

¡Pa'lante!



Issue 7 • Spring 2026
Cerritos College

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iPa'lante!

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A R E

words
are drawn curtains
are the half of the paddle below the surface
are a balled pair of socks under the sofa
are a tennis ball between a dog's teeth
are ancestors
are an elderly couple fallen out of love
are a stained barstool overnight
are clipped fingernails
are bridal veils
are an unplugged espresso machine
are pips on casino dice in the cup
are still-glowing discarded cigarette butts
are a dripping sponge
are smoke
are smoke
are smoke
are the glass covering a wall clock
are a trail of liquid soap dribbling down the tiles
are molted exoskeletons
are the wrong size of batteries
are descendants
are the dog's tooth as it punctures the ball
are plastic bottles that once held stomach medicine
are dented hubcaps
are an elevator shaft
are skirts of boulders wadded in the nooks of mountains
are a state-of-the-art bank vault
are oil on a rag
are a bag of glucose water administered through IV
are funeral veils
are smoke
are smoke
are smoke

GUITAR DREAMS

In the most febrile of my dreams, I am a guitar. Not just any guitar, but a handmade classical guitar with natural gut strings, a solid-top body and tuning machines with gold-plated tuners and ivory tuning pegs. This guitar is known for its warm and resonating tones, and when played by the likes of Andres Segovia or Julian Bream, it not only can move concertgoers all over the world, but it can also coax teardrops out of a cold cinderblock and distort a well-alloyed beam of high-strength steel.

I dream that my ample middle-aged torso is being shaped violently into the hourglass form of a guitar body. Excess bits of lard and flesh are chiseled away to form the delicate S-curves that are required to produce the warmest of tones. My insides are hollowed out in brutal efficiency, but they are not discarded. Some of the entrails may be used to make the gut strings later. The top and bottom are planed to the required finish and meticulously match-marked for proper fit-up. The sound box is reinforced for strength without compromising its resonance. A sound-hole is cut with artistry and care and the body is set aside for further assembly.

I dream one of my limbs is fashioned into the neck and headstock, all in a single piece. Pieces of metal are hammered into pre-made grooves along the neck at prescribed intervals to make the fretboard. Each blow of the hammer causes me intense pain, yet I fail to wake up from the dream. They continue to work on the neck, burnishing it and then decorating it with the finest of inlays. Finally, the neck is ready to be glued to the body.

The tuners are precisely machined and the gears engage with ease. Most of the exposed metal is gold-plated; this provides corrosion resistance and ornamentation. Somebody decides to fashion handles of the tuning pegs from my teeth and this exercise makes a visit to the dentist seem like a mid-afternoon stroll. Despite the pain, I don't wake up from my dream. I toss and turn as they extract six teeth, one for each of the tuning pegs on this 6-string classical guitar.

The strings of the guitar are a crucial component and are traditionally made from animal gut. I dream that they use my intestines to make the guitar strings. The fat is first removed, the membranes are treated and then immersed in a solution of lye. Strings are made by combining one or more strands, with the

heavier strings requiring more strands. The strings are then dried and treated and are ready for stringing.

The guitar is ready for assembly now. Most of my body has been consumed in the making of the guitar and I observe the proceedings as they marry the neck with the body, the glue applied to the upper bout adheres firmly to the heel of the neck. The bridge is glued in a similar fashion and the guitar now awaits the installation of the freshly made strings. An expert runs the strings through the capstans on the tuning machine while the other end is neatly braided onto the bridge. The strings are made taut by turning the tuning pegs and this causes an intense discomfort in my dentition. As the strings stretch, they emit a tone of higher and higher frequency and I feel an uneasy sensation in my stomach, as if someone was tearing and stretching it from the insides. Finally, all six strings are installed and tuned. I wake up in a naked sweat feeling an intense pressure around my torso and my jaws. One of my limbs is missing and I start to panic.

Slowly I hear the strings being plucked and I am lulled back to sleep. First, it is just the random plucking of notes. Each note resonates through my body and traverses its entire length. When notes are played together in chords, I feel an intense sensation of pleasure and ease. Slowly, I can hear familiar tunes being played; I hear Asturias in all its wonder, I hear pieces from Bach, some Baroque tunes and the more modern Classical Gas. Slowly, the pain disappears. My jaws relax, my stomach is no longer clenched and my limbs appear whole again. I wake up and go to the music room and see my guitar in the corner, not unlike the one I saw in my dreams. I hold it in my arms and feel whole again.

E Kraft

BETWEEN

waking up to the weight
of a thousand deformed lies
I wear my flaws
like a second skin
cracked and fraying at the edges
torn between who I am
and who you want me to be

hiding behind pasty makeup
I run from the mirror
but she follows
always taunting
always pointing
the cracks that I'm too tired to fix

I should be more
but I don't know how
letting the world crumble
while I stand
the anti-hero
daring to exist
in the spaces between
who I could be
and who I really am.

HOW TO BECOME A HOBO

Step One:

It's a mindset that starts slow. It starts around the third time you move that year. When you realize that life is already condensed to boxes that stay in the car, shoved under the seats.

It grows as the deep self-doubt becomes self-hatred because if someone wanted you, loved you, you wouldn't be in this mess. They don't because you're too stupid, too fat, too boring even though you convinced yourself that moving here, to this small mountain town filled with people who also love the things you do, would fix that girl who was all of those things back home. That you could start over, leave the ugly parts of you behind, and pretend you were good enough.

But the pressure explodes; the doubt that you can ever escape this reality, ever be loved only numbed by bong hits and bottles of champagne.

You realize somewhere in there that this is probably why you move so constantly. You've failed.

You fantasize about escaping once more. So as soon as you can cut your commitments, you duck tape plywood to a PVC frame and set it in the back of your Subaru to make a bed frame. You keep the boxes under the seats, add more on top of them. You make a nest of blankets and pillows in your car which has become your new home and convince yourself that this makes you happy. That this coziness fills your heart.

Step Two:

You don't feel ready to live in your car. It's the first night and it's cold. It's the first of December and the start of one of the snowiest winters on record.

You have a couple more shifts to complete at the ski resort you work at. Your coworkers ask to see your car, they're curious. Everyone feels stagnant, everyone is trying to fill their hearts. Some even seem jealous of you on that dark, cold, December night. You notice this and are proud to be leaving, to outpace this thing we're all running from. But only for a moment, then you drive through town to find a place to park and sleep and your doom resumes leaving you feeling, once again, alone in the deep suffering you feel.

You drive for an hour, unsure. You circle town, stop once in all of the parking lots and twice at the overflow lot downtown. Nothing seems right. This is the first time the feeling seeps around you, that you are separate from those tucking into their homes with a foundation and central heating. That feeling of being a beetle, a cockroach. Scuttling around in the darkness, trying to escape death by remaining unseen.

In some ways, your suffering is solitary. Your suffering requires medication and therapy; an un-doing, a re-learning. But that doesn't come now. That comes much later, years and years and years. Now, you are becoming a hobo and you need to figure out where to sleep.

You land, finally, because you cannot drive any longer. It's a trailhead you've parked at hundreds of times before, between the river and the train tracks. The irony is lost on you in that moment because the fear has taken over your mind.

Step Three:

You wake up from that first night, skittish as a bunny in coyote country. You're alive, unharmed, but the fear doesn't recede.

Because it is the holidays, you cannot leave immediately. You stay to celebrate with family because that is what you've done your entire life. Because you cannot completely cut ties yet. Because you are not ready just yet.

But in staying, you discover you live now in limbo. Not fully human, not fully hobo. People make jokes to you. People ask questions of you. When you go into different places, different people make the same jokes and ask the same questions. They're unsure of you. They think you're crazy. You laugh and answer with a smile, but you are also unsure. You also think you're crazy.

Despite this, there is nothing left to return to. No home, no job, no community. The future there looks like the past and you need more.

You tell no one that you slept down by the river the other night. You tell no one that that same night a man parked in the van next to you came out of his car towards yours and shone a light in your window. You told no one that even though he returned to his van, that you couldn't sleep all night. That you felt like crying but didn't because the noise of sobbing would distract from the noises outside and you need to hear the noises outside. It's your only chance at safety.

