

A bronze sculpture of a figure with arms outstretched, set against a background of a painting with red and yellow sections. The sculpture is positioned horizontally across the middle of the frame. The background is a vibrant red wall with a yellow and black abstract painting below it. The text "¡Pa'lante!" is written in a white, cursive font across the top of the image.

# *¡Pa'lante!*

Issue 5 • Spring 2024  
Cerritos College



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# *iPa'lante!*

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“The Ecstasy of Ecstasy” by Robin Young

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Poetry

Vanessa Ramirez	
MARIANA TRENCH . . . . .	11
Micah R.M. Buchman	
TWO HOURS BEFORE I CALL MY GRANDMOTHER AND SHE TELLS ME ANOTHER STORY ABOUT THE INQUISITION . . . . .	12
Nosduh Nam	
WET . . . . .	19
Yogita Sharma	
IN BETWEEN THE PILLS AND MY PULSE . . . . .	20
SWAPPING SCARS FOR SANCTUARY . . . . .	21
Issac Cordova	
RYAN . . . . .	28
Rich Glinnen	
BUCKET HAT . . . . .	29
BUSH . . . . .	30
Lulu Salvaterra	
I AM MUCH LIKE THE CHARACTER . . . . .	34
OH, MAMA . . . . .	36
THIS INTERMINABLE WAR . . . . .	37
Caley Shiota	
COMPOST . . . . .	43
FREE ADOPTION . . . . .	44



Brendan Praniewicz	
ELECTION YEAR JESUS . . . . .	.49
Natalie Estrada	
DEAR LITTLE ME . . . . .	.50
Mike Horan	
DOMESTICITY . . . . .	.56
Alexis Jaimes	
GENTRIFYING TIMES (BLEACHING THE BROWN). . . . .	.58
Daniel Romo	
TAKING ROLL. . . . .	.64
Cristian Ramirez Rodriguez	
IF YOU FIND ME . . . . .	.68
Jackie Robledo	
I CARRY HOME ON MY BACK . . . . .	.69

**Fiction**

Chad Lutz	
THE OUTER BANKS . . . . .	.14
Guillermo Gonzalez	
ANOTHER SUNRISE . . . . .	.39
Kevin B	
WORDS FOR SUNSHINE, WORDS FOR SNOW. . . . .	.51
Diya Bhakta	
THE DIARY OF LIZZY GRANT . . . . .	.59
Fabián González González	
MADE OF MIST . . . . .	.66

**Creative Nonfiction**

Leslie Lisbona	
THE BLUE SKY . . . . .	.22
Indira Buerklin	
OMA. . . . .	.31
Caley Shiota	
ALMOST HOME . . . . .	.45

<b>CONTRIBUTORS . . . . .</b>	<b>.77</b>
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*Vanessa Ramirez*

## MARIANA TRENCH

I was born with	a hole in my chest	as I grew older
	the hole grew	
bigger and heavier		slowly but surely
	the longer time	went on
it became clear		I was the ocean
and the hole	the Mariana Trench	I became restless
	trying to fill it	
with anglerfishes		and comb jellies
	for a while	it worked
my waters		no longer lonely
yet time came	where tectonic plates	collided and
	deepened the trench	
pressure increased		with heavy steps
	in the depths	of this crescent
shaped hole		the foundation
of my being	was weak and	prime to cave-in
	I found	
myself drifting		into the water
	wondering why	I was here

*Micah R.M. Buchman*

## **TWO HOURS BEFORE I CALL MY GRANDMOTHER AND SHE TELLS ME ANOTHER STORY ABOUT THE INQUISITION**

I grapevine and gesticulate through the market  
just like my family used to;  
sweeping my hands through scarves knit like  
riverbeds,

Fibonacci lettuce, garlic almonds from the  
carboned soil.

After sampling the stinkiest cheeses made  
by goats with names  
and a great-grandfather,

I ask for a container of apricot & honey chevre and he  
slips me an extra handful of stilton, *Nobody else'll eat  
it anyway. Just us.*

I take a bite and taste the rhizobia  
baking like a danish underneath the tent's toes.

I pray for the LA river and recycling bins,  
drag you to the used bookstore,  
try to even fathom the size of the newest Amazon warehouse, wonder if  
any poachers actually like the taste of  
elephant meat and aren't just trying to sustain some sort of life through  
their hundred-pound death.

But then I remember the superbloom in Chino Hills last week and that  
my great-grandfather Eddie probably also wore a nazar while he  
soldered gold bands  
for his springtime markets in Izmir  
as I photograph the painting

of a manatee grinning with an open third eye; remember, feeling  
God thick and growing is an omni-phylogenic miracle.

When we walk to dinner, two squirrels chase  
each other's tails

and a colony of ants powerwalk home, each with a different  
fruit scrap in their mandibles.

The dirt continues to knead.

*I've never been this close before*, you say as a mourning dove walks  
past your forearm.

I've never been this close before.

I never want to be this far again.

*Chad Lutz*

## THE OUTER BANKS

*for Bug, who always fought and never complained*

Most scientists will tell you the scale of the universe is near impossible to imagine. There are black holes sitting in the centers of distant galaxies that have the solar mass of 60 billion Suns. Our own solar system is moving at an average velocity of 450,000 miles per hour as it orbits the center of the Milky Way, which is roughly 100,000 light-years across.

But my world isn't organized to this scale, can't be. Human beings don't have the cognitive capacity to understand the vastness of space and time, and, furthermore, the capacity to understand the relative position we sit in relation to objects like nebulae and quasars.

We have photos and data, sure; but I sometimes have a hard time understanding miles and kilometers. Five miles seems like such a long distance. To drive it probably takes fifteen to twenty minutes in the city. To run it takes forty.

If you were Amber.

Some call it God, some call it coincidence, but regardless of what it is, there's something mysterious about the way the waves crash on the beach, and from where I'm sitting, on the top deck of a rustic four-story house overlooking the ocean, the sentiment is not lost. Sure, gravitational fluctuations caused by the Moon govern the tides, but all Amber had to do was say, "Hi," to me in the eighth grade.

The Outer Banks is one of the best kept tourist traps in the United States and it's where I'm seated now. They call the island chain remote, but how remote can a place really be with million-dollar homes lining the shores? I mean, there's a gym three blocks up Route 12 now, and ten restaurants within a two-mile radius. There are Taco Bell's and Harris-Teeters and car washes pockmarking the national seashores where Blackbeard the pirate and other rum runners thwarted infamous kings and queens.

Ton 618 is remote.

Sagittarius A\* is remote.

Jupiter, for heaven's sake, is remote.

So is twenty years.

Just last night, my family and I went to a restaurant in Avon where over a hundred people shuffled in and out of the low, cabana-style patio. There

were plates clinking and gulping sounds set to Jimmy Buffet as patrons wolfed down crab legs and seafood bisques.

I sat alone at the end of the table, looking around at the plastic sharks decorating the ceiling, and watching the rest of my family, perfectly paired off and content in their love lives, doing the same celebratory feasting everyone else was indulging in. One of my cousins asked me if I was OK and I told them I was fine, but I could see in their eyes the acknowledgement of how far out in my thoughts I had been and their rightful concern.

It was twenty years ago that I found the tanker. I was out for a morning run, wearing knee-length, seafoam tights, with a neon green bandana. I remember how firm and pleasing the breeze felt blowing through my long hair.

It was at your sister's 30th birthday party: September 11. The irony was not lost; it changed my entire world. There you were, using your parents for support as you feebly made your way up the short drive with a wig on your head.

I tried not to let you notice I noticed.

I don't think you did.

No one had shown up yet. It was just me and your sister, who was excited for us to see each other.

It had been longer than I care to admit, but I was there that day, watching your weak and boney frame approach the backyard, where balloons and streamers and tables with decorative table cloths baked in the evening heat.

You immediately came in for a hug, and I remember thinking, "I'll break you," but that never stopped me while we were dating, and it didn't stop me then. But when we went to pull away, I knocked the wig from your head and it went floating to the ground where it landed like a giant spider ready to scurry away. You simply bent down and picked the wig up, with your parents still guiding you, and told me, "It happens," before I could even say I'm sorry.

You laughed and gripped my shoulder tenderly.

I was shaking with fear.

I didn't know what I was afraid of at the time, but I now realize I was afraid of losing you; of everyone losing you, even if it wasn't my place to worry about how others felt.

I should've just been thankful you were alive.

Thirty-seven years old and running along Ocean View Dr., I hung a right onto a short boardwalk, climbed the dunes, and then settled into a comfortable pace on the beach, Sweat rolled down my face and arms, my feet were whispers in the sand.

I ran.

I went about a mile before I saw the tanker. At first, I thought it was a camp set up by some family from the Midwest (as it seems every family that vacations down here is from), but the closer I drew, the less I understood what it was I was looking at.

So, I sped up.

Four minutes later, I realized it wasn't a camp at all. I also realized there was some kind of writing on it. I slowed as I approached the giant, metal object and when I got about thirty feet away, I was clearly able to see, in what looked like spray-painted lettering: "Amber 6/12/23".

I walked up to the tanker and carefully ran my hand along its iron sides. It felt cool, against my fingers, despite the heat of the day.

How was I the only person seeing this?

Where were the crowds of people taking pictures on their phones?

Where had it come from?

There are three gas stations in a total land area of 2.3sq miles.

Nearly a thousand people live in those 2.3sq miles and the tanker was as big as a forty-yard dumpster.

And yet, here I was, the only person I could see in any direction.

For a while I just stood there, with my hand against its sides, until I felt the strength go out of my knees and I dropped to the ground. I felt like crying, but I didn't know why. I felt like throwing up.

And then, something washed ashore in my mind.

The memory was of us watching *The Grudge* at your parent's house one night when we were nineteen. We had just passed the part where the face appears in the bus window, and no more than a minute later, your mom's face popped into the window next to the TV exclaiming, "You can see Mars!" You instantly started crying, but I held you and told you we didn't have to keep watching.

Maybe I will someday, but today is not that day.

Today, all I can think about was kneeling there and looking up at the sky and comparing the vastness of the ocean to the vastness with which I loved you, and how I'd somehow forgotten how deep that love still was.

The phone call.



Yes, there was the phone call.

The one that brought our relationship to an end.

We were both twenty-one at the time; undergrads and on the verge of marriage. You'd gone to the doctor for a routine PFT test and didn't think anything of it. You called me before my astronomy class (subject of the day: black holes). You were bawling so hard it took me ten minutes to calm you, but I did, and when I did, you told me the doctors said you had five years to live. I then did something I regret to this day. I told you it was over and hung up the phone. I didn't want to be a widower at twenty-six. I could barely keep my apartment clean, much less manage a grief like that.

So, I put distance between us, light years, and it stayed that way until you called me one day asking if I'd like to grab lunch. I went, and we talked about our lives and the day of that phone call and how you didn't blame me. With a hitch to your voice, you told me it had been that way with everyone you dated.

"It takes strength," you said, and placed a hand over mine.

I would start visiting you and your family more often over the years that followed until the day the tanker washed ashore.

