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LOS ANGELES

miscellany

VOLUME 70

....

2022

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S E N S E S .

...

TAYLOR CROWELL, CLASS OF 2025

Her childhood tastes like ripe tangerines on her lips,
warm, amber sunshine that slips into her mouth.

Her childhood smells like dusty daylight on an old window screen,
California mountains that shaped the curves of her body.

Her childhood feels like a worn-down carpet brushing against her fingertips,
a once white, now off-white relic of her home tattooed on her skin.

Her childhood sounds like children screeching over chlorine splashing into her ears,
the roll of bikes and scooters passing her by, quick bursts of wind whispering now-forgotten secrets.

Her childhood looks like everything sweet and good with naiveté, even with its stains and wrinkles,
a picture of a bickering family, the call down the block for dinner, red polka-dot strawberry fields, the
orange creamsicle sky that melted off the sun each night, like butter on warm sourdough toast.

Oh how she wishes she could go back, crawl if she could,
back into the years that now live in the crevasses of her memory,
and wrap her childhood around her like a blanket,
safe and pillowed from the rest of the world.

But she cannot.

Because time marches on.

The world tilts on its axis each day,

and she has problems and responsibilities and sadness and happiness to attend to now,

but this is more real than anything she has ever known,

and it is not easier,

not easier at all,

but she does not only have things to look back on,

she has things to look forward to.

THE PHEASANT

...

SHOKI BUNDY, CLASS OF 2023

In the corner of Jiji's¹ garden

Beside the stone pagoda

An almond-colored crescent

Clunks and crashes

Against a sickly steel casket

Cloaked in ripe verdure.

He's been there for years

Incessantly mute, forever impatient

He had company once

But she fled from their cell

When the door was left open.

¹ grandfather

His only company now is Jiji
Who feeds him twice daily
It's hard to imagine
The rage he must feel
When he submits
To the mulish hand that feeds him.

But it's hard to blame Jiji
For he and the bird
Strangers in Intimacy
Yet bound like tired siblings
Will welcome death's inching embrace



HOMEMADE POND (PHOTOGRAPHY) • VERO URUBIO, CLASS OF 2022

THE MANNEQUINS OF EDITH HEAD

...

GABRIELLE JOHNSEN, CLASS OF 2022

Nakedness had been a condition not easily discouraged, but then
bluebell lips expired air, and the cold molded clouds out of the refuse.
Bad habits form. Frigid schoolyard children pretend to pass
smoke through their baby teeth, less dragon fangs than doctored
pearls between the resinned lips of *la belle dame* on-screen. Sans *merci*, she
spins spider's silk across each drifting word. Her figure floats in whispers.
Only so much
skin exists.

A starlet and her costume, flattened
together under the lens, congealed
and sealed in symbiotic envy.
The beating heart covets
grace unencumbered by sweat;
the fabric wants autonomy.

Edith's fingers in the glory days, worn,
nails shorn and shedding, sewing
feathers into Paramount's birds of paradise,
molding the arches of their flamingos'
feet, pointed mid-air. Edith sitting before the fittings,
in profile, alone, surrounded
in her sanctum with darling mannequins,
plush forms steady against pin-stabs
and needle-slip-pricks. A coven of the headless
feminine, the blueprint Miss America
pageant. No body-blood to draw, no
animation. All is velvet silhouette.

An impoverished series of moving pictures survive, condemned
to swim through the marshes of the American dreamscape, stained,

calcified, and fried in infancy. A legacy: a series of drawing board lines,
which, if rearranged, would otherwise resemble the crosshatching
of a thatch cabin chimney smoking on a stony winter's night.

A spell, once cast, lasts only until dawn:

 a lone train slumbers before the shrieking
 and the steaming and the places to be seen.

The dresses articulate themselves in the language
 we all would have spoken, had Adam not
 choked on his bite of the apple.

DREAMS THAT RAIN

...

LEXISS MORGAN, CLASS OF 2023

Cyrus and I are dripping wet from our wade through the Millrun River. The summer breeze dries us off as we wander through the trees. There is a calmness to these woods, one that I can always rely on for comfort.

Every last day of summer vacation has been the same since he and I were kids: we explore the woods to try and find purple gladiolus flowers to bring back home. They can't be the pink ones, nor the yellow ones. Not even the white ones with flecks of purple. The flowers have to be purple through and through. I'm not quite sure how this became an annual thing, but I try not to dwell on it.

Cyrus has a tree branch, that he's broken off, in hand. "Hey, man, don't you think teenage boys looking for flowers is kinda gay? Maybe this should be our last year, people might start thinking we're fruity." I shoot him a look of annoyance, he says this every year. Cyrus is always worried about his appearance, always wondering what 'they' would think—whoever 'they' might be. That explains why he picks out his clothes the night before school, and why he takes nearly an hour to do his hair in the morning. But who cares what people think? What we're doing isn't any of their business. And I know that deep down he never wants this annual trek to stop... and neither do I.

I puff out my chest, mocking those stupid self-proclaimed 'Alpha Male' pickup artists, and say, coolly, "Nah, Cy, we're just those edgy, sensitive guys you see in the movies that all the chicks fall for." Cyrus rolls his eyes at my

impersonation. Now I say normally, "Plus, we've been doing this shit since we were kids, so why stop now? And what would we even do instead? Play video games in your depressing little room all day and eat random shit you left on the floor? Let's just stick to the flowers, dude."

Cyrus lets out a soft grunt of agreement. "Yeah, yeah."

Though... I understand what Cyrus is saying. Finding the flowers is kind of lame and has lost its spark, over the years. But we both need this.

. : : : . : : : . : : : . : : : .

We've been walking for what feels like hours, though no more than a couple have probably passed. My legs are getting tired, and I just want to go home, sit on the living room couch, and watch some TV before Dad gets home.

"AHHH WE'RE NEVER GOING TO FIND THEM! This time last year we'd already found 'em, maybe they're just not growing this year?" Cyrus thrashes a new, bigger broken tree branch around, striking nothing but air.

I take the branch from his hands, annoyed that he's not making proper use of the makeshift weapon, and start hitting him with it. "Shut your ass up. I'm sure we'll find them soon."

About one hundred feet up ahead, we notice a clearing and decide to take a break up there. The clearing is full of overgrown weeds and uneven, patchy grass that looks about ready to die. We

find a nice, shaded edge of the clearing and I sit up against a tree while Cyrus just kind of... stands in front of me. He has one hand up to his chin, indicating that he's thinking of something.

"Bro, what if Andrei picked them all?"

Another excuse for why we aren't finding the flowers. "No way, he's like... seventy. I doubt he'd have the energy for that."

"The guy was in a *prison* gang, the hell do you mean he wouldn't have the energy?"

"The dude's built like a praying mantis! And again, he's SEVENTY. I'm telling you there's no way he coulda picked all the glads."

"Well. Okay, you got me there. But I'd bet he could still kick our asses."

"He definitely could kick *your* ass, Swifty."

"HEY! Just because I *happened* to be crying while listening to *Fearless* doesn't mean I'd get my ass kicked by an old man. And I wasn't crying... it uhhh... started raining... on my face... while I was listening to Taylor Swift."

I raise an eyebrow. "Uh-huh, *raining*."

"Okay yeah I was crying, but that just means I'm in touch with my emotions!" Cyrus said, smugly. "At least I'm not some weirdo like you who hasn't cried in four years."

I don't have a comeback for that one. I look at the ground and start picking at the grass, trying to think of something else to talk about.

Cyrus realizes what he's said. "Hey... I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't. It's fine... Swifty."

We laugh it off, and a pleasant silence falls between us. It's that comfortable kind of silence where I don't feel like I need to say or do anything to keep Cyrus from getting bored of me. Right now, in this moment, we can just enjoy the sounds of rustling leaves and singing birds.

After about fifteen minutes, I get up from the ground and stretch, signifying to Cyrus that we should start moving again. Not even ten feet into walking, something at the opposite end of the

clearing catches my eye. I squint to make sure I am seeing correctly. Sure enough, I saw the purple gladiolus flowers entangled within the weeds that signaled the end of our journey. I run over to the flowers and Cyrus follows quickly behind. We check each petal to confirm they are fully purple; and thankfully, we can now head back home.

Cyrus lets out a breath of relief. "Dude, they were here the entire time? Damn... we're kinda stupid, huh?"

I kneel to pick a few flowers out of the bunch—a souvenir for today's adventure. As soon as I pull the last flower out of the ground, I feel a chill go down my spine, one that I've only felt once in my life. I look around me, searching for the reason why I felt this way, silently hoping that I won't find anything. Then, behind me, in the clearing, I see something that I can confidently say wasn't there before.

A circular stone dais about twenty feet in diameter with a pedestal of crudely stacked rocks in the center of it sits quietly on the grass. It reminds me of that Sword in the Stone attraction they have over at Disneyland, except instead of a sword on the pedestal, there's some weird brick-looking thing sitting on it. I look over to Cyrus and find him staring at the dais. I can't read his expression.

"Yoooo, how did we miss something like this?" Cyrus heads towards the dais.

"Cyrus, we didn't *miss* anything, that was NOT there before."

"Well. I don't believe in that paranormal junk so it musta been there the whole time, we just didn't notice. What's that uhh... cognitive dissonance stuff again? Or... selective inattention? I dunno, but there's gotta be a logical reason for what's going on."

I start walking towards the dais, unsure of what might happen next. I get a clearer view of what I thought was the brick: turns out it's actually an alarm clock radio. Cyrus reaches for the clock on the pedestal, moving cautiously as if

a giant boulder is about to crush us as soon as he picks it up.

“What the hell is this piece of junk?” Cyrus fiddles with the clock, turning it over in his hands and pressing every button on it. He almost immediately loses interest and tosses it over to me.

I almost drop it. “What’re you giving this to me for?”

“I don’t need it.”

“And I do??”

“Well, you *do* take forever to wake up in the morning.”

“But that doesn’t mean I should take home random stuff!”

“Well, why not? You can have a different souvenir than just the glads this year.” He starts walking back towards the way we came. “C’mon, we found the flowers. Time to go back home.”

I let out a short sigh, making sure Cyrus can hear my discontent. I want to put the clock back onto the pedestal and forget about the whole thing, but something in the back of my mind is telling me that I shouldn’t. “Aye, Cyrus, wait up!”

⋮⋮⋮⋮ ⋮⋮⋮⋮ ⋮⋮⋮⋮ ⋮⋮⋮⋮

Cyrus and I walk out of the forest and out into the street. I fumble with the clock in my hands, analyzing all the little buttons and dials.

“You know... I know I wasn’t around when these things were popular... but I don’t think this is what this thing is supposed to look like.” I motion towards the face of the clock. “So, you see the flip numbers to show the time here, that’s normal... well minus the fact that half of the numbers are missing. But never mind that, what the hell’s up with these four extra number slots?”

“I think that’s for the year, dummy,” Cyrus says, confidently. He takes the clock and studies it for a second, finding a dial on the underside of the four number slots, and turns it. The numbers on the clock face quickly circle through the years

1994 through 2010. Cyrus snickers, proud that he figured this out. He stops messing with the dial and the numbers land on 2004, then he sets the clock back into my hands.

“Th-that doesn’t even make sense! Why would a clock need to have years on it? And why does it only cycle through the years we’ve been alive? I’ll bet you this shit’s cursed.”

“Well, that’s why I’m making you take it home.”

The only sound between us is the beat of our shoes hitting the pavement. The setting sun casts a red-orange glow on our faces. My hands are sweaty from holding the clock and the flowers for so long, and my legs are about ready to give. We keep walking until we reach Malandro Lane, which is where my house is. Cyrus is just two blocks over at Jackson Street. We say our goodbyes and see you tomorrows, and then I head for home. Now I hear only the beat of my own shoes hitting the pavement.

Once I return home, I grab a transparent blue vase for the flowers, fill it with water, dump the flowers in, and set it on the mantelpiece next to some family pictures and dusty trophies.

“That should do it,” I mutter to myself.

I open the fridge and take yesterday’s leftovers and head up to my room. I throw the clock onto my bed and switch on the TV for background noise. The food is soggy. I would kill to have some decent home-cooked food for once. But neither Dad nor I can cook, so that option’s out the window.

Once I finish my food, I hop over to the bathroom to take a shower. I turn on the water and wait for it to heat up. I pull up that little thingy that changes the route of the water from the faucet to the showerhead. I get in. The thousands of water droplets are hot against my skin, and they wash away all the day’s accumulated dirt and grime.

About ten minutes into my shower, I hear the front door slam open. Dad’s home. I pick up the pace and quickly rinse the conditioner out of

my hair. I want to finish this shower as soon as possible so I can go back into my room without having to deal with Dad on what's been a pretty good day.

As soon as I finish toweling off, I make a beeline towards my room. But I'm too late. Dad walks out in front of me, beer bottle in hand.

"Hey." He lets out a small burp.

"Hey." I brace myself for whatever could come next.

"Did you put those flowers on the mantel?"

"... Yeah. What? You want me to take them down or—"

"No. They're nice."

"Okay..."

"I miss her, you know?"

"Dad."

"It's been four years."

"Dad." I grit my teeth. "I don't want to talk about this now."

"Well, when do you want to talk about it?" He raises his voice. "You get those flowers every fucking year and you still don't want to talk about it??"

"Well, maybe if you didn't drown yourself in alcohol, I'd feel better about talking to you! No use in talking to some incoherent loser who can't get his shit together." I hit a nerve.

In a swift motion, he swings his free hand at my face. I'm not able to protect myself in time. Blood starts trickling down from my lip and onto the floor. I grab at my shirt to stop the bleeding. Dad's eyes open wide, he realizes what he's done. He tries to say something—an apology, I assume—but his pride gets the better of him and he turns to go back downstairs.

I go back to the bathroom to take care of my lip. In the mirror, I see a purple bruise already forming below the split. I feel like I deserve this somehow, like all these bad things happen because I'm doing something wrong. Logically I know it's out of my control, but emotionally I feel that I just ruin everything; and more often than

not, my emotions overpower my reason.

After cleaning my lip and putting Vaseline on it, I return to my room, ready to call it a day. I lock my door to make sure that Dad can't bother me again. I slump into my rolling chair and stare at the ceiling. I can hear the soft buzz of electricity running through my lamp, as well as clanking bottles from downstairs. I crank my head over and stare at the clock sitting on my bed. I reach over and take it in hand. It's a lot heavier than I thought it'd be. I search for a free outlet and plug in the clock.

"Famous last words. Or... action, I guess."

The flip numbers automatically turn to 11:17, accompanied by the '2004' that Cyrus flipped to earlier; I was too lazy to change it to the current year. I check my computer to see if that's actually the time, and sure enough, it is. Weird. I also had no idea that it was already this late. I set the clock down on my desk, angling it so it faces my bed. I turn off all the lights and hop into bed. I look at the clock as I try to fall asleep. I like to count the minutes that go by so I can see how long it takes for me to go to sleep—it usually ends up being around fifteen minutes. As three, four, eight, then thirteen minutes go by, my eyelids get heavier and heavier, and I finally fall asleep.

.:~::~: :~:~:~: :~:~:~: :~:~:~: :~:~:~: :~:~:~: :~:~:~:

I find myself in a dream. I'm aware it's a dream because Cyrus and I thought it would be a fun idea to learn how to lucid dream back in middle school. He didn't quite pick it up, but I've been having fun in my own little world ever since. Right now, I'm just bouncing around in a cloudy scape enjoying the zero-gravity until I think of something to do. Suddenly, I hear footsteps from behind me. I turn around to see who they're coming from, but I don't see anybody. Again, the footsteps. This is weird. I continue turning around, half expecting someone to be there. So,

when I do eventually see a black shadowy figure, I stop in my tracks.

Looking at the figure, I get an oddly comforting sensation. Knowing the figure won't hurt me, probably, I ask, "Who...? Or what . . . are you?"

The figure ignores me and just keeps standing there.

"All right... ummm... do you have something you need to say to me, or can I just get along with my dream? I'm thinking of having a date with Natalie Portman, and I'd like to get to it before I wake up."

Ignoring me yet again, the figure extends its hands as if it wants to show me something. I inch closer, thinking that'll help speed up the process of getting rid of the thing. I look into its hands, and nothing is there. I'm getting impatient. "All right, dude, what is your prob—"

A violent poof of colorful smoke starts rising from the figure's hands, with the clock radio emerging from the small cloud. "Okay, great! This is progress! Now, what the hell am I supposed to do with it?"

I wait for a bit to see if I can get an answer, and right before I go off on the figure, I hear a deep, echoey voice that I feel could be the narrator of some action/mystery film. The voice, coming from everywhere, says, "An offered chance from spirits unknown, your saddened soul may become renewed. Take this moment to relive the past, for her death will always come at last."

"Huh?" I am thoroughly confused. "Is that Shakespeare?" Then, there is a soft rumble, and the landscape around me starts to melt away. I am in my living room, staring down at a ten-year-old me and Cyrus flipping through a giant book of introductory braille. Unintelligible words come from the young boys' mouths as they eagerly flip through the pages. I forgot this happened, but feelings of nostalgia resurface, and seeing this memory reanimated in front of me fills me with

longing. It was a simpler time. A happier one.

I hear a faint voice calling the two boys coming from upstairs. I can't quite make it out, and neither can the two in front of me.

The voice calls again. This time it's much closer. "What're you up to, boys?"

