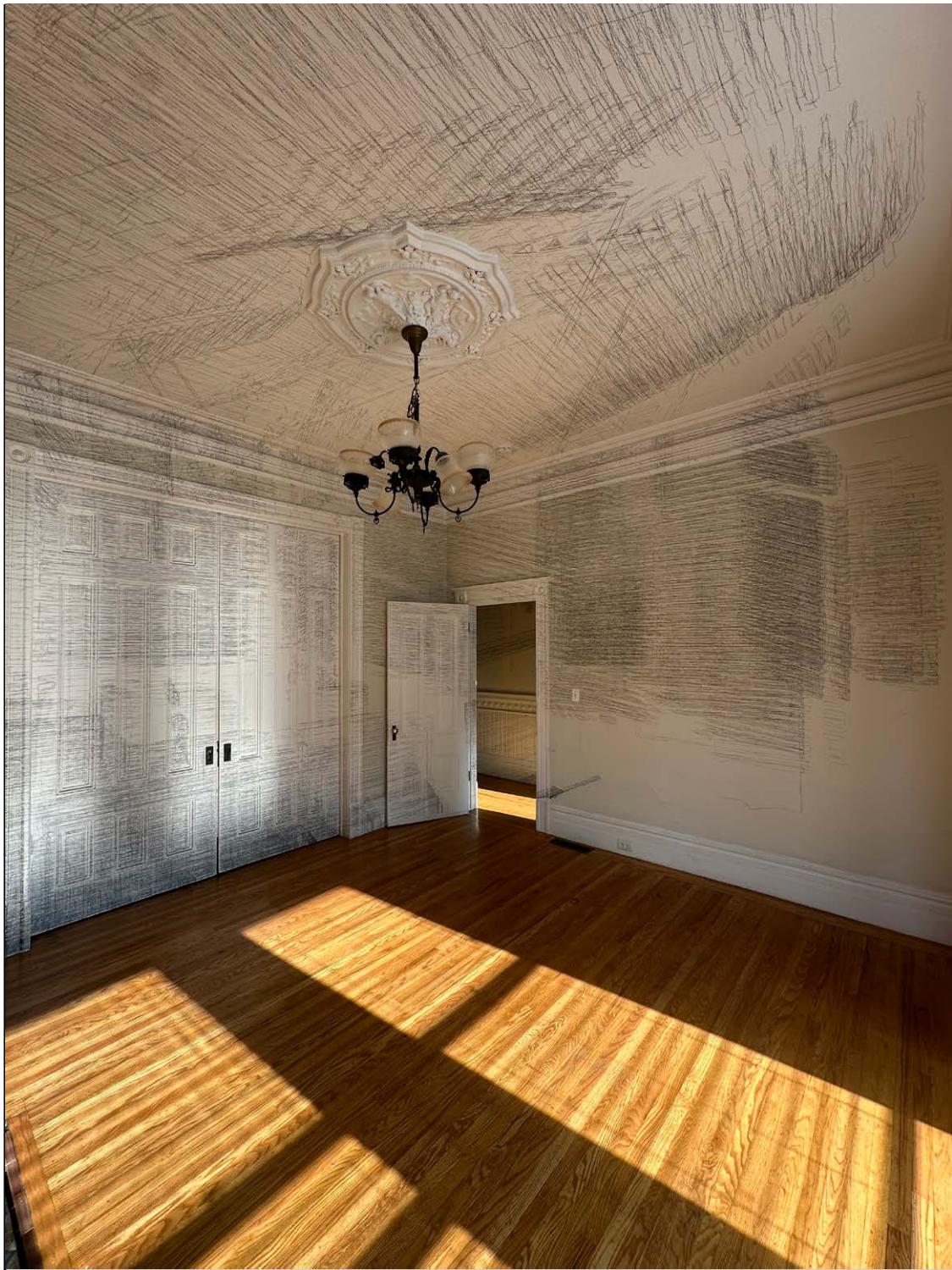


Angel City Review



Foreword

I'm going to be honest and admit that I never really know what to say when it comes to these, so I always gladly pass it off on one of the editors when they volunteer to write one. This project has been a constant in my life for over 10 years. As an all-volunteer run project it is sometimes a constant source of pride, and sometimes a constant form of stress, but none-the-less it has been here as a place that I have been proud to share the work of new, emerging, and established writers alike. This year we released the 10-year best of LA poetry anthology and I wasn't sure if that was a good place to leave it off or not. But quickly the anthology became a reason to fall in love with the work we do again. It is gratifying to provide space for people to share their work. When the world continues to prove that it is capable of so much ugliness and pain, it is good to be able to see the immense beauty that also springs to life in those same places. Seeing people who use their art to create, to fight against injustice, to destroy archaic ways of thinking, inspires me to do the same. This is also the first issue that Lizeth De La Luz worked on as she joined us as our new poetry editor. Her vision for the poetry section has brought a new perspective to the journal that I am looking forward to seeing more of in the future. As always I hope you enjoy the work we have collected for you here.

- Zachary C Jensen

FEATURED ARTIST

JOSHUA MORENO



In my work, I examine the overlapping relationship between the natural and human-made environment and highlight patterns and systems of efficiency that exist within them. Through installation, drawing, and film, I re-evaluate the everyday spaces and objects that surround us, with added attention to elemental phenomena.

I was born and raised in Watsonville, California. In 2011, I graduated from the University of California San Diego with a BFA in art practice, and in 2022 I graduated from Stanford University with an MFA in studio art. Since 2012, I have been working in art education, teaching courses in art history, filmmaking, and art. Presently, I am teaching art courses at Stanford and San Jose State University.

I close my eyes - Only for a moment - And the moment's gone, 2025, Graphite on architectural surfaces, Dimensions variable

From the spring equinox (March 20, 2025) to the summer solstice (June 20, 2025), I traced the movement of light in my Mission District apartment, capturing both direct sunlight and reflections from cars and windows outside. Over time, the graphite marks formed silhouettes of domestic objects: our couch, plants, and other signs of everyday life. In observance of the summer solstice on June 20

Angel City Review Issue 14 2025

Zachary C Jensen: Managing Editor

Lizeth De La Luz: Poetry Editor

John Venegas: Prose Editor

Simon Tran: Art Editor

Gabby Almendarez: Editor

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Homesick

BY AZALEA AGUILAR

power goes off in the middle of the night
water comes in slow drips from rusty faucets
fridges offer moldy cheese and rotten milk
humidity weighs heavy on your chest
I climb tree tops, imagine far away places
where the air isn't so salty
at nineteen with a newborn
Grandma squeezes hard, makes me promise
“mija, don't you ever come back,
never come back, entiendes?”
so much love in losing
my sister sends money for a uhaul
you can't raise this baby there baby
decades later, news is constant
girlfriends who I smoked weed with on the gulf
stared at stars with from pick up trucks
needles in their arms
shot by guns they bought for lovers
their children left behind
I knew them before, when we tried
to get lost on roads we'd memorized

Azalea Aguilar is an emerging Chicana poet from South Texas, where the scent of the gulf and memories of childhood linger in her work. Her poetry delves into the complexities of motherhood, echoes of childhood trauma, and the resilience found in spaces shaped by addiction and survival. She writes to honor the past, give voice to the unspoken, and carve tenderness from the raw edges of experience. Her work has appeared in the *Angel City Review*, *The Skinny Poetry Journal*, *The Glass Post*, and *The Acentos Review*. She has been featured at events hosted by the American Poetry Museum in DC and is currently crafting her first manuscript, a collection exploring the intersections of love, loss, and lineage.

To The Young Man in the MAGA Hat

BY JOON SONG

If you're trying to tell us that you're scary:
it's working.

When you tailgate us over potholes
in your Japanese-made truck

and get yet another tattoo of a flag
flying black, white, and blue

and proudly wear your bright red hat
with the MADE IN CHINA tag tucked away

we understand that you mean to frighten us,
we truly do.

But I want to ask you why you're so angry
at people who wish you no harm.

When you wave at your parents' gardener,
what is going through your mind?

You both probably don't make enough money,
you both probably worry about tomorrow.

We're not so different, he and you, you and I.
You're right to be angry. So are we.

To the people texting at the bar in Silver Lake

BY JOON SONG

instead of talking to the people to your left and right,
like the woman at the far table who is glancing
over from her book in between sips of her sidecar
or the man who obviously got a new haircut
and looks earnest in his best button-up flannel:

I hope that you are texting someone who loves you
instead of someone who, without so much as raising
a glass to your presence, is taking up all the space
in the finite corners of your time and attention
as surely as that absence you fear is waiting.

A Vision of My Great-Great-Granddaughter Cooking Tomato Sauce With Her Mother

BY JOON SONG

When she asks her mother
why she uses so many bay leaves

her mother will say that it was
just something her own mother

used to do, please keep stirring
and make sure to simmer slowly.

She will accept that answer
but I hope she knows there is more.

I hope, perhaps, she will see
even faintly in the patterns of steam

a vision of me as a young boy
watching his mother make lasagna

for the first time from a telephoned
recipe copied in Korean,

mesmerized by the fragrant leaves
so foreign to them both.

The Hand of God

BY JOON SONG

At the dinner table in the light I spy
a little gnat flying on little gossamer wings
until it comes to rest beside my plate

and though I suppose I didn't strictly have to
I exerted the tiniest bit of effort and crushed
it with my finger, feeling as intimately

as a lover the softness of its body yield and
break against an irresistible force
that might as well have been the hand of god.

Afterwards I am struck not with remorse but a feeling
we were not so different, this small little thing,
making our way in a world that makes no sense,

and as I go to wash my hands I wonder if
in its last moment it had been cleaning its legs
or if, as I so often do, it had been praying.

Getting There

BY JOON SONG

If I had made a left onto Benton
and then a right onto Reservoir
to bypass that stretch of Sunset
a few blocks west of Alvarado
as Google Maps had directed

I would have saved two minutes
but I would not have seen, by the road,
that riotous stand of yellow flowers
whose name I will never know,
about which I still wonder.

