



phineas

reprint 2025

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A note from our team

Our team greatly appreciated everyone's work and submissions. We made sure to prioritize the submission process and keep all submissions anonymous that way our team could guarantee fairness. A few members of our team did choose to anonymously submit work that was chosen, but they still went through the same guidelines as everyone else. These guidelines ensured blind selections from our team so that every submission did not have any identifiable information to prevent any bias. We made sure to focus on the quality through our blind review process, and as much as all submissions were good, we based our final selections on our vision for Phineas.

Thank you to all those who submitted.

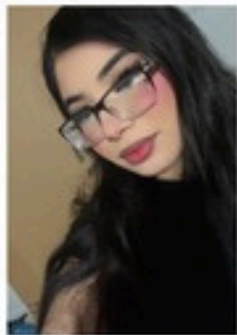
Reprint Explanation

Due to an error on my part, a reprint was necessary. I accidentally miscredited one of the stories in this issue and needed to fix it. I misnamed the author of "A Cold Reflection." The proper author is now credited with this work.

This reprint also includes a few extra deserving poems that fit in spaces left too blank.

-Prof. Edward Shea

Editor's page



FICTION LEAD EDITOR
Fatima Morales Ortiz

SBVC nursing student,
shopping addict, cat lover,
love being an aunt



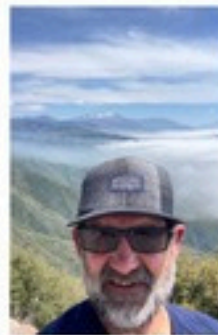
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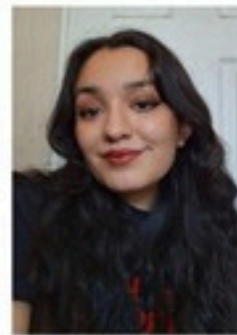
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enthusiast, loves to cook



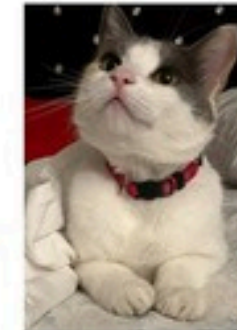
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FACULTY ADVISOR
Professor Edward Shea

Professor of English, writer,
adventurer, traveler, and
Star Wars nerd.

Paul's Epistle To:

By Gilberto Prieto

Casper,

I'm writing this letter. I don't know what to write, but I'm writing this letter. My therapist says it's good to write letters. So I'm writing this letter.

I got back from the war a year ago. I miss you so much. My leg still hurts from the bullet that went through it, from the burn of the gas, and I miss you so much.

I have to tell you, getting back has not been easy. Being home has not been easy. I can't leave my house, haven't been out much, and my mom helped me get a job at the grocery. People stare at me when I wobble, when my leg hurts as I'm stocking groceries, and I can't stop thinking about them, can't really stop thinking about you. I had gritted my teeth, did my job, but a lady, a lady was just snickering at me.

This lame bastard, her eyes were saying, this lame bastard, what's he doing here at my grocery store? I know that's what she's saying. She had to have been saying that.

I tossed the cans at her feet like we were trained to do, and she snickered still. Tossed the cans, and they exploded in bloody tomato chunks like grenades. My manager called the cops on me, and they were both snickering as a jeering cop put me in the back of a police car.

And maybe you understand how I miss you so much. Maybe only you can understand how I haven't been able to get out of the house since then. You'll definitely understand how my skin still peels like rotten constellations where the bullet went through, where the gas touched.

Say, do you remember? Do you remember just before the sky went black? It was just me and you on that grassy hill at night. We were staring at the stars. You told me about some myths you know. I really liked the one with Persephone and Hades. You said it was the darkness taking over the spring – but spring comes back up.

I told you about the constellations. I pointed out the Big Dipper and the twins. I pointed out Orion's belt. Then you laughed at the word and pointed to your own.

You smiled those blue eyes of yours and got close to me. You weren't wearing cologne, but I imagined that you would wear something musky with tobacco and hints of leather. I laid my head on your forearm and locked eyes with you – your eyes were so blue. You invited me to touch your belt, your laughter ringing like wedding bells as I reached out and had my hands explore your crotch. And maybe you understand how I miss you.

But you didn't kiss me on that hill.

And I didn't seem to understand why.

You played with my hair as you asked me if I had anyone at home. At home, I had my mom. My dad? Dad didn't want no fag as a son.

I told you I would like to have you at home.

You laughed, but you still didn't kiss me. Was it because you were waiting? Waiting to get back home?

Wishful thinking.

I stopped feeling your crotch. We both turned our attention back towards the stars, the constellations glittering away with mythological heroes.

Wishful thinking as I eye a star.

The next day, we were ambushed. Snickering, jeering soldiers attacked our camp at night. The constellations disappeared like spring getting kidnapped by Hades. The gas blotting out Orion's belt with a corrosive yellow vengeance, and I wish we were still on that hill with my hand exploring your body.

Instead, my shaky fingers were touching your skin where the gas ate holes through your uniform, burning your flesh. I watched you fall as the bullet went through your torso, your gun clanging violently as you dropped it on the floor.

Do you remember? Do you see me? Your blue eyes were so vibrant – they are getting so milky, just please stay with me. I'm cutting up my uniform to cover your wounds, your burns, and there's gunfire around me.

You moan in pain, and the world freezes around me for a second – I can't stop, I won't.

I don't care, I don't care. I just need you back home with me. Back home, I think as a I hear a bullet nearly miss my head, back home so I can introduce you to my father and he'll have two fags for sons. Back home, I think as I cover up your wounds and your blood on my hands, back home so that we can have wedding bells clanging instead of all these whirling, flying bullets.

You groan as I pick you up. I don't want to leave you. I won't leave you. It stings as the gas eats through my uniform, starting to burn my left leg. Hades' milky cloud corrodes our starlight, swallows our spring in a black hole.

And still I didn't want to leave you.

I pull your weight as we walk together, and I continue to think of wedding bells – down the aisle we go. One step, two step, here comes the bride, one step, two step - Bullets fly through.

Vibrations, as I feel them go through my left leg. Vibrations as I feel more go through you. In the force of the gunfire, we topple over. You don't make a sound as you fall on top of me. We land face to face. Your eyes are milky, and the pain of your weight unbearable.

I'm in shock, and I don't remember if I screamed or cried out your name. I wanted to kiss your forehead, tell you it's okay – but I didn't, I couldn't – my fear wouldn't let me. Instead, your eyes go dull as I lose consciousness. I remember falling through a darkness that had none of our constellations. I wake up in a bed without you.

The doctors said I was found, and I was lucky. Said they were able to save my leg, and the burns will be healed – but the scars?

The scars will ripple on my skin like peeling constellations that I want to be rid of. I asked about you, asked for you, but no one could tell me anything.

I healed and was discharged – was sent home with a medal that I keep at the bottom of my laundry basket because I kept asking for you until I annoyed one of the officers, and they told me you died and were sent back to Wyoming.

What part of Wyoming are you at? I asked your family, but they won't tell me. They smell my desperation, my queerness, my love. They won't tell me where you are buried because they think that I could taint your legacy. Their son is not a fag, they say with blue eyes, go home queer, leave him alone.

Leave him alone.

How many springs will I have to wait to know where you are buried? I keep waiting like Persephone at the exit of Hades, but the time never comes, spring never blossoms.

I'm alone for winter.

I told my therapist about not leaving my house and the jeering people, the tomato cans exploding in a grisly pulp. I told my therapist about you, how I miss you, and the way I imagined you smelled like tobacco and leather.

He told me to write this letter. So I'm writing this letter.

I miss you,
Paul

Phineas

THE RESTLESS SPIRIT DEANNA PARKER WILLIAMS

Haunted is the presence of this old abode
Dusty, desolate, and the air is cold
Broken promises and dreams of old
Nothing about it is beautiful, I am told Deception and unrest live in the walls
Misery and death dance the halls
Dark and endless, a path to destruction
The wicked spirit won't be hindered by obstruction
Rancid and decaying, oozing like pus
Wreaking of death; innards filled with disgust
Spun like a web are the secrets within
Evil and lost souls wrapped in sin
Once a place of laughter and joy
Dreams that lingered are now destroyed
Carpets stained from broken hearts
Intricately patterned but nothing like art
Screams and contention reach for the ceiling
Only the devil finds this scene appealing
Thick and tangled like cotton in a quilt
Is the pain that comes from a ghost named Guilt

INVISIBLE GIANT DEANNA PARKER-WILLIAMS

Tonight, I want to say something wonderful for The malignant disease cancer.
I marvel at your pursuit of the living, A serial killer, bludgeoning hopes and dreams.
Remnants of life cling to emaciated skin, Like fingers grasping for safety.
Body after body, birthing desperation, and grief.
You mystify the brilliant mind,
An invisible giant, and master at your craft. Puncture wounds mark your presence, Virgin
blood is tainted by your cure.
A formidable opponent, souls fall at your knees. Hairless crowns are your reward, Remission,
your only foe.
Tears of mourning water you.
Your power is increased,
As you regurgitate your violent rampage.
Thanks to you,
Generations are stirred like a pot of gumbo. Death of ancestry is your final blow.

Artwork/Photography winner



Mythos: Stairs to the underworld.

BY ROSEMARY RUIZ

More than Just a Building



By Richard Contreras

Thirty-five years ago, the building where I type this story from did not exist. It was built because of campus-wide improvements and another important reason: a study found that a good portion of San Bernardino Valley College sits on a significant earthquake fault.

In the mid 1990's a plan to restructure the campus came into effect. The result? Many buildings were torn down and new ones were constructed. The current library where I now sit was one such building built. Disappearing over a roughly ten-year period were the old library, the Administration building, Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences, Chemistry, the old Campus Center, Art, Medical Arts and both gymnasiums.

In fact, a student who attended Valley College then would be astounded to see how dramatically different the current campus looks decades later. The only buildings that remain from the early 1990's are the Planetarium, the classical Auditorium Theater, and the Liberal Arts building. The Liberal Arts building is now slated for demolition—bringing a close to a memorable and life-changing period for me.

In November 1991, I was a 20-year-old searching for purpose in my life. I had recently graduated high school but had taken a year off as I was reeling from the untimely death of my father. I decided to check out Valley College without a plan, really, but I knew I had to push myself to do something. Something meaningful.

As I walked around campus one crisp autumn afternoon, I noticed a flimsy paper sign posted to a pole between the Liberal Arts building and the library. The words went something like this: "Do you enjoy writing? Do you like sports? Join us in LA-100D to write for the campus newspaper."

As a kid, I remember always loving to read. I won numerous awards in grade school for reading and writing book reports. At the breakfast table, while my father read the front page news, I was busy looking at the sports section. In high school, I was one of those 'weird' kids who buried myself in classical books and consistently got superior grades in English class. I suppose it was these recollections at the time that got me to reason that since I loved to read and write, what could be so bad? What did I have to lose? So, off I went with a new sense of purpose.

Excitedly, I found room 100 in the Liberal Arts building. Opening the door, I found a large auditorium with a stage, but it was eerily devoid of people. Nevertheless, I waited. And waited. Soon, someone appeared! When I asked if they were there for the newspaper meeting, I got a quizzical look and shrug. I was in the wrong place! Indeed, I was not in room 100D. Hurriedly, I asked around, but no one knew where the room was. By then, I had seen every other room number. I went upstairs and also looked in the adjoining foyer on both levels filled with small offices. Nothing. Now I was worried. Perhaps any chances at meaningfulness had slipped away.

Someone had suggested I go to the library and ask someone. Certainly, the library staff had all the answers they reasoned. I was in luck. But when the person explained how to get to the room, I was left even more confused. I was told to follow them. Back into the LA building we went. But this time, I was led to a side door that led to the outside. Turning off to the right and walking towards Mt. Vernon Avenue, there was a door that led back into the building! Strange, I thought. It was like going downstairs to a lower level, but then it wasn't. I cannot explain it any other way. You'd have to be there to know what I mean.

So, there I finally was. The room had been so, so close by as once inside, a quick passage led into the auditorium where I first went. (If you're struggling to follow along, you and many other students throughout the years have my sympathies.)

Once inside, I saw three students hunched over one of those old Macintosh computers. Sheepishly, I said that I was there for the newspaper job. Without hesitation, the guy^[1] in charge asked me if I could write sports. I shrugged, "I suppose so; I mean I love sports". He replied, "Good. We have everything covered now." I was nervous, yet relieved. But I was in. I was told to go to the basketball games later that evening and write down what I saw and to bring back a story. That was it. Just like that, I was on my own--a fledgling writer who had embarked upon a career that would last the next 30 years.

