



¡Pa'lante!

Issue 2 • Spring 2021
Cerritos College

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Stephanie Johnson

THE LIFE-CHANGING MAGIC OF TIDYING UP

“I recommend it for anyone who struggles with the material excess of living in a privileged society”

-- Jamie Lee Curtis

You sit there on the edge of the bed,
holding those grubby tracksuit pants close
to your chest, trying to determine if they do,
in fact, spark joy; and if they do,
then how can you keep them when you have
eighteen other athleisure wear options in your wardrobe,
so, you set them aside in the “maybe” pile for the moment,
with the thirteen sweaters, the forty-two graphic tees,
and the uncounted lone socks that sit in a pile;
you still hope that their mates will miraculously
appear out of the wash one day,
and as you sit there drowning in stuff,
you dream that your whole life would improve
just by throwing out some clothes,
and maybe some books too,
and those Sega games from 1997...
Oooh, and those things there don't even fit any more—
but maybe they will by summer.
and... they definitely don't fit... ugh
there goes a seam!
OK, into the discard pile with these ratty things,
You tumble in waves of junk: it all
sparks joy, or at least it did when you bought it,
as you descend into the darkness, you close your eyes
and feel the joy of stuff, and you reject the change
and you sink into the deep.

MEMORIES

She slipped on the stockings. The expensive ones. Guanaco fur, or something like that—vicuña? Llama? Alpaca? She could never remember. They were gifted to her by an ex, a Chilean woman she'd met in New Zealand. Traveling the South Island together, sleeping in a rental van, eating red beans for dinner every night. Equal parts sublime and messy. Lesbians, queers—life on the Sapphic side was supposed to be easy. Shared genitalia, hormones, periods. But no, relationships were work. No matter who was involved. Sacrifice to appease, compromise.

She smiled, recalling the time they spent together. The taste of her tongue. The rambunctious outings in Christchurch. The dancing. The journey, the exploration. It was special. Really, truly. Until the differences, the problems, built up, thickening like the accretion of ice on a windshield. Overnight. And then, come morning, it's all there. So clear and so cold and the question comes to you: How much can I abide? Suddenly wrathful, angry, rabid and ready to bite at the mere suggestion. Don't you dare go to bed without washing your plate! Don't even consider moving that shelf! And why are you always rolling around in your sleep? And the smoking, it's all over you—yellow teeth, bad breath, stinking clothes. And somehow what was beautiful and rich now feels antithetical to the very idea of your own happiness.

Still, as she slid the stockings on, the warmth of their fur caressing her ankles and calves, she couldn't help remembering fondly even the worst of times. That's love for you. Relationships. Always filtered through the lens of nostalgia. But it really was tremendous. For a time. Naming the rental and scrubbing her until she was lustrous, blinding. The makeshift curtains. The exhaustive hiking. The bawdy jokes that inevitably functioned as foreplay. The myriad of whimsical ideas: crossing the Tongariro dressed as Frodo and Samwise; having sex aboard the ferry that crossed the Cook Straits; creating a computer program to detect homophobes; wearing cloaks to stave off the baleful Eye of Sauron.

She glanced down. Her right stocking was pilling. But that didn't concern her. All things come to pass; everything ends. Good or bad. It was her leg she was considering, contemplating. How much had it impacted everything? Had she not broken it climbing Mount Cook would things

have been different? Would their time have lasted longer? Would the end have been less messy? Without a leg, she was kaput—broken, useless. She couldn't do any hiking, climbing. No kayaking, no rafting. Nothing. And Manuela always waiting on her. It wasn't fair. But Manuela had insisted: it wasn't a big deal; she was happy to help.

Maybe it wasn't a big deal. Maybe she was just feeling guilty. Maybe she missed her. Manuela. Her freckles. Her dimples. Her thought pattern, her tenderness. And yes, her body: her stumpy legs; her curvy hips; her misshapen breasts, different sizes with nipples like thick baby carrots. Her paunchy stomach. The smell of her hair—that acrid fragrance that was the mix of tobacco smoke and lavender shampoo. Maybe. Maybe she did miss her.

She couldn't say. In hindsight everything melted together, the good and the bad. Nostalgia. Romanticizing an idea, an illusion. Wasn't she happier now? Back home, with a new job, a new apartment—wasn't this what she wanted? Already she was due for a promotion. Her colleagues adored her. She was seeing someone. But wasn't something missing? Didn't she leave something behind there? Some part of herself, some quintessential part of her being? Hadn't she been incomplete since her return? Like something wasn't quite right, like a person without a shadow?

Gently, she lifted herself from the edge of the bed. She went into the bathroom adjacent. She studied herself in the mirror. Short black hair, olive skin, glasses. Beauty mark on the chin, droopy ears, bushy eyebrows. What was missing? Everything appeared normal. As it should be. But she could tell: something was missing. Something wasn't right. But what was it?

Suddenly, as if guided by some force of nature, she returned to her bedroom. To the desk where her phone sat. A woman possessed, she scrolled her contacts, searching. She thought about sending a simple message, but this was too important, too urgent. So she called instead. But all she heard was the automated voice of rejection: The number you have dialed is incorrect.... Maybe she changed her number. That was always possible. Maybe a mutual friend had her new one. Again she scrolled through her phone, searching. Martín—Tincho—he would know. She texted him immediately.

And almost automatically, timelessly, he answered. She read the text a thousand times, but it never sank in. Everything was blurry, wet.

Ash Arumugam

MIDNIGHT BABY

A soul born in nighttime can rest easy
Their eyes can settle into the details of the dark
Like an analog picture bleeding into place
It is the rest of us that meet this time of day
Who grab blindly at odd shapes
Who cannot see the beauty of the night
Without knowing it first

32°F

You wake with the sun. You both get up and stretch, but while you sit up and crack your back, the cruel sun reaches for the ends of the planet and barely warms the whole world awake with a soft steam. Ripples rigidly fold under the frozen water as you step onto the ice.

“Good morning beautiful,” you murmur to it and the ice settles.

Yawning, you stagger into the elevator. It drills down 2,100 meters into the city. As it breaks through the ice, cracks form and the ice growls, threatening to topple over and completely crush you.

“Rest,” you say, “you are treasured. You are enough.”

The ice reassembles itself into smooth walls that tower above you. You notice how the city is empty this morning. You are absolutely alone. You have the sudden urge to yell, and you do so - you jump into the air and crash into the ground and throw a tantrum - anything that can break this deafening silence.

You are interrupted by the sight of a familiar blur. Recognition dawns upon you, and you turn to walk in the other direction. As you dart between icicles, you glance over your shoulder and shudder as you see it.

A stream of water trails behind you. It pauses under your gaze and then starts to rise. You break into a gentle stride, hoping to not alarm it and make it rush towards you. It stalks you from a distance, slowly gaining momentum. You don't run until you feel it nipping at your heels.

You turn into a corner and find yourself in an unfamiliar part of the city. You glide down the street. You can feel the ice under your feet start to crack, and you shift your weight from one leg to the other as quickly as possible. You throw out a few words of encouragement to the ice in hopes of appeasing it. Your steps fall lighter and more frequent. You have never heard of anyone who has fallen through the ice, and you don't intend to be the first to find out.

But the water does not shift from its course. It stretches out towards you and rises. Soon, it looms above your head, swaying to an invisible tune before it crashes and latches onto your leg. You still continue along, hoping that you can eventually flick the water off. Instead, it grips you tighter. Droplets dig into your skin, and you shudder. The water drags itself along with you, never breaking its contact. Fear kicks in and you stop to give your leg a good shake. The water slides off and you have a moment of relief

before the ice underneath you gives in and shatters.

You yourself shatter. You wish that you had seen the water beforehand.

I hate you, you think to yourself before giving up.

As you sink down, you curl into yourself. Just as you are about to close your eyes for the last time, a flash of light blinds you. Bubbles surround your body, stroking your skin. Tiny whispers circle you: *you are beautiful. you are worthy. you are enough. you are loved.*

The water pushes you up to the surface. It then blooms into a repeating pattern that traces up all along the city. You finally realize how deeply impacted the ice is by the kindness that the people gave to it for centuries. You smile and give a gentle pat on the ground.

“Thank you,” you simply say.

The planet beams with pleasure and shoots up a spray of water that freezes into a cascading crystal.

You are welcome, it says.

Jenny Thomas

SITTING IN THE DARK

Day after day just sitting in the dark,
Emotions are spent,
All energy gone,
Not dressed, hair a mess.

