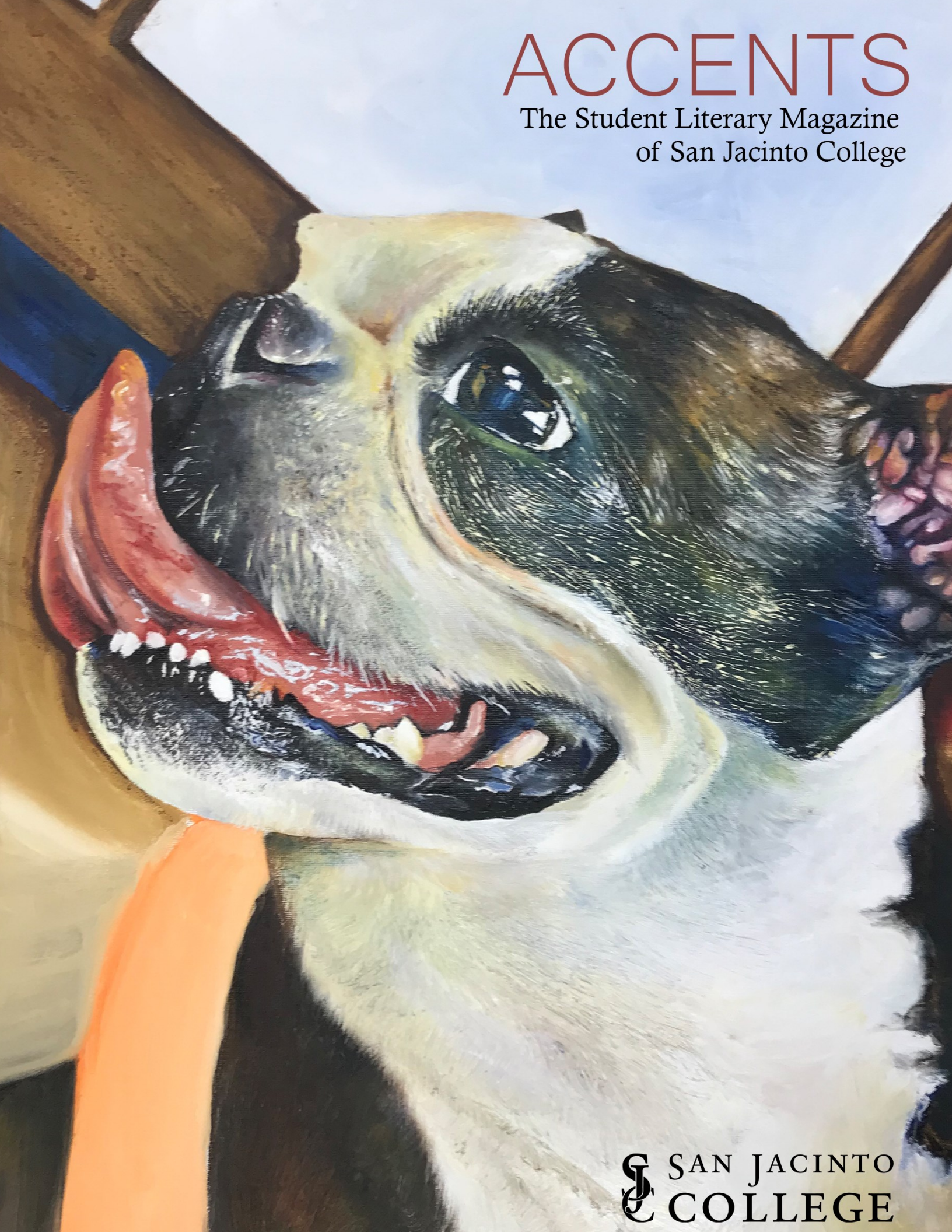


ACCENTS

The Student Literary Magazine
of San Jacinto College



 SAN JACINTO
COLLEGE

Accents

2019

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Accents*, the literary magazine of San Jacinto College. The magazine exists to recognize artistic talent and creative expression from students at San Jacinto. It represents the collaborative efforts of faculty across the college and reflects the diverse voices of our students.

For information about the magazine, including information about how to submit work for future issues, visit sanjac.edu/Accents/

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Cultura

Karla studies Fine Arts on Central Campus.

STIGMA

Taylor Arbuckle

A hero saves its villain
and the world thinks,
“That’s what a hero should be.”

A villain saves its hero
and the world refuses to think,
“Maybe that could be a hero, too.”

THE GATHERING

Christian Hudspeth

They jam themselves in, clustered like a bulging balloon.
Each one takes a turn screaming their hearts out.
The room reeked with aromas, perfume and whatnots.

A boy, the lone runt, could smell the vying sounds of relatives.
Aunt Wendie boasting her pies, cousin George bragging about his Europe trip.
It filled the room but made it so empty.
Though, the noise has its own special meaning.
For this was apparently “adulting” in the eyes of the boy.
Carrying meaningless rambles, they say, will draw folks closer.
“Jimmy looked swell!”, “Ben got a job!”, “Oh, they grow up so fast!”

It is all a gathered mixture of nonsense.
But it is an interesting boredom, in its own way.
Tune out and the boy drowns in his own head.
“I am the Underneath. He that is forgotten in the mass.”

The runt is destined to join the blabber giants.
A thought that brings a sad acceptance.
As all shall be made in the image of one’s self.
Who will he be? What nonsense will he speak? *Temet nosce*, time is short.
Until the day when needed, he’ll let the room chant its empty words.
He sees through the pungent confines, knowing its meaning will one day come.



El Ocaso de un Artista

THE GILDED CAGE

Osasare Edo-Ewasiha

How conflicting it must be to be locked in a beautiful prison, a gilded cage with golden chains and diamond bars.

I know.

Like a bird in a cage, who never knew of one flying day. Fed, kept, but never set free.

Should I press my face to the glass or content myself with the familiar luxuries held within? Plumped pillows and silk sheets, what can be more than this? Outside there is darkness, there is danger, and there is fear. But inside there is everything that I hold oh so dear.

The sunlight looks most beautiful when you have never felt the scorch of its heat- but what if you like the heat? You don't know.

So many questions, so many things left unknown. Outside there are answers and plains to roam. There are oceans to swim, winds to ride, and roads to run.

If all I have known are four corners, what will I do if there are none? Yes, I am safe, but what beats the breath of relief after a brush with danger?

What are goods without grief? The ice is applied after the slap, the food after the hunger, the lone flower after the flood.

I must go. Let me go.

Let me be as free as the ocean's breeze. If all ends tomorrow, let me live today. If the sky is pouring rain lean me out so I might feel it, rushing wet and dripping down my face.

Do not tie me down using the tendrils of your own fears. Let me break my arm flying and come down crying, being all the more better for actually trying. Put my feet in the grass and let me wiggle them away from your anxiety. Cut the cord, loosen the tie, and set me free to find my calling. Let me out in the sun and allow me to feel its burn.

I've never been a good bird anyway.

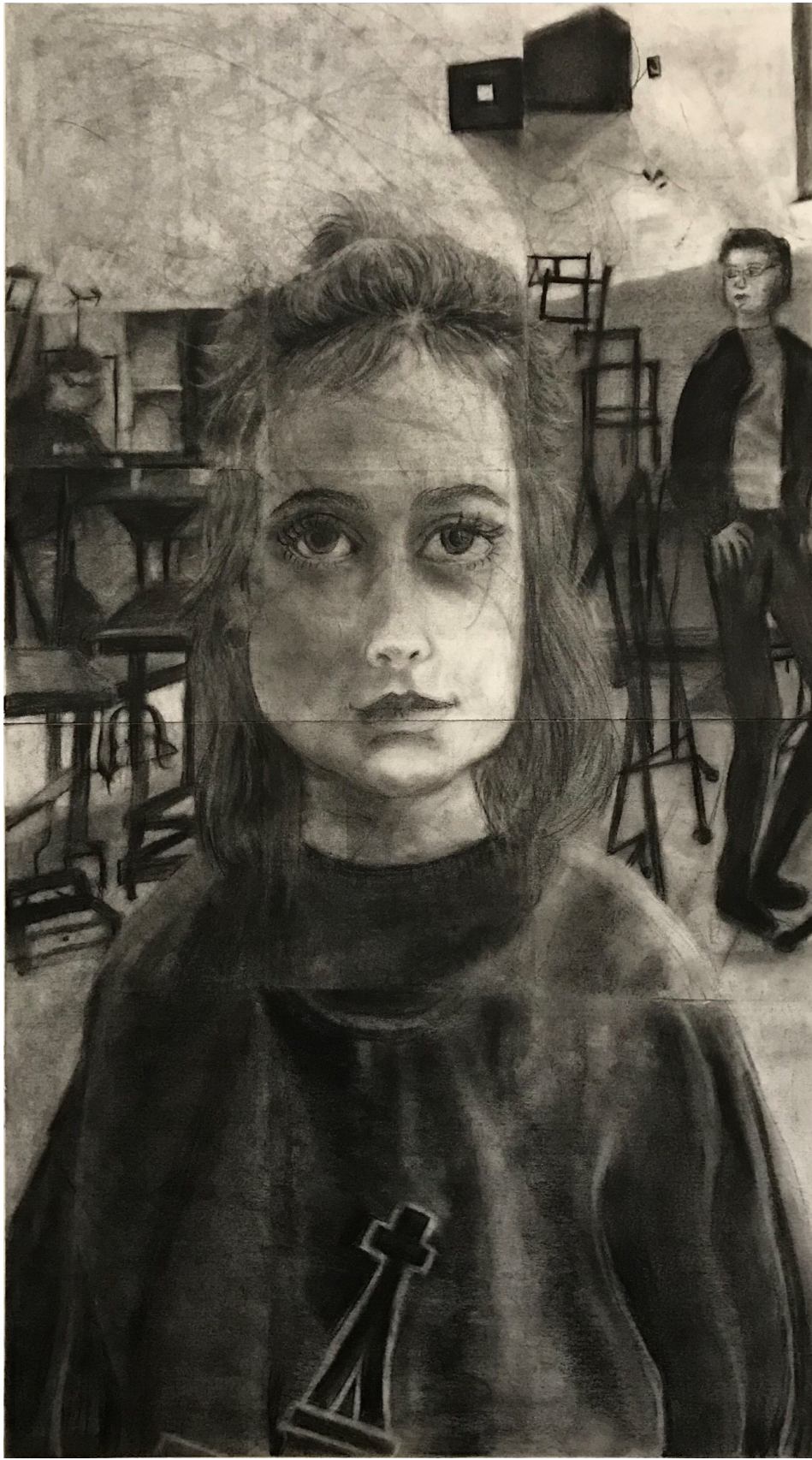
PINK

Gwenyth Dolen

It's two a.m.

Smoke is still lingering in the cold early morning, carefully blown out of the crack in the window, her little secret. There's something soft playing from her laptop, *Simpsons*, or *Golden Girls*, or *Bob's Burgers*. She's a little lonely, but knows that if another human being is invited into her sanctum of hazy colors and short highs, she would not be able to return, and that was almost as devastating to her as the isolation.

Besides, she mused. I'm not really alone, am I? I have this ancient stuffed animal, I have Betty White, and I have the ghost of Jesus Christ, wherever he is. In the morning, when light leeches through her blinds and she has no recollection of this moment, she'll paint her pallid face and return to the world of the living, smiling at strangers, her window firmly shut.



My Disproportionate Self

Jessica studies Fine Arts on Central Campus.

ENGLISH CLASS DAILY

Syeda Ali

These days have gotten more
unfortunate by the second
They love to anger our elder
and find rules to bend

Our elder calls the quits on us,
for dealing with us is the worst
The elder stepped into the en-
lightening zone by choice, but still felt forced

The daily struggle of parting
two noises becomes the worst task
Instead of parting, the noises
dare to talk back

"How mature!" they howl regarding
the action that is representing
the elder's anger as a rude remark

To hush the noises, it takes
more than just a bark
It takes forever to finish one sentence

Whether it's about Eliza's sixpence
or Scheherazade's tales of suspense

WE WON'T CALL IT HAIKU

Rylie Rezapour

With love in my heart.

I shall give you everything.

And nothing less of that.

Look into my eyes.

Tell me you don't want me.

Don't forget to remember the touch of our bodies.

When you take my hand

you take my heart.

Are you ready to hold both?

Ink and needles all over my body

Why do I do it?

For the love of taboo art.

BLUE ROSES

Melissa Perez

Blue roses rose from the earth under the moonlit sky,
Swaying with the breeze until the earth itself looked like the sea during a storm.
The field of blue roses is where we the lonely come to lie, amongst the cold,
with ice thorns that prick us and numb our pain.
And the moon hangs above us,
Watching,
As more blue roses rise.



Color y Esperanza

Karla studies Fine Arts on Central Campus.

BORING DAYS

Nallely Garcia

Enchiladas with a side of pinto beans, Mondays and Fridays. Coming from school was a routine. I would nap, eat, do boring and stressing homework, take a shower and go to sleep. Waking up again, getting ready for school and repeating the same things over and over again was getting old.