You're in too deep for people to understand. Your way of life now is not theirs.

These same people who make the jokes and ask the questions push food into your hands along with offers of open couches and warm showers. Again, you smile because the pity in their eyes is real now. Because if you didn't smile, the illusion would be broken and the truth would be forced out. And somehow,

all of the things that are happening now feel less scary than saying the truth.
Than saying you hate yourself so deeply that you need to disappear.

Step Four:

While still developing into a hobo, your routine is awkward and careful. You park in the Safeway lot to sleep and use their bathroom. You try to cover your bed with your body as you stand at the open door of the backseat to grab your toothbrush and underwear. You feel people staring. A woman walking past with her child makes a comment.

You hide your toothbrush and underwear in your jacket pockets, but realize this will make you look like you are stealing things from the store. You move the tooth brush into your oversized, zippered wallet but it can barely zip and you still have the underwear to deal with. The pressure of your bladder is increasing. You start rocking back and forth to alleviate it. You pull the toothbrush out, then put it back. You throw the underwear back into the car, mutter forget it, and shut the door.

You feel suspicious as you walk into the bathroom. You make a mental promise to the store that you will buy something in exchange for your facility use. There is another woman in the bathroom, locked in a stall. You walk into the other stall and pee, sitting there longer than needed to try to out-wait her. She finally leaves but another walks in as you make it to the sink. You consider walking out, but you stay and mess with your hair in the mirror. Car life has not been kind to your thin, staticky locks. You run your hands through your hair to detangle it, pulling out strand after strand. You know you should stop, but worrying about baldness distracts you from the reality of your situation: that you are the homeless person in the Safeway bathroom pretending to be

normal in front of someone who is actually normal. More hair wraps around your fingers.

The woman finally leaves and you brush your teeth in the sink with wet paper stuck to the bowl. You look in the mirror and are defeated by what you see. Is this what you wanted?

You leave the store without fulfilling your promise to it.

Step Five:

You've traveled for over a month and through three states. You are now in Aspen, Colorado. It's a beautiful place filled with excitement for skiing, \$700 snow jackets, and fine steak dinners. You are also excited because this is where Hunter S. Thompson lived and died.

You think that some sarcastic, brutally truthful spirit still exists somewhere here. That someone — besides yourself— is dolefully drunk and angry.

You don't find this, not really. But you do find a bar where you sit in the corner and drink alone. A man sits next to you and starts asking questions. He guesses that you live in your car. You don't stop to think what exactly about you gave this away. Instead, you are scared that your secret is revealed. That your vulnerability is shown so clearly to a man whose intentions you could never know until they're acted. You drink until he's gone and you walk in circles around the town, watching your back.

The next day, you feel defeated. You sit at a park bench and drink a beer. You refuse to pay \$35 to get into the local gym for a shower. You smell. It's been more than four days since the last shower. The beer is water and you need whiskey to deal with this feeling. Two men carrying large packs on their backs with hair rattier and a stench more foul than yours. They ask if you'd like

to spark up with them. You would, actually, love to get high and consider the proposition even after you've shaken your head no and watch them walk away.

These two homeless men are a confirmation, for the second time in two days, that you've finally made it to your hobo-dom. The jokes people made before you left feel like weights added to the already enormous load you're carrying.

You decide to pay \$35 to shower. As you walk to the gym with your duffle bag, women in sparkly jewelry and fur coats switch sides of the street to avoid you. You are not surprised, You do not blame them. You are outside of humanity now. A cockroach that made it to the light of day.

Step Six:

They say that you are never lonelier than in a room full of people. This is not true. More months go by. More towns, more anonymity. More loneliness than you could ever imagine.

There are moments of happiness, but some days you speak to no one at all. In one town, you will drive a man you fucked to work the morning after. He will tell you how cool it is that you are doing what you are doing. He will say that he wants to do something similar. It will take every bit of you to not tell him to join you. You want him to ask to come with you. He won't. He won't invite you to his house the next night either.

All this time you wanted to run away, but the bell curve dropped. You want home, even though that doesn't exist. That truth keeps you on the road. But you fantasize about hanging plants in a window. You think about washing dishes at the kitchen sink. You crave a home decorated in carved wood furniture.

One day, almost two months after Aspen, as you drive into Montana, you realize that you've lived the adage about chasing greener grass; this thing you've heard for your entire life carves a hole between your lungs.

You feel stuck in purgatory again. So you keep driving and you keep hoping that something flies in the window of the car along the way that changes your life.

Postscript:

It'll take you years to change it yourself. It will take years to realize the miles won't, that no one else will. It will take years and years and years after those realizations. After almost crashing your friend's brand new truck in a drunken stupor, after losing that friend and finding yourself alone again. It'll take therapy, it'll take medication. It'll take finding yourself, then losing yourself, then finding yourself again to realize that only you thought you were ugly and stupid and boring and unworthy.

For the longest time, you'll look back on this hobo life and think it was all a waste. When you start to love yourself, you start to see how brave and strong that girl was.

That, at the end of her rope, she started tying scraps of fabric. That these scraps didn't make a new rope necessarily, but that the act of trying saved her from dying. That there was some —very unconventional — force from within her that kept trying.

But it will take you years and years and years to look back at this time you became a hobo and see someone who isn't pathetic. To see a woman stumbling through a tunnel with no light. And though she fell and sat in the filth for some time, she got up somehow.

Maria Jacobo

I AM FROM

I am of Indigenous roots.

I am from Michoacán—rich in culture,

Yet stained with violence and protests for justice that too often feel unheard.

I am from a courageous grandfather

who worked long shifts in cotton and raspberry fields, sweat the price he paid

for a work visa and a dream.

I am from a father

who left his hometown at seventeen, searching for a better life.

I am from gatherings on my mother's side cousins, aunts, and uncles, piñatas

bursting with candy, birthday

cakes.

I am from laughter and loud music, from holidays with a home overflowing with

family.

I am from playing ball with cousins,

from PBS Kids and visiting my cousin's house just to use a computer.

I am from steamy plates of caldo on hot summer days after school, love served
in broth.

I am from a hardworking father
providing for his four children and a mother who stayed home
to protect and raise us— a family surviving paycheck to paycheck.

I am from the noise of gunshots, sirens screaming through the night,
helicopters overhead, trying to sleep through chaos.

I am from a place they call “the ghetto,”
yet one that raised famous rappers and brilliant students
misjudged simply for being from Compton.

I am from life experiences. that reshaped me completely.

I am from “mistakes” that became my greatest blessing.

Reyna Sánchez

GRIEF

Grief
doesn't only happen
after the fact.
That's what nobody tells you.

I felt grief today
when I ran into my dad
in the toothpaste aisle at Wal-Mart
closely reading a label
hunched over
frail.

I felt grief
when I saw my mom
moments later in the dairy aisle
struggling to reach
a carton of eggs.

I feel grief
any time I speak to them
on the phone
and they say things like
te extrañamos hija
quieres venir a comer?

It's grief
that keeps me away
I say to myself
because i'm too scared
to admit
what it really is.

