Phineas

2026



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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, so that 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 would not have any identifiable information to prevent any bias. We made sure to focus on the quality through our blind review process, and although all submissions were good, we based our final selections on our vision for Phineas..

The final winners in each category are chosen by faculty judges. It is a thankless task that requires hours of consideration and reading. While Phineas has no budget to give out prizes, the winning pieces receive the standout recognition of knowing their work stood out.
We are truly thankful to those who submitted their work!

Meet the Editors & Judges

Ren Dionisio

LEAD LAYOUT/GRAPHIUC DESIGNER



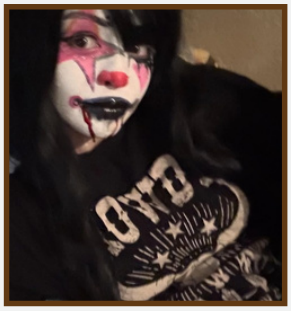
Mother of 3: 1 dog & 2 cats; Anime Lover; Lifelong Gamer; Pokémon Card Collector ♡

Mariano Perez-Bautista



English Major, Radiohead and cat enthusiast, and big-time cinephile

Yazmin Cardenas



English Major, Writer, Artist and Gamer

Sidney Coleman



English major and a horror writer in her free time.

Selena Cordar



Writer, artist, communications professional and animal lover.

Professor Edward Shea

FACULTY ADVISOR



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

Librarian Jessica Shea

FACULTY JUDGE



Librarian, Star Wars Nerd, traveler, and Swiftie

Professor Alma Lopez

FACULTY JUDGE



English professor, IE native, co-coordinator of the Puente Project at SBVC.

Professor Joseph Honnold

FACULTY JUDGE



English professor, loving husband, gamer, reader, friend.



Phineas is an art and literary magazine published by SBVC's English department. This publication has been in print since 1969, helping showcase student poetry, writing, and artwork. It exists for students, but its continuation over these decades is due to the dedication of the faculty who have kept it alive and produced it. For many years, its existence hinged on the love and dedication of Professor Joel Lamore. He took the helm in 1996. When there was no budget, he made it work; when he had only two students, he encouraged them; when the work piled on, he continued through it. The magazine could have been lost years ago, but Professor Joel Lamore kept it alive for the benefit of our campus. While he may have passed on, his legacy continues along with Phineas.

"Contemporary Motion"



Arthur Mario Ramirez

Kaylyn and Abelle

Fiction Winner

By Samantha Jimenez

“Sooooo, do you wanna go get pizza after school today?” Abelle whispered to Kaylyn with the same stupid happy smile she’s had since first grade. Kaylyn didn't say anything, she didn’t even look at Abelle. She just stared straight ahead, tuning out both the teacher and Abelle while she pretended to be taking her math notes. Abelle just can’t take a hint for the life of her, and she never will.

Abelle ignored Kaylyn ignoring her, and she persisted as she leaned closer to her best friend to whisper, “What do you think? Maybe… Antonio’s? Papa Mario’s?”

Kaylyn still didn’t so much as look at Abelle. She just gave one, direct, exhale of annoyance through her nostrils. Yet, Abelle persisted.

“Oh! Maybe we can go to Franky’s! I know it's for kids and stuff, but you can play some of the games they have there! If you’re short on cash, I’m sure my parents wouldn’t mind giving you- Oh, hey, wait, that’s even better! You can come over to my house! You used to come all the time, but it’s been forever now! I mean, if you just tell them what happened, my parents could probably for-”

Abelle’s blabbering was swiftly cut off as Kaylyn murmured sharply, “Not happening.” She tried to be quiet about it, but the teacher still caught it. That subtle glance in Kaylyn’s direction proved it. Damn it.

It took an eternity, but finally, the bell to end math class rang throughout the school. The other kids were quick to shove their belongings away, while Kaylyn took some time, as always. Taking her sweet time with every paper, pencil, and whatevers. By the time she stood up, everybody was gone.

Just as Kaylyn expected, she heard the teacher speak up and say, “Kaylyn, could I talk to you for a minute, please?”

“Yeah, Mrs. Gordon?” Kaylyn attempted to casually ask, using all of her willpower not to give a blaming glare to Abelle when she followed Kaylyn to the teacher’s desk.

The teacher removed her glasses and gave Kaylyn… a look. Something of pity, yet exhaustion, matched with her voice as she informed her student, “Kaylyn. I know with what happened the past month, you’ve been having some behavioral changes. You probably think this school has already written you off as a problem child, but you should know that we care about every one of our students. If your behavior doesn’t improve soon, we may have to phone home and schedule mandatory visits with your counselor.”

Kaylyn didn’t even bother to try to remember whatever kind of conversation she had with the teacher; it doesn’t matter anyway, she would’ve been quick to leave whatever it was. Now she walks through the school's halls without a direction, looking away from all the flyers and missing posters on the bulletin boards scattered across. Despite it all, Abelle was still following Kaylyn, still talking her ear off as she walked.

“Sorry I couldn’t back you over there Kay-Kay… But hey! Who cares what Mrs. Gordon thinks! She’s had it out for you since freshman year, you know that! So uh… Still not heading straight home after school despite everything? That’s fine! We can probably still do the stuff we always used to do! I mean, you didn’t say what kind of pizza you wanted!”

“I don’t want pizza.”

“Oh! That’s fine! Maybe we can go somewhere else! Remember that burger place my mom would take us to after the movies when we were little? Oh, those milkshakes were so good! You should have one again! Or maybe this ice cream place I know? I’ve been dying to show it to you for two months now! I went, like, every week last summer with my parents!”

“I’m not hungry. Stop talking”

“Uh… Okay, not hungry. I get it! I mean we can go to other places! Like the river behind the school! Or the mall! Ohhh! Remember that pearl-encrusted purse I always let you borrow in middle school? My parents bought it from one of the stores there! We can probably still find it so you can buy one! And then go buy a bunch of other things we see! Remember those shopping sprees my parents let us go on? Oh, I miss those so much! Let’s go on one today!”

"I don't have money. Shut up."

"That's fine! I'm sure my parents can lend you some money if you just talked to them! I mean... they probably miss you. It's been a month and you've just been avoiding them! I know they've been calling you! You can't just keep ignoring them Kay-Kay."

"Stop calling me that. And, oh yeah. Your so loving parents? Go bother them instead or something."

"Hey! You know why I can't do that! . . . And look I get why you're avoiding them. You know, you don't have to. And it's just gonna make everything worse the more you do it! Yeah my parents are loving, they love you so much! Ever since first grade they've loved you! I'm sure they're still gonna love you if you just tell them what happened. They gotta know! They probably won't be mad, because it was an accident! I know you didn't mean to-"

"SHUT UP! OH MY GOD, JUST SHUT UP AND LEAVE ME ALONE FOR GOD'S SAKE!
GO! STOP FOLLOWING ME! STOP TALKING TO ME! IT'S BEEN A MONTH JUST MOVE ON ALREADY!"
Kaylyn's screams ripped through her throat, her voice narrowing the line between infuriated and desperation.

Her quickly emptied lungs left her heaving, slightly hunched over like some kind of animal as she stared directly at Abelle. Everyone else in the hallway stared directly at Kaylyn, judgement, confusion, even concern. Kaylyn could just hear whatever whispers they were sharing in their minds as they exchanged glances. She turned heel and ran. Ran through the hallway. Ran through the school. Ran into and through the woods. Kaylyn didn't know what to do, where to go, who to talk to. The only person she could talk to was...

Whatever thoughts Kaylyn was cycling through were interrupted as she tripped on a tree root, and tumbled down a hill. Her head barely missed hitting a large rock that already had a month old blood on it. Kaylyn was quick to scramble up to sitting, the running water of the river confirming where she was.

As if Abelle's words didn't make it obvious when she cheered "The river! Ohhhh I knew you'd pick this spot! You always knew the best hidden spots! Remember when we would collect cool rocks? Oh! And catching all those salamanders, or frogs, or whatever we found in the water! Haha! Too bad my parents wouldn't let us keep them! Sooo what do you wanna do? You can try watching the leaves float away like when we were eight! Or see what kind of cool things are under the big rocks! Or-"

"Shut up I know-"

"Or maybe we can just talk! I missed that the most... We used to have the best conversations. Like, remember that one we had about dream worlds? We used to think that our dreams were traveling in different dimensions and stuff and we were in bodies of different versions of us! You know I still believe that actually! I think it's really funny. Like there's a version of me that lives in a world where the ocean is made up of chocolate milk! Or a version of you that is made out of bubblegum. Or a version of me that's still with my family... Or a version of you that tells the police what you did."

Kaylyn's usual silence felt heavy, as she suddenly remembered the specific patch of dirt she was sitting on. The dirt looked much less disturbed than it was a month ago, it almost blends right in. She scrambled to her feet, taking a few steps back with a look of fearful disgust.

Still, Abelle softly pleaded.

"I know why you won't tell my parents. I can't blame you. But they're still looking for me, I know they are. So if you can't tell them I don't blame you. I don't blame you for anything. If you can't face them, then you can just tell the police so then the police can tell them. I want them to have closure."

The silence grew heavier as Kaylyn looked Abelle in the eyes. She saw the desperation, the tears that never touched the floor.

". . . Please tell them what you did."

The silence lingered until finally Kaylyn broke their eye contact. She bent down to pick up the bloodied rock before tossing it far off into the river. She turned back to Abelle and went right through her as she walked away.