I would guess that even today if you asked the average student to find LA-100D, they could not tell you. Would a Google Maps search work? Beats me. But what I do know for sure is that many students from decades past could tell you something meaningful about a building that is soon to disappear. Recently, I have been privileged to help my sister navigate the college experience as a Nursing major; and even she reminisced about what this building has meant to her in a short time. She says: "The Liberal Arts building has been a place of growth, support, and inspiration during my time so far at SBVC. I find myself reflecting on how much I will miss walking through those doors knowing I had a place where learning felt both challenging and rewarding. The Auditorium, with its wine-colored chairs, was always a place of quiet reflection. The Learning Center played a big role in my growth as a student. I will always carry memories of this place with me." Truly, I could not agree more. Both my sister and I started our collegiate journeys at the same place, in the same building, decades apart. This was no accident we believe.

I can recall many a late night packed into LA-128 with many reporters and editors over the years as we put the finishing edits on stories--coffee, pizza, and the AP stylebook at the ready. The harrowing night of the Rodney King riots in May 1992 and the mob violence is unforgettable. We were glued to a radio and armed with knives, not knowing what was going to happen. Then, there were threats for exposing things that young reporters with no sense should be covering. Trailblazers of our own right, we carried on. We would carry printed ½-page sheets downstairs to LA-100D to 'paste-up' camera-ready boards of the latest edition of *The Warrior*, or *The Arrowhead* as it would be called years later. In that building, in those seemingly insignificant rooms there was a literal convergence of media. From old to new, from paper, glue sticks, exacto knives, and light tables, to the lightning speed of zip drives, Photoshop and instant reporting of the digital age.

And the beloved Liberal Arts was witness to it all. Surely, I think many would agree that it was more than just a building and will be missed.

[1] Doug Arendt, Patrick Rowe, Marty Bachman and I were singlehandedly responsible for resurrecting the San Bernardino Valley College campus newspaper in 1992 as volunteer student-reporters. The following year, a new 'Fundamentals of Newswriting' course would be offered in the English department. Later, a journalism production class would also be offered. You can find special-collection archives located at the SBVC library of these past editions.

**SHADOWS AND LIGHTS
BY CHRISTIAN ESPINOZA**

In shadows and light, they walk unseen, Woven threads in a dream half-dreamed. Undocumented hearts, in silence they speak, Carrying burdens, heavy and deep.

In the mixed chorus of status and life, A hidden melody sings of strife.
Fear and hope in tandem entwine, In the quiet battle of borrowed time.

Whispers echo in the dead of night, For futures just beyond their sight.
A mind in turmoil, a soul that yearns, For peace elusive, as the world turns.

The undocumented spirit, resilient, strong, Yet often weathering storms prolonged.
Anxiety's grip, sharp and unseen, In every card life's dealt between.

Mixed-status minds in relentless whirl, Dreams and fears in a constant twirl.
Mental battles, unvoiced, unheard, Blurred by silence, defined by the blurred.

Yet, from the shadow and the fight, Emerges a will forged in the night.
Strength rises where struggles unfold, A story of resilience, brave and bold.

In their journey, let's lend an ear, To silent cries we seldom hear.
In understanding, we find the way, To bring some light to shadowed days.

In unity lies healing and health, In shared stories, unmatched wealth.
Let's stand together, with hearts alight,
And march as one toward brighter nights.

**TACOS AT MIDNIGHT
BY CHRISTIAN ESPINOZA**

It's midnight again, the hunger is real, My stomach's a DJ, dropping the deal.
"Tacos!" it whispers, the craving is clear, The greasy, the spicy, the joy so sincere.

Out to the taquero, the hero of night, With flames on the grill, a glorious sight.
Al pastor spinning, like it's dancing for me, Carnitas and lengua, pure poetry.

"Dos de asada," I call with a grin, "Con todo," I say, let the toppings begin.
Cilantro, cebolla, a squeeze of limón, Salsa roja so fiery, it burns to the bone.

The first bite's a symphony, a flavor parade, My taste buds are cheering; a fiesta is made.
Grease drips down, a badge of my joy, Like the midnight tacos I loved as a boy.

A horchata to cool it, a sip so divine, The cinnamon sweetness, the perfect combine.
It's a ritual of bliss, a love that's so pure, For tacos at midnight, there's no better cure.

Forget fancy dinners, forget caviar, Give me tacos at midnight, mi comida star.
So next time you're hungry and don't know what's right,
Find a taco stand glowing in the Mexican night.

IN PRAISE
AALIYAH MEDAWAR

Tonight, I want to say something wonderful
for the morticians, clad in mourning black
who greet their guests with kindness
as they arrive upon the slab
They speak to the departed
for dear they are to them
not merely reminders of fleeting life
but people, lovers, friends
They smile upon the sleeping few
and bid them fair farewell
For though they go into the gentle night
the journey is dark and cold
and afraid are the souls of the deceased
of the cruel and frightening unknown
But the mortician guides them to the light towards
peace in the beyond
I love the way the mortician cares for them
as if they were they were their kin- who
would not want to be alone when they
are beckoned to cross the valley go
through the shadow of death
where no fear can touch their bones
for they are protected by a friend
The mortician does not brag, nor seek glory or honor
Nor do they strut like primping peacocks, with their plumes of
colors fierce and tails meant to blind those
to their shallow ways.
Simple are the mortician, not clawed and vivid birds
with dressings of pomp and circumstance-
The mortician is simple a raven in the night
Nevermore they cry- unheard
The mortician does not see a body, but see a human being
A person treated with dignity as they must turn and leave
For pushing up daisies is a lot easier when one has company
To love humanity so much, to care for those who are gone
To trust one's heart not to break as they do their work alone
To smile and death and say so simply: "Goodbye, my friend. So long."
Is why I wish to say something to the morticians
Something true and rich with life
So here I say: Thank you for truly caring
As you dedicate your life to death
For those who must depart this world
Need a kind hand to see them out

Love Language



by Evelyn Rodriguez

A COLD REFLECTION

By Megan Lewis

Sitting on the hilltop, I stared down at the town. Everything always seemed so small and unimportant from up here. Lights illuminated from the house windows, mirroring the stars in the sky, vibrant shades of blue dancing between them. A soft breeze rustled through the trees, carrying the subtle scent of pine flowing through the crisp air.

The cold from this metal bench seeped through my clothes and nipped at my skin. I need to go into town tomorrow to buy better gloves. These leather gloves aren't cutting it; my finger tips are still going numb. At least this beanie was doing a good job at keeping my head and ears warm. Cold ears are unbearable—always a sensory nightmare. Nothing can put me in a worse mood than having cold ears.

I'm questioning if dragging myself out into this cold was really worth it. I was hoping that getting some fresh air and spending some time in nature would magically make my stress and anxiety disappear. At the very least, maybe the numbness in my fingertips will soak into the rest of my body.

It's funny—I know spending time in nature is supposed to make me feel more grounded, but sometimes it does the opposite. Take this view, for example. It doesn't even look real. It looks like something you would find on a postcard or in a painting. How am I supposed to feel, according to my therapist, "one with myself" with a view like this? It doesn't make any sense.

Hmm... maybe we are living in a simulation after all. No one appreciates my jokes like I do. I think I'm hilarious. I guess I'm just not supposed to be appreciated in my time, haha.

It's probably me. I'm probably the problem. I'm always the problem. I can't even ground myself correctly. Other people do this all the time—why can't I figure it out? What is wrong with me?

Wait! Uhh...I'm falling into negative thinking patterns again. At what point is that going to stop? It feels impossible to correct.

Okay...Positive thought. It is good that I pushed myself to come up here to try and clear my mind and body. Next positive thought...it's good that I caught the negative thought pattern and corrected it. Next positive thought...I'm feeling frustrated that I'm still falling into this pattern, but like my therapist says, "You are doing the best you can in this moment, and that is okay."

Forcing myself to think positive thoughts always feels so cheesy and unnatural. I hate doing it. But I'll stick with it if I have any chance of getting rid of this stress and anxiety.

I always feel like I'm putting in so much effort for such little payoff. I know I'm making progress and doing the right things, but it never feels like enough. I'm never satisfied and I'm never proud of the progress.

The cold from the metal bench soaked through my beanie as soon as I relaxed my head back. I think the numbness from this cold is finally starting to reach the rest of my body. I feel like I'm finally relaxing a bit. My chest doesn't feel like it's going to explode, which is always nice. Or maybe—just maybe—I'm actually making that thing called progress. Is that just wishful thinking? Only time will tell.

FOR WHEN I AM WEAK
BY LA REENAH DECKER

For when I am weak, my strength remains;
How could I be weak when I am strong?
Trial's exhausted hands
Could no longer restrain a Phoenix's blazing heart.
Grace is a neighbor on Feeble Avenue.
Mercy is a friend on Compassion Boulevard.
Encouragement descends like a dove upon my heart.
A nest constructed by love's breath and hope's arms.
A vulnerable soul with five stones and a sling.
Goliath's robustness could not withstand a warrior's zealous heart.
The weak could shame the strong.
Even feeble hands could demolish the defenses of Babylon.
Grace will rest upon the hearts of the weary
Mercy will give strength to a shattered soul.
My strength remains eternal...

DEAR CURIOSITY
BY LA REENAH DECKER

Dear Curiosity,
What has piqued your interest this time? Why are you always on the run?
Haven't you had enough knowledge already?
What more could you learn?
What can you discover on this expedition of yours?
You've explored the seven seas of imagination.
Searched the hidden mines of creativity.
What else can satisfy your heart?
Is there a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?
How would you know for sure?
What has piqued your interest this time?
Dear Curiosity.

MAGRITTE'S LOVERS
BY MARK ANDREW HOLMES

Inspired by Les amants (The Lovers) (1928) by Belgian artist Rene Magritte (1898-1967).

Two people, trying to kiss,
Their heads shrouded in cloth, like hijabs, but with no opening for the face—
You can't even see their faces;
They can't see each other's faces.
They can't kiss except through the cloth.
There's no opening in the cloth for them to see or breathe.
Having concealed themselves from each other and from the world,
They have concealed the world from themselves—
They have made themselves blind and liable to suffocate.
To see, to discover, to love properly, to breathe freely—
They must take off the masks that shroud them.

THE BALLAD OF PRETTY SADIE LANGHORNE
AALIYAH MEDAWAR

In the night bloomed the white bulbs of the jimsonweed
As pretty Sadie Langhorne committed that awful, awful deed
Took up her daddy's double-barrel, with a look of horror in her eyes
Praying to the Ozark lake: "Lord willing and the creek don't rise-"
She was a good girl by birth, an even gooder girl by blood
But all her breeding was gone in a flash, carried by that flood-
Of evil! That overtook the heart of Sadie Langhorne true
And nothing could prepare her kin for what she was about to do
Sadie Langhorne went to church, every Sunday she did sing
While on Saturdays she went out to the crick, for she was its king
Yes, the forest was the home of that dear pretty Sadie Langhorne
It was where she found her home, where she was free from scorn
Lightning bugs shone among the junipers, lighting Sadie's path
Some folks say her neighbors knew she had planned for a bloodbath
For even though Sadie was a God-fearing girl, the Devil had his due
And turned that pretty Sadie Langhorne into a whisper amongst the yew
Moonshine was on Beau Dulle's breath that night, as well as on Sadie's lips
Hers was for courage, his was something that Sadie slips-
Into his tea that night, just to be sure that he would sleep
So that he would not hear his loving wife, for towards him she did creep
That daggum man, was a rotten soul, the worst kind of all
But he relished in his nasty ways, and loved each and every brawl
Be it beating her or cheating her, Beau Dulle was the worst of men
He had a hankerin' for misery, and was madder than an old wet hen
Well, Sadie had enough one day, of his bruising and his lies
So she shot that dirty son of a gun, right between the eyes
"Someone's done Ol' Beau Dulle in!" shouted that little Missouri town
And so began the undaunting hunt to track Sadie Langhorne down
But pretty Sadie Langhorne was gone! Not hide nor hair to be seen
Disappeared amongst the trees, she had gotten away clean
Come Sunday they sang a prayer for her, for from Beau Dulle she was free
And no doubt wandering in the woods she was, giddy with glee
Some say they can still hear that girl, some say they've seen her too Running
'round the Ozark lake, hidden amongst the dew
That double-barrel is still in her hands, that smile still on her face
But nobody dares to disturb her, nor to give her chase
Pretty Sadie Langhorne shot Beau Dulle dead, but possessed she was not
And many ladies in that Ozark town are glad that she weren't caught
For their husbands soon took to learning to treat their wives better than he had done
Or else they too may find themselves staring down the barrel of a gun

**KILLER INSTINCT
BY PORSHA GREER**

You wake up
Get out of bed
Throw on some clothes
And fix your head
Start your car
Dreading the day
Hoping that work
Will someday walk away
What you forgot
Is that you killed
Your hopes and dreams
Your wishes, your will
You didn't realize
That childhood
Would be the place
You most understood
So don't forget
To go back to the days
Where you had fun
Where you played
Where your dreams mattered
And you never killed
Where you knew what you wanted
And felt completely fulfilled

**HEART LIKE A THORN
ELIZABETH GONZALEZ**

Thoughts running miles in my head
Unsent letters, only torn
Are some things better left unsaid?
Never uttered, never worn
what if I unravel this loose thread
Tell the tale, sound the horn
Love may bring forth his dear friend dread
To pluck my heart out like a thorn
For if this path I choose to tread
And my words were left to mourn
For if my letters, you have read
Would a new love be born?
Or are some things better left unsaid?

