



ACCENTS

The Student Literary Magazine
of San Jacinto College

ACCENTS

2022

Cover Artwork: ***Head in the Clouds*** - Alisha Arif

Back Cover Artwork: ***Splash*** - Diana Beraza

Dedication



This issue is dedicated to Cade Varnado, Lead Faculty Editor, *Accents* 2021-2022. Cade's boundless knowledge, talent, and dedication were indispensable to the publication and San Jacinto College.

Ethan Cade Varnado
February 14, 1992- February 15, 2022

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Accents: The Student Literary Magazine of San Jacinto College exists to recognize artistic talent and creative expression from students at the college. It represents the collaborative efforts of faculty across the college and reflects the diverse voices of our students.

For information about the magazine, including a digital version and information about how to submit work for future issues, visit sanjac.edu/accents.

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Flash Fiction Contest

According to Bradley Babendir in *The Paris Review*, flash fiction is difficult to define. “Flash fiction is not just a shorter short story. Compression does something fundamental to the writing form that changes its DNA. Length is sometimes an effective definition of a genre convention, but it often fails to highlight what makes the genre special.” In other words, the brevity of a story is not the defining feature. Babendir says, “An essential element of flash fiction seems to be prizing force over narrative [...] if the novel is a marathon and the short story is a 5K, then flash fiction is a 100-meter dash. You use the same tools, but they are very different in training, approach, and execution” (theparisreview.org).

For this contest, we were interested in 100-word fictional stories about grit. Each participant was asked to incorporate either sand or a three-legged dog.

Contest Winner

The Glassmaker

Alaizja Hunter

Rockie huffs as he watches his owner tinker with his latest creation. Being secluded in the deepest part of the city, Dr. John Pearius, also known as the Glassmaker, sits at the melding desk of his workshop. He adjusts his specs as sweat beads his forehead, examining the device that would soon change the realities of many, and finally give his people hope. A word that has been lost for nearly two centuries. A loud bang sounds in the distance, causing the Glassmaker’s back to stiffen. He watches as his three-legged friend’s ears perk in alert. They’re here. It’s time.

Second Place

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Nathalie De La Cruz

At 7:00 am, she turned the hourglass over before departing. She gathered what she had left and turned off her lights one by one. With hesitation, she switched the last light off. She stepped out of her house and down the steps, looking at the sun peaking over the horizon. She walked forward to greet her husband with open arms. Together, they walked down the edge of the beach once more. As the last grain of sand hit the bottom of the hourglass, they began to walk towards the red-golden sunrise. Reunited again, she peacefully closed their final chapter.

Third Place

The Human in War

Emiliano Torres

My fingers run through coarse sand. I struggle to see an injured angel to my right. My comrade. My best friend. We loved each other since the day we met. My brother began grunting unconsciously. I lift my stone legs and sprint towards him. I removed him from under the burning vehicle and evaded the bullets looking for a home in my body. I found a wall and lay my heavily breathing friend down. Thinking I was without harm, my pool of blood was growing. I will walk with my brothers once more. My fingers run through maroon coarse sand.

Flash Fiction Contest

Notable Submissions

The Storm

Itzel Salinas

Marina stares at the upcoming storm, her hair flowing with the powerful winds. The calm ocean that existed a few hours prior is no more. She carries her sister and starts running. A thousand grains of sand under her. The village was abandoned, everyone had fled while they were gathering crops. The winds and Lia's cries were getting stronger as Marina ran, starting to feel hopeless. She screamed with no response. No shelter on the beach would survive this storm. She did not give up; she ran and ran until a winged machine started to descend, foreign to Marina.

The Monster

Deyanira Ramirez

Time was running out quickly as the moon shined bright in the pitch-black sky. Holding on tight to their flashlights, the boys ran. A ferocious monster followed behind them. If they could not make it back home in time they would be eaten. Slowly the monster was in their shadows and the boys began to scream. As they fell down to the ground, a wet and slobbery tongue skimmed over each of their faces. "Stop it" they yelled until one of the boys let out a small giggle. Frankie, the neighbor's three-legged dog, had caught up to them.

The Culprit

Aneesha Varkey

Cats. We all love them, right? However, cats accompanying killer clowns are not as precious. I live in a small town called Marbella. This past year, we've had strange sightings of clown shootings, pranks, and property violations. There is a pattern to these sightings, and that's cats. Citizens were perplexed and terrified by the situation, but authorities dismissed it as a joke. On October 31st, I decided to take the initiative, which led me to an abandoned park where I noticed a silhouette following me. I heard a noise, and there it was, the true culprit, a furious three-legged dog.

The Beautiful Sea

Jessie Rodriguez

My heart is racing. Something is watching me from below the surface of the water. I swim to the shore. I feel the wet sand between my toes and feel safe. Before I know it, the giant squid's tentacle soars out of the water, grabs me by the waist, and pulls me forcefully into the depths of the endless sea. I know this is the end and accept my fate. I finally finish my novel, look up at the beautiful calm sea, and appreciate my work.

Silencer

Bianca Borrego

She noticed lip stick on his button-down shirt. He is on the telephone, there is another woman on the line. But she has been hanging around next door, learning how to shoot a handgun. She learned her name was Baby. Baby lives on a quiet little street so she bought a little silencer. Just when she got the courage, he told her something she would have never believed in a million years. "I got this woman pregnant," he said. The gun slipped through her fingers like sand. She blinked and there he was on the floor.

One with the Sand

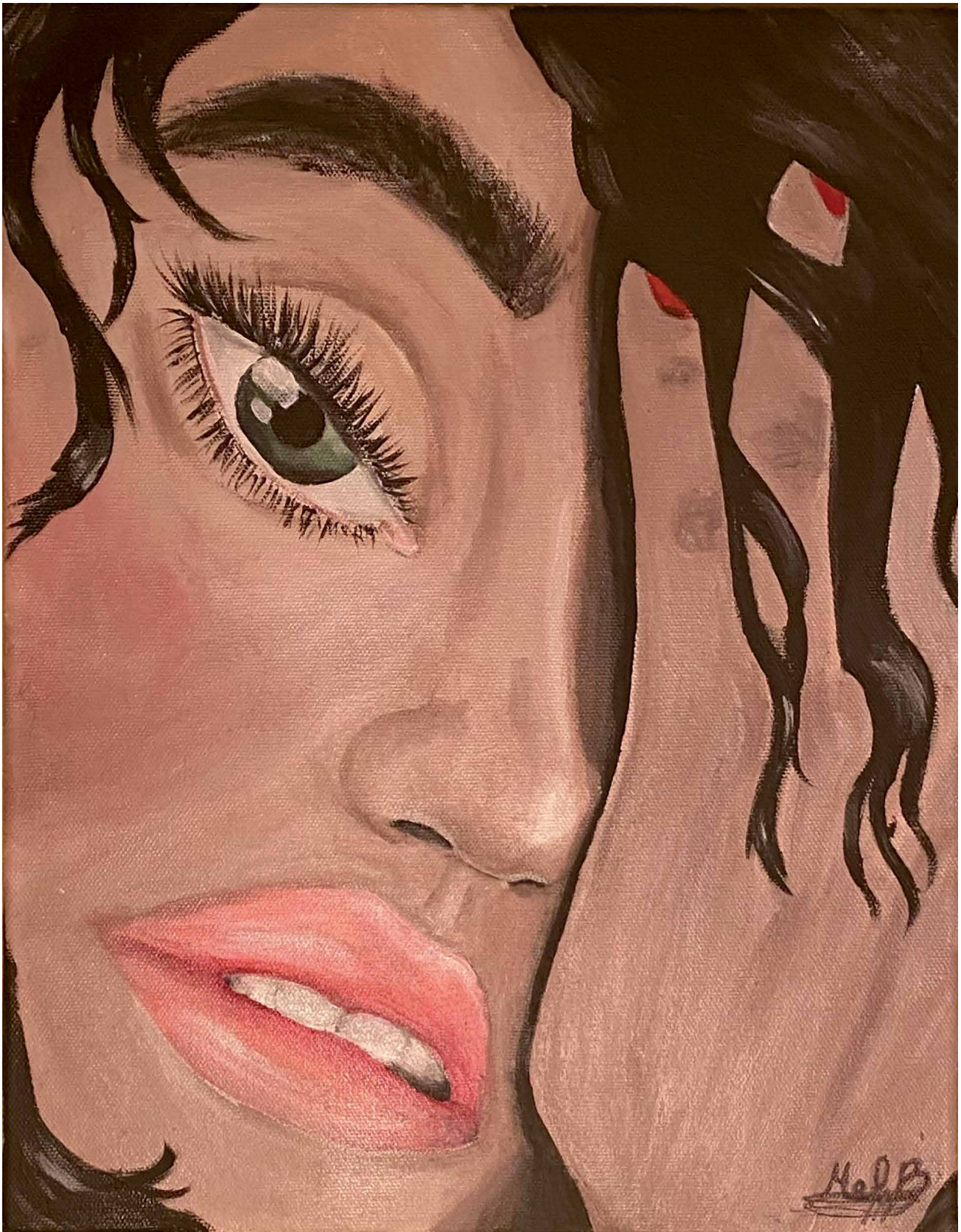
Natalie Garza

Lily often spent her days in the sand, rarely spending time elsewhere, enjoying the sunsets and the warmth of the gritty substance beneath her. She would watch families come and go throughout the seasons, often her own family would come and sit by her. Although they lay right beside her, they never noticed Lily, but she still found comfort in watching the young children play around her as she once did when she was alive but now, she is just a part of the sand where her ashes were laid to rest.

Beach

Richard Gil

It was late afternoon; the sun had just begun to set. The waves were still clashing, and the sand was still there. The fish were still swimming, and the wind was still blowing, yet the people... well, they were gone. There was nobody in sight but there was still a beach right in front of you. The palm trees were still swaying, the birds were still chirping, you just needed to see it for yourself. You do not need anyone when you have your inner beach inside of you waiting for you to discover it.



The Face You Hide - Melisa Bonilla

My Heart at Sea

Naomi Tapia

As the wind hit my face, my eyes widened. “It’s today,” I murmured. I texted Eliza about hanging out at the beach. Nervously, my heart fell into sync with the waves. Eliza approached. My feet dug into the sand. Handing her a bouquet of roses, “I got these for you.” “Thanks,” she replied. Then silence. We watched the waves crash. “Would you go out with me?” I asked. “Is this what you called me for? No! Look at you!” The flowers dropped. My eyes fogged. I walked home like a three-legged dog with my heart still at the sea.

Desert Rose

Alaizja Hunter

There’s a river hidden deep within the massive, fortress-like dunes of the Wai ‘Lan desert. Its waters healing, and the clearest blue. Silk, lavender rose petals adorn the river, encasing it as the smooth, crystalline torrent flows through the marble sands. Laia treks through the harsh terrain of Wai ‘Lan, her breathing ragged as clouds of dust riding on the wind fills her nostrils. Her muscles are sore from days in hiding, and her feet ache from the endless walking. But she is a warrior. And the pain enslaving her heart makes the gash in her side dull in comparison.

Grains of Emotion

Hannah Schmidt

They grind against clothes as I lie there, alone, my thoughts, sandstorms. They pile up, dunes upon flecks of hair, tumble and turn, tumble and turn. Is there escape? I don’t know. Dunes rolling, gains and losses. I am stuck, in a stagnant present waiting for a probable future. An oasis? Not in easy reach. Work hard for this, work hard for that. My very survival in the balance.

There’s no easy breaks in the desert, at least as far as I can tell.
Am I able to reach out an asking hand?
Or will I just sink here, alone?

Friends...or Not

Alessandra Garcia

Shrieking screams pierced her ears as she desperately hurried down the trail back to town. The moon illuminated her path allowing her weary body to weave through the trees as if she were a three-legged-dog. Chaos filled her mind, until a sudden silence forced her to contemplate what had just happened. “She brought this onto herself right?”, she questioned out of breath, remembering she deliberately pushed her friend for the wolves to rip to shreds, following abruptly with, “Yes! Yes of course she did,” continuing her route home, now with peace of mind, and a smile.