My eyes climb the steps and land on a woman who has a laundry basket in one hand and a couple of trash bags in the other. Her hair is loosely tied up with a purple scrunchie, and she is wearing a faded Bikini Kill band t-shirt. Mom. This is the first time I've seen her in four years. It's been four whole years since she took her own life. During that time, I never voluntarily looked at a single photo, and I did my best to avoid all thoughts of her. For so long, there was not a single moment that she ever found herself in my mind. And now, all at once, I see her again. My trance breaks when Cyrus jumps and follows Mom into the kitchen to show her the book of braille.

"Look, look, look!! These dots make letters! Isn't that so cool?"

"Yeah, that's super cool, Cy! What sparked you to learn braille, hon?"

"Tomorrow is the first day of December!"

"Okay...!" Mom always tried her best to be supportive, even if she didn't quite understand.

"That means it's Maya's birthday! I'm learning braille as her gift, that way I can talk with her more better! I don't want her to feel sad because she can't see too good."

"Ohhh, of course!" Mom lets out a chuckle and pats Cyrus on the head. "You're a great older brother, Cyrus, don't ever lose that love for your siblings."

Cyrus smiles wide, but all you can really see are gaps from lost teeth... some of which I may have punched out of him.

From behind me, I hear the click of the front door unlocking. I instinctively step a few feet forward so I won't get hit by the door, even though I know it would just pass right through

years, and nearly half of the minute numbers are missing... they go through like zero through thirty-one... which kinda defeats the purpose of it being a clock.”

“Well, now that just sounds like an unnecessarily complicated calendar to me.” Cyrus says this absentmindedly while eating the fries from my tray and watching a couple pass by.

I look over to Cyrus, then down at the ground, then back at Cyrus again. I start to piece the parts of this puzzle together.

“CYRUS, YOU’RE A GENIUS!!”

“Cool.” He’s still eating my fries. “How so?”

“Okay, so my dream took place when we were ten. That was in 2004, which was the year you flipped it to when you were messing with the buttons and dials yesterday! And then, I fell asleep around 11:30 last night, and it was November 30th in my dream!”

“How’d you know it was November 30th?”

“Ten-year-old you mentioned something about Maya’s birthday. Remember that time we were learning braille?”

“Yeah...” Cyrus stops eating my fries. “Hahaha, man, I totally forgot about that!”

“Yeah, me too!” I pause for a second, thinking. “Do you know what this means?”

“You’re incredibly susceptible to the power of suggestion?”

“Wha- no! Quit being such a sarcastic shit! This means that I can relive ANY moment in my life! You saw the years, Cy, I can go back to the day I was born or even revisit yesterday! I just gotta time when I fall asleep just right!”

“All right, Marty McFly, do and think what you will.” Cyrus takes my chocolate milk and opens it.

“Dude... why can’t you believe me on this? Something supernatural is going on with that clock!”

“It’s not that I *don’t* believe you. More like I’m *pretending* that I don’t. Because as soon as I start believing in the supernatural, then I’m

gonna have to start believing in the paranormal and whatever other creepy stuff, and there’s no *way* I’m gonna mess with that shit. So, I choose to ignore what you say completely.”

“Cy... you’re so weird.”

“Guilty as charged.” He chugs the chocolate milk, finishing it all in one go.

“I’m gonna mess around with that clock some more. Then maybe I can find some answers to...” I don’t want to finish that thought. Cyrus doesn’t ask me to.

Cyrus turns to me and looks me in the eyes. “Well... whatever you choose to do... I’ll be here. If things get too hard, then let me help. Okay?”

“Okay.”

.:~::~ ~::~ ~::~ ~::~

“Okay, so over the last few weeks, I’ve experimented with the clock to see the extent of its power. Comparing the time travel dreams to my memory, each dream so far has been an *exact* replica of what I remember and then some. All of this shows that this clock is a thousand percent legit! It’s completely unbelievable that something like this even exists! There are SO many things that I’ve learned and can find out, or at least understand better, now that I’m older!” I rant like a madman pacing back and forth in Cyrus’s living room as he sits on the couch and watches me have a breakthrough.

“Anything else you’ve learned?”

“Well...” I have a lot to say, so I say it as fast as possible. “My Mom was on antidepressants and benzos, Dad used to smoke, our cat got hit by a car, Dad got suspended from high school 14 times, my grandparents were accomplices to a bank robbery, I almost had a younger sibling, our moms used to—”

“Okay! I get it. So what next?”

“Uh...” I falter a bit. I know logically the next step is to understand Mom’s death, but...

I'm scared of what I'll find out. "Maybe I'll just hang out with Mom a little more, see what she was up to when I was at school or something."

"Nope. You aren't going to waste any more time like this. What you're going to do is revisit the days before her... passing and see what was going on behind the scenes. Your Dad's never sober enough to talk to you about it, so you have to see it for yourself, otherwise, you're never going to get over this. Sorry for being super blunt, dude, but this is a chance that *nobody* gets. You have to be smart about it." Cyrus abruptly looks away, breaking eye contact and pretending to focus on something else. His attempt to appear deep in thought about those mighty interesting tattered curtains is pointless, because in his eyes I can see the unmistakable glint of tears being held back.

I'm kind of shocked, I've never seen Cyrus so shaken. I suppose it makes sense though, my Mom was almost like his own. She'd often take care of him and his siblings since their parents were always out working. So many nights she had to feed three extra mouths, but never once did she complain about doing so: they were always welcomed with open arms. We're his family. And, as family, he wants closure too.

"You're right, Cyrus."

He takes a deep breath and faces me again. "Damn straight." And the normal Cyrus is back.

I sit down on the couch next to Cyrus. The midday sun shines through the window, a warm blanket that covers the both of us. Upstairs, I can hear Maya and Cyrus' little brother talking and playing together.

I take a deep breath. "I have these journals I write. Been writing 'em since about a year and a half before Mom's... suicide. It's been a good outlet, especially since Mom and Dad were always fighting around that time. And even now it helps sort out the jumbled mess inside my head. But anyway, that's besides the point. I've marked all the days that would probably be the

most important to revisit... and most of them are probably the worst days I've ever had. I know I've got to see them again, but I'm scared of what I'll see, what I'll hear... I don't know if I can do it."

"You can. I believe in you."

.....

Back at home, I prepare for the worst nights of sleep I'll probably ever have. I rifle through the pages of a navy-blue notebook that I originally wrote my journals in. I marked the important days with sticky tabs, most of which are yellow. There are only two days that are colored differently. Those two days are marked in red, and they are the days that I feel are most important for understanding what was happening to Mom in the months before her suicide: the first is Mom's birthday, and the second is when mom got the news that Uncle Erik died.

With a cheap neon green mechanical pencil, I map out my plan for the next two nights on a loose-leaf sheet of paper. "So, February 17th is Mom's birthday... I'll have to go to sleep at 2:17 a.m. since I missed this afternoon... year's gotta be changed to 2006..." I mumble under my breath as I scratch out random lines and numbers connecting to one another. "Next up... April 28th... Uncle Erik croaked... gotta sleep at 4:28... afternoon should work, so I won't have to stay up 'til the ass crack of dawn..."

I lean back in my chair and look at the clock. I talk to it as if it'll answer me. "Are you really gonna fix anything? Will I feel even the slightest bit better after visiting the past?" I let out a sigh. I truly don't know if this will help anything, but it's better than just sitting in ignorance.

I walk out of my room and down the stairs, floorboards creaking with every step. Dad has the night shift on weekends, so I don't have to worry about having any awkward (and potentially violent) run-ins with him—I can just enjoy the

night all to myself. I pass by the gladioli on the mantel, which are long wilted by now. Shriveled-up petals sit at the foot of the vase, the stems all gnarled and brown. I leave them there, as if cleaning them up is somehow an insult to Mom. I go into the kitchen and examine the pantry for anything good to snack on before I go back to my room and patiently wait for it to become 2:17. I take a bag of salt and vinegar chips, a few rice crackers Cyrus' mom gave to me, and some chocolate wafers to balance it all out. Not the healthiest, but definitely a good coping mechanism for what I'm about to deal with. Back in my room, I eat my snacks and watch TV while waiting for the time to come.

The program I am watching comes to an end. I flip off the TV and put the pile of wrappers and crumbs, that have been waiting desperately to be thrown away, into the trash. I look over at the time and find that it is finally 2:00 a.m., meaning that it's almost time to go off into dreamland. I change into something a little more comfortable and jump into bed. Again, I count the minutes for how long it takes for me to fall asleep, making sure that I drift off at the right time.

I open my eyes and I am in the dining room. So are twelve-year-old me, Dad, and Mom. Donned in sparkly party hats, the trio sits around a pink birthday cake with large candles that say "40." The boy and Dad are serenading Mom with an incredibly off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday" while readying confetti poppers in hand. When the song ends, the confetti poppers pop, and the candles are blown out. They start digging into the cake. Little me has the biggest piece. Mom has the smallest.

Once the festivities die down, little me is ushered upstairs to go to bed. My parents stay down to talk a little longer. When this actually happened, I remember the soft hum of their voices lulling me to sleep. It felt calm at the time, but waking up the next day told me it was

the opposite. Now that I'm here again, I can understand what happened.

Mom sits at the dining table staring at nothing while Dad rinses the dishes we used for the cake.

"So, how do you feel, hon? Made it to the big four-zero!"

"Mhmm." She still stares at nothing.

"Mhmm?" Dad playfully imitates her as he puts the dishes into the dishwasher. "Where's your head at, Lia, everything all right?"

"Brian... how do you know when you've made it in life? That all your efforts aren't just for nothing... that you aren't just useless? I'm forty now and don't feel like my life means anything."

"C'mon don't think like that! Let's get a grip." Dad's always had a way of being a little insensitive.

Mom glares at him. She was never one to yell—but her expression delivers all the emotion she needs.

"Hey, hey, you know what I mean. I'm just saying that there's no reason for you to feel that way! We've got a beautiful family, a nice house, we can put warm food on the table... all kinds of things!"

"But is that all there is to it? What's the point of all of this if I still don't feel like I'm doing enough?"

"I don't know what to tell you, hon, but just know that you're everything I need and more. I'll go up first, see you in a bit." Dad kisses Mom on the forehead and goes upstairs.

Mom sits for a little while longer at the table. Her little talk with Dad obviously didn't help her mood. I want to hug her and let her know that everything is going to be okay, and that what she's feeling now will pass. But I know I can't change anything that will happen. After a few minutes go by, Mom slowly walks into the living room and towards the bookshelf. Tucked behind some books that are just there for show, she pulls out a small teal notebook with a pen attached to it.

She sits down on the couch and begins writing. I peer over her shoulder to see if I can find out any more information, but the words appear as gray scribbles across the page. I guess I shouldn't be prying anyway.

I retreat to the corner of the room, watching Mom write in the notebook. I never noticed when I was younger, but she was so incredibly thin and frail, like she could snap in two at any moment. I always thought she was the strongest person in the world, so it breaks my heart to see the reality of that childish admiration.

Mom finishes writing. I can't quite see clearly in the dark room, but it looks like tears are streaming down her face. She closes the notebook and lets out a brief sigh. I wonder what she wrote about. She stands up and walks towards the bookshelf to return the notebook to its hiding place. Quietly, Mom walks up the stairs, so as to not wake the little boy sleeping in the room next to hers. I try to follow her, but I am stopped by the soft rumbling and fading surroundings. It's time to wake up.

Parallel lines of sunshine bleed through the blinds. I stretch a bit, change into different clothes, and then head downstairs. I see Dad sitting on the couch. It looks like he just came back home. No drinks are at his side.

"Hey, kiddo. Uh... did you sleep well?"

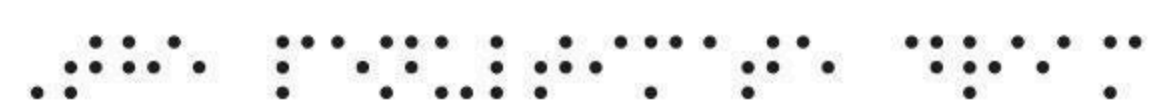
"Yeah. It was all right." I stop myself from giving a snappy response.

"Want me to make you some food? I've uhh... got a bit of time before I rest up for my next shift."

"...As long as you don't burn it." I can tell he's trying to apologize for hitting me... even though he's a couple of weeks late.

"How about some shrimp alfredo?" Dad quickly gets up from the couch, as if he had been rehearsing this moment.

"Sounds good."



Dad has left for work again and I still have plenty of time to kill. I do what I normally do to pass time—watch TV, scavenge for food, think about doing homework—and now we are approaching half past four. Since it's still light outside, I've made sure to completely close the blinds so no sunlight could get in. I also took some melatonin about half an hour ago so I can fall asleep easier. I don't want anything to get messed up. Under my bed sheets, I count with the clock as the minutes tick by. As soon as it hits 4:28, I fall asleep.

I am in the hallway. The door to my parents' room is cracked open just a tiny bit, and a twelve-year-old me is peering inside. I stand over him, peering through the door as well. Mom and Dad are seated on the edge of their bed. Mom is crying and Dad has his arms around her. Shortly before this, we had gotten a phone call from Mom's sister-in-law, telling her that her brother had just died in a car crash. She didn't want me to see her cry, so she rushed up to her room. Little did she know that I'd still see every little thing. Twice.

"Caelia, honey, I need you to slow your breathing."

She is huffing and puffing, desperate for air during her panic attack. She is most definitely not slowing her breathing.

"Lia, c'mon, it'll be okay. Just focus on the sound of my voice."

"He's gone."

"I know, Lia, I know. But there's nothing we can do, it was a freak accident. You just gotta forget about it and move on." I'm starting to think that Dad just really sucks at comforting people. He means well, but his macho-man way of dealing with things just isn't helpful.

"HE WAS MY BEST FRIEND! AND NOW HE'S GONE FOREVER!" She throws Dad's arms off of her and stands up. She clutches her head as if it's about to explode.

Dad retaliates, "I KNOW! I'm gonna miss him too! But we can't bring him back to life and overreacting like this isn't going to solve anything!"

Lia, come on, be reasonable!”

“Hah... be reasonable! What do you know, *Brian*?” She says his name as if it were poison on her tongue. “You could never miss him like I do, you barely even knew him! And unlike you, I actually know how to worry and care for someone other than myself! He was the only one who ever supported me and didn’t make me feel like shit!”

“Don’t I support you?” Dad looks hurt.

“You wish.” I will never know if Mom truly meant that. I hope she didn’t.

Little me loses balance and falls into the room, compromising his eavesdropping spot. Both parents turn to look at me... at him. The feeling is just as scary, whoever they’re looking at. My stomach twists and turns in anticipation.

“What the hell are you doing in here?! I told you to go to your room. Get out!” Mom is furious. She throws a pillow over at the boy, who now has tears streaming down his face. Dad rushes over to him.

“Let’s go, bud. To your room.” Dad says in a soft but stern voice.

“I-is Mommy going to be okay?” the boy says, as he peaks over his shoulder into his parents’ room. He sees only darkness.

“Yes, she will be.” Dad directs the boy to his bed. He pulls up a chair and sits face-to-face with him.

“What’s going on, Dad?”

“Your Mom is hurting right now. Your Uncle Erik’s died, and she’s having a hard time dealing with it. She’ll need some time before she gets better. So, for now, I’m gonna need you to be a good boy and just stay here, all right? Everything’s gonna be okay.”

“... Okay.”

The all too familiar rumbling happens again. The scenery disappears and I am in the present again. I look to see what time it is. It’s 10 p.m. I don’t fall asleep for the rest of the night. I can’t.

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“So... did you find anything out?” Cyrus asks as we walk to school.

“Well, I didn’t really find out much, more just relived some pretty shit memories. Mom was just... really sad.”

“Yeah.”

“It... it just pisses me off that killing herself was the best option she could think of, that she would do something like this to her family. She’s so selfish for doing that!” I kick at the air, hoping that that will give me the least bit of comfort.

“Yeah, she was selfish. She didn’t think about the impact it’d have on others. At least that’s how I see it. But it’s also selfish of *you* to think that what she was going through could be easily solved, isn’t it? Selfish feelings are the most honest, dude, and you have to deal with the fact that *everyone* is selfish. You can’t fix anyone but yourself, so quit thinking that way.”

“I hate it when you’re being reasonable.”

“Sounds about right. And plus, I wouldn’t want you to be mad at me for being selfish if I killed myself, I’d want you to understand that I was going through a lot of shit and just lost my battle.”

“NOPE! Nope, nope, nope we are not talking or thinking about that, so kindly shut the fuck up.”

“Damn, I was just about to tell you what I’d hypothetically leave you in my will.”

“Ugh, shut up, dude!” Even though a little insensitive, Cyrus joking around makes me feel a lot lighter. “Anyways... tonight I’m finally gonna find out what happened.” I don’t know why I’m telling him this. Cyrus already knows the plan. I guess saying it out loud is a way for me to mentally prepare for what I’m going to see.

I go through what is a very average school day. As soon as the dismissal bell rings, I head straight home—no time for distractions. I eat an early dinner, take a shower, make sure the clock is set to the right year, and get ready for bed... all at 4:00 p.m. I still have two hours before I need to hit the hay. I play video games to try and ease

my anxiety. Half an hour passes, then another, and then one more. T-minus thirty minutes. My mind is racing, and I can't settle down. I'm scared of what I'm going to see. I take a deep breath. I remember Cyrus' little pep talk, and for some reason Dad's from the last dream, telling me that everything is going to be okay. I take another breath. I can do this.

For one last time, I count the minutes that go by on the clock radio. It's kind of awkward since the numbers 32-59 aren't there, but I've grown used to their absence. Finally, I drift off as the numbers flip to 6:01.