I Did Not Break the Lineage

By

Ana Zarate Lopez

I did not break the lineage.
I freed it.
I loosened the knots
tied by women who survived
because survival was the only language
They were taught.
I took nothing from them—
I carried their strength
and set down their suffering.
I am not the end of anything.
I am the breath after holding it too long.
I stopped confusing love with labor,
silence with loyalty,
endurance with worth.
I learned that peace is not betrayal
and rest is not forgetting.
I am not starting over.
I am starting from myself.
From a body that no longer apologizes
for needing care.
From a voice that doesn't ask permission
to exist.
From a heart that knows
Love does not require disappearance.
I became the woman
who stays.
Not in rooms that erase her,
but within her own skin.
I became the place I no longer abandon.
What came before me was strength.
What comes through me is choice.
I choose presence over sacrifice.
I choose truth over tradition that wounds.
I choose to give from fullness,
not from depletion.
This is not rebellion.
This is remembrance.
I remember who I was
Before I learned to make myself smaller.
Before love asked me to earn it.
Before, I believed pain was proof.
I carry the lineage forward—
lighter, cleaner,
free of the debts I was never meant to pay.
If they could see me now,
They would rest.
They would know
it finally ends here;
not with destruction,
but with dignity.
I did not break the lineage.
I freed it.
And I did not lose myself in the process.
I found myself—
and gave from there

Becoming Me at 45

NonFiction Winner

By: Ana Zarate Lopez

For thirty years, I lived beside a man who never really saw me. To everyone else, he was a proud, hardworking man, traditional, disciplined, and devoted to his family (his family in his eyes was his parents and siblings). But behind the closed doors of our house, his pride took on a different shape. It became sharp, cold, and controlling. It was in his words, his silence, and his eyes whenever he looked at me, not with love, but with expectation.

He grew up in a strict household in a small town in Mexico, where men were kings and women were expected to serve. When we first met, I was 19 years old, and he was my first boyfriend and soon my husband. I mistook his confidence for strength. I was young and hopeful, drawn to his ambition and his strong sense of family. I didn't see the warning signs, the way he dismissed his previous girlfriend, the way he talked over me, the way he needed to be right about everything. I thought it was normal. I thought love meant patience. And I dumbed myself down to make him feel better.

For the first few years, I tried to be the wife I thought he wanted. I cooked his favorite meals – fresh tortillas, Chicken Soup, Beef Stew, and Chiles Rellenos – all made from scratch. I ironed his shirts, scrubbed the floors until they shone, and made sure our home looked like something out of a family magazine. I gave up my dreams of finishing school to raise our children and keep the house running smoothly. But no matter how hard I tried, it was never enough. I kept my job even though he insisted that I quit it and become a housewife, which was one of the biggest struggles, where he would follow me to make sure I was at work and even broke my work cell phone.

He and his mom would come home, sit at the table, and immediately point out something wrong. "The rice is too sticky," he'd say. Or, "You call this clean? Look at the streaks on the counter." If I wore a dress, he'd frown and ask, "Why are you dressed like that? Who are you trying to impress?" If I wore sweatpants, he'd shake his head and mutter, "You don't even try anymore."

I learned to live between contradictions – always trying to meet a standard that didn't exist.

When the kids came along, I poured everything I had into being a mother. I made sure their homework was done, their clothes were washed and folded, and their lunches packed with little notes inside. I attended every school event, every parent meeting, every doctor's appointment. I thought that maybe if I were a good enough mother, he would see how hard I was trying.

But instead, he saw my care as weakness.

"Stop babying them," he'd say. "They need to toughen up."
When went back to work to help with the bills, he told me, "Why? I can provide. Your place is here." "Taking care of the children, the house, and myself."
When I mentioned wanting to go back to school, he laughed. "At your age?

At first, I believed him. After all, I had grown up with similar messages – women should take care of their homes, their husbands, their children. But over time, something inside me began to ache. It was a quiet pain, the kind that doesn't scream but lingers like an echo. But that did not stop me from keeping my job and my dreams of one day going back to school.

He refused to see a therapist/marriage counselor. When I begged for counseling, hoping maybe we could fix what was broken, he agreed to go once – but after ten minutes, he crossed his arms and said, "This woman doesn't know what she's talking about. She's probably divorced herself." He never went back.

That was the day I realized I was the only one fighting for us.

The years went by in a blur of routine – cooking, cleaning, raising kids, pretending. I smiled at family gatherings, acted like everything was fine, and convinced myself that this was just how marriage worked. But I felt invisible. My opinions didn't matter. My feelings were dismissed as "emotional."

My silence was twisted into guilt.

Sometimes, his words cut deeper than any argument. He didn't have to yell to hurt me – he used silence like a weapon. He would go days without speaking, just walking past me as if I didn't exist. And when I finally broke the silence, asking what was wrong, he'd say, "You're too sensitive. I didn't even say anything."

That's what emotional abuse looks like – it's quiet, subtle, and easy to hide.

The children, my reason for staying, eventually grew up. One by one, they packed their things, hugged me tightly, and stepped into their own lives. I was proud of them, but when the house fell silent, it felt like the walls started closing in. For the first time, I had to face my own emptiness.

The woman who had spent decades cooking, cleaning, caring, and keeping the peace suddenly didn't know who she was anymore. The kids didn't need me every day, and my husband – well, he never really did.

He still criticized me. He still found fault in everything I did. The difference now was that I had no more excuses to hide behind. There were no children to protect from his coldness, no school events to distract me, no reason to pretend. I would look at him across the dinner table and feel... nothing. Not hate, not love – just a hollow kind of detachment.

And that's when I realized something: I wasn't living. I was surviving.

It took me months to find the courage, but one morning, I stood in front of the mirror and didn't recognize the woman staring back. My eyes looked tired, but behind them, there was still a spark – small but alive. I decided that if I didn't take control of my life now, I never would.

At forty-five, I applied to community college. I remember filling out the application with shaking hands, terrified of what he would say. But when he found out, his reaction didn't surprise me.

"School? At your age?" he laughed. "You're wasting your time. Who's going to hire a middle-aged woman?"

I didn't answer. For once, his words didn't stick.

Going back to school was like stepping into sunlight after years underground. I was surrounded by people of all ages – young students with dreams ahead of them and others like me, rediscovering themselves after years of putting life on hold. Sitting in a classroom, notebook open, pen in hand, I felt like I could finally breathe.

At first, I was self-conscious. I worried about my accent, my age, my lack of experience. But soon, I realized that none of that mattered. Every lecture, every assignment, every discussion filled a void I hadn't even realized was there. I started to feel proud of myself again – something I hadn't felt in decades.

Meanwhile, at home, things were the same – or maybe worse. He didn't like that I was gone in the evenings. He accused me of neglecting the house.
"Who's going to make dinner now?" he'd ask.
"You're changing. I don't like this new version of you."

He was right. I was changing.

I stopped apologizing for everything. I started dressing the way I wanted to – wearing colors he thought were "too loud," earrings that dangled, lipstick that made me feel alive. I cooked what I wanted, not what he demanded. If he criticized me, I didn't shrink anymore. I just looked at him and said, "You don't have to eat it."

Slowly, the house that once felt like a prison started feeling like mine.

I won't lie and say it was easy. There were nights I cried myself to sleep, questioning whether I was being selfish for wanting more. Years of conditioning don't vanish overnight. But each day, I took one small step toward freedom.

My children noticed the change in me. They told me I smiled more, that my eyes looked brighter. They supported me in ways that healed parts of me I thought were permanently broken. They saw the strength I had forgotten I possessed.

He didn't change. He never would. His pride wouldn't allow it. He still saw the world through a lens of machismo — where men led, and women followed. But I no longer needed his approval. The power he once held over me began to fade.

I started working part-time on campus, helping with administrative tasks. It wasn't about the paycheck; it was about dignity.

When I'd come home tired but fulfilled, he'd scoff.
"You're always busy now. What happened to dinner at six?"
I'd smile and say, "Life happened."

Over time, I learned that freedom isn't a single decision — it's a thousand small ones made every day. It's choosing not to react when he tried to provoke me. It's choosing to believe that my voice mattered. It's choosing to see my worth, even when he refused to.

One afternoon, after another one of his cold remarks, I packed a small suitcase. No yelling, no tears — just calm. I told him I was leaving. He didn't believe me at first.
"Where will you go?" he asked. "You can't make it without me."
But this time, I just smiled. "Watch me."

Two years later, I earned my Accounting Certificate. When I walked across that stage in my cap and gown, my children cheering in the audience, I felt like I was finally walking into my own life.

Now, I work in a field I love — helping others who've lost their voices find them again. I tell women my story, not out of bitterness, but out of hope. Because I've learned that it's never too late to start over, no matter how long you've been silenced.

Sometimes, I still think about the woman I used to be — the one who tried so hard to please, to be perfect, to earn love by giving everything she had. I don't hate her. I honor her. She survived.

And because she survived, I am here.

At forty-five, I thought my life was over. Now, in my fifties, I know it was just beginning.

I wear what I want. I cook what I crave. I laugh loudly, love deeply, and never apologize for existing. The scars are still there, but they remind me that healing is possible — that strength isn't about never breaking, but about finding yourself again after you do.

If I could tell my younger self one thing, it would be this:
You were never too much. You were just with someone who made you feel like less.

Today, I live for me — and that is the most beautiful freedom of all.



Wenli Wang

The old man's eyes traced the crack running the length of his water-damaged ceiling. He sat up in his bed, throwing the crumby army blanket aside, and let his legs dangle over the edge. He drew in a deep breath, which led to a horrid, rattling cough that came from deep within his ribcage, the kind of cough that would startle some but only made him reach for his cigarettes on the nightstand. He stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, Bogey style, and fumbled for his matches. In doing so, he knocked over a jar full of disassembled rosaries, which fell to the floor in a smattering of applause, and broken glass and beads spread across the wooden floor like so many lost marbles. A slim orange cat named Mimosa leaped from the bed, darting behind a smudged charcoal portrait of Jackie Onassis, which was propped up in the corner.

