

Angel City Review



Foreword

Running a literary journal for over 12 years now, it is hard to not feel repetitive writing these things. At the end of the day, there are always challenges to the arts, to humanity, to everything that makes life feel worth it. At the same time, there is also so much beauty, strength, and resilience that allows good people to hold on and even thrive no matter what. That “no matter what is” the rub though, life gets hard for everyone in different ways, and we can easily lose sight of what is important. Every writer in this issue has found their own way to hold dear the things that matter. The pieces can at times be an act of resistance against erasure, to challenge those that would wish them ill, to fight for a world where their history is recognized. There is also deep celebration of identity, of culture, of simply being alive.

I feel this often, but this issue especially feels closer to what I envisioned when I started this all-volunteer project years ago. It can be extremely stressful working on this sometimes, but it is extremely rewarding to be able to share such powerful and poignant work.

Thank you to all the writers who trusted us with their work, all the community spaces in LA and beyond that have supported us over the years, and everyone who reads these pages.

Lastly, through some delays and other mishaps, this issue release ended up coinciding with the two year anniversary of the passing of my beloved dog Francis. Those who know me on social media knew the deep connection I had with her. A connection to an animal can sometimes be more profound than any connection to another human being. Her passing is only second to that of my grandmother Doris Jensen in the profundity of the loss. I will always miss her and I think about Francis and my grandmother every day. This issue is in part dedicated to them.



- Zachary C Jensen
Managing and Founding Editor

Featured Artist

Minoosh Zomorodinia



Artist bio and statement:

Raheleh (Minoosh) Zomorodinia is an Iranian-born interdisciplinary artist who makes visible the emotional and psychological reflections of her mind's eye inspired by nature and her environments. She employs walking as a catalyst to reference the power of technology as a colonial structure while negotiating boundaries of land. Her strollings sometimes reimagine our relationships between nature, land, and technology, while addressing transformation of memories into actual physical space absurdly. Zomorodinia has received several awards, residences, and grants including Recology AIR program, the Kala Media Fellowship Award, Headlands Center for the Arts, Ox-Bow School of Art and Artists' Residency, I-park Foundation, Santa Fe Art Institute Residency, Djerassi Residency, ArtYard Residency, the Alternative Exposure Award, California Art Council grants, Red Bull Arts Microgrant- Oakland, and Foundation for Contemporary Arts FCA Emergency Grant. She has exhibited locally and internationally at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco Arts Commission, Pori Art Museum, Berkeley Art Center, SOMARTS, Pori Art Museum, Nevada Museum of Art, ProARTS, and Currents 826 gallery.. Her work featured in SF Chronicle, Hyperallergic, SFWeekly, CityArts Magazine, KQED and many more. She earned her MFA in New Genres from the San Francisco Art Institute, and holds a Masters degree in Graphic Design and BA in Photography from Azad University in Tehran. She currently lives and works in the Bay Area.

Informed by my cultural background, religion, and politics, my work investigates the concept of "Self", specifically how it relates to the environment. Inspired by nature, I borrow from rituals including walking, sometimes infusing humor. I integrate contradictory concepts into pieces that visualize struggles of the "self" by inserting my body into these moments of time and space. Recently I employed walking as a catalyst for my sculptures, which reference nomadic lifestyles, as well as colonialism. By tracking my paths using technology, I claim the ownership of the land, while representing a changed perception in the digital age and addressing transformation of memories into actual physical space absurdly.

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Zachary Jensen: Managing Editor

Lizeth De La Luz: Poetry Editor

John Venegas: Prose Editor

Simon Tran: Art Editor

Gabby Almendarez: Editor

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Frames 2009

“MELTING POT”

BY LAURA CESARCO EGLIN

You have to translate everything
to be understood. Or even
listened to.
Say it flawlessly, without an “accent,”
make sure no one feels
uncomfortable. Tame your tongue.
Tame yourself.
They change your name,
they say it wrong, making you them,
as if you were no longer
from anywhere else.

GEOGRAPHIES OF EXPERIENCE

BY LAURA CESARCO EGLIN

Pain in South America hurts
in words that describe how I
cry. The U.S. measures
pain in numbers. How much.
L4-L5 and the intervals
without a pang: I see it
as the rhythm of syllables
like spells
to counteract
depleting.

Laura Cesarco Eglin is a poet and translator from Uruguay. She is the author of six collections of poetry, including her latest chapbook *Break a Part* (Finishing Line Press, 2026). Her poems and translations (from the Spanish, Portuguese, Portuñol, and Galician), have appeared in many journals such as *Asymptote*, *Zócalo Public Square*, *Figure 1*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Copper Nickel*, *SRPR*, *MAYDAY*, *International Poetry Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Timber*, and more. Cesarco Eglin is the translator of *claus and the scorpion* by the Galician author Lara Dopazo Ruibal (co • im • press, 2022), longlisted for both the 2023 PEN Award in Poetry in Translation and the 2023 National Translation Award in Poetry. She is also the translator of *Of Death. Minimal Odes* by the Brazilian author Hilda Hilst (co • im • press), which was the winner of the 2019 Best Translated Book Award. Her latest translation is *Sardine* by Miriam Reyes (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2026). Cesarco Eglin is the publisher of Veliz Books. More at lauracesarcoeglin.com

On this Planet or any Other

BY DAHLIA AGUILAR

Ekphrastic Poem for the Alien Mural in Tepoztlán

I have the stars

there is nothing I love that you can or have not given me

I found our reflection today, two alien beings walking a proud love up the hills of Tepoztlán

I want to name them us, and specify myself, what with the generational nature of things

how do you know they aren't ancestors or someone we could be in the future

Aditi said the future is now only unevenly distributed she was quoting someone else

I can imagine by now fireworks have opened a portal behind the mountains

where we could boulder, burrough, arrive sweaty breathless and insisting we hold hands

what with these eyes like horses, we see what should be kicked behind us

keep threat at bay, hide en las cuevas where no one will find us

just be still with me here, protected from the rain with cats that trust us

a half bottle of mezcal and a full pack of cigarettes

we are the future and the echo of cherry bombs

the dog barks, el gallo reprimands

the priest welcomes us to a queenship we ignore or abandon
now let us pray celestial clouds on high part the sky that we might see

the red lunar glow promised us this night
the only deal we want to honor

a certain way to return home fed, full,
illuminated before the waning

Dahlia Aguilar is a Texas-born Chicana poet and calls D.C. her hometown. A 2025 DC Arts and Humanities Fellow, she is an alum of the Macondo Writers Workshop and has held residencies with Under the Volcano, and Elk River. Her poems appear in *Entre Magazine*, *Acentos Review*, *The Skinny Poetry Journal*, *Journal X*, *Boundless*, *Nepantla Divina*, and the award-winning anthology *Somos Xicanas*. Finishing Line Press releases her debut manuscript *La Otra Cara* as part of their New Women's Voices Contest (September 2026). She lives in Deanwood with her teenage son, two dogs, and menopause.

The Garden Where I Lie

BY AYESHA ASLAM

Ask me about the pollen coated flowers
clinging to the patch of scorching grass,
I remember how my feet anchored into the cool dirt
Peering through the distance at a lover's stolen tomb
I left us there, in the mountain

Memories drenched in honeycomb
led me through The Garden where I now lie
dreaming with the breathing leaves

And then my wandering eyes moisten
But a tear cannot stream through,
To water what must bloom.

Nightfall has reached me again
Making its quiet lap around the quilted garden beds

The day I began counting trees
I felt a ringing through the cavities of my ear
A prophetic roar of ease
And the breath I hear is the same one
That shuffles the leaves.

Ayesha Aslam is an emerging poet whose work explores the boundary between the human, the mystic, and the natural world. Drawing from her experience as a pilot and sailor, she writes musical, imagery-rich poetry shaped by movement and elemental landscapes.

Forgetting the Forgotten

BY MICHAEL C. SMITH

there was a spot of sunlight
on the floor I mistook
for a tissue and tried
to pick it up standing
empty-handed
and looking for the mistake
between my fingers. I forgot something
yesterday but forgot what I forgot.
Perhaps that was it.

Interlude

BY MICHAEL C. SMITH

To children, marshmallows are fruit fallen
from trees of clouds.

As I watch them vanish
from the ripped package
on the counter
the powdered sugar smiles
form parentheses
for a day as busy as it should be.

Michael C. Smith's work has appeared in or is soon to appear in the following publications: *Iowa Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Bard's West Anthology*, *Potomac Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, among others. His forthcoming chapbook, *The Infants at the Shoreline*, was a finalist in the Choeofpleirn Press chapbook contest, releasing in Aug 2026. He is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Arizona and lives in Pomona, CA.

MY GOD IS BROWN

BY ANGÉLICA M. YAÑEZ

my god moves
grooves, gets down
salsa steps
aztec dances
feet stompin'
to ancient sounds
my god is warm
earth-toned,
heartfelt, gentle
i know
i am messy
human, divine
my god loves me with ease
he she they them
trans nonbinary
my god is third gender
doesn't care about labels
blesses us with chocolate pieces and
ancestral whispers of wisdom
drumbeats raindrops ocean waves
flutes and whistles
my god is full-headed and nappy
hair down wind-blown
carefree, ridin' lowrider style
listening to art laboe

head rockin'
contemplative and sappy
writes love poems that rhyme
gets shit-faced on birthdays
quick to forgive
sends us baskets of bounty
watermelons, mangos
coconuts under palm trees
for rest and relaxation
my god is breathtaking
show stoppin'
a stunner
she is bronze, sun god
her reflection glimmers in fields
of beans, quinoa, and corn
she is fierce
waterfall in full roar
soft as flames
that gather us close
and vast
as the wind
that touches all things
my god is you
my god is me
she sings her own key
grinning in gold teeth

WHEN MY PEOPLE STAMPEDE THE BORDER

BY ANGÉLICA M. YAÑEZ

They will bring with them brooms made of pelos de elote to clean up this colonial wreckage, to sweep away centuries of lies and ash, to find the earth beneath, the tender scalp of a land still breathing. They will stroke her hair as if apologizing, and under the moon's full gaze, create something new, a place where milpas grow and gardens bloom in every home, on every corner. Around the ceremonial fire at midnight, we will clear the path with cedar and smoke, with instructions from our ancestors.