I am in the bathroom. The fluorescent light flickers, and there is a constant drip from the leaking sink. Mom is staring at her reflection. On the sink counter, I can see several bottles of pills—Prozac, Xanax, and several over-the-counter pill bottles that usually sit in hidden places around the house. In the trash, I can see an empty vodka bottle. In the surrounding rooms, Dad and little me are sleeping, unaware of what Mom is doing. She starts talking to her reflection.

"This is for the best. I won't be a burden on anyone anymore. I can see Erik again..." She mutters on and on her justifications for doing what she is about to do, as tears start to trickle down her face. I get a chill down my spine. The same as the time I saw Mom on the ambulance stretcher going away forever, and the same as when I picked those flowers. She downs the pill bottles one after another, ingesting more pills than anyone ever should. The scene flashes forward to her lifeless body collapsed against the door. Flash to the urgent knocking and calling from Dad. Flash to the paramedics busting down the door and trying to find ways to resuscitate her. Flash to a crying young boy being told that he won't see his mother anymore. Flash to my crying father embracing that crying boy. Flash to nothing.

I sit in silence in the cloudy landscape, not wanting to wake up just yet. It happened all too

fast... I want more time with her. Then, I hear footsteps. The shadowy figure I met in my first visit to the past shows up in front of me. But this time, the shadow is more defined. I can see hair loosely tied with a purple scrunchie, a brown fitted shirt, black leggings, and a warm smile.

"Mom...?"

"I love you, Luca. And I'm sorry."

"Mom! I—"

I wake up. I'm drenched in sweat and have tears in my eyes. But... for the first time in four years, I don't feel like something is weighing down on me. I feel like things are finally going to be okay.

After processing everything that's just happened, I feel an urge to go back to the forest, to the clearing. I jump out of bed and throw on a jacket. Just as quickly, I unplug the clock radio.

I run downstairs and head straight for the door. As I am about to leave, I see Dad sleeping on the couch—knocked out cold while watching TV. Knowing he's not going to wake up to finish what he was watching, I search for the remote control to turn the TV off. Seconds into my little scavenger hunt, I find a notepad with the words, "I'm sorry," and various scribbles and scratches on the page. Dad has always needed to plan out serious things he wanted to tell people, and I'll probably hear what he's been drafting sometime in the next few days. I resume my search and use the light of the TV to look for the remote, which I find wedged in between the couch cushions. Off goes the TV. And before I head towards the door, I grab a blanket from the closet to cover Dad as he sleeps on the couch for the night. I've already lost one parent, so I need to do my best to keep the only one I have left.

I leave the house as quietly as possible and head towards the forest, clock radio in hand. It's dark outside, and I have no idea how to get to the dais, but I don't care. I just walk.

Under the warm glow of the lampposts, I move through the silent streets. The occasional

car passes by, making the street feel a little less lonely. The drivers are probably wondering what I'm up to in the middle of the night, just as I'm wondering about them.

I go back to thinking about everything that's happened. I know I didn't get the entire story, but I also know I can't spend my every waking moment using this clock to understand the intricacies of Mom's mental anguish. Giving up the clock is okay... I will be okay. This opportunity allowed me to look again at her situation, one that I was much too young to understand before. Though I still can't shake the feeling that, had I been older at the time, I could have shared that burden with Mom, and she could have had one more pillar of support. But that wasn't the case—and her memory will always remain close to my heart.

I've been so deep in thought I don't even realize I am in the forest. I walk aimlessly for several minutes. Eventually, I find the clearing.

It's odd that it takes such a short time to find, especially since it took hours to get to the first time. But that's the least of my concerns.

In the middle of the clearing, I see where everything began. The stone dais emits a hazy blue light, illuminating the most in the center, where the pedestal stands. There is a strong breeze that blows, making it look as though the forest is breathing. And, at the edges of the clearing, I can see the gladiolus flowers reflecting light from the dais and dancing in the wind.

I walk carefully onto the dais, nearly losing balance from the uneven rocks that form it. Once steady, I gently put the clock back onto the pedestal. I stare at it, almost reluctant to part from it. But I eventually tear my eyes away and look into the dark forest. It's time to go home. Barely making it a step off the dais, I sink to my knees, a soft thud on the dry, overgrown grass, and wonder to myself when it started raining.



FRAGMENTED (DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION) • RENEE CHEUNG, CLASS OF 2021

A FEVER OF ANGST

...

IZABEL MAH Y BUSCH, CLASS OF 2024

I lock my neck, craned
against her shoulder.
Black wiry hair pricks
my cheek, leg, and arm.
An ear, cold, brands against
the back of my neck:
“Stay.”

*I want to lean on a comfort;
an embrace.*

I hear a ticking, plucking in the
back, I flinch. She holds tightly
fingering at my ribs counting
them off. She’s gentle but persistent
fingers pressing deep into the cracks;
she’s feeling, with intent.
My mind lulls into her smell.

The cursives of her hair
flicker. I feel her speak,
hear her tongue move.
Its wet clicking cuts
the silence. Shatters it
for a moment. Nothing
comes out but “stay.”

*Do I dare: hold tight or let go?
The third’s inevitable.*

I pluck away at a flower,
a breathy aromatic denial.
Feel velvet, wet pink between
my thumb and forefinger.
Fold it, watch it crack, bleed.
Clots of yellow pollen catch
under my nails and turn brown.

She runs her finger carelessly over
the ridge of my spine. No longer
counting, but inspiring; doubt.
It’s cold, it knows where to linger,
how to move.

What burns faster?

Millions of eyes, like glass,
distort reflections, and although cold
their vision burns, ignites an internal wick.

MY ABUELITA DEFINES GRAVITY

...

VERO URUBIO, CLASS OF 2022

Her rumbling hands had held the carton.
These were the hands that left
Scattered rice on the white-tiled, kitchen floor.

She hands me another self—contained—and, like
Scattered rice on the white-tiled, kitchen floor,
Photographs spill out on the wicker-waxed table.

Scattered rice on the white-tiled, kitchen floor,
An open fridge and flame:
These were the doings of a woman lost in time.

She has shrines for the dead and the lost, intermixed like
Scattered rice on the white-tiled, kitchen floor.
I've been told that looking back is an act of mourning.

That dog is loose again—
The one with the orange spots on a dirtied, matted coat like
Scattered rice on the white-tiled, kitchen floor.

I am lost, thinking about
Scattered rice on the white-tiled, kitchen floor
And how it never seems profound when you're the one with the broom.

...



RICE DOG (PHOTOGRAPHY) • VERO URUBIO, CLASS OF 2022

THE RED STRING

•••

CHRISTELLE KUA-BALBUENA, CLASS OF 2023

I was five years old when I first saw it.

A red string, as thin and fine as a single strand of hair, my young eyes almost missed it. It extended for miles on end, all the way from the knot at the base of my pinky to far beyond the horizon. My whole world was streaked with red, as if a veil had suddenly been lifted from my eyes and I was seeing for the first time. Some of my classmates had strings connecting to each other's pinkies, while other strings seemed to stretch to the other side of the world. But even though I was able to see these red strings, I did not understand what they were. So as any child would, I asked my parents what the red string meant, and despite mutual looks of confusion, they still gave me an honest answer.

"That's the red string of fate that connects people together," my father said. "Your soulmate is supposedly on the other side of that string."

"My soulmate?" I asked.

"Soulmates are people who love each other very very much, Rena," my mother explained. She snuggled closer to my father on the couch and placed her hand lovingly on his chest, her diamond wedding ring twinkling on her finger.

"So does that make you and Daddy soulmates?"

My mother smiled, pleased with my deduction, and entwined her fingers with my father's, the red strings on their pinkies getting tangled up in the process. "Yes, sweetie. That's why we married each other."

"And had you!" my father added with a chuckle.

I tilted my head, confused. "Then why are your strings not connected to each other?"

The moment those words came out of my mouth, I immediately regretted it, but I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't stop staring at my parents' strings, which were leading in completely opposite directions. My mother's string curved around the corner into our kitchen, escaping through the partially opened window and into our backyard. If I strained my eyes, I could see the crimson thread intricately woven around her rose bushes that she cared so tenderly for, before disappearing over our fence. My father's string trailed loosely across our living room floor and vanished through the narrow gap underneath our front door. When I looked back at my parents, their faces were petrified, and their eyes locked onto me as if to turn me to stone as well.

"W-What are you talking about, Rena?" my mother asked, panic seeping through her voice. Her mouth was pulled into a thin, tight smile, but I could see the guarded glint in her eyes. I pressed my lips together, determined not to utter another word. My father, meanwhile, was starting to sweat, and he glanced down warily as my mother's grip on his hand tightened.

"Now, now, Rena dear," he said, "that's enough pretending, okay? Why don't you go up to your room and play with your toys."

There was no room for argument in his tone, and I scampered up the stairs as fast as my feet could carry me, eager to escape the suffocating

atmosphere looming over the two of them. A storm was brewing in our living room, and I did not want to be there when it struck. Before I closed my door, I could hear my mother's voice rising as my father tried to appease her. A numbing shame crawled up my spine as I laid down on my bed and buried my head under my pillow. If I had just kept my mouth shut, we would have gone about our evening like we always did. I would help Daddy set the table while Mommy placed spoonfuls of steaming fluffy white rice onto our plates. Daddy would tell her to give him an extra scoop, Mommy would laugh and poke at his belly, and then we would all sit down and give thanks for our meal and for each other. Instead, when I came down for dinner, I was met with silence and an empty spot at our kitchen table.

"Where'd Daddy go?" I asked, timidly. My mother's shoulders stiffened as she stirred the pot on the stove, and she met my concerned gaze with irritated eyes.

"He went out," she snapped. When I flinched at her tone, her expression softened, and she took a deep breath before donning a smile. "Don't worry, sweetie. Daddy just needed to cool his head. He'll be back soon."

But by the time I was dressed in my pajamas and tucked into bed, my father still had not returned home, and I went to bed feeling even more miserable than before.

This became a pattern over the next few weeks. My father started coming back from work later and later, which I regret to say relieved me, in some backwards sense of comfort. Because whenever he came back, that's when the interrogating and screaming would start.

Where were you? Why were you out so late? Who were you with? My mother would spew out all these questions like bullets the moment my father came trudging through the door. Before, he used to humor her with a response, but as

time wore on, he stopped caring altogether. Then one day, after my mother finished her barrage of questions, he just left. He hadn't even taken off his shoes before he entered the living room, as if he never planned to stay in the first place. My mother's shouts did nothing to deter him, and I could only watch helplessly as he grabbed his car keys and wallet. I didn't miss the cold parting glance he gave me before he slammed the door.

This is all your fault, his eyes said to me.

I shrank back behind my mother under his penetrating glare and sighed with relief once I heard the car engine start. Something was changing inside my father, like a ticking time bomb I couldn't stop, and to be honest, I didn't want to be there when whatever was holding him together ran out.

As it turned out, that time came sooner than I expected.

My mother was driving me back home from school, and while we waited for the light to turn green, I happened to glance over my shoulder at the little coffee shop on the corner where my parents would take me to get my favorite vanilla macarons. A man and a woman exited the coffee shop with bright smiles on their faces. The woman was holding onto the man's arm and laughing at something he had whispered into her ear. Her teeth flashed bright white against her ruby red lips, which made the red string around her pinky stand out to me even more. I followed the trail, which was only a short distance since the string led to the man right beside her. *Good for them,* I thought. The man lifted his head in my direction, and for a brief moment, time froze.

The light turned green. We sped off, my mother pressing on the gas without a second thought.

But the image of my father's face was seared into my mind.

He had found her.

He had found his true soulmate.

My head felt like it was going to split in two. I

desperately wanted to crane my neck back to get a better glimpse of them, to see if my eyes were just playing a sick trick on me. But doing so would alert my mother, and I did not trust myself to keep this a secret. All I could do was sit silently in my seat as questions jostled around in my brain.

How long had they been together? Did they just happen to meet today?

No, I told myself. The way my father behaved around that woman was the same way he used to act around my mother, although now I understood that it was just an act. That realization crushed me. However, as much as I hated seeing this woman cling to my father, I couldn't help but feel relieved seeing him laugh so genuinely. I had almost forgotten what his smile looked like. It had been so long since either of my parents looked truly happy.

I peered over at my mother's red string, still hanging loosely by her side. Her soulmate must live somewhere far away. My father was just lucky that he was able to meet his soulmate within our little city. I glanced at my mother's reflection through the front mirror, noting the dark rings under her eyes, her eyebrows scrunched in a permanent frown, any trace of happiness gone. She hadn't even turned on the radio to search for her favorite song.

How long would she have to wait until she found her soulmate?

I pictured my father, his eyes brimming with affection for another woman, his chosen one, and felt my heart crumple within my chest. If only my mother was his soulmate, then he would only look at her that way...

My eyes widened. That was it!

If I could just tie my parents' red strings together, then they would be true soulmates, and everything would go back to the way it was before.

Only this time, it would actually be real.

I knew what I had to do. Once we got back home, I immediately started practicing my knots. I tied the shoelaces on my sneakers, my father's

brown work shoes, and my mother's lace-up boots, repeating the method my parents taught me each time—two bunny ears, cross over, under the hole, pull, and repeat. My hands were still a little unsteady when I held scissors, but making two simple cuts was way easier than cutting out shapes out of paper, so I wasn't too worried. I would carry out my plan once both my parents fell asleep. I measured the distance multiple times, so even though my mother slept upstairs while my father slept on the living room couch, I knew her string was long enough to stretch all the way downstairs.

After dinner, I lay down in bed and waited for my parents to fall asleep. As the moon emerged from behind the clouds, the crickets outside started singing, and I opened and closed my scissors in time with their chirps, imagining they were congratulating me on my successful plan. *Well done, Rena, chirp chirp! You're so smart, chirp!* Smiling to myself, I closed my eyes and envisioned my mother and father coming into my room to wake me up the next day. I would be tired and grumpy from executing my mission so early in the morning, but it would all be worth it. By the time the sun rose, my parents would be back to loving each other again.

I sprang upright with a start. The crickets were silent, the only chirping being the two lovebirds perched outside my window. The sun was shining right in my face, and I frantically wiped the drool from my chin, berating myself for falling asleep prematurely. Thankfully, it was Saturday, so my parents should still be sleeping in. With a new sense of urgency, I grabbed my scissors and made my way to their bedroom, careful to avoid the squeaky floorboards. If I worked quickly, I could cut their strings and re-tie them before they got up.

To my surprise, when I opened their door, their bed was empty. Puzzled, I crept down the stairs

into our living room and found that it, too, was deserted. There was no indentation that showed my father had slept on the couch that night.

Had he not come back home at all?

The very thought sent chills down my spine, and I shook my head in disbelief. He must have come back. I just didn't hear him because I fell asleep. Because no matter how late he stayed out, my father always came back. I would wake up to the smell of him frying bacon without fail each morning, or at least hear his car leaving the driveway if he left early for work. But as I entered the kitchen, there was no sizzling bacon. Just my mother sitting lifelessly at the dining table, her head bowed down like a defeated soldier.

Hiding the scissors behind my back, I called out to her, but she did not respond. Inching closer, I tentatively placed my hand on her shoulder and yelped when she flung herself away from me so violently that the chair nearly tipped backwards from the force, as if my mere presence repulsed her. Her eyes were red and dried streams of tears trailed down her face. She must have been sitting there for hours.

"Mommy..." my voice quavered. "Where's Daddy?"

My mother just stared straight through me like I was a ghost, and I was about to repeat the question when her shoulders started shaking. I thought she was about to start crying again, but instead a harsh, derisive laugh ripped its way out of her throat.

"Gone!" she cried. "Like he was never even here!"

She stood up and stumbled towards the living room, and I followed after her like a lost duckling. Sure enough, my father's car keys were missing, as were his shoes and the coats he hung by the stairway. My mother stopped at the front door, breathing so heavily I worried she would faint, and for a few moments, the two of us just stood there in silence. Then, like an overfilled

glass, my mother collapsed to her knees and broke down in sobs. I had never heard a sound more heartbreaking. Desperate to comfort her, I wrapped my arms around her back.

"Get off me!" she screeched, raising her hand, and I jerked back abruptly.

But I wasn't fast enough.

The back of her hand smacked the side of my head, and I cried out as a stinging sensation erupted across my cheek. Something wet slid down my face. I wiped it, thinking it was only tears, but when I brought my hand back up, the tips of my fingers were stained red. I stared at my hand in shock, then back at my mother, who was cradling her hand near her heart.

There was blood on her wedding ring.

My blood.

"You wretched child," she snarled at me. "You have some nerve. Whining and crying like you did nothing wrong. All your stupid talk about seeing red strings of fate." She pointed her finger at me accusingly. "This is all your fault! You ruined everything!"

I trembled like a leaf about to snap from its branch. "Mommy—"

"Shut up! Go to your room!" she screamed. "Now!"

Not wanting to test her patience any longer, I made a break for it and sprinted up the stairs two at a time, nearly spraining my ankle in the process, and slammed my door shut. My heart was pounding so hard I feared it would burst out of my chest. From the hazy reflection in my window, I could see the scratch left by my mother's ring was already forming a scab, but my cheek still throbbled. I touched it gingerly and flinched when the red string tied around my pinky brushed across it. I had become so accustomed to seeing my own string, but now the very sight of it made bile rise up my throat. I wanted to tear it off my finger and shred it into a million threads. I thought this ability I had was something special,

something amazing. Instead, it was a curse.

And it had ruined my family.

No, a voice whispered darkly. You ruined everything. You don't deserve to find someone who makes you happy when all you do is create unhappiness for the people who love you.

My hands curled into fists. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't deny it.

Before I knew it, I snatched the scissors up, and in one swift motion, I cut my red string. The part still attached to my pinky hovered in the air like a ripped piece of cobweb while the rest escaped through the crack in my window.