It was a Friday, yes! The most exciting day from the week. Walking into our little apartment, tired, sleepy and annoyed, I was ready to jump into my bed, wrap myself in my favorite yellow blanket, and take a nap after a boring long day at school. It seemed like another normal day. "No enchiladas today?" I asked my mom, as she sat on the couch with a worried face and tears rolling down her cheeks. "It must be really serious" I thought, considering the fact it was Friday, enchilada day. I have never seen her so desperate and sad. When I asked her what was going on, the answer that came out of her red lips with a broken voice was: "You have to travel today". I love to travel! Especially when the whole family gathers and we share those memories together. "Monterrey? San Luis? What part of Mexico are we going to this time?". Silence filled the whole room. This trip was definitely not going to be like one of those. The answer she gave me turned my world upside down. "You are going to live with your father in the United States." My heart started beating faster than normal. I felt as if I had horses riding at full speed inside of me, without any direction. I did not know if I was upset, angry, or sad. I was confused and did not expect that at all. I didn't expect that kind of news on a regular Fri-

day. I was mad at her because it seemed like she made that decision for me, without thinking about her feelings... my feelings. While packing, I thought maybe it was going to be a cool adventure and a way out of my boring and common days. So, I decided to give this decision a chance, and stop seeing the negative side, at the end of the day, I always wished my Mondays and Fridays were different, so why not a little change?

My mother's attitude reflected that she was not giving much importance to the situation that was going to separate us both. It seemed like she was forced to act in a certain way, so cold and careless, but her big brown eyes filled with water were saying "please don't leave... stay with me" She wanted to be able to say goodbye in a special way and enjoy being with the person she loved the most one more day. I could look in her eyes and see that she was upset because she couldn't do anything about it, but I still didn't understand why my mom wanted me to be so far away from her.

It was a very long trip. Eight hours of silence and intrigue. Saturday morning, I woke up in a new place with people speaking another language, different cultures, traditions and manners. "Wow!" was the only thing I could say at that moment. Everything was completely different from what a normal Saturday was for me. Finally, something new to experience, no more boring and repeated days. Two weeks passed and I was still adapting to my new life. Every day I learned, explored and did something new. Monday morning, I woke up craving those delicious enchiladas from my mom. I ran to the kitchen and I see nothing but a bowl, cereal,

and milk on the table. I started to feel like I was missing something, but I tried to ignore it.

Time passed by and I had great opportunities, school and job wise, opportunities that I wouldn't have had if I was still back home because I was raised in a city where people have 50-50 percent chance of going to college or even having a good job during their whole life, sometimes because of money, transportation, or because people seems more important to get a job rather than graduate from school.

Living with my dad was not easy at the beginning. He was always at work and barely had time for me. My dad is that kind of a person who does not show love physically, which means no hugs and no kisses. I used to get home from school wanting to talk to someone about my day like I used to do with my mom, but nobody was at home. It took me a while to get used to that. I grew up with my mom having breakfast every morning "Good morning sweetie, go wash your hands, breakfast is ready" she would say, as she kissed my forehead and caressed my face with her really soft hands. I loved waking up to the pleasant smell of eggs, pancakes and hot chocolate. She was also parked every day in front of my school at 1:15pm patiently waiting for me, and she was there for me when I needed to vent. Don't get me wrong. My dad was a very great parent during my first months in my new home, it was just the fact that I was not receiving as much attention as I used to get when I was living with my mom. It got to the point where I was not happy. I had everything I needed (materialistically) but still felt empty. Nothing was filling that emptiness and I was getting tired of that. "What else can I do?" That was the moment when reality hit me for the first time after months of being in my new home.

Sitting on the edge of the bed thinking how this whole situation changed my life, I realized that my mother did everything for love. That one Friday when I went on an unexpected trip, my mind was out of this world and I didn't see things clearly. She just wanted the best for me and I couldn't see that. I thought she was being selfish, but she was caring about me. My mom knew what was the best for me and that was sending me to live with my dad to a

city with more opportunities where I was going to have a better life and a brilliant future.

When we decided to leave Mexico, being a stranger in a big city full of diversity wasn't the only thing I was worried about. There were a thousand things passing through my mind. Definitely the hardest thing about this whole situation was leaving my mom. The person who carried me for nine months, taught me and protected me for fifteen years, was going to be 400 miles away from me. It was so hard for me. That was one of the sacrifices we had to made in order for me to have a better life, leaving my city, and everything I grew up with, in the past.

I was mad at her and I regret everything. I wish I can go back in time to my boring days, where I was happy and I didn't know. Those days where I had love and attention, or at least go back to that one Friday to do things different. I was worried about other things but I did not worry about her. We both didn't show our emotions and that is what eats me alive every time I think about that day. I wish I could go back and hug my mom and tell her how much I love her. Maybe everything would be different. Two days are not enough when I go visit her.

Life is about cherishing little insignificant moments, even the ones you think are boring or not relevant. One day you are with your loved ones and the next day is a mystery, you never know what life might have for you. Life changes so quick, in a blink of an eye. I took not only my happiness but my mom for granted, I didn't appreciate her, and now I wish I could change that, but it is too late. We live eight hours away from each other and a border sets a boundary between us. We only see each other five times a year, and the only way we can communicate with each other when we are not together is through text and phone calls.

I miss those enchiladas with pinto beans on the side. I miss getting home from school and taking a nap knowing I would wake up to a very delicious Mexican homemade dish. I miss waking up knowing I live with the woman I love the most. I miss those warm hugs telling me "everything is going to be ok... you got this," when things get hard... I miss my boring days.

NAMELESS

Taylor Arbuckle

For a while, I felt like
I could touch the stars with my hands,
drag my fingers through open space
like it was water
and carve my name in the ripples.

And then
you disappeared,
and you took the stars with you,
and now I no longer feel
like I even have a name.

ONCE I RAN A RACE

Osasare Edo-Ewasiha

What is life if it is not a competition of
Gnashing teeth, sweating bodies, and aching feet?
“If my hands do not defeat,
If my feet do not prevail.”
Are we not just children, stamping out feet?
You see, to compete is to bargain off a piece
Of a soul for a shiny plaque made of fool’s gold.

Win or lose, it is all a ruse.

Competition is the poor man’s balm,
We don titles and honors like coats. Strip
Us down and what are we but shivering, sniveling
Bodies.

Out of competition, nothing comes to fruition but bruised and bolstered egos.

Everyday competitions are a drain. Are we, in all
Our advances, not secure enough in our own skin
To forgo the child’s play? The race may be won
But so much is lost.

What is competition if it is not a pain?
What is winning if there is no gain?
What is life if it is not a game?

But, even I must admit. When I compete, I do so to win.
Second place is a mortal sin.
Apologies, if my words are too harsh.
Of course, competition is the drive
That causes humanity to thrive.

It’s the ambition and emotion that
Twists and turns it into something
Ugly.

Either way, it's a competition, a contest, a tournament, a match, that will go on and on and on.

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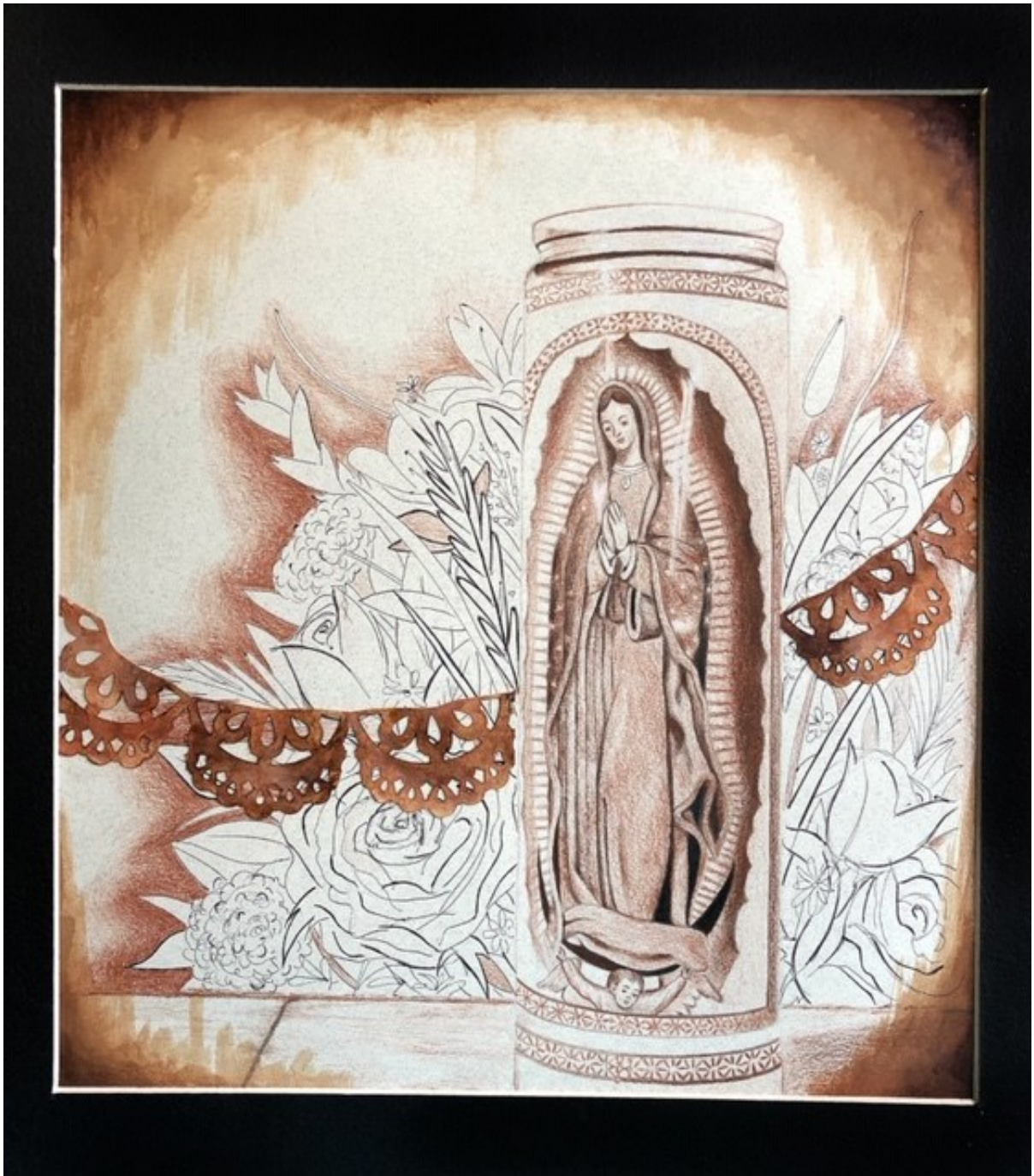
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Ugly.

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SOMETHING FOR THE PAIN

Taylor Arbuckle

Crying feels like taking
anti-depressants for broken bones;
it won't fix what is broken,
but it'll dull the pain
of knowing you'll be limping
for the rest of your life.



Devoción

TANTALIZING SOULS

Alexander Contreras

We mortals only know that one day we must go
Forever chasing dough to buy a friend or faux
Lining up for polls like ducklings in a row
Just hoping that a vote will represent us so
Remain out of the loop to ride the feeder road
Avoid freeways because we can't afford the toll
Hands on steering wheels yet we have no control
Climate's getting hotter - please turn off the stove
Fires scorch the land by yet another drone
Many paid the price, but how do much we owe?
Let's ask what's the damage? Everything we own?
Banks have us all locked up with constant loans
To the highest glass ceiling we must throw a stone
Not skeletal when we see it crack the dome
Airplanes flown over plains with horizons low
CIA has skeletons - give a dog a bone
Teleprompting scripted reality on a show
No wonder why we're so confused as we grow
In debt as well as in death for which we're sold
Earth beneath your feet letting grass caress your sole
Wish eternal peace for our tantalizing souls
Because heaven truly knows what we have sewn

THE LIVING CORPSE

Syeda Ali

Externally, those gleaming eyes kindle a fire glowing with passion.

Internally, they have no hope and no one to see but the faces of those who give the owner of these eyes nothing but trouble.

Externally, that fair skinned face looks white like the freshly fallen snow on a gorgeous, winter morning.

Internally, it has withered, is pale like death, in need of a revival, and in need of a glow that will shine once the owner of this drained soul is finally free from its tormentors.

Externally, those firm hands look so steady, capable of lifting any weight without hesitation.

Internally, they resemble the tin hands of a robot, doing the given task without making a sound, just working and working day and night.

Externally, that tall figure looks so bold and brave, so modest, and all dressed up and ready to go to work.

Internally, it is hollow like Tin Man, standing like a tree, and working like a slave with no one to look after it.

Externally, he is a handsome, young lad who works hard day and night to live a long and prosperous life.

BON

Alayna Glover

do you remember
when we were so young and innocent
and how every emotion could pour easily out
like a waterfall or dam or river
but then as we grow older
we learn that letting our feelings rush forward
will get us hurt
why must we hurt to learn
why must others scar us
to seal up the emotions bottled inside
until we learn to keep the liquid locked up
and let it age
but not like wine
instead like whiskey that has gone bad and then
we seek those feelings and only let them show
and the end of a different bottle
I hate the feeling of being numb
I miss being able to smile
without the fear of someone breaking the bottle
and cutting the shards against my skin



Maria

FLOWERS AND THE SMELL OF VANILLA

Taylor Arbuckle

How are you today, Noel?" Dr. Kim's voice is soft, calm, gentle like it always is.