The Meaning of Life

Marissa Ramos

My life had no meaning without academic recognition. I have not always been the smartest person, yet I still try. I am no different from most students. Like a grain of sand at the beach, I do not stand out. I have never let that stop me from pushing forward to become the best version of myself.

So, as I sit here at my dinner table holding an envelope that determines my whole future, I become nervous. “Congratulations!” I read at the top. I sigh deeply in relief. Who knew a piece of paper could give my entire life purpose?

Last

Abigail Fajardo

Out of breath, tired, and sweaty. I could feel my heartbeat accelerating as I got left behind, my eyes shifted to the side and just for a split second, I could see silhouettes running past me. I looked down at my legs, hoping they would move faster, but it was useless. I closed my eyes tightly before looking up in front of me, in front where everyone was too far ahead but I couldn't give up. I felt sand hitting the back of my ankles harshly and I finally stopped. There I stood, last place of my first track meet.

Dress

Anahi Arredondo

I lace my fingers through the silk and every detail embroidered by hand. I've never seen anything so pretty before in my life. I quickly close and lock my door.

I put one sleeve on and then the other, I've never felt this feeling before. I look in the mirror, I look different, and I don't feel like a three-legged dog anymore. I hear a knock on my door. I freeze in my spot.

“Just a minute,” I say. No, I can't hide this anymore. “Come in,” I say loudly. The door opens, my father looks and says, “cute dress.”

Simon Says

Emeli Elizondo

Always do what Simon says. When Simon says “clap,” you clap. But we never do anything outside of Simon's orders. Today Simon told me to keep my mouth shut. Simon said, “Get Pogo to stop barking!” I went outside and shushed the three-legged dog. Simon said, “Get me a beer.” I did and did so until Simon was in deep. That's when I knew the game would get trickier. I was starving, but Simon never said I could eat. In the basement, there were girls huddled in a dark corner. I guess it wasn't a thrill to play Simon says.

The Race

Avalynn Estrada

Being the fastest swimmer was a big deal in my community. This meant that others knew who you were. I wanted to be the fastest as I felt like a grain of sand that no one cared about. So, I trained. I swam everyday, seeing improvement every time. Finally, the day of the competition came. “Ready, set, go” was yelled, I swam with everything in me. Swimming to the finish line I knew I had won. My hard work and training paid off. Excited, I was about to scream until suddenly I was aggressively scooped out of the water, caught by a fisherman.

Alive

Saul Flores

“Get up”!

He gets up wondering where did time go

Darkness suffocates him

Knowing that he has to keep going just to get out alive

Feeling like a three-legged dog he wonders if its best to simply rest while he dies

But no he says, he gets up gets through his challenges in life, as he

Advances through the image of a better life

Filled with butterflies and good smelling pies

He feels unstoppable and he sees the opening of life

He steps out, tears flood into his eyes, memories rush into his mind

But at last, he is alive

Confront

Karissma Sierra

After the accident, after the car crash, Sara was not the same. She loved hiking, skydiving, and any type of adventurous thriller, but from the crash, she sadly lost her leg. Sara felt like a three-legged dog, hobbling about. The fear of not being able to be the same adventurous person as she was before was tearing her into grains of sand. Until one day she decided to hike up Mount Fuji while on her family trip to Japan. Looking up from the bottom of the mountain. She had no idea what she was about to face.

Sunset

Melissa Martinez

I never understood why people love to exercise. I’m always forced to run but I’m only motivated, for one thing, by a three-legged dog I pass by every day, a stray with no family. I wish I can take her home, but I can’t afford to take care of her. I take pictures of her on the beach while I’m on the boardwalk, but one day I really wanted to pet her. I took off my shoes feeling grit and slowly approached her and as I got closer, reached my hand out and felt the softest fur, enjoying the sunset together.

The Truth Behind Success

Destiny Martinez

Every time he stepped into a room all that could be sensed was immense strength and courage. Everyone wanted to be as successful as he was, what they did not know was how much bravery it took. The fear of becoming a failure had taken over his entire life. Until one day he decided to do whatever it took to be successful. It was like a three-legged dog trying his best to gain balance. He had to find the balance between fighting off his fear and having the courage to continue this fight. Fear had to be left far behind.

A Second Life

Miryam Monrroy

In the far distance, I saw a bright light with pretty clouds surrounded by singing birds. I walked to the light and was magically sitting in sand filled with toys. A sweet gentleman asked for my hand, but I knew it was too early for me to leave. I rejected the offer, and everything turned pitch black.

I woke up in a hospital room with a bloody broken arm. I had to come back to finish my journey and make something of myself. It was not my time to leave. There is so much a four-year-old has yet to discover.

Desolate Mind

Brandon Nguyen

There was a world shrouded in strife. A world in control by an unknown entity who came to existence out of nowhere as it devours thoughts. This creates a world filled with dry sand. In this world, there's always one glimmer of light that challenges this entity, fighting through whatever the darkness throws at it. There are moments where this light dims to its weakened state, but something outside grants it strength to overcome this darkness. Rain and solace began to fill the air as this world is now free from this entity. This world is what makes our minds.

Wish I Was There

Alizah Morales

Record! They pulled out the camera. She was taking her first steps. She looked like a three-legged dog learning to walk again. Mom and dad are as happy as can be. Their daughter was growing up. I never got to learn how to walk, but I am glad she did. I wish I could celebrate with them. Instead, I am looking at them from up here.

The Light House

Roger Barquera

Frozen, trapped in a concrete cylinder that stands 250ft at the edge of the world. Not even the mightiest waves contest the beast who swallowed me. Surrounded by night when the brightest star in our solar system disappears, I became the star that lit up the darkness of the sea. The hope for sailors when fearing they are too close to shore. But who is my last hope when my eyes shut? When my body is exhausted from sleepless nights, maintaining the light illuminating the dark sea? I am my last hope. Until the last grain of my strength fails.

Insane

Oscar Gonzalez

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. That's exactly how I feel as I run around this track... insane. I counted each breath, hoping to distract myself from how tired I really was. I tried to calm my mind, keeping it peaceful and at ease, like sand on a beach shore. I managed to reach the end of my run. I looked down at my time, inching ever so close to my final goal, but I wasn't quite there yet. I'll have to come back and try again tomorrow.

So This is Christmas, What Have I Done?

Juliana Padilla

I was riding the high when my family picked me up from the farm. The chainsaws and goodbyes were scary. But they came! I even rode on top of their SUV back to their log cabin. The kids decorated me! They thought it was funny to roast chestnuts by an open fire. I'd say that was more dangerous than fun. I posed in our family portrait with my lights on. I thought I had it all, but after Christmas they left me here. My new purpose is to support the weight beneath beachgoers. Useless sand, one in an infinite pool.

Will He?

Yajaira Castillo

As I stood there, looking into his eyes. Not moving a single muscle, he had me in clear range. Wearing an all-black attire, with a ski mask on his face. Weapon aiming directly towards my heart. Wondering if he had the guts to actually pull the lever. As we were face to face, I started noticing little similarities. Those eyes, I've seen them before. His stance was one I've met in the past, just like a three-legged dog. "Take the mask off" I demanded, he obediently took it off. There I stood in shock, it was my first love, Ethan.



Alurement - Joseph Rogers

Why I Read

Elsie Bura

I am an imposter to this reality.
dropped into the wrong story. Should I not be living in a book?
Alive is when I hear the music scores of fantastical movies.
Living is in the ink-stained pages of adventurous fiction.
Alive is when I'm enraptured with dragons and magic.
When I have forgotten to breathe into this body,
yet I overflow, overwhelmed with Life.

I exist.
In colorful nebulas and quasars and blazars.
Timeless yet Infinite.
In a state that this place disremembered to imagine.
Cannot be verbalized.
I am not made for here or for now. My life is over or has yet to begin.
Or maybe I am insane.

I plead insanity when that call is so strong that it extricates tears from my soul
and makes Runners of my feet
and Reachers of my arms,
Wanderer of my heart.
Always moving
and wanting,
searching and wishing
and never content with just
being.

There is more.
I journey to find my land
to find what calls out to my soul.
It is in books and in the imperceptible moments
when the taciturn Moon and her impenetrable gaze transport me,
and I discover the shyest secrets of the universe.
Wanderers, Runners, Reachers rest,
and I no longer long.
I arrive Home.



Blue Bird - James Seward

What's Wrong, Mr. Bird?

Taj Singh

This poem was inspired by a line from Jason Reynolds' "Spread Your Wings" speech.

Mr. Bird, I can tell that
You have worked hard to perfect your wings
Your beautiful, beautiful wings

So, what's wrong, Mr. Bird?
Why do you look so miserable?

Your wings are
an arrangement of colors and patterns
So vivid and vibrant that
it would be an insult to call them

Perfect

So why do you look so miserable?

Sneaking a glance at you as
you soar through the cool summer breeze makes me

Radiate

You are everything I dream to be

So why do you look so miserable?

By merely gazing upon your beauty I
feel like I am able to see right through you

Almost as if I
can see your future and your

Past

Past all your wings

Past all your claws

Past your beak I

see a warm feeling glowing throughout

The sensation?

A fusion of
Protection
Safety
Security
and
Love

Anyone
Would do anything
Just to feel that sensation for
even a second

So, what's wrong, Mr. Bird?
Why do you look so miserable?

You are turning red, Mr. Bird.
Is the heat from all your feathers getting to you?
Is that why you look so miserable?

Mr. Bird,
Some birds are cold.

Some birds do not have nests that they can fly back to at the end of a flight.
There are birds who do not have as vivacious feathers as you
There are birds who do not have any feathers at all.

Perhaps
Take off some feathers
And share them
So others can experience the warm sensation that you constantly feel.

After all
This world is too cold to keep all those feathers to yourself.

Writing in Blue

Juan Quintero

I'm colorblind, but
Somehow, I'm writing in blue.
My paper is black and white,
Somehow, I'm writing in blue.

My black ink pen dances across my paper,
And it's in remembrance of you,
It's crazy because
Somehow, I'm writing in blue.

My words soak up my tears,
I now have to start a new letter,
Letting you go is hard,
But it's for the better.

Writing in pain is a new feat I've accomplished
It finally ends here with you,
All this agony I've dealt with,
Now I'm literally writing in blue.

Periwinkle

Meghana Budankayala

My periwinkle is loose
a wrinkle in time,
I can choose
My periwinkle is bright
a memory of mine,
I can despite
My periwinkle is blue
a tear of sadness,
I can undo
My periwinkle is slow
a blossom of flower,
I can blow
My periwinkle is elegant
a sight of white,
I am a celebrant

Bike Ride

Karissa Moreno

After my little sister begged me many times to go on a bike ride with her while my mom walked the dog, I gave in. I had been on multiple bike rides with them, so it felt like a routine—just like any normal day. As we turned down yet another street, my sister challenged me to a race to see who was the fastest. “You can’t beat me, Sissy!” she shouted as I reluctantly began pedaling faster. Riding bikes in the neighborhood reminded me of any hectic scene from *Stranger Things*. My dog tried to keep up with us as best as he could but failed as my mom kept pulling him back. “Stop at the stop sign!” my mother shouted from behind us as we raced down the street.