You died in a hospital ward with your family by your side. Your sister said you went peacefully, and that you fought until the very end.

Five years to live?

You made it fucking fifteen.



Sometimes I think about grief as an island, where you and you alone can understand what it feels like to be stranded, because that's exactly what grief is: a personal place no one else can access. I find it funny that happiness is a shared experience. Your happiness is my happiness. It isn't caused by the same things, but when we get there, it's all the same.

Matter only constitutes 5% of the universe anyway.

I rose to my feet and wasn't surprised to find tears rolling down my face. I wiped my eyes with sandy fingers and felt the burn of the brine as it mixed with the saline in my eyes, but I didn't care. All I could think about were the hemp bracelets we swore we would never take off (they unraveled) and the Dave Matthews we'd always listen to (I haven't listened in years).

I heard someone yell and turned to find my brother standing on the top deck of our rental, seemingly miles and miles away. He had a kite string in his hand and a nylon spaceship floating high into the morning sky.

“I’ll be right there,” I yelled back.

That’s when I checked my watch and caught the date.

It was 6/12/23.

It’s serendipitous, uncanny even, to think about now, but I didn’t hold any significance one way or another at the time. Maybe someone had been down there on the beach that morning. Someone with a can of red spray paint and a love for someone named Amber who had maybe been proposed to that morning, and the graffiti was a way to signal their love.

I simply smiled in wonder. Of course, there was a rational explanation for it. Even the universe has an explanation.

The Big Bang.

(Young Love?).

I gathered myself on the shores of the Outer Banks, and took a deep breath among the million-dollar houses and fine sands and began running back to the house to wash off and maybe get in the pool. I wanted to tell everyone about the name and the date and the tanker I’d seen and how serendipitous it had all felt, but my brother was the only person up.

No matter.

When I finished my story, he laughed and simply took me out on the deck and pointed. There, on the sand, was not a single trace of the tanker or its graffitied side.

Ten minutes later, I got the text message from your sister saying you’d passed away. Or, as she put it, left your earthly body behind.

It’s now been twenty years since I got that text message, and ever since that day on the beach, not one has gone by that I haven’t thought about how strange, how inexplicable that tanker had been. It makes me think of planets and stars and the unknown secrets they hold so high and far away.

That’s why I’m back in the Outer Banks again, sitting in the relatively remote confines of my family’s rental, staring off the top deck at the spot where the tanker washed ashore, wondering if I’ll ever see you again.

*Nosduh Nam*

**WET**

i sit in my bed  
between the covers  
completely soaking wet,  
like a dog that has found its way  
into the middle of a puddle,  
i am drenched

i want to wring myself out like a towel  
and watch it all ooze out,  
from every pore  
that makes up the surface of my skin  
while my spine  
twists and fractures

to be freed from it,  
like letting go of a hand  
that has led you through the dark

*Yogita Sharma*

## **IN BETWEEN THE PILLS AND MY PULSE**

my neck wobbles and snaps back in quick exhale  
eyelids drooping and muffled conversations

an ache jolts through my senseless frame, trampling through an emerging  
secondhand bliss

my chest begins to raise up and again

i am alive

my hands reach, stretch, and swallow the remaining pills  
eyelids sink into my skull and blaring lights flash

an alarm puts me back to sleep as slowly i'm hinged into the pocket of an  
ambulance

my throat begins to burn and

i am alive  
again

## SWAPPING SCARS FOR SANCTUARY

my tainted smile grew as i handed the bottle back, dramatically  
half empty, you gasped at its hollowed contents

my flamboyant recklessness only adds to your curious interests,  
threatening the confidence of my past

how do i rationalize my casual neglect,  
years of practice and perfecting the craft

which one's worse,  
the exposed privilege of your sheltered nature  
or the explanation for my invincibility to handfuls of pills

lips chewed out, stomach lining ruined,  
i would trade my tensing temples with your trembling traits any day

*Leslie Lisbona*

## THE BLUE SKY

Oliver dyed his shorn hair the color of a tennis ball. He said a tearful goodbye to his girlfriend, and the two of us boarded a plane for Italy. He was going to spend a semester at an American university in Florence. He was 23.

Unlike his older brother, Aaron, Oliver had never been away from home before. He never went to sleepaway camp. He commuted to a city university in Queens from our house in New Rochelle, battling the traffic on the Whitestone Bridge and making few friends.

I suggested the semester abroad. When I had gone to Paris at his age to study, it opened up my world in ways that going to Queens College and living at my parents' house hadn't. But Oliver was ambivalent.

His biggest concern was the pain that lingered in his knee after two operations that were meant to fix it. He wondered how he would manage with knee pain in a city like Florence. He didn't see the point. He didn't see the point of anything lately.

I was worried. I didn't know for sure until we got on the plane that he was even going to go.

Oliver and I arrived in Rome at 6 a.m., when it was already one hundred degrees. We walked to the Spanish Steps. At the Trevi Fountain, we got some pistachio gelato, and we each swooned a little at the intense flavor. The fountain was off, and the workers were sweeping the coins out of the basin, so we continued to the Pantheon. When a street vendor put a bracelet on Oliver's wrist, Oliver smiled. I gave the vendor five euros for that smile.

At the hotel, we unpacked and fell onto the king-sized bed. The sheets chilled by the air conditioning were so delightful that we napped for hours. At midnight, we looked at each other, and he asked, "Do you want to watch *Breaking Bad*?"

"Sure," I said.

He opened his laptop and propped it between us. He got a bag of peanuts from the mini-fridge and poured some into my outstretched hand. Cold

peanuts tasted good.

In New York, we had watched first *Better Call Saul* together and then *Breaking Bad*. He wanted me to see it, and I had always refused. I didn't like suspense, so we had an agreement that he would warn me and tell me what was going to happen beforehand. I was up to the last season and already wishing the series wouldn't end.

We visited the Colosseum and the Vatican. We went to restaurants. At one of the restaurants, on Via Margutta, the waiter poured a little wine in Oliver's glass instead of mine, to taste.

Oliver looked at me alarmed.

"Taste it," I whispered.

He did and gave the waiter a nod.

Afterward, I showed him how to stick his nose in, take a sip, swish it around in his mouth, and then slowly swallow it. This made him laugh with an abandon I hadn't seen in so long. It was contagious. The more I demonstrated how to taste the wine, the more we laughed.

Oliver and I were once so close. He noticed things about me that were overlooked by everyone else, like when I got a manicure or changed my purse. He could finish my sentences, and he used to think I could read his mind, especially if I really concentrated. When we teamed up for Pictionary during the outages caused by Hurricane Sandy, his father, Val, and Aaron could not beat us.

At six, when his bangs were even with his pupils, he loved to jump up and down and sing a song he made up called "Me and My Mommy." He jumped, smiling at me, until he was out of breath. When he was eight, he had silky brown hair that fell to his shoulders, and he smelled like flowers. He seemed always to be ready for a hug. In middle school, when I dropped him off in the mornings, he leaned over, puckering his lips, eyes closed, to give me a kiss without caring if anyone would see. I was his focal point, and he made me laugh. We had days that were dedicated to only us. We went to Manhattan, to a museum, marveled at the starlings swooping over Central Park, ate at a hotdog stand, walked around the West Village, had hot chocolate at Caffè Reggio, and caught a movie at the Waverly.

At fifteen, seemingly overnight, I lost him. Although I knew it would happen, it was abrupt. It felt like a slap. He made friends in the woods, where he drank and got high. When I confronted him, there were harsh words and doors slammed so hard that paint chips drifted to the wood floor. Although I could read him better than anyone, I was never sure how he was going to react to me or when I was going to upset him. It was a little like poking a sleeping bear. I sometimes felt that he hated me for loving him so much. He eventually towered over my 5'2" frame. I tiptoed around him. Sometimes things were good, and I had a window of the Oliver I loved. Other times, he scared me.

During the roughest times, I found myself gazing at photos of him on my phone, at night in bed. I would scroll through as if I were mourning a child, even though he was a few feet away from me in the next room.

On this trip, without Val and Aaron, I was cautious, and yet things were going remarkably well. I had his attention. He relied on me again. What I said mattered.

We took the train to Florence. Oliver slept while the hilly countryside passed by. It was so green and went by so quickly at 300 kilometers an hour that I was tempted to wake him. I gazed out the window, instead.

That night, we resumed our snacking and *Breaking Bad* watching. Two more episodes to go. It was intense, and we paused the show a lot to discuss. Jesse, a main character, was a hostage, held in a cage. I fidgeted.

"Ma, he is going to be OK." Oliver handed me a peach.

The next morning, we headed over to the administrative office to get the keys to his apartment. We were each rolling one of his suitcases on the bumpy cobblestones, down narrow streets. He said his knee hurt. Then he said, like a declaration, "I shouldn't have come."

I winced. I said nothing, hoping this would pass. I imagined him coming home to New York with me as feelings of failure swept over me.

We turned a corner and found the building. Oliver's apartment was seven stories up, on the top floor. It reminded me of the painting Van Gogh made of his room. It even had the chair by the window and the twin bed against



the wall.

The chain of Oliver's necklace broke while he was unpacking, and the Star of David pendant fell to the floor. I had bought him that Magen David in the ghetto in Venice when I was there with Aaron five years earlier, and Oliver never took it off. I picked it up and saw his sunken face.

"I know where I can fix it." I zipped it into my wallet.

"I'm hungry," he finally said, and we went around the corner for a bite.

During the meal, he hardly said a word. "Your neighborhood looks nice, less tourists," I ventured. He ate his pasta and didn't answer.

After lunch, he said he was going to nap in his own bed, and without a goodbye he walked away from me, shoulders slightly slumped, toward his apartment.

I wanted to ask him if we were going to see each other soon, if at all. I resisted grabbing his arm. I wished he looked happier.

I meandered through the open-air market. I dropped off the necklace to be repaired, listened to a man in the street singing opera, and then my phone pinged.

Oliver texted, "WYA" (Where You At).

"I'm about two blocks from the Duomo," I answered quickly.

"I can't sleep, I'll come to you."

I searched for him in the crowd, and then I spun around, and there he was. He was the blue sky, the core of the sun. We hugged, as if we hadn't just seen each other.

Oliver and I sat on the curb and listened to the opera singer, and afterward he said, "That opera was amazing!"

I never thought Oliver would use the words *opera* and *amazing* in the same sentence. I stared at him. He looked cool and sophisticated.

"What?" he asked.

When I did not answer, he said, "I need shampoo."

We walked into a pharmacy, bought some things, and he was off again. This time, I needed a nap.

I woke at midnight and watched more *Breaking Bad* on my phone. My room was freezing, and I got up to get my sweatshirt, which was dirty. I wondered if Oliver was sweltering in his Van Gogh room. I ate a peach and missed him. The episode was stressful. I turned off my phone and tried to sleep.