THE RATIONALIZATION OF THE DONUT THIEF

You're gonna throw that away
That donut there
A whole grip of them maybe
Hundreds to spare

Yet they still look delicious
Despite their age
That maple cake there
Stuck in that cage

I could free one or two
Maybe three or four
My stomach holds nine, so...
I could free more

I peek and scan
No one the wiser
Except that short man
SECURITY on his visor

So I give him a wave
And he looks away
And I take my twelve donuts
I empty the tray

The sweet fried bread
Goes right to my head
I'm gleeful and joyous
My feet now like lead

And then, some new eyes
Behind that cleared tray
They eyes of all knowing
The baker that day

“Enjoying those sir”
He asks, so I say
“I’m stealing your work
Delicious today”

He smiles and nods
“We throw those away”
“That’s why it’s guilt free,
the stealing,” I say

He looks to his right
To the man with the visor
Donut in hand,
Much definitely the wiser

Patrick Johnson

STANDSTEAD

I have been given a brief
To design an abandoned
Airport
Waiting lounge

I have previously designed
abandoned factories
decaying municipal buildings
and half completed schools

But an abandoned Airport
Waiting
Lounge
Is a step up from
These other projects
Both in terms of scale
And prestige

The conceit
The primary motif,
If you will,
That will serve as a centre piece
Both physically
And conceptually
Will be an upended drinks
Vending
Machine
Cola cans bleeding from its severed aorta
As never-used seats
Look on in quiet boredom

Miles Miller

OBSIDIAN LUNGS

I'm just missin' when I could smile half way
Broke down in front of God
He told me I couldn't stay
I had more to live for
'fore I could get the record straight
Then I saw your **obsidian lungs**
You're breathtak-

I remember seeing your **obsidian lungs**
For the first time
You made me so sad, until I realized
You wouldn't let me go
'till my stomach turned to butterflies
Trembling in fear knowing I'd be scrutinized
While I'm falling from heaven
Starin' into God's eyes
Then you were the angel-

The angel who kept my **faith** alive

ENTERTAINED POSSIBILITIES

If you were searching for me
On an adventure that was far from my sanity
Where would you be? How would I look?
If you were entertaining possibilities

The sea is getting tired of the sails that have expired
A lifetime, and a bloodline
'Cause your hopes and dreams are on thin ice
And the endings that approach you just won't suffice

But then you entertain all in which I could possibly be

And I hope I can be the one in your dreams
Be the hero with arms that are never empty
I hope I can be the one in those seams,
Breaking everything that I'm not allowed to be
Entertained possibilities

My leeches are admired by the stains that they've inspired
On my last line, and my eyes dry
'Cause your copes for the week are on thin ice
And the goodbyes that approach you won't bid you adieu
But then you entertain all in which I could possibly be
Where did you go?
On an adventure where you'll never find me again?
And I hope that you'll be happy in the end
But don't you want to know what could possibly be?
Oh, your arms are tired and weak
And I know that the man who holds you will never be empty
But until then I will still dream

I will still dream

Entertained possibilities

GRAVITATIONAL PULLS

I try not to look at my phone during road trips. To me, the trip is as important as the destination itself. The stars are my favorite part about traveling. It's 2021, and I haven't seen them in four years. I don't visit the stars often. In fact, I only visit them when I am in the middle of the desert because we usually travel at night.

This time was different.

Going 60 miles per hour in the passenger seat: It's midday on a chilly, cloudy day in March. The windows are cold to the touch, and the desert looks unchanged: shrubs, rocks of various sizes, and lots of sand. Desert plain. I can at least appreciate my music and see the Seven Magic Mountains art installation coming up. It's full of life in a place that's so monotone.

When I moved, I took a lone semester of art. It was the middle of my junior year in high school when I stepped into the second semester of a beginners art class. Though I was nervous to try something new, it was exciting. For the five years before that, I had been taking music, which is what I identified with the most, but this school didn't have an orchestra.

One of the assignments had a single rule: draw six different things that are circular. The selection was broad, but most people chose one of their drawings to be a flower. Despite us gravitating toward the same idea, we were all universes apart. I was in awe seeing everyone come up with different ideas and getting a glimpse of their creative potential.

I was learning from zero again, feeling distant from their world as I had never operated in one like it. I was probably the first one to ever ask for clarification in that class. Still, there was only one rule. Other than that, it was your imagination leading you, which was a big switch from what I was used to. I thought just having one rule would make the class feel like a mess, but everyone seemed to synchronize.

Orchestra was very different.

You had assigned seating, instruments, uniforms, and a conductor always leading you on a stage with blazing lights.

At this point at night, I would be able to see the light polluting the sky above the city. Even though I know it is harmful, it was what made the city beautiful and made it my home.

Las Vegas was where I had my first steps, found my favorite music and my closest friends. It also became a place where I faced uncertainty, despondency, and isolation as I learned that I didn't belong in many spaces.

I have never been a person with too many friends. When I do make a friend, it is a deep connection; I prefer it that way. I dislike small talk although I try so people don't think I am rude.

In the middle of my freshman year of high school, my classmate Perla and I had a conversation trying to remember how we first met. Once Perla remembered, she told me that she thought I was a bitch before we spoke. I was shocked, but before asking why, I already knew we would stay within each other's orbits. I like people who are upfront and don't care to have a filter. It makes gravitational pulls intensify. When I did ask why, she stated, "It's 'cause of your resting bitch face."

We laughed for so long that our math teacher almost had to separate us.

She became a beacon of light in a place with extraordinarily dazzling lights. But like a comet, she eventually had to pass by.

I was 16 when I moved to Los Angeles, and I had to leave everything I knew behind. Up to this point, I have learned, worked, and progressed toward my goals in the time I have lived in Los Angeles. I have found creativity, a new sense of style, and a new name.

Now Las Vegas feels like the weekend, whereas Los Angeles feels like the weekday. That weekend, in the distance, I started to see the first buildings. I don't remember them being there; they must've been created during my absence.

Looking back, the buildings in Los Angeles and Las Vegas were the only things I connected to both cities at first. They are similar, yet very different. One's features seem otherworldly as the other feels grounded; they are both tall and have lights, but they shine in a different way.

We reached the buildings. They seemed big, but were blending in....

I took out my AirPods to be able to give them my undivided attention.

"Are they houses?" I asked myself.

There were rows of them. Just files of uniform squares. Walls with identical SKU numbers. All equally spaced with exact measurements. It feels like, if one of them were slightly different, it might be bulldozed. Separated in their own intergalactic galaxy. It was intimidating.

"Ew, I hate them," I said under my breath.

They were houses, but I would never call them homes. There was no originality.

It was so lifeless. Those buildings felt like they couldn't have their own ideas.

We finally passed the buildings, but their teachings were orbiting my mind. It felt like my mind was regressing, having to fit into a box. And everything I learned as I was away was slowly being taken from me. How disappointing.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time at church. So, naturally, the disciples tried to "guide" me. I was a chatterbox and a skeptic, though. I didn't comprehend how everyone wasn't. How people could simply follow others blindly.

A question I asked often was why women couldn't look a certain way, and they answered, "It's ungodly" or "Stop looking for attention." I did my best to be like them, but I could never keep up. Keeping me at a distance so they couldn't hear my question: "What about me was so different?"

I thought as long as I kept going to church, I would have my questions answered, but as I grew older, my questions were never good enough for a better answer. Like Pluto, slowly orbiting around the same sun, always too far from the others until it is no longer a part of them.

Sometimes, I wish I had told the people who passed by not to bother asking more questions. Their response would never be good enough for you. Their interpretation of their sun has already decided your fate for you. They are tied by this gravitational pull in their solar system.

Even though I thought I hated them, without them, I wouldn't have found myself. So I thank them. For not sucking me into their orbit. For staying within their own solar system. For being unable to stop me from seeing the stars.

Sakura

CYAN

I, the poet
with feeble honeyed words
How can I begin?
How do I begin?

I'll be the morning dove
Perched on your shoulder and
Sing sweet melodies
That your own throat balls up

You taste like dandelion
Budding
amidst the harsh winter

Coffee stained lips
Imperfect harmonies sung in the car, stars as the audience
Tenderness at the fingertips-

Won't you let me cut you open?
Shedding light upon your
Insidious innards,
Let the kaleidoscopic butterflies flutter in release

I cling to the threads of time,
Silky and sinewy
Weaving them into the curves of your awkward smile

Lay down your sword, my love
Take a rest
For all the words you cannot say
My pen will write the rest

ASSEMBLY

When the Halloween stuff appeared at Target on Labor Day, 2025 Demetrios Callas (Dem to his friends) called bullshit. And it wasn't just the "holiday creep," as Dem dubbed it. It was the way that Halloween had lost any semblance of genuine scariness. You only had to look at the pop-up stores selling "sexy" costumes, as if the world really needed slutty nuns, trappy leprechauns, or dishy Teletubbies. The proliferation of arched black cats on everything. The cartoonish ghosts and witches. And when did it become compulsory for regional sales managers and actuaries to appear at work in the guise of vampires and zombie milkmen?

Back in 1975, when Dem was 7, a local TV affiliate had aired a pre-Halloween showing of "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane," (which Dem watched after a babysitter had fallen asleep). The sight of a rat, under a silver cloche, being served for dinner to Joan Crawford showed Dem the real meaning of Halloween: having the shit scared out of you next to a snoring 62-year-old matron, bathed in the electron blue light of a 14-inch Zenith black-and-white TV.