As I watched the other half of my string disappear with the wind, a wave of despair washed over me, and I sank to the floor, finally allowing my tears to run freely. A low rumbling sound reached my ears, and I wiped my eyes to clear my vision. I stood up and looked down at our driveway just in time to see my mother's car reverse into the street and take off.

I never saw her again after that.

My grandma took me in after we were unable to locate my mother and father. If you asked me to describe how the first years I spent living with her were, I couldn't really tell you. I felt like a bystander in my own life, just watching a movie of myself going through the motions: wake up, eat, sleep, repeat. With time and plenty of patience from my grandma, I eventually stepped back into my life, but the severed string around my pinky was a constant reminder of my offense against my parents.

Grandma was always careful about mentioning my parents in front of me, something I am forever grateful for, but every once in a while, they managed to weave themselves into our conversations.

"People are like puzzle pieces," she told me one day after I came back from school and told her I got in a fight with a girl who I thought was my friend. "Some of them fit together, and

others just don't."

Like my parents, I thought bitterly, but the way my grandma sighed, her gentle eyes glazing over with a sad, distant look, it was as if she had heard me anyway.

"Sometimes people just aren't meant to be together, Rena," she murmured, "no matter how hard they try to make things work."

She drew me close, and I rested my head on her shoulder, allowing her warmth to envelop my body. "It is my greatest wish that you will find someone who completes you. Don't try to force it the way your parents did. It may take a while, but when it happens, everything that you went through will finally fall into place."

The sincerity of my grandma's voice made me tear up, and I did my best to swallow the lump in my throat. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I would never be able to find that special someone, that I had given up that privilege a long time ago in order to atone for the mistakes of my childhood.

My name, Grandma once told me, came from the characters meaning "benevolence" (仁) and "elegant, graceful" (娜), but if you look up my name, you will find that it means "joy." My parents had chosen a name for me that was the antithesis of my entire existence.

Benevolent, elegant, joyful Rena—destined to be all alone.

It was so sad, I could only laugh at the irony of it all.

And so my life of predetermined solitude went on, but I tried to find happiness wherever I could, despite that knowledge. I graduated from college, got a steady job, and even had my own apartment. For the most part, I was content. Of course, there were times when I wished I had someone to welcome me home. Someone to wish me good morning, share my meals with, or kiss me goodnight after a particularly stressful day



RED NEURO (DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION) • TRINITY CATLIN, CLASS OF 2023

at work. Most of the people I knew had already found their soulmates and were in a steady relationship; some were even married. Based on the way my parents' marriage turned out, I thought that finding one's soulmate would prove extremely difficult, but everyone else around me seemed to have no problem whatsoever. It made me wonder if I would have found my soulmate just as quickly if I hadn't cut my red string.

Over time, I had gotten so used to seeing everyone's red strings that they just blended in with the background, but ever since my grandma died two years ago, I became hyper aware of them. With Grandma gone, it felt like I had nothing else tying me to this world. I had no other living relatives, and while I met up with my friends once in a while, the gap between those get-togethers increased each year.

And it's not like either of my parents had come back to check on me after all these years. No phone call, no birthday card, nothing. When Grandma died, part of me thought my mother would have at least shown up for her funeral, but as usual, I was disappointed.

It didn't help that afterwards my friends started trying to set me up on blind dates. *You need to get out there and meet people, Rena, we're worried about you,* they would tell me. And while I appreciated their concern, it just made me feel even more guilty because I knew it was all a waste of time. Not only would it be wrong of me to accept their offer, but it would be completely unfair to the other person they set me up with. I couldn't let them waste their time dating me, someone who wasn't even their soulmate, when their true fated partner was out there looking for them. To do that would be completely dishonest and selfish of me. I had already ruined my parents' marriage; I didn't need to become the monkey wrench in someone else's relationship.

It was better for everyone if I just kept to myself.

And then one day, it happened.

It was a chilly Saturday morning, and I was sitting at my usual table at my favorite coffee shop munching on a vanilla macaron. Suddenly, the door swung open, and a gust of wind blew my napkin onto the floor. I leaned down to reach for it when a hand unexpectedly picked the napkin up for me.

"Sorry about that," said the young man who had just entered the shop. His oversized sweatshirt emphasized his lanky frame, and his bangs were sticking out from underneath his dark gray beanie. He placed the napkin back on the table and offered an apologetic smile. "It's really windy out there, huh?"

But I didn't hear a single word he said. My mind was swirling, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I tried to speak, but my mouth only flopped open like a fish struggling to breathe after being forcefully pulled out of the water, a hook snagged in my lungs.

The young man raised his eyebrow concernedly. "Hey, everything alright?" he asked, waving his hand in front of my eyes, trying to get a response.

I wanted to nod my head, to tell him *everything is fine, thank you, please go before I say something stupid*, but all I could do was focus on his little finger.

This had to be a dream.

Because wrapped around this person's pinky was a severed red string.

Unsure of what to make of my silence, the young man followed my gaze down to the fine red string hanging limply around his finger. Something clicked in his expression, and his eyes locked onto my pinky.

"Wait," he said, an air of excitement in his voice, "you can see them, too?"

I blinked. "E-Excuse me?" I tried to sound confused, but the young man was already pulling up a chair, looking like a little kid about to open a present from Santa.

"The red string," he whispered. He looked

around and leaned in so others wouldn't hear our conversation. "You can see them, too, can't you? I knew I wasn't the only one!"

He rambled on enthusiastically, but my head was elsewhere. I had looked up the ability to see the red string of fate, but all my searches turned up empty. Those who claimed to have the ability ended up being scammers just trying to make a quick buck off of fortune-telling or supposed love charms. After being tricked and disappointed so many times, I had given up on finding anyone like me.

My thoughts were interrupted when I felt a light tap on my hand.

"Was your string always like that?" he asked, his eyes shining with wonder.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. His question caught me by surprise. I was still processing the fact that another person could see the red strings like me, so it felt weird for someone to ask me about my own string. Not wanting to go into the whole tragic story, I simply replied, "Yes."

"Oh," he said, and his shoulders drooped, the light suddenly extinguished from his eyes, although I couldn't understand why. "That's interesting. Mine was normal until I was about five years old. I'll never forget it. One day, I opened my eyes and saw the end of my string lying at the foot of my bed. It was like someone had cut it."

My heart skipped a beat. In my head I heard crickets chirping along with the rhythmic snipping of my scissors. My mother's hysterical screams. The car rumbling out of our driveway, fading into the distance.

"I always thought that my soulmate would also have a broken string like mine," the young man continued. "I guess that's why I got so excited when I saw yours. Sorry if that creeped you out..."

He scratched the back of his head awkwardly and let out an embarrassed chuckle, but I knew he was just trying to hide his disappointment.

Five years old. The same age I was on that fateful day.

The sight of his severed string made my heart quiver with anticipation, as if it knew that this was the person my string was supposed to be connected to. Something fluttered to life inside of me. It flickered and danced up and up and up, threatening to burst from within me, and I had to bite my lip to keep myself from grinning.

Even after everything that had happened, somehow, miraculously, he had appeared before me. This man, who smiled way too easily, for someone with this cursed ability, was my soulmate. I had finally found him.

The person I had forsaken all those years ago.

With that thought, all the lingering shame and guilt suddenly came crashing over me, smothering any feeling of joy I felt from this encounter. My parents were grown adults, and they were disturbed just from me telling them about their strings not being connected. I could only imagine how distressing it must have been for him as a child to see his red string lying lifelessly on the floor. How he must have tormented himself trying to figure out what could have happened to his soulmate, unable to do anything to help them or see if they were in danger. His soulmate could have died for all he knew!

Again, I thought. All I do is cause unnecessary problems for people.

"Order for...Yang?"

I flinched when the young man stood up abruptly and picked up his drink from the counter. Expecting him to sit back down, I was surprised when he took out a pen from his backpack and started writing on my napkin.

"My phone number," he explained. He stuffed the pen back inside and slid the backpack over his shoulders. "People like us need to look out for each other, yeah?"

He sent me that easygoing smile of his again, and I knew my cheeks were burning. If he asked, I could just blame it on the weather. But he didn't, and instead gave a little salute before walking towards the door, drink in hand. "I gotta get

going, but hopefully I'll see you around!"

And then he was gone. Just like that.

I took a shuddering breath, as if waking up from a deep dream, and feared that when I looked down my napkin would be blank. But there, hastily written on the surface, was the young man's name—Yang Chen ()—and ten digits that were so squished together I could barely tell them apart. I traced over his chicken-scratch handwriting with my finger and chuckled to myself, a small ember of fondness glowing in my chest. I took out my phone and entered Yang's number in a new contact profile, then switched the keyboard so I could write the characters for "positivity" and "morning" after his name. Such a fitting name for such a sunny person.

I never knew how much I could miss the warmth of a person I just met.

My finger froze just before I clicked "done." What was I thinking? This was getting dangerous, moving too fast. I couldn't do it. I *shouldn't* do it. Not after everything I had done.

Hating myself, I deleted Yang's contact information.

Then reentered it.

Then deleted it again.

Then reentered it.

I buried my head in my arms, muffling my groan. Was it really okay for me to do this? My soulmate was literally standing right before me, and I hadn't even been able to hold a decent conversation. Why would Yang even want someone like me as his soulmate?

And that thought hurt me even more. Because after all these years of convincing myself that I was fine being on my own, I realized I was wrong.

I wanted this. More than anything I had ever wanted before. Because I was sick of it. I was so sick and tired of being alone and

watching everyone else find their partner while I remained a constant third wheel. I was done beating myself up and drowning in guilt over what happened with my parents. It was their fault for getting married when they weren't even meant to be together in the first place. Grandma already knew that their relationship was doomed from the start, and she couldn't even see the red string of fate like I could. So why did I have to suffer for the rest of my life just because they had been too cowardly to cut ties? Why did I have to lock myself away while they got to move on with their soulmates?

It wasn't your fault, Rena. Grandma had always told me this, and although back then I nodded, I never truly believed that and I think she knew it as well. But that was the simple truth.

And it only took me over twenty years to accept that.

Better late than never, I suppose.

I didn't realize that I had started tearing up until I heard the concerned whisperings of the people sitting beside me, who quickly averted their eyes once I started laughing to myself. They must have thought I had gone insane, but I didn't care. My chest felt lighter than it had in a very long time, and with the speed at which I bolted out of the coffee shop, I could have been flying.

I looked at my red string one last time, and for once, my heart trembled with delight at the sight of it. The last thought I had before I spotted that familiar gray beanie was that I hoped my knot tying abilities had improved.

"Yang Chen!"

I held my breath when he turned around, a smile of recognition blossoming across his face, and saw myself and the sun reflected in his eyes.

A new day had begun, and it was time to take my fate in my own hands.

DREAMS

•••

SIENNA CAPUTO, CLASS OF 2023

In a sea of mountain anemones
an angel strokes my hair,
twists my neck towards a tree.
My uncle speaks to me—
laughing lemons, crying glitter tears.
A lion flaunts its chest, groans
like a wrench wrought its throat
and there's blood
spilling between my legs, children
picking dried glue off their fingers, burning
the angel, my uncle, to ashes—
Wake up Sienna joon,
it's time to wake up azizam.
Wave goodbye. Kiss the *Qur'an*.
Sneak a taste of Baba's coffee
in a grown-ups-only mug, think,
I can't wait to drink from one of those.

ROCK COLLECTION

...

SOPHIE JONSSON, CLASS OF 2022

I. Amazonite: courage, truth, friendship, communication, inner peace, acceptance

After dozens of calls and no response, I found Jude slumped over her kitchen table and a shattered glass bottle around her feet. She saw me, yelled for a while, and gave up. Carrying her to bed, I knew she didn't know what she'd said or why she'd said it, and that she certainly wouldn't remember it tomorrow.

On the way out, I locked eyes with Jude's tabby cat and set a small blue-green stone on the table. We had gifted rocks and crystals to each other for years, based on what we thought the other needed each time. And whether or not we ever really believed in it, I knew that it was just sentiment now— objects to hold when she could no longer remember the person who gave them to her.

II. Angelite: communication, heals anger, compassion, acceptance, truth, peace, cooperation

The next few months were filled with logistics and heated anger. I had been put in control of Jude's finances and moving her to a new place. Even though she was over a decade older than me, we'd been best friends for years, and this was the time she needed a friend the most. The financial power she'd given me years ago now meant she would have to call me for money, oftentimes for things I couldn't let her buy. She'd scream and cuss and tell me that I was a bad friend, but I knew it meant nothing. The wave would pass, the dust would settle, and all that'd be left was the quiet truth of age.

III. Lapis Lazuli: protection, clearing negativity, balance, truth, wisdom, clarity, good judgment

Since the small business she'd run for forty years had to be closed, Jude was now living off of savings and social security. She never talked of such things, but with no husband or children, only a cat, I often wondered what it felt like to have to lose the thing you gave so much of your life to. And so quickly, relatively speaking. The decline is slow, but one day, it passes the point of no return, and just like that, it's just too much.

IV. Polychrome Jasper: passion, movement, physical vitality, creativity, protection, balance, stability

After traumatic complications and side effects of an open-heart surgery years ago, Jude refused most medical treatment. As her knees and back got worse, she refused pills, x-rays, and opera-

tions, only allowing the assistance of a walker. Sometimes she would carry the rocks I'd given her, each in its basket, picking up each one and turning it over in her hands. I wondered if she thought they were helping.

V. Epidote: courage, identity, power, healing, objectivity

Once we'd sold Jude's house, her sister came into town, and we began packing up boxes. Since she couldn't really move, Jude watched as we packed everything up, quietly looking at some points and bossing us around at others. Jude had all of the normal things, but a lot of it was stuff she didn't need in the new place. That meant most of the things we took were decorative or sentimental—kitschy sculptures, bowls of shells, rocks... These were the things Jude watched like a hawk as we packed.

VI. Green Beryl: guidance, calming, courage, positivity

As far as these places go, Jude's room was small but nice. She had big windows, filling the room with natural light, a view of the pond and a few roaming deer, and the faint sounds of birds chirping outside to drown out the woman down the hall, yelling about her TV remote. Though we remarked on the niceties as we unpacked, I felt Jude's unease, and perhaps her fear of her new home.

VII. Jade: protection, prosperity, health, cohesiveness

A little over a month after Jude moved into her new place, I got a call from one of the nurses telling me that I had to find a new home for Jude's cat because she couldn't keep him anymore. Evidently, Jude could not remember to keep her door closed and the cat kept getting out and into other people's rooms. Even though I knew I could get her sister to take him so she could still see him, it was going to be devastating. The last living piece of her former home, her former daily life, gone.

VIII. Danburite: heartbreak, wisdom, serenity, change, inner peace, acceptance

I called and visited Jude every so often. Some times were better than others. One day was thirty voicemails about how she felt so much better and how she thought she could move out and get her own unsupervised place and go back to normal, and another day it's an hour-long roundabout conversation because she couldn't remember what either of us said five minutes before. The nurses give their own opinions and diagnoses, but we'll never know exactly. If it's genetic, brought on by substances, a fluke, age... I've offered trips to the state's major hospital to do brain tests and scans, but Jude always said no. She said it's too long of a trip, that it'd be too taxing on her body. I don't blame her. What's the point in really knowing, anyway?



KO'OLAUS (PHOTOGRAPHY) • KELLIE TOYAMA, CLASS OF 2022

FACE IN THE BARK OF THE MANGO TREE

...

KELLIE TOYAMA, CLASS OF 2022

It rains every day
on Haiku Road
in Kaneohe.

A woman walks her granddaughter upstairs
with a stuck-open umbrella.

Water slides down dried leaves
and onto glass

Down the green legs of orange birds in paradise.

The squash garden in the backyard sighs
and the dogs whine.

The woman brings her grandchild bitter tea
(the girl's nose is sniffing)
She takes it but doesn't drink.

"Obake¹, obake!"
The child points out the window and yells—
there's a face in the bark of the mango tree.

Her grandmother laughs,
"That's just Lono²."

¹ ghost

² Hawaiian god of rain and fertility

THE PROTEST

...

SIENNA CAPUTO, CLASS OF 2023

Father is cunning, carrying caramel candies, colloquially speaking like canker sores aren't suffocating his throat. Autumn's fingers ride up my skirt with all the fervor of a child, a child who's been held indoors in contempt, and all the secrecy of one, too. She digs her fingers into me, like scooping out melon seeds or pumpkin guts—I'm nodding along to Father's sermon like the God-loving girl I am, like I'm not acutely aware of the sweat and scratchy pew upholstery under my thighs, like the only thing I'm praying for isn't her fingers in my mouth or around my neck. The incense, the instant coffee, the stale carpet and stained glass. Miss Ferricks looks at Father like starving teeth waiting to sink into green-rinded, orange flesh. A mother hushes her wailing child, exacerbates its miserable moans. Autumn smirks, speeds up God's work. The choir, the congregation, the leaves, and I rise in a surreptitious sea of yes, Lord that smothers the flame of the sanctuary candle.



SINNER'S HIGHWAY (PHOTOGRAPHY) • LEXISS MORGAN, CLASS OF 2023

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN ONE
AND THREE IN THE MORNING

...

ALLYSON DUNLAHEY, CLASS OF 2022

I'm the only one left awake.

The boat is leaving
I'm not coming home

My reflection doesn't
Match me anymore.

I came out of the womb
Starving.
My hunger would fade
But not the memory
Of what I wanted.

I enter my grave.