We will die trying, our bodies pressed against the border wall's shadow, our names resurrected, carried by the desert winds. We will demolish the wall with jade tears and obsidian knives; watch it crumble under the weight of our return. We will go through, over, or underground, because no wall can contain the howl of the displaced.

We know the bones buried below

We will honor them

Drum a soul song

Pay what is owed

We will paint its ruins with murals, splash it with color for lights that faded too soon, marigolds for every child lost in the desert, and calaveras for the stories never told.

We will build stairs to the heavens

Doorways for the forgotten

Holes for the wind to breathe through again

We will break dirt with clay-streaked fingers, hands deep in the soil of abundance and desire. We will crack its metal ribs and prepare tamales, pozole, and atole for all to feast. We will rupture your façade, turn your wall into an altar where grief and faith sit side by side.

We will reunite the eagle and the condor, watch them soar together against a sky that once belonged to us. We will speak all our tongues, Nahuatl, Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, Spanish, Spanglish and braid them together.

We will make “mixed” mean magic

Make Mexican mean miracle

We will bring flint corn and flower water, a remedy for the wounds of historical devastation. We will crown our heads with the spine of nopales and remember that we too had our temples.

We will sing corridos, nortañas, and the ceremonial chants our grandmothers whispered to the cosmos. Our communal knowledge will be restored.

We will bring our molcajetes to grind centuries of bitterness into something sweet. We will mix guacamole and salsa with our tears, toast the dead with tequila and mezcal.

We will stay up too late, aching but alive, dancing barefoot under the open air where the stars bear witness and the night listens to our cries. We will weep for the ones who didn’t make it, holler for the ones who did.

We will let out a grito

A victory call

A warrior cry

We will lay down our struggles and find rest in each other’s arms. We will hit snooze and rise with the sun, because the day is ours.

Your frontera is a lie we refuse

This hemisphere knows no bounds

This land is Native

Today belongs to the ones who crossed with babies on their backs.

The ones who fell but never stopped crawling.

The ones who prayed to gods who spoke their names long before the world forgot them.

This is for us

The ones who stayed

The ones who left

The ones who keep coming back

with palms full of seeds

dirt under our nails

we are still planting

Dr. Angélica M. Yañez is an Indigenous Chicana poet, Aztec dancer, educator, and founder of The Ancestral Teachings Institute, a decolonial space for creative writing, cultural healing, and community ceremony. Her work celebrates ancestral memory, feminine power, and the everyday sacred, bridging the worlds of academia, art, and activism. Dr. Yañez's poetry appears in *Latinas: Race, Class, and Gender*, Vol. 2, FlowerSong Press, *The San Diego Poetry Annual*, *Curious Publishing*, and has been featured by Planned Parenthood. Her forthcoming collection *My God is Brown: Poems of Body and Land* will be published by Riot of Roses in 2026. To explore her upcoming workshops and writings, visit ancestralteach.com or follow on Instagram [@ancestral_teachings_institute](https://www.instagram.com/ancestral_teachings_institute).

Adelanto

BY TERESA MEI CHUC

March 14, 2026, Pasadena NDLOM Caravan & Serenade

Detention center in the high desert surrounded by barbed wire fences.

Where the land is dry, barren, a few foxtails growing, the life sucked out of the earth like the people in the prison. One creosote bush survives around dry grass.

Just beyond, creosote grows abundantly, some in bloom. One of the oldest plants on this earth, over ten thousand years old. Ancient like the desert and mountains overlooking the land. Joshua trees, linear leaved goldenbush and blue sage grows around the neighborhood beyond the detention center.

Joshua trees are called “hunuvat chiy’a” or “humwichawa” by the indigenous Cahuilla.

Some live to be five hundred or a thousand years old.

They watch over us like great, great grandparents.

We gather outside Adelanto to sing songs, play music and dance.

We gather to let family, friends and neighbors detained know that they are not alone.

They could hear us chant outside, they could hear the music.

A speaker says that the prison walls outside are so tall that detainees cannot see the beautiful mountains beyond.

This is not a place created for life, this is not a place created for life.

Teresa Mei Chuc was born in Sài Gòn, Việt Nam shortly after the Việt Nam War and grew up in Pasadena and Altadena, California on unceded Tongva Territory. Altadena Poet Laureate, Editor-in-Chief from 2018 to 2020 and a Pasadena Rose Poet since 2016, Teresa Mei Chuc is the author of three books of poetry, *Invisible Light* (Many Voices Press, 2018), *Keeper of the Winds* (FootHills Publishing, 2014) and *Red Thread* (Fithian Press, 2012). Her recent poetry chapbook, *Incidental Takes*, was published by Hummingbird Press in 2023. She is co-editor of the anthology, *Convergence: Poetry on Environmental Impacts of War* (Scarlet Tanager Books, 2026). Teresa has a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Poetry) from Goddard College. She is a public high school English teacher and has taught in the Los Angeles Unified School District for over twenty years.



Frames 2009

Speak Now

BY XIOMARRA MILANN

At 6 years old, we were
witches and whimsy was still
everlasting.

Youth was not something that needed
to be chased, flowing through us
in bounty, made up
of all that has since been lost.

We ate puff pastries for breakfast, lunch, dinner,
tasting nothing but the sweetness of the world.
Immune to its bitter aftertaste, the way it twists
your stomach sick.

We dressed in extravagant gowns and played with dolls
whose development far exceeded our own understanding
of what exactly we were meant to look forward to
becoming.

Icarian flora, growing
too close to the sun
is not what made us burn.

Celestial beings, brought into this world
on golden chariots, meant to stand
on the highest of shoulders, but
never allowed to remain within

Our right to be amongst the greats,
painted as arrogance, reason enough
to be shot down

Before we could kiss the skies goodbye,
we meet the humble earth with
mouths full of dust, fists full of ashes

All girlhood is
torn from our roots, the audacity
is ours. To exist
in joy, never meant for our hands to hold.

A violent loss of innocence
we can no longer find in our melted-plastic hearts,
wax dripping from our lips.

All girlhood is

a becoming
of being gone.

hell is a teenage girl

BY XIOMARRA MILANN

Kayla waxes my bush in the back of her aunt's studio/tells me it doesn't hurt as bad as I think it will/makes me down a shot and glares at my coughs/ like don't I know that we're not supposed to be here/ like didn't she tell me that her mom thinks we're too young to be doing this sort of thing/like doesn't she understand our need to transform into something other than what we are?

She pulls the strip and I howl at the moon/ we both laugh till our pain becomes tears/ made up of more joy than fear/ pull/howl/repeat until I'm a version of myself that's more woman than beast/ Mia Thermopolis turned Princess of Genovia pussy/ like doesn't she know what the media wants of us all?

like doesn't she know we're the young girls who feed their hunger/ the domesticated cats puking up hairballs/ wax our bodies raw till we glow like bones in the moonlight/ till the full moon brings us right back to where we are now/ howling in the dark/ like the sort of wild animals young girls become/ when our bodies are no longer enough

Xiomarra Milann is a borderland storyteller, multidisciplinary artist, activist, and educator whose roots lay in Laredo, TX. She holds her MFA in Creative Writing from UTEP, and her writing has been published with entities such as *Sybil Journal*, *Querencia Press*, and *Acentos Review*, among others. She has been the recipient of fellowships with MoveTexas, the Rowan Foundation, and The Heart of It. She was nominated for Sundress Press' Best of Net 2025, a finalist for the Jack McCarthy Book Prize in 2024, shortlisted for the 2024 Peach Pit Grant, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2023. Follow her journey on Instagram @90strashpop.

Homework

BY MIGUEL CAMNITZER

For homework one time back in middle school
 I interviewed my Oma about escaping Germany in 1939
 with her one-year-old baby my father. I still have the
 old printout and now I can't stop reading it looking
 for answers that aren't there. Her final quote is "I have
 a family that I love and who loves me. I am happy
 and the war is over." I bet my teacher gave me a good
 grade but I wish kid-me was a better interviewer
 because the war wasn't really over was it? and I forgot
 to ask her which camps they died in and now she is
 also dead. I never even asked if she thought it could
 happen again or what to do if the next time
 they do it they do it in my name.

Mom isn't Jewish and dad grew up to be an atheist so
 what does that even make me? Our blended family chose
 Christmas but dad said there will be no tree in this house.
 We invented new traditions. Instead of hanging glass
 ornaments on branches we molded them by hand from
 white clay that you bake in the oven. We painted sloppy
 eyes on lumpy creatures and gave them names and hung
 them on strings that we taped to the mantle above the
 busted fireplace we filled with supermarket poinsettias.

Somebody please do the math for me and quantify how
 much luck was required back in 1939 to be able to
 fast-forward half a century and manifest a child in the
 suburbs cutting snowflakes out of post-it notes and
 hunting for presents hidden in cupboards which was the
 game our family made up since we had no tree to put
 them under. It's absurd to me that I even exist but I
 guess each human being is a product of uncertainty.
 Random events narrow escapes chance meetings.
 At birth the probability curve collapses into observable
 reality like quantum physics. I'm not smart enough
 to calculate the odds but anyway here I am.

This was the year I put ambivalence aside and started
 calling myself a Jew without all the nervous caveats

while at the same time the most brutal empire in human history was funding the extermination of an entire people under the banner of my newly reclaimed identity. Also this was the year I put my insecurities aside and started calling myself a poet which is honestly a ridiculous thing to call myself when the real poets are being blown to pieces and buried in rubble by bombs I paid for with my taxes. I want to die as a whole not in pieces the little boy said to the reporter. What are made-up poems even good for if a single sentence from a real-life kid can crack me open like that?