I could have gotten there sooner,
but then again, I do not recall where.
All I remember is a trace of gold
reminding me that sometimes, simply
being is as good as getting there.

Joon Song is an attorney and poet who lives in Pasadena, California. He won the Academy of American Poets award at his college and has been published in journals such as the *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Humana Obscura*, and *samfiftyfour*.

To that holy bear whose rage kept his head above water

BY DANIELLE PAFUNDA

Your oily coat collects salt crystals. You are inhabitant and habitat. You cure your own fish and assemble your paws to break a wave whose veiny weeds trouble its fleshy interior. Each wave a muscular column sent to embrace and flatten us.

Issue speech, bear, and, in the vicinity of your well-toothed maw, we find a rent its edges neat against our regular dimension. Though it is streaked red it's not bloodied. Though it appears dark, it isn't empty. Sound there.

So we note we have sound waves, light waves, and wet waves repeating all around us. In a wave, the promise of every subsequent rise, and in many the constant vertigo through which one could plummet.

Such a bear's halo slips like a collar golden around his industrial neck, his neck so like a redwood with its direct ascent into the sky, even in nighttime as though from the moon might be gleaned some food as from the sun. What do you tell us,

unsinkable prophet? Take light not meat? Rise to your full heavenly height even should there be no ground beneath you? Stay afloat much longer than you're able, warm yourself with the history of your own body? Had you told us just one of these things.

To the night sky, even in its cheapest reproductions, a wonder and a balm

BY DANIELLE PAFUNDA

Who were you, even in vinyl, who had changed so little over so long a passage? We couldn't look at you without thinking of Maya or ancient Greece. Not once did one of us look up and think something new.

Our eyes were bent with blue light, our minds new-media wired. Our fingers were coated in microplastics. All of us trashing on anxiety, scrolling, trolling, trawling. Repeating our caws, clipped noses in the wind.

If a person woke to the smell of peat fire in a suburb, it was true. If a person woke to tar on the retaining wall, it was true. If a bruise from a bee sting lasted all season, a fisher cat bolting across snow in sunshine.

The arctic caught fire and confused itself in our imaginations with the aurora borealis which also caught fire and dripped toxic gel onto the ice below. Fat was in great supply in some places.

So great that we had to ice it out of existence. We had to inject a gel that cannibalized it. While in other places seals withered, whales and bison dry to the bone, even the grasses went skinny on us and thought became brittle, toasted.

We wanted every realization to end in a solution, and then a lesson, and then a consolation, at least, and then we just wanted them to end. So one would no longer look at a star and make a wish, nor would one look at the star's geometry and tell a story.

We examined, as though for the first time, love's divisible numbers

BY DANIELLE PAFUNDA

Love splits mud into you and I.
No, you say, mud cannot be split.
Mud is whole, at all times, complete.
That is its motto as it fills
the mouth. As it fills the cavity.

On what was to be our last day,
we lived out our fantasies. Ate mud
and disposed of our government
names. Hunted ghosts and
harvested the worm at each core.

Halted bears and cleared their wounds.

On what was to be our last day
we felt the earth dissolving
beneath a tight braid of roots.
Love split roots, love split lips
where mud could smell acrid or
ashy, animal or industrial. Gather me,
mud, and forgive me I walked with humans
across your sea. I dropped into it
the cinders of my cigarettes
my loss and trash and so much bitterness.

To the world if the world is going to end

BY DANIELLE PAFUNDA

If the world is going to end, I say to myself,
I might as well have read this book. It is
Housekeeping, and I pick it up and read
a few pages.

When the world ends, I tell my students,
and future aliens come to earth to sift
through our delirious things, it might be
my hard drive that survives. It might be
your essay they read.

What can you do. You can contribute
to the human record those things
the human record does not yet contain.

If the world is going to end, it's not
going to end very quickly. It's taking
forever. Which is literally true.
If the world ends, it will have existed
exactly the length of our forever.

Status update: I have been complicit
in the basic and the brute.

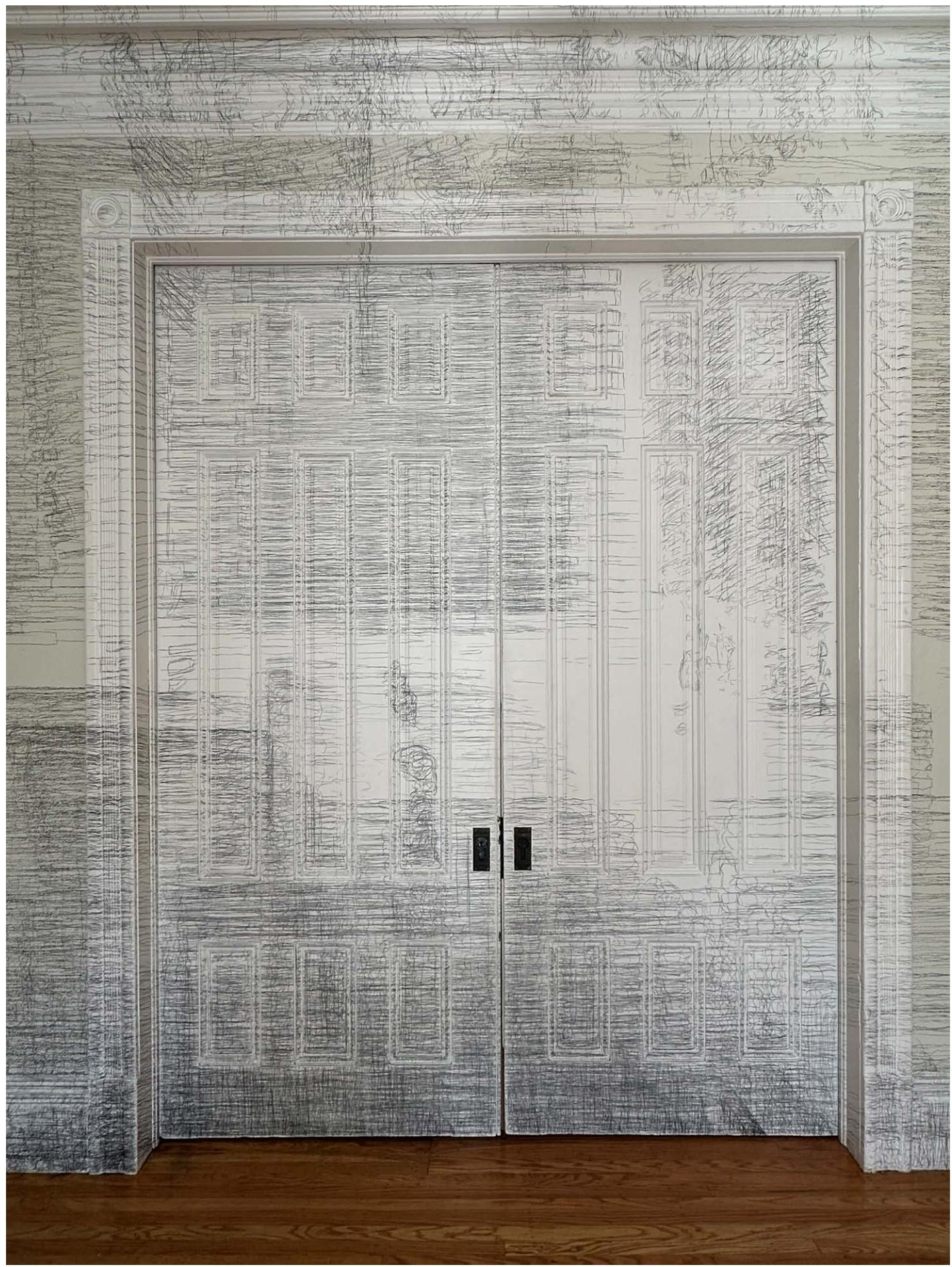
Status update: Felt loathsome, IDK
might delete later.

Status update: My scale is such
that in my head the model of our earth
and the line of my lifespan equate.

*If the world is going to end, I reason
in the moment, I will be glad I did this
But later, I will ask myself what possessed me
to do that thing*

If the world is going to end, we might
as well work a few more years. We might
as well try.

Danielle Pafunda is author of ten books of poetry and prose, including *Along the Road Everyone Must Travel* (winner of the Saturnalia Poetry Prize), *Spite* (The Operating System), *The Book of Scab* (winner of Troubling the I, Ricochet Editions), and *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison* (Bloof Books). Pafunda teaches creative writing, worldbuilding, literature, and queer/gender studies at Rochester Institute of Technology and lives in Rochester, New York.



Huesos

BY LÁZARO GUTIÉRREZ

Mother feeds me vanilla pudding
a treat gifted by a friend from *La Yuma*—
we don't know that taste around here,
at least I never have—
I lick the droplets that fell on the refrigerator door,
savoring its flavor in my hungry belly,
artificial vanilla, a delicate and sweet taste,
mis huesos taunt the skin on my shoulders,
they laugh at how they can stretch
the elastic skin like leather, like a balloon,
my belly—the neglected middle child—
screams for the attention
of more vanilla pudding from *La Yuma*.

generational

BY LÁZARO GUTIÉRREZ

it came from my mom and dad,
and they got it from their mom and dad,
who got it from their mom and dad,
we carry it—but we do not let it live,
it must starve until it eats itself
the rage will exist, but silenced,
it will have its toddler fits,
it will renounce your mind,
it will burn the flesh,
it will bitter the blood,
but it will not persist if we leave it hungry,
if it is not fed, it will not replicate,
you will suffer all the pain,
but your children will be free.

Lázaro Gutiérrez is a Cuban-born writer and poet. His family immigrated to the United States when he was eight years old. Lázaro has been writing stories and poetry since he was young. He attended Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, NC where he majored in Educational Studies and minored in English literature. Most recently, he completed his Master's degree in Communications.