Worms feast on the honey
Of my bones

I think I came back wrong.
you don't want to die
you want to want to die

GRANDPA'S HALLWAY

...

ALLEN LAM, CLASS OF 2023

About a decade ago, I chose not to speak
At ông ngoại's¹ funeral because
What they don't tell children is that
Age summons a deal with death
And I would not let the phantom invite me

So I retreated to my room and locked the windows
Before realizing there was no stairway
What they don't tell children is that
The afterlife is held at the end of a hallway
It's straightforward and only has two ends

Candles flickered to his heartbeat and mine
It frightened me to dare snuff them out
What they don't tell children is that
The wick is what must be preserved
Torches lack direction, setting our home ablaze

Generations have led me running
I have no clue which way
Con nít không bao giờ được kể²
Missteps echo louder than any stomp
On the wretched pavement that becomes us

How long would faces bleed along the corridor?
Praying I respond in language I cannot grasp
Con nít không bao giờ được kể
Their unfamiliar kisses suck the life from us
Leaving only dust that settles and decays

That could be bố mẹ³ six feet under
Reminding me, threatening me since I was birthed
Con nít không bao giờ được kể
The slow burn is what peels our skin
Piece by piece, we gradually lose ourselves

¹ grandpa

² "What they don't tell children is that"

³ Mom and Dad

TAKE US TO THE STARS, LITTLE BROTHER

...

MADELEINE MALCOLM, CLASS OF 2024

I remember the day you multiplied by a thousand.
strapped in your car seat you spoke it aloud
and I had never seen mommy whip her head around that quickly. she took you home and
asked you more numbers
and you answered all her questions while you played with play dough, not even realizing the
supernova you were.
when daddy got home mommy rushed to the door
and said "Scott, your little boy is a genius."
he picked you up, and spun you around
and the next morning he told everyone at work that one day his little boy would
take us all to the stars.

I wish you had never left to join the world.
I taught you how to multiply by a thousand.
mommy doesn't remember,
but I do.
I propped you up with pillows to play schoolhouse.
I showed you books and flashcards and worksheets
and mommy said you wouldn't understand but I knew you would and you did.
you multiplied by a thousand.

then you went to school. I wish you never had.
they didn't see that you were a supernova.
you tested and you passed and you proved
but they wouldn't believe
couldn't believe
refused to see.

I remember the day you left that school for the last time. your car seat was
bigger than before.
mommy cried. I didn't know why.

I knew that she knew and it made her very very angry
and very, very sad.
with tears in her eyes she told you that you could multiply by a thousand and when
daddy got
home mommy rushed to the door
and said "Scott,
they took the stars from your little boy's eyes."

I didn't know why. I didn't see.
I didn't see the way they did.
I saw stars, a supernova,
my baby brother the genius who I was so so proud of.
in school they asked me to draw a picture of my family. peach crayon for me
brown crayon for you, my baby brother the genius.
for hair I had a straight yellow line.
daddy's was straight and gray.
mommy's was brown and curly and yours was like hers only black.

they saw different.
the Little Blond Boy on the bus saw mud in your skin
instead of rich earth
and he told you so.
the other moms on the playground saw aggression
instead of self-worth
when their Little Blond Boys pushed you down
and you pushed back.

the Little Blond Boys got to go to Special Classes
for Special Little Blond Boys
when they added by the hundreds.
you multiplied by the thousands and you
got
squat.
they moved your stick to the red and you cried
because you didn't
know
why.
and neither did I.

neither did mommy.
mommy came to school one day
for the class party. she brought cupcakes.

they didn't know she was your mommy.
they didn't see, but she sure did.
she saw every other Little Blond Boy get candy
but not you.
the teacher said that only Good kids get candy.
and you sat there, Good as can be, as you always were, and decided you must be Bad.
mommy saw all the other Little Blond Boys play
while you sat alone.
she asked you why you sat alone.
you said they didn't want to play with you.
she asked you why.
"Because I'm too Brown."

mommy took you home from school that day. on the way home she stopped
to buy you a bag of candy and gave you all of it.
she never took you back. the damage had been done. the stars had been
snuffed out.

I wish I could tell you,
my baby brother the genius,
I wish I could make you see
that mommy fights a war for you every day fighting her way
down I-75
40 minutes, each way, twice a day
to a place where the kids are as brown as you and you always get
a piece of candy.
that daddy still thinks
he still knows that you'll take us into space and he calls me
nearly every day to tell me
all the wonderful things you're doing
and the wonderful things you are.
and beyond all that I wish I could tell you that big sister

is sorry. she's so so sorry.
she's sorry she wasn't on the bus,
or on the playground,
or in the classroom.
she's sorry she couldn't protect you like big sister should. other big sisters
protect from playground bullies and mean girls and hurt feelings.
how do you protect from something bigger than both of you? something Little
Blonde Girls can't even see?

I couldn't see. I'm so so sorry.
I did what I could.
I taught you to multiply by a thousand.
I wrote stories about you.

when you hopped the fence and peeled the wallpaper and smashed the window when
you were a Little Black Boy before the world took that from you and made you only
Black.

and when you ran away at the aquarium, slipped through mommy's legs and
disappeared into the crowd
I'm the one that found you. I knew where to go.
the others went to the big tanks, the sharks and the whales and the dolphins
but I went to the jellyfish. where I knew you'd be. and you were staring up at them,
stars in your eyes.

they'll shine again little brother.
you are multiplied by a thousand
and you can take us all
to the stars.

VACATION

•••

ANTONIO RADIC, CLASS OF 2024

We were sailing smoothly above a sea of clouds.
the water looks like church glass...

can you see the lava flows on the seafloor thirty thousand feet below?
the cabin was high and the sun, bright like heaven.

...papa, el mar me parece vidrio de la iglesia.

i asked him, ¿puedes ver los delfines en las olas?
the sun was high and hailed heavenly light on raccooned heads.
at some point, the reflections of the clouds cleared away.

can you see the dancing dolphins now, hijito?
only, i couldn't tell the sky apart from the sea – there was only blue
because the clouds drifted away from the air.
our cover was blown.

i couldn't tell up from down—just blue, then
we felt a strike at the tail: a bullet aimed at hell.
our cover was blown.
i was ready to surrender, but He pulled me back without my family.

the tail was struck, and we became a bullet hurtling towards hell.
i stretched for their skinny arms, but His pull was too strong.
He wanted me to live a blissful few seconds without my family.
i watched them crash and burn.

their skinny arms stretched for mine, but His reach was longer.
it was smooth sailing above the sea of dolphins.
i flew far with fathers who watched their families crash and burn
until lava was flowing on the seafloor thirty feet below.



NOT ALWAYS BAD TO LOOK BACK (PHOTOGRAPHY) • VERO URUBIO, CLASS OF 2022

HERO IN BLUE

...

LEONARD ARMSTRONG III, CLASS OF 2022

Part One

“Keep going,” he thinks to himself. “Keep going.”

With every stride and bound he feels his chest getting heavier, his knees caving, his hamstrings squeezing. He checks behind him, but it is futile, his eyes are unfocused from his depleting oxygen and the speed at which he is moving. All the sounds are a blur, too, and although he was in familiar territory just minutes ago; he is now in a completely different world. His right hamstring squeezes again, this time more intensely.

“Cramp!” He thinks to himself, as he begins hobbling.

Then one more sharp pain, right in the lower back, stops him in his tracks. He is confused, and looks up to the sky as if the moon and the stars would have answers for his sudden loss of momentum, (they do not give him any). And then his face is meeting the asphalt, his body frozen like a toppled statue.

“Aw... aw fuck.”

He slowly realizes what is happening to him. He cannot move, although he tries. He squirms and wriggles. But cannot get back on his feet.

“Oh, oh no,” he says.

...

“I spoke to him that night... yeah, I had spoken to him that night.”

Chris shifts in his seat uncomfortably. He

takes a look around his tidy New York apartment. The living room where they sit is an attempt at a welcoming comfort, but one that fails. It is stiff, the couches do not sink or conform to your shape, they keep theirs. The pillows are hard squares and the chairs stiffly close off the living room from the kitchen. It is all grey, or some tone of it, and Chris keeps the windows closed and blinds drawn.

Jimmy wouldn't quite like it here, would he? Chris thinks to himself. He picks up his coffee, then puts it back down without taking a sip.

“Yeah I spoke to him that night, mhm, I had spoken to him that night... last time I spoke to him.”

Hannah senses Chris' discomfort, so she switches the topic, flipping on her recorder, labeled *LA Times*.

“Well, mm. Apologies. Sorry for such a heavy question to start things off, but I figured I'd just get it out of the way.”

“Pull the band-aid off quickly...”

“Pull the band-aid off quickly.”

“Well, is there anything that makes you remember James... fondly?”

Chris thinks and picks up his coffee again, slowly rotating the cup in his hand. He puts it back down again without taking a sip. He begins to dig his fingernails underneath each other. He notices that Hannah sees this, so he stops.

“Before he was James Walks, Jimmy was just an anxious, sad mess. Before that, though, he was just a happy little kid, not a care in the world. I'm eleven years older than him, so you know there was never much in common between us. But like

I was saying, as a kid he wasn't so fucking anxious all the time, ya know? Just cute, loved playing on the instruments and stuff. I wasn't musically inclined, neither were our parents. Nobody knows where he got that from." Chris chuckles and continues with a smile.

"We grew up in a mainly white neighborhood. Not many people for Jimmy to really look up to. He took all the shit the white kids gave him on the chin. I heard the stuff they'd say to him from time to time, make jokes about watermelon and fried chicken and shit like that... he went back at them though. Had to learn how to defend himself quick. You know it's either that or some white girl telling you about how woke she is, or some teacher making an insensitive comment then apologizing to you after class so you don't make a big deal outta it. He was completely alone. Plus all the Black Lives Matter shit. He couldn't make sense of it, had friends playing both sides, he didn't know what the hell to think or say. But I know he was upset."

Chris begins digging his fingernails into each other again. He watches Hannah take notes, and lets out a quick cough. He finds the arm of the sofa and begins to pick at it instead. Hannah looks up.

"He didn't go to your father? Or mother?"

"Listen, my father and mother are wonderful people. But that's not what we do. They're hardworking, put their head down and grind it out, type people. Jimmy wasn't ever gonna go crying to them about something like that. Plus, it was tough for him. They didn't have much to say to each other and once I was outta high school I never went back. He was alone. He faced the world alone and that never stopped." Chris takes a deep breath.

"I guess... I'll say it like this, my parents lived not to die. Jimmy would send them money and shit, we would talk to them a couple times a month, they'd make sure we weren't dead.

It's good that way, we're all pretty independent, solitary. Chris stops for a second, and thinks of the family members who are now nothing more than blood.

"But if I was him, I would've fucking killed myself at 16."

"So how would he deal with his feelings of depression and anxiety? Did he go to therapy? Did he have friends who he could talk to?"

"I don't know if he had a fucking shrink. And like I said, we're all independent, solitary people. He had a ton of friends, but none of them could possibly understand. Black and depressed? I mean like I said my father and mother did the best they could, but prepare him for all of this? Being who he was and being who he *was*. He handled it like any normal man would, on his own, like our father would."

...

James tilts his head back while he finishes a drink at the hotel bar. He fumbles around in his brown Dickies jacket pocket looking for money, muttering nonsense. He throws loose dollars onto the bar top. As he stumbles up from the stool, two teenage white boys come up to him excitedly.

"James Walks, what's up my brotha! Loved your album. We're gonna be at the show tonight, we got VIP tickets."

James nods his head.

"See you there," he forces out and pushes past them.

James continues through the lobby, drawing eyes from everyone. He passes by the lobby doors as his name is being shouted by a horde of people from outside. He throws his hand up in an attempt to wave, then keeps stumbling through the main lobby. Finally, he arrives at the elevator and pushes the up button. He can barely stand straight, so he puts his hand on the metal door and leans heavily against it. The door dings, and

James' head slowly comes up. The door opens and his hand slowly slides with it, until he falls face-first into the elevator. The passengers coming out quietly step over his body, and he uses the railings to help himself up.

James presses the button for the 14th floor and examines the gap between 12 and 14. He smiles, leaning back against the railing. The elevator dings and the door opens once again. James pushes out of the elevator and down the hall towards his room. He takes out his wallet and tries the room key. It fails. He tries it again, and it fails again. He inspects the key—the wrong one, so he throws it on the ground and pulls out another card. The door finally opens. When he makes it inside, Chris is sitting on the couch.

"Where'd you go?" Chris asks without looking up from his phone. "I heard them chanting your name and shit."

James doesn't acknowledge his brother and begins moving through the room as if he is looking for something. Chris hears his clumsy, broken footsteps and finally looks up from his cell phone.

"Where'd you go?" he asks again, but this time, more inquisitively.

James again does not acknowledge his brother's question and throws his suitcase out of the closet.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Chris asks, his intrigue growing.

James stops, turns around and looks at Chris.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Chris repeats.

"Where's my guitar?" James asks.

"In the closet by the door, fuck, not that one... Did you go to the bar? You've got a fucking show in 6 hours! We're leaving in 30 minutes!"

James sways his way over to the closet by the door. He opens it and pulls out his guitar case.

"Jimmy! James!"

James pulls out his guitar from the case and continues to ignore his brother. Chris gets off of the sofa and walks towards his bed.

"You know what, if you don't give a fuck, I

don't either."

James begins playing some chords on his guitar. He stops, then messes with the tuning pegs. Chris sighs from the other room.

"At least you're rehearsing."

James plays again and seemingly begins to find his rhythm.

"You might be better drunk than when you're sober," Chris says, jokingly.

James stops abruptly and lifts the guitar above his head, smashing it on the ground, over and over, again and again. Chris runs out of his room and looks at the damage, and then at James. James looks back at Chris and then pulls out his cigarette pack from his pocket and lights it.

"What, what the fuck... what the fuck are you looking at? They're Light Blues, helping me quit." James labors through the words, swaying back and forth. Simply standing in place is too much for him at the moment.

Chris is speechless.

"Not like you're paying for any of this shit anyways," James says, matter of factly.

He then takes a long, hard drag and lets the nicotine reach the bottom of his feet, slowly pushing the smoke back up through his body and into his brother's face.

"You-you know where my bag went? I want some coke to sober up a little before the show," James asks, nonchalantly, and drunkenly.

James stares at Chris blankly, waiting for an answer. For a minute, the brothers do not move, and do not break eye contact.

"You little bitchass—"

Chris charges James and tackles him to the ground, they wrestle until James starts choking Chris. Chris elbows James in the ribs and he lets go. They both stumble to their feet and begin to trade blows. James trips over a broken guitar piece and falls backward on the floor. Chris jumps on him, punching him in the chest and face over and over and over. Chris finally stops when he is

out of breath and looks at James, shocked by the damage he has done to his brother. James groans, and begins to wheeze and laugh at the same time.

“Are we still leaving in 30 minutes?” James squeezes out laughter through broken ribs and a bruised face.

Chris slowly gets up and looks at his little brother, and then the rest of the room, at the carnage. He heads for the door.

“Grab me some coke while you’re out. Need to sober up,” James says, as he passes out from a combination of pain and drunkenness.

...

Hannah is visibly uncomfortable and quite confused, unsure what to say or where to look. She waits a while and feigns writing in her notepad.

“Um...”

“Well, you wanted to know how he dealt with shit.”

“True... um, how long ago was this?”

“About 5 or 6 years I think. At first, you know it started with just the music, he loved the music. He lived in silence, so he filled it with his instruments. To live in a world where nobody is like you, and nobody cares for you... it’s something else. And then he was thrust into the spotlight.”

“You think it was the spotlight that changed him? Not his depression and anxiety? Your family?”

“To be honest I’m not entirely sure... My brother was always proving himself worthy. Always trying to be enough. It’s difficult to explain what it was like for him, he was a person who felt so deeply... I guess... you ever seen that 80’s movie, with the kid with the fucked up face? And everyone hates him cause his face is so fucked up, but he’s so kind and so beautiful inside that he doesn’t retaliate? But in the end, he turns out to be an angel and so everyone is like, ‘boo hoo we are horrible people,’ Well, imagine nobody knows you’re an

angel. And even though you’re so damn beautiful, you gotta let that pain and anger out somehow...” Chris’s fingernails find each other again.

“I like to imagine that if that fucked-up-face kid actually existed, he would love the bottle and be into some really weird shit, you know? Fuck I don’t even know what I’m talking about anymore.”

Hannah scribbles some more in her notebook.

“No I, I think I see what you’re after. Like... someone trapped almost?”

“Nah, not trapped...”

Hannah pauses her writing, and ponders. They sit with that for just a moment. Then she breaks the silence.

“What happened after? Did he make it to the concert?”

“Yeah, he did. I mean after that we didn’t speak for about a year and a half. But I hear he made it. Show started an hour late, they tried to use makeup to cover the bruises and gave him a hat, but he couldn’t really sing cause his ribs were so fucked up, and he was hungover as shit so, he really wasn’t all there.” Chris takes the cup of coffee in his hands again and examines the brown ceramic design around the rim.

“He got absolutely crucified in the media. It was tough watching that, knowing what he was going through, it was tough to watch a bunch of talking heads and random people in comment sections shit on a little Black kid, especially your brother. He was 20. Nobody defended him either, nobody would touch him. Took him a while to get back.”

“Did you feel guilty,” Hannah responds, “Do you feel guilty?”

Chris stares at her, then breaks eye contact. He begins sticking his fingernails underneath each other again as he tries to let time and space answer the question. Hannah persists.

“Do you, you know, ever feel a bit guilty? Or maybe feel like things didn’t have to go that way for him?”

“What’re you asking me?” Chris asks, agitated. Hannah nods her head and drops it as she takes more notes.