And so, when the annual email from Principal Thomas--with BOO!! and ghost/pumpkin/vampire emojis in the subject line---popped up on Dem's laptop before his 5th graders arrived, Dem knew what was coming. This was the "invitation" to the annual Halloween assembly, which was, of course, mandatory for all faculty members. A tradition since Otis Morks Elementary had first opened its doors 50 years ago, the Halloween Assembly had, by now,

achieved a humdrum uniformity. First, the costumed kids would troop into the school's stately auditorium. Mrs. Cubbins (herself an Otis Morks tradition, having founded the school's music department) would then pound out some chestnuts like "Five Little Punkins" and "Can We Go Burn The Witches, Ma?" on the school's Steinway upright. There would be a talent show. Finally, a faculty member would read one or two Halloween-themed poems, endured by the kids before they reluctantly filed back to class and clockwatched until the 2:30 bell.

Squinting at the email, Dem had an idea.

"Dem. Come here, son," said Stavros, Dem's dad, on a cool fall day, 1974. Stavros, patted his thigh, twice, and Dem, aged 6, dutifully climbed up with an alley-oop assist from his dad. A hard-covered book was lying, pages down/spine up, on the scarred walnut coffee table. This could only mean one thing: a story! Dem bounced with anticipation.

Stavros opened the book, with its worn blue linen cover and faded gold title. Believing as he did that story time should be not only entertaining, but instructive, Stavros began by telling Dem just a bit about the author.

"James Whitcomb Riley. He was an American poet, born in 1849 in Indiana. He was famous for writing poems for children."

1849! thought Dem. *Olden times!* To Dem, 1849 might as well have been when dinosaurs roamed the earth. *What's Indiana?*

"So, today, we're going to hear a poem that my dad used to read to me, called "Little Orphant Annie," said Stavros. "Huh, you know what, wait a

minute. Nope, too scary. Sorry, Dem,” said Stavros, pretending to close the book.

“No! Dad, read it! I won’t be scared!” cried Dem, bouncing even harder.

Of course, Stavros had contrived this little charade, all the better to set the stage. He started the poem, reading the first paragraph to Dem the way that his own father, decades earlier, had read it to him:

Little Orphant Annie’s come to our house to stay,
An’ wash the cups an’ saucers up, an’ brush the crumbs away,
An’ shoo the chickens off the porch, an’ dust the hearth, an’ sweep,
An’ make the fire, an’ bake the bread, an’ earn her board-an’-keep...

Now, 50 years later, Dem vividly recalled this day. Stavros had explained that an

“orphant” was really an orphan: someone who had no parents. This, by itself, was deeply distressing to young Dem. *No parents? So, a child had to go work at some strange family’s house?* Dem shuddered to think of it.

The poem was a cautionary tale, about what happened to children who wouldn’t say their prayers, or mocked visiting senior citizens (“ole folks”):

An’ the Gobble-uns’ll git you
Ef you
Don’t
Watch
Out!

But any force that the poem might have had was dulled to almost nothing

by Stavros' delivery. He recited the poem in a sing-songy, exaggeratedly childish tone: "Little Orphant Annie's come to OUR house to stay... ." The last line, too, was delivered by Stavros in a fauxfrightening way, more suited to nursery rhymes than a proper chilling poem: he placed an exclamation point and patted Dem's stomach after each "Don't!" "Watch!" "Out!" If Dem had known how to roll his eyes, this would have been a good a time as any.

Returning to the email from Principal Thomas, Dem hit the "reply all" button to tell her and the faculty that he would be reading James Whitcomb Riley's classic "Little Orphant Annie" at the Halloween Assembly.

The auditorium hummed with excitement as the principal took the stage. Tapping the microphone (and generating the predictable feedback howl), Principal Thomas smiled at the sea of Disney princesses; hoboes; Spider Mans; and Super Marios.

"Who's ready for the first act of our TALENT SHOW?!" she bellowed in her best Oprah style. Cupping her ear and looking fake-confused, as if she had missed the resulting roar, she relented. "Our first act: PLEASE give a warm Otis Morks welcome to...DOCTOR DOOM and THE VOID!" Doctor Doom and The Void were, in actuality, Stewie Hoffman; Mikey Tulinsky, and Skippy Miller, all wearing Doctor Doom masks. Their act consisted of them hitting the crap out of each other with toy lightsabers to "The Monster Mash." Next up was Willow Conway, whose hippie parents had clearly dictated her act. Dressed in a white peasant dress, pink octagonal sunglasses, and sturdy brown sandals, she earnestly played "Where Have All The Flowers Gone?", which gave the students an

opportunity to catch up with each other, loudly, despite the angry shushing from Principal Thomas.

Backstage, Dem knew that he had about 15 minutes to go. Ignoring the other acts, he sat on a folding metal chair and mentally repeated all four stanzas to himself. He was ready.

The last act was Mrs. Cubbins 4th grade music class, 14 strong, who played Katy Perry's "Firework" on recorders. The "Make 'em go, Oh, oh, oh" hook of the song yielded a staccato torrent of shrill and off-key bleats that was as satisfying for the players as it was painful to the audience. Ignoring the fact that most of the students had covered their ears with their hands, Principal Thomas took the stage. "PUPILS, *PLEASE! QUIET!* It's time for our final part of the show. Let's welcome to the stage our own Mr. Demetrios Callas, who will be reading the classic Halloween poem, "Little Orphant Annie!"

Walking off the stage to a polite rattle of applause, she gave a "go get 'em, tiger!" nod to Dem. Dem gave a throat-slitting gesture to Dan Keller, the stage manager, who killed the lights with a dramatic "thunk." After 10 seconds of total darkness, Dem's intro music slowly emerged.

Joy Division's "The Eternal" is a bleak and slow dirge, with references to "loved ones now gone" and "flowers washed down by the rain." Lead singer Ian Curtis had killed himself two months before the record's release, and the icy, distant vocals indeed sounded like a man singing from beyond the grave. The children, who had never heard anything remotely like this on TikTok, drew still.

A pale, dim spotlight slowly illuminated a threadbare armchair in the

middle of the empty stage, and Dem slowly walked toward it. Dem's long Greek features and deep-set eyes already looked a bit gaunt. This, along with the muddy light, the black suit and shirt, and Dem's slow, precise tread to the chair alarmed the children.

The music subsided, and Dem sat in the seat and, after about 10 long seconds of just looking into the auditorium's darkness In contrast to his Dad's exaggerated and childish tone, Dem sounded like a forbidding Michael Corleone slowly issuing an order, or a doctor telling a patient about some extremely concerning test results.

"Little Orphant Annie's... come.. to our house...to stay," Dem began, channeling his best somber, Walter Cronkite delivery. Dem had decided to downplay the corny contractions and dialect so dear to the poem's author, and opted instead for a slow, matter-of-fact delivery.

The effect was immediate. Hundreds of wide eyes peered through the darkness. The typical rustling of restless children stopped. Telling the students the inevitable fate awaiting their misbehavior, Dem concluded by grimly pleading to the kids that the "goblins will get you...if...you don't watch out." (not 'gobble-uns'll git you ef you Don't. Watch. Out.)" With another "Thunk!", the lights were cut and the room plunged into darkness.

Before the lights even came up, Little Emma Crowley, aged 7, wailed in anguish, burying her face into her teacher, Ms. Egan's, crochet sweater. Stevie Chung, in the back, threw up (for the third time this year) all over his Minecraft

costume. When the house lights slowly came up, most of the kids were simply frozen in place, and their teachers had to gently corral them, glaring at the now-empty stage, back to their classrooms.

The emails were as varied as they were immediate. Principal Thomas icily suggested that Dem immediately contact his teachers' union shop steward pending the board of education hearing. The PTA president asked how he, an elementary school teacher, could look himself in the mirror. Dozens of parents recommended that he seek alternate employment, perhaps in the waste disposal or animal control professions (although many such emails were careful to note that Dem's finding such positions was by no means assured, and that he might not be suitable for such careers in any event).