Did you know every human life is a universe? Judaism teaches us that. Save a life save an entire world they say. I mean we say. My skull can only hold a few pieces of the horror at a time but supposedly there's a whole universe crammed in there too and it would spill right out on the concrete if someone cracked it open. I really want to know what's in there but I never will because I'd have to die for me or you to see it. I don't think a person should have to die for us to see their universe. Haven't we already spilled enough universes? How many tens of thousands will it take before we all agree we see starlight?

However many pieces of this history I can hold today or you can hold today in our crowded little skulls doesn't feel like enough does it? It can never be enough can it? But it has to be. Don't you see? It has to be enough because if we try to hold on to all of it at once we'll crack and we can't crack now because come on my love get up it's time to fight and that's what I wish I'd asked my Oma about back in middle school because for a new universe to be born it takes a lot more than a bunch of luck and quantum physics. It takes more than love. It takes resistance.

Am I Free to Leave?

BY MIGUEL CAMNITZER

Always ask Am I free to leave?
Ask your parents and your teachers
Am I free to leave this house? This school?
Ask your employer from time to time
to see what they say.
Of course ask the cops.
Always ask the cops
Am I free to leave?
but also your spouse
and the cashier at Whole Foods.
Ask the flight attendant right after take-off
to practice doing it
in awkward situations.

Ask Am I free to leave
when you're alone in the shower
to check how you'll reply.
Don't ask the mirror though,
unless you want an out-of-body experience.
Ask the doctor after
you're hooked to the table.
Ask the man who corners you
at the bar and shoves his hand
into your underwear.
Call the DC switchboard and
ask your congressperson
Am I free to leave?

Ask the city you live in.
Ask the winter.
Don't ask your children unless
you're ready for them to ask you back.
Obviously ask the feds when
they come to your door.
Always ask the feds.
But once they've gone, go ahead
and ask the door too.
You could ask your bed or your couch,
but they'll probably shrug at you.
Definitely ask the television though,
and you should be asking your phone
on a regular basis.

Invite your friends over so
you can all ask together
Are we free to leave?
Ask even when you know the answer,
because this time you might be wrong.
Ask your priest on Sunday.
Better yet, ask God directly.
Am I free to leave?
If you don't believe in God, then
ask your body.
Don't ask anything sharp, however.
Sharp things lie.
Things in bottles also
can't be trusted.

Ask a billionaire as he

boards his spaceship,
then go ask a redwood tree.
Compare their responses.
Animals are trickier,
like how it's unkind to ask your dog
but asking your cat is funny.
Just don't go around annoying birds.
Test it out. Trial and error.
Bring the question into every room.
Am I free to leave?
Yes or no.
Ask your sadness.
You'll be surprised how honest
your sadness can be.

Miguel Camnitzer is a queer, Jewish community organizer working within the Palestine liberation movement to end US complicity in genocide. He has a background in film and television, but left that career behind to earn an MFA in creative writing from Hamline University. The poetry he loves most (and aspires to create) embraces the ambiguities and contradictions of living, loving and fighting in a messy, beautiful, hopeless, hopeful world. He lives in Downtown Los Angeles with his husband. You can find his writing in *Blood Tree Literature*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *LA Public Press*, and on Instagram @verse_daddy.

KEYSTONE APT B

BY SHEILA McMULLIN

The story goes a ghost materialized in the living room stacking chairs in unbalanced towers, turning on and off the lights, shaking the chandelier, filling the walls with dead animal rot. The fear of the unseeable being seen is what sent the tenants running. The truth is, it was the man who owned the building who put the female tenant's body between his and the wall. Feeling with her hands behind her back, her fingertips bent into the wall, she knew there was no farther she could go. After the tenants left, the man who owned the building complained about the money he was losing and how he'll get them to pay him what he was owed. He wouldn't be extorted, the criminals! A ring of skeletons giggling on his hip. He shook his fist at everyone he could until his assistant who ran the books said the tenants had paid in full for the month. They weren't losing money. In fact, now that the apartment had been vacated, they could charge the next tenants more for rent.

KEYSTONE APT C

BY SHEILA McMULLIN

The story goes the tenant's package was sacrificed to Mercury, the God of Commerce. The beguiling prophet demands plastic goodies and swallowed subscription fees daily to ensure the safe passage of prayers to beloveds on the other side. This day was the tenant's turn to sacrifice mail and ensure the continued blessings of the community. The truth is, the package has been sitting on the stoop of a neighboring apartment complex for months. The deliverer of news misplaced the package and the neighboring residents assumed someone else would eventually tend to the mistake. When a note was left informing of wrong address and stamped *return to sender*, the wind blew it away. When the package was moved from one side of the stoop to the other, it reappeared in the same exact spot as before. The package just sits there a totem to reluctance to do a favor. The address slip tanning, the name opaquing, the package tape bubbling, the corners cracking open and middle sinking in, dust covering every exposed side. Products unused and blocking the entrance.

KEYSTONE APT F

BY SHEILA McMULLIN

The bird flew in through the hole in the baseboard. The bird made its way into the pipes. The bird flew out the kitchen sink drain moments before the proprietor flipped the garbage disposal switch. The child standing behind the proprietor believed her home was full of magic, the walls alive with creatures to befriend. She laughed watching the bird fly into the ceiling from one corner to the next into the window, alight, then bring itself to flight again. The bird flew in through the hole in the baseboard. The bird made its way into the basement walls. The tenants who lived down there cared for a cat who sat facing the walls for days. The bird chirped excitedly. The cat waited. The bird chirped. Another day passed. The tenants informed the proprietor of the trapped bird. He said, he'll find a way out. The bird stopped chirping and the proprietor said, see. It got free. Then the basement apartment filled with odor. The cat walked away and the stench clung to their clothes, clung to their skin, clung to their teeth.

KEYSTONE APT G

BY SHEILA McMULLIN

She was told it would happen as long as she didn't want it so badly. So, she grew straggly sage in terracotta pots, monstrous monstera to flank the windows, and let the pothos run rogue along the walls of her apartment. When a plant would die, she said, we're all only here because we were born. We make compost to help birth what will come next. All a death meditation, she imagined her bones unlocking from ligament and vein, unmoving wherever they fell except for the small creatures who made a home inside her. The thought of being a home filled her with expanse and a pain that grew so wild, the walls breathed, sung time into morning. Noon breathing into twilight, shadow pulsing where wall meets wall, slices of light through cracks in the door covered in fern, awake in the wait, trying to breathe after breath, and one more inhale. Just a bit longer now. Shouldn't be long now.

Sheila McMullin is a poet, editor, and community gardener writing at the intersection of mixed-race identity, infertility, and generational and environmental care. She is the author of *daughterrarium* from Cleveland State University Poetry Center, a proud co-editor of *Humans of Ballou* and *The Day Tajon Got Shot*, both written by teen authors and part of the Black Lives Matter series published by Shout Mouse Press, and co-editor and contributor to the forthcoming *Comix and Community: Creative Pathways Toward Social Justice* from Penn State University Press. She hosts monthly poetry gatherings in her local community garden, serves on the board of the Contemporary Irish Arts Center of Los Angeles, and holds an M.F.A. from George Mason University.



Virtually Land

hollow parts

BY CYNTHIA VIA

I ate.

Food meant for ghosts filling myself
until my outer skin could not hold

my insides.

French fries, samosas, pineapple rice, madelines, ice cream. I ate.
Until I was annoyed for eating,
but still ate, just to pass the time between living

and dying.

The emptiness settled when I filled my belly
to the brim. But the hungry ghost came back confused
not knowing what it was filling. My body swallowed
the need to fast for silence. If it was the heart,
or the hollow insides

that leaked.

My own horror movie. The bubbles festering, a deep residual pain
as I paced back and forth, rubbed my belly,
promising never—I threw up on white tiles,
beer among the morsels—

to eat my loneliness.

The answer was outside, absorbed
by archaic bowels. When it calls me
like what sends a cat
when it receives too much warmth. Not enough

wild.

I went running, uncaring for the puddles, how they splashed,
sleepwalkers drenched under the murky
bridge that sent fresh
fear down my throat. Coating the insides.
Ducks bathing in the blurriness

of waves.

My stomach sensed sky falling on water. A reminder
of light clouds. The trail. Its expansive
silence. The creak of bark. My feline legs that worked
hard ground. Enough to make

a body animal.

Cupboard Woman

BY CYNTHIA VIA

With a dusty robe close to noon
searching for cold water
her body begs to fill a green glass
pushing the curtains
he tries to wake her
letting the sun hit the docile face
as if that could send her moving
through the day any faster
so she could make something of the rest
not pacing through rooms too big for her
inventing plans for a future already desolate
still he tries seeing her the being her
easier than she deserves
his grace to disappear into a chair
until she can shape dulled history
pay this attic off where she stays most hours
when the rooms below have lost their hold
on floating land

She heard an old tale about a woman
living inside
a cupboard
who only crawled out to piss and eat.
The owner clueless about the uninvited
sensing something off
when all his shrimp
went gone.
A wooden door unlocked, creaking, slowly opening—
a shadow
enlarged over the kitchen wall. She figured
it was her
in a parallel universe with the grip of claws
veining down
to the counter, dropping bowls as footprints
at nighttime
when only stray cats and spiders crawl out
while her owner is asleep.

Cynthia Via is a Peruvian writer, educator and editor based in Maryland. She explores feminine angst, the duality of motherhood, and the confluence between nature and emotions with writings published in *Yellow Arrow*, *The Acentos Review*, *Wild Willow Magazine*, *Write or Die*, *Grace & Gravity Anthology*, among others. Currently, a submission reader and editor for Trio House Press. During off hours, she spies on birds and performs stand-up.

Crossings

BY MARILYN RAMIREZ

I.

You turn twelve in May at the San Ysidro border crossing, on the Mexico side. You borrowed (your words, not his) your older brother's Sega Game Gear and are playing Sonic the Hedgehog in the backseat of your father's van. He and your mother are talking up front, windows rolled down. It's been three hours. Most of the other cars are parked like yours, engines still running. Stop and go is worse in the heat.