The next day I took a bike tour of the city. I liked being on a bike. The tour guide stopped in front of Santa Croce basilica, and I asked her why there was a Star of David on top instead of a Cross. She explained that the architect was Jewish, and this made me smile. I touched the Magen David on my neck. I had picked up Oliver's chain that morning and wore it for safe keeping. We continued our guided tour around the city, and I felt like a kid again. After, I went back to the basilica and sat cross-legged on a stone bench on the piazza. I FaceTimed with my sister, and then Oliver called.

He sounded animated. He said he had dinner plans with friends. "Let's meet before dinner," he suggested.

I waited for him in the piazza. Someone was singing opera; a sudden wind whipped her scarf around her body, and she struggled to get it under control. The sun was setting, and the sky was pinkish. I thought of my mother and my own study abroad semester. How naïve I was; I hadn't even packed a winter coat.

I saw Oliver crossing the piazza, resplendent in his blue linen shirt with all that pink enveloping him. When he spotted me, he beamed his brilliant smile at me, and he was my boy again.

His eyes fell on the Star of David around my neck. "My necklace!"

I put it on him.

The following afternoon, Oliver came to my room so we could watch the last episode of our show together. He brought his laptop. It felt like a much-anticipated slumber party.

"Get the peanuts," I said, and he joined me on the bed.

The next day, after lunch, he said that we were going to say goodbye soon, and he curled his bottom lip down into a pout, a childish gesture for my benefit.

I walked him to his apartment. He seemed happy, and we hugged. I went halfway down the block and turned around, waved, and shouted, "Bye, Oliver." I didn't care if I embarrassed him, and he didn't seem to care, either. He waved back, lingered a moment smiling, and stepped into his building.

Two days later, as I sat on the plane on the tarmac in Rome, I thought, I *have done it: He is on his way*. I felt my body loosen and let myself relish my good feelings. We had had a nice time together, just the two of us. I was leaving his time zone and hoped this new Oliver would be OK.

As I was about to turn off my phone, I got one last text from him: "I forgot to pack my winter jacket."

*Issac Cordova*

**RYAN**

I'd like to arm wrestle God  
I wonder if he'd let me win  
Honest I revere God  
More than any human or being  
It's like God forgot me  
I still reverence him  
The pastors I came across  
Were worse than a skid mark  
Laying in the dirty laundry pile  
Ryan the only Pastor or man  
Who did not have a judgmental  
Eye looking at me analyzing  
Like Sodom and Gomorrah  
For one righteous person  
That man saved my life  
We talked once or twice  
I never knew what God  
Could do

*Rich Glinnen*

## **BUCKET HAT**

*For Ali*

You should've heard  
what came out of my wife  
when I told her  
I was thinking of getting a bucket hat.

*No, Rich, that's so embarrassing*  
was the gist of it,  
and that's ok.  
I wasn't dead set about getting a bucket hat anyway.  
Just thought it would be good  
to keep the sun off my face and neck.

But I could use a little color,  
a little kiss from  
the nicotine-stained lips of the sun,  
telling me with her gravelly voice,  
*You look gorgeous, darling,*  
summer after summer,

even after they chip off  
the tip of my nose  
and toss it into a yellow biohazard bag,  
which is where cancerous noses belong,  
along with bucket hats,  
if you ask my wife.

## BUSH

There's a giant bush  
on the northbound side  
of the Cross Island Parkway  
that someone has shaped like a bird.  
I think it's a chicken  
because of the hint of comb,  
but it could be any kind of bird  
with a bad hair day.

This person didn't need to do this,  
but they took time out of their life  
to manicure this bush  
and carve out a scene  
where there wasn't much of one before.  
A thoughtful deed  
that was probably against the law,

but now, when I merge  
on to the Cross Island,  
I get to catch a glimpse  
of the great chicken  
posing amidst her untrimmed peers  
that collectively resemble a frame,  
as if she was the subject  
of a *New Yorker* cartoon,

with each passing driver  
whipping captions,  
like roses,  
from their windows,  
so the alighted words  
wind up italicized,  
as in:  
*Too bushed to get to the other side.*

## OMA

On our last day with my grandmother in Bad Krozingen, we visited my uncle's house in the Black Forest. I was sitting with my hands folded and earphones in my ears, the noise-canceling kind. My mom pointed out a beauty mark on my arm and asked me if it was growing. She told me I should see her dermatologist. I started worrying: "Is it cancer? Again?" My chest started tightening. Again. I spent the rest of the drive annoyed and reminded my mom that I had earphones in and couldn't hear her. She just laughed, which made my blood boil.

I told my aunt and uncle all about my writing and told a joke about living in a house of acapella singers. When they laughed at my jokes, my heart nearly beat out of my chest. Finally, I could show my family who I was. My dad and his siblings were countryfolk. Nothing was funnier to a German who grew up in the countryside as an American college acapella group. For a moment this sharing of myself felt complete, and among fewer people, I could easily communicate with them in slow, halting English. I wished I had learned more German before visiting for the first time in six years. Everyone else in my family could speak it fluently.

My uncle wore a worn-out soft, cherry-colored cotton t-shirt. It reminded me of the faded Bart Simpson shirt my mom used to wear. My aunt made a cake from local cheese, with raspberries and a homemade crust. It would have been called a homemade raspberry cheesecake tart in my country where regional ingredients didn't matter. My mom asked if I wanted to tell my aunt and uncle what had happened at the restaurant I worked at. Sometimes she would say things like this, putting me on the spot. I only considered answering the question because I longed for my family to know more about me. I thought it was best not to explain too much to them. I was afraid of being misunderstood. Even more so, I was afraid of being completely understood.

My cousin's boyfriend's first name, Simon, happened to be my current boyfriend's last name. Coincidentally, both boyfriends liked cars and motorcycles. They had been together for the same amount of time as we had: four years. My cousin was wearing her work uniform. She gave me a brief tour of their apartment, which sat above my uncle's glass-blowing shop. We laughed as though no time had passed between our last meeting (it had been six years since the last time I saw her). She showed me photos

of her and her boyfriend with their friends and the car part they used for a nightstand.

My mother, sister, and I all accompanied my aunt on a walk with her dog while my cousin got ready for dinner. We explored the outskirts of the town surrounded by the forest. Vast green, rolling hills spread out over the wide expanse of land that sat beneath a pale blue sky. The forest was dark, filled with mystery. My aunt told me that children were not allowed to go into the forest alone because it was dangerous. There are tales of people vanishing in the forest, without a trace, especially children. I ran ahead so that their big fluffy dog would gallop after me. I couldn't get enough of that sweet, warm air or that feeling in my heart that I was finally home. My aunt's English was exceptionally good. She and my mom discussed my Oma's old age. Oma leaned to the side, which looked as though half of her drooped down slightly. Her memory was slightly muddled these days. My mother was worried. I wondered if we would be back to visit Oma again before she passed. Suddenly the air thickened, and my throat formed a lump.

When we came back, we all sat down for dinner. I sat next to Oma and my mom. As the aunts and uncles chattered on about politics and pandemics, I sat quietly trying to understand their German. My mom seemed to be having a hard time understanding them too, which made me think their German was a different dialect. My older sister was quite fluent and grew up in Berlin until she was five years old. Oma turned to me and started telling me what I thought was a story, but I couldn't understand anything she said. My heart dropped, my cheeks turned red, and a buried sadness rose inside me: I wished that I could understand what she was saying and not need someone to translate for me. I turned to my left to see if my sister or mom could help, but they were both busy conversing with everyone. I asked Oma slowly if, perhaps, she could say it in English, trying to keep my lips from quivering, embarrassed at my request. She looked to her right, where my cousin's boyfriend was sitting. Then he translated for us. I was so upset and embarrassed that I didn't remember what it was he said or, rather, what she said. The more I fear forgetting things, the more I forget them.

Later in the evening, my Oma told a long story about visiting us in New York. She told everyone that she stopped visiting us because my sister and I were growing up and didn't need her anymore. That made my heart hurt even more. Then she told a story about a bear outside of our barn in Woodstock when no one else was home. My parents looked at each other with confusion and concern. I don't think anything in the story actually



happened. Rather, Oma was filling in the blanks in her mind. I felt sad.

It was quiet for a minute and then my cousin's boyfriend asked me, "And Indira, what do you do?" I was too overwhelmed to explain the things I like to do with the same excitement as before. I felt strangely naked and vulnerable, but unable to speak. I was an outsider in a strange land. While I tried to keep my voice from wavering, I gave him a summary of where I live and what things I write about. I had wanted to share so much with my family, but my words began to feel like wasted space.

I sat in the middle seat again on our way home from my uncle's house. The countryside along the road flew by. I remember my Oma's bright white curly hair, and my dad glancing at her ever so often because normally on a drive like this, she talks and talks but was quiet that night. We left my uncle's house early so that we would be home early enough to get a good night's sleep before the plane ride in the morning. To the left, my sister sat wide awake looking at our Oma whereas normally she'd be napping. My mom sat on my right side, too focused on her smartphone to notice anything beyond it. The night sky hovered above us.

The song that played in my ears was about being unable to explain a certain feeling. All I wanted was peace of mind knowing I would not ever forget Oma. I wondered if I had even spent enough time with her to remember. We pulled up to her apartment, and the tears that had been welling in my eyes finally burst out. I put my head in my hands. Oma woke up: it turned out she was only quiet because she had been asleep. When she got out of the car she asked me what was wrong and my mom told her in German that I would miss her, "Sie Vermissten dich." Her grammar was incorrect, as this translates to "she misses you." I did miss her, even when I was with her because I never felt close enough to her and because of the language barrier. In a steady voice, my dad said that we would see her in the morning to say goodbye before getting on the plane home. Oma sighed, saying words I couldn't quite understand but in a tone I could understand well. I knew because she pronounced the "R" in my name harshly as she did when she scolded me as a child. She was gently scolding me now for crying, telling me that it would be okay.

In the morning Oma gave us one last wave from the balcony garden of her light-yellow apartment building. She kept waving until we were out of sight. I stared out the window, already and always missing Oma.

*Lulu Salvaterra*

## **I AM MUCH LIKE THE CHARACTER**

As I sit in the dimly lit classroom  
I feel the ridged edges of the desk jab right up against my confidence  
My pencil then follows and continues to erase any ounce of predictability I  
    thought I had  
I must memorize these phrases  
I must squeeze them into a small crevice inside of my brain,  
hoping they won't fall out due to the amount of space my constant  
    thoughts, doubts, and worries take up

I hear the ring of my name in the distance  
The teacher asks me to analyze the internal battle with self-criticism  
    portrayed in the novel  
As if she knows this will only further erupt my own battle  
Because I am much like the character  
Fearful of wrongdoing  
Naive to the fact that the thing that is my biggest comfort is also my biggest  
    enemy  
The thing that has led me down this road of misery a million times over  
And kept me far from my happily ever after  
But at least the character's fate can be altered by the author  
Unlike mine, which seems to be stuck in this state of longing

Yet eventually, I revert back to reality  
I bite my tongue in hopes that my own relation to the character will not slip  
    out  
The automatic cookie-cutter answer greets the class once again  
I glance at the teacher, hoping to seek her approval  
Her approval of my answer, my future, and most of all my purpose  
And I can't help but wonder if she knows  
If she knows how much power she has over me  
Or how many moments of my life I spend ruminating on that one  
    percentage  
Which has calculated the trajectory of how I continue to see myself every  
    time I make contact with an ounce of dissatisfaction  
But maybe, just maybe, that is the way it should be

Because I am much like the character  
And they eventually come in contact with joy  
So we shall soon see  
See if their fate will ever find me

## OH, MAMA

Oh, mama...