I will get up and move today.

The sun has set, the day is done,
All the emotions of pain and loss
Nothing changed, still the same,
I can't move, I can't think.

It was just a pajama kind of day.

So empty inside
I feel so lost
Weeks have passed
Already a month?

Not dressed,
Hair still a mess
Day after day
Still sitting in the dark.

Laine Derr

WOKE

Fresh, still dripping with showered thoughts,
days spent chasing birds without names,
days not measured in halves, empty or full,
a realist, she laughs, on a chain to Chino,
woke up on Sunday knowing the truth.

Meztli Morales

MOTOWN LOVE

Let's ride together, *viejo*.
In our Chevy Belair,
Twilight Turquoise,
Cruisin' down Olympic Blvd.
While the Miracles harmonize
How you've got a hold on me,
As we go to our favorite
Taco spot, King Taco.
Our love in stereo.

You, in your pompadour,
Just how I like it, slicked
Back with pomade,
Me, with the Chicana pomp
The big one you just want
To touch but don't want
To ruin, you know how
Hard it is to make this shit
Stand.

Let's finish our tacos, *viejo*,
And I'll let you touch it
When we get home.

MODESTO GOSPEL MISSION

We live in a homeless shelter. We children understand this is unusual, but we like it because it's like playing a game of pretend. We are Little Orphan Annie or Madeline. We sleep in a large room of forty bunk beds. Women we've never seen before lie on their mats, snoring, clipping their toenails, reading, or brushing their hair. They are women with sad eyes who laugh easily and speak loudly. Some roll their eyes, some place their hands on their hips, and some say, "Don't get me mixed up in your drama!" Some call us "honey" and "sweetheart."

Ms. April, a large black woman, combs my tangled hair and rolls tight cornrows on my scalp. I wince from the pain. "Don't start crying on me," she laughs. I have a crush on her son Andre, who plays basketball and has dreads that hang low by his ears. Mom tells me to talk to him. She says he's shy. But I'm shy, too.

Sandra, a woman from Mexico, calls me *mija*, speaks to me in Spanish. *Boys are never to be trusted*. You stay away from them. She rolls her eyes when I don't understand her. "But you're Mexican, *mija*," she says. "You need to learn Spanish."

We girls take a shower together in the communal shower. We like to look at the different women. Some with tattoos on their backs. Some with one tiny tattoo each on their feet: a heart, a rose, or an ex-boyfriend's name. Some with sagging hips, and others with taunt stomachs. Some with breasts that make us wish we were already women, and others with scars where breasts used to be. We like them all. Some with hair so long that it covers their backs completely. Some with hair that is cut shorter than men. Some with honey hair dyed too much, so it's brittle, breaking, leaving chunks in the drain.

We line up in the cafeteria, like at school – except there's more food, and there's always dessert. Hot food, like Thanksgiving food, better food than we normally have when we used to have our own home. We pretend this is our family reunion, like in *The Addams Family*. We like this family. We want to stay in this pretend forever.

But we hate cleaning bathrooms, sweeping and mopping floors, doing dishes. Every night, there's a curfew. We're not sure where we'd be otherwise, but we know we don't like being told what to do. Everyone must be in the big room by seven to listen to a sermon, one that is usually too long. Mom says she's heard it all before. We act like that's true for us, too, crossing our arms, closing our minds.

All the men, the ones who would maybe tempt Mom, are not allowed in our space. We are safe from men who want to take Mom from us, distract her from being a good mom to us. Men who like to drink too much, smoke too much, swear too much. Men who are angry at their daddies. Men who have a hard time keeping a job. Men who are always blaming. These men live on the other side of the mission, but these men also serve us food in the cafeteria. One of these men, the one Mom says has nice blue eyes, winks at Mom one morning, and I feel like my stomach has turned into a bundle of knots. I'm angry at him, at Mom, at this damn mission. Don't they know those men ruin everything?

Anjali Pajjuri

REPARATIONS FOR AN OLD WOMAN

i've decided this morning that I shall
marry the farmer's son(s).

divinity is timeless;
yet, i still print perjuries, and so i
bequeath my lovers this repose.
i seek men that are not unkind,
i seek

silkworms that thread me a gossamer
veil, mandarins half-dipped
in chocolate,
dried omens
and a husband.

my exigence is this; this moment,
this life.

the white currents ebb in femininity,
eclipsing with each new moon.

(the locusts like to breed along this
river.) i walk in stoicism beside them,
and

gasp, in retribution, at how delightful it must be:
marriage with a woman.

MR. CHAVEZ'S BEST FRIEND

The Martinez children rode their bikes around the neighborhood every Sunday afternoon. It was Emanuel, Clarissa, and Jacob, who lived down the street.

"Hey, stop! Dad's back," said Clarissa, stopping on her tricycle.

Mr. Martinez opened the door of his truck and stepped out. He then went around to the passenger's door and opened it. A hand reached out to hold on Mr. Martinez's shoulder for support, and Mr. Chavez, the next door neighbor, hopped out.

"Why is your dad always giving that old man a ride? Where do they go?" asked Jacob.

"Papi takes him to see his best friend, at the old people's homes," replied Clarissa. "Abuelita wanted to go to one."

"The homes Abuelita looked at weren't like the ones Mr. Chavez's best friend is in. He's in a crazy people's home," said Emanuel.

Clarissa got goosebumps, "No, he is not. Why would he be there?" she said in a worried tone.

"Well, the other day," the children got closer to each other. Emanuel looked around. "The coast is clear. The other day... I overheard mom talking to one of her nurse friends who said Mr. Chavez was lobotomized."

"Lubota...what?" said Clarissa.

"Lobotomized, what is that?" asked Jacob.

"Well, after some research on the dark web..."

"The dark web? Really?" said Jacob.

"Shh..." said Emmanuel, "Yea, the dark web." He said silently. "It's when doctors take out your brain and chop it up into pieces like carnitas, so you can't do things you used to, and sometimes you go crazy. That's why he's there."

"Take your brain out? Why would they do that? You need it for everything. Look, I'm using it right now," said Jacob as he wiggled his fingers.

"Yea, Mr. Chavez's best friend is crazy, *esta loco!*" yelled Emanuel as he waved his arms in the air.

"Maybe he just needs a little help because he's old," said Clarissa softly.

"No, he's crazy," Emanuel replied, exaggrating as he rode off on his

bike, "let's go, guys!"

"I'm staying," Clarissa responded.

"Let's go to the dirt ramp behind your house, Jacob."

"Look, I'm using my brain to peddle," said Jacob.

As they rode off, Clarissa watched her father. He was walking out of Mr. Chavez's yard. He saw Clarissa and smiled, then slowly looked around.

"Y tu hermano?" he asked.

"Se fue ala casa de Jacob!" she shouted across the Street.

"Y ahi te dejo? Alone?" he asked as he nodded his head, hands on his waist.

"No, I'm waiting for you!"

He smiled, "Esperame, I'm going." He looked both ways and smiled at her again. He crossed the street. "Okay, vamonos." She started to peddle, "Hey, fijate, look both ways, mija!"

She stuck her head out over her handlebars, looked both ways, "No cars."

"Okay, vamonos, vamonos," said Mr. Martinez while they crossed. They got to their driveway, Mr. Martinez threw himself on their yard, "me muero, me muero!" he shouted jokingly.

As he played, dead Clarissa got off of her bike, grabbed the water from her basket, and drank some. She walked towards Mr. Martinez and laid on top of him.

"No te mueres papi," she whispered.

"Okay, mija, no me muero," he replied. "Let's see what we see in the sky today, mija."

She laid next to him on the grass, looking at what shape the clouds would form.

"That one looks like a turtle, oh una mariposa!" she pointed at the butterfly looking cloud.

"Mira es, La Mano, La Escalera, y La Rana, Loteria!" said Mr. Martinez.

They laughed. Clarissa searched for the next shape, squinting her eyes and pointing at the sky. She came across a brain-shaped cloud. She stopped giggling.

"Papi."

"Yes, mija?"

"Emanuel said that they took out Mr. Chavez's best friend's brain and that he's in a crazy house."

"Ahi Emanuel, he should be in the crazy house. No mija, he's in a

home where he gets help, nomas necesita mas ayuda.” He explained to her.

Clarissa got up quickly, “I told him that, but he said ‘he’s loco!’ He even said he was lobotomized.”

Mr. Martinez knew what she meant. He was bothered, “Ahi Emanuel, alrato hablo con el.”

“Papi,” she said.

“Yes, mija?”