Lázaro's work explores his early childhood in Cuba, his love of nature, the journey of immigrants, as well as love, fatherhood, and his most personal experiences. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in various literary magazines such as *Tint Journal*, *Snapdragon: A Journal of Art & Healing*, *Latino Literatures*, *Discretionary Love*, *Molecule - A Tiny Lit Mag*, *Somos en Escrito*, *Frontera Lit*, *Azahares Literary Magazine*, *Barzakh Magazine*, *SOMOS Latinx Literary Magazine*, *BarBar*, *The Word's Faire*, *AAWP: Meniscus*, *Chrysalism Press*, *Who's the King* and *Free the Verse*.

Children of the American Medical System

BY SARA ENIT RODRIGUEZ

We are the children of the American Medical system. The kids who know how to entertain themselves in waiting rooms. The homework done on laps. You know the hospitals with the best cafeteria food. The translators to a language we learn very early on, a skill that serves everyone but us. It's making roosters from blown up gloves. It's holding back a hug because it'll hurt them, or you'll set off some alarm. It's anxious sitting in a space you don't want to be in. Patience in the form of holding in energy in your body until it feels like a poison. Being freezing cold in a emergency room lobby because you rushed out and forgot your jacket. It's finding the nurses that applaud how well behaved you are when all you want to do is run out the door. Do not applaud what dedicated children we are, we don't want to be here, and the hate for it is not yours to understand. This isn't crying when the ambulance shows up. It's crying when the appointment you have been waiting three months for gets canceled. It's going to the same psychiatrist your parents go to. This is peace within, and war all around. You don't get this good at injections watching Disney Channel. The TVs in the hospital have that channel, but that's not what you're paying attention to. You soak in every word the doctors or nurses or nurse practitioners say. You soon pick up on body language cues, and how certain words although seemingly harmless mean more damage than others. This is learning how to fill out paperwork, when you can't even fill out your homework. It's knowing that if you get taken out of class early it's because someone is in the hospital. This is to survive and do it well.

Sara Enit Rodriguez is a Puerto Rican, Salvadoran poet from Orange, California. She writes poetry and fiction novels. Caregiver-patient advocacy is a passion that is threaded through the narratives and prose in her writing. Her hope is to continue to provide a platform for those who have struggled with life as caregivers. Her writing showcases an emphasis on young and young adult caregivers, and distinctions between chronic and acutely ill family members. With an extensive background in the American healthcare industry her writing seeks to provide a global view of caregiving from all perspectives

The Devil's Winds

BY SHARON V. BROWN

I am from this place.
I know the winds from the east
that agitate nerves and hair and skin.
I know those winds, exhausting,
like a searing headache--
the sharp, brittle bones,
the sun too bright, the air too hot,
like a premonition of hell.

But here it is,
winter in Los Angeles,
and the Santa Ana winds
have come in hard,
no longer presaging hell,
but delivering.

Like a witch's breath,
the angry winds blaze
across the stick-dry hills.
Showers of sparks
careen and whirl
seeding the parched earth
with fresh infernos.
Trees, landmarks, homes,
indifferently targeted--
just enough time to grab
a random photo or grandma's
porcelain bowl, before they're gone.

And it's beautiful, Los Angeles,
in spite of what the people say
about movie stars and Botox
and arugula smoothies.
It is beautiful, the land
of golden hills, sweet eucalyptus,
and a sparkling coastline
that goes on forever.

It is beautiful, the land
and the people,
who drift now to sleep
under a darkening sky
and dream of angels,
bent and grieving.

Sharon V. Brown grew up in Southern California, and currently lives in the country outside of Seattle, Washington. A retired English professor, she writes poetry from the perspective of an older woman, reflecting on loss, change and fragility. Recent publications include *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Cirque, Monterey Poetry Review*, and *The Senior Class: 100 Poems on Aging*, from Lamar University Press

Sycamore

BY AARON GREENBERG

In the sidewalk cracks
The gashes of heavy fingers
Smooth twisted thumbs
Of Lankershim or Hancock
Who wanted to build something great and exotic

Underground living seems democratic by nature
A city the size of a soul

But there may be a civil war going on
Lovers in tunnels
The close combat of frustration and desire

Once you begin to wander
Into the asphalt
An eye can drift to other
Places that hide places

When it comes to
Closing things
We are surgeons
Lifting ice cubes with steel chopsticks

But under fleshy medical tape
Your date will still notice
That you have been
Picking the back of your neck bloody
The way the gardener
Cuts into sealed gravel
With the sharp end of a shovel before
The catacombs get a breeze,
A straw of sunlight

1995-1996

BY AARON GREENBERG

When I took the bus
Which wasn't often
I would tug at the silver duct tape
Until the sticky duct ended up on my fingers
Like dried grape juice

The holes in the seat rubber
Supported by the steel skeleton
A still robot with excellent posture
Is where they hid the lanyard string

I could never get beyond
The most basic design
Square stitch, was what they called it

But to devote yourself to something more
With the shiny plastic tefillin
Was to miss
The Chatsworth boulders
That even the freeway couldn't move
Catching the last daylight

Aaron Greenberg works in the labor movement and lives in Los Angeles.

the airport-hospital hypothesis

BY CLARA MEJIA-YUAN

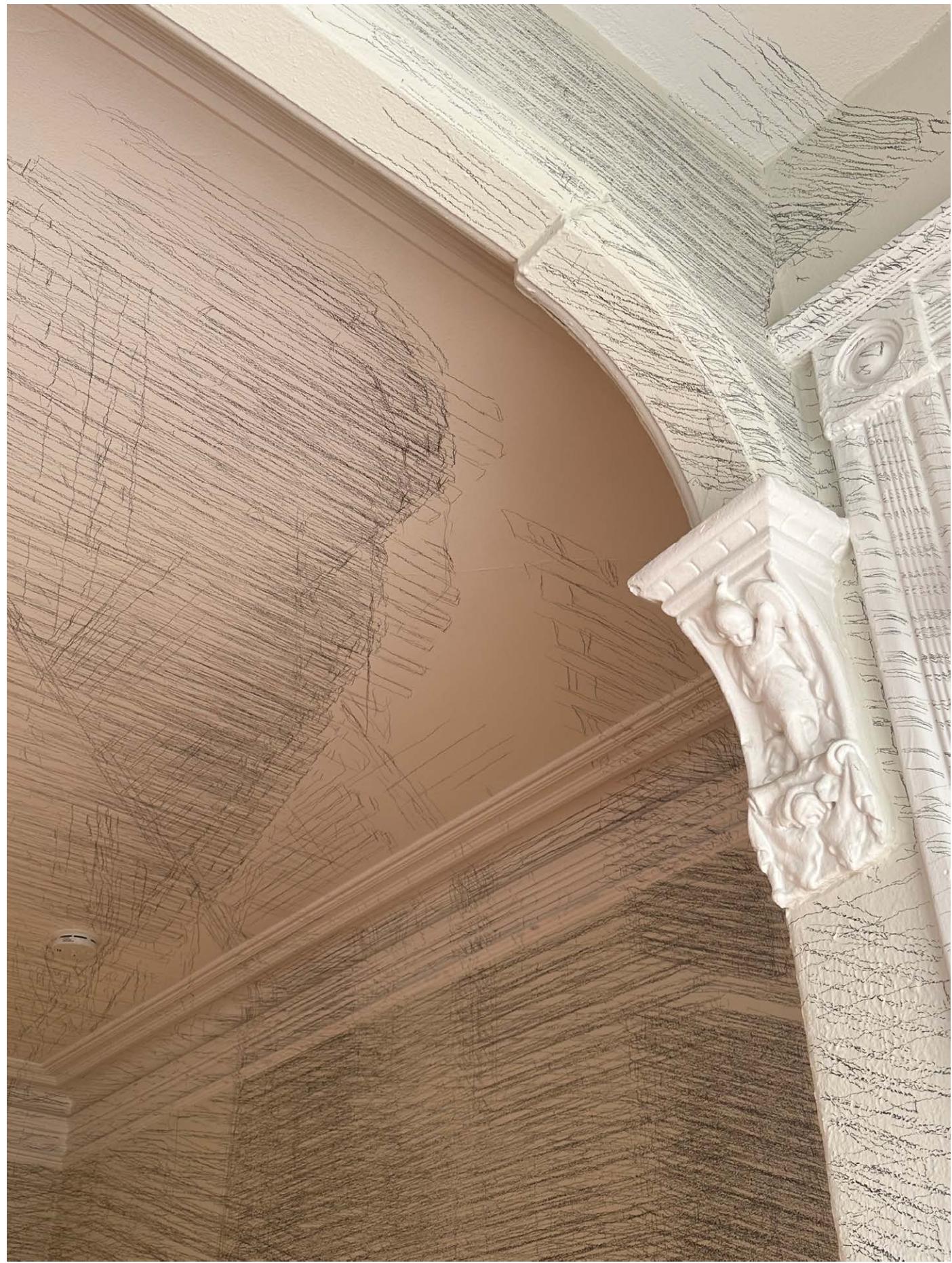
when people think about which places in the world have seen the most humanity
it is not a grand palace with shiny things
or a crowded party with loud music
or a barren street with no shade
it is the places where time is scarce and short-lived
where people recognize time is only a brief moment

airports and hospitals are the same thing when you think about it
both born from a need to have places of transition
harbors for both the beginnings and endings
heft for both the recovering and terminal
space for both the arrivals and departures
depth for both the created and destroyed

my hypothesis is this:

airports and hospitals are the places that have seen the most humanity
they have heard the most electric hellos
and have felt the most anguishing goodbyes
because in a fleeting moment
when everything is stripped bare
we know what really matters
we remember what really matters
for we know love is not time-
but timing.