**IN EVERY MOON
BY ELIZABETH
GONZALEZ**

Lend me whispers of a sign
Show me fragments of a light
Bring my vision, a new sight
Upon my ears whisper a tune
For if I shant see you again
I'd look for you in every moon
Fondness for you, I cannot fight
I wish to bask upon your sight
And bathe myself in all your light
If like sweethearts we could swoon
For forever and a night
The end would still arrive too soon
And I'd look for you in every moon

The Weight of Tradition

By Ana Zarate Lopez

I still remember the sunbaked streets of my hometown in 1985, where the sound of laughter and gossip filled the air. But beneath the vibrant surface, I witnessed a harsh reality – one where tradition and patriarchy reigned supreme, controlling the lives of those around me, including my own family.

As a child, I saw how girls my age was betrothed to men twice their age, their futures decided by their families due to poverty and other societal pressures. The look of resignation on their faces, the loss of spark in their eyes, and the frustration etched on their faces as they faced a future without a say in their own destiny – these images remain etched in my memory.

My sister and best friend, Aracely, just a year older than me, was one of them. We had grown up together, exploring the town's hidden corners and sharing our dreams. But when Aracely turned fifteen, my father arranged her marriage to Jorge, a 55-year-old notorious drug dealer from the state of Jalisco, Mexico. I watched in horror as Aracely's smile faded, replaced by a dull acceptance.

I could not comprehend why Aracely could not refuse, why she could not follow her own heart. But in our town, tradition was a powerful force, suffocating individual desires and aspirations. Girls were expected to obey, sacrificing their own dreams for the sake of family honor and financial stability.

As I grew older, I began to realize that these arranged marriages were merely a symptom of a broader issue – the systemic injustice towards females in our community. Women were denied education, economic independence, and basic human rights, their lives predetermined by the societal norms of our patriarchal town.

But there were women who resisted, who fought against the constraints of tradition. My own mother was one of them, secretly instructing my younger sister and me to read and write, encouraging us to think for ourselves and pursue our education. I recall the pain of watching my four older sisters being denied the opportunity to attend middle school, instead of being confined to the home to learn domestic duties.

When tragedy struck our family, forcing us to flee our town and seek refuge in a different state, eventually leading us to the United States, I felt a mix of emotions – relief, fear, and uncertainty. But as I looked back, I realized that I had been given a second chance, an opportunity to forge my own path and create a different future.

As I reflect on my childhood, I acknowledge the profound impact those experiences had on my life. They taught me the importance of empathy, the value of education, and the need to challenge unjust systems. Though I've left my hometown behind, its streets and stories remain etched in my memory, reminding me of the struggles and strengths of the women who came before me.

Their legacy inspires me to continue fighting for a more just and equitable world, where women and girls have the freedom to make their own choices, pursue their own dreams, and live their own lives.

And when the memories of my past threaten to overwhelm me, I remind myself: "You made it, you survived, and you are thriving."

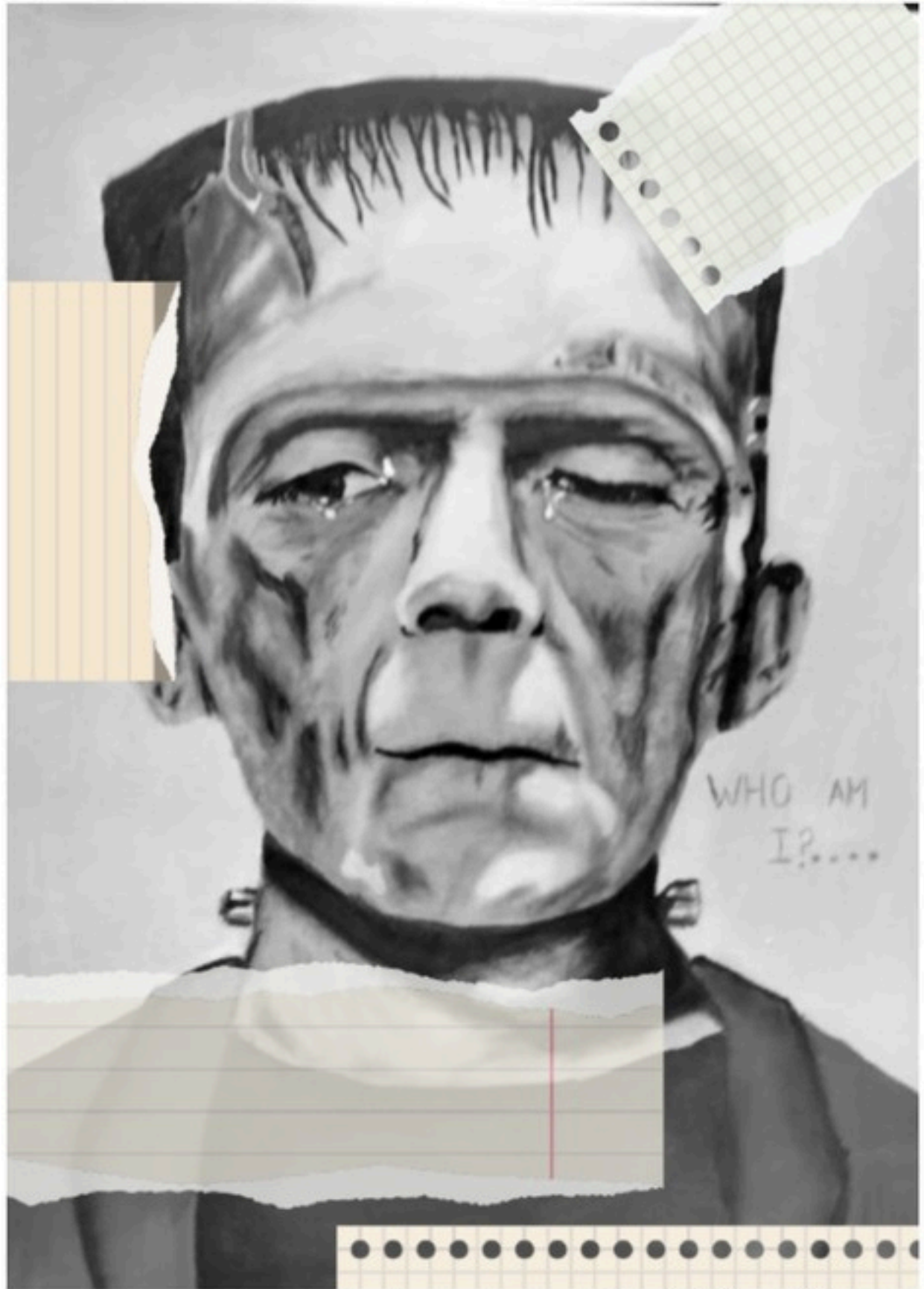
THE HOUSE NAMED TILLY
BY SAMANTHA JIMENEZ

There is a house named Tilly
In that house was old Miss Hall
The old miss finds the house silly
Even if she is seen as a screwball
For the house will creak and crack
Doors and cabinets will slam and shut
In puddles of water a face would look back
In reflections a girl can be seen clear cut
For Tilly was not always a house
And miss Hall was not always alone
For old miss Hall has a spouse
With little Tilly she wished now would be grown
For her husband was an angry man
He would scream and drink
Towards Tilly she had the value of a garbage can
Yet all Mrs. Hall could do was shrink
Until it all came to an end
Mrs. Hall was out of the house
Her father's relationship Tilly tried to mend
But accidentally knocked over the scouse
With that her buzzed father had lost it
Yet he did not give her a scrap
Or ever give her a hit
Rather took her neck and made it snap
Seeing what he did her father felt fear
Shoved her body in the basement
Never shed a single tear
Arriving home, Miss Hall noticed displacement
Her husband had run
She never saw him again that day
She never learned what he had done
And Tilly's soul had not gone astray
What was once her house was now just her
Even as 50 years had passed
To old Miss Hall it is all a blur
And little Tilly will never hurt at last

QUIET
BY SAMANTHA JIMENEZ

A cave, so quiet.
A deep forest, so quiet.
The dark, not quiet.

The Creature's Tears



By Ashley Hernandez



By Jazmin Granados

Stay Away From the Light

By Caitlyn Tiszai

Light. It was hard not to spot, even as far away and small as it seemed. They'd been living in the pitch black for days now, their eyes would zero in on anything that proved to them they were open, even if it meant danger.

And light always meant danger. That was a lesson they learned quite quickly after the crash.

It was supposed to be a routine rescue mission, repair a stranded ship. Although, even before they had arrived, it wasn't exactly routine. Regulations frowned upon any operation involving those who were... involved. But Ava's ship was the only one nearby, so Command had no choice. A crew needed to be saved, and her crew was the only one available. The fact that she was married to the captain of the other crew was secondary.

But maybe it shouldn't have been. Maybe if she hadn't been so one-track-minded on completing the rescue and getting back to River she might have seen the signs of a trap.

Now half her crew was dead, and the surviving half was tethered together at the bottom of an alien ocean. They knew very little about the planet before arriving in its orbit, but in the past few days, they had learned a lot. It was full of bioluminescent life forms, predatory ones at that. They lost August and Carla to some sort of giant eel with several rows of needle-like teeth their first day in the waters. They had run into it while dodging the searchlights from whoever shot them down. After that they figured out not to trust anything that emanated light. If only they had learned faster.

Even though every instinct in their bodies begged for them to get out of the darkness, they all stilled at the small glow up ahead. Ava's knee hit the rocky sand below. She tugged slightly on the rope that connected her to the rest of her crew to let them know to cover her. There would still be a glow visible nearby for a moment—not to mention the blinding headache she got every time she did this, but it was the only way to see how close they were to the crash coordinates of the other ship. Once she felt her crew move into place, her hand gently searched her right forearm for the button that would wake her arm console. She could feel the soft texture of her protective suit give way to something small, round, and hard.

Ava took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and pressed her finger on the center of the circle until she felt a click.

She never noticed how brightly it glowed back in the light of her ship; now it might as well have been the sun. There was no way to slowly turn it on so that her eyes could adjust. She was forced to sit and wait until the headache dulled enough for her to see the screen and hope she could make out the map through her blurred vision.

Slowly, the distance and direction from the homing beacon came into a sort of clarity. Enough for Ava to confirm that the rest of the survivors—if there were any—were right under that light.

That didn't make sense. They wouldn't put out a visual signal like that, would they? River was too smart for that. But if the light wasn't from him... if it was a creature from the depths or the mysterious search team, what did that mean for River's ship?

Ava turned off the panel and stood back up. The urge to run forward was now not just to get out of the darkness. She was already desperate to reunite with her husband before. Now she didn't know if he was even alive. But she wouldn't go down that route until she was forced to. The thought of seeing him again was the only thing keeping her remotely sane down here.

Ava tapped a message on Clay's arm behind her to confirm the supplies from the crash were still with them. Morse code was a slow way to communicate, but it was the safest they had down here. Those supplies were their only hope of not drowning or imploding. It wouldn't completely fix the ship after the crash, but it would at least get it flying. As long as River and his crew were able to stabilize the damage from the ambush, they might all survive this hell.

It took awhile, enough for panic to set in, but eventually Clay tapped her back in confirmation. All was still there. Good. Next step, "Weapons check." Ava sent the message down both ends of the line. While that was making its way down and back, Ava weighed the risks. There was no avoiding the light if they were going to get in contact with the other crew. Beyond that light was safety. And River. They could do it. They could get both crews out of here and back to safety.

Two taps on each shoulder confirmed that everyone was armed and ready. Ava took the first step forward. The ties around her waist tugged at the rest of the crew, signaling to them it was time to move. She kept the pace slow, occasionally reaching out to the side to make sure she was still in front.

After a while the glow stopped getting bigger, just brighter, more in focus. Objects around the light were starting to come into view, too harsh, too designed, to be natural rock. A ship.

The next minutes felt like hours as they crept slowly toward the ship coming into view. Once they stopped, Ava could see that the light was tucked into a corner right above them. She could practically feel the tension release from the crew through the line that tied them together, but all Ava felt was confusion.

Why would River have someone set up a light? It attracted too much attention. Judging from the angle, it could only be viewed from the sea floor, but still, it was quite a risky move just to help guide Ava home. River had risked a lot for her, but not the lives of others. Had the crash made him that desperate?