Noel's fingers dig deep rivets in his shins like he could rip himself open and find the answer in his blood, but his bones are empty and his nails are too dull. He'd bitten them down to jagged nubs one by one, the skin around them red and torn. He's not sure how long he's been here so far, less than an hour for sure, but it feels like longer. He doesn't have the courage to look up at the clock on the wall.

"Been worse," he murmurs after a pause, barely a whisper. It's true, he's been much worse before. He's not good, not at all, today or any other day, but he's been worse. He supposes that's as much of an achievement as he should expect.

The silence between heartbeats is polite, like Dr. Kim's smile. She's always been so kind to him, despite it being the opposite of what he deserves. He's been cruel to her before, cracked open the gates of his heart a little too much a few too many times and retreated further into himself as a result, and every time, he does it with a litany of insults, things he expects to attack and sting and leave scars the woman won't be willing to overlook. But she always takes his pain in stride, never lets her smile crack.

"It's okay, Noel," she'd say when his breaths would stutter back into rhythm, just a fraction of the kindness she shows him every week. "You don't have to be ready right now."

"How is your uncle?" she asks this time, trying to spread flowers and the smell of vanilla through the

darkness between them. Or, not between them. Around him. The dark clouds over his head. It's strong, almost overpowering, like it could distract him from everything bitter and rotting underneath. He feels dizzy with it.

Noel shifts against the soft pillows on the couch, pulling his legs closer to his chest. A breath shudders in his lungs and gets caught in his throat. *Angry*, he wants to say. *Made of alcohol and ugly words. Grieving, just like everyone.*

"Been worse, too," is what comes out.

Dr. Kim smiles through the lie.

"Have you tried this week?" she asks, a gentle nudge that feels like a shove.

Noel hesitates, staring harder at the patterns of the rug, counting as many strands as he can in time with his heartbeat like a song, a way to slow his thoughts. His journal is woefully empty of anything important, anything except a repeated mantra of *alone, alone, alone* in thick, dark ink. His mind is too tired for anything else. He thinks he might have tried, but he has nothing to show for it.

He shakes his head.

Dr. Kim tries something else. "How is school?"

"I met someone," he says, and he's not sure that it's quite what Dr. Kim was looking for, but it's something. He thinks it might be something.

"Someone?"

"Someone at school."

Dr. Kim has always been patient with him, ever since the very first appointment a year ago when his hair was made of grease and his eyes made of stone. She'd waltzed right up to the wall around his heart and taken a seat, set down a blanket and a basket

and has been watching ever since. She throws stones every Wednesday, always in different spots, never expects to see a crack. There's a lot of wall to work with.

"Are you happy that you met someone?"

Noel thinks about this for a long moment and doesn't know the answer. He hasn't had anyone to talk about in a long time, since before he moved, before his local hospital told him he needed Dr. Kim. He hasn't had anyone that knew him beyond his name in the town newspaper in a long time, so long that he's forgotten if he is even enough of a person to warrant being called a friend.

He tells Dr. Kim this as he always does: *It doesn't feel like I'm a person, feels like I haven't been alive for a long time. What if he doesn't want to be friends with a ghost?*

Place your hand right here, she'd always say with a hand against her sternum. What do you feel?

A heartbeat.

He presses his fingertips to his own sternum, takes a deep breath, and waits for his heart to press back.

"Does he know?" Dr. Kim nudges again. "About your parents."

"Everyone knows," he whispers.

"But does he *know*?" she presses, like his fingers, like the darkness around him. "Does he know what really happened?"

For a moment, Noel lets himself wonder if he even really knows himself.

At the end of the session, he goes home and he tries. He always does, Dr. Kim's presence inspiring something small inside him, a tiny flame of determination that flickers out by the time he gets his notebook open. He writes *alone* three more times and lays in bed until the day turns into night.

Another night of restless sleep later, he goes to school with his head down, ignores the quiet stares and the gentle parting of the crowd around him. It's been a year, but everyone still skirts around him like he's something fragile. The only difference is that now he barely sees it anymore.

At lunch, his someone plops down in the seat next to him with a grin, a tall boy named Elijah that may or may not be on the school's Water Polo team. Scratch that, he is, and they apparently just won a

meet last night. Noel thinks about what he did last night, the extra *alones* in his notebook, and tries hard to mean the *congratulations* he offers. Elijah doesn't seem to notice the strain in his smile.

Do you think it would matter if he knew?

They trade papers in fifth period English, where Elijah has written a satirical response to the day's assignment. Noel doesn't have the energy for satire, but he tries to laugh anyway.

Elijah asks to hang out after school for the first time in passing between fifth and sixth period. It sounds casual, a mindless *I got a new game, wanna see?* but it wraps itself around Noel's lungs like vines. He stutters out a breathless *I can't, I'm sorry, my uncle needs me home right after school* and runs away with his fear, ignoring Elijah's look of disappointment. He can't get out of sight quick enough.

He hugs his backpack to his chest when he falls against the wall of a different hallway, an empty hallway, and tries to breathe for the first time in a long time.

It always matters.

Four Wednesdays later, Noel paces Dr. Kim's office with his heart in his stomach and his stomach in his gut and everything else shifted to accommodate.

"He showed up at my house out of the blue the other day," he rushes out like the words are trying to race his heart. He brushes a shaky hand through his hair. "He said he just didn't want to go home and didn't know where else to go."

"Did you invite him in?" Dr. Kim asks calmly, listening carefully.

"What else was I supposed to do? I shouldn't have, my uncle was home and he'd been drinking—"

"He was drinking?"

Noel's pacing falters, and he throws a wild look at the therapist. "He... Not... Not a lot."

Dr. Kim frowns, and it's the first time he's ever seen anything on her face besides careful calmness. "Did he do something?" she asks, teetering on the edge of urgent.

Noel shakes his head almost frantically. "No, he... Well, he called Elijah a fairy because he thinks I'm gay, b-but I'm not, Elijah's not—"

"Noel, breathe," Dr. Kim instructs, leaning forward. Noel hunches over, pressing his fingertips al-

most bruisingly hard against his sternum. His heart presses back angrily. The dark clouds press in closer. "Is this recent, his comments about your sexuality?"

Noel shakes his head, hiccupping around the lump in his throat. His eyes sting, but he blinks through it. "I've always been an emotional person, even before all the grief and anxiety. My parents never treated me like it was a bad thing, but apparently my uncle grew up in a different society." He shakes his head harder. "I don't—it's not a big deal; I-I don't want to talk about that," he says in a voice that doesn't leave room for questions.

She seems to understand, sighing as she sits back again. "What happened after that?"

He shrugs sheepishly, sinking clumsily to the floor and leaning back against the couch. "We just went for a walk."

Dr. Kim studies him quietly, letting him catch his breath. Her voice is softer, slower, when she says, "Did you ask him why he didn't want to go home?"

"He told me his mom died a few years ago," he confesses, quiet all of a sudden like he's afraid he'll disrespect her memory if he says it louder. His lip trembles as he wraps his arms around his knees. "He said that it wasn't all over the news because it wasn't some freak accident, that it was just cancer. He told me he was sorry that my pain was broadcasted to the world like that, that I deserved to grieve in peace."

Dr. Kim has sympathy in her eyes. "Did you tell him how it happened?"

Noel swallows, nodding slowly. "I told him I was screaming in the backseat, that my mom was overwhelmed and trying to calm me down, and that yelling at me to stop caused my dad to lose control."

He remembers Elijah's face when he said it, how he'd listened intently and didn't laugh at the tears in his eyes or the quiver in his voice. His hands shake when he recalls how Elijah hugged him until he stopped crying, and he ducks his head into his knees.

"What did he say?"

Noel inhales sharply, tears falling freely from his eyes now as they did then. "H-He told me the accident wasn't my fault, that I shouldn't blame myself.

Even—" He laughs, or maybe he sobs; both feel hysterical. "Even if it was my behavior that distracted my dad."

There's silence for a moment. Then, "Do you believe him?"

Noel takes a shaky breath and lifts his burning eyes. He's not that strong, not yet, but, "I could," he admits softly. "I think, eventually, I could. Maybe."

Dr. Kim smiles kindly, her eyes glimmering. "You can."

His clouds grow a little lighter. Flowers begin to rebloom.

"How is Elijah?"

Noel's lips twitch into a grin. "He's good, finally passing all his classes. His dad took him out to dinner the other night to celebrate and they invited me along." The memory rests low in his mind, and it feels impossibly big. He feels warm with it.

Dr. Kim smiles. "I'm happy to hear that. Has it gotten easier to be around him?"

Noel nods, glancing down at his lap. "The anxiety is still there, the fear that one day he's just going to disappear like my parents, but I trust him now. I just have to figure out how to trust myself."

Dr. Kim's eyes are heavy with some emotion Noel doesn't know if he recognizes. Something like pride.

"My—" He clears his throat. "My uncle joined a support group for grieving alcoholics a while back. He's not quite where he needs to be, but he's getting there." There's hope in the words, he thinks. Dr. Kim acknowledges this with another quiet smile. It almost seems like all she ever does.

"Did you try this week, Noel?" Dr. Kim's voice is soft, calm, gentle like it always is.

More Wednesdays than he can count have passed, and Noel doesn't need to think about his answer anymore.

"Always," he says. The smile that accompanies it is less forced than he can ever remember being capable of. He hasn't written any *alones* in a long time, hasn't felt lonely enough to need to. He doesn't feel like a ghost in his own body anymore.

He twists between his fingertips the little sprig of Joe Pye weed he'd picked on the way here.

Faintly, there's the smell of vanilla.

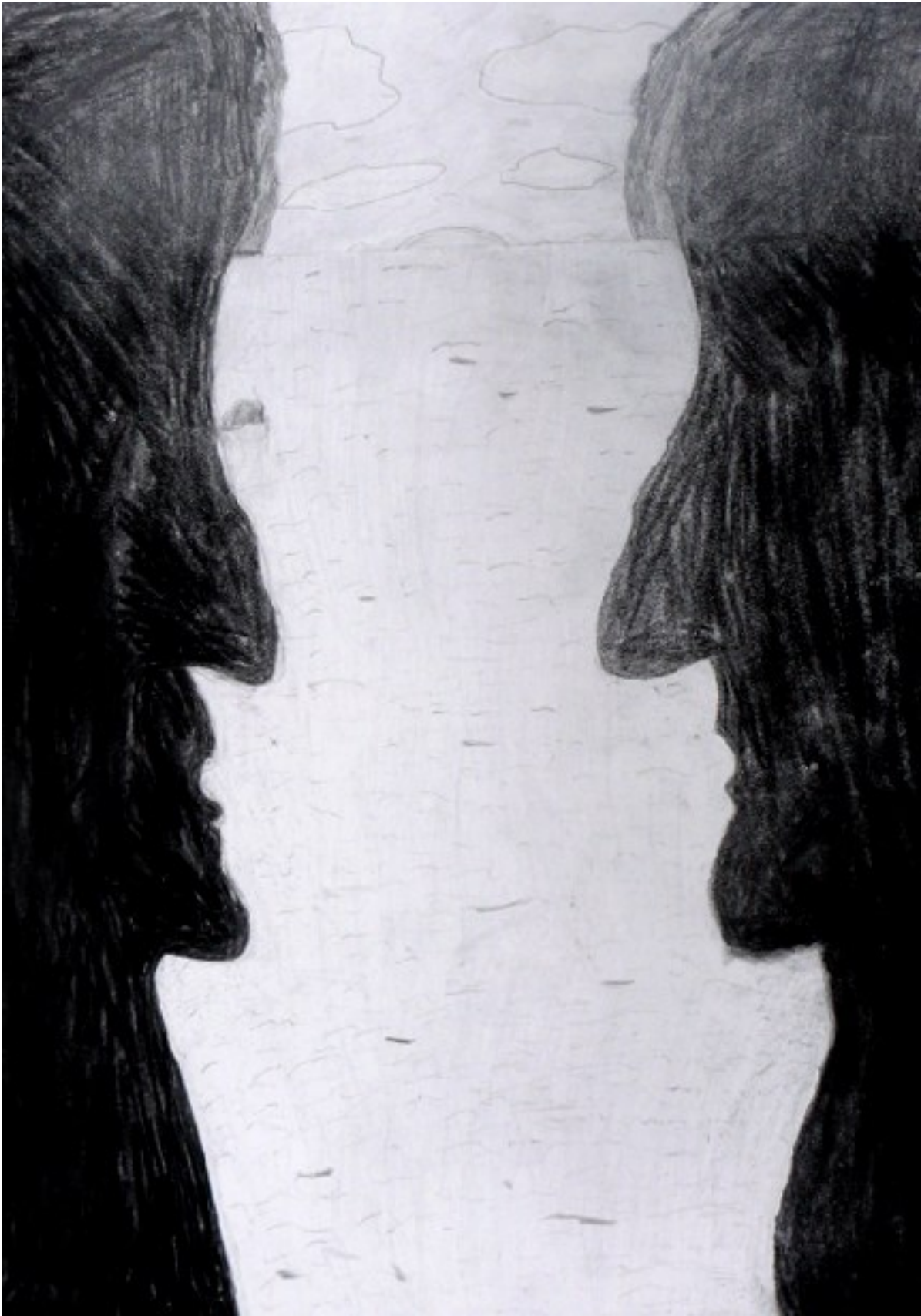
MY APOLOGY

Julie Pascalin

Your emotions are not expressed in smiles or tears.
It's not spoken aloud,
Or written in captions.
You don't go out of your way
To say anything nice,
Or anything at all most days.
I come home and you don't greet me.
All I hear is a soft patter of keystrokes from your door.
You leave your dishes for me to clean
And your hairs in the sink,
Which sometimes makes me forget

Those times when you offer me your pizza crusts,
Because you know I like the crust.
When you wanted to talk about laptops,
And when you wanted to talk about your depression.
You cover my back.
You let me make the shots
Because you think I have better judgement.
And you helped me escape the old house
Even when I left you to the dogs.