Clara Mejia-Yuan is a Mexican-Chinese high school poet based in Fullerton, California. She spends her free time dancing, writing, reading, and hanging out with her friends. This is her first publication and she continues to write poems that express both her emotions and wit.



ahogando en agua fresca

BY ALEXIS JAMES

If the night were a drink,
it would be this jamaica in our hands
with sweat boiling out,
rolling down
kissing our necks along the way
tenderly leaving sanguine stains pooling

p

u

l

l

i

n

g

drowning
us
in rubicund petals

liquid truth—too honest,
too tart to be lies—
tells us to profess
with summer breath condensing
under a crescent plunging with us into crimson waves
matching florid eyes

striking the ruddy flesh
like a match caresses a surface
the heat overpours
spilling it all
on our tongues
that thirst, the sparks,
the taste & all

Family Album: Mi mamá

BY ALEXIS JAMES

This is my mother, mi mamá

she is smiling so wide her teeth are showing, which she never allows,
claims the metal crowns aren't worth showing

she is holding my hand as we walk down the steps with papeles long sought declaring her
legalized

in a language that jammed itself between her jaws
unhinging the joints until the acentos are sawed off
so the tongue can no longer roll

but she can still roll masa
like she rolls with the punches
like she rolls & swirls when she dances to El Tucanazo
like the last bead of sweat rolling off her brow on those nights
like she rolls out of bed en la madrugada the day after
like my eyes roll when she tries to speak to me in this unhinged tongue

she is looking across to me

waiving a flag of some place called home
me, oblivious

to the hours of Inglés sin Barreras she studied with her sisters
or the hours of overtime
spent elbows deep in chemicals,
scouring dried ketchup from tables,
withstanding searing oil hurdling from the fryer
to the point the cartilage of the knees will wane
& no number of massages from abuelita will help

& it still won't be enough
enough money
American enough
Good enough

but for me,
it's more than enough

Hereditary

BY ALEXIS JAMES

I was the last to find out that abuelita died
I felt a tug on one of my heartstrings
it wasn't a pull, though, like when the last of my abuelitos passed
I didn't even know her name
she was just *abuelita* & phone calls
full of false promises of returning to Mexico & see her

I think I related more to Apá's father
because he hung himself
because that was when I found out
self-destruction is hereditary

It makes sense now
that night I almost beat him to the grave
why for the longest time I sought relief from a buried ache—

I was born with a wick to my brain
surviving despite being surrounded by cinders

Apá didn't have a chance
because they don't teach you psychology in la primaria
when school stopped at 4th grade
you graduated to working with your hands
accepting the tingling in the fingers
swallowing the burning swelling around the spine
ignoring potential for what is probably forever

his wick tethered to the liver clasped to a bottle of
Tecate, Corona, Pacifico, Modelo, Bud Light...

addiction can be beautiful if you look at the remains—
shards of glass reflecting cityscape lights on sidewalk chalk outlines

Amá also didn't have a chance
because only two sexes existed & one had to labor more through their body
bending, twisting, splitting, spreading enough to splinter but not break
growing afraid of abandonment
to the point of mistaking manipulation for love
porque niñas buenas se quedan calladitas
depending on a man to be her savior
leading to marrying her abuser

her wick ran to her heart, sprinting throughout the arteries
radiating in pulses present on palms flicking coal-hot tortillas
digits coated in callouses and a ring rusting like wrinkles
she loved hard, almost too hard, becoming something to take advantage of

Especially my brother who had no chance
a first-born raised by chanceless cycles turning and churning another one
baptized in bigotry
drowning in patriarchy
fluent in homophobia
victim of a victim taking another victim
whose wick was a cry for attention that was blamed on

Gangs
Satan
TV
videogames
junk food
boredom

anything but the actual the system
that buries mental health
covers it with dirt
and when it's unearthed
it is blamed on
Gangs
Satan
TV
videogames
junk food
boredom

anything but the actual the system

I stopped wanting to be saved at an early age
I posited that god didn't care if I ate carne on Fridays during Lent
or if I preferred men
or if I didn't attend church
or if I adorned my skin in permanent art

my wick is buffering dynamite ready to implode
delicate like love handles waiting to be held
thirsty hands calling out for water drying out in Santa Ana sun

though my wick is ready to be lit
fire can be smothered as easy as it is sparked

jumped

BY ALEXIS JAMES

Brother comes home with a black eye
that is welcomed by the shriek from Amá that pierces the paper-thin walls
Her big brown eyes

that overpoured hope into a vessel never taught to handle it
like one of papi's shot glasses he demanded to conceal a lifetime of pain
now slit shut by the wrinkles she gathered over the years
leaving tears to overcome fleshy levees still doing so

This is the asthma attack Brother had at 14 all over again
only, this time there are no uniformed men pressing down his chest
absent are the cacophony

of his wheezing, gasping for air
grunts from efforts snapping open the lungs
sirens drowning the scene in a red sea

Yet my eyes are still shut
viewing is optional
& if I can't see it
it doesn't exist

Yes, it is childish
but I am a child who didn't ask for this
I am too young
to witness

What a lifetime of gasping next to a freeway does to the organs
or
how a zip code determines your health & foresees your poverty
or

machismo with a moustache for a father

or

the consequences of believing in SkyPapi over health professionals

or

how expensive it is to ride a deafening vehicle to the hospital

or

the effects of a systemic power beyond my control like

the difficulties of raising a baby in a world where they call him

anchor

& him

believing that what it takes to feel belonging isn't the blood shared in the veins

but the broken vessels around the eyes

to show

you share trauma with others who hurt others to feel less alone

still, I am not too young to experience it

Alexis Jaimes is a poet and educator from Santa Ana, California. He is the author of the chapbook *Corazón Coalesced* (Bottlecap Press, 2024), and his work has appeared in *Flowersong Press*, *ILL Poetry Anthology*, and *Black Fox Literary Magazine*. He writes to honor working-class stories, intergenerational memory, and healing through language.

delineation | d3linEaTi0n

BY MARILIA ANGELINE

the problem is humans aren't robots

we need things
for productivity sleeping and feeding and
breathing and watering
the body and mind can overheat
and so can the heart it's even been known to
freeze
we need time to create and time to do

nothing to balance it out we're temperamental
and persnickety and hypersensitive
souls wrapped in a storage container
and one by one we are being

replaced first for labor of the hands
then the mind and its mechanizations
and now of the spirit itself it has come
for the arts and the artists themselves
find reason
to further question their significance

especially if they already lack
compensation when in comes instant imitation
synthetic and demanding the same
categorization
and AI doesn't need to feel

worthy of making
it simply automatically generates

unlike humans who tend to want
to deliberate and often we do
hesitate

to create what at this exact moment we still can
intuitively delineate—

the problem is robots aren't human

Marilia Angeline is a Los Angeles based poet, writer, actor, improviser, and transformational coach of Greek-Cypriot descent. She double-majored in Creative Writing & Literature and Drama at The University of Michigan. Marilia's writing explores themes of neurodivergence, mental health, voice, femininity, and spirituality & mythology. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Apparition Lit*, *Spoon Knife*, *NewMyths*, and elsewhere. She is working on her first poetry collection.

An Elephant is Sprinting Through the Room and the Flies are Everywhere and I Am Hyper Fixating on Invisibility

BY TRUCKER SUSHI

Picture this:

I am sitting against a New England window,
back to another forgettable summer,
my foot restless on the wood

tap,

tap tap, *tap, tap, tap*,
full of bread and gin and
twenty two.

Picture the director:

fleece button down, brown loafers (very Vermont chic) he has a
sudden heart attack,
the **thud** is heard on the set but
the cameras keep rolling,

Pan back to me:

My hands
shredding screenplay
fingers curling,
uncurling,
pieces flying just out of reach,
Sandhill Crane migration.

Zoom to the heroine:

clear skin fan favorite, she is
staring at me,
blue eyes pleading:

say the right line,
say the damn
right
line.

I know she means well but I am still learning to be human still learning how to
assemble an apology still learning the script still learning
how to
smile
at the audience.

Can we please just turn the cameras off I just...

(BLEEP)

I just
need a minute.

Rust-Oleum

BY TRUCKER SUSHI

It takes practice,
to remember the departed as they were-
no flowers
snuck into the hair,
the ledgers still grease stained,
the birthday cards
left at the top of the closet.

A laugh,
heard from another room-
an artifact.

their silhouette gardening,
nicotine on the breath,
a joke told on the porch,
breath condensing into winter air-
a monument.

The sound of the doorbell,

the sound of their feet,
on the other side.

Trucker Sushi is a writer and visual artist whose work focuses on the people of rural America, punk rock, and the feeling of being in the third row of your parent's minivan. He primarily writes short stories and poetry, and is currently working on a novel and a poetry collection. His photography has been featured in galleries all over the world, and can be found (along with his flash fiction) on his Instagram page: @truckersushi

1. Inheritance

BY TANISHA BOSE

My mother taught me to fold pain
like laundry—
smooth the wrinkles,
stack it neatly,
put it where no one can see.

My father taught me
that silence is safety.
Not peace,
but the space between
explosion and explanation.

I inherited hands that shake
but still clean the kitchen.

I inherited a spine
that bends around people
like I owe them something.

I inherited survival
like a second skin,
too tight
but too sacred to shed.

Some call it trauma.
Some call it culture.
My family calls it Tuesday.

When people ask me who I am,
I want to say:
I am made of what wasn't said.

I am the echo
of women who weren't allowed to scream.

I am the child
of people who couldn't afford
to fall apart.

I carry their ghosts
in my gestures,
in my guilt,
in the quiet way
I keep going.

Tanisha Bose is a teenage poet from Bangalore exploring identity, silence, and survival. Their work has been previously published in Blue Marble Review, Merion West and other places.