One email, though, stood out. With the subject line reading "BRAVO!", Mr. Carpenter, who was in his last year of teaching before retiring at age 70, congratulated Dem as being the first person in years to embrace the true spirit of Halloween, and would Dem perhaps like to play poker with some fellows next Tuesday?

Dem carefully moved this email to the "saved" file. He deleted the others, and started to consider should be done about Christmas.

Sam Hendrian

ORPHAN ON CHRISTMAS

Usually somewhere to be
Between the 25th and 1st,
A week of collective joy
And individual misery.

Instead they sit alone
By the last remaining payphone
Just in case an angel
Feels like making a sympathy call.

Mariah Carey murders them
Several times a day
But they keep on getting resurrected
By the sighs of peripheral suffering.

An abandoned Italian restaurant patio
Provides temporary shelter for the eternal vagrant,
The ghost of Dean Martin
Still crooning after midnight.

Mom and Dad are dirty words
And even dirtier visions
Yet they're scared if they go blind
There'll be nothing left to find.

RIPE WEIGHT

grandma teaches me how to pick persimmons
for the annual ancestors' altar offering, a cultural
adventure at a vietnamese supermarket

fluorescent lights humming, buddhist monk's
prayers held too long in the throat. she picks one
up then puts it down either too bruised or too green.

choose with your nose, she tells me, *not just your eyes*.
throw an apple in the brown bag, a quick trick
to get rid of undesirable parts tongue tarts

durian waits in its thorny fortress smelling
of musk and childhood memories, jackfruit's
sticky flesh stretching between calloused fingers

lychee clusters like coral the fruit of distant summers
folded into this moment.the skin will soften
in sleep sugar blooming in the dark

does the body absorb cooked or rawness better?
which bruises tell stories and which ones rot in silence?
what is substitution but the subtraction of desire?

FOR HER

I know that these words won't
disappear at daybreak,
that love is more than
a distant memory for retelling on
autumn grey mornings like these, hazy and maudlin,
but there are questions searing in your gaze
catching mine, retreating back to your shuffling feet.
I wonder where you'll be when reality
sinks in, when a spotlight is raining down.
The lines are in you, not like those
hastily rehearsed in cold pews.
The lights hit, and you're
biting the body, absolving how our
bodies merged

that

Saturday before.

but Oh,
warm lake nights, oh,
burn of the unspoken, treading a tightrope
between us.
Two mouths collide like the
universal dust, and I point out our star
with your hand in mine,
limbs entangled on the shore.
They'll never recognize this union,
yes, giddy, though still somehow impure.
But the way my breath is syncing with yours
feels close enough,
at least to me.

Brandon Shane

PRESENCE

His face said, don't talk to me,
and yet he arrived at the coffee shop

every day from six to three. He had
no earbuds or screen, but a novel

he would read, a new cup of black
every couple hours. Patrons would

make small-talk and he brushed
them away and began reading

where he left off, Moby Dick
or Don Quixote, having turned

the last page to do it all again.
Other baristas found him rude,

laughing: *there are many
places to read.*

I knew him as I knew the art
of presence, as raincoats shuffle

down silent sidewalks
on a surprisingly stormy day.

There is comfort in company,
strangers finding other strangers

without commitment,
mutual relationships:

*I will love you as long
as neither of us speak.*

FIFTH PERIOD GYM

The worst fistfight I ever witnessed happened at summer camp in the mountains a hundred miles east of Los Angeles. It was July 1960, between seventh and eighth grades. From behind the cabin where I bunked came shouts, and when I rounded the corner, two older campers—Doug and Pete—were slugging each other. I never learned what started it, but moments after I reached the scene, it was clear Pete would win. He punched Doug in the stomach. The mouth. The gut. The gut again. He kicked him. Doug shrieked, but Pete kept coming on until Doug lay prostrate. Then Pete walked away. But not the campers who'd gathered to watch.

“Oh, my leg,” Doug bellowed. He cried out again. “Oh, my leg.”

I knew he wasn't faking. What teenager would sob in front of a crowd? He struggled to rise but got no farther than his hands and knees. His head appeared to dangle from his neck.

“Oh, my leg.” As he cried, a stream of saliva dangled from his mouth to the dusty ground.

“Dirty fight,” someone said.

No one helped Doug to his feet. I think we were all too shocked to move. He was howling like an animal in a trap. Frightened, nauseous, I wandered into the nearby sage and let its earthy scent calm me. It may have, but the memory never went away.

Three years later. My sophomore year at Beverly Hills High School. I had no choice. The school required us to take physical education. Each day I had

to strip among strangers, waddle through four-forties, miss baskets, and drop fly balls. Unlike my honors classes, where almost everyone was a friend, in fifth period gym, I met the rest of the world—kids from all four years and all five grade point averages. And Snyder.

Snyder was a bastard.

As we sat on the floor of the basketball court and listened to Coach Reilly lecture us about the sport, Snyder tilted back his head and started blowing saliva bubbles. He looked like he surfed, thanks to his blond hair and a sneer that suggested he didn't give a damn about school, just the waves.

Midway through the year, something made Snyder loathe me. What, I never learned. Most likely he'd discovered that I was an abominable athlete. It started small, with nasty looks that graduated to hectoring. That's when I should have rolled out the courage to demand he stop, but I didn't. The incidents worsened until, emerging from the showers, Snyder glared at me, arms akimbo. The overheated locker room reeked of wet towels, mold, and sweat.

"M***, you piece of shit," he said. "Piece of *gunk*."

I walked away. He didn't say anything more, nor did he follow me. But the insults continued, and they frightened me.

I joined the forensics squad, which met at 7:45 a.m., during the optional first period. I was practicing impromptu speaking, my favorite event. A contestant received three topics and had two minutes to turn one of them into a five-minute speech. The subject I chose was "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power." Into the hall I went to prepare. I focused on Hitler followed by Nikita Khrushchev's attempts to bully President Kennedy at the 1961 Vienna summit conference. With about thirty seconds to go before they'd call me into the

classroom, Snyder approached me.

We were alone. I couldn't believe Snyder had elected to take a first period class. Maybe his book locker was nearby or maybe he'd left his house early to get away from his parents, who—pure speculation here—were as mean as he was.

"M***," he snarled, "you better play good today, or you're gonna *get it*." He took a step toward me.

He was referring to volleyball, the sport on that week's agenda. Again, I stayed silent, which only incited him to launch another threat the moment my speech coach opened the door. I didn't look back to see whether Snyder remained there.

Somehow, I managed a decent speech but can't remember whether I played volleyball "good." Although Snyder didn't confront me after the game, his insults persisted, and I, who would place ninth in the state in impromptu speaking, had no idea what to say.

Before too long, I was sure I'd have to fight him, a mistaken assumption I know now. He bullied with words, nothing more. Probably because we were equal in height and build. About five foot eight, me a little flabbier. Unless he knew martial arts, we would have been evenly matched. The saying "know your enemy" had yet to enter my mind. With little effort, I might have learned that Snyder transferred to Beverly High during our sophomore year. That meant he probably had few friends. Most of us had known each other since grade school; many, since kindergarten. We took a long time to welcome newcomers. My stepbrother, five years older than I, entered Beverly as a junior. In his former high school, he said, "If you were new, they invited you to all the parties to find out if you were a jerk or a cool guy. At Beverly, they don't give you a

chance.” Our yearbook contained an index that listed every page on which a student appeared in a photo. Because of the speech team and other activities, I rated eight mentions; Snyder, just one—the class picture all of us automatically received. With an off-center smirk across his lips but his hair surprisingly well combed, Snyder vaguely resembled Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys at the time Wilson was suffering a facial tic due to excessive psychotropic medications. I never considered whether Snyder was a lonely boy, happy only among the waves.