“Can you tell me about Mr. Chavez’s best friend?”

“His best friend’s name is Pablo,” he sat up, “come here,” he sat Clarissa down in front of him.

“Pablo used to live in this house...”

“Really?”

“Yes, mija, a long time ago. Mr. Chavez always lived in that house, and one day, Pablo moved in next door and instantly became best friends. They did everything together, they were inseparable, and they loved each other.” He said calmly.

“Like how I love Emanuel?”

“No, mija, how I love your mother. Pero en esos tiempos ese amor estaba prohibido.”

“What’s that?”

“Prohibited, it was forbidden,” he replied.

“When Pablo’s parents found out they took him to a doctor. They believed he had a problem and believed the doctor could fix it. Mr. Chavez said they took him away for a couple of days. When Pablo returned, he wasn’t the same.”

“How was he?”

“He could no longer do things he used to. He didn’t talk much anymore. It crushed Mr. Chavez seeing him like that, He tried to communicate with him, but nothing would get through. All Pablo would do was stare at Mr. Chavez, emotionless. They moved a couple of months later.”

“To where he lives now?” she asked.

“No, mija, se fueron lejos. But Mr. Chavez searched for him, searched for a long time, and he found him and brought him to the home he is in now.

“Why would his parents let the doctors do things to him? He was fine before.”

“I don’t know mija. It was a dark time for love in those days.”

“What about now?”

“No son todos malos, they were just taught about love differently. Nobody should decide who you can love.” He grabbed Clarissa by her shoulders, “puedes a amar a quien quieras.”

Clarissa looked him in his eyes, “Te amo a ti papi!” and hugged him.

“Yo tambien Clarissa,” he said as he caressed her head.

“Can you take me to meet Pablo next time?” she asked. “Of course, we’ll have to ask Mr. Chavez first, but I’m sure he’ll be okay with it.”

“Clarissa, it’s time to shower!”

“Your mama is calling you. You better hurry.”

“Okay, papi, I’ll talk to you later.” Clarissa got up from the ground and walked towards her front door.

As she walked in, her mother walked out.

“Are you ready for your shift, mi amor?”

“Ya sabes, what were you two talking about?” she asked.

“Emmanuel told Clarrisa about Mr. Chavez’s friend being lobotomized.”

She shook her head, “Ahi ese Emanuel, I’m sure he exaggerated and made it sound worse.”

“Yes, yes, he did. But I tried to bring it down a notch, la neta que, I don’t really know about it myself.”

She looked away, “It was a procedure doctors would do back in the ‘60s to the late 80’s I think. It’s banned in many places. The doctors would cut out a piece of your brain in the frontal lobe.”

“That’s the front of the brain?” he asked.

“Si, they thought that would make the gay go away, but it just left them messed up. It had many side effects.”

“Pobrecito Don Pablo.”

“Si, pero que bueno que tiene a Mr. Chavez, que lo cuida.”

“Yes, thank god Mr. Chavez is by his side.”

“Well, it’s not the same as it was back then, esta un poco mejor. People still disagree on who someone can love,” he replied.

“Bad people?”

Christine Neuman

THE GOAT

I thought I knew loneliness,
but when you're at the local farmers market
at Carmichael Park, Sunday morning
you buy a goat's foreskin,
sew it onto your back,
and walk through the town proud.
The goat says hello in the eyes
of everyone who stares,
because they cannot see the goat
they hold within.
They have no idea
I am the goat.
I am the wind.
My limbs began to wither.
I do not love marriage.
Her dull smell, her thin string-like hair
wrapped in a ball within my stomach.
The babbling of your partner of ten years.
The unbearable silence returning,
sounding sweeter than any bar talk.
I do not love marital sex.
I do not love polyandry.
Because I keep the worst company
in the company of myself.

CANNIBALS

My brother rolled paper joints.
Sometimes he used pages from novels,
soon, even the Bible.
He walked the streets,
followed his friends to juvie for 3 months.
He once said to me as we walked home
from school,
*What if the people who lived on this street
were cannibals?*
We laughed, and then looked over
at an old man wearing a white t-shirt
and a cold stare,
after holding eye contact with one another
for several seconds,
my brother looked back at me and said,
See I told you, cannibals.

Charles Lewis Radke

THE KING OF LUXURY (VINYL)

“Out, damned spot! Out, I say!”

--Lady Macbeth

My next-door neighbor Cathy has lived in her house for thirty-four years--since the homes here were built--so naturally she seemed like a good person to ask about the history of our carpet. On a Sunday evening, I sent her this text message: “Do you remember any previous owners of our house having new carpet installed?”

I had been thinking a lot about our carpet in recent months. That’s because the longer I stared at it, the more it looked like one of those antique maps of the world. It was parchment-colored with darkening, amorphous micro-continentals that seemed to bloom if I gazed into them long enough. It was like watching clouds move.

Minutes later, Cathy responded: “The first owner lived a rather wild life,” she said. “So the second owner had to replace the carpets.”

Suddenly, I was much less interested in the tenure of our flooring, which my family of five plus two dogs--Winnie the Poodle and Perry the Incontinent--have walked upon for almost a decade. During that same time, based upon nothing more than keen observation, both dogs have hiked up their haunches and dragged their anal sacs upon it no fewer than four-thousand times, give or take.

At sixteen years and counting, Perry has gone full grumpy on us. He snaps at every groomer who gets near his face, which is why his damp maw now looks like a pot scrubber. And somehow, despite all the arthritis and having just a few teeth, he wriggles free of his nighttime diaper just to show me who’s boss. I can see the contempt in his blind, milky eyes; his voice, if he had one, would be Vito Corleone’s: “What have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully?” The Dogfather has lost quite a bit over the years, but his dignity is apparently still intact.

I texted Cathy and asked her to tell me more about “a rather wild life.” That’s one of those things I just couldn’t leave hanging in Cyberspace.

“Drugs and dealers and kids who rode their bikes from the street into the house,” she replied. Those were her exact words, so I imagined kids riding bikes *directly into* the house without stopping, just cruising past a chained German shepherd, through an open front door, and into the living

room. In my mind, these ruffians dropped their greasy, muddy bikes *on the carpet*, then demanded sandwiches, which the drug dealer homeowners likely told them to fix themselves.

“Get your own baloney,” they’d have said, and since it was the eighties, they might have been nervous and wide-eyed and overstimulated, maybe a few months behind on their BMW payments.

Another text or two with Cathy and some simple math brought me to the conclusion that the carpet in this former trap house was thirty years old; the shelf life for a bag of potato flakes but still more than a decade older than Perry, whose loose, unruly bladder brought me and Karen to a long-overdue tipping point a few weeks ago.

I am a clean, fussy man, and after several months of piddle pads and doggie diapers and scented carpet powders, after absorbing and scrubbing and steam cleaning, after the very last time I stepped on a wet spot in my socks, I’d had it: I called a local flooring store and spoke to a nice young man with exceptional sales skills, but let’s face it: by that time, I was a pushover. I was an easy sell. I couldn’t get new flooring in this house fast enough.

It had gotten so bad, in fact, that I’d convinced myself it was time to sell our house and move to a place with clean, shiny floors. A museum, maybe. Or a castle. Or a mental hospital.

A couple of weeks later, at the bidding of our flooring salesman, two workmen came to our house and brought with them a remarkable capacity for destruction. In a few short hours, they sledgehammered our kitchen tile, then razored our carpet into sections, which they rolled up and carried to the front yard. Since old carpets hold four times its weight in dirt and dead skin, I am sure the carpet rolls were very heavy, especially since their undersides were also covered in a fine layer of moss and mold spores.

Immediately, I felt like a derelict for letting my children grow up in what may as well have been a rainforest.

When our kids were young, Karen and I would take them to see the elephant seals in San Simeon. Occasionally amongst the animals flipping sand over themselves, we’d see a rotting seal carcass covered in flies. This is what I thought of as I was taking pictures of our old carpet and a young mother appeared on the sidewalk across the street with her toddler. They stopped on the corner. The little guy pointed at my old carpet with his tiny finger, then his mother placed her hand on the back of his head and

moved him along. Though I couldn't hear them, I imagined the boy asked his mother why there were dead elephant seals in my yard. She would have said something like, "Oh, that's just nasty carpet, sweetie. That's what people used to put on their floors in the old days."

Once the workmen got all the bad stuff out of our house, they scraped and buffed and shop-vacced until all that remained was a concrete floor, which smelled faintly like mildew and, in some spots, featured what looked like ancient cave drawings.