You know better than to complain. In the back of the van, your body is sprawled on the third row bench seat. Its gray upholstery is stained with spilled water and pizza sauce from years of short trips like these. You are only allowed to lay on it when you visit without your brother. He has told you the story about the van being stolen years before you were born, returned with the ghost of a boy who'd been left inside for too long. *Lay here*, he warned, *and he'll possess you*. You don't believe him, but sometimes, when you catch yourself falling asleep at the border crossing, your ear rings.

Your father points out the checkpoint to you, telling you to be ready to buckle back up. In 20 minutes, supposedly. Your mother has your school ID in the glove compartment. You have all crossed over so many times, from LA to Tijuana, from Tijuana to LA, that this is all just an inconvenience. Like a 12-year-old's birthday during his grandpa's cancer treatment in another country. You don't realize until you are older that he is close to the end.

The game console dies for good, briefly coming back to life for a few minutes before the sound like paper tearing returns. You return to the seat behind your mother. Though it is nearly sunset, the afternoon heat is trapped amongst the lanes packed with cars. Their exhaust settles in the van, clinging to your jeans and t-shirt. Vendors weave between cars as they yell what they are selling: fruits, nuts, tables, bottles, puppies. You consider asking for a pet for your birthday, already knowing the answer will be no because your apartment doesn't allow animals, but if it did, you know what you'd name it. This is a secret. Men with silver-painted skin perform tricks for families like yours, holding out buckets for tips. Sweat drips from their arms as they swing in circles over and over juggling tennis balls. None hit the ground. You can hear the sound of coins hitting metal. You hold your hand out the window, flipping your palm up and down to the sun. Why is the palm of your hand so much lighter than its dorsum? The checkpoint is waiting for all of you to cross north.

"*Mi cielo*," your mother says. "Ponte trucha."

She hands you your school ID, asking you to repeat what you tell the agent each time: you are Miguel, you are twelve years old, you were visiting your sick grandfather, you are American, you live and go to school in Los Angeles. Yes, you speak English, yes, you are a good student. You hate this. When nervous, your tongue tricks you, its small stutter enough

for the agent to press you. Once, you tried to pretend you were asleep, but the agent told your father to wake you up and roll down the back window, forcing you to list the most distant facts of your existence.

When you reach the checkpoint, your father provides all the cards and documents for the three of you. You wish you had a voice like his: deep, controlled, able to switch between English and Spanish after decades of practice. The agent looks at him, then you.

“No doubt he’s yours,” the agent says. He shares the same mustache as your father, even the same broad shoulders. “What’s your favorite subject?”

Your mother looks at you. Winks.

“Math. Sometimes science.”

The agent’s approval waves the van forward.

You and your brother used to play a game where you picked a state and looked for cars with that states’ license plate, keeping a tally. California always won.

II.

Your father brings you alone to Tijuana with him because your brother is still in school. Sucker, you think. Technically, you still had school, too, but your father convinced your mother that it would be good to take you to visit your grandma, now alone in the Tijuana house. Before the summer is at its worst. The house is the only one owned in your family: both in the States and Mexico.

The lanes are even more crowded. Your father passes the time by making up parables about people in the cars around you. Two men in a Nissan are visiting another brother that never left the country like they did. The lesson: never forget where you came from. A family in a minivan are taking care of doctor and dental appointments. The lesson: there is always a better price – you just have to look for it. A couple with a dog in the bed of a pick-up truck have just broken up but still need to decide who is keeping the dog. The lesson: don’t have a dog. You watch as he points and talks about anyone but himself, taking small sips of beer in between to cool himself down.

You are both here to check on Prima, the tenant who was subletting a part of the duplex behind the house, and make sure her plumbing was working. You have called her “Prima” for years, not because she asked you, but because she felt like someone only a little older, even if she was probably around your parents’ age. Maybe younger, the way she didn’t seem perpetually tired from work like your mother. Prima grew all the plantitas around the house’s exterior, turning it into a shady oasis that you could hide in when you got bored.

There was a morning, once, when she found you, playing with your grandparent’s dogs on the roof. You were tasked with scrubbing the two of them down, rinsing their bark brown fur until all the dust from the road below settled into wet muck for you to sweep off. You

enjoyed watching the water splash on the cement wall that protected the front of the house, then the dirt road below. Your father had forced you to do it before the sun darkened you in its afternoon state. His mother, the grandmother who was now alone, was always threatening to scrub your face with lemon juice. You thought, *yum*, each time because lemons with salt were your favorite snack. When you are older, you will know what she meant.

“Miguel?”

Prima walked carefully toward you. Her hand lay on her chest, as if a reminder she was whole. You suddenly realized how wet your clothes were from dumping buckets of water on animals who knew nothing about staying still but everything about roaming, guarding, watching. They circled and jumped on her as she waited for you to respond. All you could do was look down. Blood rushed to your face.

“I saw the water falling, and I thought you were your father,” she said.

You felt her fingers underneath your chin, tipping your face up as she bent down in front of you.

“Just me,” you say. Your tongue loses itself to your stutter. “Do you want me to get him?”

You had seen her many times before: helping your grandparents bring bags of produce inside the house, sweeping the long driveway behind its tall metal gate, drinking coffee or beer with your parents in the evenings. You hadn’t noticed how small her nostrils were, the clay brown of her lips. Her hair was straight like yours, but much longer, and in a braid so tight you could see the scalp near her temples. She smelled like a sharp citrus.

“In another life,” she said, “you could be my son.”

She kissed you on the forehead. A moth landing on skin. You realized she was alone, had always been alone but did not know why. Maybe your mother could share you. There were two of you, your brother and you. You knew you were the favorite: the baby. But you were always alone, too, and you knew what that felt like.

When you wait to cross back to LA, your father seems lighter. He hangs his arm out the van window, rapping his knuckles against the door to the beat of a corrido playing on the radio. The truck next to you is playing the same station, and your father acknowledges the couple in its front seat before offering them a wave. You slink down, not used to this side of your father. On the passenger seat sits a potted fern with instructions written in Spanish, its leaves green with life.

III.

Early morning rain slows down the cars around you. In the backseat, you blow hot hair on the window, dragging your finger to create an outline of a face, then its smile. Your grandma is getting worse, but you don’t know that. You know that your brother, now on the trifold

bed, is talking to your mother about classes and majors. He has taken back the Game Gear. Confident phrases exit his mouth in between clacks of the joystick: *expedited track, technician, one hundred grand a year, a place of my own, fuck El Super*. In the passenger seat, your mother is nodding her head, asking your brother questions. They are questions she sounds unsure of asking.

She has told you a story over and over. Its hope stings you. There is a tradition of motherhood in her family, one that she might have ended or prolonged. But after she graduated high school, enrolled in college, and received a full scholarship, they demanded proof of status. She dropped out. When you are older, you will realize this is a fact, not a regret.

When she tells the story again, your brother rolls his eyes but listens. He has dropped out before, for a girlfriend that is no longer a girlfriend.

“You will be better,” she says through the rearview mirror. “Both of you. Just tell us what you need, Chuy.”

She looks at your father. He was still in his coverall, refusing to change before we left L.A. Dried paint flecks stick to his clothes, his skin. His neon green safety vest hangs from his seat. You know no tradition of his besides liquor and labor.

You pipe in, calling Chuy a major ween because you have no idea what a major is but want to be included. He tells you, No one’s talking to you, and kicks your leg below the knee. A bruise purple as dusk will form, but your mother says, *No chisme*, and that’s that. Without looking up from the game console, your brother continues to tell your mother things that make her sound happy. He’s trying again.

There are boys around your age selling wooden desks with lids that can be lifted open. They are walking with them tied around their backs, nearly half the size of their bodies. They yell in Spanish that the rain is good luck, that the desks’ wood has been oiled so well that it won’t absorb the water. You flinch each time they whip the desks with a towel – they are trying to keep the desks dry, but the rain is falling so hard you think it’s impossible. They’re yelling the price in pesos and dollars, back and forth, back and forth. You feel ashamed.

IV.

In your family, there are rules to being a son. Take the trash out every night. Do not pull away from your mother as she pours bottled red chile in your mouth for swearing. Wake up before dawn with your father to know what a real job feels like. When your mother dies, when you lose both parents to time, when you are old enough to deserve to feel pain, drink until the pain becomes a ghost.

You attend your grandmother’s funeral at 15. Services are a week-long event. For days, you rise to the sound of men and women murmuring prayers before cooking large batches of frijoles, papas, pozole. In one corner of the kitchen, aunts chop onions and cilantro, throwing

back sharp laughs. You take a spot with your uncles and male cousins gathered in the living room, splitting yourselves between the couch, plastic crates on their sides, and the stucco wall with beer bottles in their hands. Some of them offer you one before your mother shoots them a look. They chuckle. After she walks away, they sneak you one anyway.

“Andale, just a sip,” one uncle said.

“Déjalo,” another said.

“Drink and you’ll have one of these,” said one more before he grabbed his fat belly and shook it.

You all laugh. You take a small sip to appease them. You swallow it quickly, and when they cheer they yell so loudly you shove the bottle back in one of their hands and look out for your mother. She doesn’t see you. You watch her feed, gather, and console relatives that are not her blood. She is shorter than your father by a foot, yet she walks through the house and driveway as the new matriarch. Your brother’s Spanish is better, so much better that your cousins gravitate toward him, this wonder of an American-born child of Mexican parents who can move between two worlds. You like to imagine someday you will be like him: a perfect crossing of language and power.

On the final day, your father goes missing. You scan inside and outside the house, a growing, gangly body weaving through people who are dropping food while they eat from paper plates standing up; moving furniture back to its original locations; and taking swigs of beer before laughing or crying and patting you on the shoulder to move you along. When your father and you were both younger, you would wait for him by the front door so you could climb barefoot on his sweaty back when he returned from work. You could hear his boots causing the metal railing to vibrate as he walked up to your second floor apartment, opening the door before he could unlock it. Sometimes, he was sober. Sometimes, he arrived before your mother and Chuy fell asleep. Oftentimes, neither was true. You think of that, now, if you would be able to help him if he had fallen. Or worse.

During your search, the back of your neck is grazed by delicate fingers, then a gentle tug of your collar. Prima smiles up at you. Her eyes are red. She is still beautiful.