Even if I reported Snyder to the boys’ vice principal and the school suspended him, I didn’t think I’d be safe. He’d pick another time. I wondered who among my friends could protect me if Snyder decided to “choose me off the island.” There was no good answer. They called my clique the “intellectual soches”—kids who worked their brains, not their muscles, who joined everything, liked their classes, and whose teachers liked them. For a second, I considered my debate partner, a brainy, articulate string bean of a boy. I thought about Ron, a member of the tennis team. Also thin, with a long head and round glasses. He’d matriculate to Cornell and become a surgeon like his father. To imagine him fighting was as absurd as envisioning Peter Pan on the wrestling team. Ron’s idea of fun involved, once, inviting me to spend an evening at his home to watch a medical training film produced by his father—*The Removal of a Twenty-Pound Tumor*. (Benign, it turned out.) Not a bad movie, especially the scene in which the surgeon sliced open the growth and let two gallons of pus spill into the tray.

After worrying through several more days of abuse, I devised a way to flee the gym.

The school offered a unit on driver training, sessions with one of our

teachers in a car fitted with dual controls. To participate excused you from physical education for those few weeks. I walked into the main office, told them I had my learner's permit, and said, "They want me to take driver's training."

"Who's 'they'?" asked the stout lady behind the counter.

I wish I could recall my answer. Some palaver about a coach, my family, and maybe someone else. The woman frowned and called over another person, and maybe even a third. Whatever I said worked. They signed me up, my safe-conduct pass out of gym, away from Snyder, and into trips through the streets of Beverly Hills, onto the newly opened San Diego Freeway, and along roads that wound through the hills where, at certain turns, signs warned us to "Slow to 5." Driver training shielded me until school let out for the summer.

Shortly before the start of my junior year, the fear returned, fear of being scheduled into another gym class with Snyder. I couldn't sleep. My mind replayed the fight between Doug and Pete—the punches, the moans, the drool. Sympathy pains ran down my leg. I couldn't think of another escape; I'd already played the driver training card.

Fifth period gym, again. I looked around. Over a hundred or so boys filed into the bleachers of the swim-gym—a building with an Olympic-size pool that could turn into a basketball court—and waited for Coach Gutman to call the roll. It may have been the first day of the school year, but the air was already humid with the odor of hardwood mixed with chlorine.

"Rothstein," Coach Gutman called out in a deep, husky voice. He'd been an all-American football player at UCLA.

"Here."

“Rutberg.”

“Here.”

“Sanders.”

Another “here.” Spoken as a question.

“Snyder.”

My stomach turned to water.

No answer.

“Brian Snyder,” Coach Gutman said again, louder this time.

Still no answer. I’ll never know if anyone heard me exhale.

Snyder was absent the next day too.

I never saw him again. I was free to fumble passes in football, serve volleyballs into the net, and bumble through every other sport fifth period gym had to offer. When our yearbook appeared, Snyder’s picture was missing. He’d transferred away.

These days, I wonder about Snyder—who he was, what courses he took, what caused him to wink into my life, bully me, and then leave. I imagine myself trailing Snyder after we left gym, following him up the steps that led from the boys’ locker room to a blacktopped area where, most likely, Snyder would turn right, toward the drab Technical Arts Building, which housed classes in print shop, auto shop, wood shop, and mechanical drawing. I turned left, to the long flight of stairs that led up the hill to our main building, a two-story, Norman-style structure that stretched across the top of the hill, featuring a watchtower at one end and classrooms full of college prep courses. A metal roof over the stairs shielded us from the occasional rain.

High school gym classes must be full of stories about kids who baited each other, who almost but not quite beat each other up. Now I know what happened to one of them. A brief foray into social media revealed that Snyder came to Beverly High from a school of average rank. Says Wikipedia, the median income for that district was and still is low for Los Angeles County. After Snyder left Beverly, he graduated from another mediocre high school in another middling neighborhood.

Snyder's father may have earned a fortune in a hurry and just as quickly lost it. Or maybe his parents divorced—the expensive, nasty kind. Divorce was rare in the early sixties. Moves up and down the economic ladder must have damaged him. They would have shaken me too. In fact, they did. After my parents separated, my mother told me, too often, “We can’t afford that.” A year later she remarried, and her money worries ended. I’m not surprised that Snyder lashed out, with me a convenient target.

Today, Snyder has a beard to go with his messy hair. I gather he still likes the water, but he sails instead of surfs. His social media smile is straight and inviting. No longer snide. Nevertheless, I admit that the understanding that comes with adulthood has failed to include total forgiveness. I’ve fought him many times in the half century since high school, always between three and four in the morning. I’ve split his lip, smashed his face, broken his nose. I’ve kicked him in the balls. I’ve thrown him down the stairs across the hall from Room 125, where forensics met. Then, with Snyder prostrate on the stairwell floor, I’ve gone back to sleep.

Diana Hipolito

LAS MUJERES (A TRUTH)

We share her story, the truth
Our future
Our revolution

With our blood magic, hemomancy,
They call us Bleeders
Beasts and 'rotten things'

We are women now
We live to protect
We live to love
We live to remember HER name

For our children
For our country
For peace

Hemomancers we remain
Not the 'bleeders' as the colonizers or history
Write us away

The children listen restlessly
The men reap their machismo
The women shed not a tear, but smile

We heal, bleed and prosper
We continue her story
Her legacy

Dora Rollins

I KILLED TONY HOAGLAND'S SHRUBBERY

Sometimes I prefer not to untangle it.

I prefer it to remain disorganized

~ from Tony Hoagland's "Entangled"

Transplanting was the first mistake
straight for the shovel
instead of a spade
to dislodge the community
of calcified stories
coax the outlier
roots to let go

The neighboring vine
a latent conjoined twin
wouldn't budge from its source
without a pickaxe

Midway above these subterranean stems
fibrous identities murmured
skin and sinew unwilling to part
like want fused to wonder
a combination impossible
to replicate
in a poem

The new spot
might fill the gap
beside my peek-proof front door
and double-curtained picture window
Passersby could admire
the burst of color
the unique foliage display
overlook the dull of shame
and silence stuck
on the grooved wood floors

As per the Urban Forestry Initiative
I dug and moistened the recommended
size cavity
gently lowered
the renegade marriage
replenished its foundation
watered weekly

Blooms never emerged
Neither simple or compound
leaves waved

The Master Gardener prescribed
sever and relocate
My psychiatrist prescribed
a dissociative anesthetic

I should have checked with Tony first
I thought he was done with it
I needed to try
something different
something both fierce and fragile
to fail with ragged fingernails

EMPTY

The forest was calm. The sun shifted through tall pines, obscuring the horizon. In a clearing, a cabin the size of a generous closet sat painted brick red. The wood drank the daylight, soaked up the last bit of it, like it had all the time in the world.

Levi stood in the yard. Mud, grass, and a stump full of gash marks. It had seen things. He wore thick canvas pants and a sweatshirt with a skate logo that said he remembered cities, even if he'd been ignoring them lately. He lifted the bright red axe, set another block of spruce on the stump, and split it clean. The halves thunked to the ground and built a small fort around his boots.

Again. Plant feet. Wind up. Slam it down. Tiny splinters of bark.

He dropped a weird-shaped knot onto the stump and squared it with his palm. It was ugly, and would burn beautifully. He aimed, exhaled, swung. The blade slid, curved, and made contact with the wrong spot. His leg.

He froze. The axe knocked against the ring of split wood. For a second there wasn't any pain, like his body didn't register it. Then it arrived all at once. Big and deep. He sank to the ground and carefully rolled up the canvas. Blood was soaking through a long gash that followed his shin bone in an almost perfect straight line.

Levi stared like he could will it into being a scratch. His hands trembled. He peeled off his sweatshirt and wrapped it around tight. The Thrasher logo looked

big and dumb in this context. He waited. The waiting didn't help. He braced on the stump and hauled himself upright, feeling every bit of it. The cabin door screamed out when he opened it, like he was doing foley work for a b-rated horror movie. The open woods didn't care.

Inside, the place belonged to someone who had lived a whole life somewhere else, but only brought small pieces of proof. Framed photos of family posing together in front of a waterfall. A mug from the Santa Monica Pier. A baseball with faded signatures. Levi lay on the twin bed and stared at the ceiling like it might have some advice. His breath was shallow and sticky. He reached blindly to the side table and slid out a little wooden box.

He tilted himself upright with a pillow and opened the lid. Ticket stubs shifted like leaves. He thumbed a photo of himself, baby-shaped, planted next to a woman with 80s hair sprayed into a big, tall cascade. Mom as a cathedral of fried hair and pink scrunchies. He smoothed the tall wave of bangs with his thumb and felt as useless as the baby in the picture.