Then, for three more days, these nice men whom we fed and cared for returned very early in the morning to install something called "luxury vinyl plank," which folks-in-the-know will tell you is the latest in durable, urine-resistant flooring.

The fact that "luxury" is part of the name makes me feel like a better, more accomplished person. After fifty-two years on Planet Earth, it's about time a little luxury came my way. Until now, the most luxurious thing I've ever owned is a velour bathrobe.

Interestingly, my garage floor, which I have painted and epoxied, was cleaner than our old carpet. A few years ago, I rolled out black, industrial carpet strips to protect my shiny floor paint from hot car tires. Sometimes, on Saturday mornings, I open the garage door and run the vacuum in there. This has been a great way to attract the attention of my neighbors as they pass on the sidewalk with their children and their Yorkies. These folks are unfailingly friendly. They always have a smile on their faces when they see me in my garage, running my vacuum.

My garage as a whole is so clean that I considered moving my twin daughters out there. Since they were Covid-gyped out of life in a freshman dormitory, I transformed the space into what could easily pass for a studio apartment. I thought this might give them a place to play beer pong and watch TikTok videos with their friends so they wouldn't miss out on the true college experience. Plus, they're individuating, and it's impossible to fall asleep in your clothes and wake up next to total strangers when your parents are around.

The space features a sectional sofa, a worn easy chair with ottoman, and Netflix streaming on a wall-mounted flat screen. There's the ping-pong table, a Nerf hoop, and a space heater. A sash bar window with horizontal blinds. To create a kind of starry night vibe, one of my daughters strung twinkle lights from the rafter beams. She laid out a welcome mat in front of the private side entrance, so guests, if they are so inclined, can wipe the excrement and E. coli from their shoe bottoms before entry.

Not that I've ever worried about excrement and E. coli on shoe bottoms.

Inside, we have a red, overstuffed chair in the corner of our living room. It has broad arms with space to set a book or a pair of eyeglasses. It has a matching ottoman on wheels, and Winnie the Poodle has learned that when she jumps on it, those wheels will carry her over the luxury vinyl as though she were riding a skateboard. One of my twins has been trying to capture this on video because among her hashtag goals is to be TikTok famous.

I have been sitting in this red chair quite a bit over the past week. Mostly, I just sit and stare at the opulent new flooring that spreads before me like a palace hall.

I am doing this on a Saturday morning when I hear Perry walk in. I hear him before I see him. His toenails click like tiny castanets. Very slow, tiny castanets. It's a sound that echoes, something I am told I'll get used to. The echoing, that is.

Perry passes in front of me. He turns his head in my direction and sniffs the air. In the absence of functioning eyeballs, this is how he now finds things. He sniffs them out. His clammy nose leads him to his bed by the fireplace bricks. He climbs inside, wheezes, hacks, and brings his head to rest. It takes him one-point-two seconds to begin snoring.

Sitting in my big red chair, staring at my new, luxurious floors, I feel like a king on his throne. "Bring me fine wine and stinky cheese!" I feel like I might just sit here a while. Why would I ever leave? I have a cup of hot coffee. I have morning sunshine sluicing through the blinds, warming the back of my neck. And I even have a robot vacuum that spins around the luxury vinyl like a giant hockey puck on tractor wheels, retrieving the millions of tiny menaces that once drove me mad.

Bring me a velvet diaper. Bring me a Balinese dancer in a golden crown. Bring me a silken pillow and I will rest my weary head.

Travis Stephens

SHARP

You can find it easily enough,
a post in a tools forum
or You Tube video, related to
one on making a wooden spoon
out of firewood. Make your
knife scary sharp.

Digress to Japanese versus
Arkansas stones, or diamond
dust on a plastic block.

Eye the wire edge.

Use a leather strop.

Use a bench grinder.

Or glue expensive sheets of
rare sandpaper to glass panes.

Nobody asks why.

A knife so sharp
the blade doesn't snag,
no tiny serrations,
just touch the blade
& it whispers
hungry.

Reflected in the mirror
blade is the cool
indifference of a
medicine cabinet.

Touch it to a rope &
the strands fall away
like snowflakes
or a fainting lady.

Put that thing away.

LAMENTATIONS IN TRAFFIC

O Keeper of Roadways most Swift
O wind of unheeded Progress
let the Volvos not Hinder this Carriage
let us Resolve and sing Halleluah!
Woe!

There Cometh a Minivan
Despair, it is a Carpool for Certain,
Foul of Breath, Countenance Hated!
Verily is turns.

It Changes Lanes without Signal,
does it Come this way?
Woe, its Brake Lights Flash.

What has befallen my People?
What Grim Portent lies over the Horizon?
O Sorrow, it is a Garbage Truck,
spawn of Hell, stinking, and Darkness,
it comes with a Cement Mixer, Slow and
most Unclean.

My People. Learn the truth.
Delivered onto the Day a Cup of Sadness.
Tomorrow drink not One more Coffee,
its bitter Harvest, readeth not the Paper
but Rise and Go.

Idler, you shall Weep for tardiness,
you will Incur the Wrath of ancient
Station wagons who smoke and Clog the
Lane most Fastest. Better to cleave
your Home in Darkness, enter the Highway
in the Company of White
Pickup trucks unnumbered,
whose drivers Lament wicked
Subcontractors and whose Curses fill the air.
Rise and Be Glad.

God has madeth the Suburbs.
God has sanctified the Freeway.
Say a prayer and Go there.

Scot Hurd

A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

For Natalya

Los Angeles 3:03AM

T-Minus 1 Minute and Forty-Five Seconds

Mason knelt before the device winking at him in the otherwise all-consuming darkness of his living room. A line of sweat rolled down the bridge of his nose, and he tried to ignore the yowling pain in the sole of his right foot. He rubbed his eyes, clicked on his penlight, and groaned.

Never before had he wished he'd followed in his father's footsteps and joined the bomb squad. Nevertheless, at 45 years deep into life, Mason Dunloe, purveyor of freshman philosophy at Dravrah Online University (where you can *earn* a bachelor's degree in just three months), shook his head grimly and thought, *There's a first time for everything.*

"Found it," he hissed into the Bluetooth earpiece connected to his phone.

Only moments before, as he had teetered on the edge of sleep in the comfort of the bed for which he'd spent his day longing, his wife Wanda had nudged him.

"Do you hear that?" she whispered.

Mason heard nothing and pretended not to hear her; he'd been enjoying only his fourth hour of sleep in as many days.

"Mason!" she hissed and shook his shoulder.

He sighed. "Yes, dear."

"Do you hear a noise?"

"Yes," he said, "I hear your voice and wish I knew a way to stop it."

"I hear noises in the living room."

"It's the house settling," Mason said.

"It is not."

After being soundly beaten in a brief but impassioned campaign to ignore the mystery noise, Mason found himself treading softly down the lightless hallway.

Armed with hawk-like vision, lion-like courage, and a father's sixth sense, he deftly navigated the blackened tunnel, creeping past his 1-year-old

daughter Sara's room like a cat slinking past the...

Yowzer!

The edge of a wooden block—one of a collection that Sara loved to scatter across the floor like caltrops—sank into the soft underbelly of his right foot. Mason clamped his hand over his mouth, blinked back tears, and swallowed whimpered curses, but made no sound and had continued to stalk the house in silence.

Now, kneeling before the device, something trivial about the block nagged at him. I could have sworn *I cleared the floor before bed.*

“What do you see?” asked Wanda through the earpiece, interrupting the thought.

Mason gulped. Looking at the maze of gears, buttons, and blinking lights made him feel as though he'd smelled Wanda's latest attempt at Asian cuisine: confused, overwhelmed, and terrified, fighting an internal battle to grab his keys, abandon his family and drive to the nearest hotel to hold up there until morning.

But now, as then, he steeled himself, hoped for the best, and braced for the worst.

“Three wires,” he whispered, “yellow, green, and red, each connected to an LED by a plastic clip. Looks like they complete some sort of circuit.”

“How much time do we have?”

Mason zigzagged his light across the device until he found a yellow dial relentlessly ticking precious time away. “Ninety seconds. Maybe I should pull the red wire.”

“What? Why?”

“It's always the red wire on TV.”

Wanda chuckled. “Hopefully the person who built this thing watches as much TV as you do.”

Mason scoffed. “Your boundless faith never ceases to inspire.”

“Why don't you just take it outside?” Wanda asked.

“What about the neighbors?”

“To hell with the neighbors.”