Basically, what I'm trying to say is
Sorry for assuming
That you didn't care about your sister
Just because your love
Doesn't look like anyone else's.



Rubin River Illusion

Beverly studies Graphic Design on Central Campus.

DEAR

Karolyne Galdamez

Dear Angela,

With pen and paper, I declare,
The tortuous pleasure it is to see you.
To feel your breath, bounce away.
To anxiously listen to your tales of woe.
Oh, woe to you!

Your aura aggravates the deepest part of
myself:
My other half,
My evil twin.
It silently seethes with rage,
Cautiously watching its prey,
Immobile it stays.

The accidental phrases that humorously
slip.
Within this dance,
Our secret war wages on.
And yet you stare!
Not through me,
But AT me.
Your visage screams your eager interest.

This was your plea:
A smile,

A nod,
For what?

An answer.
Attention.
An ode to we!

'Twas birthed this tale,
Foretold by our elders,
Our forever, never.

BLUE

Christian Hudspeth

I am the color blue. There are forms where I am many, be it good or be it bad. I am the water, with tranquil lakes and furious torrents. In the puddles you step in to the oceans you sail, I live. I am the sky, hugging the land and harboring the clouds. A barrier between warm life and cold death. I am the eye, great orbs of crystal glass and tears. A mistake beholding beauty. I am a jewel, a shimmering sapphire and a sparkling diamond. Small crusted rocks marking a treasure of envy. I am the light, a shining beacon of hope and a blinding end. The day's known color and a dimming dusk horizon. I am the rain, a giver of life and a shower of tears. Sprouting the lands and blanketing them with floods. I am sadness, a mild thought and a creeping invasion. A normal emotion and a terrorizing epidemic.

There are days when I am dull, dark, and navy, and there are days when I am bright, rich, and young. Though I am seen and live in aspects of this world, my true nature is that of a lonely, reflecting wave.

OCTOBER

Molly Huckabay

I fell the hardest in autumn,
but I didn't fall with him.
You don't hit the ground when you fall in
love,
but when you fall alone.

I fell the hardest in autumn.
A purple voice guided me:
"Jump!" he cried. "I'll hold you later,"
but later never came.

I fell the hardest in autumn.
He said we'd fall together.
I turned to see if he had jumped,
and then I hit the ground.

I fell the hardest in autumn.
I waited for him to jump.
At the bottom I sat for five long months,
when at last the answer came.

I fell the hardest in autumn.
I heard him shout from above,
"You shouldn't have expected so much of
me.
I can't give you what you want."

I fell the hardest in autumn.

The words fell down to me
like bricks in a lake too shallow for diving,
but I built my home right there.

I fell the hardest in autumn,
sitting in nauseous expectation.
I traded my sleep for 15 penciled pages
and my smiles for endless tears.

I fell the hardest in autumn.
My home in the lake proved fitting
for the crime committed and the wounds
inflicted,
and I didn't make plans to move.

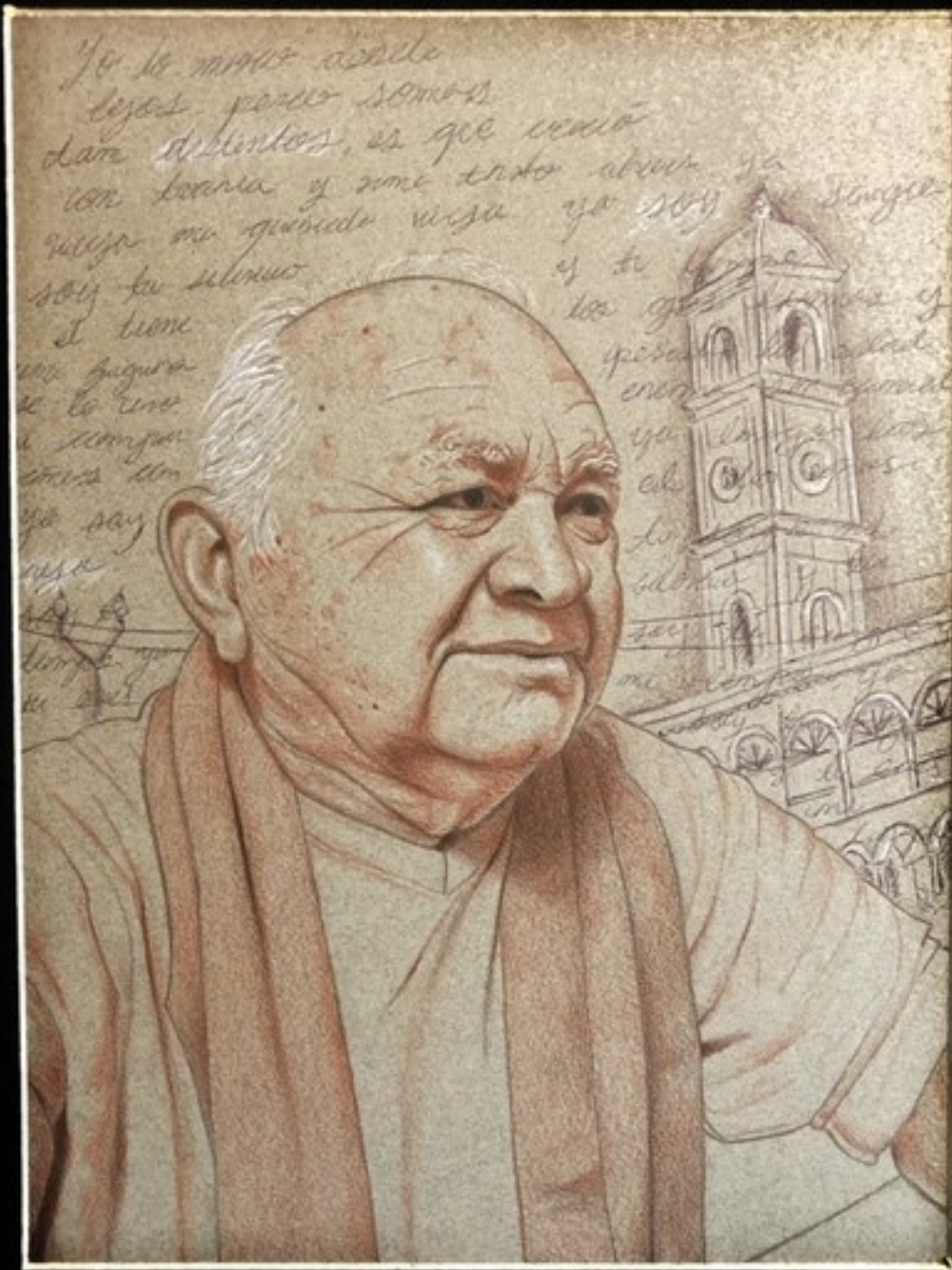
I fell the hardest in autumn,
but orange warmth dried my tears.
A green breeze forced me to leave the lake
and pointed me to sunnier fields.

I fell the hardest in autumn,
and I hope to stay on the ground.
If I'm on the bottom, I can never fall
or be forced to jump alone.

INSIDE OUT

Catly Le

Take a step into my heart and tell me what you truly see,
Because I see a dark, cruel, empty world right inside of me.
I could show you around if you'd like. Oh, it's fine, I don't mind.
Can you see the torn-up walls? There's many more that you could find.
The sky is gray, all gloomy and dreary, just no sign of life.
Do you see all of those spirits? The ones holding the sharp knives?
They're the cause of this damage, they're the cause of the destruction,
They don't seem to care, ruining the world's beautiful functions.
A precious place where meaningful and loved ones come in and out,
Is now taken over, the people flee, hide, scream, and shout.
Maybe you think that I'm just being dramatic, but it's true.
You wouldn't be laughing if this was happening inside of you.
Windows are broken, glass is shattered, it can never be fixed.
Seconds, minutes, hours, days, time flew by, and the clock still ticks.
You cannot just tape the pieces or glue them back together.
Sometimes you need help, fix it yourself, or it's gone forever.
Oh, I forgot one thing, do you see the girl in the corner?
"It happens, I'm used to it", she's stuck in between the border.
She explains that it can occur all day and lasts until night.
"I'm all by myself. I don't know if I should still stay and fight."
You see, all of this catastrophe betrays a broken heart,
How outside events sink in and make a person fall apart.
The girl you see, with the trembling hands, sitting there, crying,
She's the same girl, when you take a step out, standing there, smiling...



Burgos

QUETICO

Mitchell Jackson

Pinpricks from the stars float the water like dragonflies
Bobbing, tracing a figure-eight on the surface.
I can smell the freshness of cold water and the muck
And beyond, can almost hear the blackness
Surrounding Jacob, stubbornly fishing the inlet.
The chill is thick and heavy, but I feel warm.

I'm sitting between two towering pines
Their lost needles lock me in place
One should try not to disturb fallen leaves in the woods.
The stoic stone of rest I sit on
Is a soft, tender rock, listening to my problems.
I have convinced her, my boulder, to hold my hand
Someday we may be more than seat and sitter.
The languid shoreline watches and laps
He doesn't know what he's talking about.

I sigh. Veni vidi vici, and it's a big spotted leopard of a lake.
My monolithic crush longingly waves farewell.
Jacob and I chase the wind again,
Cutting apart the bright figure-eights with our canoe.

BLUE

Levi Cline

Blue is...
a beat-up old truck
lost pennies in the dryer
soft waves beneath an early morning sky
an orchestra of wind chimes that
compliment the buzzing of a humming bird
rocks being crushed by vacant cars and
water that'll give you a brain freeze...
sugar from a cool aid that washes away a hot summer day
air that scurries across your tongue just to feed your lungs
and make you smile

Blue is...
a fluffy blanket, atop of even comfier pajama bottoms
a heartbeat that shakes your whole body like an earthquake trying to keep up
with a tsunami
and the girl of your dreams wrapped tightly between your arms and your body
with brown hair, brown eyes, but damn a soul bluer than any pair of jeans

Blue...
can change the color of your blood
depending on how fast you breathe
so please
slow down your heartbeat
and take a deep breath of
Blue

ENTITLED

Katheryne Wood

Heated pants stung her lungs with an ironically cold burn. However, it was nothing compared to the snow pelting against her face, or the cutting winds slicing at her cheeks. She was on her way to her salvation: a cottage in the near distance.

She nearly ripped the door from its hinges whenever she arrived. Then, when the door was slammed shut, she laid eyes on a man that filled her with anxious mischief. She exhaled a laugh and a muted thump resonated from the door as she hit the back of her head on it.

“Hold on – you died.” He gaped, dropping the pan he was holding with a clang.

“Yeah, well, it didn’t stick.” She sighed, slumping against the wooden frame and sliding onto the floor. “It’s a long story, Ethan Burke.”

“You conned me and millions of others into firmly believing that their worst enemy and the leader of the resistance was *dead*.” He angrily yanks the oven mitts from his hands, throwing them with mild disdain onto the kitchen counter. “We thought the world was *finally* purged of your existence for two whole years! Also, there’s a blizzard outside. I have time.”

The girl sighed, staring up at the ceiling. “On a scale of one to ten, Mr. Burke, how much do you want to kill me right now?” She finally steadied her gaze on him.

“I’m hovering somewhere in the mid-fifties. You have one hour before I call authorities to escort you to prison, where scum like you

belongs.” He huffed, pacing to his couch and plopping down.

“Nice,” She laughs, “ though it would be more intimidating if you weren’t wearing a ‘Kiss the Cook’ apron.”

“Ridiculing me will get you nowhere.” He growls.

“Oh, yeah? It got me far enough to be both hated and worshipped by whatever is left of the population. I’d say I’m doing just fine.” She shrugs, kicking off her boots.

“How did you do it?” Ethan narrows his eyes at the woman.

“Do what?” She grunts, standing.

“Oh, I don’t know, fake your own death?” He raised his voice, causing the woman to wince.

“Shut up, why don’t you? You’re too loud.” She groans, hanging her heavy winter coat and stripping herself of her winter-themed gear. “Anyways, I’ll be leaving once the storm lets up. And you won’t be calling any authorities.” She glares at the coat hanger.