The old man lit his cigarette. He sat there on the bed and slowly looked around at his surroundings. A battered old chest of drawers sagged against the far wall. It had once been a beautiful sky blue but was now faded to an unrecognizable gray. It was filled with thrifted itchy sweaters, slacks, suspenders, and a thousand pairs of worn woolen socks. Atop the chest of drawers, there were books, many books, piled across the length of it and upwards of two feet. They had been found in alleys and library donation bins throughout the years. Their population included the standard tomes of Steinbeck and Fitzgerald, but a few unexpected needles lay hidden within this literary haystack: at least three copies of 'The Thief's Journal,' 'The Myth of Sisyphus,' and a torn and sun-kissed copy of Woody Guthrie's 'Bound for Glory,' among others. A rickety wooden chair sat beside the chest of drawers, and an old Underwood perched there. It needed a new ribbon and the S key was missing. The wooden floors were scratched, and the nails were coming up in places; the walls were whitewashed and covered with the scattered carcasses of flies and mosquitoes. A pair of rusted casement windows opened onto a ledge that Mimosa favored in the afternoons. In one corner of the room were Jackie and Mimosa; in another corner were the old man and his broken bed.
His other scarce possessions haunted the wall near the doorway. A scratched suitcase with Greyhound stickers, a guitar without strings, a small blue bowl of water, a litter box badly in need of cleaning.

He smoked until his fingers burnt, and then threw the stub into a glass of water on the nightstand. He rubbed his nicotine-stained hands over his sunken cheeks and tried to get the blood moving. He felt the wrinkles that had collected under his eyes, and he felt the stubble that sprouted along his jaw line. He ran his fingers gently through his wiry hair. Without turning, he groped for his t-shirt, which had tangled up with the blanket on his bed. He pulled it over his head and fingered a mysterious hole along the neckline.

The 2 o'clock sunlight came pouring through the east-facing windows, and the heat in the room was stifling. The old man picked up the glass of water from the nightstand, almost took a drink, remembered the cigarette, and set it back on the table. He stood up and felt his knees protest. He stepped over the broken glass and rosary beads on the floor and pulled open a drawer of the chest across the room. He managed to locate some tweed slacks and a pair of socks. As he slowly dressed himself, Mimosa slunk from behind Jackie's shadow and made his way out onto the window ledge where he would remain for the next few hours. Mimosa took care of himself. He and the old man owed nothing to each other, ignored each other, and yet could not possibly do without the other's company.

He picked up the crumpled five-dollar bill that was lying on the nightstand, shoved it in his back pocket, slipped on his loafers, and made his way to the door. The door was missing the bottom hinge pin and, therefore, was difficult and often impossible to close. He didn't mind. He didn't have a key. He had stopped locking it long ago. He had finally decided that there was nothing inside worth stealing, and even if there was something worth stealing, it would most likely be something he cared nothing about. He prided the fact that he could walk away from all of this at any time. Except the cat, of course.

The building had once been a grand hotel, and his room had been a quarter of the ballroom. In the 20's, the old hotel turned speakeasy was converted into the headquarters for a minor film company. Elaborate period sets were erected, marcelled starlets lounged in breezy private dressing rooms, hoop skirts drifted down the stairwells, and plywood ship replicas were dragged out the front entrance down to the beach nearby for swashbuckling box office hits. The film company folded after the intervention of sound, and the building went back to its former disglory. He was grateful for what he had made of his quarter of the ballroom.

The old man made his way down the hallway, covered in circa 1930 poison green fleur de lis print carpeting, thin, frayed, and stained. There were dimly lit lamps beside each apartment door; half of the bulbs were out, and the hallway was cast in a sort of greenish tinge. The ceiling was low, and the stairwell was narrow, giving one an overwhelmingly claustrophobic feeling. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen one of his neighbors. He could hear them and smell them.
He rushed past the mailboxes downstairs and out the front door.

The moment he stepped out of the building, he looked up, past the peeling paint and the sign advertising vacancies, to his window ledge and the orange cat that peered down at him. It never ceased to confuse Mimosa when he was downstairs. Mimosa could not handle the fact that the old man could go wherever he pleased, could one moment be sleeping next to him and be gazing up at him from the street the next. Mimosa stood up and stretched his paw out to the old man, as if offering to pull him back up to his room. The old man waved and carried on down the brick path to Crescent Avenue, past the skeletal rose bushes and the cockroach corpses, the rain-bloated newspapers and the avalanche of junk mail piled against the side of the building. Where the brick path met the sidewalk for Crescent Avenue, there was always a congregation of bums and teenagers. The bums were just looking for a place to nurse their Wild Turkey, and the teenagers a place to smoke; the two classes seemed to get along. Sometimes he would find them engaged in some astonishing argument about Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival or Alfred Hitchcock's obsession with blondes. He tried to stay out of it.

He stepped out into the street and made his way up Crescent, toward the Bravo Biscuit Factory all the way down on Orange Avenue.

He had no plans, no aspirations. This town seemed to encourage that. It was the place where the old and the tired settled into their armchairs and drank their way to that numb, unassuming place where there was nothing better than Wheel of Fortune and a sack of chips.

There was hardly anyone out on Crescent this afternoon. A few blue-haired ladies stood outside the post office, clutching their toy poodles to their chests and heatedly discussing the merits of something called "Slim Fast." He continued down the street lined with towering palm trees, all leaning perilously to the left, and crossed Olive. The scent of the sea nearby hit him full in the face, and he stopped at the curb to absorb it. Seaweed, salt, wet dogs, and some sort of raw sewage mixed together to both assault and caress his senses. It was a perfect combination, and he had been inhaling it every day of his life. He continued down the street and passed the coffee shop on his right. A group of painfully intellectual boys sat outside, their hips slim, their eyes dark, and their shirts neatly pressed. Each was absorbed in a book and either nursing a cigarette or clutching a cup of coffee.

The Bravo Biscuit Factory loomed up at him suddenly, and he stopped to contemplate the old, cratered plaster walls. It was abandoned, yet the neon sign atop it still lit up at night, all fiery orange and blinding white, B R A V O, an encouragement and a warning. The grass around the deco landmark was littered with beer cans and bloated condoms, telltale signs of the bored youth of this sleepy old town. They saw this building as the ultimate enemy. The reason many of their families had moved here and the reason they were stuck in this stifling place. Bravo had built this town and had brought it down with it seventy years later. Yet the building refused to budge. No one wanted to deal with its sun-bleached carcass.

The old man turned to the gas station on his left. It was a run-down old Shell station, only some daredevil had shimmied up the pole long ago and had stolen the S. It still made him smile.
It was empty, dusty, lonely, except for the clerk inside, surrounded by a riot of color and junk food, the talk radio blaring, and the slushie machine churning along.

The automatic doors swept open to admit the old man. He stepped inside timidly and turned immediately away from the clerk, making his way down an aisle of sponges and motor oil. He turned down the candy aisle and ran his hand over the plastic wrappers and familiar old labels. Neccos, Bit O Honey, and Chicko Sticks were his old friends. The old man picked up a package of gummy bears and inspected the ingredients printed on the back. He could see the clerk eyeing him suspiciously from behind the slushie machine. He put the gummy bears back and circled around to the fridges at the rear of the store.

He opened one door and let a cloud of cold, Lysol-scented air rush over him. He reached out for a Coke in the bottle and then hesitated as a he saw the clerk round the corner and busy himself with a Fritos display nearby. The old man closed the fridge, turned to the clerk, and smiled. It was mischievous, and the clerk was obviously confused. The young man backed away, stepped up to the counter to answer the bleating telephone.

The old man made his way to the front of the convenience store, to the counter littered with beef jerky, scratchers, and condoms. The clerk was clutching the phone to his ear and angrily explaining to someone where he had been last night. He turned his back as he saw the old man approaching and lowered his voice, but cold threats and lies could still be heard.

The old man stopped at the counter, and gazed at the low freezer filled with various ice cream treats. It was the perfect height for a child to reach into. He approached it and his pulse raced when he saw the vast selection of ice cream sandwiches. He slid the door aside, and delighted in the foamy cold cloud that came pouring out of the freezer. He leaned over into it and felt his back stiffen. He was worried he might get stuck in this position, bent over, with his head in a freezer full of ice cream. Could be worse.

There were so many choices laid out before him, so many different treats with crinkly packages and pastel color schemes. He ran his wrinkled old hand over those classic ice cream sandwich bars and felt goosebumps sprout along his cold arms. The clerk slammed the phone down and leaned over the counter and stared at the old man, openly hostile.

The old man slid the door shut, nodded to the clerk, and stepped around the slushie machine and out into the salt sea air. He could feel the clerk watching him through the window.

The Bravo Biscuit Factory was calling to him. The sun was setting behind it, the sky a poisonous grayish purple, and the neon sign shuddered to life. B R A V O.

The old man stopped at the foot of the old relic, glanced up at the neon sign, and gave it a nod.
Then he turned back up Crescent, back to his room, to his cat, to his bed. His books.

On the way there, smiling to himself, he reached into his pocket, pulled out the pilfered ice cream sandwich, unwrapped it, and took a bite. Neapolitan.

From One Artist to Another

By Jazmin Granados

A light, breezy morning—
I walk across a stone bridge,
a small creek beneath me
cradling fallen autumn leaves.
Orange and scarlet drift slowly,
as if the season itself is unhurried.

Stone walls line the path,
wooden buildings standing softly with time.
Japanese shrines,
elderly faces moving at their own pace.
I keep walking,
still searching for my destination.

Only to discover—
it is closed.

So I sit at the bus stop,
pondering absence,
When a ceramic studio catches my eye.
A table out front,
quietly displaying itself.

Flowerpots and bowls,
mugs and plates—
each marked with a signature,
each carrying a hand, a history.
Neutral glazes,
Tiny pieces beside larger ones.
Affordable, honest.

No one is there.

Only my solitude
and my curiosity.

The studio is also a home.
An artist's life folded into his work.
The sliding door opens.
An old Japanese man stands there—
surprised, almost disbelieving—
as I choose piece after piece.
He tells me this rarely happens.
He has never seen someone
Buy so many at once.

He smiles
and discounts his work anyway.

With careful hands,
He shows me their purpose—
how some are meant to hang on walls,
holding flowers like quiet offerings.

Each piece is wrapped slowly,
bubble wrap crinkling like gratitude.
He hands me a business card,
kanji inked with identity.

From one artist to another.
From one country to another.

The joy on his face—
knowing someone, somewhere,
will live with his work—
stays with me longer than the objects themselves.

It makes me want to keep walking around the world,
seeking hands,
stories,
and artists waiting to be seen.