Tempting (Mason and Wanda shared the good taste to despise the neighbors) but no good. “You know how powerful this thing is, I'd have to take it to the end of the block.”

60 Seconds

It was true. Although disguised as a child's toy, the Fischer Price

S2S-5000 Sit to Stand Party Walker was actually a sonic weapon with the power to penetrate stage four sleep like a bunker-buster missile. And unless Mason acted with faith, skill, and crackerjack timing, it would deliver its cacophonous payload of mooing cows, crowing roosters and clanging bells with the decibelic force of a NASA launch.

Worse it was protected from disarmament by a series of crafty failsafes: the battery case was secured by a screw so small and awkwardly placed it would make a Swiss watch blush; a terrible zinging noise protected the dial, preventing any attempt to reset it; and experience had taught Mason to never, ever jostle the S2S-5000.

“How the hell did the thing turn on, anyway?”

“Much as I love pointless questions,” Mason said, “let’s table that one until after I’ve diffused this thing.”

“Wait a second, I’ve found the manual.”

Hope leapt in Mason’s chest. “Where’s the power button?”

“Looking.”

45 seconds

“Look faster!”

“The goddamned manual is 74 pages long!”

Seconds ticked by. Panic filled Mason’s bladder, and his sweat went cold.

30 seconds

“I’m pulling the red wire,” he said, shifting from side to side.

Wanda grunted. “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“Why should I? I’m just a husband. This family has an infallible wife in possession of a concise, easily-navigated manual. Unfortunately, we’re out of time for either.”

“Fine,” she said, “do what you like, but you’re putting the baby back to sleep.” Then the line went dead.

Dammit! Of course, Wanda was right. Pulling the red wire was, at best, an arbitrary time-suck; at worst, who knew what hell it might unleash.

But what other option did he have?

15 seconds

Shutting out the pain in his foot and the doubt in his heart, Mason did something he'd never done before. He prayed. He reached out to the spirit of his father.

Dad, I know I didn't become the man you'd hoped I'd be, and I know it's been a long time, but I need you now. Help me, please.

For the rest of his life, Mason Dunloe—skeptic, atheist, man of reason—would raise his hand and swear to two things. The first: kneeling before that awful contraption, with all time, hope, and imagination exhausted, he experienced a miracle.

He felt the presence of his father, Mason Sr—dead these twenty years—next to him. A serene, even naïve sense of protection forgotten since childhood enveloped him, and he was possessed of a simple truth: though his life had been pockmarked by mediocrity, Mason's first moment of triumph had come at last. A small triumph perhaps, but his nonetheless.

Trusting to this and to fate, Mason closed his eyes.

He felt Dad's calloused fingers take his hand and guide it until it brushed plastic. Mason opened his eyes and found his finger touching a yellow switch that he'd failed to notice before.

He smiled. *Thanks, Dad.*

3 seconds

Mason exhaled, felt all tension melt from his shoulders, and tripped the yellow switch.

1 second

The second thing to which Mason would swear: he should have prayed to Dad's partner Sgt. Thompson. Or Lt. Mulaney, his boss, or to Waggy, the cocker spaniel Mason had gotten in third grade. He should have prayed to anyone but his father because the last time Mason Sr. experienced something for the first time, Mason Sr. had mistakenly cut the blue wire instead of the red wire when he was diffusing a bundle of C4.

When the dial ticked zero, Mason learned he'd not killed the power.

He'd cranked the volume.

A window-rattling clangor erupted from the great sonic engine and set his teeth on edge. As he clamped his hands to his head, trying to fortify himself against the blitzkrieg assault on his quivering eardrums, the culprit, the mastermind behind this maniacal plot, stepped from the shadows and

proudly took the helm of the S2S-5000.

It's impossible, he thought. Yet there Sara stood. Mason panned his penlight over to Sara's bedroom door and realized that she had, for the first time, opened it by herself.

Then he watched her push a green button that Mason had also failed to notice and the dreaded S2S-5000 fell silent.

Sara raised her arms above her head and squealed with glee.

Well, hell, he thought. Maybe he was a damned fool. Maybe his best days were behind him. Perhaps they never would come again. But Sara's had just begun, and in spite of the noise, the exhaustion, in spite even of himself, Mason joined his daughter's laughter.

Mateo Pérez Lara

HERETIC

you can't talk about the light like that, with all that love
there's no perfect way to be still, or use it all up.
Each moment unravels. You strike it,
hope it destroys something sweet that you hate
that is too clean for all the good people,
too expensive in the mouth.

They ask you, say, "hey, don't move too fast, don't stall, don't spill
everything out.

Where do you go now with that silver in your veins?"

I have a need for smelting
the remains of my past lovers
down into a ring or two.
Say you love someone over & over,
say you don't, watch them pulse,
crumble like the ruins
in the depths of a cavern, bats & lizards,
acidic and decayed and cold,
co-existing with your worst memories,
possessed bat-wings flapped on chapped lips.
We batter each other a bit before we go
or let go. Amends seem not to matter

when you kill the worries with the right touch,
right spot straight to ash in the alley. They say "no, no, bad!"
I'm in the field softer. This was our last resort before
we cornered each other for one
last goddamn truth, because you felt it too and you liked it.

WHERE FAITH DOES NOT KILL

2016 – Philippines’ president Rodrigo Duterte declared the War on Drugs. The excuse – *shabu* – cheap heroin – had infiltrated the country through China and had turned the country into a “narco-state.” His promise: all drug criminals would be *eliminated*.

Mass incarceration followed.

The poor who were closest to areas where *shabu* was used were targeted first. After being accused, some were thrown into crowded jail cells. But a great many of the country’s addicts were convinced to turn themselves in, due to some higher faith in the government to treat them well if they surrendered. Maybe they regretted it when they saw the bodies in the jail cells stacked like firewood, waiting to be thrown into the fire.

Outside on the streets, the vigilantes followed orders straight from the president.

On the backs of black diesel-fueled motorcycles, they gunned down anyone suspected to be dealing *shabu*. The Tondo, the poorest section of Manila, became a dead pool where assassins struck down justice. Others were revenge artists, not so much concerned with pursuing lofty ideals than with their own petty vendettas. They strapped cardboard signs declaring “Drug Dealer” with a black sharpie on dead Filipinos. Only after they died, were they reborn as heroin dealers and users. Their murders justified.

And the president would say this about the violence: “If you think that you can get justice simply because you lost somebody who’s into drugs, I’m sorry to tell you I will not allow it.”

Justice would not follow.

The year before, when I was in the Philippines, I had visited my Tito Pitong’s grave for the first time. He was my mother’s favorite brother and third youngest of nine siblings. My mother, Lola, Tita July, Ate Michi, and I rode from the family house in a tricycle - a motorbike attached to a metal enclosed carriage, capable of carrying six passengers including the driver. I was squished with Ate on the small red seat behind the bicyclist while my mother, Lola, and Tita managed, with some difficulty, to fit into the carriage. The carriage shifted the entire tricycle to one side, but the machine bravely chugged with its weight. The bicyclist, with his memorized map of Manila, drove skillfully through the city’s mazes.

The main roads were filled with old motors, jeepneys, whose yellow and white cabs spewed dark fumes. They were unable to access the new Sky Freeway which my Tita July grumbled was only finished because politicians needed the people's votes to win positions in the government. We moved along on the older streets and passed markets, halls, and monuments to the *bayani*, the country's historical heroes.

On a different day, I visited Jose Rizal's monument in the heart of Manila. Rizal is often claimed to be the Philippines national hero, though no law from the Philippine government has officially declared it. He lived during the waning years of Spanish rule in the Philippines. Educated in the Philippines and in Europe, Rizal wrote in Spanish and in Tagalog. He wanted to prove that Filipinos were equal citizens as the Spanish, that they were more than brown bodies laboring for the crumbling empire. He thought reform through peaceful, legal means was possible.

He was hardly the revolutionary. Though his novels dealt with Filipino suffering under Spanish corruption, he had faith that Spain would recognize him and his people as equal. When the violent revolution in the Philippines broke out, he refused to join, believing the outbreak would ruin any chance to have peace with Spain. He thought that through his writings alone the change he envisioned would become real.

His ideas of pursuing peace with Spain were naive. An oppressive, corrupt regime wasn't going to surrender control of a colony from which they'd had profited for 333 years. Words were not going to undo blood spilt and money spent. And so, in return for his faith in words and pursuing peace, he would unwittingly be led into the revolutionary fire. The Spanish captured him, put him on trial for treason, and then condemned him to die by firing squad.