“What’re you writing down?” Chris asks, almost accusingly.

Hannah looks up.

“What?”

“What’re you writing down in there? Aren’t you recording the whole thing anyway?”

“Well, I’m writing down things that I find significant to the story. Body language, things that I can’t remember from just listening to the recording.”

“It’s hard to talk to you when you do that.”

“I apologize, if you want me to stop I can.”

Chris shifts in his seat, nails still digging into each other.

“Nah, don’t worry about it... what else do you got?”

He is fixated on her notepad. She looks up.

“During that year and a half where you said two didn’t talk, what did you both do?”

“He finished that bullshit tour that he was on. Got crucified in the media like I said, and kept doing the same bullshit cause it was all he knew. I went back home... uh, to D.C. and sort of sat on my ass for a while. I was still technically his manager so I was getting paid still, and just waited until things between us blew over, like they usually do. Our parents reached out, even offered to let Jimmy come home for a while when he was 21, 22. He declined obviously, and started dating some bougie white girl from LA. That’s when I heard from him again, in 2015, asked me if I’d fly out to see him.”

...

“Hey, Chris!”

James waves his brother over to the table.

“Hey little brother,” Chris responds as he takes a seat across from James. “The Rose, huh.

Very fancy. What’s up with the sunglasses?”

James laughs.

“Trying my best not to get spotted.”

“So, how you been?”

“You know, good, good. I’m working on a new album. I’d love for you to hear it.”

“Yeah?” Chris chuckles. “Maybe... So who’s this new little white girl you got on your arm, I’ve seen you guys in the news.”

“Her name’s Lucy, she’s from LA. Been hanging in and around my circle for a while and really helped me out of a dark place. I’m doing much better now, you know?”

“Yeah, you look healthier. How’s the coke?”

“Just for big occasions. Lucy’s got me on tight watch.”

“Make sure you’re doing it for yourself.”

“I am, she’s just been a big help.”

Chris looks around the brunch place.

“So what’s up, why am I 3,000 miles away from home?”

“Well, I wanted you to go with me to this thing Lucy’s friend is having... He’s this skater kid, I don’t know. Untalented, white, good looking, can do a kickflip, got a million followers on Instagram. And it’s just gonna be a bunch of white kids I don’t know and you know I hate that kind of shit.”

“Can’t your girlfriend hold your hand?”

“She’s grown... I don’t know, man... tired of my shit, I guess. She loves me, but the anxiety and the crowds... she’s social. And I’m not. She has a bunch of friends I don’t like and don’t wanna be around and I haven’t seen you in a while—”

“Yeah yeah, sure I’ll go.” Chris shakes his head. “Fuck is it with you? Always doing shit you don’t wanna do.”

“I love her, man. That’s what you do for people you love, right?”

Chris sucks in his teeth and grimaces. *Is it?* He thinks to himself.

“You’re 22, you’ll still have plenty of time to do shit you don’t wanna do when you’re older.”

"I know. She's just, she's great but she's got a hold on me."

"Alright."

"JJ, JJ. Come here, baby. This is Noah, it's his party. Noah, this is my boyfriend JJ and his brother Chris."

Chris and James shake Noah's hand. He's tall and skinny with shaggy dark hair cut into a mullet. The typical LA white kid.

"James Walks. Fuck, man, it's a pleasure to meet you. You're badass, man. A rockstar for a new generation. And you're Black. So fucking dope."

Chris gives James a look. Lucy then grabs James by the hand and looks him in the eye.

"Noah has like the coolest IG, and he was telling me how interested he'd be in working on a BLM campaign with you. I just thought you're like so popular and you're Black so it would benefit the both of you."

James begins to dig his fingernails underneath each other aggressively. Lucy notices.

"JJ, stop that. It's not good for you and it's gross."

He stops immediately.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Chris whispers to himself.

"Uh, yeah. Sure, man, what's your username? I'll give you a follow." James pulls out his phone.

"It's Noah, with a zero, underscore, godly."

"Alright, dope. I just followed, man."

"Jimmy, let's get a drink," Chris says. He and James shake Noah's hand and walk over to the bar.

"So that's what you're here for," James says, with a sigh of relief.

"Mhm."

They lean against the bar and both chuckle at each other.

"Can we get two vodka sodas please?" Chris asks the bartender. "You're that girl's fucking pet."

"What do you mean?" James responds, genuinely.

"Whenever you finally realize, I'm not

breaking up with her for you," Chris says, somewhat seriously.

James takes a sip, then starts grinding his teeth and sniffing.

"You're fucking racked right now, aren't you?"

"I told you, for big occasions, man. It helps me get through."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Jimmy. This is not what I expected when you said you were doing better."

Lucy walks over and butts in on James and Chris' conversation.

"JJ, JJ, baby, this guy over there was grabbing me on the stomach and kept asking me to dance. Do you even care? Are you serious? Do you not care that some guy was trying to dance with me?"

"Who was it," James responds. He pulls his back off the bar and finishes his drink. "It doesn't even matter, he's like not even that cute. You like don't even have to worry."

"Then why would you tell me if you didn't want me to do anything?"

"I just thought you'd wanna know that someone was trying to fuck your girlfriend."

"Well, yeah. So tell me who it is."

"Oh my god, you're like so dramatic."

"What the fuck, Lucy?"

"Ok, oh my god. It was Noah."

Chris shakes his head in amazement.

"What the fuck is wrong with you two," Chris asks, bewildered at the current conversation he's hearing.

Lucy looks at Chris, then back at James.

"Are you gonna let him fucking talk to me like that?"

"He was talking to me too!"

"You literally don't even give a fuck about me. Some guy just tried to fuck me and you don't care and now you're letting your brother shit on me like what the fuck?"

"Fuck this," James says, now seething. He takes a full drink from the bar. One of the other partygoers protests but he doesn't acknowledge

them and pushes towards the dance floor.

“Jimmy! James!” Chris and Lucy hurry to catch up with him.

“Do not do this, JJ, if you do something to him I’m gonna be so fucking embarrassed. Seriously, if you do this, we’re done.”

“James, this isn’t worth it,” Chris says as he tries to pull James back, but he gets shrugged off.

James finds Noah and pushes him, then throws a drink in his face. Everyone turns to watch.

“Hey, what the fuck, man? This shit is vintage,” Noah says to James.

“What? You think I’m a fucking bitch,” James asks, irately.

“Hey, she was all over me first. You gotta control your girl, bro.”

“Fuck you.”

Everyone has started recording the altercation. Chris tries to pull James back and Lucy tries to push Noah away. But James pushes Chris off of him and then grabs Lucy by the shoulders and throws her to the ground. Noah tries to run from James, but James pulls him back and punches him in the nose.

“Fuck!” Noah screams in pain.

James punches him again and Noah drops.

“I’m not a fucking bitch. I will fuck your ass up,” James screams as he continually punches Noah.

Chris pulls James off of Noah and he drags him outside of the party. Chris stares at James and he stares back, eyes wide open and seething with anger. Chris shakes his head.

“What? What, Chris? You think I’m a fucking bitch too, don’t you? I’ll fuck you up too, motherfucker. Try me. You fucking bitch. You’re a bitch just like him. You aren’t shit. I’m the man of this fucking family. I’m the best son. You’ve never done fucking shit!” James pulls out a gram of cocaine and a key. He takes a sniff. Chris stares dejectedly.

...

“Yeah, and that was the last time I spoke with him again, up until... that night a year ago,” Chris says, reluctantly.

“Why?”

“Why? He fucking lied to me and called me every name in the book. Honestly, I’m not gonna lie, my feelings were hurt. I would have rather him be alone doing that fucking bullshit than with some girl using him like a toy, and he knew it too. He knew what she was all about.”

Chris feels the coffee cup going cold in his hands. “What’s so fucking sad is that he needed me. But that’s not how we were raised. Every man for himself... I should’ve kicked his ass right there.” Chris drops his head.

“After that, that video of him punching that white boy went everywhere, he was done. No PR team would touch him. I don’t know what he did for those two years.”

“He got sued, right? Did some community service?”

“Yeah, that kid sued his ass off. Thank god Jimmy was rich. Imagine if he was a nobody. Just a random Black kid. Probably could’ve done some time.”

“Whatever happened to the album?”

“He scrapped it. One thing I will commend him for is that he never used to half-ass anything when it came to his music. But I guess he couldn’t put any more time into it.”

“Well, I hate to circle back, but...here we are. You hadn’t talked to him for two years and—”

“Yeah... we hadn’t talked for two years and he told me he’d been working on an album, and wanted me to come out to listen to it before the release date. So, I did, but my flight got delayed. I came a day late and he was having some people over at his house in LA. He had stayed out of the public eye and was living in Westchester. This small part of LA, about 45 minutes outside of downtown on a good day. So I came over to his house when I finally could get out there and I walked in on a party.”

...

James Walks takes a swig of his drink, it goes down smooth. He picks up his cigarette from the ashtray and takes a nice long drag, exhaling with a smile. He leans over his glass table and takes a long line of cocaine. He turns to the pretty young white girl sitting on the couch to the right of him, taking a line as well.

"What's your name?" James asks with a sly smile and a tilt of his head.

"I'm Anna," she says, blushing with a giggle.

"Anna what?"

"McNulty."

"Ooh, McNulty huh, I've never been with an Irish girl before. How'd you hear about this small get-together?"

"I go to LMU, it's a college, not too far from here. My friend over there, Jamie, matched with your friend on Tinder, and he invited us. I didn't know it was your party. I've been a fan for so long. I loved your early stuff, and I can't wait for the new album to come out."

"Wait, you're in college? How old are you?"

"Don't worry, I'm 20. Only four years younger than you. If you want, I can list off every single song on both of your albums in chronological order."

"I only have one album," James says, smiling.

"The one you scrapped, you know it leaked right? If you had finished it, it would've been a classic. I just know this new one is going to be amazing."

"Well, Anna, I'm starting to be a fan of you too."

James leans in for a kiss and Anna obliges.

"Hey, little brother." Chris Walks looks over James, thousands of dollars of cocaine in front of him, and a girl he has never seen before.

"Chris!" James pats Anna's leg, then takes her hand. He then gets up and hugs Chris.

"Anna, this is my older brother, Chris. Chris, this is Anna. She goes to LMU, right down the street."

"Yeah, what the fuck is this? I came here to listen to your album. Not watch you do coke and talk to bitches."

"Hey, calm the fuck down. You could do with some bitches. Don't ruin the vibe." James sits back down, and Anna puts her leg around him. "Grab a drink and relax."

"It's been two years, and you clearly haven't changed. I'm not staying here for this shit, man. I'm not watching you waste your life and your talent like this." Chris storms out. James moves Anna's leg off of him and chases him out of the door.

"Dude, it's one fucking night, it's one party. My album's coming out tomorrow. Just live a little." Chris doesn't respond. He gets in his rental car and drives off. James walks back into the party.

...

Chris is stone cold. Hannah interjects out of curiosity.

"Did you ever get to listen to the album?"

"Yeah."

"And what'd you think? I've only heard rumors."

"A classic. Really," Chris says as tears begin to fall down his face.

"So, what did you do when you left?"

"I just... I guess I thought I'd scare him straight. That sad little fuck," Chris says, now trying to fight back his overflowing tears.

"Scare him straight?" Anna is very confused. She has no notepad in her hand, and is just sitting, listening to Chris.

"Yeah."

"Oh my god. You were the anonymous tip."

"I was the anonymous tip." Chris' voice breaks.

"I killed my brother."

Part Two

Owen McNulty stares out of his bedroom window at the dozens of news reporters outside his home. He wears only a wifebeater, boxers, and slippers while he holds his standard-issue pistol. His suburban LA community has turned into an absolute madhouse since the death of 24-year-old singer James Walks. He hasn't gotten a good night's sleep in days because of the constant harassment by news reporters and protesters. He shakes his head at the people outside. His wife, Allison, walks into the room in her robe and gets into bed.

"She just won't stop crying, babe. I don't know what to do anymore," his wife says.

"All over a fucking nigger," Owen says to his wife, glaring at the people outside of the window.

Allison sighs.

"Honey, just come to bed," she says back to him. "How about we forget about all of this for a night, huh? Come here, honey."

Owen closes the blinds and puts his pistol on the nightstand next to him. He climbs in bed next to his wife and turns off his light. They begin to kiss, and move closer to each other. He takes off her robe and she gets on top of him. She reaches down under the sheets but finds nothing but slack skin. She rolls off of him onto her side of the bed and pulls the covers over herself.

"What's wrong, honey?" Allison asks her husband.

He sighs and rolls over away from her and looks at the ceiling.

"I just can't believe how much attention they're giving him," he says, aggravated, staring at the ceiling. He hears his daughter Anna weeping all the way downstairs. The news report covering James Walks' death is playing on the TV.

"Anna! Anna! Cut all of that goddamn noise out!" His voice carries throughout the house.

Anna's weeping softens.

"All over a fucking nigger," he repeats.

"Maybe we should let her stay with a friend

for a while," his wife suggests, sighing.

"Nope, she is going to stick by her father, because her father didn't do a damn thing wrong."

He throws the covers off of himself restlessly.

"Allison," he says into the night.

"Allison," he repeats.

"Hmm," she responds, beginning to fall asleep.

"Where did we go wrong?" he says, puzzled.

"What are you talking about," she responds, tired, physically, and emotionally.

"With Anna."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our daughter, Allison. Crying over some Black boy. A druggie, no good, nigger boy."

"She's a kid, Owen. And enough with that word. I can't take the profanity."

"I've always been a straight shooter, Allison." He chuckles, Owen enjoyed that one.

"Allison," he whispers into the dark again.

"Allison," he repeats. "Do you remember that time, when Anna was about 15 or 16, and she wanted to go to that boy's concert? That concert was all she wanted for her birthday. That son of a bitch was selling tickets for about \$350 each, nosebleed seats. And I was working overtime, coming home late, all so she could go see some Black boy. Not for a nice dinner with her father, or a movie, or a weekend trip. She just wanted him. And I saw those looks she gave me, even before all of this. Hated how I was a cop. Even though I'm protecting her, providing for her—she wanted to see *him*. But she's my little girl, so I got her the tickets and even took her there. He came on stage an hour, no, two hours late. His face was caked up with makeup like some whore, and he barely even sang. But she was screaming her lungs out for him—like she's doing now. I'll never forget how embarrassingly happy she was." Owen restlessly rolls over again.

"But I'm glad it won't happen again."

"Let's go to bed, Owen, please," Allison says.

Owen goes back over to the window. He opens up the blinds and looks down at the reporters again. Allison gets out of bed and walks to the window with him. She puts her head on his shoulder.

“Come back to bed, honey, please. Don’t give those people your attention, they’re just making something out of nothing.”

“Remember when we were kids, and when something like this happened you’d get a medal for this? My father must’ve had 17 or 18 of those medals. Seemed like every other year he was killing a nigger who was hopped up on drugs trying to take someone’s money. Or some fucking beaner. Now they give them a sob story, and want to put *me* away. Where’d it all go wrong?”

“Times change, honey,” Allison says, as she walks away from him to slip back into bed.

“Anna... Anna!” Owen’s yell shakes the house.

“Honey, leave the girl alone.”

“Anna! Get up here now!”

Anna walks into the room, eyes puffy and red, hair a mess, in a sweater full of snot and tears. Her head is bowed. Her father walks up to her and tries to hug her. She pulls away.

“Now Anna, listen to—”

“No! you fucking—”

“Anna,” Owen snarls, then starts again, calmer. “I said listen to me. I’ve done too much for you and this family for this kind of disrespect. I did my job. And I saved your life. You should be thanking me. That was my duty as both an officer of the law *and* your father. Now cut out the crocodile tears, turn that goddamn TV off downstairs and take yourself to bed.”

“Listen to your father, Anna,” Allison says, trying to calm the tension.

Anna turns and makes her way out of the room, without a sound. Owen crawls back into bed. He turns over on his side, then turns once more so he’s lying on his back again. He keeps adjusting his pillows.

“Would you please stop moving?”

“I can’t, Allison, I just still feel that rush,” he says, excitedly.

Owen begins to lose himself in thought. He remembers receiving the call.

He wasn’t even supposed to be working that late, around 1:30 AM on a Friday, he was working more overtime, for his family. He imagined Anna, a couple of blocks away, sleeping in her dorm room, or studying hard in the library. Dispatch said they received an anonymous tip from a caller that a Black male was having a loud party, a few blocks away from where he and his partner were. The caller said that he knew there were felony amounts of both cocaine and marijuana and there were underage girls there who were unsafe. Owen’s mind lit up. He was about to have the bust of his career. Probably a fraction of a gang or a mid-level dealer, and he would save those young girls. He could be on the Today Show. His name and photo would surely be in the Times. His partner suggested they call for backup, but Owen declined.

And share the glory? Never in a million years. He and his partner drove over to the address that the caller gave. His partner carried a 12-gauge they kept in the back of their car, and he carried his standard-issue pistol. They banged on the door.

“LAPD. OPEN UP!” he shouted.

There was suspicion of crime at this address, so he pushed through the door before he was done talking. The first thing he saw was his daughter, Anna, on the couch kissing a nigger. A familiar boy, where had he seen him before? He made eye contact with his daughter and she screamed a blood-curdling scream, which incited panic in the entire room. Everyone began running around, trying to get out.

“Everyone, put your fucking hands up now!” he shouted.

The nigger boy violating his daughter got up and ran out of the side door.

“Hold things down here,” he said to his partner as he left out of the front door and peeled back around to the side.

He saw the Black boy slip and fall, then pick himself and keep going.