As told, we dutifully stopped and waited for my mom and dog at the stop sign. Once we all met up, we planned on turning around and going home until we realized something was running towards us. We tried to run away before the thing got too close, but it was already too late. Right in front of our eyes, a giant pit bull ran up and attacked my dog, biting him everywhere it could. Horrified and afraid, I jumped off the bike and tried to pull the aggressive animal off. My mom tried her best to do anything she could, but nothing worked. My little sister, who was just laughing minutes ago, was now scared and crying, and although I wanted to comfort her at that moment, I couldn’t. There were many different thoughts running through my head, but the main one that I kept repeating in my head was, “This can’t be the way we lose him.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see a young girl standing and staring. I soon realized the dog who was attacking mine was hers. She had accidentally let her dog out when she was going to throw the trash out. “GET YOUR DOG!” my mom shouted through angry

tears. Even though her dog was the attacker, I still felt sympathy for the young girl because I remember being in her shoes once. Letting the dog outside on accident then having to chase after it. To my left, I saw an older woman pull up and get out of a green truck. I then realized this woman was the owner of the dog and the mother of the young girl. But the entire time, she stood and watched as I tried to pry her dog off of mine.

To this day, I still don’t understand how I did it, but I managed to pull the pit bull off of my dog. It took everything in me to do so, but for just a quick second I did, and that quick second gave my dog enough time to get up off the ground and to run as fast as he could. I still hadn’t had time to process what had just happened, but I was quick on my feet. I immediately got back on the bike and pedaled as fast as I could behind the two dogs. Everything felt so surreal at that moment. I felt like I was Mike Wheeler and his friends from *Stranger Things* while on the bike and the pit bull felt like a Demogorgon that was after my dog. “Nanook!” I shouted so loud I heard my voice echo down the entire street. I passed by many people and asked those standing outside of their houses if they had seen a husky running, to which they all point to the left. I quickly thanked them and continued pedaling. I could see the pit bull in front of me as I was searching for my dog praying that he wouldn’t get close enough to my dog again.

In my peripheral vision, I could see the familiar green truck from just a few moments ago speed past me. I saw the owner finally grab her dog and put him in the back of her truck. Even though the pit bull was finally gone, I was still worried about where my dog was. I turned down the last street to get to my house, but I couldn’t find Nanook anywhere.

I didn't know if he had run off to an intersection or if he just kept running down more streets. I stopped right in front of my house and hesitantly called out his name, "Nanook?" I questioned. I suddenly came to the realization that because we had gone on the same route many times, he had become familiar with the area, so when he was running, he already knew his way back home. All my fear disappeared once I saw him walk out of the garage with his eyes squinted and his teeth showing a big smile as he wagged his tail.



Dogs - Hayden Ross

My Best Friend

Mikayla Mathews

Eighth grade. Ah, what a time to be alive. The peak of girl-drama and spring fling relationships. Ever the outgoing student, I was an avid member of the student council, and every year in May, the La Porte Junior High School Student Council put on the eighth-grade formal as a last hoorah for students. It was a rite of passage before we went off to high school. I was the student council vice president, thus I had quite a few responsibilities for this dance. Now, looking back, and in the spirit of honesty, I will tell you that I did not do these tasks in a timely manner, nor did any other eighth grader on the student council. So naturally we found ourselves, a week before the dance, scrambling to make ends meet.

In my opinion, I had one of the easiest tasks—dealing with caterers and putting together photo booth props. So, on the Monday afternoon the week of the dance, I called a student council meeting to make sure everyone knew their tasks and deadlines. While sitting in the meeting, I was on the phone with Chick-fil-A ordering ten large trays of chicken nuggets, three hundred medium orders of fries, and 20-gallon size jugs of lemonade. I clearly remember the way my friends mocked me as I repeated the order fifteen times until I was certain that it was properly placed.

Just as I finished my call with Chick-fil-A, my phone rang again, which was odd because the only people who ever called me were in the same room with me. Who could be calling? I saw my brother's name on my phone, groaned, and reluctantly accepted the call. He frantically asked me if my dog, Barney, was okay when I left for school that morning. I felt my heart drop, why would he ask that? Was my baby boy okay? I assured him Barney was okay when I left, and with tears in my eyes, asked why he needed to know. He told

me Barney could not walk and his back legs just dragged behind him. I felt nauseous, there was a lump in my throat, and I couldn't see three feet in front of myself.

I finished making food orders and then called my mom at work and told her she needed to come get me right now. She asked why, and all I remember was saying, "My baby isn't okay." She came to get me, and we went home at what felt like the speed of a snail. I couldn't get home fast enough. By the time I got home, Barney had lost his ability to walk, pee, and poo. As his front half dragged the back half of his little body, he spread his fowl smelling feces around the house. By this point, I was home with my mom and brother, but we couldn't get a hold of my dad; he was on the golf course with his phone off. As soon as he saw all of the missed calls, he called my mom and asked what was wrong. He said to take him to the vet and he'd meet us there.

Around 5:30 we arrived at the vet. I sat with my leg shaking for what felt like hours as they did numerous tests, scans, and general examinations. I remember the little bell on the glass door handle ringing as my dad arrived and I ran to his embrace. He stood there in the doorway and held me while tears of fear for what would happen streamed down my face. Finally, a tall blonde lady in a white coat walked through the door. She called out "Family of Barney Mathews I have an update." I stood, walked towards her, and asked, "Is he going to be okay?" I remember her response like it was yesterday, "Probably not," she said. PROBABLY?? I thought. Um, lady, what the heck do you mean probably, are you incompetent? I need to find a new vet. A million other thoughts raced through my head as she explained what went wrong. With old age dachshunds have an extremely elevated risk for herniated disks in the spine,

and Barney had two. She continued to explain that this does not mean there is no cure—there is hope—but this “hope” was a ten-thousand-dollar surgery that had an eighty percent failure rate. What kind of hope was that? I did not trust this lady. I got my dog and left.

Once we were back at home, we had a decision to make—should we take all measures to save Barney knowing it might hurt him more, or should we make the choice to end his suffering? I never thought I would lose him. I’d had him for as long as I could remember. Take extreme measures, I urged, Barney will be the twenty-percent success rate! I will not lose my baby without a fight! But I was out ruled. It would be inhumane to knowingly put Barney through a surgery that would most likely worsen his condition and his pain. We called the vet back the next day and made a euthanasia appointment for Saturday morning. I knew my days with him were numbered, and every time I woke up the number got smaller.

Four, three, two, one. Saturday.

I woke up. My chest was tight, my head was heavy, I didn’t know how to feel. I felt numb. An eleven o’clock appointment, we arrived at ten thirty. We all went back into a small room where they laid him on a soft and comfortable grey bed. He barely had the ability to move anymore. My brother broke down crying and left the room; my dad followed him out. I couldn’t leave. The doctor came in and showed me two needles. One was filled with a numbing agent; Barney would get that one first. The second was the one that would shut down his organs. They did the first injection, and I held Barney’s paw. The doctor left the room and came back about fifteen minutes later to tell me it was time for the second injection. She put the needle into his left front leg and pushed the solution into his little vein.

Once she finished, she told me it should take twenty minutes for it to go into full effect, and that I could hold him if I wanted for the rest of the process. I picked him up and held him as tight as I could. I never wanted to let go. I felt his little body grow cold. I could feel his heartbeat, I felt it slow down, I felt it stop, and I heard the last breath escape his body. It’s true what they say. “A dog is man’s best friend.” And that day I sat on the floor of the vet’s office weeping while holding the lifeless body of my best friend.



Sight for Sore Eyes - Alexzandra Defreitas

Begin Again

Karolyne Galdamez

Is there enough love
Within your pith
To love again?

Is there enough light
Within your orbs
To see again?

Is there enough hope
Within your bones
To trust again?

Is there enough joy
Within your lips
To shout again?

Is there enough vim
Within your feet
To stomp again?

Is there enough fight
Within your wits
To stand again?

Is there enough you in this world?
I think not!
So, Begin Again

Where I'm From

Nilanee Balamurugan

I am from misty mornings,
rooster calls and sounds of horns.

I am from the rough roads.
(narrowed, potholed,
and filled with life)

I am from Palani Temple.

Along with
once a month full moon's diet
and Harvest celebrations.

I'm from the confused,
the shh-be-quiet,
to the Vanakkam and Hello.
I'm from the porch that was always loud,
filled with laughter,
and writings on the walls by the children,
with the old books of the young adults.

I'm from climbing and swinging on trees like,
the peepal trees
that have a spinning top like figure,
and the banyan trees,
that have thick and broad branches,
that hang like ropes.

I am from the festival lights in celebrations,
bullock carts, Krishna, Chhota Bheem and MGR.

I am from generations of owned property,
friendly family neighbors, rice,
and hot rasam from self-grown veggies.
From the cricket matches in the wide-open space,
to the boiling heat in the afternoons.

I am from and more of these fractions —
fractions of an unused road —
thriving in my memories —
Left incomplete by force.

Los Primeros Vaqueros

Vivian Thompson

He learns the ropes while
Watching the old vaqueros,
The first true cowboys.

The silver screens of Hollywood never give justice to the diversity and history of cowboys. Actors like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood have helped shape our ideas of cowboys. Vaqueros were the original cowboys. The Spanish brought horses back to America and created ranches based on Spanish haciendas. During the late 19th century, one out of every three cowboys were Hispanic. The vaqueros taught Anglo-American settlers the methods of ranches and cattle driving. Even if the life of the average cowboy was not as thrilling as the movies make them out to be, the fact stands that the cattle industry was one of the largest in the States up till the 20th century and its economic input was massive. The influence of vaqueros benefitted the United States immensely and is an underrated contribution from Hispanic culture and heritage.



Pond - Jill B. Gilbert

Dreams

Alexis Reed

I'm still feeling the warmth of your skin; hearing your infectious laugh. Still remembering the way, we lay together and watched the stars. Watching them sparkle, as they seemed to dance along the night sky. Thinking of you, remembering you is a pain, one that strikes my heart as hard as lightning, makes my stomach turn in circles, twisting and knotting, making me want to cry again. The thoughts that come to mind are thoughts that are now and forevermore bitter-sweet memories. I yearn to go back in time, to change the way things went. I want to have you here again. I long for you and your smile that could stop time. But I can't have you here, I pushed you away, created this wall; built of stone, a wall that was too big to be brought down, too heavy for me to push. This wall is up and stays up, I wish it would come down. If the wall came down, I could see again. I could see your eyes again, colored a vibrant blue, deep as the ocean and just as beautiful. Yet edged with gold. As the sun fell into them, they would glimmer with the sunlight radiating them to the world. Nothing would be able to tame my aching heart more than to see those eyes, that gleaming smile, or hear your laugh just one more time.

I remember the first time your eyes met mine, I was so scared. But I saw you and said, "Hi," entirely unaware that those dimples would make my heart melt. I would fall so hard for you. That's exactly what I did, little did I know falling for you was the best and the worst thing to happen to me. The way your presence made my heart sing, the way that you would look at me, shoot that goofy smile and I'd crumble just looking at you. Memories of you swirl around in my head, like butterflies flying around the sky. Remembering you sneaking up behind me; wrapping your arms around my waist saying, "guess who" in my ear while I would list off random names, as

if I didn't know it was you. "Joe? Ethan? Derrick?" Nope, none of those, it was you, the boy who stole my heart. I remember laughing as I turned, our faces met, and I stared into those eyes and just smiled as my heart was full of joy. I touch my waist when I think of that memory; it's as if you're still there. I gain goosebumps thinking of you, it sends chills throughout my body. I want you wrapped around me one more time. I want to have you, the you that I fell in love with. The you that made me so happy because of the little things you'd do and say. The you that made my heart pound and my stomach grow wings. There is something about you that just draws me in, makes me want to ask for more, ask for one more hug, one more kiss, one more time to catch you staring at me and giving me that smile that makes me melt.