He was forced to stare into the Manila Bay, hands tied, with his back towards the men aiming at him with their rifles. When the command was shouted to shoot, Rizal, at the last possible moment, spun to face the squad, to look squarely into the empire that betrayed him, and when the triggers were pulled, he yelled his last infamous words – "It is done."

The day I visited his bronze statue, the clouds on the horizon threatened rain. Despite knowing what I knew about him, I felt overwhelmed. From its pantheon of heroes, the Philippines had exalted a gentleman who had faith in peace and died violently for that faith.

After an hour of being cramped on the small tricycle, we finally arrived at the cemetery gates. The cemetery didn't appear any different from

the ones in the United States, though I knew that was not always the case. My mother told me of cemeteries flooded with graves that there was hardly any room for the living to visit. Some poor families, after selling all they had to bury their dead, would then fashion their loved ones' gravesite as homes. They would sleep and wake, side by side, with the dead. If a cemetery had mausoleums, it was not unusual for a family to live in them. The Philippines lacked enough capital to build houses or create jobs, so the homes of the dead and the responsibility to take care of them were all that was left for their survivors.

Even in death, however, there is privilege.

At the cemetery entrance, my family and I piled into a golf cart, driven by someone who worked at the cemetery, and the driver drove us deep into the cemetery on its crooked, black paved roads. We sped away from the iron entrance and bars that demarcated the boundary of living and dead. About twenty minutes passed when Tita July barked at the driver to stop. The brakes on the cart were so weak the cart skidded before it completely halted. Lola, Ate, my mother, and I left Tita July to continue harassing the man about payment. We walked up to a small hill filled with gravestones.

"Taba taba po," they whispered to each gravestone. *Excuse us, excuse us.*

I said it too to the graves with fresh flowers, to the ones with a thin film of dust on its surface, and to the ones marked only with a name and date on gray cement. About half a mile from the street, we reached him. My Tito Pitong. His amber gravestone with small white speckles had his birth named inscribed: John Tayag. My Lola named gave all her children first names that begun with the letter "J" as my mother christened me and my brother's names with the letter "L."

I walked carefully to where Tito rested, aligned my red Jordans just on the edge where the stone sank into the ground.

I said, "Taba taba Tito."

Once my Tita July caught up to us, we did the sign of the cross, and joined the rest of the cemetery in a moment of silence.

Threads of stories change over time. Some have receded into the beige background of my everyday living, into the walls of my family's suburban townhouse. Yet, others grow brighter over time. Yet I find, with the story of Tito Pitong, that an enduring brightness still flickers.

Once I was told that my Tito Pitong was killed by roaming band of

loan sharks as a case of mistaken identity. Later I was told he was killed by a security guard at the mall. He had been looking for a job. In other stories, I was told he wasn't looking for anything; he was a loiter. I was told he had no connections to drugs. I was told, yes, he had vices. He was addicted to some form of marijuana. I was told both everything and nothing. I was told I was told I was told...

Truth remains buried in contradiction.

My Lola's "amen" signaled it was time to eat. It was not unusual for Filipino families to picnic with the dead. The most massive national picnic is on November 1st, the Day of Dead, where tribes of Filipinos descend into the cemeteries with trays of food.

My family didn't talk about Tito's life while we ate lunch. Instead, they spoke of him like he was still alive. They described how their lives were going and their plans. Ate discussed her decision to move to Dubai in a year as though Tito could still offer sage advice and share his own former difficulties with job hunting. My mother talked about her experience working in American retail dealing with annoying, demanding American customers. Lola lamented a little about growing old and how soon she'd soon be up there with Tito. Tita July chided Lola and joked with Tito as if he knew how difficult their mother could be.

I listened to them and forgot that Tito wasn't actually there. Not in physical form, anyways, but I could tell my family believed his soul remained. As Catholics, who thought the dead were actually alive somewhere in heaven, they could be forgiven any of their delusions.

"Pitong," my Tita said at where my Tito laid. "Your niece graduated from a big American college. She's back now and brought American shoes to step on you!"

We laughed. This was a running joke since my mother, my brother, and I landed in country: because all our possessions had been in America, they were imbued with spectacular powers – mostly relating to the making of money magically appear, like my iPhone, which if anyone had one in the Philippines, would've had to have been imported from elsewhere, like Dubai, where they were remarkably cheaper. My Tita July and Ate faked being jealous of the objects that would return with us to America, remarking how these ordinary things were able to go and live with us. After all, visas were hard to get, yet a *tabo* – a plastic bucket with a handle used to wash after going number two in the bathroom – was able to pass through customs quickly. And the job security for tabos was exceptionally high since the

plastic never disintegrated.

Stepping on my Tito, or at least the soil my Tito was buried in, must've sounded like an honor to my Tita July and Ate Michi. American iPhones are one thing, but American shoes that might have carried American soil on them? Maybe a money tree would grow on top of Tito's grave. Perhaps that would provide reparations for his death because there was no justice better than the sprouting of green paper straight from the ground.

But where my family saw American money, I saw American violence. If I were to step on my Tito with them, instead of money popping up like daisies, I wondered if blood instead would sprout like a geyser from the ground? His blood, their blood, everyone's blood?

My mind wandered from my family discussion of the money involved to maintain Tito Pitong's grave, to something else my mother once said about Filipino funerals. For 40 days and 40 nights, families held vigil over the dead. They said prayers, sang hymnals, and surprisingly, feasted, well, the dead themselves couldn't eat anymore. After 40 days, there would be a procession, and the dead would be buried. My mother believed Filipinos find comfort in the rituals. At least she did when Tito died.

By 2019, 20,000 Filipinos would have been estimated to have died due to the War on Drugs. That's about 800,000 days spent keeping vigil; 2,191 years spent mourning the growing dead. I think of the 21 years my Tito was allowed to live. I think about the faith required for families to undertake these rituals. Such faith I have yet to experience, to sit for 40 days and 40 nights attending to your loved one, to believe because they are finally at rest and so, conversely, should be at peace.

Back at the cemetery entrance, our family decided to take a jeepney back home. We climbed aboard one that was stuck in Manila traffic. I sat next to my Lola and held her hand. I felt I was holding more bone than flesh. I worried I was hurting her, so I tried to pull away. But I was surprised when she kept a strong grip on my hand.

She wasn't going to let me go so easily.

She whispered closely, her lips brushing the soft fleshy part of my ear. "You must always pray. Always pray for me and Tito Pitong."

I said I would but, in truth, I was afraid. I knew that faith alone would not save me or anyone else from feasting on more loss.

FOUR-LETTER WORD

I remember blue and red flashing across the screen as the mighty Spider-
man leaped from
buildings.

I remember the rough carpet on my aunt's living room floor as I devoured
steamed broccoli
in a sea of cheese.

I remember the metal door swinging open as its hinge cried out to warn me
as my aunt walked
in.

I remember her dark shadow and the stewing heat she let inside the
comfortable world I created
for myself.

I remember her sad eyes and the words that cut like a million daggers.

I remember the wave that crashed over me and swallowed me whole.

I remember that six-letter word ringing over and over again in my head.

I remember cancer.

I remember *forgetting* every other word in the English language.

I remember trying to remember my mother's beautiful face and her warm
embrace.

I remember the salty ocean that rushed from my eyes to my quivering lips.

I remember the sound of my beating heart while the world went silent.

I remember the paralyzing fear and the darkness surrounding me.

I remember rising from the sandpaper carpet and running out into the
world seeking vengeance.

I remember screaming at the wind as the golden sky began to blacken over
the horizon.

I remember the cold metal against my warm knuckles as I knocked on my
mother's door.

I remember her pale, yellow skin and fear-stricken eyes.

I remember that she was fading, disappearing, as if she were a ghost.

I remember the weight that lifted after I was able to mutter a tear-filled

“I’m Sorry”.

I remember her beautiful face against my cheek as her warm embrace
enveloped me.

I remember my mother and her fight with the six-letter word.

I remember my mother’s war.

I remember the war my mother won.

I remember the six-letter word that tried to break us.

I remember the four-letter word that fought by our side.

I remember love.

BEHIND MY GOLDEN LOCK

Knowing a certain security can come from living inside a locked cage, at times I miss my previous life, seen through cold golden bars of imprisonment and preservation. Being so tiny, the few scraps and crumbs were banquets to me, and regular ones at that. And my miniscule size protected me, as I would not have proven to be even one mouthful for a hungry beast. My mouth was much more useful singing my chirpy tunes anyhow, since many a wanderer found my notes charming, unintentionally beckoning them to my confines in the woods. Being in no peril, and having no prominence in the goings on, I had lived most of my life in peaceful harmony within my pen, pierced only by brief bouts of dread and barbarity.