“LAPD. Stop running!”

He presented himself, now twice, and told the boy to stop. He could fire whenever he wanted to. He shot at the boy, but missed. He kept chasing after him down the street.

“Stop running! Now,” he shouted at the boy again.

The boy kept running. Then, the boy looked back for a second.

Where did he recognize him from? He kept chasing after the boy, then stopped, planted his feet, and aimed his weapon.

“Stop, now!” he screamed one last time.

He shot once, and hit the boy in the hamstring, causing the boy to hobble. He takes

his second, and final shot, and hit the boy right in the lower back, causing the boy to freeze up like a statue and topple over, his face going straight into the asphalt. He watched the boy wriggle and squirm in pain. His jerkish movements stopped as he jogged up to him. He rolled the boy over with his foot.

“That concert,” he says to himself. “I got him,” he says. “I saved my girl.”

Owen lays in bed, looking at the ceiling, smiling. The slack skin underneath the covers is now stiff and solid. He moves his wife’s hand underneath the covers.

“Oh, Owen, what on earth has gotten into you,” Allison asks, excitedly.

Owen smiles.

—*After James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,”
and “Going to Meet The Man.”*

THE GREAT DEBATE

•••

SAM YAZIJI, CLASS OF 2023

I watched the scene from a window stained with some dried-up sickly yellow paste, like the stuff that squirts out of creme brulee. Down there an old man lay, arms askew in twisted dissonance, head sagging on the curb, a whole note roosting on the lowest ledger.

A woman and man argued above him, debating schemas of innocence in heated linguistic trapeze, words fluttering and floundering around ears clogged with granules of asphalt and murmurs from passing buses.

A little girl in a red sweater sat, chewing her nails, watching the baroque performance in cadaverous trance, eyes tacked open and hands thawing into trembling kneecaps.

And then the train pulled away, but not before ribbons of siren became audible over the hiss and decaying ligaments of the city.

UZO ART—REPRESENTATION MATTERS?

...

JOLIE BROWNELL, CLASS OF 2022

I want every one of your paintings, one on each of my walls,
even though I know I will regret it...
Because you refuse to stay on the wall,
you won't stop crawling back into the eyes of my reflection.

Here you paint an entire neighborhood,
except they are all me—
it's a little creepy, honestly,
all the ways you keep brushing me in.
One day I am dancing;
now below, to the side, I am glaring by,
as tomorrow I bring back two armfuls of fresh flowers,
and the next day I bribe my brother to help me squeeze,
yes, yet another painting into my little office.

Or maybe I'm just pissed
at the way you perfected my birth mother's cheekbones,
and how you hid all our truths in her eye.
I wasn't ready to face her again,
after all these years,
after all this separation,
and here you are, reminding me
I am still the *apple of her eye*.

Then, there is your painting of my little brothers,
with broad shoulders, fully grown up,
but somehow you managed to get them to sit down,
to stand still, *how?*
Luther is the smooth shaven one in blue,
with a little added bling;
the oldest, Thomas, is staring dead straight, unbothered,
still trying to be cool.

Lucas is a mixture of Luther's side profile
and Thomas' plaid suit.
It's like you staged all my dreams come true
and threw them back into the future.
But why must you be so cruel—
don't you know we still live in a world where black boys die?

Also, how dare you ask me what death looks like,
and then give her pink lips!
I am now a mother because of you,
and the child I'd hoped to never birth
won't stop picking at my cheek,
as the silhouette of my soul keeps mowing over
the corn harvest that never grew in,
and my lover simply waits behind thin newspapers,
always carrying much too heavy news.
But at least you knew to bury me in the right earrings,
don't you know I never believed in the *American dream*?

So, you distract me with a mood board of gold chrysanthemums,
and finally convince me I look good in a sky-blue bucket hat
and my grandmother's white ribbed turtleneck,
two things I wouldn't dare wear outside this room.
Good times are coming, you assure me,
just wear that big-old smile of yours, you say.
But feminists do not like being told to smile...
What was your job here anyway?

...

I still want every one of your paintings, one on each of my walls,
so, you can keep taking all the cutouts of the things I keep trying to hide away,
and glue them back together, turn them into centerpieces,
and say, *this too shall be made anew, made beautiful*.

But today, I really am not sure what to do with you...

Uzo, why can't you just leave me on the floor?



RED CHANDELIER (PHOTOGRAPHY) • SAMANTHA CHENG, CLASS OF 2023

KNIFE TATTOO

•••

HARRISON HAMM, CLASS OF 2022

Dark glow in afterhours.
Slits of light. Oil haze.
Sunspots on olive-tan skin.
Love fluttered hot in between
the wood-eye grates, the lake whispers.

Lick up the sand-warm hills.
I cut myself on your knife, ink
wet with daddy's firewood sting.
Statue still but for a crevice-beat
 carved out
by these brown eyes
 stroking you in
like folklore, I'd learn. Stalking each other,
animals in cages of vine—these dusk-soaked
heavyquiets. My hands lost in the kitchen, I see
a towel-wrapped, sad story about a father
 and his pretty boy.

Summer lasted two shades of green. Maybe three.
When I remember those premature fireworks, now
and then, I catch a breath in the midday showers.
Yes, your waist bled *kiss me* when you let me down.

I could die right here, by unplayed pianos
in the shacks for empty queer boys.
 Please
 just
press the silver through me now.
Show me how the pen hits the vein.

JOHN WAYNE, UNDRESSED

...

HARRISON HAMM, CLASS OF 2022

You're an actor, aren't you?

Pretend this is dress rehearsal,

and I'm untying the anger knotted down your back.

Cast a lasso tight 'round your chest,

heartstrings choke into a Shit Guitar

—*I'll pluck it right.*

Leather with a side of whiskey

spilling indigo down your neck.

Wash it off before I lap it up, cowboy: Thirst is watching you ride.

I'm young and you're on TV.

Forget Mount Vernon, Hollywood, the Wild West.

Give in with a tipped hat.

Baby, that's the silver screen. Touch yourself. If it helps.

Easy. Steady. Denim scratch of sandpaper skin.

With every button, you strip America bare naked

so I beg you play a Kinder Man for the scene.

Texas lingers with an open door – a question:

Haven't you ever held a dog

as it died young in your hands?

Kiss me like that, cowboy.

Taste of shame grit in your teeth – grab onto my throat, props for reigns.

Not the Rockies; just any fucking grocery store bathroom,

hang on tight – you know how I whimper.

Shoot me down with those open-casket-eyes,

wonder where the horses go when they gallop past frame.

You know, I never saw my grandfather cry

but I caught you tonight, John Wayne,

undressed and weeping.

DAISY AND CHAIN

•••

GABRIELLE JOHNSEN, CLASS OF 2022

You won't hate us
if you meet us
with a belly

full of sprint-downed
Prosecco. Optical echoes,

a head blathered and limbs
freed to mime along, follow

how our knees wobble.
Untrained children, sticky feet
fill half of mama's heels, clonk
atop the marble.

Hyena peals, our laughter breaks skin
to harden it, calloused
toes, like those beneath the complete ballerina.

*A table, heartily arranged:
stuffed with platters,
littered with bottles,
and no one come to claim it.*

We maim it.

We're spoiled!

We're trash collapsed
in a heap that feeds
insect addictions,
a hospital of victims
smelling of death,
thick with sugar.

I'm her older sister you can tell not just because she's lamp and I'm shade nor because
she's daisy and I'm lace nor because she's a forehead shorter than me but because she wants to cut my head off
and I want to stick a fork in her stomach

Maybe the water,
 maybe to drown,

maybe to float forever,
 maybe you'll see us

in no real danger,
 because there is nobody

else in the world,
 no one left to hurt

us, only ourselves,
 and we would never

do a thing like that, not
 permanently, not as long

as there's some other
 toy to embarrass

and abandon anew.
 We remember

nothing about ourselves
 except that we are not

women, only flesh
 dolls who need to eat.

We're always naked,
 no matter the clothes.

The thrill is that
we apply
our own cosmetics,

wrinkle
our own dresses.
You don't get to.

We'll write your number on the wall and call it
once,

when we're bored.

— *After Daisies (1966), directed by Vera Chytilová*



19 (MIXED MEDIA) • KELLIE TOYAMA, CLASS OF 2022

A TEENAGE ALTAR

•••

AMELIA GORMAN, CLASS OF 2022

Beaded rosaries,
strawberry lip gloss—
sticky and neon pink.

Report cards,
algebra homework,
a locket with our faces glued inside.

We pray to God and our favorite rock stars.

Floral patterned panties
consecrated with the insignia of whatever boys
occupy our daydreams of the month,
week,
day.

Embossed glass bottles
full of rust-colored
sweetness.

We wear it to mask the sickly smell of melancholy and innocence.

Shades of blonde silk
strewn across twin beds.
The walls of our pastel prison
stuffy with silence.

You'd think we'd be bored, but no—us girls, we're creative.

A rope,
some pills,
bathwater running over,
deep breaths of car exhaust.

You call it girlish whims; we call it the best decision of our fucking lives.

– After The Virgin Suicides (1999), directed by Sofia Coppola

GODOFREDO'S GRIEVANCES

•••

VERO URUBIO, CLASS OF 2022

There is grief to be found in beginnings.

Something had to end in order for something else to take its place.

Some people have to be remade to fit what the cargo capacity decrees for their voyage and destination. Others give up the life they would have inherited—their homes and hopes, families and dreams—for a new beginning.

For a new grief.

Grievances disguised, prescribed, and unanimously understood as “better” beginnings—tricks of the eye and mind.

Godofredo had never been one to believe what everyone said, even as he arrived on the shores of California in 1929 before settling in Stockton.

Because even though he didn't believe in hopes and dreams the Golden State offered men like him, he did believe in homes and families. Particularly, his home back in the Philippines which was on the verge of being lost.

But, to believe in the home and family, one also had to believe in money.

So, Godofredo went for work along with so many others, his mind set on the material reality that would put food on the table and tools in the hand.

He knew that striving for more than what the bargain demanded of him would lead to more grief than he could muster. He knew he would not land himself in the picture films or written paperbacks that acted as his only knowledge of what the United States was like. He knew he

would not come across an uncanny stranger who would pledge his allegiance to Godofredo's cause. He knew he would not find love in the land of opportunity abound, despite what his fellows supplied him with when they went out on the town for the first time.

He knew this and more when they reached the town's taxi dancehall, the entrance as alluring and welcoming as its promise to the workers after a long week.

Dollar-A-Day, Ten Cents A Dance.

He knew its disguises only got more appealing to the eye.

His friends were a lively and rambunctious people—Florencio, Jacinto, and Celedonio.

All three were remarked as splendid dancers and the life of the floors at House Howell. Talents notwithstanding, this had landed the trio in hot waters with fellow patrons at the dancehall and, unsurprisingly, sought out by the dime-a-dance girls.

Still, Godofredo watched the scenes as they shimmied with rapt attention, minding whether they'd caught attention for more than just their more-than-proficient dances. They were more than worth the strain it caused Godofredo to be on-guard.

The white men were the most frequent fights Godofredo had to intervene for, spouting and spitting obscenities that often came paired with a flying fist or two.

A little over a month ago, they had taken him under their collective care and companionship.

Where one was, another was not too far away.

The set-up reminded him of his life and siblings at home—how they would clasp hands and cling to one another, as to not get lost in the sea of people and business that danced and dared the noisy streets.

So, Godofredo conspired to carry the metal contraption, clenched in his fist, fingers curled protectively over its casing in case he was needed for a brawl. Couldn't break bones with a punch so long as the metal of the lighter supported the bones—wouldn't risk losing his job because he had broken fingers.

Family extended to more than those who shared blood: it extended to those one would bleed for.

Godofredo would bleed for his friends—this family he had found away from his family—because he had learned quickly that no one else would.

They had each other.

And they had found themselves an enemy—or, in actuality, the enemy had found them: the white men.

Walking into town was enough to draw their ire. Breathing was enough to demand the attention of their clear, washed out eyes. If you didn't look, talk, or behave like one of them, you were worse than nothing. They did this to their own, too. It was like watching a great beast cannibalize itself, snarling and spitting and snapping at anything in its path that wasn't itself.

Godofredo had never known people could be so unforgiving of circumstances beyond anyone's control.

He kept his head down, but clenched his lighter.

It had come to blows before and, out of his friends, could risk the most; their boss thought him a fine and valuable worker, broader, stronger, and taller than the average "Filipinos" he usually got.

So, his job was not a jeopardy and, because of his usefulness and efficiency, his punishment had been far less severe than that of any other laborer.

In return for his protection, his friends offered their savvy and humor and vibrancy Godofredo so lacked in the fields—what his family had been for him, his friends were.

The ache that longed to return home—deep inside the very marrow of his veins—was accompanied by the aches of a day's work.

He could bear it.

He *would* bear it.

He had to.

Godofredo stood outside, leaning against the pillars that kept the saloon upright and observed with a watchful eye.

There were a couple others flocked closely to him, smoking and drinking and laughing. But Godofredo couldn't be fooled by their appearance of ease. He could see their hunched shoulders in wiry muscle beneath dress shirts and suit jackets alike, the scattered movements of eyes and fingers—the occasional glance towards him and to one another in a language Godofredo understood a little better.

Are we okay? Is this okay? Is the coast clear?

Then, as soon as it would occur, merriment would fill their faces in the confirmation that Godofredo wasn't moved to action.

It happened so often, however, Godofredo wouldn't have put it past the intentionality of the white men. To remind them of their place in this world of the dancehall storefront.

One of those frequent offenders stepped outside, closing the door behind him in a strange, self-conscious sort of way that was so unlike the many who sported his features.

He spared him a look, and then had some to spare with a sweep of the eyes.

All at once, conversation halted around him, and he felt the eyes of his brothers, nephews, cousins, and uncles on him, but Godofredo recognized him as the owner's son and let his gaze fall from his bleached white face.

They were around the same age, Godofredo

with a year or two over him, if that, and he acted strangely. That and the matter of his eyes seemingly searching his face for something, maybe a reason why he stood out here and not in there, maybe gauging whether he should make a pitch to sell what his father was offering, were all Godofredo knew of the man.

He continued forward a little, stopped, got out a cigar that had been lit already, and veered off to the side with a sharp dip of his head to Godofredo—an askance look and apology, or an acknowledgement of the position he'd chosen a month ago, Godofredo didn't know and didn't bother extending the same courtesy.

For he was the ceaseless, never-ending watcher—the guard or guardian angel—whose night shift was nearly complete. And the man whose father owned the taxi dancehall didn't hold a candle to the kinds of threats Godofredo had faced from people who looked like him.

People with less of a stranglehold on any of them, but who made sure you didn't know.

The chatter rose up around him, some of his fellow laborers stood and left, the magic losing its touch after the intrusion.

He wondered if it'll be trouble, if the trouble was worth this.

Sure, Godofredo wasn't interested in the pale and prettied-up women like Florencio, Jacinto, and Celedonio were, but he was the biggest and strongest and tallest of them, and they were the only family he had here.

Godofredo watched as they flirted and finessed, put on the bravado and braved themselves for the reply—the beck-and-call, call-and-response—speaking in a language Godofredo didn't understand and didn't care to with the girls who latched themselves on their arms.

This gaudy display of sensuality and courtship had never been his to explore even in the Philippines. His path was more covert and always shrouded in the cloak of darkness and deceit.

But it was something Godofredo refused to let himself feel shame over.

The white men wanted them all to feel ashamed over being in the words they scorned them with, the signs they nailed to storefronts, and the glares that lingered long after the act had been committed.

Godofredo would bear many things, but he would not bear that which he did not choose.

And he had chosen to come here for work.

For wages.

The ache hit him tenfold, stronger than anything his muscles could strain and stretch themselves into doing to him.

When the sun beat down on their bodies, casting shadows over the valley, they were devoid of the very life their labor lengthened for others. Gaunt, brown faces wore the same, pallid expression while gnarled, brown hands reached forward and pulled backward in several, fluid motions.

Like snakes that struck at unsuspecting prey.

But when the day's work ended and Godofredo's night shift began, they took on a metamorphosis. Hollow-faced friends rejuvenated by sundown as the cracked hands of laborers worked to cast off the dust and debris from their newly emerged forms.

And what else could they do with their handsome selves but head downtown dressed in their fineries, as if they were the stars of the films they'd all watched, and forget, for a moment, what they would return to. They could be the young, single men they would have been in the Philippines had they stayed.

But the disguise was different.

It was the paradox of their lives here: they were dead among the living during the day, and living among the dead by nightfall.

Godofredo chose to die because it was what would feed and clothe and house his family back home.

Florencio, Jacinto, and Celedonio lived enough on his behalf. Got him involved plenty to the point where he had a reputation among the

patrons of House Howell.

Godofredo watched as Florencio kissed the hand of the girl he'd been with all night. Watched her eyes glitter with a fondness and fire that, one knew, he was all she saw and heard in that big, big room, crowded wall-to-wall with bodies.

Jacinto and Celedonio, too, paid their respects to their respective girls, bidding them goodnight and farewell—the same song-and-dance so many fawned and fed into, it was almost a wonder how it worked, like a well-oiled machine.

The trio stumbled out into the cool air, smiling and sweating.

“She loves me!” cried Florencio. “Godofredo, tell them I'm no easy mark!”

Godofredo smiled, shaking his head at their antics as they walked down the road.

“Oy! Leave him alone!” Jacinto laughed. “You know he's got a girl waiting for him.”

Godofredo didn't know how it had started, but he hadn't been the one to start it.