“This is not my first death, you know,” she tells you.

You don’t know what she means, but she offers her hand out to you and you take it. You desperately want to take her cool fingers and press them against your eyes. Instead, you let her lead you to her duplex. She has planted the same jungle of garden as that of your grandparents: ferns, nopales, chiles, budding trees with fruit not yet ready to be known. An aloe plant cut, oozes.

This is your first time in her home. On her walls, lit by a fluorescent lamp, she has portraits of images similar to that in your home: la Virgen, a painting of Popocatépetl y Iztaccíhuatl, collages of smiling people. There is a single bed placed underneath the window,

where the sun is falling beneath its sill. There is a kitchenette lined with blue and white tiles along the wall. There is a burning stick of copal incense that reminds you of your mother. You have the urge to apologize, to explain to Prima that your mother would be upset if she knew you were here, to land your head on her bosom and feel what you felt on the roof all those years ago. She lets go of your hand.

“You really do look like him,” she says.

“Like who? My pa?” I ask.

“Like all of them. Your grandfather, your father. My boy... he is always gone, too afraid to cross over, you see.”

You see him on a blonde wood table: the ghost of you. He is opening his mouth to the corner of the frame, a lens flare ready to embrace him. He has your flat, black hair, your tan skin, your brown eyes. You are careful with the memory of the boy in the van, but it lodges itself in your chest until it pounds so strongly you reach for the picture and place it face down. Prima says nothing. Later, your mother will tell you her boy found work in the States – but with no papers. Again, she will state this as a fact, not a regret. You wish you could trade places, drag him out of the frame by his shoulders and ask him to take your place. That’s when you hear him.

In the bathroom, your father’s cheek rests on the seat of the toilet. The sound of his snoring reaches you before the smell of his vomit. You have never been afraid of him until now.

“You need to move him,” Prima says. “Can you?”

“I’m really sorry he did this.” You really are. For her, for you, for your mother who has taken care of all the arrangements for his parents’ deaths. You don’t feel anger, not yet, not until you become a parent and learn that there are better ways to manage grief than this.

When you poke your father on the thigh, his jeans just barely hanging off his knees, he doesn’t move. You try again. This time, you put your fingers into his nose and he gasps. Eyes bloodshot not seeing you, only everything around you, above you. When he stands, he stumbles toward the sink. Memory is foggy here. He hits his head. Stitches are needed.

V.

As you grow older, it becomes more and more difficult to cross. Until you don’t. And you stop thinking about Prima or her son until you are dating the person you know you will marry – the person your mother approved because she reminded herself of her – and she asks to see the place that you talk about only when you are a few beers in, and remembering your father drunk with grief feels like a parable. Digestible. Distant.

Underpass

BY MARILYN RAMIREZ

You meet me at the taco stand off the 5 Freeway, the one with the best al pastor in the San Gabriel Valley. It's the mist from the Rio Hondo river, I say. A joke in a drought-ridden place. *Debatable*, you say, but you eat the tacos anyways, a pineapple and achiote and chipotle waterfall out the corners of your mouth. You tell me, *we are still done, okay*, and I say, *okay, I know, just eat*. My mother has always told me food is made with love, so what difference does it make who makes it? Against the black sky, rope lights dangle over the spit-grilled pork, the trompo spinning with each patron's order. You tell me you can't keep doing this, it's too hard, and I think about the last time that phrase came out of your mouth, not unlike a night like this, where the moon waits to see what we are doing as two bodies, perching its glow over the noctilucent clouds. Strangers' children crouch next to us while their parents laugh with the taqueros. *I still want to be with you*, I say. You stop eating. *You know what's better than this*, you say, *cochinita* – no onions, no cheese, no random bullshit the taco shops dump on food over here. I twist the peridot ring on my finger, the ugliest of all birthstones, and I think of the time we watched *Mi Familia*. The spirit of the river had returned to claim what was rightfully his.

Marilyn Ramírez is a writer and poet from Pico Rivera, California. An MFA recipient, she has works published in *Epiphany*, *The Plentitudes*, *¡Pa'lante!*, and elsewhere. She has been awarded the Epiphany Literary Journal Breakout! Writers Prize, the UC Davis Dean's Graduate Award, the Literary Women of Long Beach Harriet Williams Writer Prize, and was a finalist for the This Is Poetry prize. Marilyn was the Fiction Editor for *The Plentitudes*, an Editorial Intern for *Huizache Magazine*, and is currently the Managing Editor for *Abode Press* and Fiction Editor for *The Rumpus*. She is an alum of the TinHouse Summer Workshop. Marilyn is currently working on her first collection of short stories where she obsesses over crossings, hauntings, and cenotes.

Family Dinner

BY BAILEY CHEREDAR

Tina sits next to Greg at the dinner table. In a casual manner, he has his arm draped across the back of her chair. Her parents don't think anything of it. This is how it's always been anyway. When she started dating Greg at 15, as typical puppy-love teens, they couldn't resist the PDA back then, no matter who was around. Now it's just a habit they were still trying to break. Her parents would worry they were in some silly argument if they didn't have some level of physical contact.

"What are your guys' plans for your 5th wedding anniversary next week?" her dad says across the table. This snaps Tina's attention out of her thoughts.

"Just staying in with the kids," Greg responds casually. With his other hand rubs the back of baby Andrews' head, making him give a gurgle noise.

There's Greg, always to the rescue. Again.

"Oh, you guys should do something special! 5 years is such a milestone! Go out and celebrate! We can babysit!" her Mom interjects.

"Grandma's house!" Nate, the three-year-old, chimes in. The grandparents give oohs and aahs over the kids.

"Another time, sweetie," Tina says to her son, making his face scrunch. "It's ok, Mom. Thank you, though. We talked about it, and all we want is a simple night with the kids," Tina says, following his made-up lie. How many more?

"But you guys are so young and in love! Don't waste it!" her mom continues. "That new restaurant opened up. What's it called, Dear?" she asks her husband, tapping his forearm lovingly.

"Francesco's!"

"Yes, that's it! I heard they have lovely house wine and pastas!"

Tina just wants her mom to let it go; she and Greg had agreed to keep it a secret. If her Mom keeps pushing this lovey-dovey agenda, Tina won't be able to not tell her. Tina truly just wanted to talk to someone about this, especially her mom, so she could hug Tina and tell her everything would be ok.

But at the same time, Tina couldn't fathom telling her parents, who had 35 blissful years of marriage. They had gotten married at the same age as her, and she could barely make it five years. After months of failed couples therapy, the choice of divorce lingered in the air, neither acknowledging it at first. Tina finally broke the tension and suggested it – Greg was

too polite to do it.

Greg began asking her father about sports and the game last week, moving the conversation away from their anniversary. The chatter of her family is a light buzz as all she can think about is Greg's arm across her chair, a thing she has grown used to. She resisted shifting in her seat, away from his touch. Once a thing of comfort and love, now a neutral, a nothing feeling; something just for the show they got to keep up. She had been playing this role for a long time now. When will the director call cut? Tina wondered.

Luckily, her mom eventually forgets the topic, so the rest of dinner and dessert pass as they usually do at their weekly dinners. Once her parents leave, Tina preps Andrew for bed while Greg does the same with Nate.

Tina crosses the hall to the bedroom, while now just her bedroom, she is exhausted pretending everything was fine and normal. Greg steps out of Nate's room, softly shutting the door. There is just one final thing she has to build up the strength for.

"Greg, if you're comfortable with it," she emphasises the words the couple's therapist recommended, "I think it's time to at least tell my parents."

"Depends. When?"

"Next week?" Tina offers.

"Can we do it in two to three weeks?" Greg shifts and crosses his arms, "Just so we can figure out the speech on how to say it delicately."

Tina sighs and gives a tight-lipped smile, "You said that a month ago when I asked after the papers were finalized, and we still haven't."

"It's a difficult thing to explain."

"Yes. But it gets worse the longer we wait."

"Fine." Greg says, exasperated, then takes a calming breath, "Let's do it next week. Good night, Tina."

"Night, Greg."

They pass each other in the hall, careful not to brush shoulders, as Greg goes to the guest room, which he has lived in for six months now. The day they officially filed for divorce.

Tina closes the door and slumps against it. She stares at the room, scattered with their past.

10 years together. 5 years of marriage. 2 kids.

When she got pregnant with Nate, they had a shotgun wedding. Two twenty-one-year-olds in love and pregnant, why not?! The following years were a blur and felt like she had just

been going through the motions. One day, Tina realized she couldn't remember the last time she had kissed Greg or had a conversation not about the kids.

Tina and Greg had crafted the picture-perfect life – a nice house, kids, and good jobs. What else could they have asked for?

The bedroom was an empty shell of their marriage; Greg had taken his personal things and only a few pictures of the kids. She still had the wedding photos and their posed portraits, all remnants of the show they put on. She and Greg still loved each other. But they weren't in love. Hadn't been for a long time.

After long discussions of custody and housing, they decided it was best to have this amicable co-parenting relationship. This was all for the kids; they were so young. Tina and Greg still wanted to give them stability and be a good example. Greg's parents divorced when he was young, and they outwardly loathed each other; he refused to traumatize his kids the same way.

They would remain in this arrangement until the kids were old enough to understand. They will now have separate lives; what that means to them in other aspects, well, they will have to figure it out along the way.

Bailey Cheredar is a Southern California local that is attending university in the Los Angeles area. She is undergraduate student majoring in English and an emerging writer.

No Ceremony

BY ANGELA QIAN

At the end of the day, the girls were returning equipment to the Japanese-style room. At least thirty bags sat in the entryway, filled with heavy objects of mysterious provenance. Kettles, rounded ceramic vessels. The girls had been practicing tea ceremony in some special location, in preparation for some special event. The location might have been on the seventh floor, although to my knowledge the school only had four floors. The tatami room had been the first stop on my school tour. I sometimes liked to peek inside to see whether there were any students in there, lounging shoeless or practicing the koto. It was only the first week, but school life had quickly grown to occupy my whole life, to the point where all my days felt full of school, and by the time I got home I usually just walked around the neighborhood or ate in my apartment before going to bed.