“And why not, Mrs. Resistance Leader?” Ethan stands.

“Because, you’ll be dead before you can. And you can count on it if you keep this shit up.” She looks at him and a dangerous gleam danced within her neon green irises.

A moment of tense silence passed.

“Threatening my life?” Ethan gawked, seemingly surprised.

The woman narrowed her eyes. “I’ve threatened millions. You’re no different.”

Ethan began to laugh bitterly. "What makes you think your life is worth more than so many others?"

"What makes you think that yours is worth anything at all?" She countered, glowering. "It's simple; I'm the leader of the resistance. And what are you? Oh, nothing more than a captain of the police with a habit of making foods that taste almost as good as sewer water."

The man ran a hand over his face. "I'll ignore your comment on my cooking, Thalia."

The woman seethed. "Don't you *dare* call me that name! Do you have a death wish, you dirty son of a b-?" She ran at him with her teeth bared in a menacing sneer. Thalia stopped, however.

"You're a fool for thinking I don't carry a gun on my person ever since we first met." Ethan gestured to the cold steel in his hands. "I had special bullets made, just in case I'd ever run into you again."

Thalia sighs, the fight leaving her veins. She approaches the window next to the door, moving the curtain to the side. It was vast fields of white, with strong winds still beating at the frosted glass.

"It's so... white." She comments, her voice soft.

"It's *snow*." Ethan scoffs.

"I grew up in the desert, Ethan. I don't know what weather is like, let alone ice that falls from the sky." Thalia scoffs as well.

Ethan says nothing, but the grip on his gun relaxes and he sets the weapon on the coffee table.

Silence passes over them once again.

"Why'd you start the resistance?" The policeman takes a seat on his couch. Thalia turns, her exotic eyes piercing. She takes a seat on the other side of the coffee table and crossed her legs.

"It was a simple choice," She shrugged. "You can continue with a worthless and pitiful life," She holds her left, clawed hand up, "or you can become someone who matters." Her right hand joins her left. She meets Ethan's gaze. "And I chose to be someone who mattered."

"Yes, fine, sure. But what I'm asking is *why*? Why did you see the need to rise up and kill so

many people?" Ethan rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"Why?" She said incredulously, as if the answer was obvious. "Because, Ethan, we have no rights. We tried the peaceful route, we tried to have calm marches and no fighting. But what were our attempts at freedom met with? Violence. Violence seems to be the answer to all your problems. Can't agree? Kill the opposition. There's no diplomacy. There's no peace." She spat. "So, what did we do? We *adapted*. We killed instead of argued, slaughtered instead of talking over afternoon tea. And do you want to know the part I don't understand? We learned from you. And you call *us* the monsters? How *dare* you."

"Thalia-"

"Don't *'Thalia'* me." She growled. "One thing remains, however." Ethan raised his large brown brows. "We still march."

"No, you don't-"

"Yes, we do. But this time, it's over your *bodies*." Thalia leaned forward, her sharp teeth slightly bared.

"You claim we didn't try peace." Ethan leaned back and crossed his arms with a sigh. "But were you not present whenever-"

"Whenever you and your sad government tried to start some sort of 'peace treaty'?" Thalia scoffed. "Yeah, that was a huge success. As you can see, it was a smash hit with our community." She holds her cheek with her hand.

"You killed the president!"

"You killed our queen!"

"You killed my *wife*!"

"You killed my *brother*!" Both were breathing a bit heavily from their yelling match. Ethan looked away, head bowed. Thalia had a fierce glint in her eyes, challenging him. "Look at me, Ethan."

"No."

"I said look at me!"

"And I said *no*!"

Thalia made a noise of frustration. "Why are you so... short-sighted?!" She shot up, her long and powerful tail swishing with irritation. "You humans are so difficult and narrow-minded! You only care about what satisfies your filthy need of

greed, and then say ‘screw that’ to everything else! I don’t and probably will never understand your kind.” She paces, dragging a palm down her sloped face.

“You’re one to judge, Thalia. You and your Oni kin are filled with wrath and pride. You have no room to speak.” Ethan finally glares up at the seven-foot-tall woman in his house.

“Wrath? Pride? At least that means I don’t doom my own planet into a self-made apocalypse that results in the Earth being plunged into an ice age. And why? Because my people don’t decide their wants and needs are above the planet’s welfare.” She approaches, her broad chest inches from Ethan’s.

“And what planet are you from, exactly? Because you sure as hell aren’t from around these parts.” Ethan’s glare threw swords at Thalia.

Thalia’s three eyes squint down at Ethan while a moment of charged silence passed.

She then retorts with a scoff, “At least my people have the capability of making something edible.” She gestures the slop decorating his kitchen floor, stemming from the pan he was holding from the beginning of this encounter.

Ethan shouts, pushing her away as he jogs to his kitchen. “That was a low blow, Thalia. It was going to be lasagna.”

“No, a low blow is more like enslaving your own kind *and* us. As if those who hadn’t shared the same pigment to their skin wasn’t enough for you.”

A moment of silence passed between them once again. Ethan stared, wide-eyed, at the purple slop of a lasagna on the floor as what Thalia said sank through every argument that bubbled into the back of his throat. He had no retort for that. He had no excuse. He had no clever one-liner to deflect against the cold feeling of the realization of her truth.

“Damn.” Ethan whistled. “I... I got nothing. You did it. You’re the superior race; you’ve officially got us. How will us humans ever recover-”

“You won’t. You know why? Because that means the privileged and bigoted screw-ups of your heightened society must live through *our*

hardships and *our* pain for a change. And I doubt such a fragile race could handle such empathy.” Thalia hisses.

“Empathy? You want to talk to *me* about empathy? Was I not empathetic to you while you worked in the weapons factory? Was I not nice whenever I offered you food? I’m sure you were hungry.” He straightens his back.

“You? *Nice*? Not in the same sentence, please.” Thalia cackles. “You weren’t kind – you were decent. A decent person would offer food. Did you truly have such a low opinion of what you labeled as slaves? That you call it *kindness* whenever you offer food when one is hungry?” Her shadow grows as she straightens her spine as well. Her form towers over that of the average man.

“You tried to bite my hand! You rebuked my act of ‘decency’.” Ethan’s brows furrowed.

“You’ve done more damage to me than I could ever hope to inflict unto you. Biting your hand is the least of your problems, Ethan.” She stalks the man, leaning forward until she was on all-fours. Her ears flattened against her head and her tail swished from side to side as she moved to the coffee table.

Ethan deeply felt that he was in the presence of an apex predator. He was her prey. His hand flew to where he kept his gun, yet his hand returned empty. A cold spike of dread pierced his heart as his eyes laid upon the black steel on the coffee table.

“Was this your plan all along, Thalia?” Ethan spoke slowly, narrowing his eyes at the weapon on the table. Thalia traced his gaze back to his gun and a menacing grin grew on her feline-like face

“Was what my plan? Be more specific, Ethan.” Thalia growled deep in her throat. Her hand grasped the gun slowly, her grin nigh splitting her face.

“You came here to kill me, didn’t you?” He finally gathered the courage to look her in her eyes. His bare feet made miniscule sound as he traveled from the tiled floor of the kitchen to that of the carpet of his living room.

She didn’t answer, and instead she tilted her head as she inspected the gun further. She

brought it close to her face running a claw down the carved designs on the side.

"It's snowing like hell outside. I can't get help. You- you- *bit*-" Thalia cut him off with a bang. Her finger barely fit inside the hole with the trigger, and she cackled. Ethan crumbled to the ground with a pained scream.

Blood splattered against the carpeted flooring, and Ethan wheezed out a curse as he fell onto his back. Still trying to keep himself from hyperventilating, the wounded man slowly lifted himself back up to see what she had shot.

Thalia shot his knee. Blood and flesh oozed from the wound, and there wasn't much still connecting his thigh to his shin. He let out a small, shocked sound. His head whipped to face Thalia. "Ah! You *shot* me! In the *leg*!" He gestures to the bloodied appendage.

"Well, yeah. You can't run away without a kneecap." She shrugged as if this was a normal experience for her. As if she shot men's legs off all the time. Her nonchalant nature was greatly disturbing to Ethan.

"Run away? So, your intentions really were to kill me?" Ethan's voice broke on some words.

"I don't normally take prisoners, Ethan. You should consider yourself lucky. You are lucky that I won't kill you, and that you're so important to your pitiful remnants of your government." She spat, stalking over on two legs instead of four. His eyes trailed to the pistol still within her grasp, trying to claw together an idea that might work to turn the situation around onto her.

"Take prisoners?" Ethan scoffed. "You did at the White House."

Thalia stopped. "I didn't recruit prisoners," she smirked, "I was interested in doing some *fine dining*." Ethan had to think about the message that she was attempting to send. Fine dining? Ethan thought. Isn't she a carnivore? The realization finally hit his sluggish brain.

"Did you *eat* them?" He inquired slowly, genuine, icy horror filling his veins.

Thalia gave a long, hoarse laugh. "Eat them? No, that's barbaric." She glanced at Ethan as she began to don her winter equipment again. "I *feasted*." She cackled at his expression.

"That's... that's disgusting!" He wheezed. "Eating raw hu- hu-" Ethan couldn't finish; he started to gag.

"No, we cooked them. We're animals, but we aren't barbarians. We have standards, Ethan." She scoffs, shoving carefully made boots onto her monkey-like feet.

"Are... are you going to eat me, too?" The middle-aged man fell onto his back, staring blankly at his ceiling.

"Once you serve your final purpose, yes." Thalia deadpans, approaching his limp body.

"I don't understand... I was so nice to you. Thalia, why'd you do this to me?" This caused the woman to scoff.

"We went over this, Ethan. You weren't nice; you were decent. Get that through your thick skull." She frowned down at him. With the lack of lips that she had, though, it looked more like a sneer.

"I don't think I will ever understand," Ethan sighs and his eyes are blank and unseeing, "why you're such a terrible *being*." His voice is low, and Thalia stops. "Slaying women and children alike; showing no mercy to those who begged for it. Kicking those that you no longer had use for while they're down, you're no animal." His voice grew spiteful.

"Choose your next words carefully, Burke." Thalia narrowed her eyes.

"*Thalia*," he whispered, eyes now boring into Thalia's own, "you're a *monster*."

"If you're going to accuse me of being something so foul, Mr. Burke, the least you could do is use my real name." She clicks the back of the gun. "My name is Nemmonis Xxonathros. *Not. Thalia.*" She growls. A bullet whizzes between Ethan's eyebrows, ending his life.

Blood stains the carpet below his corpse, rapidly pooling below his emptying head. She sneered. With herself outfitted in clothes prepared for the brutal weather that await her outside, she dropped the gun in her clawed grasp and trudged to the door. Nemmonis' hand hovered over the door handle as she spared one last glance at the dead man.

"If only you would listen, Ethan. It wouldn't have had to be this way." She said softly. She

then scoffed. "What a waste of meat." And she dived into the building snow, opening her mouth so sparks could fly from within and melt some of the overwhelming cold.

Monster, she thought as she pushed through the blankets of white, how could he call me such a thing. I am a hero to my people, an avenger of her Majesty. May you rest in peace, old bastard.

Nemmonis glared at the cabin that shrunk in her vision. She only looked back to see how far she had gotten, she told herself. She told herself that she didn't regret any of her actions. This was necessary. This was required if her kind were to survive.

She sighed, a small wave of flames flying from her thin lips. She may be cruel, but she was no monster. A monster would have killed him the second they saw him. Instead, she conversed. A monster wouldn't have shown remorse. She had done that.

Perhaps her empty words would convince her soon enough.



Mambo

STARS

Natalie Gandara

Soft light that illuminates the sky, constant reminders that we are never alone in a world of infinite universes and possibilities.

Stars, balls of gas that emit light from billions of light years away. Some being suns or even planets in a never-ending galaxy.

Stars, loved ones who look down on you and guide you on your path of life. Endless hands pushing you in the direction you needed take. The eyes of those who you do not know and of those you would have known. The being of those who hold meaning to life.

Stars, souls of those in history, who lead you along in the darkness when life goes awry. The whispered words of endearment and encouragement when the spirit they protect is bound; the hand that awakens the butterflies when nerves ignite. The bandage that mends the broken heart and pieces it back together.

Stars, cold and desolate, a friend to the spirit of the moon. A reminder of the passing of days, lighting the night when the moon is away. A companion to the lonely soul during the witching hour.

Stars, a tool of navigation when one loses their way. A burning North Star to point your way home, a way back to your loved ones.

Stars, stories told of past feats and of heroic tales. Constellations who speak of the past present and future of all. Horoscopes that depict who one is and who they will be.

Stars, a never-ending symbol of life and death. Something so simple, yet so complex.

OUR LOVE

Jannely Gutierrez

Took me the longest time
To see right through your beautiful eyes
Never thought I'd see it,
Never thought I'd believe it.
I wonder what happened
To make you fall in love with me
Because I know there's plenty of fish in the sea
Yet you chose the rawest one
Who might just poison your heart



Amor Eterno

LIVE FOR

Melissa Rodriguez

(The scene is in a room. The room only has 9 chairs and a podium. The actors are sitting in rows, staggered between empty seats, facing the podium. JESSE's standing at the podium, welcoming people as they enter. There's a sign on the wall that reads, "Every beat, every breath". The last person enters.)