CAN YOU HEAR ME

By Melissa Olvera



Nobody's listening
can you hear me

Defeat by the enemy
women lay as their child pray

Sky is grey,
what is to come

Waves of hate,
Rubble and despair

Take over the air,
lungs filled with smoke

Guns a blaze,
our hearts surrender

That is enough for today.

Confronted by the enemy

Sun has fallen
just like my brother

As he lay,
I continue pray

Hands cold,
feet blistered

Hunger last,
well I waste away

World says this a fight

This is Genocide.

"Nobody's listening"
can you hear me

Silence pieces my ears,
dagger of sorrows

Babies on the ground,
women never seeing tomorrow.

Birds singing obituaries...

This is a Genocide
can you hear me?

I Miss You Sometimes

Non-Fiction

By Andrea Francine Martinez

Enduring the loss of a loved one is difficult on so many levels. Self-reflection is harder. My life has been a mosaic of memories resembling a kaleidoscope of joy and sorrow. Growing up in a home filled with alcoholism and emotional abuse wasn't easy. As a child desperately seeking validation and love, I grew up to be a woman who accepted impulsive, bad decisions and the chaos that followed as the norm. I thrived wholeheartedly on discarded scraps of attention and affection. I discounted mental abuse because, in its familiarity, it felt like home.

Joe and I had met years ago when I was sixteen, and he was 24. A long time later, when I was in my early thirties and after our respective marriages to other people had fallen apart, our paths crossed once again, and we became a couple. Building a relationship with tears and quicksand was destined to fail and was not at all built for longevity. We had the mindset of two against the world, which on paper, sounds triumphant. It's just an illusion to mask the hurt with zero accountability. Two Tiffany glass panes is a more accurate depiction. Try to imagine putting a band-aid on a cracked reservoir, knowing that it's a pointless effort, but doing it anyway, ignoring the warning sirens that were yelling for me to stop and turn back. I should have listened, but I didn't want to hear it, knowing the echo would be like a sonic boom. That was the two of us together.

Joe was charming and charismatic, though prone to bouts of anger and selfishness. I discounted his behavior, convincing myself that all partnerships take work, ignoring red flags waving like skyscraper banners. My own lack of self-confidence and self-worth allowed it, expecting it. I told myself I was happy, though deep down I knew the pattern of abuse created in childhood was in full swing.

After 17 years together, Joe was diagnosed with a heart condition. The cardiologist entered the room, tapping his pen on a silver chart. He said that with a complete lifestyle change, Joe could enjoy a long life. The fluttering of my heart felt so strong that I was sure the doctor could hear it thumping in my chest. I sat down in the chair next to the window, suddenly aware of how weak my legs felt as I heard his diagnosis. There was no magic prescription to fix this. The heart is a muscle, and once damaged, it does not have the ability to heal itself, unlike a broken bone. The commitment to heed the doctor's advice had to be there because this was, in fact, life or death. I felt the loss at the time of diagnosis like suffocating waves burying me in the sand. I looked at Joe as the doctor excused himself. Joe smiled, and I saw a flicker behind his blue eyes, telling me he had made up his mind.

In my mind, I was screaming, "It's you and me, remember? You can't leave me and make me face the reality that I've been fooling myself all this time, believing this was a relationship instead of a trauma bond." I prayed to God to please guide me. Why couldn't Joe understand that I needed him here with me? The burden of helplessness became so great that I could no longer cry. I could only bear witness to the rapid decline of his health. My heart broke a bit more each day as he refused to take the baby aspirin-sized heart medication, leaving him in a weakened state. The acoustic guitar that he played every day became too heavy to lift, exhausting him after strumming a cord or two. I was no longer a partner as I became a caregiver. Fighting back tears daily, I held his hands to help him stand, guiding him to take a few steps before he needed to stop and rest.

Joe was scheduled to undergo a procedure to try to stabilize his heart eight months from the date of diagnosis. I felt a depth of fear as I tried to put on a brave face and accompany Joe to the hospital. There was a high probability that he could end up suffering a stroke or paralysis. I was shaking with the uncertainty of it all. Joe looked back and smiled at me as he was wheeled away towards the operating room. I stared blankly at the wall, vaguely aware of the deafening silence of the cardiology wing and the bright lights of the waiting room. Breathing deeply, my mind began to reflect on our years together.

After nearly two decades, there had only been a handful of good, decent moments. I felt nauseous as I searched for any semblance of a reason why I had embraced this relationship. I brought this trauma to my door when I reasoned that staying together would be better than walking away years ago. I am a broken empath, and I've been in survival mode my whole life. That epiphany hit me like a thunderbolt.

The moment the anesthesia was administered, Joe's heart began to fail, his blood pressure dropping rapidly. He was connected to every machine possible, but he would not live through the night. Walking on trembling legs as I was led to his hospital room, I was shaking my head in disbelief. Joe lay there with hospital bands on his wrists and tubes connected to help him breathe. I sat beside him, taking his hand and gently kissing his forehead. Touching his blond curls once more, I whispered that it was ok to let go. The heart monitor that displayed his vital signs chirped, and the rhythmic beeping began to slow. "No. Not yet, please not yet," I said aloud as tears streamed down my face. I could barely breathe. The hospital chaplain entered the room to say the Lord's Prayer. I said the words, but the sound of my heart breaking was much louder than my barely audible voice. He was gone.

Through the tears that burned my eyes, I looked at Joe. There was no more pain, no more discomfort. He looked incredibly peaceful with the hint of a smile on his face. The cost of loving someone is the pain of grief. I don't remember how long I stayed with him or when I let go of his hand, walking out of the room. I was so angry. I cried from a part of my soul that I did not know existed. I was heartbroken yet relieved his nightmare was over. I thought of all the things I should've said. I wanted to scream a guttural war cry and make him feel an ounce of the pain I was experiencing. "How dare you make me sit next to you on this journey and watch you die! I loved you so much! You left me and never once thought about the emotional devastation you were causing! I hate you!" I cried until I had no tears left and could only breathe deeply.

When I calmed down, my own words replayed in my mind. Joe didn't force me to stay. He didn't make me suffer through his loss. I stayed because I loved him. The truth is that all the love in the world can't save a person who can't love themselves. I don't remember the first few days after Joe passed away. At some point, I knew I was putting one foot in front of the other, making it through another day. I went through a full spectrum of emotions. The numbness and shock, which bordered on disbelief because he was really gone, turned into despair as I wondered how I would continue without him.

Life has a way of tightening its steel grip and forcing one's eyes to look at that reflection in the mirror. Own it, the mirror says, but don't allow it to be all that is seen. In my journey to rebuild my life, I have created boundaries out of granite to protect my peace. My spirit was bruised, not broken. Healing takes time, moving at its own pace, and I'm stronger than I realized. There is no time limit for grieving. As I've peeled back the emotional layers that I collected like war medals, I learned a few things about myself. It's ok that I've felt breathless, but not from pleasant emotion, but instead from sadness. I've made it through crippling, bleak days as I searched for the tiniest break in the clouds. It's ok that I've cursed his name as I looked at the sky above when I remembered his face. It's ok that there aren't any "right words" to comfort someone after a loved one dies. Time does not heal all wounds, though it does lessen the sting. It's ok that I miss his laughter, forever associating the music of Bob Dylan with Joe. I still get angry when I think about Joe because I do miss him sometimes.

Peace

By Kaitlinn Johnson



I hope you are well.
I feel an ache that moves without sound.
I look up and see you turning inward,
and I resist the question, how can I help?

To reach for you would fracture more than
silence:
who I am,
where you come from.
So I carry the ache alone,
watching you from a careful distance.

I prayed for you yesterday.
I pray for you today.
I will pray again tomorrow
for battles you never name,
for the composure you wear like armor,
for loyalty to a name that outweighs the heart.

I think I understand.
And I am sorry.
Sorry that love is chosen for you,
that freedom is not.
Sorry for the longing
that lingers in your eyes.

It hurts that this ends
before it is allowed to begin.
I share the silence with you
unspoken, unseen
and I imagine you carry me the same.

There is a quiet beauty
in intimacy without touch.
I do not regret meeting you.
Some connections ignite without permission
Is it finally time for this to dim?

I will carry the ache of what might have been
over the emptiness of never crossing paths.
And I pray we meet again in another life,
if this one will not allow us to speak.

In Another Life, My Love

By Ana Zarate Lopez

In another life, my love,
We meet without mirrors,
without the hunger to be seen reflected.
Your eyes do not search for applause,
And mine do not learn the art of shrinking
to make room for your storms.

In that life, love is not a performance.
It is quiet.
It does not keep score.
It does not ask me to prove my worth
by surviving you.

But this was this life.
And in this life, I learned how love can wear a crown
and still starve the room of air.
I learned how compliments can feel like loans,
How affection can arrive with conditions,
How silence can be louder than anger.

I loved you—
not the way you wanted,
But the way I knew how:
with patience stretched thin like prayer,
with forgiveness that arrived before apologies,
with the hope that believed potential was the same as truth.

I mistook intensity for intimacy.
I mistook your wounds for doors,
I could heal through.
I thought if I loved harder,
You would soften.
I thought if I stayed quieter,
peace would finally stay.

But love is not supposed to erase the self.
And I was disappearing so slowly
that I almost called it loyalty.

Still—
hear this clearly—
Our ending was not born of hatred.
It ended with love.
Just not the kind that keeps bleeding to survive.

I. Because one day I looked at myself
and realized I was the only one
who had been asking permission to exist.
I saw how tired my soul was
from negotiating its worth.
I saw how strong I had become, carrying out a relationship
that required me to be smaller.

In another life, my love,
You would meet me whole,
and not try to carve yourself into me.
You would not need me to orbit you
to feel real.
You would love without taking.

But in this life,
The greater love arrived quietly—
not in you,
but in me.

It arrived the moment I chose peace
over proving my devotion.
The moment I chose truth
overstaying misunderstood.
The moment I realized
that loving myself was not abandonment,
but resurrection.

I did not leave you empty-handed.
I left you with love—
the kind that does not chase,
does not beg,
does not stay where it is diminished.