The wind dancing around us made this day even more magical than I could have imagined. You are with me here in this place, holding my hand, squeezing it, gently but enough to make me do it back. I look up and you're smiling at me, you poke my dimples and kiss my cheek. Your cologne surrounds us, as we walk through the meadow. All the lively colored wildflowers around us. The smells of them encircling around us, sweet and simple. Colors of reds and blues, with bright oranges and soothing yellows, violets filled with awe surrounding us. "You are my wildflower," you said, as you bent down and picked a lavender flower, put it in my hair, and started to hum our song; it filled the air around us. You held me and sang while the sun set below the trees. It seemed like a movie. "Together by each other's sides forever, stay with me all of the time?" I said to you as I looked into your deep blue eyes, with gold rimming the irises. I see the ocean in your eyes, hear your soul in your laugh, I feel your warmth with every touch. You look at me, those deep cobalt

eyes, the way they gaze into mine, locking me in. You smile and pull me in closer. I can feel your breath on my neck, I can hear your heart thumping against your chest. Never losing eye contact, it's just us in this moment, you take my hand and spin me around. Wrapping me in, we sway together as you whisper in my ear, "By your side forever, my beautiful vision." In this moment I knew I was complete, my heart full of joy and happiness. Now I see, and I realize that having you with me by my side, like we said we would do, was a lie. You aren't here. You left me to fend for myself, healing my heart that has been torn apart.

As I lay in bed, troubled with my thoughts of you, I turn to my side and look to my nightstand. I see the dried out and dead wildflower, the one you picked for me and placed behind my ear, tucking in my hair. The color has disappeared from the flower, maybe it went when you did. I go to the meadow on days that I just need to feel your presence again, when I need to have some hope. Hope that you'd be at the meadow with me again. We could dance, sing, and be surrounded by nature again, just being happy, just being us. But the only times I see or feel you are in my dreams. I sleep all day; I only want to sleep. Sleeping is the time that the pain stops, the only time when I can feel that happiness again. I crawl into bed and bury myself under blankets. When I close my eyes and lay my head to rest, I dream, and I dream of you. These dreams are so clear and vivid, as if it's happening all over again. I can smell you, the scent of your cologne in my dreams, the subtle smokey mahogany and teakwood fills my head. I can feel you, I can touch your face again, run my fingers through your hair, except I now wake up in a panic, sweating and scared. I reach for you and realize the truth. I know you are gone; I saw you leave, heard the flatlining on the machine. I watched horrified as you sunk deeper into the ground. Standing there, looking down at you, I threw

a handful of dirt over your redwood casket. I laid on top of your casket a bundle of orange and yellow wildflowers picked from the meadow where we made the promise to be together. I remember in color seeing you leave, images of you floating through my mind. I was there when God gained you, my love, my everything. Yet I'm still wishing you were here. If only I could go back in time; I would see you outside of my dreams.



Rocky Skies - Racquel Brooke King

A Personal Introduction

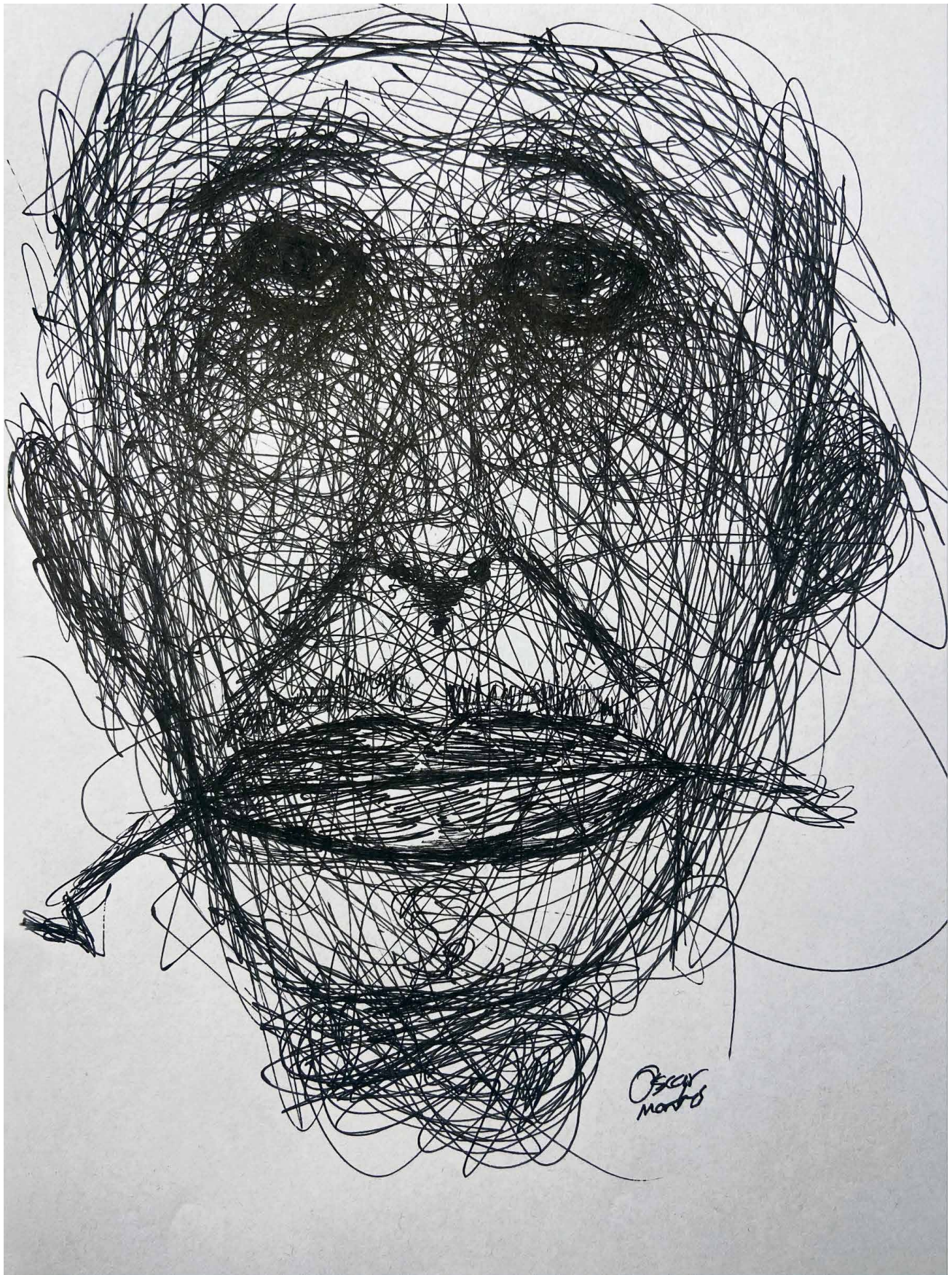
Amanda Nguyen

Tonight I consume a mug of chamomile tea
In order to focus on writing about me
And the timeless rays of love that my parents bear
Who nurtured their seeds with guidance and care

I am a hundred percent human, but only fifty percent Asian
My father is an immigrant of a war-struck nation
In '74, the Vietnam war ravaged his homeland for miles
Forcing my father, a dirtied infant to find safety in exile

I am a hundred percent human, but only fifty percent white
My mother is a debutante whose father she'd fight
In '99 her only peace was the place she and my dad met
The old, pixelated internet.

Today I'm an answer to the dreams of my ancestors
For they paved the yellow brick road to a life that is greater
They led me to here, consuming chamomile tea
Up late at night, telling you a story about me.



Lost - Oscar Montes

Blanco

L. Mendoza Hernandez

Somewhere, always at a distance,
he shows up.
I could never tell when he arrived or left, where he came from or where
he'd go off to,
but he was always there.

He is the man of the fine suit, precise watch, and white umbrella.
We never crossed words.
Always at a distance.
Close enough to feel his critical eyes but
too far away to recognize his face.

That empty glance fixed my posture, covered my laugh, and
covered my arms.
He left his contact card in my purse.
The finest letters wrote—
Mr. Insecurity
A doubt away

Duty

Anisa Masrura

Whispers echoing,
Surrounded by muted screens,
All due by midnight.

five foot four

Rhayla Candler

five foot four,
waiting
five foot four,
praying
five foot four,
grateful i'm not five foot two
i wish i was five foot eight like my father
or five foot five like my mother
maybe even five foot humongous
like my favorite lover
five foot four,
growing
five foot four,
knowing i seal my own fate
i have the luxury of asking,
what will it be?
i have the luxury of answering,
whatever will be, will be
five foot four wondering if someone will bring me the stars
if they'll plot new constellations and spell out our initials
wouldn't that be five foot something.



Orange - Natalie Rodriguez

The Spot

Danna Linares Dalitz

In the left corner of our house, you will find a spot I call “My Room.” Next to my room is the big play area where I hear the laughter of my siblings. To the left of my door is the enormous living room where we share family time. As I open the door to my room, the air from the a/c hits my back. My feet hit the ice-cold light brown floor. I always wanted carpet. I lay my school bag next to the hangers and shoes I have yet to put away. The dried-out roses I got weeks ago fill the room with a pleasing aroma. My desk is still a mess because I cannot seem to find the time to clean it properly. As I lay on my bed, I feel the softness of my blanket. Instantly I feel safe. I have created a connection with every minor item in my room. My blankets hold a special place in my heart.

My room is full of memories, from holes in the wall to old pictures. Life is short-lived; keep those mini memories close. I have this hole behind my bed, and it reminds me of when my two little brothers slept with me. I thought an animal would randomly crawl out. My wall and closet door have some special drawings from my little brother “the artist.”

Shoebboxes fill my closet but, when opened, you will find little things that hold memories, sand from Guatemala, rocks from Colorado, flowers from my first high school dance, mementos I have achieved through my life so far. I celebrate my milestones because I am proud of myself. My room acts as a person I can confide in. In it, I share all my thoughts. The way I express myself through drawings shows on my walls. I drew a butterfly, knocking down dominos with a quote saying, “everything affects everything.”

My brother broke my blinds, so every morning I am up at seven because the sun shines right through my window. Our chickens are busily

pecking under my window at sunrise, which makes the blinding sun worse when waking up. The handprints on my window remind me of when my friend visited, and we snuck out to Escapade. I eschew reality; it is hard to face. The door cancels out every sound; it brings me peace of mind. My thoughts flow, and I can be myself because I am alone.

I close my door every time I am upset. I feel as if I am putting off the problem while I plan out a solution. My room is like a room of wonders. You will never know what you find. There is nowhere in the world like this, so pleasant and undisturbed. I come to my room for peace and happiness, where all things seem perfect and carefree. I wish to stay here forever. The laughter randomly comes from behind the door. When my siblings sneak their way in, I find them all bundled up and ready to watch our next Disney movie. I have created so many memories in this wonderland I call my room.

No matter if I move homes, it will always be the same. The energy I create within every additional space I will call my room. My room has been there for me. I know it is not a person, but I have shared my difficulties there. The nights I came home from partying, my bed made me feel warm and safe. The dolls that sit above my window remind me of when I finally met my dad. Not every memory in my room is amazing, but it tells a chapter in life. I still have my work vest from my first job at Walmart. I was living life with those paychecks. Every night I must come home. The only place I feel OK is in my room. It seems like I would lose myself without it. My shoe collection started with a love for basketball; this started in Colorado. My shoes connect everything to a memory. I would share stories with so many people in my room, and now we have all fallen apart,

just like a cookie. I may no longer have those connections, but my spot holds these memories within it, and I cherish them.