Your little girl is still in here, she just doesn't want to be here

This place is cold and cruel

And everyday as I walk to school, I think about the times you used to hold  
me before I ever cared if it was "uncool"

I think about the times I leapt with so much joy before this sadness came to  
rule

I want that little girl back

Not this stranger I've grown into

But mama, oh mama

Your little girl is still in here

She just wants to disappear

This place is swarmed by tears

And she cannot bear to withstand another year

I can't believe I wished the times away where you were so near

I thought that being older would be as fun as it appears

But the more I grow, the more I seem to abhor the girl in the mirror

## THIS INTERMINABLE WAR

Because suddenly...  
My thoughts became a bit deeper  
My screams became a bit louder  
And my light became a bit dimmer

It's an odd thing to watch yourself slip away  
A peculiar sensation the deprivation provides

But there isn't an instant realization of the destruction you've caused  
Even with the world around you pleading for you to stop  
Your head praises you for the way you're disappearing  
Its validation only igniting the flames you use to burn each calorie  
And yet, that sense of delusive contentment that millisecond of validation  
provides  
Somehow makes you forget about the interminable despair your world is  
now constructed of

But yet the validation does not equate to satisfaction  
For it will never be enough

*I do not believe I am sick*, I thought  
As my heart began to slow,  
vision went black,  
And my world went silent  
*I have to be good enough*, I thought  
And even as they asked me what good enough would be  
I couldn't tell you  
All I could tell you was it was something that I was not  
Something that I was misled into thinking would be attainable by  
manipulation  
That ruining my health would result in wealth  
And laying in a hospital bed at the age of 13, was a step towards being  
enough

I turned into an engine only running off the validation of others  
Hoping that draining myself would soon nourish my dismantled soul  
And the world would serve my worth to me as I served it my joy...

It was not a fair trade  
It morphed from a way to change my body to a way to change my being  
It provided a sensation of stillness as my world disintegrated  
Only hiding from the fact that it was the executioner of this hurt

And I hate it for what it did  
But I long for the feeling of deprivation it gives  
And I'm ashamed for missing the storm  
But sometimes being stuck inside can be even more warm

## **ANOTHER SUNRISE**

The clouds painted the sky gray filling it with melancholy. The grass was softer, every blade letting itself move as one with the wind. The wind brought a slight chill. The trees danced. Adam noticed none of it and even if he did, he would not admit to himself. The trail felt different today, there was no denying that. The cliff where he had camped for the last couple of years would see him there one last time.

His watch read twelve. He'd been up since sunrise. One last time, he thought to himself, I'll give myself that. After all, there would be no more sunrises in his future. He prepared his tent, set up his chair, and got ready to get the fire going. He'd done this a hundred times at this point, but he had no luck today. No matter what he tried, there was too much wind or too little. The fire would not start.

"Dammit! Dammit! I can't do anything right! Why! WHY! DAMMIT!" He tossed a rock beyond the cliff.

"Why! Why! Why can't I just do this?" Adam grew frustrated. Tears began forming under his eyes. "Why?"

His watch read two. Two hours trying to get a fire started. No matter what he tried he could not find a way to get it started. His frustration grew, as did his anger but none of that fueled the fire.

"Seems like you need a little help." A voice came from seemingly nowhere startling Adam. No one had ever come this way. A bit of panic filled his stomach. His breathing increased ever so slightly. He wiped his eyes, looked at the man that was headed his way in confusion.

"Wind has not been much help today." The man's voice was as soft as silk. "I'll give you a hand. It'll be no problem. I've done this forever it seems like."

"Who are you?" Adam finally forced out.

"Does that matter?" He answered as the fire was given life. It rose, its bright reds, yellows and oranges reflected in the man's face.

"There you go. Now it won't be as cold." The man gave Adam the softest smile he'd ever seen.

"Who are you?"

"Again, does it really matter?"

"Well I'd at least like to thank you properly."

"That's fair. My name is Emmanuel."

“Thank you...for...the fire.”

“This is such a nice place. How’d you find it?”

Emmanuel looked beyond the cliff. Trees lined the skyline and seemed to go on forever. It seemed to swallow Adam up the longer he stared, so he’d always preferred not to look too long.

“You see this? Wow. This is where art comes from, wouldn’t you say? How lucky are we to experience this?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a beautiful place.” “Yeah.”

“So what brings you here today?”

“I camp here.”

“Excuse me.” he chuckled. “Let me be more specific. What brings you to this cliff?”

“It’s my favorite spot to camp. I’ve been coming here for a couple of months.”

“Wow. What a place you found for yourself huh.”

Emmanuel looked beyond the cliff again.

“Yeah it’s quite the place.” Adam was still puzzled over Emmanuel’s sudden appearance.

“How’d you—”

“Do you usually camp this close to the edge?” “Yes...well...no. Hey... how or why—”

“I see. You pack light.” Emmanuel pointed to Adam’s tent.

“Yeah...I don’t do much.”

“You plan to stay the night?” “Yeah...that’s the plan.”

“I’ve been up since sunrise. Did you catch it? It was beautiful. One of the best ones I’ve seen recently.”

“Yeah...I saw it...Uh excuse me?” “Yes?”

“How did you find this place? It’s pretty secluded so..it’s weird to see others here.”

“I just stumbled here I guess.”

“Oh...uhh...thanks for the fire...”

The wind blew gently past them, leaving a chill air behind.

Adam sat in his chair. The man sat on the ground across from him. The fire in between them.

“Have you ever heard the saying, the eyes never lie?” Emmanuel looked at Adam.

“I’m sorry. I...I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well it means that people may lie but their eyes do not.” “What?”



“You heard me Adam.”

“Yeah I just don’t understand...what do you mean?” “Well, may I ask you a question?”

“Sure?...”

“Has the cliff ended for you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Has it?” “I...I...”

“Do you not see the trees beyond the cliff?” Emmanuel pointed into the distance.

“Those trees, they’ll tell you that their leaves have fallen and have always come back.”

“And the trail you walked up? It’s been battered, but you were still able to follow it were you not?”

“Well yes, but cliffs end, you know.”

“Sure but is there not another side?” Emanuel looked into the distance, where a waterfall raged.

The raging water, muffled by the distance, had always reminded Adam of the times his mother had drawn him a bath when he was younger. It did so now more than ever.

“Look I thank you for the fire but...”

“But you’d like me to leave.”

Adam looked away from him.

“You’ve set up a chair. Why don’t we eat? Before it gets too dark.”

“I didn’t bring any food with me...” Adam could not meet Emmanuel’s gaze.

“That’s okay I have some.”

Emmanuel took a loaf of bread from his pack and handed it to Adam. He then took a bottle of water and handed it to him as well.

“Eat it’s okay.” “What about you?”

“I’m full. You are not.”

They sat and as Adam ate, the wind blew gently in his face. It was warm like the touch of a mother caring for her child. He had opted to sit on the ground along with Emmanuel. He regretted it now. The dirt he sat on was warm and softened to meet his weight with comfort. He looked to the sky that wrapped around him, the way his father would wrap him Christmas morning. The grandness of everything around him took a toll on him little, by little.

“It would be strange, you know?” Emmanuel asked. “What?”

“I could not imagine a world without you. Even if we’ve just met. I mean who would I meet here next time?”

Adam stayed silent.

“Who would I share my bread with?” Adam played with his thumbs.

“Who would drink all my water?” Adam’s lips started twitching. “Who would I talk to?”

A knot formed in Adam’s throat. “Whose fire would I start?”

Adam closed his eyes.

“Who would ask me to leave?”

The past couple of months came racing. The reasons for his hike this morning had come out from hiding. The memories that held him captive brought out their whips once more. Adam thought of Atlas who carried the Earth. He clenched his jaw. He tightened his fists. He shook his head.

Emmanuel put his hand on his shoulder. It was like a gentle tide touching the shore.

“It’s okay Adam. The cliff does not end here.”

Adam unclenched his jaw. His shoulders dropped. His lips twitched and he didn’t know what to do with his hands. The water in his eyes blurred his vision. Little by little his body loosened. He wept. He buried his face in Emmanuel’s chest who embraced him without a second thought.

They wept. The wind blew. The leaves rustled. The waterfall could be heard in the distance. Nature sang.

From there, they spoke till the sun set. They ate together as old friends. Time became irrelevant. The edge of the cliff seemed to get farther with every passing minute. Eventually Adam fell asleep. Emmanuel was gone but the fire still burned. He woke to another sunrise.

*Caley Shiota*

## **COMPOST**

On bad days I'm a flood,  
that drowns out the green,  
or the sprout underwater,  
pleading to be seen.

Then the trees told me,  
you returned back to earth.  
From the root rot you left,  
something new came to birth.

Now the sun coats my skin  
until I'm finally blooming.

Thank god the worms  
don't know what they're consuming.

## FREE ADOPTION

Hot summer felines;  
they call it a kitten boom.  
Foul matted black fur,  
but they came out soft and gray.  
I watched from afar, waiting.

They grew so quickly,  
and so did the coyotes.  
Only three left now.  
All alone, eating crickets.  
When did mother move away?

Creep behind the bush,  
looking into big jade gems.  
Scatter, run and hide,  
but I know these avenues.  
Two gone but one still running.

Concrete walls stood high,  
claws desperately clinging, now  
two voids look back.  
My hands form a gentle cage,  
her heart pounds against my palm.

## **ALMOST HOME**

When I was a child, I didn't know I was Japanese. I remember seeing myself in the mirror and knowing how different I looked from all my extended family. If our blood was soup, we'd be an alphabet. We had Tarascan ancestors who then mixed with the Spaniards, who then immigrated all over Mexico and America, mixing further until we reached our current time, where I now have cousins who are blue or green-eyed, dirty blonde hair, and pale olive skin, while others have black or brown eyes with black or brown hair and tanned sand skin. They all looked different from one another, but I looked so different from all of them. I could see their templates so clearly; their same eye shapes, same noses, same hair textures, same lips, but just different colors. I had none of those things because I took after my father's template.