And I walked away carrying something new:
my voice intact,
My heart is still capable,
my self no longer on trial.

So yes—
in another life, my love,
Perhaps we would have lasted.

But in this one, I chose myself.
And that was the truest love story of all.



Branches in Bloom



Naomi Shaha

LET MY PEOPLE GO

By Aimee Ashley Ortiz

I see my people in jail, I see my people in court. Everywhere I look, the shredded tapestries of the cultures that you took.

Let my people go.

I see my people ousted from stolen land. Herded like cattle, like fish on a hook. You call us names while eating the food that we cook.

Let my people go.

To you I plead, let my people go.
You bleach my skin, and tape my eyes.
What of the tongues of the generations you've traumatised?

Let my people go.

You've carved lines on my skin, and made holes in my head.
The trail of my blood is thy daily bread.

Let my people go.

To you I implore, let my people go.
As crimes transpire, your thoughts and your prayers, and the rage they inspire.

Let my people go.

Our tongues cut off and stuck onto barbed wire,
You watch us burn waiting for your chariot of fire.

Let my people go.

I beseech you now, let my people go.
They're rapists, marauders, theives, and thugs.
Forever the victims of your War on Drugs.

Let my people go.

Jailing us all without a care.
Step into my kingdom for a minute, if you D.A.R.E.

Let my people go.

I entreat you, let my people go.
You've separated us. Divided us. Fragmented us. Torn us apart.
It's us against the world, but we can't leave the start.
We sit on our hands, catering to the ones who despise us. No matter what we do they still minimise us.
Too loud, too brash, stay in your lane. Words from own brothers and sisters who silence their pain.

Tongues ripped out. We hate our own reflection in the mirror.
The carnage in our own communities is the feast of the beasts. What's the use of screaming if there's no unity in the streets?
For years we've pleaded, beseeched, entreated, and implored.
Our screams falling on deaf ears.
Our tears falling on hardened soil.
Our blood hemorrhaging from our heads into your hands.

Today I demand that you to let my people go!

Today I command you to let my people go!

Let my people go!

Late Autumn

Paola Daney Arriola

Shortly before the very middle of November
You've left this chaotic realm
Now you've become a character of the story
Of books read by every youth

Especially whenever snowflakes starts to paint the ground
Covering those golden leaves that fell from the trees
I think of you
Wondering how history will be like without you

When I think of you, I remember my calling
Whether or not we have met
Let the Man above use us to create a paradise
Whether or not I shall be written in history books

Oftentimes I will think of all the places
Where you've been here on Earth
I imagine the two of us having meaningful conversations
On the serene shore of the sapphire river

If ever we are born at the same age,
Would we ever met?
Would we own each other?
Would we live together?

I could feel my heart lose its rhythm
Whenever I read your name
Among the multitude of words in a history book
My feelings resembling the sound of a violin

You are like a spouse that I've never met,
Who lived while I was oblivious of everything
Who talked to me while peacefully sleeping underneath the ground
And now I shall be working for our dreams for a paradise



THE CROW CLAWED MOON

Alanna Jordan

Anyone can notice the sun a continuous ray with a job never done
So bright it can light half the world
You can even notice the moon
But only after day anything before is often too soon
When it's big and bright in the night
It will easily come across our sights
But tell me this can you see
The moon during day above where you be
Do you care for it at night when from below
It looks as thin as the claw of a crow
Some fight to be appreciated others to be noticed
Because you can hate the sun but still understand it
But the crow clawed moon yearns for an astronomer
For someone that just might appreciate her
The one who says this is more than enough
Others may not see but with me you are loved

A Disturbed Alphabet for Gruesome Kids

Samantha Jimenez

A is for Abel, whose pills had the wrong label.
B is for Beau, who was left in the snow.
C is for Caine, who went down in a plane.
D is for Denise, who was shot by police.
E is for Ella, who met the wrong fella.
F is for Frank, who swam in the shark tank.
G is for Gilbert, who was alive in the dirt.
H is for Holly, who was hit by a trolley.
I is for Iris, who had an untreated virus.
J is for John, who ate spoiled prawn.
K is for Kate, who burned at the stake.
L is for Lynn, who died in a break-in.
M is for Mandy, who choked on a candy.
N is for Nick, who was hit by a brick.
O is for Olive, who chose not to live.
P is for Phil, who was pushed off a hill.
Q is for Quincy, who was stranded at sea.
R is for Raquel, who fell down a well.
S is for Sally, who was stabbed in an alley.
T is for Ted, who was trapped in a shed.
U is for Una, who was hit by a tuna.
V is for Viola, who drank poisoned cola.
W is for Willow, who was smothered by a pillow.
X is for Xander, who was encased in amber.
Y is for Yvette, who was shocked by an outlet.
Z is for Zach, who took an axe to the back.

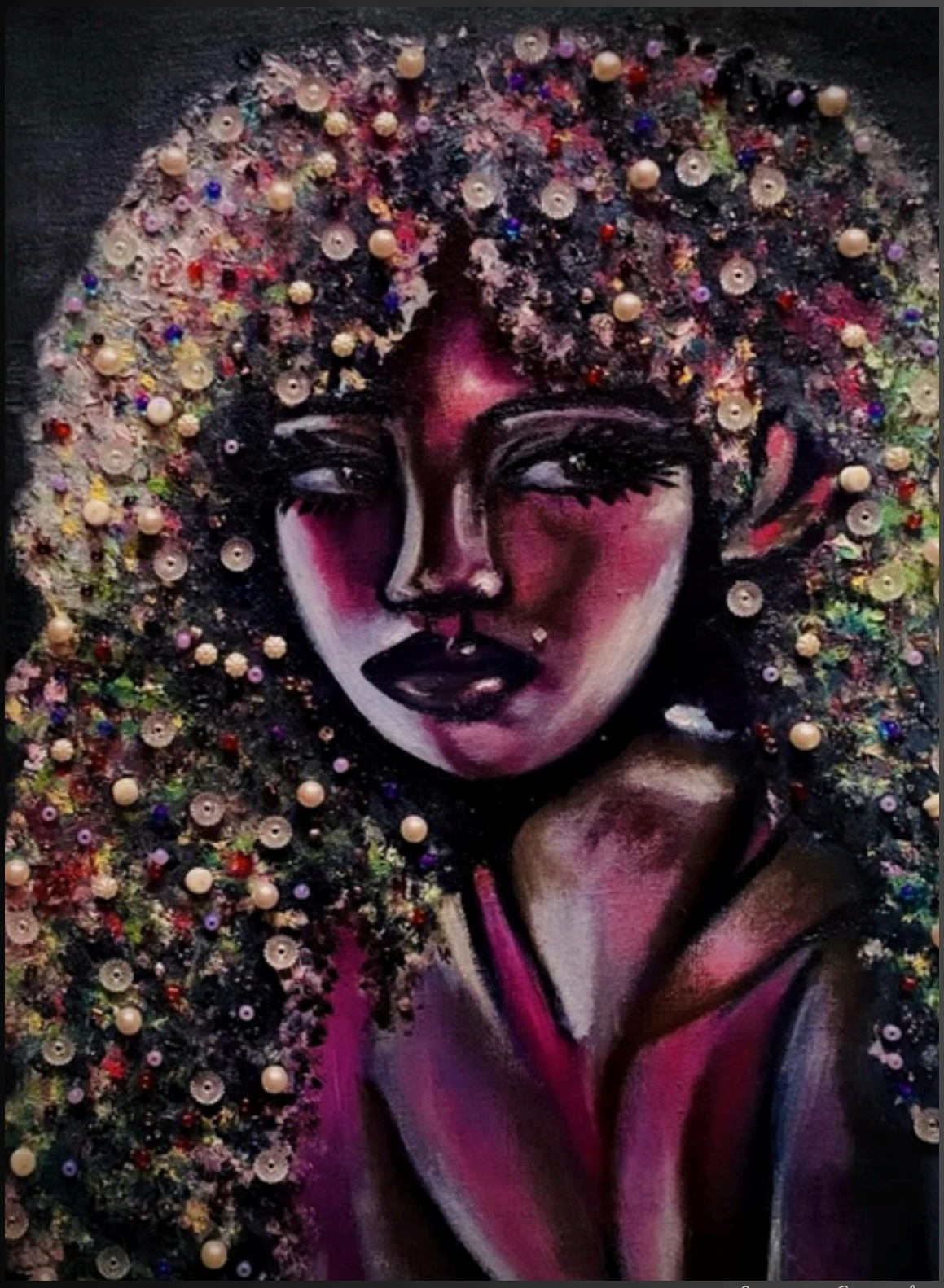


Embrace of the floral reverie



Jazmin Granados

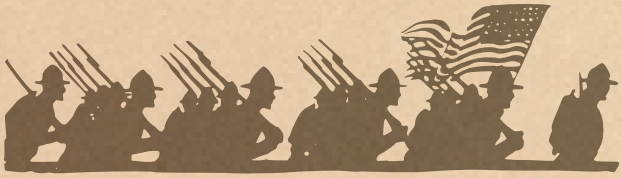
Tears of solitude



Jazmin Granados

LITTLE TOY SOLDIERS

By David M. Solis



[BEGIN TRANSMISSION LOG]
CLASSIFICATION: S-LEVEL POST-CONFLICT ANALYSIS | DATE: [UNDECIDED DATE, POSTWWIV] SUBJECT: Addendum I: Contextual Genesis of the Nation of the Worlds (NOW) Conflict (W-IV)

I. The Global Mandate (Post-World War III)

Following the definitive collapse of the United Nations post-WWIII, the surviving Continental Alliances agreed upon an audacious geopolitical experiment. The intention was to replace flawed national governance with a single, uncompromised global authority. This authority, later designated the Nation of the Worlds (NOW), was established on a sequestered, neutral island territory (code designation: [Sentinel]). The founding charter required all member nations to cede citizens—the most diverse array of ethnicities, intellects, and backgrounds available—to this island. This was not a demographic gesture, but a conscious attempt to inoculate the governing body against traditional national loyalties and tribalism.

