheap, ya know, just buy some proper balloons with helium she said."

Jake's wife, Missy, felt strongly about decor. She had already sent six messages so far in the neighborhood group chat about tacky Christmas decorations. With examples and photos.

"I just find it odd," Jake went on, "that he does it now. This time of year, I mean."

Alice wasn't sure odd was the correct word choice but Jake, who never had more to talk about at a party than his last marathon or his next one, perhaps couldn't be called on to be the most eloquent.

"Yeah, seems more for a birthday," Alice said, not wanting to seem quarrelsome.

"Not for her death right? It's an odd thing to do on the anniversary of her death. That's what I meant," Jake said, still looking at David's house.

"Her death?" Alice asked.

"She died in November. We had the girls at our place for Thanksgiving and Christmas while the police looked into things. I'll never forget it. Anyway, I need to get a shower. See ya around."

And Jake walked off, soon only his light strand visible in the dark.

Molly Quell is a Dutch-American journalist covering international law whose work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and others.

Mi Culpa

TISHA MARIE REICHLÉ-AGUILERA

“Teresita!” Abuela’s cry from the back bedroom wafts out, beckons me to her side.

If Mamá doesn’t hear the first request for my assistance, I can wait for the commercial.

“Te-Re-Si-Ta!” Even though Abuela’s body is weak, her voice is still strong as ever.

Before I can reply, Mamá steps out of the kitchen, my sister on her hip, my brother at her ankle, and a spatula in her free hand. She glares at me.

“A sus ordenas,” I yell back before I stand and turn off *The Brady Bunch*. I smile at Mamá. “Dinner smells good.” I exaggerate my inhale, hope garlic and oregano will stay in my nostrils long enough so that Abuela can’t erase it.

“Spaghetti is your dad’s favorite,” Mamá replies. “Now I gotta finish the bread.” She turns back toward the kitchen, my siblings in tow.

When Abuela cooked, she didn’t care what daddy liked. She made cocido, enchiladas, chicken and mole, and my favorite, chilaquiles, which daddy refused to eat because eggs are for breakfast and chips aren’t dinner.

“Teresita,” Abuela greets me, quieter than before.

When Abuela had come home from the hospital weeks ago, the bright yellow walls of my bedroom had faded. My puzzles and books had been moved to the hall closet, stuffed between towels and sheets. My dollhouse had been moved to the garage and my jump rope now lay tangled behind the front door.

“Tengo frío,” she says.

The room is stuffy, but Abuela’s toes are exposed and her circulation isn’t good anymore. I heard the doctor tell Mamá that Abuela could lose her feet because of the edema. Instead of just putting her socks on or covering her with another blanket, I get the blue lotion from the windowsill. Neighbor Marta made it special for Abuela. It smells minty and fruity. I put a little in my hands and gently rub Abuela’s swollen feet.

She closes her eyes and lifts her head back, tries not to cry out in pain. Half-moons under Abuela’s eyes reflect the blue-gray of her sheets. Her completely bald head is covered with a pink flowered scarf. Her skin is hot, but whatever Marta put in the crema soon relaxes Abuela. Her face stops contorting, and she wiggles her toes.

I cover them and wipe my hands on the blanket. I help her sit up to drink a glass of water and the pills Mamá had laid out for this time of day.

Abuela smiles at me, her eyes glazed and sunken into her pale skin. “Teresita,” she whispers then drifts off to sleep.

~ ~ ~

Heat waved up from the sidewalk and I skipped ahead of Abuela, jumped over big cracks. “Can I get a FunDip?”

Abuela smiled. “Too much sugar for a hyper little girl.” She shook her head, stepped on every crack.

“You’re gonna break your Mamá’s back”

“I don’t have a Mamá.”

I stopped. “How’d you get born?”

She walked past me without responding.

I know Mamás have babies and they take care of them ‘til they get big. I skipped to catch up with Abuela, ignored the cracks so I could go faster. Abuela took care of my Mamá, mis tías, and Tío Mando. “Who took care of you?”

She stopped at the liquor store door to wait for me, held the metal bar tightly. She looked down at me and in a voice I’d never heard before said, “No one.”

Bells tinkled when we went in. “Hola, Mr. Gee.” I ran up to the counter where he sometimes had little butterscotch discs wrapped in clear yellow paper. I saved them to make the windows of my dollhouse.

The store owner smiled and put up two fingers, reminding me not to take more than my share. He walked out from behind the counter to help Abuela.

“Just milk today, Freddy. Ran out before my coffee.” Her smile back at him looked sad.

Maybe I shouldn’t have asked about her Mamá. I took her hand after she paid and lifted the quart of milk up on my shoulder with the other.

“You got that?” Mr. Gee asked.

I flexed my muscle for him as we walked out. “I’m strong!”

“You have to be,” Abuela said.

At the corner of Pine Avenue, we detoured around the park. She took the bag with milk and let go of my hand. I always get to climb up and slide down the giant wooden slide at least once on our way home. “Less sugar than Fun Dip,” she said.

“Way more fun,” I said.

I took her hand again and we walked on the shady side of the street.