I set to work with the students restoring the objects to their places. They felt smooth and warm and nearly alive in my arms. Unlike the shy, singular scrutiny of the first days they accepted my help with no ceremony. Just a bundle of activity that seemed somehow also calm, surrounded by these small bodies. It was summer, and there were no English classes. I was never “supposed” to be anywhere, but I never had anything to do. Sometimes I wandered around the halls, peering into classrooms feeling like a lost thing. The teachers, and indeed some of the students, told me that the students really wanted to talk to me but they were very shy. Oftentimes I tried talking to the students I ran into, but it soon began to wear on me. I began to feel like a nuisance or at least an oddity, strange American teacher interrupting their tasks, needing to be humored.

Reiko, the head of the tea ceremony club, bustled around, already the picture of a little lady. “Ahhhhh,” she said, every time she spied me. “Please join us,” she said, never failing to delight me. The girls busied themselves around the room and slowly the pile of empty bags grew. “Please put the shoes here,” said Reiko. I knelt down next to a low cabinet. I began filling the shelves.

Some of the shoes were traditional getas with wooden block soles. Some were ordinary flip-flops bearing tropical motif. They belonged to the girls, were well-worn but cared-for, each and each so tiny in my hands. I placed them next to each other. Almost without realizing, the cabinet filled.

After everything had found its place and most of the students had vanished I was left with Reiko and her friend. We walked back to my office to meet the second English teacher, who had just arrived that day. I had given them the option to meet him and Reiko had said, fearless, “I would like to meet the new English teacher.” As we walked down the hall I asked them about their homeroom classes.

To Jim, they introduced themselves with their full names. “Hello, I am Reiko Kimura.” “Hello, I am Mari Sato.” He seemed dazed and overwhelmed. I felt vaguely bad

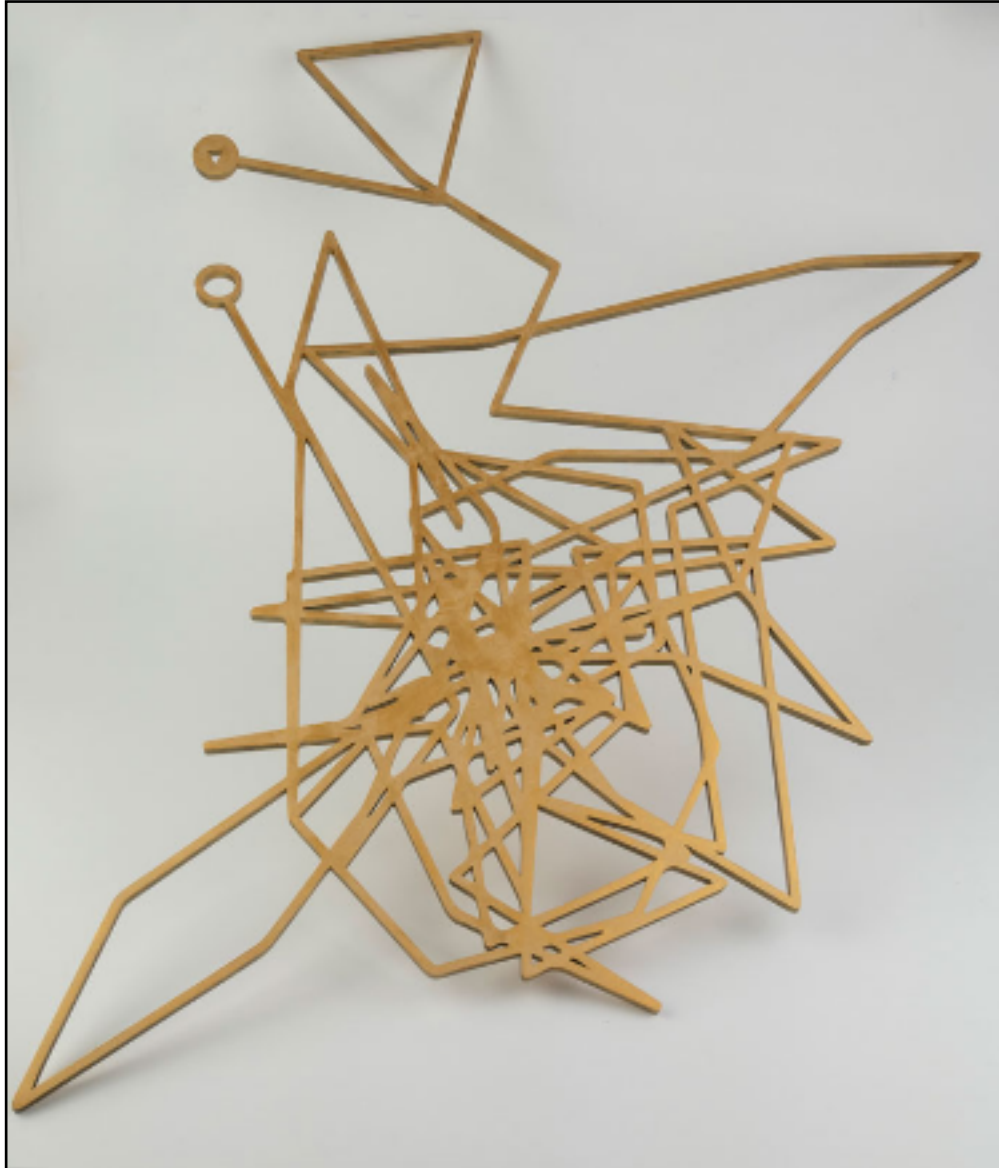
for him. He had just arrived that day and already I sensed the differences in our approach. He was thirty and British and had come to Japan with his wife. He was someone who “knew a lot” about Japan, knew the tourist destinations from several previous vacations, and I felt a kind of contempt for this, to speak with such flimsy and ill-gotten authority on such an uncommunicable topic as cultural difference. As if it meant anything to memorize a great many rules and customs of “the Japanese people”, as if it were that easy to understand—as if there weren’t more important, more pressing matters at hand— matters I didn’t know how to think about, maybe not yet or ever, and where I had wanted an ally in the mysteries I instead had gotten Jim.

I also felt territorial, reluctant to share with him the bounties of the school, the students’ kindness, which I had enjoyed for a week but already felt I had claim to, I had earned somehow, with all my beauty and youth and intellect and confidence, which I hadn’t.

That evening I got home and tried to walk to the city office. There was some bureaucratic task I had forgotten to do. Something that would cast me into error even before I opened my mouth, as if wrongness were a conditional state. I liked this walk, I had walked to the same area just the night before. The telephone wires ranging low through the air and meeting one another on each pole in ecstatic tangle. The flowering bushes, dark green stalks giving way to petals of all kinds, although now in my memory they are all pale and thin and unfragrant, soft and the size of my palm. The lush humidity against my skin, the closeness of the air and the sweat. The narrow streets, mostly apartments, lit by soft incandescent bulbs and illuminated windows, the scale of which was all so unfamiliar, smaller. On my way back home, my phone went off, a devastating whoop I hadn’t ever known it capable of, and I looked down to an emergency warning that a strong earthquake was hitting my area. A “mega-earthquake warning” was being issued by the Japanese government. I looked around and felt dizzy in the yellow light and made no move, considered for a split second running into the restaurant across the street and cast it away immediately. Instead I continued walking, crossed a street at random, looked up and around at the apartments and felt the weight of all my inadequacy. The ground shook and then returned to normal.

I walked to the government office, but the address I had been sent led to an apartment, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t find it, so I turned around and started walking home. In the middle of an intersection, the asphalt had been redone and mixed with mica or some other sparkling thing. It shimmered in all kinds of sedate and special ways. On the window near the ground there was a pattern of pink birds in flight. The air felt close but not touching, yes, it all felt so close but not touching, some huge weighty unknown thing. Yes, the road sparkled. The students’ shoes all in a row. The birds had flown. The child walked home.

Angela Qian is a writer who lives in Brooklyn.



The Last Innocent Morning

BY CHRISTIAN EMECHETA

Before any of the rest of this story, there was the gazette. Silas ran it out of a rented storefront on Beekman Avenue in Sleepy Hollow, a village that tumbles down a hillside toward the Hudson River like it was poured there two centuries ago and never cleaned up. The storefront had a plate-glass window clouded with age and a painted sign that read The Hollow Gazette in green letters already peeling in their second summer. Inside, the floor sloped toward the back wall. Copies of past issues sat in leaning columns beside a desk buried under notebooks, coffee mugs, and a laptop, its charger trailing across the room like a vine. There was a bathroom the size of a phone booth and a fold-out cot behind a curtain for the nights Silas couldn't afford the drive back to his sublet that month.

I loved that office. My wife, Eliza, loved it too. On summer evenings, the three of us would drag mismatched chairs onto the sidewalk and sit there with cold bottles of beer, watching the last commuters hurry past on their way home from the train station. The air smelled of river water and warm concrete. Swallows cut low circles above the rooftops. Eliza would arrive straight from her shift at the psychiatric unit in White Plains, still wearing her badge on its lanyard, her hair up in a knot, and she'd sink into the canvas camping chair Silas kept for her and close her eyes and say, "Talk to me about something that has nothing to do with medicine."

And Silas would. He'd talk about the osprey nest he'd spotted near the Croton Aqueduct trail. He'd talk about the old Italian barber next door who claimed to have cut the hair of every mayor since 1974. He'd talk about Washington Irving's ghost, which three separate residents of the village had reported seeing near the cemetery gate in the past year alone.

"Three sightings," he said one night, holding up three fingers. "Three! Either Irving is restless or this town has a serious imagination problem."

"Maybe both," Eliza said.

"Tell me about the ghost again," Eliza would say, eyes still closed, beer resting on her knee.

"Which one? Irving or the horseman?"

"Irving. The horseman isn't real."

"Neither is Irving's ghost."

"Humor me."