A quick tug on the line and tapping on her right shoulder pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Frank found airlock." Ava didn't even need to let the message finish to understand. Frankie, their engineer, knew their ship inside and out. River's model was not dissimilar, so it was no surprise that she could figure out her way around by touch alone. Ava let the tugs of the rope pull her in the right direction.

Soon she felt someone's hand, probably Clay's, reach out to grab hers and guide it into another hand. That hand gently placed Ava's against the hull once again. The airlock.

Only a single wall blocked her from getting her crew to safety and reuniting with River. All she had to do was knock. Sound traveled quite far in water. It would come with its own risks, but they had no choice. The sounds of the ship's engine starting up would also alert anything nearby. The second the two crews reunited, they would have a small window of time to get everything fixed and installed before they were caught or killed. They all had to trust that the River and his crew were ready.

With a deep breath, Ava let her fist hit the hull once, then four more times, then twice more. The pattern River had always used to knock. He'd know it was her.

In the echo of her final knock, she sat in dark silence, waiting for a sign that they were heard, that this nightmare would be over soon. Finally, she felt the dull reverberations of a knock respond on the other side of the metal hull. A sob escaped her lips.

A small strip of light appeared at the bottom of the hull, just enough to let the water in to fill the airlock. They were so close to getting out of this ocean, she could feel her crew practically shaking with excitement, or maybe it was from sobs of relief. Ava couldn't wait to see their beautiful faces again, even if they were wet with tears.

Wait... she could see some of their faces. There was light shining on their faces that wasn't from the bottom of the airlock. Ava's eyes followed the light, stopping at its source. She froze. It was the same light from before. The light that had led them to River. The light she had chalked up to being a part of the ship.

But it was no longer attached to the ship. It was making its way around the corner they had come from and down toward their faces. No one dared move a muscle.

This light had a face behind it, and behind its face a tail. It also had teeth. Rows and rows of needle-like teeth.

The same creature that killed August and Carla. This one was much smaller, about three meters from head to tail. It swam slowly back and forth down the line, searching for any slight movement, any sign of life to feed on.

A dull rumble came from the hull, and the thin strip of light slowly started to move its way up, immediately catching the attention of the creature. It would be able to slither its way into the airlock long before the person inside would be able to leave it. They would die trying to rescue Ava and her crew.

Clay must've come to the same conclusion. Just as she started to move for her weapon, she felt him move away too. No time to communicate. She just had to hope they'd all act at the right time. Ava wasn't ready to lose another friend.

Someone off to the side must have moved too quickly. Suddenly the eel whipped its head around to the end of the line, bearing its teeth for all to see before propelling itself forward.

Ava launched herself forward in hopes of grappling the eel before its teeth could puncture someone else's suit. She caught the eel's tail, and it snapped its head back to attack her.

Someone's weapon sounded off but the eel's movement didn't falter. It went directly for her head. Teeth and tongue were now all Ava could see as it struggled to get its jaw around her helmet, the glass the only thing keeping her alive.

Another shot rang out; this time the eel did react. It writhed and hissed in pain. The eel then turned its attention to its attacker. Clay.

Ava's stomach dropped. She reached for her sidearm but instantly realized she couldn't shoot the eel without hitting Clay.

Frankie attempted the same lunge Ava had just barely survived, but this time the eel was ready. When Frankie grabbed at its body, it swiftly changed direction and slipped right through her arms. Then it turned right back toward Clay.

Another weapon went off, and the eel went limp, its teeth only centimeters away from Clay's shoulder.

The shot hadn't come from any of her crew. With the eel now dead, Ava finally noticed the space had gotten a lot brighter. Headachingly bright. The airlock had finished opening, and in its door frame was someone with their weapon raised. They started to wave the crew inside. All that weapon fire was bound to attract something or someone out there.

Adrenaline was still pumping through Ava's system. She made sure all the supplies got inside before signaling to the other crewmate to seal the airlock and start the draining and depressurizing process. Now in the brightly lit room, it was hard to make anything out. Her head was pounding, and with every pulse, what little details she could discern went out of focus.

"Clay, are you alright?" The sound of her own voice felt alien after all this time in silence.

"All good, Captain. Just a really really close call. How about you?" He sounded out of breath and shaky over the comms.

"Besides a killer headache, I'm fine."

The water level lowered. Ava was itching to get out of her suit, she was sure the rest of her crew was eager to do the same. The person from River's crew wasn't a part of their communications link, so they would all have to wait until the water was drained to figure out the next step.

The water fell below Ava's waistline and she collapsed on the floor. She could feel the thuds of the others doing the same. So much time in water—both using it to carry themselves and their equipment and fighting it in the form of currents and pressure—it wouldn't be easy getting back up on their feet.

"Just... everybody take a moment. It's not like they were expecting us in top shape. When you can, take off your helmets and await your orders from the other crew." Now she sounded out of breath. The adrenaline was still there; it would be until they had this planet long behind them, but she could no longer fight off the physical fatigue the past few days had put her through.

The water finished draining, and the lights above flashed green. The room was depressurized. They all took their helmets off, exhaling with relief. There was only one not collapsed on the floor, their rescue. They took off their helmet too and moved to kneel by Ava.

"You really had me worried there for a second." Everything in Ava stilled at the sound of that voice. Her eyes darted to his face. His features still blurred, her eyes still learning how to see again. But she didn't need her eyes to confirm a voice that she was so familiar with.

One of River's hands found her cheek. Her hand moved to rest on top. "Just rest for now and let my medic look at you. We'll take the supplies and get everything sorted." River leaned down to press a kiss on Ava's forehead before reluctantly pulling away. There'd be time for a proper reunion later. There was still work to be done.

The door opened behind him. Two figures walked in and gathered up the supplies, taking them toward the engine room. Just as they disappeared, the medic came in and approached Ava.

"No, Clay and the others first." Ava nodded in their direction. After all they went through, she couldn't get tended to before her crew. She'd survive a few more minutes, especially now that she'd seen River. He was alive. Knowing that was a fact and not a hope gave her the courage to look forward. They could—no, they would get out of here. They'd get back to the mission base and figure out who the hell attacked them and why. She'd make them pay for the lives lost.

Ava was sure of it.

The Unyielding Spirit of Cecilia

By Ana Zarate Lopez

In the arid desert landscape of rural Jalisco, Mexico, where tradition and patriarchy reigned supreme, my mother, Cecilia, was born into a world where her fate was predetermined. Her life was forever altered when, at the tender age of twenty-two, her parents arranged her marriage to my father, a man she had never met. In a society where women over twenty were considered spinsters, my mother's options were limited.

To complicate matters, my mother was already in love with another man, a firefighter who was deemed unsuitable due to his poverty. Despite her protests, she was forbidden from seeing him, and her parents pushed forward with the arranged marriage.

The "dowry" offered by my father's family was a pregnant pig, a symbol of the value placed on my mother's life. The pig, a prized possession, was meant to seal the deal, solidifying the union between two families. But my mother, Cecilia, was not one to be bought or sold. She was a firestorm of determination and courage, refusing to accept this fate.

As she walked along, returning the pig to my father's family residence, she was confronted by my intoxicated father in the middle of the street. His drunken state was a harbinger of the tumultuous marriage that lay ahead.

As the day of the wedding approached, tensions ran high. My mother's family, eager to secure the union, urged her to comply. But Cecilia stood firm, her resolve unshakeable. She would not be married off like a commodity, her life reduced to a mere transaction.

The day of the wedding arrived, casting a dark shadow over the proceedings. My father, barely able to stand, was dragged to the ceremony by his family. My mother, her eyes blazing with defiance, refused to participate. The air was thick with tension as the two families faced off, their anger and frustration palpable.

In a shocking turn of events, my father's family produced a gun, threatening to harm my mother's family if she refused to comply. The ceremony proceeded, with my mother being married at gunpoint to a man she did not love. The pregnant pig, a haunting reminder of the brutal transaction, was left to roam.

Despite the traumatic beginning, my mother never lost her spirit. She taught my sisters and me to read and write in secret, encouraging us to think for ourselves and pursue our education. Her unyielding determination inspired us to challenge the unjust systems that had oppressed her for so long.

As I reflect on my mother's story, I am filled with a sense of awe and reverence. Her courage in the face of overwhelming oppression is a testament to the strength of the human spirit. Though she was married off like a commodity, her life was not defined by that singular event. Instead, she rose above it, her legacy a powerful reminder of the importance of resilience, determination, and the unbreakable bonds of family.

Repentance



BY LETRICIA BROWDER

Reaching somewhere beyond the sky is my only intent.
I had to split my limbs wide open.
I don't want to spill my unholiness on the golden gates.
About 23 years so far.
Feels like an eternity.
Waiting for the one to purify the masses.
I know tomorrow isn't promised.
I rejoice in that fact.
On days like this, when I'm so close to ending it.
I have to dig deep and find some sort of meaning.
No matter how insignificant.

BY LETRICIA BROWDER

She was only seven.
When multiple men took advantage.
Of her fragile body and soft skin.
They towered and overpowered.
A power meant to protect.
They chose to instead rip her to shreds.
Savages disguised as men.
She said her private parts hurt.
Her mother ignored every word.
Abuse and neglect.
I want everyone responsible dead.
In such a twisted fashion.
Multiple men.
Family that's supposed to be trusted.
Violated a delicate flower.
I commit a well-justified murder every hour in my mind.
Mutilating and gutting every guy.
And let's not forget.
Every blind bitch.
Who fails to save their offspring in time.
They too can fuck off and die.

A Dream in Black and White

By Andrea Feodorov

On a cold, raw night on a tall, ghostly-lit suspension bridge called the Tri-Borough that spans the East River to Queens, you find yourself in a crowded sedan, rain rapping angrily to get in. The traffic that night is heavy, even at three in the morning. The car you're in merges into the right lane, with trucks and busses zipping past you at seventy miles an hour. You feel a car hit you from behind, not hard, but hard enough to knock your car out of its lane. It spins in slow motion, the front bumper coming to an unnatural stop against a concrete embankment on the side of the bridge, the rear extended far into the right lane. You can't stay in this position. You are going to get hit again. The screech of brakes, an air horn, and a second, violent crash slams the car with far more force than the first collision. A wall of metal sparks fly in all directions as the side of a tractor trailer cuts through the middle of your car, slowly, spewing sparks and twisting metal in all directions. Slowly. Very slowly.

All of your relatives are in that car. They are all dead. Your parents are crushed against the dashboard, their faces gray and broken. Your grandparents are slumped against the back seat, limbs crushed, blood everywhere. An aunt. An uncle. Mouths gaping wide as if frozen by the horror. All dead. But not from the crash. They were dead before. Before the crash. All except you. You were already in the car. You were somehow alive.

You find yourself outside the vehicle, gripping your husband's hand with all your force from the back window, dangling beyond the bridge above a dark, foreboding river in the rain.

Your husband Michael shouldn't be there. You shouldn't be able to see the occupants of the car. But you can. And it makes no sense. The lights on the bridge are bright like the lights at a highway construction site or sporting arena at night. People are beginning to congregate, gawk.

Someone screams. A man jumps on the hood of the car, but your eyes are locked on Michael.

Your fingers intertwine as tightly as possible. "I love you," you whisper, almost mouthing the words. "I always will."

His grip begins to weaken and his eyes become wet and desperate. You can see the gold wedding band you bought for him on your wedding day as your hand starts to slip. You look down in terror at the dark, frigid waters below nearly two hundred feet. Through your tears you tell him you'll wait for him forever if that's what it takes; that you'll always be with him no matter what. He cries out your name and your wet hand slips.

You fall and a light, cold rain wets your face like tears. Slowly. Always slowly. It's late January and the thought of the icy waters below are terrifying. You plunge into the river feet first in a blast of black waves, bubbles, and globs of pollution. But the water isn't cold. It's strangely warm, almost tropical. You struggle to get to the surface, thrashing through bubbles and muck. You break through the surface and gasp for air. The frigid night seizes your face. You look up and see the bridge towering far above you; other-worldly, like a silkscreen in a theater production, eerily lit, glowing, white, unreal.

You scream up to Michael to let him know you're okay, that you're going to swim to shore. But he doesn't hear you. You flail your arms in a desperate attempt to get his—or anyone's—attention, but no one responds. They must not see you.

The lights on the bridge seem brighter now. Great activity is occurring at the accident scene. Someone will see you. They have to see you. But no one bothers. There's no rescue attempt. No searchlights. No boats. It's like your life doesn't matter. You thrash through the water toward the shore, determined to reunite with Michael, when you realize the dark water isn't filled with pollution. It's filled with thousands of eerie, undulating, black shapes as far as the eye can see, intermingling, wiggling with each other in a slow, sinister dance, as if trapped in an oily purgatory. The sight of them terrifies you, but they're all around you, everywhere.