Tonight, they returned without trouble. They didn't meet the sunken eyes of the white men as they walked past, but the disdain stunk all the same, wafting in their direction as they headed back to their makeshift bunker.

Another shift ended, two more to go until the set was complete.

They returned to the taxi dance hall the next night, Godofredo leant against his pillar.

The door to his left tentatively opened, then closed, but Godofredo kept his vigil—there was a man who openly glared at Florencio and Darlene as they laughed and swung each other around, lost in their own world.

The white man—the son of House Howell's founder—approached him, unlit cigar in hand.

This time, there was no conversation to be halted, but something halted all-the-same within Godofredo.

Because Godofredo was out alone.

“I've seen you 'round before,” said the man—

the first words he'd ever spoken to him in the month Nick had only acknowledged his presence with a curt nod. “I think your name's Go-doe-fray-tho? God-owe-fray-doe. Go. Uh. Sorry.”

Godofredo stared.

“Would've said something sooner, like hello, but I, uh,” he continued undeterred, “didn't want your pals thinkin' things. This place here being on the ebony and all, it wouldn't be too strange, I s'pose. But. Strange times we're livin' in.”

Godofredo isn't sure what to make of him yet. Or his rambling.

He had not told him to leave if he was not planning on spending his dimes, but made no move to suggest that it would be an altercation because of that fact.

“Nick,” said the man, fumbling over his own introduction in a way that unnerved Godofredo even more. “Nick Howell? My Pops owns the joint.”

Godofredo thought of his father, who could scarcely keep the house despite the work he put into selling his wares and helping family and friends with their own, and ached.

Nick gestured nervously to the sign at the front with the hand holding the unlit cigar.

“I can read,” Godofredo replied with an ease Nick didn't have.

Before he knew what he had done, he held out his lighter and flicked it open.

Nick took the opening with a hesitancy.

Godofredo likened him to a small, woodland animal.

Their eyes never broke away in the exchange and the cigar never met Nick Howell's lips.

Godofredo would've seen.

The next night, the four get dressed and do it all over again.

Godofredo had been the first to finalize his look, using the minimum amount of gel that waxed over his fingertips and palms to style his hair. The tin's substance would keep its wave-

swept form for the remainder of the night.

He watched from his cot as Florencio and Celedonio alternated suits, being of a similar height and build, while Jacinto picked lint off his one McIntosh. The three gleamed black-and-silver under the flickering light they hadn't bothered reporting.

Florencio scooped the jelly from its tin and combed his fingers through his hair, watching his own progress through the reflected image in the one mirror they had presented to him. It had been Florencio himself who had found the discarded mirror—unshattered and untouched by spider web shards—and Celedonio had brought in some old crates too broken to carry produce with the very next day.

Together, the four had collected items to turn their collection of trash into something of a vanity—like what they saw in the storefronts and open windows of the houses in the nicer part of this town.

It was a project that had taken the better part of a night some nights ago and, by the end, had them whooping with delight at their accomplishment outside of working hours. It had meant something far too profound to have omitted aloud other than the noises of celebration and relief: if they had the strength to build and mingle against the grueling work hours and aches of their labors, they had the hope that there was more to this “America” than the latter.

Jacinto nudged Celedonio on the shoulder and said something too quietly for Godofredo to hear, gesturing to his whole self.

It was so unlike home—where the noise would pierce through any passing thought of his.

Here, in these moments of preparation, were the sounds Godofredo would attribute to them all.

Godofredo had never bought a suit—only the dress shirt and the slacks, being mindful to leave the sleeves rolled up for dexterity. What was the point of making such an outrageous purchase

if it was under constant threat?

Jacinto and Celedonio turned to Florencio and began swatting him away from the mirror, reaching out and dipping their hands in the little tin to the side despite Florencio's attempts to fend for his position.

Godofredo held back laughter at their antics as Florencio attempted to peer over their heads before giving up any fleeting hope of seeing his reflection stare back at him.

Celedonio's snort broke the ritual's silence that only the footfalls and creaks of the floorboards had briefly interrupted.

Florencio looked at him expectantly, gesturing wildly at the two who shared the mirror.

Godofredo hoped his expression conveyed all Florencio needed to know that he would not intervene in this; he had a long night of standing ahead of him and he would not rise until it was absolutely necessary—no matter how much more time they all knew it took for Florencio to gel his hair at just the right angle or how pretty the girl was.

Florencio sighed and waited to retake his turn beside Godofredo. He stood, unwilling to crease Celedonio's suit—no matter how bothered he was by the intervention at his expense.

Though it had only been a handful of months compared to the lifetime he'd spent back home, this was as tradition as rounding together his siblings to assign chores. When ritual became routine, there was nothing one in his position could do but cautiously embrace this newfound role that had found him.

This, Godofredo knew.

They went back to the taxi dancehall and Godofredo ignored the white man's—no, Nick Howell's—attempt to navigate yet another conversation with him.

So, they stood together in silence.

For his shift.

The entire shift.

Then, his friends poured out, jesting and nudging one another with a playfulness Godofredo would rather have them keep.

“Goodnight,” said Nick, still holding his unlit cigar and still as confusing.

Godofredo didn’t bother with a verbal reply when he left.

Hadn’t last night, either.

He was reminded of the times he’d had to answer to white men and knew that this could mean certain trouble, but he was angry and he didn’t *have* to entertain this particular one.

He fell asleep with thoughts of his mother, preparing the meal for the afternoon, and he awoke with the scent of freshly cooked food pervading his nostrils and the warmth of words chastising him for staying out late again.

The workers stumbled and stalked into the new day.

Then, the workers worked.

Reach-and-grab-and-pull. And reach-and-grab-and-pull.

Godofredo would have liked to think them a collective—a unified front—but where they lived and worked in the same field, shared the same label, they were all very different.

What reach-and-grab-and-pull for Godofredo was reach-and-grab-pull-grab-pull-grab-pull for Florencio, or reach-grab-grab-grab-and-pull for Jacinto.

Celedonio was like Florencio in his method.

Some workers were ahead of their rows, while others—the more methodical of the group—lagged behind on theirs.

Reach-and-grab-and-pull. And reach-and-grab-and-pull. And rest.

On the eve of the new weekend, they had gone to the pool bar that still allowed Filipinos. They had also gotten into a fight with a white man who didn’t like the way they looked.

Celedonio suggested the dancehall for the next night, sealing Godofredo’s need to act.

But they don’t go. At least, not at the usual time, suits still hanging on their wires.

There had been a fight amongst the laborers of different camps—the Filipinos and the Mexicans. Godofredo had gotten involved, prying worker off worker and, now, sported a cut on his lip for his troubles. His friends had helped settle the workers, talked to them.

The boss had pitted them against one another and everyone knew it. Offer one camp higher wages and, when the other found out, it was a struggle over scraps.

Jacinto had cursed and yelled, claiming it was like a picnic to the boss. There was talk of not going out, but everyone vouched to go because their shiners would make them more attractive to their ladies.

Godofredo had wondered if Nick was ever in a fight; however, he dispelled the thought because, if Nick had been, it could have been one of his people.

It could still be him.

But that thought, too, was dispelled the second Nick’s eyes met the cut on his lips.

“What happened?” demanded Nick, though his voice wavered along with his expression.

“Fight,” Godofredo admitted. “It should have been worse, but friends. They helped.”

“You disinfected it? Sterilized? With—with alcohol.”

Godofredo laughed. “There is no such thing,” he replied, “not on the fields. Not for us.”

“Come with me. Please, I know you don’t like—I just—let me help. It could kill you.”

Godofredo spared a glance to his friends. Nodded once. Sharply. And went.

He didn’t want trouble and he had seen that manic look in the eyes of the white men before—had seen it twist when you didn’t give in to what they wanted out of you.

It was a quick affair, ducking inside House Howell and letting Nick take him to a room off

the side with an actual sink and the bottle of sterilizing alcohol.

"I want to kiss you but," Nick rambled to himself, unaware Godofredo could listen, too, "it—I mean—it'd hurt."

Godofredo stared and Nick came back to himself, realized he was being watched.

"Shit. Of course it wou—forget. Forget it! You can—I just wanted—I'm sorry, I didn't."

Something in Godofredo gave at that.

"Please don't tell anyone," Nick continued, "my father would—I'm sorry."

"You can do whatever it is you want," Godofredo relented, "to any of us."

Nick looked up sharply, eyes wide and uncertain—ever-searching.

This man wore an expression far more severe and far more afraid than he'd ever seen any of his companions and fellow workers. He was the very opposite of his friends whose flirtations and masculinity were flaunted, strutting like roosters, yet as mindful and considerate of their girl as any gentleman rehearsed in the mirror.

"I—I don't know about that," admitted Nick, "but I would like that very much. To kiss. You—I didn't want to assume you're a fella like me. I just thought. Thought. It'd be real swell."

Godofredo couldn't help the short exhale of a laugh that escaped him.

Nick stilled, waited for an answer Godofredo hadn't even considered a question.

Nick had power but didn't recognize it—something he figured was impossible with these pale men, these ghosts of humanity, haunting those who dared to threaten their rule and their women.

It was a bad idea, to invite grief in when it remained a threat to the list of grievances still yet to be seen through, but Godofredo didn't believe in what everyone had to say, he believed in what he saw and, right now, he saw Nick.

"Godofredo Vazquez is my name," he

admitted, putting the man out of his misery. "I will not kiss that who cannot say my name, Nick Howell."

"I can work on it," Nick argued, tone desperate and stumbling. "Pronouncing. I'm a fast learner, I—I can do that. Just out of school and all. Leave it to me."

It had not been his choice and seeking out pleasure was so few-and-far between that it felt foolish to damn one part of himself to the Hell his mother so lovingly warned him and his brothers about in her sharp tongue.

Feeling shame over seeking out suitors was not choosing death, but life; it was everyone else who had chosen his death. That was their choice, but this was his and he would not grieve.

So, he had kissed Nick under the roof of House Howell; then he had left, awaiting his friends he had hoped hadn't gotten into real trouble without his knowledge.

They hadn't and, then, they headed back to the shack they called home.

Godofredo awoke to the smell of Nick's cologne and the smoke of his lit cigar.

Reach-and-grab-and-pull. Reach-and-grab-and-pull.

Reach-and-grab-grab-grab-and-pull. And reach-and-grab-and-pull.

Reach-grab-pull-grab-pull-grab-pull. And reach-and-grab-pull-grab-pull-grab-pull.

And reach-and-grab-and-pull. Reach-and-grab-and-pull. Reach-grab-pull-grab-pull-grab. And reach-and-grab-and-pull. And reach-and-grab-and-pull.

And rest.

A month later saw Godofredo in the same place—the same taxi dancehall—and the same clandestine meetings with Nick.

Some nights, Godofredo stood his long night's vigil, shifting the weight between his legs, but he had companionship—it was something.

Other nights, Nick provided a cover to the barkeep they walked past each time.

Godofredo's service was needed to carry boxes and crates, so they could be inside. These were the worst for Godofredo, who could not keep watch.

By miracle, there had been no fights Godofredo hadn't been occupied for.

Then, it had come to a head under the roof when a particular homesickness clawed at the back of his wrists and somewhere behind the backs of his eyes when he and Nick had coupled.

Nick had taken to talking about growing up in Stockton and how good it was to still be with family—how good it was to have Godofredo now, too, under the same roof.

Something that had been simmering over the past days of enduring the pains—something in the pairing of the physical aches of the field that Godofredo knew would outlast his understanding of his own body and the familiar ache that trailed its way back to his heart—came to a head.

"Would you give up your home? Your family?"

"I—what, Godofredo?"

"Could you give up your hopes and dreams to follow someone else's?"

"What else would I have?"

Godofredo didn't know, but it was answer enough.

It wasn't the same after that and, by the end of the month, Nick stopped coming by.

Grief is the love left over that could not be splayed and speckled in the middle part. So, it always feels like a beginning—the fire that precludes the phoenix.

The trick is to not acknowledge the grief carried in those first few lines—the "hellos" and "how do you dos" of the world. Save that for the ending because it might just last beyond the final page.

Godofredo stood in the same spot and watched the twists and twirls, heard the chatter and the shrieks—the cacophony of coupling, the

wild cheers that rose when Florencio made a toast, his dime-a-dance-girl hanging off his arm with the same fondness and fire in her eyes.

Nick never stood next to him anymore or looked his way or even nodded, but Godofredo managed. He could bear it like he did everything he came across or what came across him.

There was one other worker, sitting on the stoop near him.

"You smoke?" asked the worker.

Bienvenido was reminded of unlit cigars and stopped himself, replying: "No."

"Damn, was going to ask if you got a light."

Godofredo uncurled his fingers and held the lighter out without looking his way. Not yet.

The worker laughed, scrambled to his feet, and faced him before taking the device and lighting his cigarette.

He was handsome—his face was not yet gaunt and his hands were only just marred—but even without the signature features that he shared with his fellow workers, he thought he'd still be as handsome over the coming months.

"Bienvenido Avila."

"Godofredo Vazquez."

"So, tell me," Bienvenido proposed, sounding out each syllable to a perfected English that gave away a background familiar in the trade, "Godofredo. What's your story?"

No one had thought to ask—not Nick, not his friends.

So, Godofredo told him.

And Bienvenido listened.

Beginnings are the postscript of an end. A forward momentum even as the last light gets swallowed by the sun. Because there will always be an end, there is always something to grieve.

But, by the next outing, Bienvenido still sits and talks with him.

They converse. They listen. They kiss.

By the next month, there is a bench in

their spot and Godofredo has suspicions, while Bienvenido laughs at the expression he wears, patting insistently next to him on wooden slats.

By the month after that one, Bienvenido sleeps on his shoulder and Godofredo watches.

But he is as warm as he is alert, and the streetlamp shines down on them, cascading their twin shadows against House Howell.

Godofredo once asks Bienvenido how he does it—sleeps on a hard bench, under the harsh light, with only himself as comfort—and the man, this infuriatingly coy man, only covers the hand that holds the lighter with his own, and tells him that it was a trick he'd learned and could not share.

Of course, they still speak and the other listens, but now they also tease relentlessly and touch publicly, as if neither the white man nor his poised threat can reach them—stuck on an entirely different plane of existence from them.

For the first time, Godofredo understands the risk his friends have taken every single weekend; Bienvenido has made a believer out of him and, in turn, Godofredo has company with him at his post and someone who can hold his own in case things get testy.

Better yet, he's made a man who can give as good as he gets.

Exasperated, Godofredo wishes him the best of luck falling asleep on the other side of the bench, receiving an open-mouthed, machine gun laugh that splinters the bubble of silence that surrounds them.

There are many tricks—this, Godofredo thinks much later, as Bienvenido softly snores and hiccups in deep slumber, just to the left and down from Godofredo's shoulder.

Tricks to life and living it with what you've been given.

Tricks to love and loving.

Tricks to survival and surviving.

Tricks to fights and fighting.

Tricks to life and living.

The trick is to not grieve until it's ended—to say *Yes* to grief—and to all that comes before it: the aches and all they embody.

Because there is always something to grieve.

This, Godofredo knows and believes.

But there is also so much to celebrate.

This, he knows and believes in, too.

SEATTLE AT 5 AM

...

TRINITY CATLIN, CLASS OF 2023

I fell asleep on your chest
Drool pooled in my cheeks
I laid my hands to rest
On your shoulder
Gripped on
So the narrative wouldn't slip away
At some point in the night
The oil in your skin
Tugged on my cheeks
My saliva slipped out
The turned corners of my mouth
And I surrendered
To your ceramic arms
Frozen body
My forehead in your neck
Your breath a cool fog
My eyes high beams of an oncoming driver
Neither of us can see
The skin of my chest
Wrap into the skin of your chest
Silks unwoven
Rewoven
Plaid, plated, pleated
Red, blue, purple
We are a textile
We are fibers
Rooted in the knots and twists and turns
Of a blinding road
And when you wake
You tear the threads

One by one.

Slowly, you make your coffee

—Quietly, you call.

We braved a heatwave

by ripping off the covers

and tearing them to shreds.

TO BE READ: BANNED, CHALLENGED, CENSORED

...

HAYLEY DENNINGS, CLASS OF 2022

My existence is a sin:
not everyone can say this,
but for me, whose existence begins
with the color of my skin,
the words roll right off of my tongue.

Rejections from hundreds of years ago
have carried into the present.
Lived experiences are not valid enough,
our words are not powerful enough,
we are not hurt enough—
we need more trauma.
Pain should be weaving in and
out of our bones, creating a tapestry of our lives
that is meant to be viewed only by white eyes.
Our trauma, once the depressions in our minds,
no longer belongs to us.

What I pull from my mind and heart,
still weeping blood and tears from
the pain of the departure,
is only given a name that is not my own.
And then I am scrutinized.
My existence is scrutinized, politicized, and criminalized.
We are not allowed to live in peace.
Our thoughts are gifts, a guiding grace for ancestors to come,
but they are plundered and pillaged before we can even give them names.

We were stolen from our homes
and told what to do and say,

then propped up on shelves
in an attempt to rewrite
our broken and discarded history.

We tell our stories, but we are still not heard.
We sell our stories, but we are still not heard.
How much suffering makes us valid?

We are pushed and pulled until we bleed words;
they scramble our stories until they are no longer ours.
Even after we share our pain,
we are told it is not enough.
I have learned
it will never be enough.

My pain is not translatable, but it teaches
a lesson in empathy,
which is something many people need.
To take it away is an act of violence so great,
it makes the leather we bled on for years look tame.
Black me out, but still I rise,
fighting to give a voice to those who gave their lives.
We all know the past is never fully dead, so
I will spread their stories
until every last page is read.

LOS ANGELES

miscellany