The wild forest trees are now my home, and the danger from a multitude of predators keeps me mute. I am free to fly as far as my heart desires, and the wide world is free to devour me, beak to claw. The brightness of my blue feathers is a danger to me, and difficult to dull. As are memories that sometimes fly into my head, of a cabin not too far from here, and of the horrid occurrence that shattered my bonds and drove me to flee the place.

It was warm, inviting, and kept that way with a purpose. Sitting in a sweet smelling, green clearing, the lodge called to passers-by. The setting sun would shine off the windowpanes, reflecting colorful wildflowers and honeybees residing in the front walk. Door slightly ajar, comers would be welcomed by wafting scents of broth spiked with wild garlic, purple sage, and a hint of harlequin pepper. It was furnished with comfortable chairs, and a rustic mantelpiece framed the few crackling logs warming the room.

As previously confessed, there were times when my singing brought a weary traveler striding through the door, though upon the arrival I would immediately cease, not wanting to be part of any carnage. But, too late. They would rest their tired limbs in whichever chair was just right. Some would have a bowl of broth, waiting for it to cool to a pleasant temperature, unknowingly savoring their final meal. My painted wooden cousin would cuckoo the ending of the day, and every traveler would climb the crooked stairs to the cozy beds in the only room next to the curtained loft.

On their way up, they would never notice the curtained loft, the hidden spot concealing the designers of their doom. They certainly never noticed it coming down either, too filled with terror, shrieking, as life blood

flowed out of them – or because they came down, bit by bit, silent and in separate pieces. The curtain, cream colored and covered with lavender flowers, hid the three of them, lurking, with their razor-sharp claws and their hungry dripping fangs. Their fur was thick and dark, and meant for the surrounding woods, but shiny and clean from the oddity of living indoors. I know not how they came to live there, though I know the cottage was not their creation. Perhaps they ended its creator, much like they ended the unfortunate hikers wandering too close to their cozy lair.

Meals delivered themselves fairly often, and the offing took so little effort, one could say these beasts had it easy. In a way, they had been protected, living their easy lives in the cabin. It was an odd thought, to one such as me, for they seemed built not to need protection- so large, and so frequently ferocious. But there would come a day when all the ease would end, when they would meet a force, against whom, they would be no match. And my little life would forever be altered, and always mismatched with the environment in which I now reside.

The beasts did what beasts do, which is to fill their stomachs, and then, after a while, fill them again. These ones did choose a highly unusual method of trapping their prey...at least, unusual for their kind. Electing to dwell in a place erected by humans was also peculiar. Nevertheless, from what I could tell, there was nothing more extremely unnatural about them.

But there was something unnatural about her. A slight jingling sound preceded her as she stepped over the threshold. The lady was of a good size: tall, not too skinny, and healthy, with a youthful glow about her freckled face. She tossed her chestnut locks aside as she peered around, removing a stole of red fur and hanging it on the back of a chair. Her nails were of the same shade and filed to sharp points, appearing almost threatening. The woman's dress was all black and revealed nothing except a long smooth neck, better to turn her head about to view all her surroundings. Her peering was unnerving, so I remained still as could be, for I sensed darkness in her purpose.

She did not sit, nor did she taste the broth, which on that eve uncharacteristically lacked sage. The stranger set her satchel on the floor, and removed a black pouch. She then opened it, removing strange items, inspecting them one by one. Placing each on the kitchen table, the woman seemed satisfied with her haul, though it was hard for me to make out all the items, or their significance. There were a few bones, a possum tail, a fox ear, some other bits of fur, something black and shriveled, and what appeared to be a large eyeball, all milky and moist. Then, from a pocket, she removed

a small vial full of some type of liquid. About to open it, she stopped upon hearing a creak from upstairs. The lady tilted her head on that lovely neck of hers, before clearing all her belongings away.

She then spoke in a disturbingly sweet voice, “Come out. Come out, wherever you are.”

After a brief period of uncertainty, the beasts foolishly made their appearance. Not a glint of fear was shone in the eyes of anyone in the house, except in mine. She gazed at the creatures, taking in the remarkable sight of them lumbering down the stairs. She had an odd smile as they crept closer, to inspect her, their mouths salivating. I knew they were planning their next meal. I knew what they thought of her.

Just right.

“Ah, you think me the feast?” Then she giggled the giggles of a young girl without a care in the world. Her eyes reduced to slits. “So fuzzy,” she whispered. She had nothing to fear.

Suddenly, and quick as any skilled predator, she cocked her head to the left, her unnaturally long neck emitting a snapping sound. The horrifying sound was accompanied by familiar metallic noises from every direction, and all at once. Every lock in the cabin, those on doors and windows alike, slammed shut. The sound of the locking of the locks was loud, so loud I felt it in my feathered breast.

The three fury beasts shrank away from the woman, uselessly, just dawning to the fact that the trap had sprung and they were caught in it. Her mouth opened into a broader smile, revealing a shiny gold incisor, glinting in the fire light. There was a moment of still silence, not more than the length of a heartbeat.

Then, chaos! A roaring scramble of sound, color, fur and blood. There was spittle, growling, and howling of pain. Furniture went crashing, as great wild bodies went racing and thrashing about the room. At times it was as though the prey were attempting to run up the very walls, trying to escape. But the walls held them in, as their furry pelts did not. Her movements were unnaturally fast, and seemingly impossible. Her nails were blade sharp, and appeared longer than they did moments before. A throat was ripped open, blood gushing on the curtains and making the floorboards slippery. An ear was torn off, just as quickly as an eye was torn out. A limb was ripped from its socket, its owner rushing about with it limply dangling. A belly was split open, spilling intestines and other viscera across the floor. And there was an amazing snapping of bones, large sturdy bones never meant to be broken, unlike mine, so small and light. Light so that my kind

can take flight.

Take flight!

The lock of my cage was unlatched! I had not noticed it with the nightmare raging throughout the cabin. Upon considering this strange occurrence later, I landed on the idea that my small lock must have opened when all the others in the house had slammed shut. Not wasting a moment, I rose from those bars that had held me for so long, protecting me in their golden embrace. Just in time, for in the next second, the smallest of the beasts crashed into my cage, crushing it in the unsuccessful rush to avoid his fate. Shoulders were splayed open, and a skull was separated from its spine.

I flew! Finding my way through the chaos, and fighting my way through the smoke and flames, I went up the chimney. I flew up the flue, and found myself in the frightening cold freedom of the forest sky. Up and up, then to the east a ways, I lighted on the tallest branch of a sugar pine tree. At that point and far below, a window was smashed as a beast was trying to break through. But alas, they were pulled back in, and finally after one last whimper, there was silence from the cabin.

I took to the air again. There I was in the night sky, a bird free. I would have to find my way in the dangerous forest, though at least those dangers were not of a supernatural kind.

With fortune on my side, my path did not cross hers again for a very long time. After that bloody night, I did hear the slight jingling sound once again, wafting up through the craggy trees at sunset nearing a summer's end. Heart pounding, I took to the air. I flew and flew, until all my energy spent, I fell asleep in some unknown part of the forest- still safer than any place near the jingling sound. Though my body was exhausted, my mind was full of questions.

How could one so aberrant be part of this world?

And yet, weren't the beasts, likewise, bizarre?

Also, is it not abnormal for a little bird to be having such big thoughts?

Forever more, sage was tucked in amongst the twigs of my nest. And I had my freedom, just not the safety I had been accustomed to for so long, from behind my golden lock.

Brian L. Jacobs

DISCURSIVE YOUTH

reechoed in my urine
soaked sheets

as I thought the lights blinking red and blue
flying outside my window shade

were UFO's
for in the 1970's

that was a thing
on TV and in movies

greys probed
in the third kind

and where the neighboring
Humdinger dive bar pilots drank

from the nearby base
next to the Stop n Go

where I stole Butterfingers
cinnamon sticks and candied cigarettes

nuclear weapons aimed red east
rest on seal'd beaches

ORPHEUS

For 23 and ½ years not a soul in the village of Lorenzo Iglesia had seen Jerome Clement. He was, at one time, a notable living legend in the country of Argentina, a hero in his small, rural community, and a rumored worker of miracles. While accounts varied dramatically regarding his physical appearance, it was never questioned that Jerome was a bright green-eyed mulatto of considerable size.