JESSE

Hello, it's about time we should get started. Thank you all for coming. I know this is one of the hardest steps in anyone's journey, but I hope I make being here a little bit easier for everyone. My name is Jesse and I am the founder of this program. I think it's important for people to come together when we feel like we have lost everything. That's why this support group exists. For people like us. Strangers, with the familiarity of pain. What I was hoping to accomplish by this, is learning everyone's story and figuring out what we all have in common. What brings us together. I know opening up is hard. I know showing vulnerability feels like weakness. I know—I *hope* every single person in this room feels safe enough to share their stories. I will volunteer to go first to break the ice. To make me not a stranger standing in front of you, but Jesse standing here for you. So... Hello, my name is Jesse and I lost my child.

(JESSE as JESSE, KENDALL as JESSE's significant other SPENCER, ALEX as 14 year old ADRIAN, JORDAN as 9 year old AIDEN.)

JESSE

We were going to spend the day at the park. My family and I. It was the first off day I had in a while and it was a beautiful day out.

(JESSE, KENDALL, ALEX, JORDAN go csc. JESSE and KENDALL put out a blanket for them to sit on. ALEX and JORDAN are frozen, about to play basketball. KENDALL is also frozen.)

JESSE

The day started off great. I can still remember the smell of the fresh spring air. We were all having a fun day. Spencer was telling me—

(Everyone unfreezes.)

KENDALL

You should start taking more days off for us to do this more often. Look at how happy they are.

ALEX

You're too short to play against me.

JORDAN

I'm not short, I'm still growing.

ALEX

That's as tall as you're going to grow.

JORDAN

No it's not!

ALEX

Yes it is!

JESSE

I do love to see everyone having a good day. Every time I go to work, I miss you guys.

KENDALL

Then start spending more time with us because we miss having mommy/daddy around.

JESSE

I'll try my best. I just have my eye on this promotion, you know?

KENDALL

I know, and I know it's important, but your family is important too. Everyday I'm home watching our kids grow without you. You need to be able to see what I see, Jesse. Don't make me look like the bad guy for asking you to spend time with your family.

JESSE

I know, Spencer. I'm sorry I'm giving you this burden. When I married you, I promised to care for you and our family, and I am sticking to that promise. Come here. (*Kisses KENDALL's head.*) Let's enjoy this day we finally get together.

KENDALL

I love you, Jesse.

JESSE

I love you more.

(*To audience.*) My kids were playing basketball and my wife/husband was so pleased with the day we had together. We began watching the birds. She/he saw a cardinal flying around and I couldn't spot it, so I kept trying so hard to find it.

ALEX

There are my friends over there. I'm gonna go play with them. Don't start crying about it Aiden.

JORDAN

I want to play too.

ALEX

You're too small, you'll only get in the way.

JORDAN

I can't get in the way of your crappy game.

ALEX

Why don't you play with other 9-year olds?

JORDAN

Other 9-year olds are boring.

ALEX

Get better friends.

JORDAN

But I rather hang out with you. Please, Adrian.

ALEX

Fine. Fine. Just don't be annoying.

JORDAN

I won't!

ALEX

That means your sarcasm, Aiden.

JORDAN

Ugh, fine.

JESSE

I started seeing my kids heading out somewhere else. HEY! I called out after them, but they didn't turn to respond. I let them go play...

(ALEX and JORDAN exit Alcove A, JESSE and KENDALL exit Alcove C. ALEX and JORDAN enter Alcove D.)

ALEX

Do you hear that?

(The ice cream truck sounds.)

JORDAN

Let's get some before we go play.

ALEX

Okay, what do you want bud?

JORDAN

Can you get me an ice cream sandwich?

ALEX

Are you sure? That's the lamest choice.

JORDAN

But it's what I want.

ALEX

Are you sure?

JORDAN

Yes.

ALEX

Are you super sure?

JORDAN

Hurry up, the ice cream truck is going to leave because you think you know better about my taste buds.

ALEX

Okay, okay, here take care of the ball. (*ALEX sets the ball down.*) I'll be right back. Don't talk to strangers!

(*ALEX exits Alcove A.*)

JORDAN

It's not the lamest choice, I have great taste buds. (*Starts singing*) *A potato flew around my room before you came excuse the mess—Adrian! Hey! Your basketball is rolling out to the... Don't worry I got it. I always got it.*

(*JORDAN runs out after the ball, exits Alcove B. Light shift. ALEX enters Alcove A.*)

ALEX

Aiden? Hey, where did you go? Stop playing, Aiden, I know you're hiding. Aiden?!

(*JESSE and KENDALL enter Alcove D.*)

JESSE

Hey, bud. Where's Aiden?

ALEX

I don't know I left him/her alone for 2 seconds and now I can't find her/him.

JESSE

What?

KENDALL

You left him/her alone?

ALEX

I'm sorry.

JESSE

Aiden!

KENDALL

How could you leave him/her alone? He/she's 9.

ALEX

I'm sorry.

JESSE

It's not your fault, let's look for him/her.

ALEX

I'm sorry.

KENDALL

Aiden!

ALEX

I'm so sorry.

(Lights out, in the dark.)

JESSE

Aiden!

(EVERYONE returns to their seats. Lights up at the podium.)

JESSE

We spent months looking. The facts are: children are killed within the first 72 hours of being taken. My heart knew he/she was gone. Aiden was 9 years old when she/he was last seen. The loss was hard on us all. Poor Adrian blamed himself/herself and Spencer was so distraught we stopped looking at each other. The loss of our child was the thing that broke my family apart and I felt like everything was falling apart. I remember seeing the cardinal after hearing the news of Aiden. It's been said that a cardinal is a symbol for an angel, and Aiden was my angel. Finally, I decided to stop remembering Aiden's disappearance, instead I think of Aiden's life. Every time he/she brought a smile onto our face. Every time we got annoyed with his/her sassy responses. I still have my favorite memories, and nobody can take that away from me. Thank you for listening.

(Applause. DEVAN raises their hands.)

JESSE

Yes?

DEVAN

Why did you stop looking for Aiden?

JESSE

Something in my heart told me he/she was gone.

ALEX

Why did you allow yourself to be separated from your family?

JESSE

I didn't intend for it to happen the way that it did. My family got stuck living in that day Aiden disappeared. They didn't want to believe he/she was gone. I wanted us to remember the good days, I wanted us to move on as a family. Not forget Aiden—of course not but rather live our lives the way we were meant to. I don't want to take the time with my family for granted, I call them, I try to visit, but—

ALEX

Sorry.

JESSE

No, no, it was a good question.

ALEX

How long did it take you to move on?

JESSE

It took me almost 2 years.

DEVAN

What made you move on?

ALEX

And why did you start this program?

JESSE

I found myself losing my boy/girl in only remembering his/her disappearance. I'll let you know why I started the program at the end of the sharing portion. Would anyone like to volunteer to go next?

(KENDALL raises their hand)

JESSE

Thank you for volunteering. *(Motions for them to stand at the podium)*

KENDALL

Um. I've never done anything like this before. My name is Kendall. *(A beat. A small chuckle.)* I expected a unanimous "Hello Kendall", like they do it on tv. Um, I don't really know how to start, so I guess I'll just... start. My brother/sister and I were struggling with money for a few weeks leading up to... the night.

(KENDALL and ALEX go csc. KENDALL as KENDALL. ALEX as brother/sister, KENNEDY. JORDAN, JESSE, and DEVAN as police officers, they exit Alcove D. ALEX is frozen.)

KENDALL

I never wanted to ask him/her how she/he made money, I knew I didn't want to be a part of it. So, I just asked: You made money tonight?

(ALEX unfreezes.)

ALEX

Yessir it's the greatest thing I laid my eyes on. Man, if business keeps being as good as this, we're gonna make it outta this shitty place.

KENDALL

Just be careful out there.

ALEX

Yes, yes I know *mom*.

KENDALL

Kennedy, I'm being serious. Shit was sounding bad out there.

ALEX

You know I stay strapped. Nobody can touch me. Don't worry I'll protect you my little Ken Doll. *(Messes up KENDALL's hair)*

KENDALL

Stop calling me that! Let me go! *(ALEX lets go, laughing.)* You're so annoying.

ALEX

You love me.

KENDALL

How much did you make tonight?

ALEX

Hey, how many times do I have to tell you to quit worrying about money. You just focus on keeping those grades up. Next time another A just "*slips*", my hand is gonna "*slip*" and "*accidentally*" slap your big head.

KENDALL

You know those classes are hard.

ALEX

How was school today?

KENDALL

It was good, I got a 100 on the test you helped me study for.

ALEX

Hell yeah. That's how we do it in this family, we succeed.

KENDALL

I have another test coming up. Do you think you can help me with that one too? It's harder than the one I just took.

ALEX

Of course, just let me know when. I learn as I help you study so it's always fun. *(Ringtone.)*

Hold on, I'm getting a call.

(ALEX answers a phone call.)

ALEX

Yeah? I don't give a fuck if he has a wife and kids! He wasn't thinking about them when he decided to use up all our supply. You—Quit acting like a bitch. Pass the phone to Flaco. Hey, who the fuck is the bitch I was just talking to? He feels too much for this guy who's stealing from us. Keep an eye on them. And Flaco, take care of it. *(Hangs up.)* Fuck this, everybody wants to start some drama. It doesn't have to be as hard as they're making it. *(To KENDALL.)* Sorry, Ken Doll, business. When's your test?

KENDALL

Yeah... It's a week away, I already made the flashcards.

ALEX

Pull em out, let's study.

KENDALL

I'm kinda hungry, are we gonna be able to get something to eat tonight?

ALEX

Something to eat? Little sis/bro, we're gonna be able to eat for a whole week!

KENDALL

(Excited) Really?

ALEX

Yes! Put on daddy's old favorite song, we're gonna celebrate like the old days. We're celebrating the money, that big brain of yours, and just life being great, man.

(KENDALL turns on the imaginary radio. Play That Funky Music by White Cherry begins to play. KENDALL and ALEX begin to sing along and boogie around the room. The room roaring with music and laughter.)

KENDALL

I finally felt like everything was going to be okay. I felt free of everything.

(JORDAN, JESSE, and DEVAN enter the room abruptly, guns pointed at KENDALL and ALEX.)

KENDALL

Then they came.

JORDAN

POLICE! GET DOWN ON THE GROUND! Get on the ground!

(Everyone moving slowly.)

KENDALL

Nothing felt real. It felt like a dream. It didn't feel real. I wish it was a nightmare I could wake up from.

(Back to regular speed.)

(JESSE holds ALEX's arms behind their back, and roughly lays them down on the ground. KENDALL tries to go to their rescue but is stopped by DEVAN. KENDALL resist a bit.)

DEVAN

Hands behind your back! Are there any weapons I should know about?

KENDALL

No, I have no weapons. Let Kennedy go! He/she didn't do anything wrong.

ALEX

No Ken Doll don't fight. Don't do anything stupid.

JORDAN

You have the right to remain silence. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning.

KENDALL

You can't take him/her! He/she didn't do anything, man! You can't do this.

(KENDALL has been resisting during the Miranda rights. DEVAN roughly lays them down. ALEX enraged.)

ALEX

Don't fucking hurt her/him! Baby just stay down, don't fight them. You didn't do anything wrong okay? I'm gonna fix this. I'm gonna fix this, I swear.

KENDALL

You have to let me know why you're arresting him/her, I know my rights.

ALEX

I'll be back for you, okay? Call Flaco, he can take care of you for now.

(JESSE picks ALEX up and everyone except KENDALL exits Alcove D. Kendall left alone, with a slow disoriented song playing in the background. Music fades. Everyone returns to their seats, KENDALL goes to podium.)

KENDALL

I grew up with Kennedy. She/he raised me. She/he was all I knew. She/he'd let me focus on school while he/she worked to put food on the table. She/he was my protector. My big sister/brother, just like that—he/she was snatched from me. *(A beat.)* I used to hate when Kennedy called me Ken Doll, and now that's all I'm dying to hear. She/he was a bright soul that brought light into my world and I don't know how to see clearly without her/him. I miss him/her. Thank you.

(Applause.)

JORDAN

Did you agree with you brother/sister's lifestyle?

KENDALL

No, but it was the only source of income we had.

JORDAN

How long is he/she serving?

KENDALL

He/she's serving 15 years.

JESSE

Who do you have now?

KENDALL

Um, my parents passed away about 4 years ago, and he/she was my only family left... I'm just trying to make ends meet.

JORDAN

How old are you?

KENDALL

I'm 19.

JORDAN

That's awful young to be on your own.

KENDALL

I think I'm doing okay.

JORDAN

Well, Kendall, my doors are always open.

KENDALL

Thank you.

JESSE

Thank you for sharing your story. (*Hugs KENDALL*) We are all here for you. Would anyone like to volunteer to go next?

(*JORDAN and ALEX both raise their hands.*)

JESSE

Yes, I appreciate this.

ALEX

You can go ahead.