You swim for the shore with increasing resolve, but your ego suddenly sprouts wings and separates from your mind, skipping across the river on its own toward the lights and the ongoing catastrophe on the bridge. You reach out to grab it, but you're too late, too shocked, too confused by the separation to know what to do. You give up quickly, which confuses you even more.

There's no fight. None. It's as if your self, your identity, the you of you, has disappeared, gone off to join some new adventure and left you without the slightest interest in reaching the shore, reuniting with Michael, or why it might be important. Your indifference should shock you. But it doesn't. You want to want to reach the shore. You want to want to reunite with Michael. But you don't. You haven't got the desire or interest. Emotions, attachments, memories have all lost their meaning. You have no interest in the world or your previous place in it. You have only the river.

The bridge is quite distant now. You have drifted a thousand yards; a million years. The bridge sparkles on the night horizon like a string of jewels, so incredibly beautiful, so very far away. Only now do you realize how precious it was, how important it was for you to have left your mark on the world, to have accomplished something.

The shapes are becoming distinct now. They're closing in around you quickly. They surround you like a viscous, semi-conscious jelly, fitting together like pieces of an undulating jigsaw puzzle. Yet now you realize these lifeless beings are no longer in the river. They are the river, a vast, endless sea of souls, drifting, bobbing, lost, without direction or destination. They overtake you without a fight. And as you take your place among the shapes in this foulest of waters, without fear or care, interest or attachment, you are powerless and indifferent to your fate. You are all lost together, ever more inanimate, ever more forgotten, undulating like liquid zombies, entwined in a black primordial river known only to poets, grown ever closer, ever more condensed, ever more estranged from the world you once knew.

And lost by mistake.

Eden's Mahogany Door

By Emily Thomas

The door had been nailed shut for a reason. That's what my parents always told me. It seemed as if the old, round-top mahogany doors stared back at me, taunting me. They said it was supposed to be her room. By her, I mean my dead sister. She was never really born, and I do not know much about that. My parents had lost her way before they had me. She would've been 21 today, 8 years older than me. They always lock themselves in her room on this day, March 3, for some kind of weird ritual or some shit. I don't get it. It was so long ago, why don't they just get over it? I'm here, aren't I enough? So I stand there, looking, I don't even know what I'm looking for or how long I've been standing in front of this old, mahogany door. My inspection was disturbed when a soft hand landed on my shoulder. It was my mother, and she looked at me with concern.

"How many times do we have to tell you to stay away from this door, Elizah," she shook her head and scoffed, "There's nothing in there for you to see."

I stared at her blankly. "If that's true, why is the door locked at all times, mother?" I watched as she tensed up and sighed.

"We already told you what you needed to know," she sighed again and turned away, "Your sister, she—"

"Yeah, I get it she died, and you two psychos still aren't over her, so you keep the damn door locked and tell me to stay away from it." I heard her gasp in shock, but I didn't care as I walked away, furious. They would lock themselves in that room for the rest of the day anyway. I plugged my earphones, blasting music, and then fell asleep.

I woke up an hour later due to a loud banging coming from somewhere inside the house. I got up from the bed, confused, and left my room. As I stand in the hallway, I realize where the loud banging is coming from. It's the door, my sister's door. I shake with fear, frozen in place. The banging continues to get louder and harder. All of a sudden, there's a piercing scream coming from the room that makes me fall to my knees in fright.

I jolt awake, covered in a cold sweat. It must have been a bad dream, I think to myself. I grab my phone and check the time: 10 p.m. I decide to get up and get a drink, but as I walk out of my room, I notice something. The door—my sister's door—that old, mahogany door—it's open.

This door is barely ever unlocked, so I'm surprised that my psycho parents would just leave it open like this. I scoffed and continued walking to the kitchen, but I heard a soft cry from her room before I could even take two steps. I tense up and slowly turn my attention to the room. I walk forward, it's an idiotic decision, but oh well. I reach the door, "Mom," I call out into the room, terrified. Another soft cry came from the room's other side, and I quickly turned to see what made the noise. There, in the corner, was a... a woman? A pale woman with pitch-black eyes and a crooked smirk. She slowly stood up; she was skinny, abnormally skinny. She was wearing a black silk robe that went all the way down to her ankles. She shuffled close to me, I would've run, but I was frozen with fear.

She stood in front of me, reached out her pale hand, and placed it on my cheek. I flinched back, and she let out a sad whimper. "B-brother," she whispered. I stood there confused and horrified for a second. I got my sense back and ran. I ran out of that room and downstairs. I took my phone out and called my mom. She picked up after three rings.

"Elizah," she questioned, seeming concerned, "What's the matter, honey?"

"M-mom! What's in that room?" I questioned, breathing heavily.

"Nothing dear, we told you-," but I cut her off for the second time today.

"Yes! Dead sister! Whatever, but the thing in there is not dead," I shouted at her through the phone. I heard her gasp, "So tell me, mother, what the fuck is in that room?"

"E-Elizah, you need to get out of the house. I thought we locked the door, oh god. Elizah, listen to me, get out of the house now!"

I stared at my phone in confusion and was about to run when I saw the figure I left behind upstairs, standing a few feet away from me. I tense up; she was making those sad little whimpers again.

"M-mom, you gotta tell me what's going on here. Who is this woman, and why must I leave the house?" I hear my mother sigh sadly.

"It's your sister Elizah. She didn't die at birth. She's 35 years old today," my mother took a stuttering breath before continuing, "When she was 6 years old, she started to get dangerous. She would harm herself... harm others," as my mother spoke, the woman I now knew was my sister slowly took steps towards me, that crooked smirk on her face, "We took her to doctors, but they couldn't tell us anything. So we decided to lock her up, only opening those doors to feed and bathe her."

I gulped and slowly stepped back, trying to reach the front door. My mother continued, "When I got pregnant with you, I thought it would be a good idea to let her know. She seemed so happy, I thought she changed. But oh, was I wrong," she let out a soft sob before she continued, "I let her roam free in the home, probably my worst decision ever. Late at night, I woke up to soft whimpers. I walked out of my room to check to see what was wrong. Before I got to her door, I was kicked to my knees. It was her, standing above me with an evil look in her eyes. She kicked and punched me, but all I could do was cover my stomach. Protect you." She sobs harder.

I keep backing away from her until my back hits the wall. I'm trapped. She gets closer and closer.

I whimpered, "M-mom, what's her name?"

She continued to sob but then said, "Eden. Her name is Eden."

I fall to my knees, "Eden..." And everything goes black.

Masked



By Adrianna Ramirez

Mood Swings



By Adrianna Ramirez

The Sound of Paper Wings

By Christian Espinoza

Rosa sat on the edge of her bed, staring at the ceiling where a single crack split the plaster like lightning frozen in time. Her mother's muffled voice called from the kitchen, sharp and urgent, urging her to come eat before school. But Rosa wasn't hungry. Not today. Not after another sleepless night wondering where her father was.

In her hands, she held a small piece of paper folded into the shape of a bird—a crane, to be precise. Its edges were worn soft from months of being carried in her pocket. Her father had made it for her the night before he disappeared.

"Whenever you feel like you're falling," he had said, his hands trembling as he creased the paper, "let this little bird catch you." He kissed her forehead and tucked her in. The next morning, his side of the bed was cold, his work boots gone, and his jacket missing from the hook by the door.

The paper crane had been her only anchor since then. She carried it through whispered questions at school, through the pitying glances from neighbors, and through the gnawing silence at home when her mother stared at the front door, waiting for someone who wouldn't come back. Her mother never spoke of him—never explained why he left or where he might be. The unspoken truth loomed over their home like a thundercloud, suffocating and heavy.

But today, Rosa decided she couldn't live with the silence any longer. She had to find him.

The journey to the factory wasn't far, but it felt endless. Rosa had skipped school, clutching her backpack tight as she navigated the streets of their small town. The factory stood like a fortress at the edge of town, its windows darkened with grime. This was the place where her father had spent most of his waking hours, though he never spoke about it. Rosa always imagined it as a cage, and now, standing in its shadow, she felt its weight pressing down on her chest.

Inside, the factory buzzed with noise and motion. Machines roared, conveyor belts screeched, and workers moved like shadows between the chaos. Rosa approached the front desk, clutching the strap of her backpack like a lifeline.

"I'm looking for someone who worked here—Miguel Ortega," she said, her voice barely audible above the din.

The receptionist, a tired-looking woman with smudged glasses, frowned. "Miguel? He hasn't worked here in months."

Rosa's stomach twisted. "Do you know where he went?"

The woman hesitated, glancing around as if worried someone might overhear. Finally, she leaned in closer. "Try the warehouse on Pine Street. Some of the guys mentioned him working odd jobs there."

The warehouse was nothing like the factory. It was quiet, almost eerie, with stacks of crates towering like monuments to forgotten dreams. Rosa wandered through the aisles, her footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. Her heart pounded as she scanned the shadows, her father's face flashing in her mind with every turn.

"Rosa?"

The voice stopped her in her tracks.

Her father emerged from the shadows, his face thinner, his eyes darker, but unmistakably his. He froze when he saw her, a mixture of relief and dread washing over his features.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice a whisper.

Rosa's eyes filled with tears. "Why did you leave?"

Miguel knelt in front of her, his hands trembling as they reached for her shoulders. "I had no choice, mija. The factory... they found out I didn't have papers. They were going to call ICE. I couldn't let them take me from you and your mamá. So I left before they could."

Rosa pulled the paper crane from her pocket and held it out to him. "You told me this bird would catch me if I fell. But you fell first, Papá."

Miguel stared at the crane, his face crumpling like the fragile paper in her hands. "I thought I was protecting you," he said. "But I see now... I was wrong."

They sat together on the cold warehouse floor, the paper crane resting between them. Rosa didn't know what would happen next—whether her father would come home or whether they'd spend their lives hiding in the shadows. But for the first time in months, she felt like the ground beneath her feet was steady.

Miguel broke the silence first. "I've been saving up. It's not much, but maybe enough to take you and your mamá somewhere safer. Somewhere we don't have to look over our shoulders."

Rosa looked at him, her heart aching. "What about the life we already have? I don't want to run anymore, Papá. I just want us to be together."

Miguel's shoulders sagged. "It's not that simple. People like us... we're not given choices. We're given corners to hide in."

Rosa's hands tightened into fists. "Then we'll make our own choices. Together."

The walk back home was quiet but filled with an unspoken resolve. Miguel held Rosa's hand tightly, as if afraid to let her go again. When they reached the small house, her mother's gasp echoed through the air. She ran to Miguel, tears streaming down her face as she embraced him. The three of them stood in the doorway, a fragile reunion that felt both impossible and inevitable.

Over the next few days, Miguel began to rebuild his place in their lives. He found work doing random jobs around the neighborhood, fixing fences, painting houses, and repairing anything he could get his hands on. Rosa watched him with a mix of pride and sadness, knowing how much he had given up for them.

One evening, as they folded cranes together at the kitchen table, Rosa had an idea. "What if we used these cranes to tell our story?" she asked.

Miguel looked at her curiously. "What do you mean?"

"We could write on them," Rosa said, her eyes bright with excitement. "Messages, poems, anything. Then we could leave them around town. Maybe someone will listen. Maybe someone will help."

Her parents exchanged a hesitant glance, but Miguel's expression softened. "It's a beautiful idea, *mija*. Let's do it."

Over the next few weeks, their home became a workshop of words and wings. They wrote messages of hope and resilience, folding them into intricate cranes. Rosa's mother even contributed a few poems in Spanish, her voice shaking as she recited them aloud. Together, they scattered the cranes throughout the town—on park benches, in library books, even tucked into the pockets of coats at the thrift store.

The cranes began to draw attention. People posted photos of them on social media, marveling at the artistry and the heartfelt messages. Local news outlets picked up the story, calling it "The Flight of Hope."

But not everyone was supportive. Anonymous letters arrived at their door, warning them to stop. "Go back to where you came from," one note read in shaky handwriting. Rosa's hands trembled as she held it, but Miguel took it from her gently.

"They're just scared," he said. "But fear doesn't win. We do."

One morning, Rosa woke to find a letter slipped under their door. It was from a lawyer offering to help Miguel with his immigration status pro bono. Tears filled Rosa's eyes as she read the letter aloud to her parents. For the first time, hope didn't feel like a distant dream—it felt real.

The lawyer, a kind woman named Elena, met with them the following week. She explained the risks and challenges but promised to do everything in her power to keep their family together. Rosa watched her father sit straighter, his eyes filled with a determination she hadn't seen in years.

"We'll fight," Miguel said firmly. "For all of us."