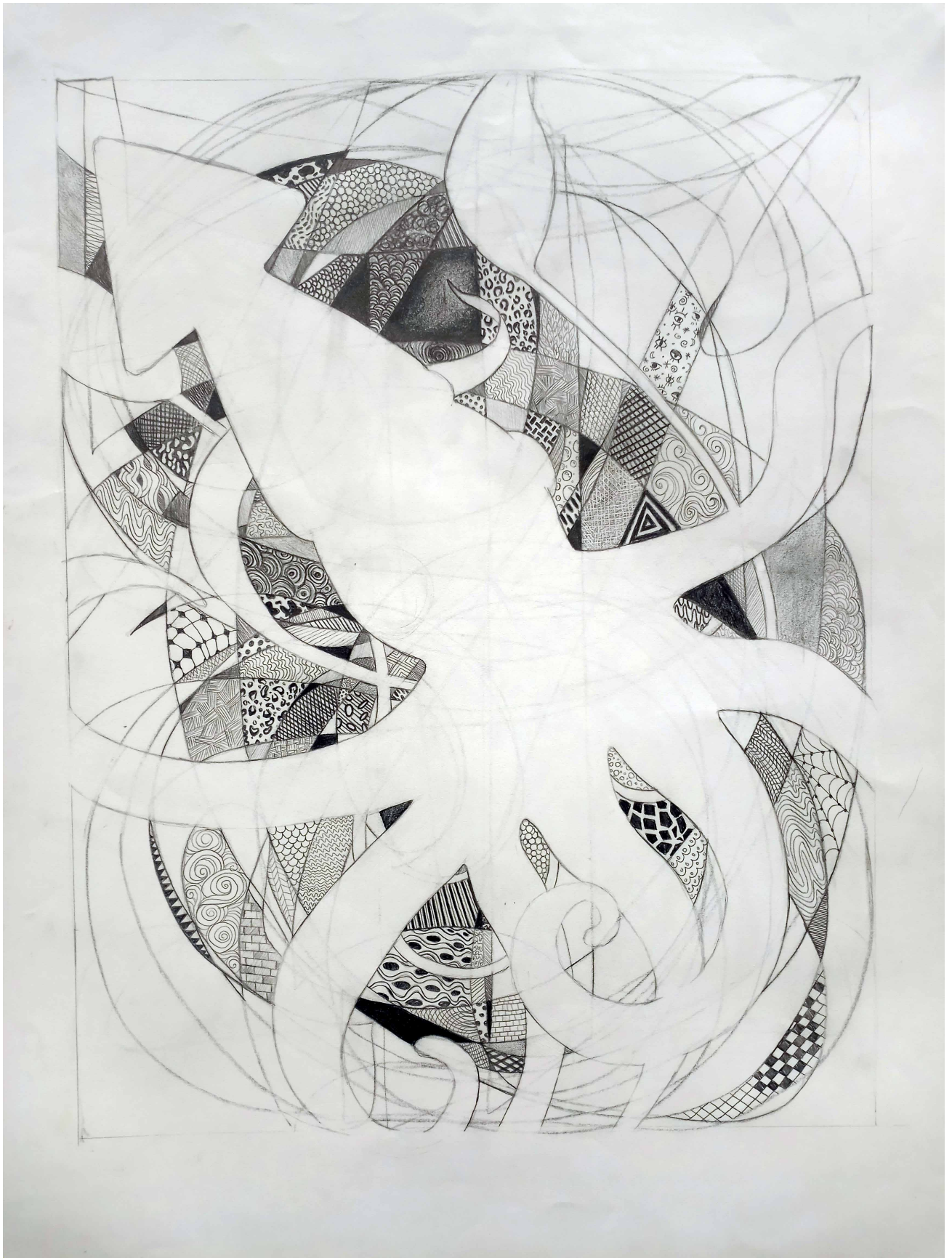
The nights I cried until I fell asleep. The days when I would just watch the sun go down every weekend from my bedroom window. I never found the remote to my tv, so now I must get up to push the buttons on the side. I get lazy, and I have this unicorn pillow; I throw it at the light switch, so it turns off. Every time there is a storm, our porch door hits my window. I get scared all the time, even after so much time living there.

I always end up with trash on my desk from snacks I ate. My room is full of glorious memories, but to every light, there is a dark side. I have this shirt my mom ripped when she tried to get physical; it is on my nightstand, and I have not moved it since that day. My mom has kicked me out once or twice, and I still have those bags packed in my closet. I would hide from my parents because they would not understand me. My spot is my haven. The birds that sit outside my window and the crickets, they cancel out the noises from my crazy home.

The pill bottle with eight pills I had a couple of years ago when I wanted to take my life is there. At some point, I wanted to throw them away, now they just move all around the room, from under my bed too. I lay down and go through a mental pause, and just like that, I feel confident again. My room may be the light of my darkness, but I drown. I trap myself in these four walls to get away, but I am just hiding from the problems and becoming even more trapped. The world I create within my room is an escape from the world I cannot handle, but what happens when I cannot manipulate my world?

My room will always be the light at the end of my tunnel. In my room, I see myself for you. I truly am. There are none of society's

standards here. I make so many decisions based on those around me, and not once did I make a desirable choice. The mirror that hangs on my wall reminds me of how beautiful you can be, inside and out. I block all standards society has set out for us. My room reminds me it is OK to be myself. It has helped me accept my flaws like overthinking and my low confidence, my heart is within this space. I have become who I am because of my room.



Squid - Yazmin Medina

Dark Dank

Hannah Schmidt

Steps echo,
Fading in to dark.
There's a lost flicker
that haunts the center.

Memories surround,
Placed flat vertically.
No intersection of the path
into the dank dark deep.

Hollow beneath,
A hideaway of sorts.
'Twill be the home of something
inaudible and forlorn.

Up and down,
Up and down.
Nowhere else to go
'cept into the dank dark deep.

Purple Means, I Loved You

Amani Khurram

The gown twinkles with stars
adorns my body
pools at my feet like
a waterfall streaked with wine
The flowers bloom in summertime,
grow in my heart, too
Then, why am I drowning
in this dark complicated love?
And yet, I am twilight
before night and set the
mood in moonlight, hoping you
will notice me, despite . . .
I'm mysterious at the age
of youthful innocence.
This love was unrequited
and foolish at first sight.

Different Colors

Evelyn Ramirez

Born red, white, and blue
My blood colors forever,
Will be green, white, red.

Dreams of Being a Big Sister

Lana Tran

I am a big sister.

I became a big sister in December of 2013, then again in November of 2018, then again in August of 2020.

Even though I have been long acquainted with this job, every day is different.

I have been doing this for 8 years.

I have woken up in the middle of the night to soothe my brothers' crying,

I have watched them flourish, say their first words, and have their first laughs.

I have seen them crawl to their futures.

I have been a big sister since 2013, and it has exceeded what I expected, it is days and nights of responsibility.

It required me to grow up, learn, and apply.

It required me to become a better person.

Being a big sister is having days of lugging a heavy baby around the house to stop the screeching.

Being a big sister is not a monotonous job.

Being a big sister is irreplaceable.

Being a big sister has taught me to forget, to forgive, and to love.

Being a big sister is like being a shoulder to lean on, a machine with a tolerance level of 100%, and a job of sharing burdens.

There are many things I want in the future as a big sister.

I want to drive my siblings to the movies while they dance in the backseat to their favorite song.

I want to watch them open my Christmas presents while their eyes get filled with excitement.

I want my siblings to feel comfortable asking me for help or asking me to bring them out.

Being a big sister may be a big responsibility, but it is a responsibility that I will gladly accept.

I will help my siblings get through challenges—
through hard days—

through every Tét—

through all their hardships—

through every scolding—

through life—

and teach them how to leave all of those with smiles on their faces.

These are my dreams as a big sister.



Wonder - Karen Harris

Please Turn Green

Jose Torres

My friends are fucking awesome, especially Cassandra. She has a brown Chevy Malibu – yikes – and lets me sit in the front for a full view of the shit that goes down on the road. Sitting in the front is a lot of fun because Cassandra and I experience a sense of *schadenfreude* every time we stop at this one specific red light. It's so fucking funny every time we ride together, she is one of those friends that you can count on for a good time.

So, I kind of lied, Johnny and Nathan were also bumming Cassandra for a ride. Anyways, my pathological lying aside, I was sitting in the front with her as I always do, just relaxing while listening to Cassandra's playlist, when we noticed something happening in front of us. We looked towards the front because we were waiting for the light to turn green, when we saw him: the man who cleans windshields. There is nothing mischievous about him. He's not suspicious or doing anything wrong, it's just alarming when anyone approaches your car. He usually asks for money and sometimes he will tell you his life story, but that is a story for another time. When we noticed him, we said in unison, "Hopefully he doesn't come over here." If he did clean the window, it would only end up dirtier than before he cleaned it.

However, he was really trying to clean windows, like it was his last day and cleaning windows was his *raison d'être*. We couldn't see the face of the person in front of us, but we could see a very annoyed silhouette waving their arms around. I said, "look! Look! She is telling him no," and Cassandra replied, "she's literally waving her hands no," while laughing and emulating the woman's desperate attempt at telling the dude no. Then Johnny and Nathan noticed what was happening, and Johnny said, "oh my God" and started laughing with us. Nathan was the

first to realize and said, "won't he come to us next though?" and immediately Cassandra and I stopped laughing, finally sitting in the front became a burden, as I would have to be witness to the Windshield Cleaning Man ruining my view. But all was not bad, after the dude ignored the woman's pleas you could see the woman give up and just let him do his thing. I wanted to tell her *c'est la vie* when you're stopped at this light.

However, cursed the stop light may be, we were lucky enough to escape unscathed. Cassandra and I were just sitting there chanting, manifesting, "please turn green, please turn green," nervously laughing as Windshield Cleaning Man began his journey to her car. We had started to make the same pleas telling the dude we didn't want the windshields cleaned, but he was still on his way to us. Johnny tried to make us feel better by saying, "maybe he will listen to us!" but we all knew our fate. This light felt like it had been years since it last had been green. And knowing Cassandra, girl I love you please don't hate me, she would be kvetching about it all day until she cleaned off the shit he put on the windows. When all hope was lost, when it looked like we would have to live with him cleaning the windows, the light turned green. We literally all screamed, "Go! Go, Cassandra, go," and we left the light as fast as a road runner would run from coyote. We kept joking about the misfortune the other woman in front of us faced since we escaped.

That shit was so funny to us because it felt like karma was going to get us back for laughing at that woman. God, I love riding with Cassandra, even when shit like this doesn't happen, and we just have conversations, it is so entertaining because they can be about anything, and we'll laugh together. She is one of the people I don't think I would ever get

tired of talking with. Cassandra is fucking great, and there is no way to have a bad time with her.



White Figure - Monique Coleman

Knitting Sunflowers

Joselinne Piedras-Sarabia

Her name was Valeria, and she was knitting sunflowers in the corner.

Someday, somewhere down the road, Natalia would ache for this moment. She'd dream of the brunette with her back turned to the crowd of eager diners, fingers engaged in a delicate dance with needles and yellow yarn. The scent of pastries and coffee would haunt her. Eventually, she'd try and count the number of freckles on Valeria's face as if it were a sky of scattered stars.

Did she have fourteen—four on each cheek and six across her nose? She could never recall.

Someday, she'd mimic her—set shop in a corner, and knit while tuned out to the rest of the world.

For now, though, she was bitter. And angry. And any creative synonym for the word mad that counting freckles was the least of her concerns.

Unlike Natalia, Valeria hadn't noticed her. She was busy doing what she always did on weekends, sometimes Tuesdays, and maybe Thursdays. She knitted sunflowers in the corner of her family-owned coffee shop. In the future, she'd tell Natalia that she only knit because she was unable to bake or be nice and resist the urge to throw coffee at any creep within a ten-mile radius. So knitting was her way of contributing because couples liked to buy flowers that never died (disgusting). The elderly liked the idea of crochet flowers, and young kids liked anything bright and yellow. Plus, it became a weird generational staple of the coffee shop, and neither of her siblings were anxious to pick up a sewing kit and watch a ten-minute tutorial.

Valeria was on her tenth flower of the day. When she began knitting, she only made two or three flowers and called it a day. Now, her fingers weaved twenty flowers on a good day. Running a finishing stitch on her tenth and last sunflower of the day, she noticed the sound of footsteps and the muttering of a string of curse words approaching her.

Normally, she was left alone. Customers knew not to touch the girl knitting flowers in the corner—everyone knew that. Even her mom would turn the other way for the sake of peace and all that was holy.

Yet Natalia approached her on that fateful Thursday afternoon.