JORDAN

Thank you. (*Heads to the podium. Shakes JESSE's hand before JESSE takes a seat.*) Hello, my name is Jordan. First of all, I am so sorry for all your losses. I don't think I belong in this support group. I didn't know where else to go. I didn't know the person I lost. Let me backtrack. I am a 911 dispatcher. I have heard lots of disturbing phone calls, but this one—I'll

never forget this one. (*JORDAN takes a seat csc, spotlight on them. Phone ringing is heard.*)
911, what's your emergency?

(*JESSE as man/woman, CHARLIE. KENDALL as 6-year-old, named CARSON. ALEX as 8-year-old named AVERY. Everyone remains in their seats. Only light on JORDAN. KENDALL cries softly. Light sound of a fire alarm throughout the conversation.*)

JESSE

There's a fire in the house. There's a fire. My kids—they're—they're safe here with me. We're going to be okay, sweetie don't cry.

JORDAN

Ma'am/sir, what is the address and what is your name?

JESSE

49305 Richardson Road. My name is Charlie. Can you please hurry?

JORDAN

Yes Charlie, I'm sending help right away. Is there a way for you to put the fire out?

JESSE

I don't know where the fire is—I'm sorry—there's a lot of smoke.

JORDAN

Where are you right now? I'm going to need you to stay low.

JESSE

I—I woke up with my kids jumping on me telling me "Mommy/daddy there's a fire" and I tried to see where the fire was but the smoke was everywhere. It's really hot, it's too hot.

JORDAN

Charlie, try to stay calm. Where are you right now?

JESSE

I'm in my bedroom.

JORDAN

Is there a way for you to make it outside safely?

JESSE

There's too much smoke. When I step out of the room, it's really hot and there's a lot of light. Every doorknob is hot.

JORDAN

Is your doorknob hot?

JESSE

Let me check. Yes. Yes, it is. Oh fuck. I don't know how this happened.

JORDAN

Help is on the way, just stay calm. Is there a window in your bedroom?

JESSE

No. (*Cries*) I wanted to give my kids the best rooms in the house, so I took the one without windows.

JORDAN

Charlie, I'm going to need you to stay calm. Your kids need you to stay calm too. How old are they?

JESSE

Sorry. Um, Carson is 6 and Avery is 8. (*To children*) Hey enough crying. We are going to be just fine. The nice firefighters are going to come and put the fire out. (*To JORDAN*) Smoke is coming into the bedroom now.

JORDAN

You need to remain low. Put some pillows and covers under your door sill to keep smoke from entering as quickly. The firefighters are almost there.

(*Silence*)

Charlie

Charlie are you still there?

JESSE

I put the covers down, I put my kids in the closet. Listen, I need you to tell my husband/wife, that I love her/him. Her/his name is Eli/Ellie. Tell him/her that she/he was the best mom/dad in the world.

JORDAN

We are not doing that, Charlie. You know why? Because you and your family are making it out safely.

JESSE

Promise me that you'll tell him/her.

JORDAN

Charlie, I can't promise—

JESSE

Please promise me.

JORDAN

(*A beat.*) I promise.

JESSE

Thank you, I'm going to get inside the closet now.

JORDAN

Help is just a few minutes away.

KENDALL

I'm sorry mommy/daddy. This is my fault. I'm sorry.

JESSE

Hey, hey, hey, there's no way this could be your fault baby.

KENDALL

We were playing. We were only playing.

ALEX

God is gonna be mad at us momma/papa.

JESSE

Why? What happened?

ALEX

I just like the smell of those matches you use.

JESSE

My matches?

ALEX

This is all my fault.

JESSE

No baby, come here, both of you. We are going to be okay. We are going to see mommy/daddy as soon as we get out of here.

KENDALL

I begged him/her not to tell. I didn't mean to momma/papa.

JESSE

Sh, sh, sh. We're going to be okay. This isn't anyone's fault. God could never be mad at anyone like you two.

ALEX

Are we gonna die?

JESSE

No. We are going to be just fine. Okay? Do you remember the day daddy and mommy took you two to the rodeo?

KENDALL & ALEX

Yeah.

JESSE

Do you remember how brave you two were getting on the rides?

KENDALL

I was crying the whole time.

ALEX

I had my eyes shut.

JESSE

(Chuckles) Yes, but when you got off, what did you do?

KENDALL

I wanted to go again.

ALEX

I threw up, and then I got on it again.

JESSE

And the second time was fun, wasn't it?

KENDALL & ALEX

Yeah.

JESSE

This is what we're going to do, we are gonna close our eyes and wait for the brave firefighters. Okay?

KENDALL & ALEX

Okay.

JESSE

*(Singing) Every night I lie in bed
The brightest colors fill my head
A million dreams are keeping me awake*

KENDALL & ALEX & JESSE

*(Singing) I think of what the world could be
A vision of the one I see
A million dreams is all it's gonna take
A million dreams for the world we're gonna make*

JESSE

(To JORDAN) Ma'am/sir, thank you for all your help. I'm going to sit here with my kids with our eyes closed, but I'm going to hang up now. Thank you for all your help.

JORDAN

Charlie, I need you to stay on the phone with me.

(Silence)

Charlie? Charlie, are you there?

(JORDAN goes back to podium, lights up on them.)

The firefighters didn't make it on time. They tell us not to get too involved, not to make promises. How could I not? I met with her/his husband/wife and I kept my promise. To look at someone who lost everything in the eye, and tell them their wife/husband's last words to them... I'm sorry, I know I don't belong in this support group. Thank you for hearing me out.

(Applause. JESSE gets up and thanks JORDAN, hugging them.)

JESSE

You do belong here. A loss is a loss.

(JORDAN sits.)

KENDALL

Why did you make the promise?

JORDAN

How could I not? I wanted him/her to survive but I didn't want his/her husband/wife to not have been told goodbye.

ALEX

Why did he/she hang up?

JORDAN

Maybe he/she knew in his/her heart it was his/her last moments with his/her children and he/she wanted to enjoy them, without a stranger listening.

DEVAN

How did the husband/wife react?

JORDAN

He/she cried. I cried too. I said I did everything I could, which I did but of course those thoughts creep in: "I could've done more. I should've done more."

KENDALL

I had those too, I can't help but think that I should've gotten Kennedy out. I could've stopped him/her from getting caught up in that kind of business. I should've done something.

JESSE

I know that kind of thinking is something we all experienced, but when those thoughts come up, yell at it. "NO!" Yell at it. Those thoughts keep us from moving forward. It kills us slowly. "It's your fault"— "NO!". "You could've saved them"— "NO!". Don't allow these thoughts to consume you. *(A beat.)* Thank you for sharing your story with us, Jordan. Do we need a break or would someone like to go next?

(JESSE stares at DEVAN. A beat.) Would you like to come up?

DEVAN

Um. Sure.

(JESSE takes a seat as DEVAN gets up from theirs. They go to the podium and stand there for a beat.)

DEVAN

I'm Devan. Hi. I feel nervous about sharing.

JESSE

Don't be. We're all here for you.

DEVAN

I haven't spoken about this to anyone. I had a nice boyfriend/girlfriend, I was happy. We were together for 6 months. I pictured myself marrying this person, I imagined what our babies would look like, imagined a whole future with them.

(JESSE goes csc, followed by DEVAN. JESSE as DEVAN's significant other, QUINN. JORDAN as DEVAN's parent, RILEY. JESSE and JORDAN are frozen.)

DEVAN

Mom/dad, this is Quinn.

(EVERYONE unfreezes. DEVAN wraps their arm around JESSE's. JORDAN turns around to size up JESSE.)

JORDAN

Who is this supposed to be? Quinn who?

DEVAN

C'mon ma/pa, don't be rude please. Quinn is my girlfriend/boyfriend. We've been together for 6 months now. *(To JESSE)* This is my mom/dad, Riley.

JESSE

(Hand out, offering a handshake) Hello, Riley. It's nice to meet you.

JORDAN

(Looks at JESSE's hand but doesn't accept it.) Already calling me by my first name? Right, why should you show me any type of respect? That's Ms./Mr. Smith to you. 6 months, huh? Where have you been hiding him/her for the past 6 months?

DEVAN

I've been waiting because I knew you were going to react the way that you are now.

JORDAN

Yeah, you're afraid I'm gonna judge him/her.

DEVAN

Can we not do this in front of Quinn, please.

JORDAN

Why not?

DEVAN

(To JESSE) Well you met my dad/mom. We can go now.

JORDAN

What's the rush?

JESSE

We have a movie to catch, Mr./Ms. Smith.

JORDAN

Okay, well you go out and wait in the car, dear. I need to speak to my daughter/son in private.

JESSE

Yes, sir/ma'am.

(JESSE goes to exit Alcove D, but hides in the shadows to listen to the conversation.)

JORDAN

Why are you bringing this person into my house?

DEVAN

Don't be so rude about it. Why do you think I waited so long before introducing you?

JORDAN

So all those times you had plans, was with this Harley person?

DEVAN

His/her name is Quinn.

JORDAN

Whatever. How does he/she treat you?

DEVAN

(A beat.) Honestly, I think I'm in love.

JORDAN

Yeah, well I get a weird vibe from this kid. I don't like her/him. You're not going out tonight.

DEVAN

I'm not going out? I'm 21 you can't keep me here against my will. You don't even know Quinn, dad/mom. Give him/her a chance!

JORDAN

I can keep you here as long as I'm the one giving you shelter and food.

DEVAN

Are you being serious? You're treating me like a child.

JORDAN

Yes I'm being serious. I get some fucked up vibes from this kid. You are not going out tonight.

DEVAN

(Overlapping) You don't know Quinn. I'm in love. I swear he/she's a good boyfriend/
girlfriend.

JORDAN

Devan, I don't care. Go tell that kid you can't go out because something came up.

(JESSE exits Alcove D in a hurry.)

DEVAN

You're being really unreasonable. Do you see that?

JORDAN

Parents always know best.

(DEVAN begins to exit)

JORDAN

Wait.

DEVAN

(Annoyed) What?

JORDAN

I love you. You know that, right? I only want what's best for you.

DEVAN

I know that. Sometimes I just wish someone was good enough for you.

JORDAN

Don't worry about pleasing me, worry about making yourself happy. Stay away from these
weirdos. You have so much potential and you're wasting your time with this kid?

DEVAN

You exchanged maybe 5 words with him/her.

JORDAN

And I already don't like him/her, that should tell you something.

DEVAN

What is it about him/her?

JORDAN

He/she's taking you away from me.

DEVAN

Mom/dad I'm always around for you and you know it.

JORDAN

I love you, my little avocado.

DEVAN

(Chuckles) And you call them the weirdos.

(DEVAN exits Alcove D. JORDAN exits Alcove B. Lights change to show new day. DEVAN and JESSE are sitting next to each other. They are in JESSE's car, JESSE is in the driver seat and DEVAN is in the passenger seat.)

DEVAN

Everything is complicated right now.

JESSE

I don't understand. We were doing so well. I was happy. You were happy.

DEVAN

I know.

JESSE

So what's the problem?

DEVAN

I don't think we're compatible with each other. That's it.

JESSE

Is it because of what your mother/father said?

DEVAN

What do you mean?

JESSE

He/she thinks I'm not good enough for you.

DEVAN

What gives you that idea?

JESSE

I heard him/her say it.

DEVAN

You were—there's no way—wait, you were eavesdropping?

JESSE

No. I was just making an inference.

DEVAN

On what grounds? Hearing the words come directly from her/his mouth? That's not an inference.

JESSE

I didn't hear her/him say it. I was just assuming because we were perfect until you introduced me to her/him.

DEVAN

You just said the words “I heard him/her say it”. You’re lying to me.

JESSE

I MISPOKE!

(DEVAN shocked at JESSE’s explosive answer. A beat.)

DEVAN

I have to go now.

JESSE

Wait no, I didn’t mean that.

(DEVAN goes for the car door and JESSE holds her in a tight grasp. DEVAN lets out a small yelp)

DEVAN

You’re hurting me, Quinn. Let me go!

JESSE

You can’t go.

DEVAN

What the fuck? You’re scaring me.

JESSE

We are supposed to be happy for the rest of our lives. You can’t go. I forgive you for trying to break up with me.

DEVAN

You forgive me?

JESSE

You can’t leave me just because mommy/daddy says so.

DEVAN

Seriously, let me go.

JESSE

I forgive you.

(DEVAN attempts to escape the grip by pulling harder and harder. JESSE makes their grip tighter.)

DEVAN

Okay. Fine. I’m sorry I tried to leave you. I don’t know what I was thinking, and I’m sorry.

JESSE

(Releasing their grip) Thank you for coming to your senses. I love you. Give me a kiss.

DEVAN

I gotta go.

JESSE

A KISS!

(DEVAN hesitant, complies to the kiss. Exits the car. Light change to imply change in scenery and time in day. JESSE exits Alcove D, JORDAN enters Alcove C.)

DEVAN

He/she grabbed me really hard, spoke to me aggressively. I guess you were right.

JORDAN

I don't care about being right. I care about you being safe. So he/she still thinks you want to be with her/him?

DEVAN

Yeah. I was too scared to say anything to upset her/him.