The months that followed were a whirlwind of paperwork, court dates, and sleepless nights. The community rallied around them, inspired by the cranes and their story. Neighbors brought meals, offered rides, and even organized fundraisers to cover legal fees. Rosa's family was no longer invisible—they were seen, heard, and supported.

On the day of their final court hearing, Rosa clutched the paper crane tightly in her hand. She sat between her parents, their hands intertwined as they waited for the judge's decision. When the words came—"Your petition is granted"—the room erupted into cheers.

Tears streamed down Rosa's face as she hugged her parents. The paper crane in her hand felt heavier now, not with fear, but with the weight of all they had endured and overcome.

Back home, Rosa placed the crane on the windowsill, where it caught the light of the setting sun. It was no longer just a piece of paper—it was a symbol of their journey, their resilience, and the wings they had found together.

And as the wind rustled through the trees outside, Rosa swore she could hear the faint sound of paper wings, carrying their story to the world.

With their lives now somewhat stabilized, Rosa began to wonder what came next for her family. While Miguel adjusted to life without fear of sudden separation, he took every opportunity to give back to the community that had stood by them. He helped neighbors repair fences, volunteered at the local shelter, and even taught others how to fold paper cranes, using them as a symbol of solidarity.

For Rosa, the cranes took on a life of their own. She started a club at school called "Cranes of Hope," where students learned how to fold them and write messages. Over time, the cranes began to symbolize more than just her family's story. They became a way for others to express their struggles and dreams. Rosa felt a sense of purpose, knowing she could help others feel seen and heard.

One day, her teacher, Ms. Delgado, approached her with an idea. "Rosa, have you ever thought about sharing your story on a bigger platform?"

Rosa hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"There's a storytelling contest in the city next month. It's about resilience and hope. I think your family's journey—and the cranes—would be perfect."

Rosa felt a wave of doubt but also excitement. Could she really stand up in front of a crowd and tell their story? She decided to give it a try.

The contest day arrived quickly. Rosa stood backstage, clutching a paper crane tightly in her hands. Her parents sat in the audience, beaming with pride. As she stepped onto the stage, she took a deep breath and began.

"My name is Rosa Ortega, and this is the story of how a paper crane saved my family."

The room was silent as she spoke, her voice steady and strong. She shared the pain of her father's absence, the fear of losing him forever, and the hope that grew from their tiny, fragile cranes. By the time she finished, the audience was on their feet, applauding loudly.

Rosa didn't win the contest, but she walked away with something far more valuable: the knowledge that her voice mattered. And as she held the paper crane in her hand, she knew her family's story had taken flight.

The cranes, once just fragile symbols of survival, became emblems of hope and transformation, soaring far beyond the small town where they had been born.

Hate and Forgiveness

By Aaron Diaz

We've all been hurt, betrayed, and abandoned at some point. All of us think about revenge. Some will seek out their vengeance, while the rest continue on in bitter anger. Though these people do not act on their hatred, they don't forgive. A very small minority – the strongest of them all – will forgive.

Before I speak about these people, I have to address any justification for forgiveness. Why should we even forgive? There are certain traumas a human heart can't recover from. Though the word "trauma" is powerful, these events don't need to be life changing – but only significant to your mental or physical state. Most likely resulting in a change of behavior. This trauma is a wound. A wound leaves behind a scar – evidence of pain. The injured member is never the same – the human heart is never the same. There is no recovery for trauma or suffering. We can only forget the event, and forget the pain we endured. Time heals nothing, it only takes us further away, allowing the trauma to fade away into the crevices of our mind.

If trauma inflicted onto us by another person is so abominable, then why should we forgive?! Imagine a man robbing then stabbing your son to death, which is to consider your son's life to be worthless – only a means to acquire loose change. How would you face this murderer in a court room? What would you say to him?

In 2017 a father had to stare down his son's murderer in court as he prepared a final statement before the killer's sentencing. Imagine the reprimand, anger, and declarations of violence that would come out of this father's mouth. But instead he said, "I feel so sad for you that you have to be in this situation. I wish I could help you, as I helped my son to be a good citizen. If Salahuddin were to be here, if he were alive, he would forgive you..." His statement ended with, "I forgive you on behalf of Salahuddin and his mother." There was no anger in his voice. He had a calm yet sad air around him.

This is a mortal wound for the heart. This is a suffering that destroys, causing parents to suffer profusely until their own painful and miserable demise. This father is no different. This is a grief that shall break him down until his last breath. Yet he earnestly forgave the murderer. But now what of the murderer? Why should he care about his forgiveness? Why shouldn't he laugh and spit on his face? This is the same man that brutally took an innocent life for a couple of dollars. Yet with a tearful final statement, the murderer Relford expressed his regret and applauded the father's strength to forgive.

Relford ended his statement while softly crying and clenching his heart, "There's nothing I can do. I want to thank you for your forgiveness." The two men proceeded to hug and cry in each other's arms. Relford accepted his fate, and was sentenced to 31 years in prison.

Why was Relford so moved? Surely, rejecting forgiveness and laughing at the father is less damning than murder? How could he commit one terrible act, yet refuse the lesser? It was the father's love. His pain will always remain, but his soul is reassured. A great love emanated from him, a love that refused to abandon even his son's killer. An altruistic and exceedingly self sacrificing love. This man took on Relford's pain along with his own, and forgave.

Such a radiant love from a flawed human must be evidence of something – that love transcends ourselves. There is no logical explanation for forgiveness at this level, nor is there an explanation for Relford being moved to tears and expressing remorse. If someone hurts you, justice – not exactly vengeance – is typically the most rational course of action. If this inflicted pain can't be prosecuted in a court room, then you cut off the person who hurt you from your life. This is the rational, while forgiveness is the irrational. The rational prolongs our life, and keeps us out of harm. Yet who would claim that this father did the wrong thing? Who would call him weak? Instead, there are none stronger than those who forgive.

The human condition is that of the irrational. But since we forgive, and understand it to be the most virtuous act, life is the enemy of reason. It is impossible to live on reason alone. To forgive is to have faith in the human heart. Reason and faith are enemies, but they require each other.

Who are the people that can genuinely forgive? They are those that have found themselves. They understand their own mortality, uncertainty, flaws, and suffering. When you see this in yourself, you see it in others. Your family, friends, and even strangers begin to look similar. You share in their joy, and in their pain. This is love, the most irrational of emotions. With this love, those who forgive come to understand a very simple tenet. We are all the same. Therefore, give yourself up to others, so that you may be in others, and others may be in you. Forgive them.



By Jazmin Granados

Game of Love

Love, a powerful emotion, a risky game to play.
Are you ready to play?
To anger, to joy
To sadness, to lust
It expresses itself differently depending on who,
So many people chase for it, dream of it or despise it
Some are lucky on the first go,
Some go for the easiest, the most vulnerable to catch
Like a firefly entrapped in a jar
Shaking it for entertainment, then set it free if lucky
Having a title may be more confronting than having nothing
But is the feeling for them true?
Do they mind till death do them apart?
Terrified of starting over, years invested but no plan on retiring
Life and memories created together
The future waiting to be made
My love and her bridesmaids Is she with me?
Does she exist?
Will she fill my heart with joy or leave me in dismay?
Take the risk if you may
Love, a powerful emotion, truly is a risky game to play. Are you ready to play?

**I HATE HOW, BUT I LOVE WHEN.
BY ALANNA JORDAN**

I hate how society lacks empathy, how people can't fathom another person's feelings because they haven't gone through it or because they've gone through worse.

But I love when people keep their sensitivity and sensibility even when society tells them they no longer have to.

I hate how people judge people for lacking knowledge on a subject, but forget that the only reason they know is because they were taught

But I love when people remember we are not born educated, we all only know that of which we hear or see.

I hate how people reach their high then forget about all the lows they hit on the way, judging those that are now in that spot.

But I love when people remember. remember where they stand now and where they once stood before. So that they won't shame the next person who stands in their place.

I hate how people are so desperate to be part of some secret club that they forget not everything is meant to be private.

But i love when people remember that there are more important things than their desire to feel special

I hate how people refuse to look past the surface, even when people are showing them the layers. As if they are blind and can't see the full picture.

But I love when people open their minds and imagination to sympathize with something even if they've never been through it before.

I hate when people deny all that I've mentioned above. Because although they know its wrong, change they wont

But I love when people accept their flaws because they know there's no change without acceptance of ourselves and the parts we hate the most

I love when people accept the layers and levels so that they can understand the full structure top to bottom left to right.

**YOGI BEAR IS DUMBER THAN THE AVERAGE BEAR
BY MARK ANDREW HOLMES**

Yogi is dumber than the average bear

Yogi pigs out on human food

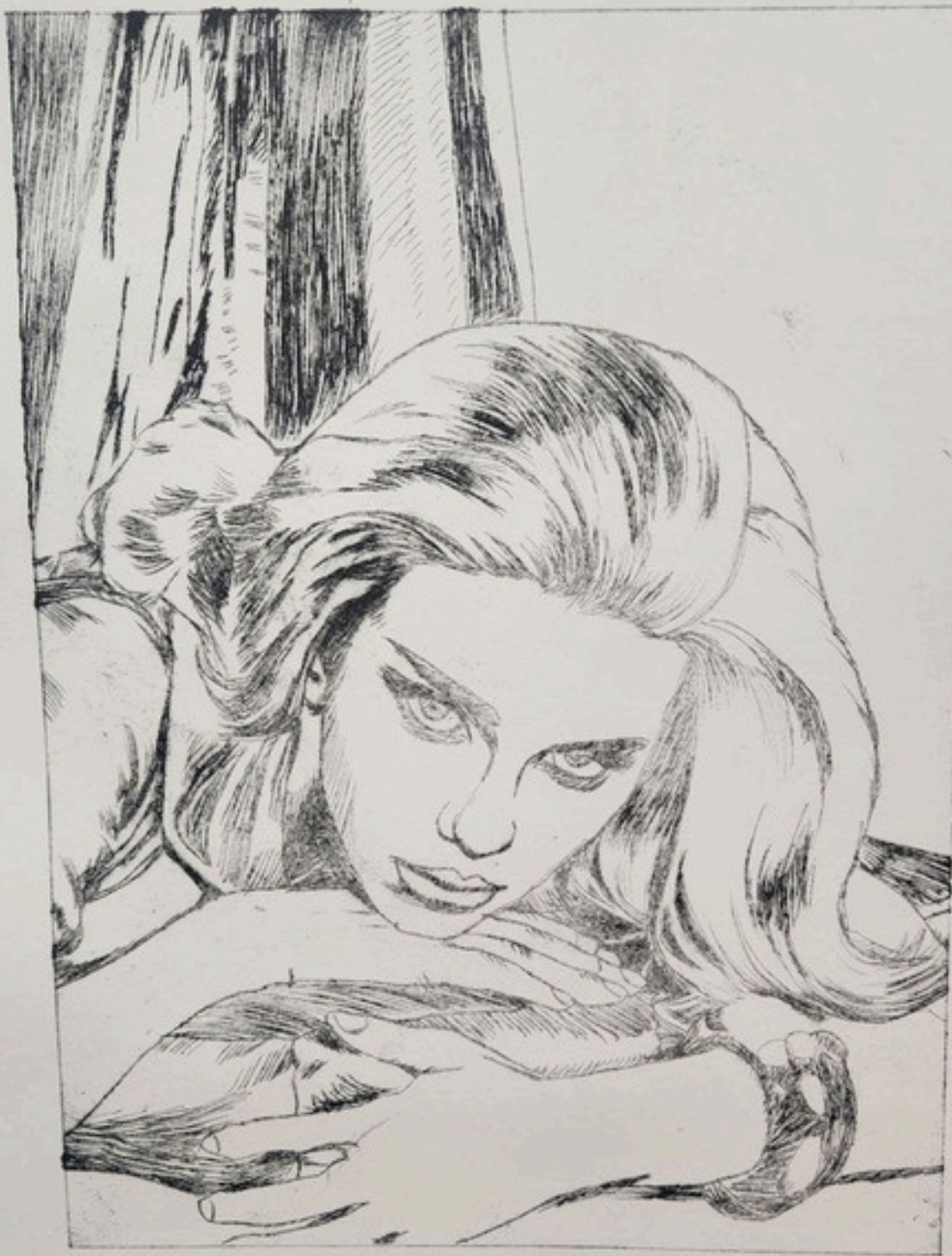
Which doesn't do him any good

He's hanging around

He's going down

He's about to get cut down to size

...And now he's getting euthanized.



By Irlanda Velazquez

Halloran

By Aaliyah Medawar

The tongues of old sailors are not to be trusted. Soaked with liquor and lies or bound behind the bars of rotten teeth is their perfidious parlance. Yet, many-a fool has still been dragged down by the beguiling net of fables they cast into the sea. I know, for I myself was one of those unlucky few. As I pen this narrative, I beg my readers to heed my warning, lest they too be ruined by the madness and mania of that accursed lot, be them thieving scoundrels or noble-blooded privateers.