I Ain't Got Daddy Issues

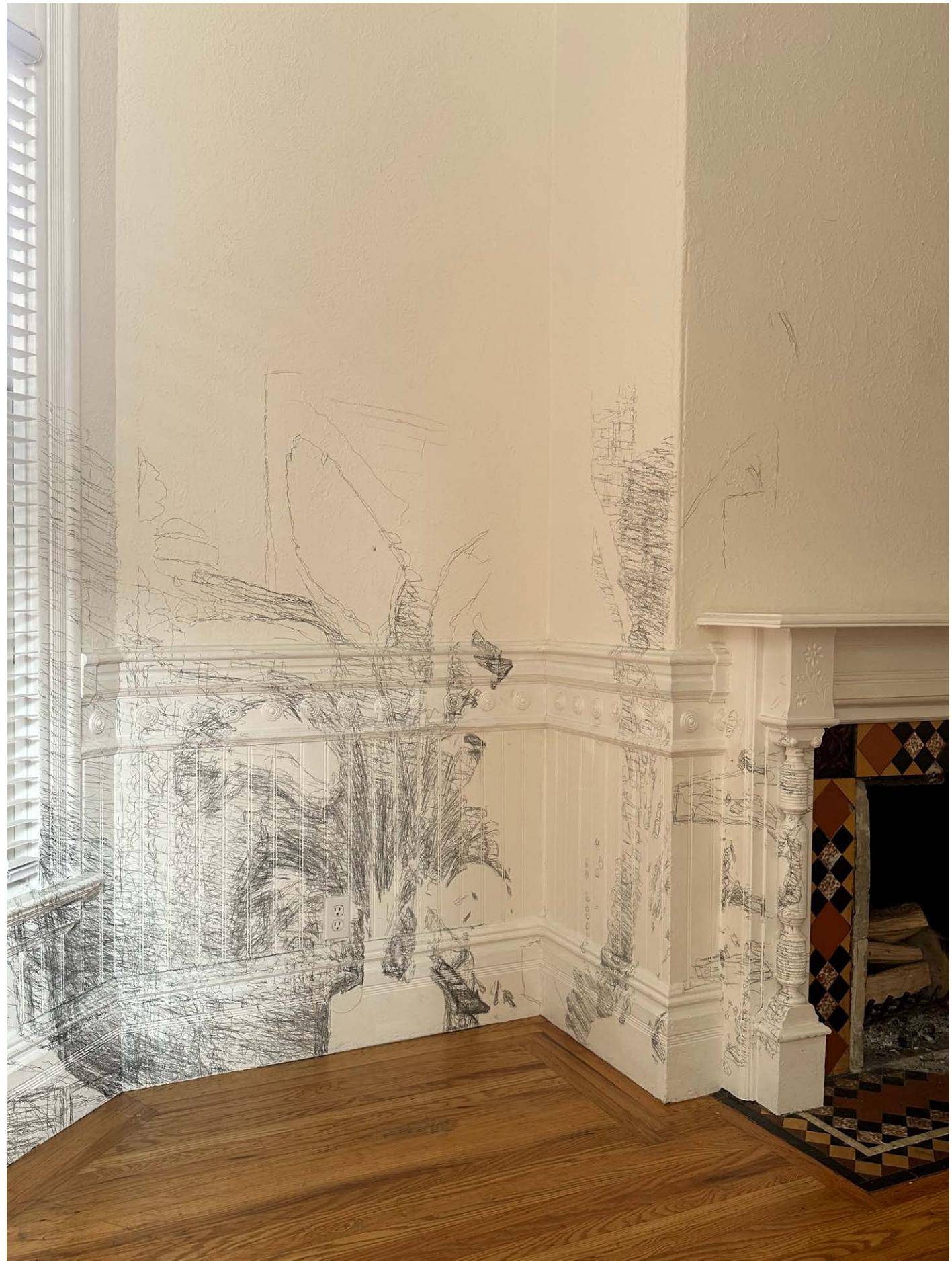
BY SUMMERTIME JAZZ

I got an issue with my dad who matches me with a 6'2 demeanor in a 5'2 body, a slanged out tongue, clear sharp Abuelita hazel eyes, a love language of smiles and laughter and smart ass remarks. An imagination that is so wide it connects to each other miles away. We envision what can hurt, what can heal, somehow it's real what we say, what to do, what to do to fix the problem. We've become House Hood Shamans in concoctions of Vick's and peppermint, hot salt water and giggles. But I can't break laughter with my father right now. I can't cry to him out in the garage over girls because, "why would you wanna do that?"

When he asks me that, he's the first homophobic encounter I've had. It'll break his heart to know that. My Abuelita and his Abuelita are rolling in their graves not because I write poetry about hot women and I wanna live my life out on stage. But because my father isn't being my dad right now. He's stuck with his head up a white man's ass blaming it on fear for my future when he's destroying my present with his mindset and unholy prayers and shitty ass politics. He's not making sense shit talking my mother what he says about her is a reflection of all four of his children, who she raises, who she loves, who she gave up her early 20's partying in the club for. Bear cubs are to be feared too, Dad.

He's riding a line that if he crosses, I can't let him back because he raised me to be stronger than that. To keep my head up and ignore those doing wrong by me and my family. What he's been preaching is never what we've been about. What he's been saying isn't fucking funny. It hurts his Chewy. And that's the issue.

Summertime Jazz is a Lesbian-American self-proclaimed Party Poet whose work pulses with nightlife energy, dance floor romance, and life's dramatic humor. Her work's been featured in zines like *Ill Anthology*, *Walang Hiya Zine*, and *Community Milk*. She's an Anaheim, CA local and a regular at OC Poetry Slam, bringing her unique, entertaining style to every stage. Summertime Jazz creates written art for your entertainment.



Daughter

BY FARZANA WASEEQ

Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles

10:30pm. The 204 bus on Vermont is late again. The bus driver on duty tonight is one I've only seen a couple of times. No chit chat. Eyebrows furrowed, but not in that way, in the other way, which makes him look mildly surprised, but all the time. He's huge but don't really seem like the fighting type. Not like the last guy, anyway. Nobody could match the last guy, he was a bazooka, although he called me "young lady" and got me home on time.

I prefer it when they're running a bit late, to be honest. Yeah, maybe I'll chide myself for thinking that next time they decide to take a phone call with a minute left to go, but at least I won't be watching them drive away a minute earlier than scheduled, leaving me to wait around for an additional twenty minutes (if I'm lucky) that I could have used to sleep, to dream, hell, to stare at the ceiling, at least I would've been in my own home and not on some street corner shivering in the dark.

The driver keeps to himself, doesn't even look at me as I board, which is fine, we don't know each other. Oh God. Why do they switch the drivers around so often? Probably so their chances of getting stalked and killed are lessened, fucking hell, that's probably part of it.

I settle into a window seat, the bus isn't too busy, but it's also not barren, a goldilocks load. Looks like that doesn't even matter though to this fool who got his eye on me the second he boards on Santa Monica. Starts to move into an empty booth all to himself, changes his mind at the last second and shoves himself into the seat next to me. Of course this idiot is fucking enormous, built like a Samoan, except with less air, less charm, unwelcome.

I feel him looking at me. He's one of those that thinks he's being seductive, charming, his lids softened with leftover high. I'm mad, I stare back at him with contempt, he takes this as an opportunity. Jee, she really hates me, now's my moment.

"You having a good night, baby?" I clamp my mouth into a line and say nothing but I am confused, his voice is softer than I thought it would be, it irrationally infuriates me.

"What kind of ice cream is that?"

Now this bitch is looking in my bag. At first I consider ignoring him, deflecting. What's it to you? But I am so tired and why the hell do all the cool responses require so much energy? Stupidly, I tell him what flavor it is, strawberry.

"Is that what you like?"

“What?” I say loudly. Good Lord, no matter which reaction I choose it’s gonna end up with me being exhausted.

“Do you like that?”

His leg is pressing against me, my shoulder bag the only thing keeping his warm thigh from swallowing mine. His fingers graze my knee, I jerk my legs toward the window, away from him, I don’t care if he is taken aback, suddenly I want him to be shamed and ashamed both. I see white. “I really don’t want to talk to anybody right now,” I say. Why don’t I know the driver to-night, why couldn’t he look me in the eye?

Against the humming of the bus and its patrons he makes me repeat myself again, twice. If I had a death wish I could raise my voice to a holler right then and there but I have a mother and, supplementally, a pint of ice cream to tend to, among other things. Instead, I spit out a “thanks” as he makes as though he is going to move seats. The vizier of unwarranted hesitation, it takes him several seconds and much moving around to decide how to proceed. Finally, he just gets up, looks at me with those lidded eyes, and lets out a groan, lets it out slowly, it tumbles into my lap, I want to brush it off. Dear God, why are they like this? God, come get this fool, he needeth purification with a swift toss into the fire. Does he deserve that? I don’t know, man, that’s up to you, my requests are just requests, prayers really, I’m not in charge of these decisions anyhow.

I frown and look away from him. This is the worst part, the stomach sink, when will he get off? Will he wait for me? Dammit, I want to be held very tight, I want to hold somebody else very tight, so that they become part of me, I want to protect and be protected, they feel so similar, why do they switch the drivers around so often? Oh that’s right, so that they are more difficult to stalk and kill. Fuck, I hope he’s too high to stalk properly. Jesus, girl, nothing has happened yet, just hold on a minute.

Melrose. Finally, familiar faces, voices, greetings. Never in my life have I been happier to partake in a fist bump. He sees it, I have a new card in my hand now, you don’t know what it is and neither do I to be honest but the bluff is part of the game anyway. We’ll see what happens if I end up having to play it.

He gets off two stops ahead of me. Confused motherfucker switches his position on the bus three times. Just get off, get off, get off. I wonder who I can call. So many people who I know would care, would come, they have told me so, but I am stuck, I cannot ask, not here, not now. I can’t even remember their names, who they are, I would rather accept my fate than ask for help. What fate? What in the world? Okay, noted, that’s a problem. Remember, you have a mother. Filed away for another time.