II. The Utopian Cost

For two millennia, the global community complied with the NOW mandate. In exchange for non-interference and adherence to global directives, every nation maintained an unbroken commitment to provide the island with the world's most advanced resources: unmatched healthcare, state-of-the-art technology, and absolute educational primacy. This isolation, combined with the mandated genetic pool, resulted in the biological and intellectual forging of a new ethnicity: the Islanders, otherwise referred to as the NOW's.

By the 23rd Century, the NOW populace achieved a level of inherent superiority— demonstrably smarter, stronger, and more capable—becoming a singular futuristic utopia. This success rendered them the perfect governors, yet it simultaneously created the fatal flaw: they were a race designed for peace, but divorced from human experience.

III. The Stalemate (The Genesis of World War IV)

In the last century, the global balance fractured. The Continental Alliances, weary of governance by a race they felt lacked empathy for real-world suffering and complexity, began to rebel. This rebellion took the form of calculated non-compliance and increasing supply blockades—a desperate, yet subtle, attempt to regain control.

The true nature of World War IV emerged not as a conflict of aggression, but as a conflict of strategic restraint. Every Continental Alliance understood the destructive potential locked within the NOW's technology and superiority. No nation dared fire the first shot, knowing that to save the NOW from the initial aggressor would be to secure two millennia of technological favor. The global strategy became a corrosive, silent proxy war: a collective, passive-aggressive siege, each nation waiting for another to take the annihilative risk, hoping to emerge as the "savior" and claim the technological and intellectual spoils.

IV. The Catalyst of Compliance

The critical failure point was designated T-minus 48 hours, coinciding with the activation of the Euro-Asian Alliance's "Contingency Compliance Override"—a non-kinetic, highlevel logistical weapon designed to collapse the North American Alliance's economic infrastructure. This guaranteed immediate and lethal retaliation, ending the strategic restraint and initiating the long-feared cascade into kinetic warfare.

At this juncture, a splinter faction of the NOW, referred to henceforth only as the Islanders, initiated an unauthorized response. This team was led by an individual designated the Leader, whose records indicate no prior training for tactical deployment, possessing only the inherent superior intellect common to the NOW populace.

V. The Intervention and Forcible Resolution

The Islanders' single-action deployment was recorded at T-minus 4 hours. Utilizing their unprecedented technological superiority, they bypassed every continental security protocol simultaneously. Their intervention was not an act of destruction, but of absolute exposure and seizure.

The Islanders executed a two-pronged action:

1. Strategic Paralysis: They released the entire classified strategic corpus of all seven Continental Alliances to the global public and, crucially, to the NOW's own central governance matrix. This exposure of all 'First Strike' operational plans and retaliation matrices instantly created a state of absolute strategic paralysis.

2. Full System Overthrow: Simultaneously, leveraging the continents' unprecedented reliance on integrated digital infrastructure, the Islanders achieved full manual, remote control over the operating systems of the seven major and several minor Continental Alliance governments. Their legislative, military, and economic capabilities were instantaneously subsumed under the direct, forceful administration of the NOW.

VI. Conclusion: The Final Stalemate

World War IV did not end in defeat or victory; it ended in absolute subjugation. The Continental Alliances were forced into non-kinetic compliance, their strategies now transparent, their governments remotely piloted by the very race they sought to control.

The post-war order is maintained by the explicit and constant threat of force. The Continental Alliances are now kept in line through the knowledge that the NOW can, at any time, turn the Alliances' own military and infrastructural forces against them.

Following the resolution, the people of Sentinel—the populace of the NOW—undertook a planned diaspora. They left the island, integrating themselves across the globe. This was not an act of peace, but of final, chilling governance: every major global capital now hosts a Sentinel, ensuring that direct, physical control remains absolute and immediate. The official designation of the conflict resolution is The Final Stalemate.

[END ADDENDUM II]

FINGER TIPS

By Emily Marie Thomas

It's hot, damn near boiling
It wraps around my lungs and squeezes it tight
Traps me in it's hateful hold
Brings me closer to the edge of destruction
Drags me kicking and screaming
Nails scratching the floor boards, as I try to escape
Finger prints and bruises wrapped around my ankles
The fire burns bright and hot, it's boiling
I feel it in my shoulders
All tense and untouched
In my face, you could see it
All pinched and unpretty
My lips bit raw
So words don't escape
It travels down my arm
To the tips of my fingers



PAIN BY REMEDIOS VARO*

By Mark Andrew Holmes

We were given a choice between pleasure and pain—
We chose pain
For all the world to see.
On the ground, high above it—
There we lay, on the spinning wheel.
What goes up must come down
The spinning wheel got to go around—
Laterally, not vertically.
We will suffer for our sins in vertiginous agony—
In vertiginous agony.

*Rheumatic Pain (Dolor Reumático), painted by Remedios Varo in 1948, is a symbolic surrealist work depicting intense physical and emotional anguish. It features a tortured figure in a desolate landscape, surrounded by nails, representing pain, likely commissioned as an illustration for a Bayer pharmaceutical pamphlet about rheumatism

A Strange Girl Who Likes The Stars

By Natalie M. Marriott

I am a strange girl who likes the stars
I wonder about the pain of the earth's surface,
and if it can feel us cutting down its trees.

I hear the sound of loudness when it is silent.
I see the need for help in people's eyes who are too afraid to ask for it.
I want to comfort the people who cry out for help through their silence.
I am a strange girl who likes the stars.
I pretend I am doing good,
when I know I am only okay.

I feel the loneliness in a person who is surrounded by millions.
I touch the ocean water hoping it will be warm, to only feel the sharp pain of coldness.
I worry there will be no more stars in the night sky when they realize who I really am.

I cry for the children who never got to know the feeling of having a real home.
I am a strange girl who likes the stars.
I understand how I am,
But not who I am.

I say "I understand", while at the same time telling myself, "I wish I could understand".
I dream of the day I can tell myself "you did it".
I try following, when I know I was born to lead.
I hope the world knows that it is cared for by at least one person.

I am a strange girl who likes the stars.

LIFE AND LOVE

By Joshua William Plumley

Life and Love, something from above the skies, to your eyes, until you realize its wise.

Hey kid, tell me what you want to do. Hey kid, tell me what you're going to do.
Hey kid, tell me what you need to do, speak it true, pay your dues,
Break on through, pick and choose, stick and move.
One nation under a groove, they move thrusting. Merry-go-round they pound the ground busting.
Something, is worth the life we're living, from beginning to the ending.

Life and Love, something from above the skies, to your eyes, until you realize its wise.

Oh now how, blows to the nose until the count down.
Flows to the slow-mo, they wound down, one sound now.
Check it, never wreck it, respect it, one record screaming.
Light beaming, sun streaming, priority steaming, life dreaming.
Come and get it, make your life love fit it, take the light above feel it, share the beauty don't conceal it.
What are you dealing with, spilling gifts, reeling rifts, common sense, drama next.

Life and Love, something from above the skies, to your eyes, until you realize its wise.

We're coming close, mama knows what you're going to dose.
Common fools know that you keep your eyes closed.
Summoned tolls throw you to the cross roads. Human molds, block you out from the tri folds.
I'm four wheeling, keep your senses to what you're seeing and feeling,
Four seasons to infinity reasons, more treason and trinity's pleading.
Stop feeding, the anarchy breeding.

Life and Love, something from above the skies, to your eyes, until you realize its wise.

I'm on fire, heat pumping the inferno much higher, speak something, eternal as required.
He conspired, this gift drifting sifting masterpiece, now release, this heart pumping healing philosophy.
There has to be, something better than the tragedy, adversity trying to bring the worst to me.
It'll never be a part of me, this mystery is history, the tragedy, catastrophe, the remedy, the mastery.

Life and Love, something from above the skies, to your eyes, until you realize its wise.

It's a new dawn, hell spawn, break one, step on son, till he says it's done, the Son will run the son.
So much to win, so much to lose, take off and spin, do not confuse,
The creator with the hater maker, the taker with the healing savior,
Much flavor to the proper tables, no waivers to the doper labels,
To the life and the love, we will be able, to open our eyes and see the tale,
Now we're wise, lets catch the sail.

Life and Love, something from above the skies, to your eyes, until you realize its wise.

Meet Me In The Stars

By Sandy R. Palma

as I am saying goodnight at

the end of the day

and you are not here, but many miles

away

my heart is so empty and so lonely

inside

as I wipe away a tear I'm trying

to hide

I close my eyes and try to go to sleep

but with the sadness inside

I begin to weep

suddenly I remember what you once said

to me

just meet me in the stars, waiting

for you I'll be

when distance tends to keep us apart

remember I still

hold you near my heart

when the night together cant be ours, just close

your eyes and meet me in the stars

remembering those words, I began to smile

and gently close my eyes

lessening the miles

I can see the stars, oh how beautiful they're

arranged

but you are not there, no hug to exchange

I sit alone waiting with hope in my heart

no longer wanting to keep us apart

suddenly in the distance

a shadow appears

a tear rolls down my face, and the image is clear

there is no question it is you

that I see

waiting in the stars just like you

promised me

you hold out your hand as you come near

and put it on top of mine

''saying I missed you dear"