JORDAN

Okay, pack a bag if you want. You can stay with you dad/mom after you break up with her/him. He/she won't be so happy to hear the news, and I know she/he won't give up that easily.

DEVAN

Okay. I'm sorry I got you into this mess.

JORDAN

Don't be sorry. I'm going to hurt that son of a bitch.

DEVAN

I love you.

JORDAN

I love you too, now hurry.

DEVAN

Okay, okay. *(Exits Alcove B.)*

(JORDAN sits and buries their head into their hands. Behind them, JESSE enters Alcove D. JESSE puts a gun to the back of JORDAN's head. JORDAN looks up.)

JESSE

Hello again, Mr./Ms. Smith.

JORDAN

You don't want to do anything you're going to regret, Quinn.

JESSE

Funny how now you can remember my name.

JORDAN

Listen to me—

JESSE

NO! You listen to me. Nothing, and I mean *nothing* can keep me away from your daughter/son.

JORDAN

You don't belong together, Quinn.

JESSE

She/he is the love of my life and I'm going to marry her/him. No matter what. Everything was going so great but you needed to dip your nose where it didn't belong.

(DEVAN enters Alcove B. Freezes. Drops her/his bag.)

DEVAN

Quinn, what are you doing?

JESSE

We deserve our happily ever after.

DEVAN

Okay. Okay. We do. You need to put the gun down and let my mom/dad go.

JESSE

Your dad/mom got into your head. Now you don't love me. Now you don't want to get married.

DEVAN

I still love you. I still want those things,

JORDAN

No, she doesn't. Quinn, you need to leave our lives. You need help. Walk away now.

JESSE

You want to tell me what to do? Try that again. Tell her/him we belong together.

JORDAN

You do not belong toge—

JESSE

TELL HER/HIM WE BELONG TOGETHER AND SHE/HE COULD NEVER DO BETTER!

JORDAN

No—

DEVAN

We belong together. I could never, ever do better. Quinn, I love you and I don't want anyone else. I will never want anyone else. But if you hurt my mom/dad I won't be able to be with you.

JESSE

Your mom/dad was the reason of this. He/she needs to go, Devan.

DEVAN

No, he/she doesn't.

JESSE

Yes.

(Gunshot. JORDAN falls to the ground.)

JESSE

He/she does.

DEVAN

NOOOOO

(DEVAN runs to JORDAN's body. JESSE drops the gun on JORDAN)

JESSE

I'm going to go pack you some more things. We're leaving tonight. Don't worry. Nobody will ever take you away from me.

(DEVAN is sobbing over JORDAN's body.)

JESSE

Shhh, you love me, right? *(Kisses DEVAN's head)*

(JESSE exits Alcove B. Moment watching DEVAN sobbing as the music begins to play. She/he is crying over JORDAN's body. DEVAN sits up, confused not knowing what to do. DEVAN stares at the gun and picks it up. DEVAN begins to pace. Points the gun at Alcove B. JESSE enters. Lights out. In the dark.)

JESSE

Devan?

(Gunshot. Spotlight on DEVAN.)

DEVAN

I could never tell anyone the real ending of the story, so as far as everyone knows, Quinn is rotting in prison.

(Lights down. Everyone moves back to the podium. Music fades as lights slowly comes up.)

DEVAN

I lost my mother/father because I chose the wrong partner. I'm tired of crying, it feels like my lungs beg for oxygen, my eyes get so swollen I can't see while I'm driving. I would do anything to see her/him again. To have her/him hold me again. To hear her/him say she/he loves me. To spend one more day with her/him. I would give anything to relive a boring day with her/him just to watch how much love she/he put into everything she/he did. I wish I could see her/his smile again. Thank you for listening.

(DEVAN sits.)

KENDALL

What happened to the guy/girl who—you know?

DEVAN

(Without looking up.) He/she's in prison.

KENDALL

Oh. *(A beat.)* Were you afraid to back home?

DEVAN

Yes, I'm afraid to revisit my home.

JORDAN

How long ago did you lose your mother/father?

DEVAN

3 months ago. Can someone else go? I'm not ready for questions.

JESSE

Of course, of course.

(JESSE turns to look at ALEX)

JESSE

Are you okay to go?

ALEX

Yes.

JESSE

Alrighty.

(ALEX goes to the podium)

ALEX

Hello, my name is Alex. I'm a bit nervous, my loss wasn't super tragic or anything. Sorry, I don't mean that insensitively, I'm just pretty nervous. Should I just sit back down?

JESSE

No, you're fine. We are all here for you, Alex.

ALEX

How do you know my name? Wait, I just said it. Right. Okay, here we go. Are you guys ready?

JESSE

I think we're ready.

ALEX

Right. Okay. *(Takes a deep breath)* I accidentally killed my grandmother/father. No, I worded that wrong.

(Silence)

ALEX

Okay, it all started off with me wanting to do something nice for my family. We had all been a little too distant this past year and I wanted us to come back together. I thought my grandmother/father's birthday was the best way for us to do it.

(Light shift. Everyone is csc, they build a couch out of the seats and DEVAN exits Alcove D. Everyone is frozen.)

ALEX

I could tell my family was getting impatient because nobody wanted to hear Winter talk about the weather anymore. Yeah, my sister/brother's name is Winter even though he/she was born in April. Anyways, he/she was annoying telling everyone—

(ALEX as ALEX, DEVAN as GRANDPARENT, KENDALL as WINTER, JORDAN as HAYDEN, JESSE as TAYLOR. EVERYONE unfreezes.)

KENDALL

There's going to be a massive earthquake in the year 2198 and the world is going to collapse into itself.

JORDAN

Nobody is going to be alive in 2198, why should we care?

KENDALL

I will be alive, you won't. With the way you eat, you'll be dead tomorrow.

JESSE

Here we go with this again.

KENDALL

It's the truth, you guys eat like garbage.

JESSE

You want to be alive in—what was the year again?

KENDALL

2198.

JESSE

To witness the earthquake?

KENDALL

No, Taylor I'm going to be alive because I know how to keep my body good and healthy.

JORDAN

Is grandma/pa coming out soon? I have other plans.

ALEX

Other plans? But I wanted us to spend time together as a family.

JORDAN

We can, but not for too long, I have other things I want to do too.

ALEX

But I said to clear your days.

JORDAN

This is important, Alex. I need to go spend time with my boyfriend/girlfriend.

ALEX

Hayden, you said you'd stay.

JORDAN

Please don't make this into something it doesn't have to be.

ALEX:

Fine. Taylor, you're staying right?

JESSE

I'm probably gonna have to head out after the cake Alex, I'm sorry.

ALEX

Why?

JESSE

I'm pretty tired. Some sleep sounds great right now.

ALEX

Winter? Are you going to stay?

KENDALL

I can try. I have study group.

ALEX

What the fuck guys? This is the one day I asked for us to be together to celebrate not only grandma/pa, but the fact that life is precious.

JORDAN

Woah, calm down Alex.

ALEX

I am calm! I'm just aggravated that you guys don't care.

JESSE

We do care, that's why we're here.

ALEX

No! I mean, I know that, but I miss you guys. I just want to spend time like a family again.

KENDALL

We are, though.

ALEX

No, not lately we haven't been. Everyone goes out to do whatever it is that you guys do, and I don't see you as often as I used to. And the one day I asked for, you guys are ditching me. Why?

(Noise off stage, Alcove D.)

ALEX

Shh, I hear grandma/pa coming. Hide!

(Everyone hides behind the couch. A few "shh"s is heard and some giggling. Silence.)

KENDALL

What if she/he forgot where the living room is?

JORDAN

(Laughing) Or she/he got lost in the restroom.

JESSE

Maybe she/he is going to take her midday nap.

(Laughter.)

ALEX

Guys, guys, she/he's probably so old she/he's gonna forget to get dressed and walk in naked.

KENDALL

Maybe she/he won't even recognize us.

JORDAN

She/he probably heard us and went to go get her/his gun.

JESSE

Please, she/he doesn't know what a gun looks like anymore. She/he's gonna come in and hit us with wooden spoons.

(Laughing harder. KENDALL falls off the couch from laughing so hard causing everyone to laugh harder. Noise is heard off Alcove D.)

ALEX

(Gasp.) She/he's coming! Shhh, hide.

(EVERYONE hiding behind the couch, still trying to stop laughing. "Shh". DEVAN enters Alcove D, slowly. Everyone jumps up and yells "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" DEVAN lets out a loud scream, stares at them, clutches their heart, and falls onto the floor. EVERYONE stands in awkward silence, not sure of what to do.)

ALEX

Grandma/pa?

(Silence.)

JESSE

What the fuck...

JORDAN

Grandma/pa?

(Lights down, EVERYONE returns to their seats. Lights up at the podium.)

ALEX

Yeah, I accidentally killed my grandmother/father. I seriously thought a surprise party was a smart move for a 93-year-old. Everything was my fault. I was the one who threw the party—

JESSE

What did we say about those thoughts?

ALEX

To yell no, but it's not that simple. She/he died, because I missed—

JESSE

NO!

ALEX

I should've done something—

JORDAN

NO!

ALEX

Guys listen to me, I could've—

ALL

NO!

(Silence.)

ALEX

Thank you. I haven't stopped blaming myself since it happened. *(A beat.)* Does it make me a terrible person if I say that she/he died in the most amusing way? Yes, it does. Never mind.

JESSE

What do you mean?

ALEX

I mean, she/he just died. Like nothing. Lived for 93 years and a little yelling is what got her/him. She/he died in the most animated way too, like if it came out of a movie. *(ALEX mocks the scream, clutches their chest and pretends to die. Laughs.)* Sorry, it's not funny.

(DEVAN laughs.)

DEVAN

I'm so sorry. It's not funny at all, it's just the way you did it. *(DEVAN mocks the scream, clutches their chest and pretends to die.)*

(Laughter. KENDALL mocks the scream, clutches their chest, and dramatically dies. Laughter grows. ALEX sits down. After laughter dies out.)

ALEX

This was morbid, I'm so sorry. I know this isn't what the support group is for.

JESSE

Right, I said I would tell you the reason I made this support group. "Every beat, Every breath". That is something I came up with to remind me about the importance of life. Through tragedies, we realize that life is fragile. At any moment, we are at risk of losing someone we care about, or even our own lives. When the dark days come, we shouldn't stay down on the ground defeated, we take the pain and we rise again. The world might feel like it has ended, but as long as you can feel your heart beat, and as long as you can breathe, you have the potential to pick yourself back up. The best part is: you don't have to do it alone.

DEVAN

What if I feel like I can't make any progress?

JESSE

But you have. By coming here today, you have established that you want to extinguish your pain. You've taken an important step into accepting the reality of the situation, now what we need to work on is stopping those bad thoughts from creeping in.

DEVAN

You don't get it. I'm too scared to love again.

JESSE

You cannot spend the rest of your life in fear. Your life and what you do with it is important; if you're going to love, love full heartedly without the fear of being hurt, and if you hurt, then feel the pain in your bones. Allow yourself to suck in all life gives you. I know healing will take time. But please, don't keep yourself hidden away, one day you'll be wishing you weren't so afraid to let yourself live.

DEVAN

Why didn't you just heal and move on? Why make the support group?

JESSE

I tried to save my family from staying stuck in place, and I couldn't. I realized I could only help those who wanted to be helped. I felt alone during my healing process and I didn't want others to feel as alone as I did.

DEVAN

Thank you for making it.

KENDALL

Yes, thank you. I felt like I was losing my mind. I didn't have anyone else to turn to and being here, makes me feel better.

JORDAN

I think there's a reason we're all here tonight. *(To Kendall.)* Why did you show up tonight?

KENDALL

My brother/sister and I had this daily quote calendar, and today's quote said, "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face" written by Eleanor Roosevelt. Lately I've been too weak to do anything, frozen in fear of losing myself. So, I came.

JORDAN

I'm glad you came today. Like I said, my doors are always open.

KENDALL

Thank you so much, Jordan. What made you come today?

JORDAN

I came because today was Charlie, Avery, and Carson's memorial.

ALEX

Did you go?

JORDAN

I couldn't. My stomach wouldn't settle itself enough.

ALEX

Oh, I'm sorry. *(To DEVAN)* What motivated you to come?

DEVAN

I saw my mom/dad in a dream, he/she told me to stop wallowing in my sorrow and to get help. My mom/dad always knew what was best for me. Why did you come?

ALEX

My family wasn't there for me.

JESSE

We're here for you. I'm glad I got to meet each and every one of you.

JORDAN

Thank you for giving me a place to open up.

JESSE

Thank you for coming.

ALEX

Yeah, I needed someone, and it feels nice to finally be heard.

DEVAN

It is. I haven't been able to share with anyone. This feels like the first time I've laughed in months.

ALEX

I guess we're into morbid humor.

(They laugh.)

JORDAN

Well, I must get going. Thank you for hearing me out, and for sharing with me. Thank you for letting me be a part of this. If any of you ever need anything, you can call me.

(JORDAN gives JESSE a card.)

JESSE

Thank you. What about we call it a session? Everybody can get some rest. Same time next week.

End of Play

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Amor a la Mexicana

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