Raising a brow, she lowered the final product and glanced up. Tugging at her wired earbuds, chocolate brown eyes met icy blue. She took in the sight of the girl, from her crown of straight, blonde hair and her dusty, black combat boots. She was taller, but Valeria knew that wasn't a compliment. Everyone was taller than her. Most importantly, she noted the scowl on her face and the heavy, iron-clad handcuffs on her wrists. The scar on her left eye, though, told another story.

“Hi, I'm Natalia.” The girl greeted, her eyes scanning the other girl. “You can call me Nat.” She reached out, trying to shake Valeria's hand.

“Valeria,” she answered, glancing down at her handcuffs. She smiled, cocking her head to the side. “Nice try, but I read your file.”

Natalia rolled her eyes, scoffing.

“Joy.”

In the future, Natalia would wish to relive that moment forever. Not because awkward first love was nicer to dream of than mountains of unpaid bills and eviction notices, or because knitted sunflowers made her feel better than mourning what never was. She'd dream of seeing Valeria. She'd wish to see her, to relive that moment. To be young.

She knew it was wistful thinking. She'd stay up later, wondering if Valeria felt the same way.

And Valeria did, but only you know that.

"So, you're not supposed to touch me."

Valeria was a liar. If anyone asked, she didn't care as much about her mission. It was supposed to be easy—something forgettable, like stopping a bank robbery or saving a cat from a tree. But in reality, she was obsessed with Natalia. Not in a weird, creepy way, but in a "This is my first mission, and my parents and grandparents are watching" way.

"Duh. I can't touch you," Valeria replied, eyes glued to the file. It was odd. She had read about Natalia for weeks, but she hadn't come off as a real person. Valeria envisioned her as this awful, diabolic, war criminal with no trace of humanity in her. She didn't imagine Natalia as a girl her age, someone with an awful sense of fashion and nails that tapped a little too loudly for her liking.

"Hm." Natalia didn't seem to care. She toyed with a straw and occasionally rubbed her now freed wrists.

Valeria knew it was a hazard to have her running around with her hands untied. A supervillain in the making running around a family of superheroes was not a good idea to start with, especially if said villain's powers copied anyone's with the faintest touch of her fingertips.

"You're supposed to teach me to be good?"

Valeria snickered. How could she teach this girl—someone from a bloodline of the worst villains of humanity- to be good? Valeria was barely learning to be a superhero herself. Besides, being good wasn't something you could learn. You were just born good—everyone knew that.

"You can't teach good to a villain."

She blew away a strand of brown hair, ignoring the sparks of electricity. Natalia's eyes shot up to the sparks of blue above them. "I'm supposed to keep an eye on you for two weeks." Valeria shut the file, pushing it towards

Natalia. "You have your own file on me, don't you?"

The blonde nodded. Valeria knew it was probably the same file—one filled with a brief summary of powers and a small family tree.

"You're a Villanueva. I grew up hearing about your little family." The blonde made a face in distaste. "But your dad—well... he's like, really respected in the supervillain community."

The brunette heaved, closing her eyes. She knew it was just a trick—a small test of boundaries. Her father was a heavy subject. Everyone in the Villanueva household knew it. Valeria told herself she did not care much for her dad, but she couldn't hide the sparks that flew across her fingertips.

"You know," her eyes were closed, but Natalia's smile still teased her. "I'm a big fan of his."

Part of her wanted to break the stupid contract and electrocute the blonde in front of her. What was the worst that could have happened? Sure, she'd fail at her first official

superhero mission, guaranteeing she'd never receive another contract, and ultimately dooming the superhero legacy carried through generations.

"Then you need better idols."

It was supposed to be easy. Keep Natalia out of trouble, make sure she somehow wasn't taking anyone's powers, and send her off to be redeemed somewhere else. Natalia was just a steppingstone, something to cross off her to-do list. In a month, Natalia would be a faint memory and Valeria would be showing off her shiny, new license to anyone in sight.

Of course, Valeria was wrong.

"Let's get this straight." Valeria looked straight into Natalia's eyes. "I'll tolerate you. You'll tolerate me. In two weeks, you'll be in some weird reform school. I'll be here. Do anything, and I will..." She raised a hand and electricity flew from her hand and into the air. "Understood?"

Natalia grinned.

"What? Did you practice that in the mirror?"

Natalia couldn't keep up.

She was accustomed to a villain's training—the kind that sent her to bed with bruises on her back and cuts on her face. Training was brutal, but she could rise from it the next day. She was strong, physically, anyway. She could handle anything at any time because she was raised to become the next Copycat. She was indestructible, a force to be reckoned with.

Valeria was another type of exhausting that she could not keep up with.

She wasn't a painful optimist (thank you, world), but she was driven. She was up by six in the morning to train with her siblings, and she was the last to come in at night. She

even volunteered to pick extra patrol shifts at night. And of course, Natalia was stuck following.

It was messing with her sleeping habits. Seriously—being a villain was more fulfilling than this mess.

Natalia finally emerged out the window and onto the roof. She purposely took her time; a tendency Valeria wasn't fond of. She gazed at the hero in training. Valeria was sitting down, her legs stretched out in front of her. She was looking down at the city, looking for danger. They'd wander off and watch the night start a life of its own.

That was all they'd done for the past three days—watch. They'd talk a little, and Natalia even made Valeria smile and Valeria somehow made her laugh. She wasn't sure what they even talked about, but it was never about the fact that fate laughed so cruelly at them. They were on opposite sides of a coin, and they knew it. Not once did it come into conversation. Instead, they were two teenagers finding company in each other after being forced.

They weren't close at first. Natalia didn't talk and Valeria scowled a lot. If Natalia moved even the slightest, Valeria was up with a ball of electricity in her palms. They were...on decent terms, now.

In all honesty, Natalia thought Valeria would make a fine hero. Yeah, she'd be amazing in the future. Natalia didn't like to think of that at the moment. This was, after all, someone who was supposed to help her rehabilitate.

If Valeria asked her in ten years if she believed in her superhero career, she'd try and be cheeky and say she knew all along. It wouldn't be a lie. Someday she'd meet her, almost in a haze. She'd be older, probably none the wiser, but definitely more experienced. She'd have

this radiance, the radiance only the moon and an aged Valeria could share.

Patrol ended at two a.m. sharp. One of the junior heroes—those who did their mission but weren't ready to get their license, would swap shifts with Valeria. Natalia mused on the system—villains didn't really do much of organizing except when it came to organized crime. (Valeria would have rolled her eyes and said the joke was lame but held in a laugh at that one).

A gentle breeze rattled through the trees and Natalia shuddered, pressing her hands onto her face for warmth. Valeria seemed unphased by the change in weather. She towered over Natalia, watching a dead nightlife unravel underneath her.

“What if you cut the last hour?” Natalia ached to sleep. She liked her dreams, the dreams of her sister and her mother and her father. They were long gone now, stuck in a cell several states away.

“They'd know.” Valeria motioned to the smartwatch on her wrist. “Seriously, they know. My sibling, Vin, the one with the mole on the—”

“Anyway.” Natalia yawned, rolling onto her stomach, and peering over the edge. “Have you thought about a superhero name?” “Valeria shrugged. She sat down next to the villain.

No, my sibling, the one with the—”

“The mole on the chin. Yeah, I know.”

“They got Echo. Even though they have the whole mind power thing going on, so I don't understand why they got—”

“That was from your dad, wasn't it?”

Valeria tensed. She didn't answer, twirling a lock of brown hair. “Yeah. Don't ask about it. They get upset.”

“You do too.” Natalia didn't acknowledge the other Villanuevas. She was polite to Mama Villanueva, because regardless of her superhero status, she was a known figure in the villain community. Also, the woman was somehow nice to her, and Natalia enjoyed talking to the family head. She faintly reminded her of her own mother.

They sat in silence for the rest of the night until Natalia spoke up again. Natalia mentally counted the things she knew about Valeria—her distaste for honey, her disgust in the color purple (though her suit was purple, go figure), and her knitting hobby.

“Go with the alphabets.”

“Huh?”

“Your name.” Natalia's gaze softened. “V. Miss V. Or just V. They'd take you seriously with that.” Valeria didn't respond, tracing a pattern of V's onto her pants until two a.m.

Natalia would ask for copyright money when the hero V manifested into the public eye years later.

Valeria would laugh.

Both girls were keeping a list on each other. They weren't idiots—it was standard procedure to keep a written record of everything. Valeria would scribble notes in the folder containing all of Natalia, and Natalia would make mental notes for herself.

Valeria didn't like people. Ironic for a superhero, Natalia thought. She liked to hide behind the counter instead of helping. Valeria also wasn't fond of dogs, and Valeria thought that good couldn't be taught.

Valeria was okay with Natalia—as a person. She was fine to be with, though annoying at times. She thought having to share a bedroom with the girl, go to class, and spend patrols with her would end up with them strangling each other. It was oddly pleasant to have someone lingering behind her.

She knew Natalia felt different at first. She didn't have to hear it directly from her to know it. She'd hear it in conversation, when Natalia rose early to speak to her mother during supervised phone calls. She'd hear the sobbing, and at night, she'd pretend to be asleep when Natalia crawled onto the roof and watched the stars.

Valeria wasn't sure what she felt. Sure, Natalia was inherently a bad person. She was a villain, for the love of all that was holy. But she was also kind to Valeria's mother. She stopped to help other students with their work. She paused to pet dogs on every street. Heck, she greeted customers with smiles and laughed with them.

Seriously.

The Latina was shocked to come downstairs one morning, ready to knit sunflowers, and be greeted by the sight of Natalia. Her blonde hair was up in a ponytail, and she wore a green apron. She joked with customers and smiled and even complimented them. The tip jar, the jar Valeria would never fill, was full.

“Look at you.”

Blue eyes widened and Natalia panicked, putting down a sharpie. She glanced at Valeria and huffed. “It's you.”

“I live here.”

“So do I.”

“Rent free,” Valeria taunted.

Nat rolled her eyes, picking the sharpie and labeling another cup.

“I'm working.”

“So am I.”

Valeria picked her basket of yarn and needles and sat on the seats in front of the cash register. She ignored the way Natalia scrunched up her nose in feign disgust. She propped her elbows on the counter and knitted silently while Natalia rang up orders.

They stayed that way, wordlessly working. Natalia slipped her a coffee at some point, and Valeria offered a mini sunflower in return.

Valeria wouldn't think much of the coffee. Natalia would run her fingers through the flower, keeping it in a box under her bed. Years later, she'd frame it in her living room to look at. A reminder.

Eventually, Valeria would wave goodbye and go off to train at night. Natalia didn't always follow because she knew it was something private. Instead, she stayed behind and helped close up shop with the oldest Villanueva.

“How's the program going for you?” Vincent was the only one who spoke about the program. Natalia wasn't sure if she should be mortified or grateful for it.

“It's going.” Nat responded halfheartedly, tossing another cupcake into the bin. She learned Vincent kept most pastries and scraped off frosting to practice decorating. Other times, they went out and gave it away.

“It must have sucked,” Vincent said mindlessly.

“Being dragged from your family.”

“It did, yeah.”

“You can talk about it, you know.”

Natalia blinked. Could she? These were superheroes, after all. Vincent had just pledged to become Echo, and Natalia wasn't sure their family history would agree. Yet the fifteen-year-old sighed, relaxing her shoulders as she reached for the knife to scrape another pastry off its yellow coat.

“I know you see me as this bad guy.”

“Not really.”

The blonde raised a brow, confused.

“You don't? I'm like a walking hazard here.”

“If you were born into a family of superheroes,” Vincent said, slicing into a slice of bread. Not once did he look at her. “You'd be just like us. If I was born a villain, I'd be like you. We were just born into these things.”

“I guess.”

“We're not so different, you and I.”

Natalia watched them coat the pastries in pink frosting, ornamenting them in flowers. “I doubted that.”

“Valeria will see it eventually.”