The doldrums of city living had infected me with melancholy, a kind not even the likes of my wife, Mary, could stir me from. Though we were recently wed, my desire to return to my employment was rather pressing, as was my wife's given our less than ideal financial standings. I was a lieutenant by trade, in the employment of her Majesty Queen Victoria's Royal Navy. But after an accident aboard my vessel left me short of a leg, I had no choice but to be discharged, and seek employment elsewhere.

The pier of Stromness in the Orkney archipelago is where I found my answer. Whalers did not care about one's disadvantages. So long as one could contribute to the hunt, the body of a mariner mattered very little to the crew. Therefore, even with my unfortunate circumstances, 'twas not a difficult undertaking to find a purpose aboard one such vessel. Only a fortnight later did I set out to sea, and only the night before my departure did I meet the Man on the Dock.

His name was Halloran, and despite the fact there were claims that he was as old as the isles himself, not a soul could attest that they knew anything more about him. No registrations or records bore his signature, nor did he have kin or kith to speak of within the Hoy Sound. But in exchange for some shillings or a bottle of whiskey, Halloran would share his stories of the sea. Be it drunken shanties of adventure, or somber whisperings of monsters below the waves, the Man on the Dock could enchant even the mightiest of magicians with his words. Still, plenty stayed wary, for the old man's wit sent many back to their ships with barren wallets and eyes clouded with a drunken fog. But even so, when one was called forth by Halloran himself, the compulsion to speak with him outweighed the hesitancy in one's instincts.

As a Stygian darkness of night fell upon Stromness, waves of fog had crept out from the Atlantic, covering the marred wood of the dock in its misty embrace. Somewhere within the thick gloom was my vessel, and as I marched along the creaking floorboards of the pier I knew I was to find it. But I was not alone beneath the ink-black sea of stars hanging above me, for as I sought out my ship, a voice called out to me. It was coarse and growling, resembling the crashing tides of a seaside storm more than the sounds of human speech. Still, comprehending what it was attempting to say was a simple undertaking, as 'twas only the voice that broke the silence that swathed the dock and I.

"A story for ye, sir?" It said, its tone besotted with liquor. "Any sort of payment will do."

With a cry of "Who goes there?" I searched for the origin of this voice, only to be met with a rather peculiar sight. I had never seen Halloran, only heard tales from my fellow matelots. But upon finding the origin of the voice in the tenebrosity, I knew this had to be him, even before he introduced himself as such. He stood upon the rocky shores of Stromness, a lantern in his hand and his feet bare and dark against the pale sand.

The skin of his short and stout physique was riddled with scars, gnarled and vulgar like Macbeth's Dunsinane. Joined with them were various shades of discoloration, as uneven pigments and textures ran wild across his flesh. In some places, he was a rich shade of bronze, whilst in others he was as pale as ivory. Clashed around his throat, was a necklace of blood-stained shark's teeth, done up into a crooked grin within its leather cord bindings. Yet that was not the strangest part about him, for wrapped around his body was a thick coat of sealskin, whose varying shades of brown resembled the very hair that sat matted and windswept upon the head of Halloran.

"What tales do you offer, lobscouser?" I regret to say I said, peering down at the grotesque creature that stood before me.

The old man laughed, inching towards me from the gloomy umbrage. "Halloran be my name, sir, please call me as such. I be not some raving Neptunist, nor some verbose trawlerman. No sir, gentleman I am. Far more a gentleman than the lords of Parliament could claim to be. So, I offer ye a story not of the vicious bloodletting of the nuckelavee, sir, nor one of noble Arthurian kingship. I sing to ye a shanty of the sea, young sailor. Tis old as time and yet new ever still, one of love and loss, and one I implore ye to take heed of."

As we stood there in the crepuscular night, surrounded by the smell of Manannán's brine and barrels containing cargo from lands far beyond the lochs of Scotland, I became aware just how out of my depth I was. Though a wayfaring man myself, Stromness pier was Halloran's domain. Each splintering oak plank, each jagged grey stone, each grain of salt in the wine-dark sea was all that of Halloran's. He was the thane of this land, and I was merely a guest in his court.

Yet, I did not flee from his offer, nor kneel before him in reverential respect. For though he outranked me as a man of the sea, he was not a man I feared. His body, small and corpulent when compared to my lean and lank frame, was still flesh and bone, bound by blood and sinew. So rather than bend to the will and warnings of my peers, I pondered his offer for a moment, knowing well of my disadvantages and yet choosing to blind myself to their presence.

"Alright, jacktar. Tell me your tale."

The Man on the Dock laughed again, placing his lantern upon one of the dock posts. "If ye've heard of me, sir- which I presume ye have- then the fact that I take compensation for my stories is not a concept lost upon thy mind."

I frowned, for I had not a shilling to speak of concealed within my purse. Acquainting myself with my crew the night before happened to involve a few games of cards, and my luck at sea unfortunately carried with me into the world of gambling, leading to a rather gruesome streak of losses that left me destitute at present. It seemed that Halloran knew this as well, for as he met my gaze, a strange look entered his hideous dark eyes and his nodose hand became outstretched towards me. Once again, he began to speak in his odd antiquated manner, his voice dancing alongside the sounds of the thalassic deep.

"If money be a problem, sir, ye shalt have not to worry. All I request from ye are two trifles, barely missed by a man of thy status. Thy name and a token of value tis all. Be it of money or of trinket, I take what intrigues me. Lest of course this story be not worthy of thy time."

When I did not respond, he then eyed my wedding ring, and gestured to it with one of his weather-beaten fingers. "Well then, what say ye to a wager?"

I am ashamed to say I was intrigued by his offer, and responded to his words with a mere "go on."

"The gimcracks I desire are for thy keeping on one condition," was all he said in return, his crooked teeth spreading into a grin.

"For God's sake, man, out with it!"

"If ye can decipher my tale, down to its very bones, then I shall let ye keep thy band."

"What on Earth do you mean?"

All he did was smile. I almost left then. I should have left then. But somehow, in ways I could not even begin to fathom, the words of this man with the crooked spine and twisted mouth were enough to anchor me in place. His deal was fair. All he wanted was an introduction and a chance to grasp at fortune. Surely it would not be difficult to solve some riddle of some maudlin old fool, therefore I could be rest assured that my ring would be returned to my person with as much swiftness as it took for it to leave. Mary- fair, beautiful, naive Mary- would never know. In the eyes of that woman this band would have never left my finger.

And even if- by some miracle- I happened to lose my ring to this feculent fellow, my contract with my whaling ship bound me to a voyage of at least three years. It would be easy to excuse its absence as a result of finding myself lost within the throes of a storm or engaged in an arduous struggle against the Herculean bulk of my very own white whale. All I would have to do is keep my hand hidden from the prying eyes of my bride until I set off the next morning. How deliciously simple this was!

I removed the sun-gold band from around my finger, placing it into the calloused palm of my malformed companion. As his short, mutilated fingers, with their dagger-sharp nails stained with the blood from chum and the fresh shark-teeth around his neck, clasped around my ring, a chill ran down my spine. With a sharp turn of my head, I glanced around the dock. In an instant, my blood filled with ice, for it seemed that as soon as I handed over that small ring of what could only be sunlight blessed by Lugh, the peace of the pelagian tides fell into ruin.

The pale moonbeams that once illuminated Stromness pier were gone, now obscured by the gloom of the Cailleach and the thickening fog that blanketed the waves. And what waves they were! Like the rolling bodies of serpents they thrashed against the rocky shoreline, drenching the soft sand with geysers of stinging saltwater.

As I watched the horrific sight unfold before me, I could not shake the feeling that I had made a deal with the Devil himself. But Halloran remained unwavering, barely reacting to the objections of the sea at all. Instead, the thrawn-bodied seafarer merely pocketed the ring, his malice-filled eyes glittering like shards of sea glass. With his hoarse, garbling voice, he began to speak once more, his tale spilling from his mangled lips like the crashing of the waves from the surrounding sea.

Readers, it is here that I must make haste, lest this story slips from my memory. I pray that you will look upon my retelling with compassion, for you are reading the words of a man whose mind has begun to fail him. But I am not mad I assure you! Lunacy is not the mark I shall have branded into me. No, for you see, I am your forebearer, your augury of what is to come when one does not take heed of the warnings left behind by those wiser than yourself. Therefore it is pertinent that you take great care when studying this tale, lest you find that your fate resides alongside mine.

It began with a girl. A child of the sea and of the land. Ula was her name, and her blood was of the selkie fae. When human, her freckled skin was patterned like the harbor seals of whom she shared a form with, whilst a long cascade of sorrel curls she bore hung low around her ankles. To her fellow fae, she was a gift from the Mither o' the Sea, as though her body was beautiful, like the other selkies of her clan, so was her heart. Blessed were the shores of Stromness with her heart, and blessed was the father who reared her, for though he was not a man of means amongst the clan's authority, he was rich with the love of his daughter.

Ula's heart however was vast, and in it lied all forms of love, all except for one. For you see, Ula had not yet found to whom she could share her heart with, as the grasp of Aine had eluded her. Neither fae men nor merfolk could stir her affections, thus leaving her spurned by love and its cupids. 'Twas many moons later when her fate was changed. Human by nature, he was, and a sailor by trade, bound to the sea on a voyaging contract. Ula's heart stood no chance, for this man was nothing like she had ever seen. Despite his mortality, he braved the sea head on, with nary blessing from Manannán to shield him. It was his bravery that was the key to her heart, and his love of the sea, despite all its dangers, that called her to him.

Removing her seal skin, Ula approached the sailor, offering him her love. Enchanted by her beauty, he engaged her in courtship, and soon they soon were wed. But the man was cruel. The ways of the fae were nonsensical to him, thus he refused the chance to understand them. Ula's beauty was all he concerned himself with, and as he neglected her spirit, the light within her heart began to dim.

The sea called to her, as did her father, who missed his child terribly. At night, he would stand upon the shore, singing his daughter songs of home, hoping she would return. Every night she listened, and every night her heart would ache. The land of humans was bitter and barbarous, unkind to those who did not behave in a manner they deemed acceptable. After months of torturous longing, Ula's desire for freedom overtook her. One night, she gathered her belongings, and fled to the shores of her home.

But her husband was wise to her plan, and followed her out to sea. Once she draped her seal skin back over her body, he emerged from behind the rocks from whence he hid behind, and casted insults upon her. She was a witch! A sorceress! A wicked fae who had stolen away his bride, binding her within the body of a wild beast! With a scream of guttural rage he threw himself upon the poor selkie girl, sending Ula to the ground. In a frenzy, he drew the knife used by men of his trade to gut fish from his pocket. Ula's cries filled the air as he cast the blade upon her, staining the sand red with her blood. But there was no mercy to be found in the heart of man, as the innocence of Ula was met with nothing but a dagger through her once beating heart.

However, the sailor's bloody glory did not last long, for Ula's father had gone to the shore that day, ready to sing to his daughter once more. But all he was greeted with was grief. To find that man standing over his beloved child was enough to send him into a rage. How dare a murderer live, whilst one like Ula lay dead. He called out his song once more, not just to the soul of his daughter, but to the clan of the selkies who never stopped loving her.

Before the man could even protest, the kin of the woman he wronged were on him like dogs, dragging him beneath the waves, led by Ula's father. But rather than kill the sailor, as had been done to poor Ula, her father bestowed a curse upon him. Condemned he would be to turn into the very object of his ire, and bound he would be to the body of a seal. Slow agony consumed him as he shifted, his bones breaking and skin morphing into the grotesque monster he so accused the innocent selkie of being. 'Twas a fate to befall many a man who dared to be of his character, for the soul of Ula still haunts the shores, and the vengeance felt in the heart of her father still burns for the souls of the wives imprisoned within such accursed matrimony.

It was then I stepped back from the likes of Halloran, blustering with acrimony. "What sort of storyteller do you call yourself, you blackguard!?"

"A truthful one, sir, tis all I am... Have thy awakened the truth within the tale I speak?"

"I do not wish to! Begone from me, foul dock-dweller!"

All I was met with was another of Halloran's wry grins. "As ye wish, sir, as ye wish. I shan't impose upon a place where I am not wanted."

As he turned to leave, I called out to him once more. "Wait! My ring! Return my ring at once!"

"I am afraid I cannot do that, sir. Thy stony heart hath remained austere to the tale of which I spoke to ye. Therefore thy ring shall remain with me. Spare me thy protests! Thy soul has spoken of nothing but failure, both as a child of man and a partner of your wife. Now ye shall bear the consequences of thy transgressions. Good night to ye, sir. May thy God have mercy upon thy soul, for you shall find none from me."