And he'd lean back and spin the tale again, his voice dropping to that half-whisper he used when he wanted you to lean in, and the street noise would fade, the swallows would circle and for a few minutes we were all inside one of those old stories, safe in the telling of it.

"You two are the best thing that ever walked through my door," Silas told us another evening, out of nowhere, the way he sometimes did, his voice catching a little. "This place can be lonely. Beautiful, but lonely. You changed that."

I remember how the streetlights had just come on. A moth was already tapping at the nearest one. Down the hill, the river was turning from silver to black. I wanted to freeze that moment the way you press a flower between the pages of a heavy book.

"You changed things for us, too," I said. And that was true. Without his gazette, I had no clips, no published work, no evidence that I was anything more than a man with a notebook and a theory about himself.

Eliza reached over and squeezed his arm. "Don't get sentimental on us, Silas. We'll start charging you for the therapy."

He laughed so hard the chair creaked.

Silas grew up forty minutes south in Yonkers, in a second-floor apartment above a dry cleaner. His father had been killed by a delivery truck on Saw Mill River Road when Silas was nine. His mother worked nights at a nursing home and slept through most of the daylight hours. As a boy, Silas found a paperback copy of Washington Irving's stories in a bin at a church rummage sale and read it on the fire escape while traffic groaned below. The stories described a valley not far from where he sat, a place where mist collected in the hollows and old Dutch farmers told ghost stories by candlelight and the forest pressed so close to the road that a man on horseback could vanish between one bend and the next. He decided that if such a place still existed, he would go there and never leave.

After college, he did exactly that. He found work cataloging documents at the Tarrytown Historical Society, rented a room above a hardware store, and started *The Hollow Gazette* because he couldn't think of a faster way to learn every person's name. He wrote profiles of the retired schoolteacher who maintained the Revolutionary War memorial garden. He covered the annual pumpkin festival with the seriousness of a foreign correspondent. He published a column called "Trail Notes" in which he described his weekly hikes through Rockefeller State Park Preserve in such loving detail that readers told him they could smell the pine needles on the page.

The artists and musicians in town adopted him immediately. The old-timers were slower to warm, but they respected that he showed up early, worked late, and never wrote anything mean about anyone. He was tall and thin and wore the same brown corduroy jacket in every

season, and he had a way of leaning forward when you spoke to him that made you feel like the most interesting person on the river.

I met him in the spring Eliza and I moved to Sleepy Hollow from the city. I'd quit a copywriting job to try my hand at real writing, and Silas offered me thirty dollars an article to cover whatever I wanted. He became my editor, my hiking companion, and my closest friend in a single season.

One Saturday, he took me up a trail I'd never found on any map, through a corridor of hemlocks that opened suddenly onto a rocky ledge above the Pocantico River. The water below was so clear I could count the stones on the bottom.

"Listen," he said, and held up one hand.

I listened. Nothing but water over rock and a woodpecker somewhere above us.

"That silence has a name," he said. "Irving called it the drowsy, dreamy influence that hangs over the land." He turned and grinned at me. "He wasn't wrong."

I have told this story forward, as though it moves in one direction. But memory doesn't work that way. Memory is a man standing at a window, looking out, and the glass reflects both the yard in front of him and the room behind. I see the past and present at the same time, layered and transparent, and I can't always tell which image is which.

So here is the room behind me. Here is what happened.

On an October afternoon in his third year running the gazette, Silas drove out to the Rockefeller Preserve to interview a young park ranger named Nate Aldrich. They'd known each other as teenagers. Nate had recently returned to the valley after a few years working at parks out West, and Silas wanted to do a welcome-home piece. They met at a picnic table near the reservoir and talked for an hour. Then Nate pulled a cooler from his truck and they sat there drinking beer as the leaves turned gold and red around them and the afternoon light went long and amber across the water.

They drank ten or eleven cans between them. Silas decided he could handle the two-mile drive back to the village. The road from the preserve is narrow and winding, hemmed in by trees on both sides. A family from Connecticut had parked their minivan on the gravel shoulder near the exit, facing the wrong direction. The sliding door was open. A girl named Tanya Sandoval, six years old, was climbing out.

Silas's car struck her at perhaps twenty-five miles an hour. She died in the ambulance.

I won't describe the aftermath in detail because I don't think details are what matter here. What matters is the weight of it. A child was alive and then she was not, and the distance be-

tween those two facts was one man's decision to turn a key in an ignition.

Silas pled guilty. There was no trial, only a sentencing hearing that lasted two days in a courthouse in White Plains. Eliza drove me there on a morning so gray and wet that the windshield wipers couldn't keep up.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked as we sat in the parking lot.

"He's my friend."

"He killed a girl." She said it without cruelty. She said it the way a doctor reads a chart. "She's gone, and nothing anyone says in that courtroom changes it."

"I know. But he needs people around him."

Eliza turned off the engine. Rain hammered the roof. She looked straight ahead through the blurred glass. "Then go. I'll be in the gallery. But I can't get up there and speak for him. Not with what I see at work every day. Not with what those parents are going through."

Tanya's parents were not present. They had sent one thing: a photograph. It sat on an easel beside the prosecution's table, tilted slightly toward the gallery so everyone could see. Tanya in a yellow raincoat, sitting on a swing, her sneakers blurred with motion, her mouth wide open in the kind of laugh that is almost a scream. The kind of joy that exists only in children and disappears so gradually from the rest of us that we don't notice it's gone until someone shows us a picture like that.

I could not stop looking at it. I also could not bear to look at it.

Thirty-eight of us testified on Silas's behalf. The owner of the bookshop where he bought his coffee every morning. The retired teacher whose garden he'd made famous. The barber next door who wept openly and said, "He's a good boy. A good boy." An elderly woman from the historical society who said she would take Silas into her home and watch over him if the judge would let him stay free. "Prison will destroy him," she said. "He belongs outside. Under the sky."

When it was my turn, I gripped the wooden rail and said things I'd rehearsed in the shower that morning. I talked about what Silas had built with his gazette. I talked about how he'd given me my start. I used the word community four times, which was three too many.

"He made a choice that ended a life," I said, going off script, my voice cracking, "and nothing I say diminishes that. But the man I know has spent every day trying to give something to this place. That has to count for something."

I sat down and Eliza took my hand. She didn't say whether I'd done well or poorly. She just held on.

Silas's mother spoke last. She was small, gray-haired, steady. She did not cry. She told the courtroom about her husband's death on Saw Mill River Road. She said Silas had lived his whole life inside the wreckage of that accident and understood, better than anyone in the room, what he had done to Tanya's family.

Then Silas stood to speak. He had been calm all day, eerily so, sitting at the defense table in a borrowed suit, nodding at each testimony like a man reviewing minutes at a board meeting. But when he opened his mouth, something buckled.

"I keep thinking about the moment before," he said. "The moment I reached for the key. I replay it a thousand times a day. In every version but the real one, I put the key back in my pocket. I walk to the village. I sleep on a bench. I call someone for a ride. In every version but the one that actually happened, Tanya Sandoval is alive tonight."

He paused. He looked at the photograph.

"I'm sorry doesn't reach far enough. I know that. But I don't have any other words."

The judge, a woman with silver hair and reading glasses on a chain, studied him for a long time before she spoke. She acknowledged his remorse. She acknowledged the minivan's position on the shoulder, partially blocking the road. She acknowledged his history. Then she said, "You understood the stakes better than most. You'd been living inside those stakes since you were a child. And you drove anyway. Twenty months in state custody, followed by four years of supervised probation."

The courtroom exhaled. Silas closed his eyes. He nodded once, opened them, and turned to face us. He didn't smile. He just looked at each of us, one by one, as if memorizing our faces for the place he was about to go.

We gathered around him afterward in the hallway, with its high ceilings and the smell of floor polish and damp coats. He hugged each of us. His arms were longer than you expected, and when he held you, his chin rested on top of your head. He smelled of someone else's laundry detergent and courthouse coffee. He told us he would be fine. He said it the way you tell someone the weather will clear up, with a confidence that has nothing behind it but the need to say something.

They sent him upstate, then moved him twice more. Eliza and I planned visits that never happened. He wrote us letters in small, careful handwriting on lined notebook paper. He described the yard where he walked for hours every day, circling the perimeter like a planet in orbit, staring at the Adirondack ridgeline in the distance. He described the cold that seeped through the walls at night and the cough he couldn't shake. Some kind of infection, he wrote. Probably from the ventilation. The doctors here aren't exactly specialists.

When he was released, he returned to Sleepy Hollow. By then Eliza and I had moved to a small rental in Tarrytown, just across the village line. The gazette was gone. Its storefront was now a real estate office with bright photos of river-view properties in the window. Silas found work painting fences and splitting firewood. He couldn't drive. He avoided the places he used to love. No more farmers' market, no more trail hikes, no more Tuesday contradances at the community hall. He had become a kind of ghost, haunting the village that had once been his home.

We took him to dinner once. Afterward, he and I walked along the waterfront at Kingsland Point while Eliza waited in the car. The Tappan Zee Bridge hung above us, its lights strung across the dark like a sentence someone had started but never finished. Silas told me he was writing a new book. *Fifty Ways to Rewrite a Mistake*. He asked if I would write the foreword.

"Of course," I said.

He never mentioned the book again.

Four months into his probation, Silas stopped reporting to his parole officer. A detective came to our door and told Eliza that if we heard from him, we were legally required to call. She told me about it that evening, her face tight with worry.

I said all the right things. I said I hoped he'd turn himself in. I said I was sure he was fine. I did not tell her what I already suspected, which was that Silas had gone into the woods the way an animal runs into the woods when it is afraid and doesn't want to be watched.

Thirteen months later, on a February night so cold the bare branches outside our window looked like cracks in the sky, there was a knock at the back door.

He was thinner than I'd ever seen him. His beard was long and tangled. He wore a canvas jacket over two flannel shirts and his breath made thick clouds in the porch light.

"Surprise," he said, and smiled. That same smile. The one that leaned forward and made you feel like the only person he trusted.

I wanted to pull him inside, sit him by the radiator, make him soup, call someone, do all the things a responsible person does. But he shook his head before I could speak, as though he'd already heard every word I was about to say and had answered each one in advance.