For some reason, her cheeks reddened at the mention of the hero in training.

Vincent pretended not to notice.

“We don't talk about it.”

“We don't either.” Vincent admitted. “But there's a lot of things we don't talk about.”

“Like?”

“My dad is one of the scariest villains and my mom is a beloved hero. I'm the only one in the family with mind control powers.” At that, they raised their hand, waiting for Natalia to touch them.

She wouldn't understand why she didn't do it. It'd be easy. Vincent's powers were perfect. She could use them for less than a minute and control both Villanueva daughters and break free.

She didn't. Instead, she shook her head and turned back to cleaning up.

“I just need to keep up with her,” she muttered wistfully.

Vincent looked back at her and nodded in understanding.

“Oh, keep those.” He pointed to the smaller cakes on the counter. “We cut off the pieces from the bottom and make a new one in a fruit cup.”

Natalia did as they did, tossing the leftover tops in the trash bin.

“Hey, Vince?”

“Hm?”

“What was your first mission, anyway? Valeria said you never told her.”

Vincent paused, almost as if weighing the choices.

“I had to help capture someone.”

This piece was cut for length in the print edition. To read the entire piece, please find the digital version at sanjac.edu/Accents/

the ground in me

Rhayla Candler

if i were a part of the earth
i'd be the ground everyone walks on
i'd keep everyone grounded and wouldn't let them fall
not quite respected, not quite appreciated
but i'm still solid, important, and necessary
i'd let them grow their lives above my wide-spanning body
just like the trees grow on me
and even after they're dead and gone
we can meet once more in holy matrimony
we are each other's eternity
we are our forever
and even though you don't quite see me until you've fallen face first,
just know i'll always keep you grounded

I Am Red

Sophia Hatamleh

I am red.
The color which constantly flows within life's veins,
A color in which we can all unite,
For we all bleed red which makes us the same.

I am the red in the flags that represent my heritage and ancestors,
Jordan, Spain, and Mexico.
All the bits of nature that fill these magic places,
Chiles, flowers, tomatoes, ladybugs, all make this world special.

I am the red that represents the resilience that resides within us all,
The color that represents the fiery flames that live in my spirit,
I am red.



Warm Fall Sun - Diana Beraza

Oy Vey

Emme Rainey

1. *Oy Vey (ohee-vay): A figure of speech that describes feeling a combination of both shock and annoyance for something that has occurred.*

Grandma died in February.
Soon after,
Mom asked me
What I would remember of her.
I told her I would remember
Church, on Fridays.
Mom's eyebrows lowered,
She reminded me that
Grandma was a Jew,
Anyway, she said,
Church is not on Fridays.
Then she asked me
What the church looked like.
I described it to her, and
Turns out,
Grandma was taking me to
Alcoholics Anonymous.
Oy Vey¹

We cleaned out grandma's house today.
In a dusty cupboard we found
Thirty years' worth of AA chips,
Not a single one was edible.
We found it funny because
Eating killed grandma.
Her ever-growing weight
Made the emergency surgery
Turn into
A yearlong stay.
It made every day
Turn into
The expectation it was her last day.
She ate more than most.
Mom said,
When we used to go to dinner,
Grandma would chew the fat on her steak,
Spit it out,
And put it on the table.
Oy Vey.

Mom asked me once more
As we folded up boxes,
Put away Grandma's
Bobbins,
Thimbles,
And thread.
What I would remember of Grandma,

I told her this.
A decade ago,
When I still had tiny
Outstretched hands,
I knew Grandma
In the way her lap felt
So inviting,
So warm,
And so endless.
I told mom,
Now, I remember Grandma
In the way her weight
Looked heavy to carry
When she would
Groan,
Grunt,
And wheeze
When she slugged around.
Mom told me
That was part of growing up,
That not everything can stay
So innocent.

Mom asked if
There was anything else
I remembered of Grandma.
While I placed Grandma's
Menorah in a box,
And stared at the dry wax on its
Silver arms.
I quietly answered mom,
Sometimes, I remember Grandma
In the way she looked in the hospital bed
After her intestines
Dissolved,
After her stomach
Gave out.

Finally, as we put the last
Box on the curb,
Looked back at Grandma's house
Sighed in unity,
I told her,
Mostly, I remember Grandma
In the words
Oy Vey.



Face Space - Julia Ibarra

Sweet Sixteen

Karissa Moreno

Tired and exhausted from a long day at school, Tessa got off her bus and started her walk home. Even though she was tired, she couldn't help but feel excited because she would begin planning her sixteenth birthday party with her mom, Callie. As she arrived home, she was greeted by her dog Max, and began to pet him as he wagged his tail.

"Mom, I'm home," shouted Tessa.

"Finally! Now let's get started with your party planning," her mother exclaimed.

Excited and eager, Tessa placed her backpack on the couch and ran to the kitchen to greet her mother, and they began planning where they were going to buy supplies.

They began their errands, going to each store to gather everything they needed, but as soon as Tessa stepped into the store, she was hit with this weird feeling in her gut.

"Are you okay, Tess?" her mother asked.

"I'm fine Mom, I just have this funny feeling in my stomach, but it's probably from something I ate at lunch," Tessa replied as they continued shopping.

They both went their separate ways to make their trip faster. As Tessa walked down the balloon aisle, she bumped into a woman who dropped all the items in her hands. She quickly began to apologize while she helped the woman gather the items from the floor.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am! I wasn't looking at where I was going," Tessa exclaimed.

"Don't worry about it. That's okay," the nice woman replied.

Tessa met the eyes of the woman and when she did, she was filled with that same weird feeling she felt when they first stepped into the store. The woman felt oddly familiar, almost as if Tessa had known this person. Once Tessa finished helping the woman, she gave her a smile and walked back to find her mother and told her of the situation. Her mother dismissed the encounter, applauded Tessa for being polite, and they soon headed home to do more planning.

The week passed slowly, and Tessa counted down each day. It was finally Friday, and school was done. Getting off her bus, Tessa practically began to run home to add finishing touches to her party. Oblivious to everything around her and only focused on going home, she ignored all her surroundings. As she began to turn down the familiar street to her home, an insanely strong person came from behind Tessa and covered her head. They carried her to what felt like the back of a vehicle. Scared and afraid, Tessa began kicking and shouting for help, but the sound of her voice was muffled.

"Somebody help me please! Anybody," Tessa tried to scream but couldn't.

After pleading for help for what seemed like forever, Tessa eventually ended up falling asleep because of how exhausted she was. When she woke up, she realized she wasn't inside the vehicle anymore. She was laying on the cold hard floor inside what looked like a basement.

"Hello?" shouted a confused and fearful Tessa.

She received no response and thought she was alone until she heard the door creak, and a bit of light began to shine down to where she

lay. She saw a dark, slim figure make its way down the stairs and reach to turn on the light. Horrified at who she saw, she began to scoot back as far away as she could from the stranger with a familiar face.

“I’ve waited fifteen years for this moment, little one,” said the stranger with a familiar face.

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?” Tessa asked.

As the stranger got closer, Tessa realized she had no more room once her back hit the wall.

“Hi Eliana, my name is Meredith,” the woman said with a smile.

Tessa suddenly remembered where she recognized the woman from. This was the woman from the store, the woman she had accidentally bumped into.

“I don’t understand? My name is Tessa, not Eliana. You’ve got the wrong person,” Tessa questioned.

Meredith began laughing while Tessa sat bewildered and fearful for what was going to happen next.

“I want to go home please, let me go home,” Tessa pleaded.

“Don’t you understand, Eliana? You *are* home,” Meredith grinned.

“I don’t understand, can you please just let me go?” Tessa cried.

“I’m sorry, Eliana, but I can’t do that. I can’t lose you again.” Meredith’s statement earned a weird look from Tessa as she tried her hardest to understand the situation she was in.

“What do you mean *again*? We’ve never met at all except for our accident at the store. Please just take me back home to my mom,” She pleaded once more.

“But don’t you understand, Eliana? You are home. You’re home with me. It’s me, Mom,” the stranger expressed.

Still confused as ever, Tessa hesitated but asked, “Can you please explain to me what is going on? I’m completely lost.”

“Fourteen years ago on this day, you were taken from me and my heart has been aching ever since that day. After you went missing, the authorities and I searched for you for so long, and eventually, they gave up, but I never did. By the time you turned four, I had hired a private investigator in hopes of finding you. Once they were able to find you, I kept my eyes on you ever since, just waiting for the perfect time to bring you home to me. I made a promise to myself that when you turned sixteen, I would finally come for you, and I would tell you everything. Then I could finally bring you home to me, where you belong”, the stranger finally confessed.

Tessa sat confused as she tried to let the information sink in.

“What do you mean I was kidnapped?” she blurted out.

“I remember that day like it was yesterday. We went outside to sit and enjoy the weather. You had just spilled your juice all over yourself, so I ran inside for just one second to bring napkins to clean you. All it took was one second, and you were gone. I came back outside, and you weren’t in your chair anymore. I looked up to see a woman with a hood on, running away with you in her arms. She took you and put you in her car and sped off,” Meredith further explained. Tessa

hesitantly asked, “What did the woman look like?”

She didn’t want to know the answer to this question, but she felt that sick feeling in her stomach again. She knew she had to ask.

“She had dark brown hair and freckles on her face with bright blue eyes. She was about 5’6” and pale. I never forget a face,” Meredith said.

Tessa’s heart dropped to her stomach when she heard the description. She tried to convince herself how common it was for someone to have those features, and maybe she would’ve fully been able to convince herself if Meredith hadn’t said two distinctive details about Callie that separated her from the rest.

“She also had a large mole covering the left side of her cheek and a scar on the top of her right eyebrow.”

It was at that moment Tessa felt as if her world had been rocked to the core.

Tessa felt scared and afraid of everyone. Her whole life had been a lie. The woman she had been living with for almost fourteen years had been lying to her all this time. She felt very vulnerable and didn’t know how to react. All she knew was that she wanted to get away from everyone and everything. She didn’t know who to trust anymore, and she felt like her entire life was built on lies, but she hated the fact that for some reason she felt a strange connection to the woman in front of her. She wondered how the woman she loved and trusted could have done such a horrible thing to another woman. How could she take another woman’s child and lie to herself and to her ‘daughter’ after all these years? Tessa realized then that people are not always who they claim to be, even those who are trusted the most still have ways they can betray us.



Graffiti - Natalie Rodriguez

The Things I Didn't Live Through

Maria Pizano

Sometimes I feel
that I shouldn't write
about the things
I didn't live through.

I feel that I should write
about my own experiences,
my own suffering,
my own pain.

It's hard,
though.

It's hard not to write
about the things
I didn't live through

because I saw them live through it.

No vengan,

dice mi Abuela.

I watched
as she cried silently
for days before it happened.

When I asked her
if she was okay,
she told me
of course,
she wasn't okay,

because who,

who would be okay now?

We went to bed
that night.
She went to sleep.
We heard the phone ring.

*Mi Reyna, she cried.
Nunca te volví a mirar.*

Veintiún años.

I watched the suffering.
I watched it happen twice,
no, four times.
Every time it happened,
I sat there on that couch.
Thinking about what
I could do.

What could I possibly do?

It happened
at age twelve,
at age thirteen,
and then twice
when I was seventeen

I don't know
what I could've done.
Because I know that
I am part of the reason
they couldn't avoid this pain.

So, I'm left
with this
nagging sensation
that I shouldn't complain.
I'm left
with this feeling
that it isn't my place
to feel upset.

They have no more people
to lose across nations.
Across borders that seem
to get wider...
and
wider...
everyday.

There will never be pain
that matches
the pain they felt
at those four instances.
Veintiún años.
I watched the suffering.
I watched it happen twice,

no, four times.
Every time it happened,
I sat there on that couch.
Thinking about what
I could do.