Anytime I looked at my father, I'd analyze all the features that made him Japanese. He was yellow-toned, had no arm hair and barely any leg hair, black straight hair, and sharp narrow black eyes. If he were upset, his voice would enter the room first. He didn't sound Japanese; he had no accent, speaking loud and solid. You could feel every word he spoke and when he was scolding us, it was relentless pelting. Even over the phone, he sounds intimidating. He spoke clearly, introducing himself and quickly asking for the name of whomever he was speaking to. He could recall the dates and times from previous calls he'd had with people, often grabbing whatever paper he had around and writing down anything he deemed important. I'd listen from my room and know when he was holding someone accountable just from the volume of his voice. For years I didn't see my father as Japanese, but somehow saw my mother as Mexican. There was never any doubt that it was from the way she carried her culture with her. My mother was born in Mexico on a cow farm, unlike my father who was born in a hospital. Her skin was softly touched by the sun; warm, soft but aged. Her arm hair is so fair that it hides its true length, while her head is draped by ringlets of dark chocolate, matching her wide brown almond eyes. I look at the wrinkles that surround her eyes and know the stories hidden in the cracks. When she talks, I can hear her hometown. She speaks English well, but there have been plenty of times where I spent hours writing emails and letters for her. Though she's not one to confront trouble, she never hesitates to speak up when something is wrong.

When I was a baby, my mother would take me out for walks, pushing me around in my stroller. We'd go around the neighborhood, to the parks across the street and even the mall. As a baby, I had incredibly pale skin, sparse light brown hair, and large round light brown eyes that resembled an owl's. You wouldn't be able to tell that I was my mother's child at first glance, but some people needed more than a second glance. My mother told me this story when a woman confronted her at the mall during one of our walks. She was pushing me in the stroller, walking through the loud corridors, looking past the glass windows of each store we passed by. Suddenly a woman approached my mother and asked her about nanny services. My mother, confused, asked her what she meant by "nanny services." The woman mirrored her confusion, looking at me and then at my mother before asking her if she was my nanny. Eyes widened as the silence blurred out the background chatter. My mother pointed to me, stating clearly, "This is my baby." Luckily, this woman was not confrontational and apologized profusely, prompting the small talk about how my father is Japanese and that I took after his looks instead of my mother's. It's a funny story to look back on since I genuinely did not look like my mother growing up, but now as an adult, I've had her relatives tell me that I'm starting to look more Mexican, like her.

People often assumed I was Filipino; approaching me speaking Tagalog, only for me to sarcastically respond in Spanish. They'd hear my voice, my unknown accent, come out of my once familiar face, and realize their mistake. Almost always, the conversation of what I am if not Filipino would arise. Yet even after telling them I was Japanese and Mexican, I still had people telling me that I basically was Filipino because of the centuries-old history between Spain, Japan, and the Philippines. It was frustrating having to defend who I was constantly to people whose mind was already made up about what I was. I don't even have issues with Filipinos or the Philippines. I have issues with people who water down my race, cutting down my family tree just because my potential ancestors did something to their potential ancestors. I wasn't just some regular mixed Japanese person with a normal heritage. I knew the history that I came from, and I wanted people to know when they asked me what I was, but I never went down that path. They saw me how they wanted, and I wasn't going to live the rest of my life explaining my existence. There's this one memorable incident back in elementary school, where I was first confronted as a Japanese person. I was waiting for my mother outside of the school, in front of the drive-thru. Two Filipino classmates approached me, asking if I was Japanese. I shrugged, not knowing

what they meant, and asked them why. They looked me up and down, then to one another, when suddenly one of them blurted out that I should go back to Japan. They said that the Japanese were awful for bombing Pearl Harbor, so I was awful too. I was only nine years old, so I stood there in silence, confused and trying to figure out what Pearl Harbor was, why it was bombed, when it was bombed, and what did I have to do with any of it when I've lived in the same house my whole life. When my mother finally pulled up, her voice calling my name brought me out of my thoughts and I quickly ran to her van. I sat quietly the entire car ride, listening to their words repeat in my mind. I wanted to ask my mother about it but what could she say about history that didn't belong to her? At some point, my mind became overcrowded with thoughts, so I went to her and told her about what my classmates said to me. I told her how they said I was awful for bombing Pearl Harbor, and to go back to Japan. My mother stood there in silence with her back facing me, still steadily preparing dinner when she said, "You should've told them you'd bomb their house if they didn't shut up." Years later, when I told my mother this story, she was stunned. She had no recollection of saying that but laughed because of how ridiculous all of it was.

For the big holidays like New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, we would go to my mother's side. Her family is loud, loving, crazy, and traditional. And by now, there are probably hundreds of relatives altogether. All my elders speak mostly Spanish, with my mother being the only one who speaks both Spanish and English fluently. She wasn't the only one who came from Mexico; her brothers and cousins also came to California when they were in their early twenties. They all lived so close back in Mexico, so it only made sense to live close in America. There was a cookout for any and every reason: from birthdays to baptisms, to graduations to engagements, and all the holidays they know about. The house would fill with multiple conversations, with laughter bouncing from room to room. The aroma was welcoming and warm; a mixture of savory and sweet foods that decorated a clearly overfilled table. Before the night would end, we would gather all around and take a big family photo. It was always fun to be included, but I could always feel the anxiety of knowing how much I'd stand out amongst everyone. At least I had my father and brother to blend in with, but I could always spot our little group in the crowd of all our other relatives.

In Japanese culture, family life is so much more private. It's not that we don't love each other, it's just that we respect one another's time so dearly, that we save it for when absolutely needed. Like funerals or weddings.

Maybe even birthdays if you were lucky enough. But so far, it's been mostly funerals. I do wish I saw them more often, just not as often as my mother's side does. Her side uses every reason to celebrate, and while that's not necessarily a bad thing, it leaves me feeling socially depleted. I grew up on my mother's side for most of my life since a majority of my extended Japanese relatives had passed away already, or lived hours away. Because of this, I grew up speaking Spanish more than Japanese. Unfortunately, when I started school, I kept speaking English because "it was faster," according to my mother. She said English was quicker to speak, and I was too lazy to speak Spanish. I never learned Japanese because my father never learned Japanese. His mother, my grandmother, was born in California just like he was, whereas his father, my grandfather, was born in Japan. However, my grandmother spoke fluent Japanese because her parents immigrated from Japan, and then grew up in a small Japanese fishing village on Terminal Island. This was a small intimate hometown where everything you needed was within walking distance. Even their Japanese was different; a mixture of English with Japanese that came from the Kii Province. It was a true home where they all belonged, a home they called "Furusato."

I never learned to become fully fluent in Spanish or Japanese, but every day I continue to practice when I can. In my daily vocabulary, I have sprinkles of Japanese and Spanish. It comes from all the things that surround me in my day-to-day life. My father is truly biased, believing that Japanese-made items will last the longest, so we have countless brands from Japan. Our rice cooker is a brand called "Zojirushi," and the rice paddle it comes with is called a "shamoji." Rice is called "gohan," which is then served in a Japanese bowl called an "ochawan." It all started with small things like the rice cooker, to slowly introduce Japanese into my vocabulary. My mother brought us to her hometown multiple times to visit, allowing me to learn Spanish quickly and naturally. Coming back home each time, having learned more words was such a fulfilling feeling. Pretty soon, my family started having our own dialect. We could speak full sentences in Spanish about Japanese things, or full sentences in English with Spanish and Japanese things. It sounds weird, maybe even silly to others but to us, but we understand one another just fine. I didn't realize it back then, but we had made our own "Furusato" that I belonged to.



*Brendan Praniewicz*

## **ELECTION YEAR JESUS**

Jesus comes back every four years,  
in cammo cargo and Tebow attire  
wearin that red big, fat MAGA hat  
drivin around in a white Ford F-150,  
belching Limp Bizkit from the cabin.  
and Jesus only tours rusty Bible belts  
Birmingham, Ashland, Bethelhem--PA  
Bible banging up them capitol steps  
the original shaman of all shamans.  
he aint using transgender bathrooms,  
he aint doin yoga, no nibblin on kale.  
he's turning plan B pills into bullets,  
speaking no parables, only conspiracy,  
dividing our country like the Red Sea.

*Natalie Estrada*

## DEAR LITTLE ME

I started to realize that as I've gotten older  
The sparkle and light has been sucked out of  
My eyes  
What's scary is that it happened unknowingly  
Slowly, with the likes of a tender kiss on the cheek

At the age of 7, I awoke  
With an obnoxious smile  
Doing ballet with the face of my cereal box

At 12

I belted out my favorite hymns  
While smearing jelly on burnt bread

At 15

I wake up with my legs trembling  
Eyes burnt out  
Pouring steaming oatmeal  
In a chipped black mug

As I sit here with my soul's remains  
I've learned to cherish that precious child  
Because even now I see you lingering  
In the seams of my cracked mirror

*Let me sing & dance with you once more*  
You are not yet fully

broken

*Kevin B*

## **WORDS FOR SUNSHINE, WORDS FOR SNOW**

The first English word my grandfather learned was “sunshine.”

He was six-years-old and standing in an empty apartment with his mother. She was wearing black, because her husband had died the year before of stomach cancer. She would continue to wear black until she remarried, but that wouldn't be for another eight years. My great-grandmother did not love her husband, but when he died, her life was upended. Marriage was meant to be your security and your comfort. Her name was Dasha, and she was from Lida, which is west of Minsk in Belarus.

My grandfather's name was Fedor.

They were standing together in the empty apartment in Morristown, New Jersey, because my great-grandmother's youngest brother, Yuri, had moved there two years earlier. He was going to be an American. He was going to open a restaurant. He had plans and he had books to put the plans in and he was already speaking American and dating an American girl. The two of them lived together on the first floor of the house where my grandfather and his mother would now be living. They would have the second floor and the rent would be paid on the first of each month by my grandmother. She was expected to go to work at the same factory where my great-great uncle was working while he saved up for a restaurant he would never open. He would work at that factory until he died at the age of forty-seven of a heart attack right on the factory floor. They would move his body and tell everyone to keep working.

His name was Yuri. Did I tell you that already? I might have told you. I apologize. There is so much story. There is a lot to tell.

Where was I?

Oh yes. The empty apartment. My grandfather. Sunshine.

My grandfather's uncle's girlfriend (I never learned her name, she would break up with my great-great uncle and end up marrying a motorcycle repairman) went to the library and took out children's books to help my grandfather and his mother learn English. She was a nice young woman and this was her contribution. Her good deed.

She went upstairs with the stack of books, while my great-grandmother tried not to fall down weeping right there on the stained carpet of the little apartment that she couldn't afford to furnish. Women from Lida are tough. Dasha was known to be tough. Unfortunately, there is tough and there is stupid. Dasha was not stupid. How could she survive? How could she and her child survive in this place that lets widows move into homes without furniture? That sends them to work while they are still grieving a man they never loved, but who took care of them? That asks them to learn another language that has rules borrowed from all the other languages that have melted together in this horrible pot that boils but never simmers? Never gets cleaned. Never comes off the stove. Dasha wanted a chair. At least a chair to sit in. When the young woman handed her a book, she went looking for a photo of a chair so she could find the word next to it and try to pronounce that word. The book the young woman gave her was a book about opposites. A chair has no opposite. Maybe a table. She would not find a picture of a chair, but she would keep looking.

While she was looking, the young woman who was dating my great-great uncle would sit down on the stained carpet with my grandfather and open up a book for him. She would turn to the first page, which had a sun on it. She would show my grandfather the page, and point to the sun.

"Sun," she would say, and then, pointing to the little yellow lines drawn around the circle that represents the sun, "Sunshine. Sun. Shine. Sunshine."