“When I was little like you, we didn’t have a sidewalk.” She pointed at the gray squares below us. “Dirt roads and rocks. Not so many houses either.” She waved at the ones nearby.

I ignored the cracks so I could watch her tell the story. Whenever Abuela talked about being a kid, she looked over the trees to a faraway land. She’d told me stories about her Papá, her brother Memo, and moving all over Texas. “I never been to Texas before.” I knew where it was because Mamá had showed me on a map.

“It’s hot like this.” She pointed to the bright sun overhead. “Dusty too. Fields like that.” She pointed to the distant lettuce growing in evenly spaced rows. As we turned the corner toward home, her steps became slower. Her lips moved and her eyes fluttered with a story. She was lost in a memory of something that made her relax her grip. She didn’t hear the growl.

But I did. Then turned and saw teeth running toward us. “Run, Abuela!” I yelled and let go of her hand, dropped the bag with milk.

The dog passed her and followed me. When he got close enough, he grabbed my butt with his giant bite.

Abuela caught up to us and hit him with the milk carton. It busted open after the second blow to the dog’s head. All three of us were splattered with white droplets. The dog whimpered away back home.

I licked my lip and wiped my arm.

“It’ll dry,” she said and wiped the sweat from her own face. “Are you bleeding?”

I tried to turn around but couldn’t see that part of my body. And I knew not to take off my shorts in public. “What about your cafecito?”

She smiled. “I don’t feel so sleepy now.” And we skipped all the way home.

It hurt a little bit, but I worried if we walked too slow, the dog would find us again.

My heart was still racing when Abuela cleaned the scratches and put mercurochrome on my butt. “Barely broke the skin you were running so fast.” It was going to bruise. She gave me a spoonful of sugar to take my scared away. She put an extra one in her coffee.

~ ~ ~

“Déjame! Déjame!” Abuela’s screams startle me awake.

Who is getting her? Should I hide or help her? Before I can peel myself off the recliner chair in the living room, I hear Mamá run down the hall. What if it gets her too? I stumble through the darkness, trip on my brother’s Tonka truck.

Mamá murmurs to Abuela. When I’m in the doorway, she stops and turns to me. “Get a washcloth. Wet it with cold water. Wring it out. Hurry.”

I run back to the cabinet by her bedroom. Truck in my way again so I kick it with my bare foot and hurt my toe. It hits my brother’s bedroom door and he whimpers.

I return to Abuela with two cold washcloths. Mamá puts one on her forehead and whispers something in Abuela’s ear. “Hold the other one on the back of her neck,” she says, “while I quiet your brother so he doesn’t wake the baby.” She scuttles out of the room.

I fold the cool damp washcloth like I’ve seen Mamá do for us and slide it under Abuela’s neck, hold it there, and watch her eyeballs move quickly left and right under her thin eyelid skin. It’s almost transparent. Maybe it’s the moonlight that makes her glow like this. It filters in through the poorly closed blinds making bright white lines across her swollen belly. It’s bigger than it was yesterday. And it quivers when she breathes.

I take her bony hand in mine and feel the spots of softness between her callouses. All the crema on earth can’t erase her years of labor.

“Armando,” she whispers. “Y que mas, Armando?” she asks the memory of Abuelo. A slight smile appears on her face.

“I miss Abuelo, too,” I say and squeeze her hand gently, careful not to press on the lump from where she had an IV at the hospital.

She shifts in the bed, tries to loosen her pain, but it doesn’t go away. She moans and grips my hand tighter. “Lo siento, Armando,” she says louder than before. “Es mi culpa.”

I wonder what is her fault, turn the washcloth over so the cooler side is against her skin. Her fever lingers on my fingertips.

For a moment, Abuela looks less tormented. Her hand relaxes in mine and the blood slows its flow through her veins. But her breathing still sounds like an ocean trapped in her chest.

I hum a song I’ve heard her hum, but I don’t know the words or where it comes from. When she wakes up, I’ll ask her.

She smiles. “Ay Teresita, mi muñequita.” She mumbles Abuelo’s pet name for me, a name

she has never used before.

I hum louder, tap my bare foot on the cold linoleum. The slap-slap echoes in the room.

“Shhhh! You’ll wake up everybody.” Mamá returns with a bowl of ice water to cool the fevered washcloths. She covers Abuela’s feet with blankets and wraps them around the sides of her body tighter.

“She’s too hot already. Why’re you doing that?”

“So her fever will break.” Mamá reapplies the cold washcloths to her forehead and neck.

I never thought anything could break Abuela.

Tisha Marie Reichle-Aguilera (she/her), Chicana Feminist and former Rodeo Queen, writes so the desert landscape of her childhood can be heard as loudly as the urban chaos of her adulthood. A former high school teacher, she earned an MFA at Antioch University and a PhD at USC. Her short stories have been anthologized and nominated for awards. Her play *Blind Thrust Fault* was featured in Center Theater Group Writers' Workshop Festival. Her YA novel, *Breaking Pattern*, is available from Inlandia Books and her chapbook, *Stories All Our Own*, is forthcoming from Bottlecap Press. She is a Macondista and works for literary equity through Women Who Submit.



only the birds can cross the silver river
gouache on paper