I don't know where to go from here.
I don't know
if I can keep hope.
Because the vivid hope
that I held onto
is gone now.
The shimmering experience
I thought I'd have one day,
has been crushed.
Honestly,
things are bleaker
than they've ever been.

And the only thing
I feel that I can do
is write about
the things I didn't live through.



Girl - Yazmin Medina

Work in Progress

N.R. Jasso

The alarm clock sitting on my desk next to my box of matches is the only line I have between life and death. It gawks at me, mocking my every move. Ticking as it reminds me of the hours I spent sitting on this tiresome chair. Days I spent watching the envelopes arrive towards my front door slot, not even finding the energy to set them somewhere other than where they reside since they arrived. Staring me down as I lift my pen and then place it back up on my desk after giving some thought to (compensation for) what I will write to provide closure. The word 'closure' becoming an almost foreign feeling, for both her and me.

I cannot even blame her for wanting to get rid of me, for I am the one that created her. She was beautiful, subjectively beautiful. A duchess of a grand dynasty, living her life in riches. A woman who fell in love easily and had her suitors return the same feeling. She bore fabrics of velvet and satin and could speak without judgment. She was the very woman I was not. Maybe that is why I felt the need to completely tear her down. Yes, she was beautiful, but her life was oh so tragic. A duchess of a grand dynasty who had been orphaned at an early age. A woman who fell in love easily but who had been taken advantage of by all her suitors. She bore fabrics of velvet and satin to use as an escape and spoke without judgment because the only person she could speak to was herself. It was not a wonder she wanted to get rid of me. Only a cruel person could bestow such hardships on somebody.

My hand has passed the point of feeling any pain, instead, being replaced with a cold numbness. A fresh set of blisters on my fingers replacing the previous as I continue writing. Scraps of crumpled paper surround my desk. A mixture of unused endings and

lost possibilities. Words that I plan to never see the light of day. I bite my nails every once in a while, to keep myself awake. If I were to fall asleep at this point, it could very well be the last slumber I could have. My alarm clock ticks on, reminding me of the little time I have left to provide closure. I bite my nail again and wince at the blood I accidentally draw. I suck at my thumb, shake it off, and pick up my pen once more.

A few lines later, and I am in a palace of marble walls and glass floors. The ceiling is an array of the smallest white specks that illuminate the pathway towards a sobbing girl on a golden throne. I approach with my only weapon being the pen in my hand. She is a faceless woman staring down a face she recognizes all too well. She approaches me with all the emotional baggage she has carried with her throughout all these years and begins chasing me down. I can't go far with a glass floor being my only surface. I can only stare down at the empty night sky as I fall face first, my nose cracking at impact. She approaches me with vengeance, pleading with me to finish her ending. I promise over and over that I will. She shakes her head, fed up with my empty promises. When... when... when?!

My alarm clock jolts me back to reality. I return to the same dull room with yellow wallpaper that I have memorized inside and out by now. A piece of paper is attached to my cheek. I remove it from my face as I notice my fingers are smudged in black ink. The same black liquid is covered on my face and right under my nose. No sign of injury is left on where I had fallen. The clock hand points to the number three as I wince. I hadn't even been asleep for an hour and already I had almost lost the battle. What would happen if I couldn't wake up next time?

If I slept through my alarm? I glance at the stack of letters at my front door, and it has almost doubled since I last paid mind to it. As I move to pick up the pen I had dropped on the floor, sharp pain in my stomach sends me collapsing onto it. It has been a week since I last had a proper meal. While I would rather not take a break, the pain will only keep distracting me. I realize it is in my best interest to put something in my system.

I stumble a bit when getting up, my knees cracking as I lift myself from the floor. My daily routine has almost been completely lost, still, I manage to collect my letters, just as I would do any day. However, when I approach my front door, there are no letters. The space in front of the mail slot is empty. Perhaps I had picked them up, placed them elsewhere, and simply forgotten. Or perhaps there were never any letters in the first place. Paying no more mind, I shift towards the front door, but she stands there right before me. Just as she did in my dream. The faceless woman who has tormented me for weeks in my sleep is now more real than ever. She lunges at me and pulls me toward the door, knocking me against the wall. If I were in a better state maybe I could have fought back. All I can do is grab her arm and slam the door against her fingers. Over and over and over again, making sure I can do some damage. As much damage as I can. Until she can no longer feel her hands again. With her other arm, she pushes me toward my vanity mirror in front of my desk, shoving me against the glass.

This is the first time I am able to see her face in whole. But the face that looks back at me is my own. A more pale, slim, version of myself that bores dark circles and disheveled hair. She gawks at me for a moment and let's go, giving me a moment to relax. She seems to be more confused than I am. Stepping back, she analyzes me for a moment, then simply says, "You are too much like me."

My alarm rings once more. I am on the floor this time. Black ink drips from atop of the desk, landing right next to my hand. My hand is dark purple and throbbing. I would cry at this point if it were not for the fact that I am more dehydrated than ever. Instead, I choose to laugh. I laugh and laugh as I stumble my way up. As I make my way to the mirror and startle myself thinking I am staring at her. But it is only me. Just as she was, just as I am.

The ticking of my alarm clock continues to mock me. Teasing me with life and death. I take it with my other hand and throw it towards the mirror, shattering the glass. Shards of glass fall beside me. From the reflection of the remaining pieces, my attention turns back towards my novel. It is now completely stained in black ink. My breath hitches as I run my injured hand over the pages, collecting black ink on my fingertips.

I take the box of matches, the same one that has been sitting upon my desk for over a month now, toss my novel on the ground and set it aflame. The wooden floor catches quickly and spreads around the entire room. However, in the midst of the fire, the novel does not burn. Instead, it sits perfectly intact as I am consumed by the flames.

Solo un Mal Momento

Veronica Vazquez Hernandez

The truck smelled like Little Trees Black Ice air freshener and the leather seat was cold against my thighs. That chilly morning, I wished whoever decided girls' tennis shorts would be an inch long would have a flock of pigeons fly over their car to shit. Then, my subconscious told me "What the fuck is wrong with you?" and I snapped back to reality. I hated asking my brother for favors, but who else on earth would wake up at the crack of dawn to give me a ride to school. We were silent the whole ride and I didn't talk to my brother because I didn't want him to kvetch about waking him up so early and I didn't want to hear his voice. My anxiety was through the roof and being yelled at would not have helped, so I decided to focus on something else, the sunrise. However, the pretty shades of yellows, reds, and purples did not make the butterflies in my stomach disappear, but at least my brother was finally coming to a stop in front of the competition gym.

Before getting out of the car, I could see some of the tennis team members chatting and I could see the coach standing in front of everyone trying to spot which of the members was coming next. Still in the car, I quickly double-, then triple-checked I had everything I needed for the tennis tournament. Once I had said my dry, "Bye. Gracias," to my brother, I stepped out into the fresh air and my brother drove away. Oh fuck, I was about to play in my first tennis tournament, and I couldn't even hit the ball right during practice. Now feeling nauseous, I said hi to everyone that had arrived so far, then Spring, one of my friends on the team who knew how to play, came up to me. She began talking to me about how she was so excited for this tournament and how her partner for doubles would be Kat, another one of my friends on the team

who was an expert at playing tennis. I envied them. I wished I was as good as them, but going to school for eight hours, having to go to tennis practice, being yelled at for not hitting the ball with the correct form, and going home at sundown just to have enough time to do homework and sleep, was tough to handle for me. I set school as my priority and I would miss practice sometimes so I could finish college assignments or catch up on some sleep because my body was begging for more rest. I told Spring how I was feeling so nervous and that I was not sure the coach made the right decision by taking me to this tournament. But she said "You'll be fine. If you do bad, it's okay 'cause everyone does bad on their first tournament. Just have fun!". I said "I'll try" without any confidence, then I asked "Where's Lily? The bus is about to be here and we are supposed to leave at 6:30". Spring said that there were still a lot of people missing and ten minutes before we were about to take off, they all arrived.

With my blue mesh Nike backpack in one hand and my tennis racket in the other, I sat by myself at a random seat on the bus. When I'm nervous I tend to overshare or stutter or make no fucking sense whatsoever, which makes every interaction I have with a human being embarrassing, so I just figured I'd sit alone. I tried to eat, but I could only get a couple small bites of a chocolate chip cookie before I felt nauseous again. I hated having anxiety and being nervous; I felt like I had no control over my body and like I needed to run a marathon to get the horrible tingling feeling out. But, being trapped on a bus and all, I just decided to listen to some music on my headphones for a while. After a couple of minutes of being on the road, I decided to watch some YouTube videos of Serena Williams playing a match at Wimbledon, hoping that by some miracle

some of her God-given talent would transfer to me. Of course, that never happened; a girl could only dream.

Next thing I know the bus was rolling into a parking lot that was next to some random schools' tennis courts. From my window I could see different kids from other schools. Some of them had letterman jackets on, while others wore matching sweatpants and hoodies with their teammates. God, they looked so cool and like they knew what they were doing. I was clearly terrified, no, intimidated is the word. My teammates were also looking through the windows while some of them said "Why don't we have matching uniforms?" and others, "Are we all staying in the same school? Or are we getting split up?" I wanted to explode because there was too much going on. Coach was the first one out of the bus because he had to check in with all of the other coaches, but once he came back, we were all set to go. Coach had split us up, told us what bus would be taking us to the school we would be playing at, and told us who our partners would be. Lily and I would be playing "Girls Doubles B" at the same school at which Spring and Kat would be playing "Girls Doubles A," so we all took the same bus filled with strangers to go to an unknown school.

Getting off of the bus, I'm not going to lie, I felt a rush of confidence travel through my body and I have no idea why. As Lily, Winter, Spring, and I began to walk to this random school's tennis courts, I stood a little taller because I was representing my school district and I didn't want others to think we sucked just by the way we stood. Though my skills would later let them know that I was a fraud, my group of friends and I took a seat on the bleachers that stood in front of the tennis courts and we waited for our names to be called. We waited for what seemed like hours until finally the random school's tennis coordinator called Spring and Kat to play

their first match. Lily and I cheered for them for a while and then just watched them play until they lost by two points. Spring and Kat were so disappointed. I just thought that if they couldn't win with their bomb-ass skills, how were Lily and I supposed to win? The butterflies were trapped in my stomach again, but I had no time to relax because Lily and I were called out to play. We played against two other girls and later lost our first match zero to eight.

After our first game, Lily and I reflected on things we could've done better as partners, but we also talked about our mutual hatred for the girls we played against. However, our small chat was cut short because we were called out to play our second match. Halfway through our second game, I felt confident because me and Lily were somehow winning by two points. Then it was my turn to serve, and I was sure we could win because serving was the only thing I was good at in tennis. Next, I prepared to hit the ball, threw it in the air and then slammed it down with all of the force I had. When I focused back on the game and my eyes tried to find the ball on the court, all I could see was our opponents shocked and looking at Lily who was covering her face with both hands. I tried to figure out what was wrong and then I saw Lily's glasses on the floor snapped in half. My dumbass had hit Lily right in the middle of her face with the ball I had just served. I felt horrible so I asked her if she was okay, even though I knew she wasn't, and for a second, I saw hatred flash in her face that quickly turned into a smile. Lily had always been a bubbly and happy person, but I don't know how she did not want to fight me right then and there. Lily said she was fine and the game ended because she could obviously not see. However, I began to cry not because we could not continue the game, but because Lily said, "I feel so insecure without my glasses." I hated feeling insecure and I would never wish it upon anyone, so I

bawled my eyes out because I did not only physically hurt my friend, but I had also managed to make her feel insecure.

When I got home, I told my parents what had happened and my mom said, “No pasa nada los accidentes pasan,” while my dad agreed and said that I should offer to pay for Lily’s glasses since I made her go through a bad moment. Though I offered, Lily wouldn’t let my family pay for her glasses, she said, “Insurance will cover it” and that was that. Now every time I see her or any of the other tennis team members, we remember this one bad moment and laugh.



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