He shut the box hard and set it down. The room wobbled in the corners. He pivoted his legs off the bed and sat up. Sweat was on every part of him. He pushed himself up, but quickly had to sit again. Then up. Then down. Then finally up long enough to grab the dresser, then the doorframe, then the front door. The door hinge screamed again. The last remaining sun blasted his eyes, squinting pain. He limped to the car.

The compact hatchback coughed awake. He used his left foot to push the pedals. It felt wrong and childish, like writing with the wrong hand. He

fishtailed out onto the dirt road. The trees thickened on both sides. Doing their tall, gentle intimidation. A shallow stream crossed the path ahead, nothing that looked too bad. He went for it.

The car sank. Mud hugged his tires. The kind of hug when you think it's the last time you might see your mom. Reverse, rocking backward. Drive, rocking forward. He found a rhythm. Back, forward, back. And finally lurched free. On dry ruts the car jittered, but he didn't lift his foot. The shaking did a kind of numbing. It felt nice.

Buildings started to appear. Those rural, blue metal mailboxes. Fences. Then a tired row of sunburnt shops. He pulled up in front of the pharmacy and jammed the car into park with a jerk of the gearshift. Getting out took everything that was bolted down. Door, roof, hood. Deep breathing.

The pharmacy door didn't care about the effort. Locked. He cupped his hands to the glass, but it was dark inside. The shelves were sparse. He tried next door at some hipster coffee spot. Locked. The one next to that. Also locked. He stood there empty. There wasn't even anybody to shout at. One of those early to bed, early to rise towns, I guess. He folded back into the driver seat and kept going.

Hours. Or a version of hours that passes quickly if your favorite sweatshirt is quickly filling with blood. Fields to houses, houses to the low rise edge of the city, then the startling vertical cliffs of downtown. Shadows pooled between tall buildings. He turned onto a main street. A very quiet main street.

No pedestrians. No cars. He pulled up to a meter, limped to it, and found “OUT OF SERVICE” on the display. He looked over. Every meter blinked with the same message.

His sweatshirt felt wet and heavy. Sweat slicked his neck. He wanted what any kid wants when they go looking for a grown up. Someone to say: Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do. Instead he got an empty intersection and the sound of his own foot dragging.

“HELP!” he yelled, but his voice didn’t bounce off anything. He tried again.
“PLEASE!”

He felt the ground reach up to grab him. Knees first, then everything else. The world went dark at the edges. Like those old fashioned movies when the tape wasn’t quite lined up right.

And then, all there was, was black.

Minutes or hours later, a face hovered over him, lined by the sun, so at least a day had passed. “Dude,” the man said, “you good?” An answer wasn’t available because he was, in fact, not good. The man glanced around like he was waiting for someone official to appear. No one did.

The man dragged a blue tarp off a shopping cart and rolled Levi onto it. The tarp was familiar, like he had done many weird favors with this tarp. The tarp resisted under Levi, as the man started to pull, but gave way. Levi’s bad leg knocked the road with little dull thuds as the pair made their way down the

street. Levi slid in and out of that twilight kind of sleep when you say the nap will just be 15 minutes, but it ends up at around five hours.

A building's doorway, then fluorescent light. A desk, a nurse in full PPE. Mask, shield, gloves, gown. Like a sci-fi costume. Paperwork in tiny stacks. The man pulled the tarp inside.

"You can't be in here," the nurse responded without looking up. "We're not doing housing placement during the shelter in place orders."

He gestured behind him with a small, tired flourish. She looked. She moved so fast the chair swung. Suddenly there were hands, and the hands were steady.

The tarp became a gurney, became a hallway that smelled like bleach and something sharper. Lights scrolled above. A ceiling tile with an unknown stain. It looked like coffee, but that was improbable.

Levi closed his eyes.

RECOLLECTION

cold hands once entwined in the dark to another,
a precarious step toward the unknown
my gaze rushes, i *ache* to discern her windows, her soul
i yearn for gazes to meet again
her phantom fingerprints seemingly felt on mine
they dash, graze goosebumps on my forearm
i yearn to grasp the impossible in the palm of my hand
lost voice, i blink and it's gone

lost, am i
through the creek; the clay grounds mellow
hollow, am i
where i wander for eternity
yet the warmth of its light fades into a chilly sky
the ember fires haunt and cease visible breath
days fade to fingertips sifting through her long hair
where she promises time shan't be empty
that her roof withholds her last thoughts

let her presence be *free*
the unknown will be known once i embrace it now
the new will be old
her doors shutting close
they start to lower her down
i bite my cheek, swallow my tongue
tears sprint engulfed by the grass
goodbye to my home

Yuna Kang

THE CONFESSIONAL OF LAUREN BARRIS

I had no recollection of the past as a precise *moment*, that golden hour of pink and yellow sunshine, the gilded love of poets and office workers alike.

Instead, my past is a sort of hollow thing: white sneakers left on bus benches, holy matrimony, divorce, tin trays of half-eaten food. I remember the stained lights at St. Clare's, streaming over our unanointed heads, and how the candles looked at Christmastime (holy-lit, dangling in iron chandeliers).

We wrote our stories as such: I am a just woman, you are a holy man. We cannot be one, but sometimes, as the night intersects with our bodies, I feel as if we are intersexed together, mushed and murmuring, a tangling, feverish dream of legs.

And then it was so. I could not have impressed to you how important you were to me, how much I loved you. The old phrases do not apply: I ache for you, I have heartbreak for you, it hurts when you are gone. I do not know how to express these things.

Sometimes you wink at me from the pulpit and my body goes pinkred all over.

But it could not have lasted, and despite the tirades, (press releases; nextdoor posts; unhappy patrons; a visit from the bishop), I still loved you. Even while you sheepishly tugged at violet collar, stamped with golden laurels, and said:

“I do not love you Lauren, nor have I ever,” I still loved you.

Even when you approached the ceremony, head withdrawn, temple glowing with diffuse light particles, I still loved you. Your eyes were blank and unwary; I knew what you had done, what you were going to do.

“Dearly beloved,” you said, and you were not talking to me. You were talking to *them*, the congregation, and the church ladies lean forward in scarred pews.

“We have gathered here today,” a pause, pregnant with possibility, I find myself pondering it to this day. Were you hesitating? Were you scared?

But no, your eyes were as blue and blank as ever. Tranquil winds blew past your balding head; I had loved you forever.

Even as you betrayed me, I loved you forever.

“to discuss a rumor of the vilest sort. One member of our congregation, whom I will never name, has-”

And what did I decide to do? What have I done? I had loved you forever, for a moment, and at night we would meet in checkered confessionals, half-broken moonlight slanting over our stained faces. *I will love you forever*, you told me this. You did.

But it didn't matter then. And it doesn't matter now.

No one knows why I did it. I don't even know why I did it. I think he loved me, but I don't think it matters.

Sometimes when I find myself thinking, *thinking thinking thinking* of those times, I pause. My life has been an endless bubble, pearls of oxygen fluttering to unknown surface. I do not rise up, I fall, I *fall fall fall*, sinking slowly in the aquamarine deep.

Moonlight cuts across my face, in the eternal ocean of life. Sometimes at night, when I think of these things, I am afraid, and tired, and I want rest.

I think I will leave now.

Claire Sargenti

THERMOGENIC HYMNS FOR THE NEW AGE AT 427 PPM

Beaded prayers
Begin to drip
A hot baptismal sweat
While palo verde tendrils
Roll like thunder
Down the teeth
Of those
Not yet initiated
To the mysteries
Of life
That smoulder
Just beyond the desert floor

Faith
Or something like it
Burns
Around saguaro spine
And aloe vera root
Where star of yucca
Char the way
To sweltering cathedrals
And revolting mountain embers

Wise men
Filled with chronicles
Pass by on broken shoes
And swear an oath
To keep the sacred pools
Of monsoon
And of rain
From scattering
In ether
Under smoking
Island skies

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Willy Conley, born profoundly deaf, is a writer-photographer whose nine books include *Photographic Memories*, *Plays of Our Own*, *Listening Through the Bone*, and *The Deaf Heart*. He is professor emeritus of theatre at Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, in Washington, D.C. He used to live in North Hollywood and work as a medical photographer at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. For more info about his work, please visit: www.willyconley.com

Caitlin Cullen is a writer and creative director. Her work explores modern longing, identity, and the strange ways we try to be seen. Her work *Everything is Advertising*, a weekly serialized novel, explores modern culture, the advertising industry, and connection in the digital age.