He'd been living in the woods and the empty summer houses that dot the hills above the Hudson. Foraging. Fishing. Moving from cabin to cabin like a character out of one of Irving's stranger tales, half real and half legend. He said the woods were different when you lived in them instead of walking through. Louder at night. Quieter in the morning. Full of sounds that had no names.

“I’m not coming in,” he said. “I just need a few things.”

He gave me a list. Rice, canned vegetables, matches, ibuprofen. No alcohol. I noticed that. I held onto that.

I walked to the store in the dark and bought everything with cash. I left the bags on the back step. Snow was falling, and I was afraid Eliza would see his footprints, so I walked back and forth across the yard until every track was smudged into a general mess. An hour later, the bags were gone.

I never told Eliza. Not that night, not any night since. At first, the secret felt like protection. Now it just feels like a wall I built between us, thin enough to see through but solid enough to lean against.

We moved West the following spring. New jobs, new schools for the kids, new mountains on the horizon. There was no way to tell Silas we’d gone.

Seven months later, Eliza’s phone rang early on a Sunday morning. She listened, said “thank you” in a voice that belonged to her professional self, and hung up. She turned the eggs in the pan before she spoke.

“Silas walked into an emergency room upstate with pneumonia. The infection from prison had never really healed. Living outside in the cold all that time made it worse.” She paused. “He didn’t make it.”

I set two plates on the table. Outside, a bird I couldn’t name was calling from the fence post. Eliza sat down and I sat across from her and we ate breakfast and said very little. The mountains outside our kitchen window were pale blue in the early light, impossibly far away, the kind of beautiful that doesn’t ask anything of you. I thought about telling her then. About the back door, the snow, the grocery bags. The words were right there, simple and small, easy to say. But I swallowed them the way you swallow a stone, and I felt them settle somewhere deep and permanent inside me.

I think about Tanya Sandoval sometimes, but not often enough. I think about what her parents lost, but I do it quickly, the way you touch a hot stove and pull back. I cannot hold it. I suspect this makes me a smaller person than I want to be, but I don’t know how to fix it. She was someone’s whole world, and in my memory, she is a photograph on an easel, a girl on a swing in a yellow raincoat, laughing.

Silas, I think about all the time.

I think about the way he leaned forward when you talked. The way he said the word beautiful like it had four syllables. The way he stood on that ledge above the Pocantico and held up his hand and asked me to listen, and I did, and the silence was the most alive thing I’d ever

heard.

He never finished his new book. But if he had, and if I'd written the foreword, I would have said that the trails in the lower Hudson Valley are not about views. They are about enclosure. The canopy closes above you and the old stone walls line the path, and the river appears in glimpses through the leaves, silver and slow. You don't see far. You see close. You see the bark of the tree in front of you and the fern at your feet and the light coming through in broken coins on the forest floor.

I would have written that there is comfort in not seeing too far. That sometimes the kindest thing a landscape can do is hold you inside it and ask nothing of you but to keep walking.

I would have written that the hollow, for all its ghosts, is a gentle place. And that the people who live there carry their losses the way the river carries the rain, quietly, all the way to the sea.

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My mother only liked deveined shrimp

BY RAQUEL REYES LOPEZ

She doesn't make it often because she hates cleaning it. She cooked it for my brother's sake. She would watch him eat until his plate was empty. Her panic began when my brother stopped eating at home with us. "¿Dónde está tu hermano?", she'd be at a loss, forgetting to flip the tortilla, letting it sit until smoke snapped her out of the realization that he was eating at a home she did not have the address to.

It was hard to eat with her staring at the two empty plates of the men we loved who gave up on us. She escaped through domesticity and try to create optimism, "Pues vamos a comer. Tu papá está trabajando duro. Tu hermano está estudiando con sus amigos. Nosotras tenemos que aprovechar.", but her eyes always told the truth, we didn't matter here. My father and brother lived without us, to me this was normalcy. I didn't expect my brother home after school; I didn't expect my father to pick me over the TV. When dad went to bed, I'd take his place on the couch with the hope of my brother seeing that after three hours of waiting I was still there for him when he'd inevitably sneak in. "WWE is on. It's an Undertaker match." I'd say, already accepting the banality of my request, before being shooed away with the familiar "fuck off". I wish I knew how many fuck offs it took for me to stop waiting.

I learned not to wait and instead go to bed. I'd walk into the bedroom my parents shared with me. I'd hear my dad snore. Next to him my mother cried softly. I'd walk up to her, tap on her shoulder, and ask for her to read to me *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?*. She'd be so quick to say, "Ahorita no mija."

I'd walk away from her to my bed and reached for my Little Bear. I hugged my plush tightly. I didn't understand why things had to be like this for a five-year-old. I only knew that I wanted my mom, my dad, and my brother to read with me in bed. Each night it was becoming impossible to have a moment alone with any of them. They were always too tired of each other to make time for me. I made a routine before bed. I would just turn the pages of my book, show the pictures to Little Bear, until I fell asleep. I would wake up each day after that understanding how familiar it was to feel alone in this house.

Raquel Reyes-Lopez is a first generation chicana poet. Her poetry advocates mental health awareness, speaks of infertility struggles, highlights tones of death, and loss. Her debut poetry chapbook 'Born to Electrify' was published by Sadie Girl Press. Her work appears in Rattle #52, Wild Roof Journal #20, San Diego Poetry Annual 2025-2026, and other publications. Follow her on Instagram @raquel4poet

BURN

BY JESSI JARRIN

It is Christmas. I am at my childhood home in Lakewood visiting my family. I still close the window in Mom's bathroom when I shower because I do not trust the neighbor to the left. He is a creep who is obsessed with her. He has an RV camper with a tinted window facing her bathroom. It's been like this for years. This is a minor concern to our family.

On New Year's Eve, Mom is at the emergency room with Grandma. When we visit, Grandma keeps demanding something from Mom in Korean. I ask Mom to translate. Mom says, "She wants me to feed you." I am almost flattered she sees hunger in me.

"But she also wants us to stay." My younger siblings trick Grandma with backwards magic: they leave and do not come back. I don't know how to tell Grandma that I am not hungry. I don't know how to tell her the way she raised Mom silenced an entire language in me. Of course, there is no way to tell someone this.

"Do you still know Spanish?" I ask Grandma.

She shakes her hand, as if to say, so-so.

"You were so good at Spanish," I say.

She taught herself Spanish by speaking to her employees at her Baskin-Robbins off Hollywood Boulevard. I was jealous of the way she, Mom, and Grandpa could speak it—and that no one taught me Korean.

Mom says that Grandpa was a brick-and-mortar Korean. That he was a rifle on the roof of their Baskin-Robbins in 1992. Or maybe I've imagined that to make him more interesting. One Christmas when I was younger, I saw him parked at a 7-Eleven, eating a hot dog in his car. I did not say hello. Like Grandma, he was a stranger to me. When he died, that moment in the 7-Eleven parking lot was all I could remember about him. But at his funeral, I lied—as one does—and said I remembered how he taught me to use chopsticks by bribing me with one-hundred dollar bills. Or later, after Mom distanced herself from them, how he dropped off pints of ice cream and birthday cakes meant for other people. I still do not prefer ice-cream cake. Just the thought of an Oreo one makes me sick.

At the hospital, Grandma asks me four times when I'll be done with school. Each time, I pretend it's the first because I don't want to get into the stickiness of her memory loss. In fact, selfishly, I want to forget this interaction altogether.

"In six months, Grandma."

"Six months."

"In six months."

“I’m done in six months.”

“So fast,” she says.

I snap my fingers to show how fast time goes when we are older. She cannot snap, so I do it for her.

“Like this,” I say.

I snap again.

After my brother leaves the room, Grandma asks, “Who was that man?” I look behind my shoulder and realize she is talking about my brother. “That’s Mattie, that’s Matthew, that’s my little brother,” I tell her. She nods and grins. “He’s not so little anymore,” I say. I motion one of my arms way above my head. She laughs. She is like Mom and Grandpa in this way. She is concerned about food and money and likes to laugh.

Grandma does not want to be in the hospital anymore. She threatens to leave. One night, when she tries, she forgets she has a catheter in and pulls it down from under her. The nurses tell Mom that Grandma has been saying she wants to die.

Grandma tells me, “I am going to get small. I am going to shrink and escape.” This reminds me of one time when my sister and I drove Mom to the dentist for her awful toothache. When the dentist suggested extraction, Mom ran out of the office and told me to hurry up and drive—like we were in the middle of a heist.

“Like mother, like daughter,” I tell Grandma. She laughs, but I wonder what she will remember of this story. My mother, running away. She will always remember that. I think this is why she hates her.

When I visited Grandma at her house the first time things got bad, there were five hair straighteners plugged in and three heaters, too. There were bottles of soju stashed in foreign places: where the water heater was in the kitchen, under her drawers, where the dog food was. The scent of dog shit and piss in her sheets. Pairs of scissors lying around. Small threats everywhere. My mother’s childhood. All of Grandma’s calendars stopped in 2022—like time froze in this place when she finally sold the store. I worried I conjured something bad when I started writing about her. When I visited, it felt confirmed. Sometimes omens live with you forever.

I expected her house would be smaller when I returned as an adult. The way places shrink. But it was still cavernous. And I was a little girl again. Everywhere around the house were places I could point and say, Fire or Bad or Familiar or Run. When we were younger, it seemed enormous to my brother and me: three floors, seven rooms, white leather couches, a full karaoke bar in the basement. I wanted to go back down there. But when I tried, I couldn’t. Spiderwebs had grown as thick as gauze. I couldn’t even make it past the fifth step. It was like

someone closed the door years ago and never opened it again. I locked Matt in there once.

I unplugged the straighteners and heaters. I hid every pair of scissors. But I left the soju where it was already hidden.

When I returned to my apartment in Sacramento, it looked empty. And without the Christmas presents lying around, it was. I still felt Grandma around me. I heard snips around corners.

The snapping never stopped.

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