By the time we reach my stop I am cold. My back aches. Before I get off I sip the familiar faces, voices, I just need a little bit to get me home. It’s got a mild taste, but welcome, sweet. I walk the

five blocks home. Is he behind me? Bitch he'd have to hail a chopper in order to catch up to you at this point, calm down. 3rd street. I smell cumin, mustard seeds, frying oil. My hand is nearly full. I straighten my back, hold my keys. When I get to my building there are more familiar faces, even the steps are familiar, the ash on the patio. It's almost eleven o'clock at night, what the hell are you all doing out here? Don't listen to me, I love that you are here, you can smoke your dumb cigarettes out here all you want.

I go upstairs, lock my door behind me, put my groceries away. I have to wait for the ice cream to firm up, it's much too soft now. In the meantime, I should call my mother. Soft blankets, caramelized onions, fresh mint, holding her calloused hand in mine (my equally calloused hand, that is). I wish I hadn't left her – don't be silly, you still have her, and you knew what you had to do to free yourself from the others anyhow. Could you have taken it, would it have been worth it to stay? Filed away for another time, another place. Dial tone. Even if she's asleep, doesn't pick up, at least she will wake up in the morning and remember she has a daughter.

Farzana Waseeq is a writer and worker from and for Los Angeles.

A Walk Through Town

BY HENRY TANNER

The town was bustling with people that seemed to have nowhere, or everywhere, to be. There were never this many out on Main Street on Monday evenings; she figured it had to be one holiday or another, likely one that was purely commemorative rather than festive. All that she knew for certain was that it was cold, surely much colder than it had been in months, and still, here the people were. She, regardless of weather or holiday or mood, happened to be on Main Street every evening at this time, right when the sun finishes setting and the artificial, orange glow of the pedestrian street lights replace it. As an actual resident of Main Street, she needn't take more than two steps out of her building to be on her way. At times, she could be found seated near one of her apartment windows, sipping a cup of black coffee or a stale tea, simply waiting for darkness to come.

When she took her nightly strolls, there was no objective beyond the activity itself, at least not one that existed outside the mind. There were no errands to run, no food to eat, and no drinks to drink; plenty of options lined the street if one were inclined. But for her, there were no stops at all. Even the benches at the local park, which were plentiful and nearly always vacant at that time of night, couldn't possibly tempt her, even if their metal legs animated and beckoned her over. Her strolls were only strolls. Nothing more, nothing less.

On that hectic evening, she took to the street in a puffy jacket and a long, pleated skirt—a clashing combination of textures that only semi-worked together because they were both as black as the night, although she certainly wasn't stressed over her appearance. When she walked, she walked tall and straight, eyes always ahead and awareness always high; this, she made absolutely sure of. If she wasn't completely mindful of her surroundings, she might miss a passing word or a fleeting face, and she couldn't have that. Yes, it was just a stroll, but to her, what made a stroll a stroll was the people. She lived vicariously through them, consumed them, until there was no longer them, and only her. And tonight, there was much to feast on.

The first couple that she laid her eyes on came and went in silence. A young woman—mid-twenties if she cared to guess—hanging from the arm of a similarly aged man, clinging to him like her life depended on it. Perhaps she was cold; the young woman's skirt, much shorter than her own, seemed to corroborate this. Perhaps she was tired; it was only 6:30, but if it was, in fact, a holiday, then it wouldn't come as a surprise if they were out all day, making the most of it. Or perhaps she was sad and quite literally needed a shoulder to lean on. Instead of landing on one, she decided on all three: cold because of wardrobe negligence, tired because of their eventful day, and sad simply because the day was nearly over, and soon the two would be separated by one responsibility or another. This combination of factors equated to silence, and when she passed them on the street, that was everything but, it spoke volumes. The rest of

their walk—or drive—will be more of the same, and when they get home, the last few hours of their night will be filled with activities that require very little, if any, conversation. Reading was his activity of choice while writing, in a navy linen journal was hers. But it will not be their home that they will go to, it will only be hers. The two do not yet live together, but the young man will stay the night in her one-bedroom apartment and leave at the crack of dawn, only one hour before his expected arrival at his white-collar office. Until then, the couple will sleep much like they walk, with her arm stuck to his, not quite cuddled together but attached nonetheless. At times, her grip will loosen and, occasionally, detach completely. But each time that she wakes throughout the night—she often does—she will reconnect herself and begin anew. He too, will find comfort in this.

The second couple left a trail of destruction in their wake. The trail, consisting of spilled beer and broken glass, nearly followed them out the door of a run-down dive bar, one that was overflowing with degenerate and honorable people alike. This couple appeared to be the former—a likely assumption for most who get kicked out of any bar, let alone a bar that typically puts up with stuff of that sort. Despite the circumstances, the thirty-something’s expressions weren’t of anger or shame but of exhilaration; when they exited the bar, they were giggling persistently and swaying so drunkenly that they almost ran right into her.

“So sorry,” the drunk man blurted, swaying back in the other direction as if caught by a strong wind. Only a couple moments later, she could hear the man say, not so covertly, “Not!” Riotous laughter ensued.

Like the first couple, they were attached at the hip, but this time, it was the man who held onto her, wrapping his arm so tightly around her shoulder that it could’ve been mistaken for a chokehold. The laughter would continue long after they were out of her sight. It will only cease just before they arrive at their shared apartment when the drunk woman begins to slow to a speed that is hardly human.

“Hurry up!” he’ll yell, standing at the gate of their building.

“What?” she’ll say, unable to catch it the first time around.

“I said, hurry up, you drunken bitch!” He’ll chuckle again at another one of his half-jokes. She will not find this funny. In her drunken weariness, she will take great offense, thinking that if anyone deserves to be exempt from his incessant disrespect, it should be her. Once inside their apartment, a silly argument will erupt. They will scream at the top of their lungs, so loud that it will wake a next-door neighbor who, in turn, will angrily bang on their shared wall; it will not be heard. The argument will come to a close simply because the man will grow too tired to continue, falling onto his bed in defeat—or rather—indifference. His partner will only let five minutes pass, nearly allowing him to fall asleep before she mounts him, beginning another night-out ritual that could withstand the most explosive of arguments; it will be just as loud and fiery. This ritual will teeter on violence, with both sets of hands unmistakably slapping, clawing, choking. In the morning, they will remember where the headaches came from, but not the

bruises.

The third couple was separate and stationary. Once she crossed to the other side of Main Street and started back in the other direction, this couple—likely in their sixties—could be seen at an outdoor table of a wine bar. This was the classiest establishment on Main Street, as far as she could tell; the older demographic and low, moody lighting inside told a story. They were the only people seated outside and unlike most others on this surprisingly chilly night, they were dressed accordingly. In the comfort of wool and down fabric, they gorged themselves on red wine and a large charcuterie board loaded with sliced meats and cheeses and various types of nuts and olives. Although the snacks were plentiful, they appeared to be too light to satisfy their voracious appetites; as she walked past, she could hear the mouth-stuffed moans of people who wanted more, more, more.

“Mmm,” the woman grunted with pleasure. “Try the stuffed olives.”

“Oh, I have. They’re phenomenal,” the man replied, popping another into his mouth just to reassure her.

Soon, very soon, they will be finished with every last drop and crumb. Although their hunger and thirst will persist, they will ask for the check almost immediately. Once home, he will head directly to the pantry and she to the living room couch.

“Red or white?” he’ll ask from the kitchen.

“We’ve already had red tonight. Let’s do white,” she’ll logically conclude, flicking on the TV and switching the channel to a rerun of Jeopardy.

The man will arrive at the couch with nearly every item that they had at the wine bar, but in forms less costly and presentable: a glossy cutting board will become a paper plate; a sixty-dollar bottle of red will become a ten-dollar bottle of white; and marconas and stuffed manzanillas will become peanuts and canned kalamatas. For the rest of the night, they will consume just about everything but each other. When they reach their bed, not a single finger will be laid between the two, but they will sleep soundly, their hearts warm and their bellies full.

She was nearly done with her walk. The last open establishment that she passed—viewable from the outside of her own apartment building—was a quaint little cafe that did very little to stand out among its Main Street counterparts. The cafe stayed open later than most despite getting little business at that time of night. Inside, there were no couples to be found, only a few individuals at certain seats and angles that prevented each one from having to look at the other. One in particular—a man—was seated at the window, taking occasional sips from a cappuccino and looking out at the street. If she didn’t know any better, she might’ve thought that he was looking at her. But wait, is he looking at me? She paused, standing absolutely still for the first time in her walk. It certainly appeared so, at first glance. It was difficult to tell, however, and she started to feel silly for entertaining the possibility. The street had been there before her, after all. Still, she felt the urge to continue looking, to wave at him. Even the possibility of going inside the cafe crossed her mind. But she fought these urges, keeping them at bay long enough to push

forward and return to her apartment, where the man and his piercing gaze could not tempt her any longer.

From her shadowy presence in the outside world, you wouldn't be able to guess that the appearance of her inside world was as colorful as can be. When she entered her studio apartment, a world of lilacs and lilies opened up to her: a bright orange loveseat sofa, a rose-colored bedspread, vibrant paintings of nature and its people, and pale, pastel blue walls. All of this character and color nearly concealed the old age of the building, if not for the concrete spalling that could be seen near the exterior entrance. Beneath her black clothing, she wore a blue tank top and a pair of yellow brief underwear, both of similar brightness to her surroundings. Now, out of the cold, she removed her outerwear and revealed herself.

She hung her jacket and skirt next to the others. As she closed the door of her tiny closet behind her, it suddenly began to rattle on its rickety hinges. It seemed to have a ripple effect; the ground followed in succession, sending vibrations up her legs.

An earthquake.

She had experienced them before in a limited capacity, but it was immediately apparent that this one was different. The quakes of her past were mild and even calming, like a soft cradle from Mother Nature. But this one, this one was violent.