Samuel Goldsmith (he/him) is a former musician who has slowly drifted northward in the East San Francisco Bay Area; he was born in Oakland, raised in Berkeley, and now lives in Richmond. He writes so as to become a river, not a lake. His writing has appeared in *Gyroscope*, *Lost Blonde*, *Empyrean*, and others.

Helena Guglielmino is a creative writer and journalist who has been published in *Broccoli*, *Outdoors*, *Reno News & Review*, *Yoga Journal*, and more. She recently authored *Urban Trails: Reno* (Mountaineers Books). She currently lives in Reno, Nevada but grew up in the central valley of California.

Sam Hendrian is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker, poet, and playwright striving to foster empathy through art. From writing personalized poems for passersby outside of LA's oldest independent bookstore every Sunday, to making Chaplin-esque silent films about loneliness and human connection once a month, Sam lives to make other people feel seen and validated. More poems and films can be found on Instagram at [@samhendrian143](https://www.instagram.com/samhendrian143).

Elizabeth Hernandez is a returning student. Although she wasn't sure where she would end up, she knew college was not the right fit for her immediately after high school. After six pensive years, she decided to return to school as a Kinesiology major at Cerritos College. While English had never been her strongest subject, she discovered a newfound joy in writing as she sought to discover her identity.

Diana Hipolito was raised the majority of her life in California. She is a medical assistant, but she continues to write poetry and short stories outside of medicine. She writes to bring awareness to various community such as, LGBTQ+, Women of Color, and the undocumented community. She is a Cerritos College graduate, where she worked in different departments from 2022 until 2025.

Maria Jacobo is a current student at Cerritos College, taking a child development class, working towards her preschool credentials. Maria wrote an “I am” poem describing parts of her life. She enjoys learning and growing, and her children inspire her to help other families and young children. Her personal background has given her the strength to continue her education and the passion to assist families with low incomes. She comes from a family that struggles.

Patrick Johnston is an Anglo-Australian writer and former professor of psychology and neuroscience. His work has appeared in *The Louisville Review*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, and *Thin Air Magazine*, among others, and has received one Pushcart Prize nomination. He is the author of the completed novel *The Gaps Between the Stories*. His website is dr-patrick-johnston.com.

Yuna Kang is a queer, half-deaf, Korean-American writer based in Northern California. She loves postcards, crows, God(x), and cats. Kang is also the recipient of the 2024 New Feathers Award.

Ali Khan is a student fiction writer and poet based in Southern California. Her work is typically inspired by art, personal experience, and the natural world. Her poem “Sleep” is published in *Wingless Dreamer*. Most of her recent poetry is available primarily on Substack @alikhanask.

E Kraft is a student and poetry editor whose poems have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes multiple times and published by *The Hanging Loose Press*, *The National Poetry Quarterly*, and others. She is grateful for everyone who has read her poems or attended her readings including her favorite dog from the local shelter.

Cassidy Mamasig is a sophomore at Sato Academy in LBUSD, who heard about Cerritos College’s very own *¡Palante!* through her teacher. As a Filipino-American, she conveys emotions not only through personal poetry but through music she creates. She is recognized in honor choir, as a violist, and as service president of Key Club. When she’s alone, you’ll find her at the beach, swimming underneath the waves or observing. Her poem, “recollection,” is one written during a time of loss.

Miles Miller is a teen from Silicon Valley. He hopes that one day, his poems' adventure to explore his lost heart will help people feel less alone in the world. Miles has previously been published in the *American High School Poet's Fall 2025 anthology*, *Out of the Box Zine* Issue 2, *the New English Review*, and *Ink Literary Magazine*.

Anthony J. Mohr served for twenty-seven years as a judge on the Los Angeles Superior Court and still sits on a part-time basis. His work has appeared in, among other places, *Cumberland River Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, and *ZYZZYVA*. His debut memoir *Every Other Weekend—Coming of Age With Two Different Dads* won several awards, including first in nonfiction in the Firebird Awards.

Jax NTP teaches critical thinking, literature, and composition at Irvine Valley College, Golden West College, and Santa Ana College. Their words have been featured in *Apogee Journal*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Hobart Pulp*, *Permafrost Magazine*, *Cordite Poetry Review (AU)*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and elsewhere. Their debut poetry collection, *In Bones & Tentacles: How to Pivot When You're Paralyzed*, is forthcoming from *Moon Tide Press*.

Chris Pais grew up in India and came to the United States to pursue graduate studies in engineering. His work appears in *Poetry India*, *The International Journal of Heat and Mass Transfer*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *The Literary Bohemian*, *Defunct Magazine*, and elsewhere. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area where he works on clean energy technologies and tinkers with bikes, guitars and recipes.

Dora Rollins teaches creative writing in the Tucson, Arizona state prison where her students are also writing colleagues. She serves as Associate Editor for the 50+-year-old incarceration-focused *Rain Shadow Review* literary magazine. She has been published in *Shot Glass Journal*, *Wordpeace*, the *Corvus Review*, and *Bindwood Magazine*.

Peter Rustin and his wife Leslie recently moved from Los Angeles to Peter's native Connecticut, with their three rather intelligent cats. Peter is an attorney practicing remotely with his firm in Los Angeles. He plays guitar badly and drums decently. His work has been published in the *Arboreal Literary Journal*, *Free Spirit*, *Wrong Turn Lit*, *Assignment Literary Magazine*, *Piker Press*, *BarBar*, *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, *The Rumen*, *The City Key*, *The Sandy River Review*, and the *South Florida Poetry Journal*.

Sakura is a 19 year old aspiring English professor attending California State University Fullerton. This is her first time a work has been published and she hopes to publish more in the future. She enjoys exploring the bittersweet complexities of life as well as the delicate nature of love, friendship, and happiness. In her free time, she enjoys being nerdy and spending time with friends and her boyfriend.

Reyna Sánchez, a first-generation college graduate and proud daughter of immigrants, obtained her BA in English and her MA in Literature at New Mexico State University. She is Associate Professor at El Paso Community College where she teaches composition, literature, and creative writing courses. Reyna's poetry has been published in the *Somos Xicanas* anthology, *Latino Book Review*, and *Pilgrimage*. She co-hosts the *Literally Literary* podcast.

Claire Christine Sargenti *Pi'kssii Aakii* (she/they/fae) is an award winning interdisciplinary author and artist currently in residence at the De La Vega Gallery. Her work has been seen at the New Orleans Museum of Art, Ogden Museum of Southern Art, as well as in galleries, theaters, digital spaces, and print publications throughout America and Europe. She has published in *Rougarou Journal*, *The Weaver Literary Magazine*, and *San Diego Poetry Annual*, among others.

Brandon Shane is a poet and horticulturist, born in Yokosuka, Japan. You can see his work in *Rattle, trampset*, *Variant Lit*, *The Chiron Review*, *Stone Circle Review*, *IceFloe Press*, *Sontag Mag*, *One Art Poetry*, *Acropolis Journal*, *Ink in Thirds*, among others. He graduated from Cal State Long Beach with a degree in English, where he is currently working on his MFA.

JT Thames was born in Houston and graduated from prestigious Bear Branch Elementary with honors. JT wrote the critically acclaimed feature film *AUTOMATIC*, and is a published poet in: *FictionWeek*, *Literary Heist*, *The Journal of Expressive Writing*, *Fresh Words*, *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Red Rose Thorns Journal*, *October Hill Magazine*, and *Why Vandalism*. He adores his amazing wife Kristen, and their three enterprising cats Muzzy, Lucy Trout, and Tynah.

¡Pa'lante!

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For full submission guidelines and deadlines for the next issue of *¡Pa'lante!*, please visit our website at https://www.cerritos.edu/english/Literary_Journal.htm.

iPa'lante!

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