Before I could speak, I was greeted with the lashing serpentine brine that battered the rocky shore. One of its savage waves had crashed down upon me, sending me prostrate against the dock. All I knew was oblivion, but upon regaining my senses I was met not with the Cimmerian darkness of night, nor the form of Halloran standing above me. Instead, gossamer beams of daylight had settled over Stromness, and the tranquility of day had soothed the savage oceanic beast.

I returned back to my lodgings at once, back into the arms of the dear woman I wed. But the home I once called my own soon proved to be anything but, for as soon as my foot crossed the threshold I was met with nothing but disdain. Mary, dear, sweet Mary, was there as I expected, but the warmth of her undying devotion had died out in my absence, becoming merely embers in the chambers of her heart. She reproached me, not even knowing my name as she cried out that a stranger had invaded her homestead. No amount of pleading seemed to stir her memory, nor could I do anything to aid it, for when I attempted to speak my name, the words died upon my lips.

Pursued by concerned neighbors, whose memories too were rid of my presence, I fled my former abode, and ran once more to the pier, screaming curses meant for the ears of Halloran. I soon discovered my crewmates, like my wife, no longer knew who I was, nor did the whaling contract upon which I registered my name bear my signature. I was a ghost, nor more alive than the likes of poor Ula. Only she was remembered, as once I crept upon the unforgiving stones of the beach, the ones upon which Halloran had stood on the night he told me his tale, I noticed a carving hidden within them. It read:

Ula. Child of the selkie folk.
Blessing of the fae.
In your heart love was woke, But hatred did it evoke
And now to rest you must lay

As I turned back to the sea, I gaped at what my eyes beheld. Sitting upon the lone jagged rocks just off the cliffs of Orkney, was a collection of seals- nay, selkies, for no pinniped could hold the majesty of such winsome, otherworldly creatures- peering at me from the foaming waves. Their downy coats, rich with shades of grey and brown, were more exquisite than the finest silk, whilst their eyes gleamed with an almost thaumaturgic glow. They were like gods of the Tír na nÓg, rich in regality and sublimity, extending their judgment upon the lower beings of humanity with empyrean acumen.

But the one whose gaze unsettled me the most was the one perched upon the tallest of rocks. Scarred and patterned with colors of freshly fallen snow and the life-giving bark of trees, his form was a tremendous display of creation, as if he was blessed by the hands of druids. His eyes, as rich as honey and as dark as smoke, lanced into my very being, as if daring me to approach him. It was a look I knew all too well, for I had seen it in the eyes of none other than Halloran. And once I took notice of the shark's teeth around that seal's throat, I knew that the amber gems of his eyes were not the only thing shared between the two.

But the jaws of the mighty aquatic beast were not all that bound around his neck. Poised just below the fangs, was a leather cord, strung fully with the wedding bands of men as foolish as I. Oh how blind I was! The guile and beauty of the faefolk was beyond me! For he was the father of the murdered girl! And twas he who brought ruin on the souls of man! Love hath brought death upon the men who wronged it, as the love of a daughter burned brighter than the lust of a sailor. Doomed I was from the moment I cast my eyes upon that of Halloran! And doomed forever I shall be because of him!

From that moment on, my life was plagued by Halloran's torment. I knew nothing but despair, and in the throes of my anguish I could very well feel my mind slip from my fingers. Days, weeks has it been since that fateful night? I could not tell you. Madness addles my mind most hours, only broken intermittently by periods of dreadful lucidity. But fear not, dear child! For I have found a cure! The mind cannot dream when the spirits from the ether begin their haunting, and peace can quite easily be found in the elixirs contained in bottles from Dionysus.

The pain of sanity however, is nothing compared to what the vitriol of Halloran has done to my body. I have become the very monster I once sneered down upon, and have doomed myself to an eternity of solitude. The tendons of my muscles have contorted, leaving me haggard and worn, whilst the structure of my bones has rotted into the cage of my perdition. Scars and blemishes of grotesque and inhuman colors have appeared along my flesh and teeth, forcing me away from the city I once loathed so ardently.

It is here you find me, dear reader, standing above the frothing abyss where Halloran no doubt still dwells. My life no longer is my own, for soon I shall be amongst the creatures I once hunted. Man has forsaken me, as I have forsaken love, and with that comes my banishment from the land. All that remains is to slip beneath the tides, safe from the greed bound to a hunter's harpoon, if only momentarily, for a life at sea is one rife with peril.

I implore ye, fair reader, to heed these warnings. Listen not to the words from the lips of sailors. Thy hearts are bound to the sea, and thy minds lie within the realm of dreams. Promises matter not, when one's drowning in their lies. Do not succumb to this fate, this of ye I beg, lest ye wish to join me in the drink. For as the faefolk lurk beneath the waves, and as caliginous night falls upon Stromness once more, the poison of sailors continues to weave their way into the hearts of the foolish. Be not the next victim to fall to their charms.

PUENTE IN MY VEINS CARÍÑO IN MY SOUL I COME FROM

By Maribel Santa Cruz

I come from the home made food, the food that reminds me my childhood. El sabor del estofado, las tortillas hechas a mano, un sope or some quesadillas, and of course la salsa de molcajete that my mom prepared. I come from the memory of my mother cooking pozole to celebrate el 15 de Septiembre, La Noche Mexicana; yo vengo del olor de la Navidad, when my mom used to cook bacalao y romeritos con mole. Nunca olvidaré ese dulce aroma del ponche de frutas, always ready to drink on December 24th to celebrate la Noche Buena, la llegada del Niño Dios.

I come from El D.F. now Ciudad de México, La Gran Tenochtitlán, capital of the Aztec Empire. Vengo de la Ciudad de los Palacios full of architectural wonders, el Palacio Nacional, el Palacio de Bellas Artes, el Castillo de Chapultepec, La Casa de los Azulejos and the majestic Catedral Metropolitana. I come from the sacred Templo Mayor y de las pirámides del Sol y de la Luna, Teotihuacán, the place where men become gods.

I come from los Revolucionarios y Las Adelitas fighting for freedom, I come from the history and battles de un pueblo lleno de orgullo y valor. I come from Zapata y Villa looking for equality and justice for all.

I come from culture and art, Garibaldi con sus mariachis. La Ciudadela y sus artesanías. Yo vengo de La Catrina y del Día de los Muertos. I come from the murals of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. I come from the house of Frida Kahlo y del Monumento a la Madre. Yo vengo de los poemas de Octavio Paz, Amado Nervo y la gran Sor Juana Inés De la Cruz.

I come from "Te lo dije pero no me haces caso"; a scolding for not obeying. "A los mayores se les respeta"; education was required. I come from the memory of my grandmother telling me "Dios te bendiga y cuide tu camino", a blessing from someone who loves you.

I come from a mix of Jarochos and Purepechas, their blood is in my veins. José y Margarita cultivaron maíz e hicieron artesanías con paja de trigo en Michoacán. Juan y Cruz harvested sugar cane y café en Veracruz. They were my grandparents, they are my ancestors, they are my roots.

Everyday People



By Tailand Scott



By Tailand Scott

Why You Should Divide Your Life Into Semesters, Even When You're Not in School

By Christian Espinoza

Life, much like the school experience, can feel overwhelming when approached without structure. For those of us no longer tethered to the academic calendar, the passage of time can become an amorphous blur, with goals drifting into a nebulous "someday." However, adopting the semester system—a strategy inspired by the rhythms of academia—can provide a framework for personal growth, increased productivity, and emotional well-being, even when you're not in school.

As someone who has navigated my life through academia, I've found that breaking time into semesters has been transformative. Starting as a transfer student at San Bernardino Valley College, then earning my bachelor's degree at UCLA, completing my master's degree at the University of Redlands, and now pursuing a Ph.D. at Claremont Graduate University while also enrolled again at SBVC, I've lived the semester system in every phase of my academic and professional journey. This structured approach has not only helped me excel academically but has also shaped how I organize my goals and find balance in life outside of school. The semester mindset offers a clear roadmap to tackle life's demands, whether in an academic setting or beyond.

The Power of Defined Timeframes

One of the key benefits of this system is that it encourages intentionality. By framing the year as a series of semesters—say, January to May, June to August, and September to December—you create opportunities to set achievable goals and reflect on your progress. These shorter, defined timeframes make large, daunting ambitions feel more manageable.

In my experience as a transfer student at San Bernardino Valley College, I used each semester to focus on specific objectives, such as transferring to a top-tier institution. Later, at UCLA, the quarter system allowed me to balance rigorous coursework, extracurricular commitments, and personal development. Even now, as a Ph.D. student and entrepreneur, I use semesters to focus on distinct projects and responsibilities, ensuring I stay on track toward my long-term goals.

Breaking life into semesters also combats the psychological trap of procrastination. Knowing that your "term" will end creates a sense of urgency, encouraging you to focus on what truly matters.

Instead of the all-or-nothing mindset often associated with New Year's resolutions, semesters allow for recalibration. If something isn't working, you have a natural checkpoint to course-correct without the guilt of "failing" for an entire year.

Balancing Productivity and Rest

Another strength of this system is its balance between productivity and rest. Semesters naturally incorporate breaks—those golden weeks between terms where students recharge before diving into the next challenge. By adopting this rhythm in adulthood, you give yourself permission to pause and reflect, a crucial but often neglected component of modern life. Whether it's a long weekend getaway or a few days spent unplugged at home, these breaks serve as a reward for your hard work and a chance to refocus.

My academic journey has taught me the importance of these pauses. Transitioning from my master's program to a Ph.D. was only possible because I allowed myself a mental break after graduation. These reflective periods have helped me recalibrate and set new intentions for each phase of my life, ensuring I don't fall into the trap of relentless hustle.

A Framework for Lifelong Learning

Life semesters also encourage continuous learning and personal development. Much like a student picking a slate of courses each term, you can design your semesters around specific themes or areas of growth. One semester might focus on improving physical health, while another might center on deepening relationships or exploring creative pursuits. This thematic approach prevents stagnation and keeps life engaging, as you're constantly challenging yourself in new ways.

As someone currently juggling a Ph.D. program and additional coursework at SBVC, I use semesters to prioritize my focus. For example, one term might center on advancing my dissertation research, while another might emphasize professional development for my consulting business. This approach allows me to balance multiple roles without feeling overwhelmed.

This method also acknowledges the cyclical nature of growth. Not every semester will be filled with major breakthroughs or achievements, and that's okay. Some semesters are for planting seeds—laying the groundwork for future success—while others are for reaping the rewards of past efforts.

By embracing this ebb and flow, you cultivate patience and resilience, recognizing that progress often unfolds in cycles rather than straight lines.

Building a Life of Intention

Ultimately, dividing your life into semesters is about reclaiming control over time. It's easy to drift through the years, overwhelmed by the endless demands of work, family, and society. The semester system provides a sense of agency, reminding you that your life is yours to shape. It encourages you to regularly ask: What do I want to achieve in the next few months? How can I align my daily actions with my long-term values?

This approach isn't about rigidly adhering to a schedule but about creating a structure that supports your aspirations. Life is inherently unpredictable, and semesters allow for adaptability. When the unexpected happens—whether it's a new opportunity or an unforeseen challenge—you can adjust your goals for the next term without feeling like you've derailed your entire plan.

Conclusion

Dividing your life into semesters might seem like an arbitrary exercise, but its benefits are profound. By bringing structure to the chaos of adulthood, this system fosters intentionality, balance, and growth. It transforms time from an intimidating expanse into a series of manageable, meaningful chapters. Whether you're striving for professional success, personal fulfillment, or simply a more balanced life, the semester system offers a powerful framework for turning goals into reality.

As someone whose life has revolved around academic semesters, I've seen firsthand how this structure can help you navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and build a fulfilling life. Even now, as both a student and professional, I continue to rely on this system to guide my journey, one semester at a time. And while we may no longer be in school, the lessons of academia—structure, reflection, and the power of renewal—can continue to shape a life of purpose.

A note about Phineas

For decades, Professor Joel Lamore ran the production of *Phineas*. In many ways, it was and still is his child. More than anything, it is his legacy. He cared and loved for this magazine. In January 2024, we lost Professor Joel Lamore. Because of this, the 2024 version of the magazine was a look back at the students who were previously published in the magazine over the past thirty years. It was a reminder that no matter how small our publication is, the work lives on.

Now, in 2025, we move forward with *Phineas*, always remembering where we came from and keeping our hearts open to where we are going. I hope that with this new edition of the magazine, we are able to make him proud. We might have made changes to how the class was operated and the way we set up the magazine, but I like to believe Professor Lamore would be happy with what our student editors have done with this issue.

Phineas was around before Prof. Lamore, and it will continue after we have all moved on. Art, poetry, and story are vital to understanding the human experience. This magazine captures the creative heart of the SBVC campus, and I hope to see many more of you submit to the future issues.



Valley is full of artists; we just don't have enough pages