My grandfather was six-years-old the first time he felt condescended to. Yes, it was true that he didn't know the English word for "sunshine," and yes, it was true, he could see that this young woman, who he had not been properly introduced to, meant well. Yes, he knew that hardships were coming soon and, along with them, indignities, but really? A yellow circle with lines around it and this woman he met an hour earlier downstairs sitting across from him smelling like patchouli mouthing the words "Sun. Shine. Sunshine" as though he were an alien who didn't understand sound or illustration.

"Sunshine," he repeated back to her, and she beamed with pride. Look at what she had accomplished. She was a good person who was doing a good thing. Across the room, my great-grandmother stood near a window and tried to find a picture of a chair as snow began to fall outside. The young woman stood up, helped my grandfather to his feet, and took him to the

window to stand by his mother.

She pointed outside and said “Snow.”

My grandfather repeated it back to her. “Snow.” More beaming, more pride. More certainty that she, this one woman in her early 20’s, could assist this small family of refugees as they began to build a new life--one word at a time.

Meanwhile, my grandfather now knew the English words for “sunshine” and “snow” and he knew that, for the rest of his life, he would aspire to be someone who knew as many languages as his mind could hold. If this was what was important to people like the young woman and his uncle and his mother, he would absorb every word and every sound and every association until any person alive could come up to him and begin a conversation only to find that he was able to speak to them with the ease of someone who has only one mother tongue instead of hundreds. He did not only want the words for “sunshine” and “snow.” He wanted all the words for “sunshine” and “snow.”

This dream of his would diminish over time. He would always love language, but, once in school, he would begin to forget his native language. His accent would dwindle and then disappear. His mother would always speak with a foreign distinction, but she would blush whenever anyone asked where she was from or how long she had been in the country. Her assimilation was of the utmost importance to her, and when she saw her son excelling at it, she would praise him. He was not allowed to ask about Lida or Belarus or his father. The only sunshine that mattered was the American sunshine. The only snow that piled up outside during the strident winters was American snow.

My grandfather worked at a restaurant as a line cook. He showed promise. The owner of the restaurant encouraged him to go to culinary school. His uncle was bitter with jealousy. That was not meant to be my grandfather’s dream. That was his uncle’s dream. How dare he steal it. They got into a terrible fight. My grandfather and his mother did not speak to my great-great uncle again for the rest of his life. By then, they had moved out of the empty apartment that had only been partially filled at the time of my great-grandmother’s second marriage. My grandfather’s stepfather was a kind man. He paid the tuition for culinary school. When he asked my grandfather what kind of food he wanted to cook, my grandfather said—

“American food. I’m an American.”

He graduated culinary school with high marks. A year later, he was working in one of the best restaurants in New York--his new home. My great-grandmother and her husband came into the city for dinner. They were so proud of my grandfather. He had tackled a slippery dream and carried it into waking. He was living in a small apartment that was all his own and it had furniture. When he brought the chef out to meet his parents, he had forgotten that the chef only knew him as—

“We’re so happy to have Frank here. He’s got real talent.”

Frank. Not Fedor. My great-grandmother seemed confused. English had been her only language for years at that point, but whenever there was confusion, she assumed it was the kind of confusion that occurs when you arrive late to the party. Frank is a name. Frank was not her son’s name. Who was Frank?

Her son shuffled the chef back into the kitchen with thanks for his hospitality. Later on that night, as he was putting his mother and stepfather into a taxi to send them back to their hotel, his mother asked him about his name.

“It’s just something they call me,” he said, lying to his mother with the ease of someone who has first lied to himself, “People can go by different names. It’s nothing.”

His mother didn’t know how to feel or if she should feel at all. She gave her son, who she was very proud of in all ways, a kiss on the cheek, and then stepped into the backseat of the taxi. His stepfather embraced him, slipping two twenty dollar bills into his palm despite him not needing it, and then he was in the back of the taxi next to his wife. They drove away as the first bit of snow began coming down on a busy street in Manhattan.

Inside the restaurant, my grandfather needed to ask for something. Soon after this, he would ask for a loan to open his own restaurant. Shortly thereafter, he would ask a woman he had been seeing for a few months for her hand in marriage. He would ask for many things throughout his life, and he would always have the words, but they would always be in English. What little he learned in another language was usually borrowed from busboys or when helping his children with their Spanish and French

homework.

That night back in the kitchen, my grandfather needed to ask for something--a utensil, a spice, something--and he couldn't think of the word. He could see what he needed, but he couldn't place letters around it. A sound. A phonetic sensation. Nothing was there. He stood stock still over a pot with a chicken in it and tried to catch his breath while the word escaped him. A second later, the chef handed him a knife.

"Were you looking for this," he asked, a concerned look in his eyes.

My grandfather nodded and finished up the rest of his shift. In the dining room, customers drank wine from all over the world. They told stories about traveling and stories about coming home. Some told jokes about people from countries other than their own. They were paying a small fortune to eat chicken. They were paying for an American experience that was steeped in experiences that were in no way American.

But let's not get too carried away, all right?

When I was a child, I would sleep over at the home of my grandparents. They had several bedrooms and all were furnished. One of the rooms was mine even though I was only there every other weekend. I would get in bed, and my grandfather would read to me before bed. He would read me stories. Some would have sunshine in them. Some would have snow. My grandfather's voice was discreet. It betrayed nothing. He could inhabit anyone and anything as though he had lived a thousand lives. He could speak as though he had spoken every word at least once. Sometimes I would stop him and point to a word so that I could ask him what it meant. Sometimes I would ask him why a character did what they did or felt how they felt. Sometimes I asked him how they could make it to the end of the story after suffering so many trials and setbacks. And somehow he always knew.

He always knew exactly what to say.

*Mike Horan*

## **DOMESTICITY**

some days, today,  
can be a little  
overwhelming  
there's no rhyme or reason for when it happens.  
If there was some sense  
you could at least prepare.  
Life isn't like that.  
If you could prepare for every eventuality  
you wouldn't be human.

You are in a fog  
like you are so often in the summer  
in that twilight period  
between the end of family vacation  
and the start of school.  
The breadwinner is doing what she does  
leaving you trapped with the kids  
or the kids trapped with you.  
Perspective is key here.

Grocery shopping  
trying to make it quick because  
the children are playing with that energy  
that devolves into violence at some point  
like wild animals let loose among an  
unsuspecting populace.  
Checking out, kids getting louder  
card declined  
2nd card declined, not sure what to do  
money was in there,  
was it yesterday?  
Too befuddled to be embarrassed.  
Hold on to these,  
I'll be right back.  
Pull children out door, protesting loudly



about leaving groceries,  
wondering when was the last time I had them  
around other people.

Driving to bank  
listening to kids wailing in back that we are  
poor.  
Gas light comes on and I have to laugh  
which pisses the kids off.  
Thinks I'm laughing at them.  
Transfer money  
get groceries  
get gas  
awake now, thinking everything will be alright.

Trip on an invisible rock back at home  
re-injure knee  
get inside  
ice on knee  
checking emails because that's safe.  
A rejection notice, the fourth this month.  
And this is the bending of a finger back until the bone  
cracks  
the feeling of a police baton meeting your  
skull  
the ice you feel when the tanto slices your  
stomach.

Pull the shades  
lock the door  
turn off the computer.  
Today, it's just not safe out there.

*Alexis Jaimes*

## **GENTRIFYING TIMES (BLEACHING THE BROWN)**

It is called progress  
but it's really  
a father bringing his son  
to an unfamiliar barbershop

where the man looks around to  
what was his once

where white tile stands on salted soil that used to be  
home of orange groves  
built by brown hope

where the abandoned strands kiss  
something so posh  
the new owner—  
the son,  
the one who knows it all—  
doesn't wonder if his father is still here

## THE DIARY OF LIZZY GRANT

Day 1:

It's been weeks, maybe even months since the world fell silent, since the last time I saw someone, since the last time I talked to someone other than my shadow. No rustling leaves, no distant hum of traffic, just an eerie silence that follows me everywhere. As far as I know the last person on this isolated planet is me. The cities I once visited are now empty ghost towns. My days are spent wandering aimlessly. A cassette player has become my lifeline. The only thing I have left in this dying world. It plays music from a different era, a reminder of a time when melodies filled the air. I find myself listening to the same 10 cassettes constantly. The soothing tunes and rhythmic beats being the only thread to my sanity.

Day 37:

I can't remember the last time I saw another living soul. The silence presses down on me like a constant weight on my chest. My reflection in the shattered windows across town has become my only friend. I've resorted to talking to myself, just to break the oppressive silence. I've made up stories in my head. Stories where I have friends, where I have my mom, stories where I'm not being suffocated in this isolation. It's a twisted comfort, a reminder that I am still here, even if everyone else is gone.

Day 64:

It's my birthday today. June 21, the longest day of the year. The sun hangs in the sky for what feels like an eternity, casting long shadows across the landscape. A day I once cherished. A day I spent with my mom. She used to decorate the house for me every year. Each morning I would come down to be surprised with a stack of chocolate chip pancakes, a pile of presents and a big hug from my mom. I miss my mom. The one person who truly loved me. She promised to be with me till the end of time but where is she? I haven't seen her since they took her. The concept of a birthday feels both taboo and irrelevant in this isolated world. Yet in a strange attempt to hold on to

the memories I cherish so deeply, I decided to celebrate. I found sponges and candles in an abandoned store, and fashioned a makeshift cake. It was not the real thing, but as I blew out the candles, I could almost taste the sweetness of the memories. The echoes of a birthday song resonate through the empty streets, a melancholic melody sung to an audience of none. The longest day of the year stretches on, and I find comfort in the lingering daylight, yearning for the warmth of a time when the sun rays meant more than just a reminder of endless solitude. This day feels never ending.

Day 72:

I heard a voice today. At first I got scared, turning my music on almost instantly to block it out; But then I was curious. Eager to hear the voice that called my name so fondly. It was faint, distant, almost like a whisper carried by the wind. It was chilling, running down my back. I froze, my heart pounding in my chest. For a moment, I believed that I wasn't alone. That someone was there. How stupid of me to believe I wasn't alone. I need to accept that I'm alone. All alone. I will never have someone again. Ever.

Day 89:

The voice is getting louder. It taunts me, calling my name. Lizzy, Lizzy Grant. I'm scared. At first I could block the voice out with my music. It's not working anymore. The melodies that used to transport me to a time when the world was once alive has faded. I hear these tapes and feel nothing. The fragile barrier between me and the abyss has left me alone. Alone with the voice. I once wanted nothing more than to be surrounded by voices. Voices of people I loved. This voice doesn't love me. The voice is torturing me day by day. I got something I wanted but it's not what I imagined. I can hear the voice crawling in me.

Day 104:

As the days pass, I notice a subtle shift in the atmosphere. The air grows colder, the once vibrant colors of autumn now paint a melancholic picture. The seasons change in this silent apocalypse, a reminder that time continues

its relentless march even in the absence of life. I watch as nature adapts to a reality it never chose. As I watch the leaves fall I'm reminded of my life before this solitude. I wonder what I did to deserve this. A life with no happiness. A life with no one. I once wished for a quiet life. Worst wish ever.