The ground shook so violently, in fact, that the room and its inhabitants came alive. The loveseat, which typically only seated her, was actually made up of two separate entities, each with its own sets of polyester cushions and wooden legs. Both of them awoke from a slumber in fright.

Beside the window where she often waited out the sun, an old wooden chair and its small accompanying table just barely shifted on their own accord. They too, had come alive. What they lacked in color, they made up in sturdiness and experience. This was not their first rodeo. The sound of laughter drew her attention to the wall. A painting, one of two lovers wrapped in each other's arms, had also come alive. Apparently, the quake tickled them in all the right places.

A nervous voice suddenly called out to her by name. "What's happening, Jillie? Is it the big one? The one they're always talking about?" It came from a half-melted candlestick—alive, unwell, and alone atop her nightstand. Its flame was already lit, wax dripping and solidifying below the brass stand that held it.

"Don't worry, Candlestick!" She—Jillie—didn't bother to ask for its name. "This will pass soon enough."

But it didn't pass. It only seemed to grow stronger, rougher, wilder. Surely, it had only been moments since the earthquake had started, but it already felt like an eternity. Yes, this must be the big one, Jillie thought. They tried to stay calm and quiet, but she could see them shaking in their figurative boots, wanting to move and get to somewhere safer, but lacking the literal boots to do so. Even the people in the painting were no longer amused, and she feared that they would soon turn on each other. In a final effort to reassure them, she flashed the most enthusiastic smile she could muster, and began to dance.

“Dance with me, Candlestick!” she said, grabbing Candlestick off of the nightstand. Jillie did her best ballerina impression, twirling around on her tippy toes with equal amounts of glee and clumsiness. With each imperfect spin, Candlestick’s flame would waver, then stabilize, waver, then stabilize, and waver again. Just when she began to think that neither the flame nor the apartment would come to any harm, the old roof, along with her life, caved in.

Henry Tannler is a writer from Portland, Oregon, currently based in Los Angeles, California. Most of his work explores themes of identity, loneliness, and societal pressures. In his free time, he enjoys reading, going to the movie theater, spending time in nature, and drinking unnecessary amounts of coffee.

The Orange Lady of Béziers

BY K. M. DAVIS

With a piercing screech the orange lady hurled herself at the ground.

She focused on the earth that rushed up to meet her. Stalks of brown grass stretched up towards her plummeting body. When she was within arm's length of the hard ground, the orange lady shot her wings out, pivoting her body parallel to the earth; her talons stretched out and snatched up the mouse. Her body was lean and compact, designed for destruction. Her powerful wings churned the air, with wriggling prey in her claws, the elegant lady effortlessly caught a current that lifted her above the trees, above the Roman bridge, above the cathedral on the hill where she made her home.

I had noticed her the day we moved to Béziers, the small ancient town in Southern France. It was renowned for wine and Roman ruins. I suspected there were even older settlements, that might never be unearthed and would spend eternity lurking below.

From a metal bench below the cathedral, I watched the orange lady spiral further away. I wondered what it felt like, to have the air whooshing past your ears and the earth crash towards you and be utterly in control, fully focused on your prey. As I watched, the orange lady disappeared behind a parapet, or some other ornamental construction you see on the roofs of cathedrals. I wasn't up to snuff on cathedral parts.

There was nothing as free as a bird of prey. Though they were freer several centuries ago, when more of the earth was their own, when there was more for them to eat. But she doesn't know this, the orange lady of Béziers, and if I could I would trade my life with hers. On my lap were the divorce papers the lawyer had drawn up. Mingdao could not accept that it was what I wanted. "The family *has* to stay together," he said over and over when I broached the topic. I left and spent the night in a hotel on the other side of town. I folded the papers haphazardly into my purse. It brushed against the stick, now dry, but in my mind forever slick with urine, proving the positive news.

A scream belted through the crinkly late winter air. Not the orange lady but my daughter, tucked under a blanket, wool bonnet over ears, red-cheeked in rage. Xuehuai was in the stage when emotions rushed through her for no discernible reason. One moment tucked peacefully in her stroller, looking up at the sky, the next screaming bloody murder.

Every time I try to have a moment for myself Xuehuai screams and cries and tries to run after me even though she can barely walk. She cannot bear to be out of my sight. Mingdao stumbles out of his study, annoyed at the commotion, and scoops her up in his arms so I could show-

er. Even with the water thrashing my face, I heard Xuehuai demanding *ma- ma MaMAAAAAAA!* There was no respite. I showered fast and keep the water running when I slipped out, just for the sound. In my few moments alone, I checked my phone. There was a message from L. “Tonight?” He asked. I’d love to, I wanted to, I needed to. I couldn’t.

“No. Lunch. 2mr?” I replied.

He immediately said yes.

Once it went through, I deleted the messages. Our chat was now empty.

I turned off the shower water that was now so scalding hot I flinched under it, and returned to the chaos of the family room.

I hadn’t figured out what the orange bird was. When I first saw her, all I knew was that she was a falcon, a term that is vague to the point of uselessness. Her orange feathers and somewhat heavy flight pattern intrigued me. I leafed through a dusty bird book on display at a café to look at options. My best guess was that the orange lady might be a western marsh harrier. Béziers was the right place for it, up on a hill next to a river that fed a marshy area in southern France.

Mingdao proposed one afternoon when we were walking around Singapore. It wasn’t elaborate. He stopped in front of a jewelry store and said: “Pick what you like.”

When I told my brother the news, he thought getting married was a stupid thing to do, and told me so.

A few months later, Mingdao and I had a civil ceremony and then dinner with some friends and Mingdao’s parents. My parents were happy, they liked Mingdao and were impressed with his parents’ success, but they didn’t fly out to celebrate.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a storefront reflection. How did I ever become 35? And with so little to show for it too. Not that I was ever ambitious, I just vaguely thought that there’d be more done at this point. Or that I would never be this old. Or a mom. Or about to get divorced, while pregnant, and with a lover. I was blowing up my life. Was I stupid?

To stop thinking about that, I went to the park and met Léo.

He was already there, his back to me, the collar of his jacket unfurled to cover his neck. His dark hair was long enough that it curled like a hero from a romantic novel. As in the romance period, when there were all those paintings of rich men in velvet suits contemplating a fog shrouded landscape.

Through high school and college and then my relationship with Mingdao there wasn’t ever a time I lost my head over a boy. I watched woman after woman fall for my brother, who was

dashing, brilliant, and inconsistent. Apparently, an irresistible combination. It never made sense to me. My quiet relationship with Mingdao wasn't that kind of tumultuous, consuming, dangerous love; but neither of us were looking for that. For the first few years it had been a safe love, an oasis from our families and the tumult of the world.

Léo was different. Or I became different with Léo.

Something ignited within me, an ember tucked into the underbrush and burned slowly and steadily unnoticed until it burst into a conflagration. It worked away inside me for months before I was even aware of what was happening.

I sat next to Léo. He gripped my hand and pulled me close. The air was cheerfully crisp, a hint of spring to come, but the wind still cut to the bone. We hadn't had sex for a few days and every gesture, every touch, was rapturous. Is that worth throwing a life away for? We had built... well we'd put in time together.

Léo whispered in my ear, "I don't want to ruin your life." And I didn't want to hear it. I pulled him close and buried his words with my tongue. He cancelled his meetings that afternoon and we slunk to a different hotel on another side of town.

Catastrophe. Calamity. Mingdao's mother was on a plane to come visit us. Did she know about Léo? Did Mingdao know? Well, he knew divorce was on the table. He wouldn't talk about it. We basically never had sex anymore. Sometimes he'd try and the thought repulsed me, even though Mingdao had retained his good looks and women threw themselves at him. The reaction was sudden and primal, like smelling a rotting corpse and feeling the need to flee.

"When she's here, don't tell her anything. And I don't want you running around getting up to god knows what." He grabbed my waist, trying to be playful. Maybe.

I hit his hand away. "Likewise."

Mingdao's body was lean and his muscles taut. He was an avid boxer and naturally rested in a fighter's stance, but his eyes were glazed from booze and weed.

"We're sleeping in separate rooms," I said. "One of us will be in the nursery."

"Absolutely not. What part of act normal don't you get?" His nostrils flared.

"You're not sleeping in the same bed as me."

"Sleep on the floor if it bothers you so much."

"Fine," I said. I pushed Xuehuai in her carriage towards the door.

Mingdao positioned himself in the doorway, blocking the carriage and Xuehuai and me in. He went on and on about keeping up appearances outside the home, how we had to rally for

Xuehuai, and how I wouldn't get a divorce. That he was traditional and I was too. I was not going to leave them. That I was a bad mother for considering breaking up the family, for keeping my job when he made more than enough money and his parents could help with anything else, for not devoting every moment of my life to thinking of them. Now Xuehuai was the most important thing, for both of us. I knew I should be paying attention to Mingdao but Léo was on my mind. Electricity barreled through my blood. I couldn't stay and listen to that inane droning. I imagined that I was in Léo's bed, with a pale blue duvet and pillows with mismatched covers.

Mingdao saw something in my eyes. That I wasn't there.

He deflated. The fight went out of him. He stepped back and I pushed the carriage out, Xuehuai cooing as we moved.

Maybe it was with Léo that I began to understand what everyone was talking about when they talked about passion. It felt like I was falling and flying. It was stupid, so phenomenally stupid, and I couldn't stop. I wanted to drink Léo up. I wanted to mine every blissful moment for eternity, bottle it up and live there only. I loved to nuzzle up against his chest and listen to him dream a future for us. Isn't life supposed to be like this? Propelled by passion?

When I first went to Léo's home, he took me by the hand and showed me every room. Inviting me to imagine our future together. How we could rearrange the dining room. How to upgrade his knife set. We decided which room would be Xuehuai's, just down the hall and with a view over the garden. A fantasy that I couldn't put down.