you gently pull me close we begin

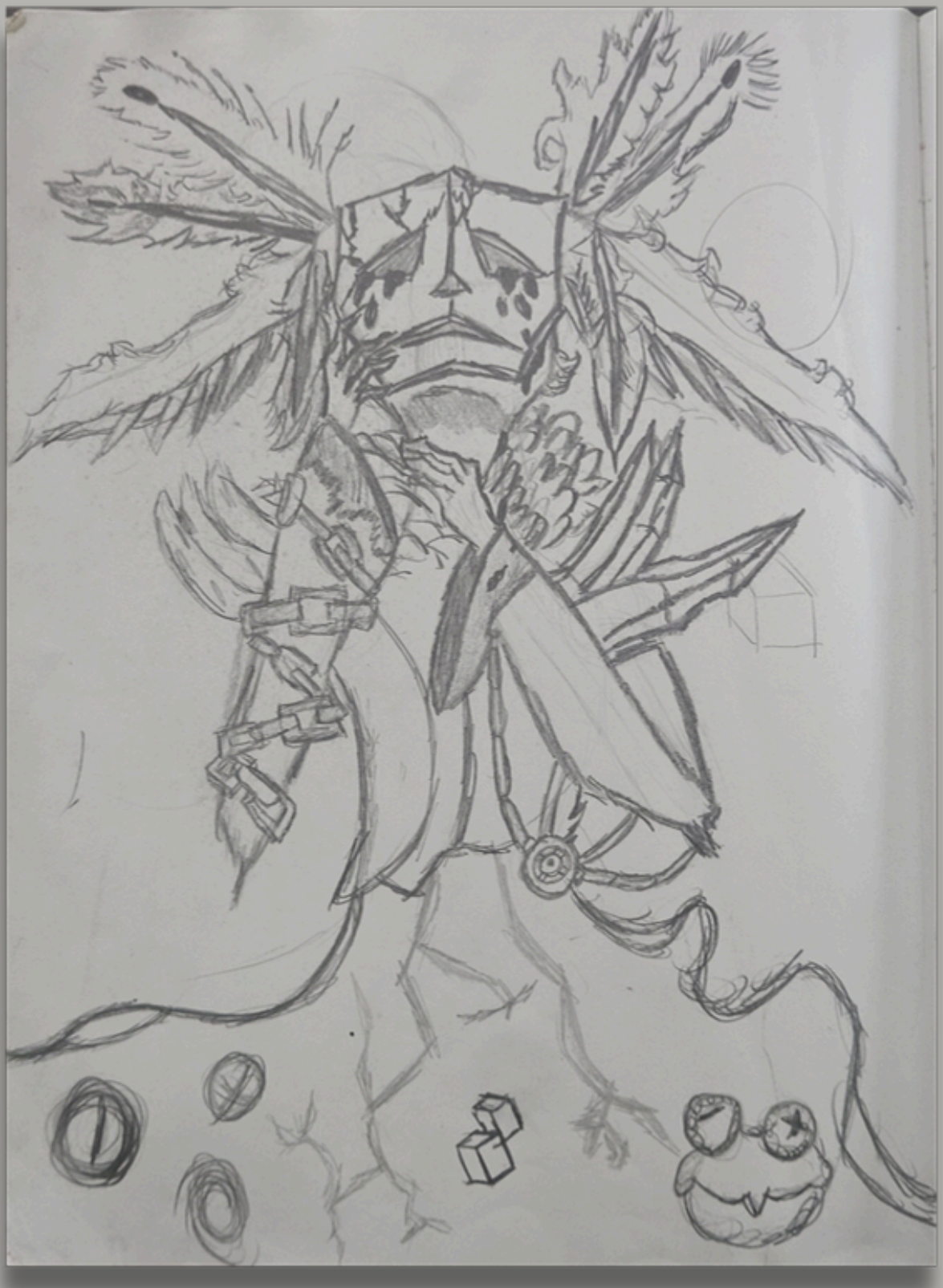
to dance

just meet me in the stars that is where I'll be

a special place in the stars just for

you and me!

Strangling Masquerade



Zolaris

Picnic Date (Bunny)



Peggy Messner

Dream about my kids

By Alejandra Contreras Talavera

When I Woke Up"
I dreamed I held my children free,
No shadows watching over me.
An unsupervised moment, pure,
A love the world could not obscure.
I hugged Karely, heart to heart,
As if we'd never been apart.
Then she left… my breath stood still,
Yet love stayed strong, unbroken still.
She came back running into me,
A second hug—so warm, so deep.
A woman spoke with measured tone:
"Karely can finally go home."
My heart rose high, my spirit flew,
Joy wrapped me whole—it felt so true.
But then I asked, with shaking voice,
"And Isaac… can he share this choice?"
Silence fell, the answer slow:
"Not yet… a couple weeks to go."
I said, "My son will hurt, he'll cry,
He needs his home, his mom nearby."
The joy and pain began to blend,
Love refusing to pretend.
Before the dream could set him free,
I woke with tears still inside me.
Yet even awake, one truth remains:
A mother's love outlives the pain.
I won't rest, I won't let go—
Until all my children come home.

Juniper Tree

By Denise Alcantar

Looking back, it took my breath away
That summer day in the lonely shade
I grit my teeth and wipe a tear
As pain and memory draw near

What were you thinking as you lied in wait?
Was there a moment that you paused

But we both know what happened
that day, and I fear we'll always
be the only ones

I stared up at the branches of
A Juniper tree as you took everything away,
I became numb to the moments
As you forever changed the person I was

As you walked away, I cried at
the death of someone I thought I knew,
A friend, a trust... shattered to pieces,
like my body, lying in dust

As I laid there I searched and searched
for the sun, but only found the shade
So, I took solace under the darkness of the tree

The tree that knew my secrets, the tree that witnessed
A betrayal so deep that the wound never healed

I broke, we broke, you broke that day
And shattered it all to pieces

Like a strand of shiny white pearls slips
from your hand, I lost what can never
be found

CHAINS

BY MELISSA OLVERA

“Consumed by her environment
always left with only crumbs of love;
hunger for attention.”

“Possessed by the entity of stress and anxiety.”

buried hatred feelings
deep in my core
with a dagger of resentment.

Single mother raising us
in this cold world
that can easily chew you up
and spit you out.

Caught in a storm,
of escalating arguments.

“Walls close in”
My temperature begins to rise
as if I was a child
with the flu
on a winter night.

Demons of anger and fear
possess my emotions,
manipulate my body
to freeze up cold,
entering a state of isolation.

Being detached to the realm,
sitting with a blank stare
only faint mumbles of words
come out. Whispers of hope.

Childhood had no remorse,
tough as steel,
destroyed everything in its path.
Born into a twirling wrath
of generational family trauma.
Feelings have not spared me;
they continued to shadow my life
question every step
I take into the world.

Home was an inferno,
filled with outright rage.

Snug as a bug,
drifting in a great sleep,
only to be shaken
with a sudden earthquake
of mother crying.

Shattered glass.
Quiet cries.

I think... mama might die.

She lay on the floor
in defeat.

Snarls of the devil
he thinks he won.

Shadow of death
has surpassed.

Mommy will be ok.

No one died that day.

Child’s heart withered away,
vivid memories of that day
still take her breath away.

Child enslaved
by yesterday's pain.



Manhattan Bridge



Paola Daney Arriola

Somewhere Familiar
By Kaylee Ortega

we have a room in the house
where things go untouched

nothing moves
dust is the new host

echoed laughter
and past conversations
scurry into corners

Replaced
with the wails of silence

the warmth
smothered beneath
blankets of bleakness

February
By Alanna Jordan

Somewhere deep inside my lungs
Still fighting for respect I know that I deserve
Treating me as what I could've been
But you never see who I am
Look in my eyes and tell me what I did wrong
Or was the fear just filling up your soul
Worried about what if instead of what is
One more breath as I plead once more
Getting the respect you know that I've earned

Ara macao
By Juno E. Moreira Paz

Distinguida voy
Colores brillantes
Azula y blanco a la par de estrellas volando
Soy el espiritu de mi pueblo natal
Nunca Rendida, echa le ganas, mas que el mal
Soy mas que lo me titulan: pobre, migrante, violenta

"¡Parese en olancho que es mas ancho!"
Dice mi madre, un lugar mis ojos nunca an visto
Ojos color cafe, como los granos que mi abuela cultivaba

Alugantina Buogu, Honduras.
Alugantina Buogu tus sopas, plantanos, rios y montanas
Algantina Buogu my pasi extrano y trabajador
Un dia volver a volar tus aires y comer tus frutas-
Sere la Ara Macao por siempre

I am not your statistic

By Princessa Garcia



Did it happen
They said it didn't.
My word didn't mean enough, nor did my self infliction.
Instead they said it was all within
They made me into a circus clown
Looked down and judged upon.
Point your finger at me...
Call me a liar, afterall i was young
So who knows what really happened, but can they explain
This endless pain and disgusting thought
Or will they treat and diagnose me like a clown
To add to their list
Of Women who could have been greater than their past?

Many Worlds Ended, Once

By Mariano Perez-Bautista

I woke up like any other day, tired
and confused and, quite honestly,
already fed up with everything.
I mocked up a half-assed, shitty breakfast
and washed it down with gatorade.

While chewing on burnt toast,
I read about people who believed that the world would end on Tuesday.
Stupid predictions that never came true and likely never will.
How pointless our desires to feel special in a universe so uncaring.
Panics of machines unable to keep up with time,
Mayan clocks ticking and reaching their end,
supposed raptures just days away.

I sat outside doing nothing in particular.
Eliminating my boredom by watching birds fly.
Gliding gently and carelessly like they owned it all.
Almost as if the sky were created with only them in mind.

Birds, like me, are descendents of beings that once used to roam the Earth.
A kingdom that lasted millions of years, brought to its knees in just a day.
Kingdoms, like words, never stand the test of time.
Leaving only scars that remind future generations
"The world ended here, once."

Beauty



Michael Contreras

Pinecone lake



Michael Contreras

A Morning with Persistent Sadness

By Yingchun Chen



Non-Fiction

I am almost always inside a sadness I am not fully aware of.

A deep sense of helplessness, a feeling of being unable to do anything, returns from time to time, regardless of day or night. Even coffee only brings some physical alertness. Especially the kind that makes my hands tremble—my thoughts become overstimulated and scattered. It is slightly better than lying motionless in bed, but the heaviness does not lessen.

This morning was no different. As usual, I had two shots of Starbucks espresso with a small amount of milk, followed by a large cup of warm water—boiling water mixed with ice. I sat at the table, hoping to begin studying or working. But I was still completely wrapped in sadness, held in place by it, unable even to cry.

I noticed again that my tongue was pressed unconsciously against the roof of my mouth, as if it were a load-bearing wall, carrying and holding the weight of the pain.

I closed my eyes unconsciously, in pain. The base of my thumb rested against my closed lips; my thumb and index finger touched the sides of my nose, while my middle finger lightly pressed the tip. The warmth of my lips and the heat of my breath settled softly into my palm and the hollow between my fingers.