Day 121:

The voice was louder than ever tonight, calling my name. Although this time it whispered something other than my name. It whispered promises of companionship, an end to this isolation. I followed this voice into the heart of the city, my breath catching with each step. My pulse accelerated the closer I got. As I reached the source the voice vanished, leaving me with the faint static of an abandoned radio. Finally the voice was gone. Finally the voice left me alone. You think I would be relieved, maybe even happy but I miss it. Without knowing I developed a fondness for this voice. I yearned for the return of the voice. The emptiness is now noticeable, a void that resonates with each movement in these bleak streets. The same streets I spent hours chasing after this voice. Places that once vibrated with the echoes of the voice now stand as silent witnesses to a solitude that feels more profound than ever.

Day 143:

In my time yearning a sudden urge compelled me to revisit the remnants of the life I once knew. As I stepped onto the porch of my old house the unmantled structure stands as a melancholic testament to a time when laughter filled its walls. The rooms that were once alive with shared moments now echoed with the haunting stillness of abandonment. My footsteps echoing louder than the memories that lingered in the air. The walls are filled with old photographs, snapshots of the happier days. Faces smiled back at me, frozen in time and the weight of nostalgia pressed down on my chest. As I picked up a picture of my mother and me, our eyes reflecting a shared joy that now felt like a bittersweet distant dream, a surge of emotions overcame me. The house which was once my refuge seemed to turn into an asylum that simply screamed of ghostly memories.

In my bedroom, I find the cassette tapes that once played the soundtrack of my life. The memories flooded back as I held the tapes, each one just being a symbol of what I have lost. As I look around the room I once called my safe space, my eyes begin to blur and before I know it I'm on the floor sobbing hysterically. I heard the blaring voice I craved so badly. Upon hearing the voice I dropped the player. The music ceased, and with it, the fragile thread that held my sanity together snapped.

As I felt overwhelmed and lost in my own thoughts, the quietness around me became almost deafening. Strange voices started whispering things that made me feel mocked and taunted. Everything around me looked blurry, like a confusing dream. The emptiness I felt was no longer just physical but seeped into the very core of my being. The once comforting memories turned into a painful reminder of what was lost, and the realization of my loneliness hit me like a double decker bus. Before I knew it the imaginary voices merged with the haunting echoes of my mind, and I found myself running out of the ruins I once called home. As I ran the tears that fell seemed to carry away the last traces of hope I clung to in this silent world.

Day 151:

Who am I? The question taunts me. Faces, names, memories are slipping through my fingers like sand. The pages of this diary hold secrets, but the greatest mystery lies within the recesses of my own identity. I'm staring at my reflection in a broken shard of glass, searching for recognition. The eyes I see are strangers. Who is she? Am I dreaming? Did I have a purpose here? Why am I left?

Day ????:

The voice is getting louder. It's taking over my body. I can't feel my heart. It's growing. It's taking me. I'm being taken. My sanity is gone. Who am I? Where am I? Where's my mom? The voice. Who is it? Mom? Is that you? Why are you doing this? Stop. Get out. NO. Please. Please. Please.

Day:

HELLO HELLO HELP ME I CAN'T THINK. VOICES. RIPPING APART. MESSAGES IN MY HEAD. NEED HELP. PLEASE. ONLY ONE. IF YOU FIND THIS. HELP. I'M LOSING IT. HELP. STOP. WHERE IS SHE. IN MY ROOM. BLOODY MESS. TORN APART. LOST IT. I'm fine.

Day: ShEs GoNe

iTTaKeSOvEr, LiZzY. sO mUcH pAiN, sO MuCh DeSpAiR. nO CoNtRoL. ScReAmS MeLtinG iNtO ChAoS. LiZzY iS GoNe. I aM ThE OnE WhO ReMaInS. ShAtTeReD MiNd, BrOkEn SoUL. aS I SiNk InTo ThE AbYsS, ThE VoIcE CoNtInUeS ItS MeRrIlEES SoNg. HELp, HELp, HELp, HeLp, HeLp, HeLp...

*Daniel Romo*

## TAKING ROLL

On my way home from teaching Saturday school,  
Latino preachers chant on the corner of  
PCH and Long Beach Boulevard  
    that hell awaits the eternity  
for those who haven't repented.  
I don't know the Spanish translation of *couth*  
and I'm certain they're unsure of its meaning  
in any language  
because I feel like the words  
blaring from the megaphones  
will turn these inner-city streets beneath me  
to brimstone at any moment.

The students have been absent too much  
so this is their punishment,  
and maybe our school would benefit from  
teachers standing in front of the campus  
screaming,  
    "Come to class or you'll be a failure... forever!"

We could all use some form of intervention,  
some type of personal plea showing us that  
our current course on *Failure to Be Present Lane*  
    and *Unfaithfulness Ave.*  
can still be corrected.

But the difference between convicting  
and convincing  
is the difference in a major assignment with  
a final grade scrawled  
on the top of the page  
or a personal note in the margin informing of  
the way and opportunity  
    for a redo.



Sometimes scare tactics are the poor man's gentleness,  
and the effectiveness of each can be measured by  
the look on the faces of the parishioners  
sitting in the front row.

I'll return next week collecting hourly pay,  
as will the students,  
earning time served for simply saying,  
Here as if it's always  
that easy to earn life credit for  
everything.

**MADE OF MIST**

- run hot, so that, boiling, his hands scalded
1. And so it was decided The Father of the and bruised her skin.
- tribe, being of formidable power and stature, 5. And at this moment a harpy eagle, high in sky,
- should be allowed to pick and choose from cried as it descended on them;
- his lot, for who were they to question the 6. clutching talons drew a terrified expression
- ancestral spirits, the god-given rights. on both their faces, and they closed their
2. A meek, rosy-cheeked girl, dressed up for eyes, and as they did so, the harpy eagle
- the approaching occasion in diaphanous turned to mist and disappeared.
- white drapes, refused, clenched her 7. And when they opened their eyes, she, too,
- teeth, tightened her fists and toward the was made of mist, and she freed herself as
- mountains flew, following the Sun's path. easy as Sunlight is free.
3. Upon the third hour—bruised feet, cloth 8. The Father could not touch her anymore; he
- frayed at the hems—she found safety could neither clutch her garments nor her
- beneath the shade, within the womb, of a hands, and he was furious, and she was free.
- mother tree wherein she lay and fell fast 9. Trembling she woke up with her cheek against
- asleep. the cool lining of velvet lichen.
4. And in her dream, The Father clasped her 10. A single leaf fell; on her forehead the
- right wrist with such strength that she mother tree delivered a blessing kiss, and she
- whimpered, and the sound made his blood looked up. The Sun descending. She realized

it'd been unwise to stop and rest a grayish pallor, at times refracting sunlight  
for fear of night and what it brings, and she into rainbow color.  
continued her path.

11. Nearly two days, and it seemed as if the 15. And the girl said unto the others, "As long  
Sun were perpetually about to set, but on the as we keep moving, it will be dawn."  
third and fourth days, the Sun seemed to 16. And so they carried their relentless march.  
ascend, and she made haste in its direction. 17. As their numbers grew, they begot the  
attention of villagers and city dwellers  
12. On the sixth day, with the Sun nearly who'd come out to meet them—sometimes  
reaching a zenith, a teen girl, about her age, with invective, sometimes with praise,  
walked next to her, and in every new village sometimes with a simple word of  
they encountered another girl'd join them. sympathy, and always in larger and larger  
crowds.

13. They walked a fortnight, at which point, 18. And throughout the kingdom, the girls  
sitting on a glade in the presence of idyllic chanted, "It's not our clothes what's made  
grace—amid the aroma of worm upturned of mist. We are people made of mist. We are  
earth, amid the sights and sounds of bright real and imaginary, we haunt you truly and  
flowers, buzzing bugs, and chirping birds vanish wholly, and you cannot touch us."  
—they looked back toward the dawning Sun  
that now followed them.

14. In the distant mountains they'd left  
behind, an elegant ribbon of mist moved  
about, sometimes lit bright white, at times

*Cristian Ramirez Rodriguez*

**IF YOU FIND ME**

in the darkness burn  
me with the heat  
from your coldest  
places with your  
skin that drowns me  
in the nostalgia  
for the days when  
the lights went out  
and our primary  
worry was hoping  
nobody would see  
us under the shadows of  
illicit candles

*Jackie Robledo*

## I CARRY HOME ON MY BACK

1.

My mother/my first home  
Wet and blue / I came out  
her womb / covered / in sadness

A deep melancholy  
passed down by her mother—  
the only inheritance I've collected  
so far. I wonder if she feels it, too—

this distance between us

the phantom weight on my chest the  
generations of broken  
promises/people  
broken language/tongue

I remind myself I am not broken,  
just fragmented shards of color built  
into mosaic

so familiar with magic

The way my mother / my grandmother built  
something out of nothing  
like a true artist / born of alchemists.

My grandmother / with broken English,  
raised siblings/children  
*en el otro lado*

with two hands

My mother, with broken heart and spirit

conjured meals from scraps and,  
like any child with wondrous eyes  
didn't question how

And I wonder if she had a chance, she could lull  
me to sleep with her soothing voice.

At times, when this world is too much to carry,  
I want to crawl back into my mother's womb

baptize me into a new rebellion

2.

First to embark on depths  
of isolation & white noise

Holding on to a collective memory–

a deep knowing  
of sacrifice  
of never truly being alone  
here.

I am asked  
where I am from  
and I say  
Here.

I'm from  
Everywhere.

I'm from  
Nowhere.

I'm from  
the hills of live oaks  
the coast that neighbors beach homes  
my younger self can only dream of living in.

I'm from O-side  
before OC's greedy fingers dug into  
gutter streets for profit.

Before resorts, hotels, & craft beer.

Born of tidepools and saltwater—  
pushed to a hidden city enclosed by mountains.

I was born  
of the eviction notice  
of couch surfing the unknown.

Born of broken home, instability, survival,  
pawn shop loans, WIC groceries,  
months of *huevo y frijoles* cooked in so many different ways.

I was born of mistakes. Of  
predator and prey.  
Born of the hunt. The hurt. Heartbreak.

Born of the in-between  
the shotgun and the silence that came after the  
years of silence that came after.

Born of all of which we do not speak of  
hush, be quiet until silence becomes a third language.

Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about.  
Of chancla. Belt buckle.  
Of hands. I was born of my mother's calloused hands.  
Born of use your hands. Sound it out. Do it right the first time.

Of hard work. Overwork. Over time.  
Of paycheck to paycheck. Never enough. Time.

Dreams of a better life. Of opportunity.  
Of prayer y *bendiciones*  
Because there is home in every place you go

in every brown brick  
built by black and brown hands  
that nourish you.

3.

How do you keep  
a weary heart beating?

It thumps  
against my chest.

Palpitates—  
disrupting mortal consciousness.

My chest caves in,  
my stomach sinks,  
And bees swarm in my head.