We waited outside the train station to pick up Mingdao's mother.

It was a bright, sunny day but unusually cold. That whole winter had been unusually cold and the farmers grumbled that the summer would be devilishly hot. A screech pierced through the occasional honks and light traffic noise. I looked up to see my orange lady in a tree. She batteed her wings and streaked through the blue sky which made her orange feathers glow. I made a mental note to get a pair of binoculars. More reading had led me to think that she was potentially a juvenile Montagu's Harrier. They were the only other birds I could find that had the same copper orange plumage. It was an exciting prospect to have spotted a rarer bird making inroads to cosmopolitan life.

Xuehuai started to fuss as I watched the orange lady rocket into the stratosphere. What must it be like to be a raptor and feel the sun on your outstretched wings, the chilled air through your feathers?

"She wants something," Mingdao said. I scowled at him, knowing he meant *you deal with it.*

"Yes," I said. I pressed my lips together to not scream. "You can handle it."

He grumbled as he unbuckled Xuehuai from the stroller and bounced her. She screamed louder. Mingdao sniffed her diaper, decided she was fine.

“She’s hungry,” I said. He looked at me blankly so I took her snacks out. Carrot sticks and crackers. I offered them to Xuehuai who gripped the carrot sticks and stared at them with wide eyes before throwing them to the ground screeching like a raptor. I felt an unnatural anger that transcended rage and eclipsed wrath. I felt the ménis of Achilles and the gods course through my body. I pushed the crackers into Mingdao’s hands and stormed off into the park, away from his blank stare and Xuehuai’s unending cries.

“She’ll be here soon.” He called after me. “We agreed to act normal.”

“Tell her I’m in a meeting. She’ll be thrilled you’re picking her up.”

My husband shouted after me as I walked, then practically ran away.

There was one thing on my mind, Léo. I had to be with him and away from Mingdao, who was always needing something, and Xuehuai who was even needier, but it wasn’t her fault. At least she was a baby.

Before we’d gotten engaged, Mingdao and I had broken up. I’d found out that his parents had been sending him money to cover our rent in Singapore while he’d let me think the rent was our responsibility. I dutifully paid my portion while he worked higher up at the bank, making more money than me, and ended up profiting on our rental situation. He argued that he was investing his parents’ money for us and gave me a YSL when I threatened to tell them. I threw the bag at his head and he left for Thailand.

Our friend group ducked away from the explosive breakup. They didn’t want to get caught in the crosshairs. It was easier when Mingdao was out of town, saying he was overseeing some of his parents’ factories, a claim I’d always found dubious but hadn’t researched thoroughly.

During this absence, our friend Noémie pulled me aside at a party. We were out of ear shot of all the other couples, people we’d known for years and we all associated with each other less as individuals than couple units. She replenished our drinks, then said, “Not that it’s my business, but while Mingdao is very handsome, maybe he is not suited to be a husband.”

I laughed. It wasn’t something I wanted to get into. Though the thought had circled my mind. Looking back, I struggled to understand how it had happened. How had I fallen into the trap of matrimony?

“Then again, there is that pull of history between a couple. I wouldn’t be surprised if you two get back together.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” I said.

Noémie shrugged. “No judgement, whatever you decide. Though I think you have the right to know that he hires prostitutes whenever he is without you. Some people have no problem with this. But there is something about the deception that I think is distasteful. It helps to know what one is dealing with, no? To make a decision.”

She offered more details that I was too shocked to decline and too shocked to listen to as they poured over me in a torrent. Noémie sensed she had maybe gone too far and I reassured her, “No, no. I’m fine.” I made us both another drink, even though Noémie had barely touched hers. The ice chilled my hands through the cup and I downed both drinks in a moment.

I had a secret from Mingdao and from Léo.

It weighed on me to keep it from Léo; it might have broken him. Or it might make him walk away from me for good, which I couldn’t bear. Someone outside our situation would probably judge me, which bothered me at the outset but I’ve shed that weight like a butterfly ripping off a restrictive cocoon. Léo and I had unexpectedly stumbled on something pure and life-affirming. Not that I saw him as my next husband, waiting in the wings, though he waxed poetic about us getting married and co-parenting. It was sweet and naïve and earnest in a way that made me love him more. While I was set on a separation from Mingdao, I hadn’t decided if divorce was the best path. And if it was, why would I leap into another marriage?

I lay awake in Léo’s arms. His soft breath warmed the top of my head. Mingdao and I had the pull of history. Noémie was right, that French bitch. She had no right to know the future or tell it so accurately. That we would be back together, that we would be glued by our conjoined history.

I wasn’t prepared to lapse into habit, for history to take over. When Léo and I first started sleeping together in a hedonistic romp, I was wracked with guilt and began initiating sex with Mingdao as an olive branch. Our sex life had cooled after Xuehuai’s birth, and he was keen to dive back in.

What shocked me was that it was the best sex we’d ever had. For a time, sleeping with Mingdao ignited me more than the burgeoning affair with Léo. My entire body felt charged with this sexual electricity as I moved between my lover and my husband. Once with Mingdao one of the orgasms was so strong that I thought it was a migraine or a brain bleed and I went to the hospital. They laughed at me.

The intensity could not be sustained. I couldn’t think about anything outside of sex with my husband and my lover. My identity felt ruptured and I was on the edge of madness. Would I cut off my hair? Run away? With or without Xuehuai? I remembered reading that Demeter, in her grief after Persephone was stolen, disguised herself as a nurse and tried to make her young charge, Demophone, immortal. When his mother discovered Demophone cradled in an immortal flame, she panicked. Demeter allowed the boy to be consumed by real flame.

In other versions, Demeter hands the cold infant to his mother, unscathed but doomed to mortality like all of us. The mother will eventually feel the same pain that torments Demeter.

I felt her power, rage, and grief course through me as I clutched my secret that I could only keep for so long. The plastic pregnancy test with the now faded but once prominent plus. It was Mingdao's. I had succumbed to the weight of history and habit and hormones. The pregnancy test and the divorce papers lived in my purse. Pulling me from and pushing me to Mingdao. I looked around Léo's apartment and the light from the moon streaming over us turned my stomach. I disentangled myself from his arms and dressed in silence before slipping out like a cat burglar.

Xuehuai was asleep in the nursery and Mingdao's mother was installed in the guest room.

A faint blue electric glow emanated from under our bedroom door. I didn't want to speak to Mingdao. I pushed the door open and hoped he'd fallen asleep with the TV on.

The room was awash in the blueish light thrown from the TV. Mingdao was awake, seated cross-legged on the bed with headphones on. He wouldn't look at me.

I grabbed my pillow and tore the comforter from the bed, dropping them to the ground. Mingdao did not respond. I curled up in my nested corner, and with the help of an eye mask I pretended to sleep under the gaze of the TV and the moon's colder light.

The house was quiet when I woke up. Even Xuehuai had slept through the night. Lulled into a deep sleep, I was sure, by the magnetic power of that gigantic moon.

In my robe and slippers, I sat in the courtyard garden holding a mug with leftover tea from the day before that I hadn't bothered to reheat. I scanned the sky for my orange lady, but the blue sky remained defiantly empty and clear.

A jangle of rattling metal announced that someone was wrestling with the door that always stuck. I turned to see Mingdao's mother struggle to push open the door. She was perfectly coiffed, as she always was, and she was adorned with pearl earrings and a jade bangle. She was a thin elegant woman who exclusively wore qipaos and looked like she'd walked off a Wong Kar-wai set. When we'd first met, she'd been disappointed that her son hadn't chosen a taller foreigner to marry. Her husband had offered to buy Mingdao a flashy new apartment if he'd marry a local girl instead of me. Mingdao refused him, and they didn't speak for months.

My mother in law sat down on the iron bench and stared at me with her large, doe brown eyes. Did she know? She must. I felt naked before her, sure that she could discern my sins and pleasures in my irises.

“Mingdao has told you about the troubles his father and I had?” She asked. “There’s no need

to shield me. I know very well that he's always had at least another woman on the side. Greedy boy. Though it wasn't easy at the beginning. Do you have a lighter?"

I was shocked. I had never seen her smoke before, and was sure that she'd glared at me disapprovingly the one time she'd seen me smoke with Mingdao. I told her no, not since Xuehuai was born. My mother in law snorted and took a lighter from her pocket.

"Never mind, I come prepared. One is enough, no matter what they say."

I leaned against the dry-stone wall and took my mother in law in. She rarely spoke this much, to me or to anyone else. Her husband was the one who liked to hold court. Of course, I knew that Mingdao's father frequently traveled between Singapore, Thailand, Korea, Hong Kong, and the Mainland, and had been doing so for years. I knew that his father always had girlfriends or mistresses or call girls or KTV girls and most likely several at the same time spread out in the cities he worked or visited. He was a man who liked to enjoy life, Mingdao said bitterly. I had naïvely thought Mingdao would turn out differently considering the rage he felt towards the man who had betrayed his mother.

"There was a time," my mother in law continued, "when I almost had a second. I was far enough along that I was securely pregnant. I'm sure it was another boy."

She looked at me as if I were going to say anything.

"But you didn't know?"

"Of course not, how could I?" She said with some scorn. "Well, why should he get to have two boys? He couldn't appreciate the one boy or the one wife." My mother in law stopped to light her cigarette. She was very proper and decisive in every movement, graceful as a prima ballerina. "What is there for breakfast?"

"We go out," I said. "There's a good boulangerie around the corner. I'll go get some food."

She sank further into the chair and took a long drag from her cigarette. I took that as a dismissal, food was desired and now. The house was quiet and almost peaceful in the lull before Mingdao and Xuehuai woke up. As I walked to the boulangerie, pulling my coat against me as a cold wind picked up, I heard my orange lady screech.

The orange lady was enjoying the air and the sun and the sky and rejoicing in the power of her wings. I threw away the divorce papers, and the test, on my way.

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