I wanted, today, to write this feeling down truthfully—the feeling of being held in place by sadness.

So for the first time, I followed the force of my tongue and the flow of sensation that accompanied it. As I focused on the force of my tongue pressing upward against the palate, I could feel nearly the entire surface of it pushing upward. At the same time, the force was trying to gather scattered, thin fragments of energy around it, attempting to establish a channel in the direction of my head, toward where sadness seemed to be.

As I followed one point of discomfort after another within my body, most of these points revealed themselves as heavy and concrete. The sensation began at the back-middle of the roof of my mouth, moved along the base of my nasal cavity, and extended upward, concentrating sharply in the depths of my eye sockets. In my head, other sadness was present as well, but scattered and without a clearly identifiable location.

When I allowed myself to feel the sadness more deeply, pain suddenly became clear in my chest. From the chest, it began to spread outward and downward into my abdomen. At the same time, my hands and feet grew cold and weak; a heaviness settled into my limbs.

I continued following these clear signals, concentrating on the force of my tongue pressing upward against the palate, moving along this strong, gathering force toward the eye sockets, allowing it to search naturally for the point of sadness in my mind. In this act of attentive following, I became aware—without intending to—of a sense of openness extending toward the top of my head. It was not intense, but it was unmistakably clear.

After only a few of these deepest attempts, the sadness disappeared.

What remained was a faint trace of discomfort in my chest, where the pain had been, and a subtle, unfamiliar lightness in the areas of my head where most of the sadness had withdrawn—perhaps a very slight residue of sadness, or perhaps only a sensation not yet accustomed to its absence.

The feeling of weakness was gone. The cool sensation in my palms remained, but it no longer felt unpleasant. It may have been because it was winter, and I was still typing at the keyboard.

Loving Across Borders, Beliefs, and Bloodlines

By Gina Covarrubias

When I quiet the noise, move away from the scroll, the chaos, the headlines, I can't help but hear: "You don't get to choose."

So I take a deep breath and a step back to look at my circle, mi gente, mi vida, and this is what I see...
I see immigrants I love, porque son mi familia. Mi raíz está en sus historias. In my abuelita's hot cafecito. In my jefe's long work days. In my mamá's quiet rosarios. They are my kin, where my roots and stories lie deep within.

I see mis amigas, mis amigos y amigues trans that stand so true. Su fuerza y corazón is enough to pull me through.

I see hard workers en las esquinas, en los campos, at the job sites before sunrise. Tired, but pushing forward for their families.

I see viejitos en la gasolinera, searching for botellas, because rest was never a luxury they were offered, even after decades of building this country with their callused hands.

And though it's not easy, and the truth is, I don't understand their choices, their views, or their world, I also see the people in my life whose values don't match mine, whose truths feel foreign to me, and whose beliefs feel wrong deep in my bones.

Con el corazón pesado, I take a step back further to see the rest of my village. A veces yo miro a los supporters de MAGA, some who are in my very tree, who share my blood and my history.
I see old friends now dressed in blues. Some who serve with grace. Some who bring light into the darkest place.

I see conservatives on my left and right. Mi familia, who've prayed for me and stood by my side.
Mirando mi gente, los quienes helped raise me, laugh with me, grow with me, I wonder how we ended up seeing the world so differently. And I can't make excuses for them, and don't want to. But still, in my heart of hearts I can't unlove the people who shaped me.

I know that we've all walked different paths. We've been molded by the places we've lived, la familia que queremos, the stories we've inherited, and the lives we've led.

And I understand how someone could grow up believing their values are the truth. Yo lo entiendo. La gente cree sus enseñanzas. What feels safe. What they see in their homes. Is that not how the world shapes us?

But it doesn't make it more real than the lives our neighbors have lived, y cómo sus vidas los han transformado a la gente que son.

Still, sometimes, I wish everyone could see through my eyes. I wish they could just get it. Then I pause and I remind myself: If I ask not to be judged for what I believe, I must offer them the same grace. I say it twice.

Yet still, I wrestle with these thoughts constantly. I ask myself why I continue to hold space for those whose values don't align with mine. It's all so complicated. Love is complicated. Life is complicated. Family is complicated. Identity is complicated.

I wish we could walk beside each other all along the road, even when it's heavy, even when it's long.
I don't want to see families torn apart anymore just because they crossed a border seeking hope. I don't wish it for my family, and I don't wish it for yours.

I don't want to see a child in a cage alone, sleeping in detention centers because their parents dreamed for a better future. I don't wish this for my child, and I don't wish it for yours.

I don't want to see mothers in California waiting for news about their deported sons. I don't wish it for my mother, and I don't wish it for yours.

I don't want to see broken families in Gaza, starving children, or kidnapped humanitarian workers. I don't wish this in my world, and I don't wish it in yours.

Mi corazón se rompe. My heart breaks for them. For us. For the world. No one should suffer like that. No one deserves that pain.

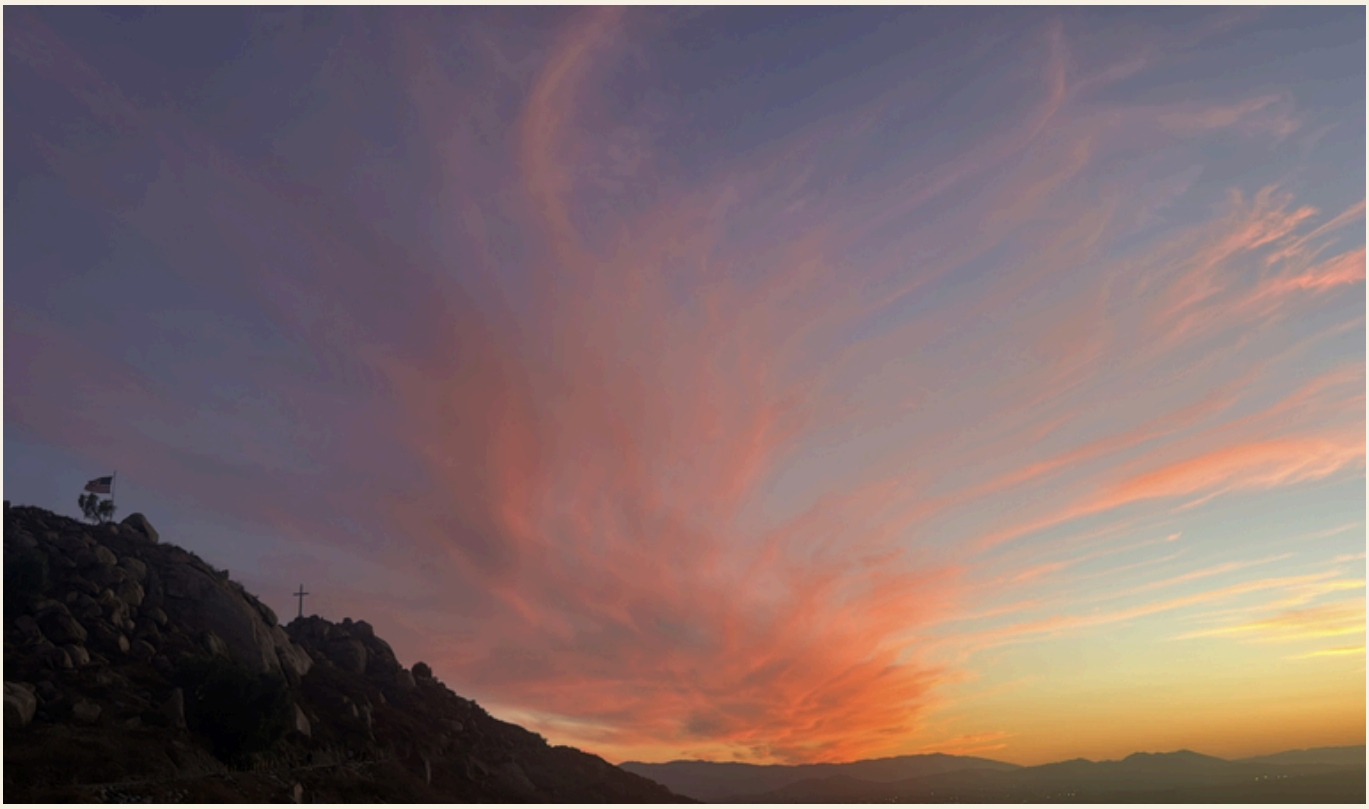
We are all someone's someone. And el amor de verdad, it doesn't draw borders. It doesn't pick and choose. No se puede. It's not that easy.

So I circle back to where I began:
You don't get to pick and choose when life is fair, when justice matters, when love is deserved.

You don't get to pick and choose who your family is, the privilege you were or were not born into, the ones who can stay or go, only when it feels convenient.

No funciona así. That's not how this works. You don't get to choose.

Under The Sun



Bre'Jon Kinniebrew

Concert B ♭

By Terra Jade Williams

I'm told... broken people break people
That's just an excuse I hear from the lethal mouths of random strangers
Written between the measures bars of concert B flat

G- G clef, also known as trouble, dances across my eyes as I try to hide from the ballads played at mezzo piano the backtrack of our relationship

A- A symphony of apologies stuck on repeat, that assault my ears; your words which I try not to believe every thought bittersweet

B- Beat boundlessly keeping the tempo, for another day... another day that I allowed you to brainwash, backstab, and betray me

C- Constantly walking on eggshells, counting the conversations we have on one hand because you don't know how to conversate, bypassing every broken boundary

D- Dissonance within myself, as one part of me tries to be brave and grow a backbone, while the other wants to cover up the bruises

E- Excuses echo across the ensemble, as your blackmail builds up, brings out the turmoil within me

F#- Is for fermata! Forgive and forget the pain you branded on my heart as I bandage up the broken pieces

G- G clef, also known as trouble, was a big blazing warning written on the music before I could even read it

I tell people... broken people break people
The lethal warning falling from my lips
Because I'm familiar with the melody that is concert B flat

Sun-Kissed Oranges



Shelby Marie Dunn



Photo by Samantha Jimenez