& Body

    fights

Body

    freezes

Body

    flees

    until I breathe life into a song.

4.

The wind whispers my name.  
She says I'm a star burning bright in the sky—  
A light in total darkness.

I won't last long.

Living, but I've already died A  
thousand times and twice



in this life.

I've never felt entirely understood by  
anybody, not even you.

I don't blame you.  
I didn't even understand myself.

We devoured each other until  
nothing was left  
but a carcass of insecurities—

broken and beat.

You say I am a void.  
A dark, endless depth of nothing.  
A vortex of sorrow  
waiting to consume  
what comes before it.

I almost let your words break  
me, grind my bones  
to dust  
but I rise from ashes  
time and time again.

5.

In finding my voice,  
I've spent a decade  
excavating—in search of

my voice  
buried under rubble  
of memory.

I've looked in every corner, along  
the wrinkle of bedsheets  
at 2 am,

in every friendly smile  
that approaches, in the crease  
in the outer corner of your eye.

My grandmother's sister,  
the only blood relation I know of  
with roots,  
still buried in Mexican soil, asks  
*Donde esta Bailando Bailando?*

When I was a girl,  
I couldn't stop dancing. They  
named me after this.  
To this day, I wonder where she went.

This voice  
was buried under the rubble  
of memory,  
too quiet and afraid to speak.  
My kindergarten teacher was convinced  
I didn't know any English  
and rested her ivory hand on my shoulder, assuring me we  
would "fix" that "problem."

Until second grade, they robbed me of critical  
instructional time  
every other day  
to iron my tongue into perfect,  
acceptable English.

I barely remembered my  
first language, buried  
under the rubble of  
memory.

My childhood friend told me about the story  
I wrote and read aloud to our third-grade classroom.  
I couldn't believe it.

The mind's ability to protect the body continues to amaze me.

I remember what has kept me alive all  
this time.

My ironed-out tongue pushes  
against my front teeth and

this voice,  
buried under  
memory/tongue,  
escapes between lips

and awakens amid the trembling of  
sound  
with profound  
and sharp  
tenderness.

6.

Confession:

I am ready to meet myself / my shadow the one that follows wherever I go.

I am ready to uncover them /  
to look them in the eye /  
to forgive / to love / them.

To gently whisper,  
*You are safe here*  
*You are safe now.*

When the body does not listen, I must stay  
silent and listen to it.

One of my first lessons  
was that anger is a bad thing.

I sit in my seat, engulfed  
by my mother's rage and my father's temper.  
I wonder what that war looked like.

My father's fist / my mother's pregnant belly / the  
unforgiving wrath that came after.

I hide my anger  
lock it away, and hold it  
in the pit of my stomach until I no longer can.

I've stayed silent in my anger. Let it eat me alive, eat  
away at my flesh, my soul.  
let it consume me.

I've expressed it in hurtful & controlling ways.

I look in the mirror and see my father.  
My mother always told me I was just like him.  
Considering his absence  
throughout my childhood and adolescence, it  
surprised me every time she said it.

When all I had was his last name.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Kevin B** is a writer and poet from New England. They have been featured in *Molecule*, *Wireworm*, *Hare's Paw*, *Qu*, and *Esoteria*. They were selected as Featured Poet of 2023 by Barely Seen, and they are the author of "Patience."

**Diya Bhakta**, an inspiring fashion designer at Warren High School in Downey, California, is not just an AP/Honors student but also a free spirit with a vibrant social presence. Formerly a student athlete, she now contributes to the school's vibrancy as a member of the ASB. Diya's diverse interests include reading, putting bows in her hair, photography, and collecting music in different mediums. Her eclectic pursuits, dedication, and pride in her diversity showcase a well-rounded individual, whose passion for fashion design is just one facet of her high school journey.

**Indira Buerklin** is a German-American creative writing student at Cal State Northridge, born in Woodstock, New York. As an editor for the *Northridge Review* and Sigma Tau Delta Honors Society member, she is proudly involved in the creative writing community at CSUN. When Indira isn't writing, she is likely painting, hiking, or reading. She looks forward to graduating from CSUN in Spring 2024 and beginning a new chapter of her life.

**Micah R.M. Buchman** is a New Yorker attending college in Claremont, California. He creates collages about transgender existence and God, kisses his friends on the mouth, and misses people-watching on the subway. His poems have been featured in *The Agave Review* and *Potluck Magazine*.

**Issac Cordova** had a few poems published in online literary journals such as *Bristol Noir* and *The Opiate* and was a winner of Cerritos College's 2023 English Department Poetry Contest. A semester with a poetry instructor at Cerritos College got him going tremendously and doing some real work on these blank pages that need to be filled up. Issac is currently working on some short stories and some new poems for this year.

**Natalie Estrada** is a sophomore at St. Pius X -St. Matthias Academy in Downey, California. She's been writing short stories and poems since the age of 7. Although this is her first publication, she hopes to share more of her work, with aspirations to publish her first poetry book before her high school graduation. Besides writing, Natalie enjoys reading, softball, baseball, and music. You can find more of her work on her Instagram page @natalies\_poetry.

**Rich Glinnen**, a Best of the Net nominee, has had his poetry featured on Rich Vos's and Bonnie McFarlane's podcast *My Wife Hates Me* and is a mainstay at the Nuyorican Poets Café. His work can be read in various print and online journals, as well as on his Tumblr and Instagram pages. He currently has two cats, two kids, and one wife.

**Guillermo Gonzalez** is a first-generation Mexican American currently enrolled at Cerritos College, pursuing an associate degree for transfer in English and the Creative Writing Certificate. Writing has been a part of his life from as early as he can remember. He has only recently begun sharing his pieces. You can find him running on caffeine and yearning late into the night or on social media @plutosrad. He posts some of his poems and excerpts there.

**Fabián González González** was born in El Charco, Uriangato, GTO., México and currently resides in California. He has published poetry, fiction, CNF, and visual art in different journals, such as *¡Pa'lante!*, *Penumbra*, *Laurel Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, and others. His latest fiction is forthcoming from *Azahares Literary Magazine*.

**Mike Horan** is an art teacher at the elementary level. He has lived with his family in Southern California's Coachella Valley since 1999. Any spare time is spent with them, writing, reading, or boxing.

**Alexis Jaimés** is the son of Mexican immigrants and lives in Santa Ana, CA. Previously published in *Polemical Zine*, *Alegria Magazine*, *Loud Coffee Press* and featured at the award-winning Fullerton Museum Center, he earned his BA in English from California State University, Long Beach, and an MS and teaching credential from California State University, Fullerton to become a bilingual elementary teacher. He aims to empower and uplift his community through words.

**Leslie Lisbona** has been published in various literary journals, most recently in *Wrong Turn Lit*. She is the child of immigrants from Beirut, Lebanon and grew up in Queens, NY. She currently lives in Walnut Creek, California.

**Chad W. Lutz** is a speedy, bipolar writer from Akron, Ohio. They graduated from Mills College in Oakland, California, with their MFA in creative writing in 2018. Their first book, *For the Time Being* (2020), is currently available through J.New Books. Other recent works appear in *Paper Dragon*,

*Final Girl Bulletin Board, Half and One, and Hunger Mountain Review.*

**Nosduh Nam** resides in the eclectic city of San Francisco, California, where the fog veils the streets in mystery and the hills echo with the sounds of inspiration. Nestled among the city's vibrant neighborhoods, he finds refuge in its coffee houses and parks, where the pulse of life beats strong. Drawing from the city's diverse culture and rugged beauty, his poetry reflects the complex tapestry of human experience against the backdrop of California's ever-changing landscape.

**Brendan Praniewicz** earned his MFA in creative writing from San Diego State in 2007 and has subsequently taught creative writing at San Diego colleges. He resides in Ocean Beach, California. He has had poetry published in *From Whispers to Roars, Tiny Seed Journal, That Literary Review, and The Dallas Review*. In addition, he received second place in a first-chapters competition in the *Seven Hills Review Chapter Competition* in 2019. He won first place in *The Rilla Askew Short Fiction Contest* in 2020. He was a *Pushcart* Nominee for poetry in 2023.

**Vanessa Ramirez** is a Cerritos College student from Artesia, California. She is majoring in English and pursuing a Creative Writing certificate. She likes to spend time reading books and journaling throughout the day. She finds it most therapeutic simply listening to music and hearing the sound of waves or rain. Going to the beach with her siblings, particularly when the weather is cloudy, is her favorite place to escape to.

**Cristian Ramirez Rodriguez** is a 21-year-old Venezuelan-Canadian physicist and interdisciplinary poet currently based in Concord, California. He currently works as a high-school math teacher in Oakland and plans to return to Canada in the 2024-2025 school year to begin graduate studies. You can read some of his work, and reach him at <https://linktr.ee/cristianramirezrodriguez>.

**Jackie Robledo** is a neurodivergent, Queer Chicane, first-generation university graduate who comes from a low-income/working class socioeconomic, mixed-immigrant status, and bilingual background. They write as a tool for personal and intergenerational processing and healing. They firmly believe in the power of the written and spoken word.

**Daniel Romo** is the author of *Bum Knees and Grieving Sunsets* (FlowerSong Press 2023), *Moonlighting as an Avalanche* (Tebot Bach

2021), *Apologies in Reverse* (FutureCycle Press 2019), and other books. His work can be found in *The Los Angeles Review*, *MAYDAY*, *Hotel Amerika*, and elsewhere. He received an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, and he lives, teaches, and rides his bikes in Long Beach, CA. More at [danieljromo.com](http://danieljromo.com).

**Lulu Salvaterra** is from California. She is 17 years old and a junior in high school at South Pasadena High School. Throughout her life, she has used writing to express herself. She hopes that by sharing her story, she can help others open up about theirs.

**Yogita Sharma** is a high school senior at Mountain House High School in California who appreciates the arts and has always been fond of exploring different ways in which she can speak her truth. She has just recently started writing poetry recreationally and always enjoys new opportunities.

**Caley Shiota** is a lover of cats and plants, an unapologetic proplifter, and constantly starts new books before finishing one first. After finishing at Cerritos College, she got called into the port to start her journey as a longshoreman casual. She would work there for five years before going back to Cerritos College to reignite her passion for wheel throwing. When Caley's not doing any of those things, she's usually writing in her plant room.

**Robin Young** is an artist based in Borrego Springs California who currently works in mixed media focusing mostly on collage and contemporary art making. Her focus is on collage art using magazine clippings, masking tape, wallpaper, jewelry, feathers, foil etc. and allows her to develop deep into the whimsical and intuitive. Robin's keen eye and gripping esthetic guide her viewers into her own semi-readymade world, repurposing nostalgic images for lighthearted and sometimes disquieting messages.





# *¡Pa'lante!*

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Published annually, *¡Pa'lante!* is dedicated to supporting California writers and artists. Its mission is to engage and promote underrepresented voices in the literary landscape, so writers and artists from all communities and identities are encouraged to submit.

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](https://www.cerritos.edu/english/Literary_Journal.htm).





# *¡Pa'lante!*

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