Each time the children would ask exactly how tall Jerome was, he seemed to grow. At first, he was just above average height, standing handsomely over six feet. Then it was reported that he was at least a healthy six foot seven inches and often too tall to be comfortable. Now, it is circulated that Jerome Clement would have dwarfed Goliath, standing well over seven feet and eating 12 eggs, two loaves of bread, a pound and a half of bacon and all while downing a gallon of milk for his breakfast.

Still, while it was true that his light black skin, long hair, and emerald eyes provided him a distinct appearance from the majority of his pueblo, Jerome had acquired his notoriety by two main sources. From a young age it had been clear that his long amber fingers possessed an unrivaled aptitude for music. He quickly gained mastery of the piano, learning to play from his grandmother before most boys could even tie their own shoes. Later, Jerome took to jazz and practiced both the trumpet and saxophone in primary school. Then when he was eleven years old, Jerome began to play the guitar.

It is said by those who knew him best that his voice did not develop until he came of age. But, when he began to sing alongside his guitar, the whole world stopped to hear him. And while *all* of the village's residents claim to have heard him, those who *did*, remember a voice which seemed to sing the sorrows of a thousand lost souls.

Nevertheless, Jerome's music was far from monotonal. He was known to dazzle his audience with a wide variety of tempos and emotions. He would often depart from his guitar and, in the middle of his performance, begin blowing through his saxophone or running his fingers over the keys of a piano. Thus, if any one fact can be justly established regarding the genre of Mr. Clement's music, it is that it rejected the very idea of category entirely.

The second source of the young man's considerable notoriety was the romantic consequence of his music. Most couples over a certain age in the town of Lorenzo Iglesia asserted with confidence that they had met while under the spell of one of Jerome's concerts. Further, many works of art, culinary dishes, buildings and businesses were all said to have been inspired by his music. Because of this, the citizens of the village professed to find something otherworldly in Jerome's melodies.

Salvador Gonzalez, for example, knew that his mother was cured of her heart palpitations after hearing Clement on his guitar during the evening of Good Friday. Maria Lopez would tell you that her daughter's migraine headaches would vanish instantly after coming into contact with the sound of his saxophone. Anytime the butcher, Ricardo San Jaun, had had a few drinks, he proudly told whomever would listen that his epilepsy disappeared forever after accidentally finding himself outside the window during one of Jerome Clement's early piano lessons.

The rumors among the village's small black community were of the same variety. It was often speculated that Jerome had received his powers from his father, who had not been a man at all, but rather an angel, or perhaps one of the old Indian gods who carried countless names.

Regardless of his origins, the town adored their musician. They treated him as if he truly were half man, half God. The people of Lorenzo Iglesia said that Jerome took the stage name of Orpheus not simply because of his near divine talent, but because of what his music was said to do.

However, fate would deem it inevitable that the village was simply too small for a man of his stature and abilities. That is why, 23 and ½ years ago, Jerome Clement packed his instruments, took what money he had, and left—presumably for the stages of South America's greatest cities.

Years later, when some of the wealthier inhabitants of Lorenzo Iglesia made their way out of the village to vacation elsewhere, they found that the name of their small town had become synonymous with the legend of Jerome Clement. Naturally, this led to the already tall tales of the man who stood larger than life to be exaggerated even further. He had become an undeniable hero, a seven-foot-seven-inch miracle worker, and the greatest musician in South America's history. All this, from a humble beginning in Lorenzo Iglesia.

Then, 23 and ½ years after Jerome Clement's departure, his grandmother Gabriella Mendoza, the one who had first nurtured his gift, passed away in her sleep. The town's Black community had lost a leader, and the village's ties to the Clement family had been extinguished. The

Mayor and Priest decided that a great funeral would be thrown in honor of Gabriella Mendoza. Not a mourning of death, but rather a celebration of life, a celebration of what Gabriella had given to Lorenzo Iglesia and the world.

At once, news of this funeral spread the idea that Jerome might return to his home village in the north of Argentina. The men began to put important business decisions off in hope that they might once again be blessed by Jerome's gift. Women, both single and married, went out shopping for new and expensive dresses and potions to enhance their beauty. After all, there had never been a man more handsome or with more beautiful eyes than the musician by the name of Orpheus. The children hoped to see him play, or at least eat a meal.

The village was abuzz when, just a day before the funeral, word came from the local inn that a green-eyed mulatto man had checked in with a guitar. Emilia Espolon was telling those whom she met in the tavern that she had heard the guitar playing from behind closed doors but would never have interrupted without an invitation. Had this man prepared a song for the funeral? Would the members of the village once again be given the joy of hearing heaven's music? Everyone was asking these questions; every man, woman and child in the village of Lorenzo Iglesia wanted to know the answers.

The funeral came on a bright, hot day. Not a soul was to be found anywhere but the ceremony. Only the best clothes were worn; color was everywhere, accompanied by joy and anticipation. Finally, when the crowd quieted, the priest began an oration of Gabriella Mendoza's life. While describing her early twenties, a murmur rose from the back of the crowd and grew louder and louder, and soon the priest had lost his audience's attention.

Collective observation shifted towards a man who stood at the entrance of the cemetery. The man had light black skin and glimmering green eyes. But, he was not what many of the older women had remembered. A deep scar ran from his forehead across his eye down his cheek and to his chin. Many noticed, but none as loudly as the tavern keeper, that he did not have a guitar or any instrument in his possession. And the children, who had the most trouble keeping their voices down, almost all shouted: "He isn't a giant! He isn't even very tall at all!"

Perturbed by the interruption, the priest began to plead for the audience's renewed attention. But, at this time, the eulogy was of secondary importance. Men and women were rushing out of their seats to get a better

look at the green-eyed mulatto. A barrage of questions came down upon him like a heavy rain. Was he Jerome? Where was his guitar? What had he been doing all these years?

The man put his hands up defensively. He had not been prepared for such an onslaught. "I..." he began, then trailed off, but just a single word was enough to settle the crowd. They wanted a response more than someone stranded in the desert wants a drink.

"The sight of the sun can still be blinding when reflected from a broken mirror," he mused.

The crowd was perplexed; what mirage was this? They wanted more, they expected him to sing, or at least explain his presence.

But, just then, the preacher let out a great roar like a tiger stepping on a thorn. "My tooth--" he shouted, "my tooth has come out!"

Sure as day, the man of God was holding a blood soaked molar in front of his face. The crowd became distracted once again. The preacher, seizing his moment, set the tooth down next to his old leather bible. "Please, ladies and gentlemen, be seated, it is not right for a eulogy to be interrupted in such a manner. Please, return to your seats."

Feeling half ashamed and half defrauded, the villagers of Lorenzo Iglesia made their way back to their respective seats. When the priest finished his eulogy, the people jumped into celebration. There was music, drinking and a display of fireworks. A crowd formed again intending to question the man with emerald eyes. This time though, he wanted no part of their frenzied interrogation. He exited the cemetery with polite haste, returning to his lodge and, according to the host, departing soon after.

His enigmatic entrance and exit left the townspeople to conclude without much debate, that this ordinary man could not have been Jerome Clement. To assert such a possibility was impossible, unthinkable, even blasphemous. How could a disfigured man of average height and without an instrument possibly have been the village's greatest hero? And what of the priest's molar falling out? If this was a miracle, it was the most pitiful anyone had ever heard of. No, the priest was old and spent his week fermenting grapes for the blood of Christ. The loose tooth could be chalked up to simple coincidence. The answer was unanimous. That man had been an imposter whom the townsfolk had sniffed out in the middle of a scam.

The answer was unanimous, until late that night. When a choice few heard the soft strumming of a guitar and a voice which sounded as if it sang the sorrows of a thousand lost souls.

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Scot Hurd, though born elsewhere, considers himself an honorary native son of California. In his teens he hiked the John Muir Trail in Sequoia National Park. He spent his twenties in the South Bay and his thirties in the Inland Empire. Now in his forties, he calls Orange County home. He's only written one short story and only published one short story. But he sincerely hopes there's a second time for some things.

Brian L. Jacobs resides with his husband in California, has been teaching English thirty years in Los Angeles, and is working on his PhD. Brian was the assistant to Poet Allen Ginsberg while earning his MFA. During that time he walked half way around the world while on a peace pilgrimage. Brian is also a three-time Fulbright Scholar, a NEH grant recipient, and a renewed poet.

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¡Pa'lante!

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

iPa'lante!

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