

# The Chaffey Review



XVIII

The  
Chaffey  
Review  
*a literary journal*

“...we tell stories of the dead as a way of making sense of the living. More than just simple urban legends and campfire tales, ghost stories reveal the contours of our anxieties, the nature of our collective fears and desires, the things we can't talk about in any other way. The past we're most afraid to speak aloud of in the bright light of day is the same past that tends to linger in the ghost stories we whisper in the dark.”

Colin Dickey

# Ghost Stories

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# Letter From The Editor

I used to consume ghost stories like they were my lifeblood. I loved the thrill of learning the high beams were deterring the homicidal maniac in the back seat, or that the ribbon couldn't fall from her neck without her head rolling with it. I read and reread these stories steeped in tradition and folklore. I still love spooky stories and campfire nights, but the ghosts are more broadly defined, nuanced and specific. Thrilling, still, but the haunting is different.

The things that stay with me, walk with me, startle me, are not only visits from a world beyond but also the bright sparks, the fear, the grief, and the heartache of a life lived. This collection reflects the depth and breadth of the often-haunted human experience and its vividly complex delight.

I hope you find something here to take with you.  
Something that brings you to the edge of your seat.  
Something that surprises you into a gasp!  
Something that speaks to you, from here or from somewhere beyond. Something that you'll share around a campfire or on a cold and misty night.

I hope that this collection finds you where the nights are not too dark and that someone will always flash their high beams to save you from the maniac in your backseat.

Jenna Campbell  
Senior Editor

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# Maybe it was a sign.

Our *Ghost Stories* theme was determined by our second meeting. We brainstormed ideas on how to get the word out and gather submissions, designed promotional cards, and set up social media accounts. We decided how far to throw the net for contributors, limiting submissions to artists connected to the Inland Empire, California. By the end of that night, our first Instagram post was live, and with it, Volume 18 of *The Chaffey Review* was established.

We'd just started filing out the door when suddenly, an earthquake shook the room. We all looked at one another with wide eyes and shocked looks on our faces. The projector on the ceiling was still rocking after the shaking had subsided, but there was no damage to the building or anyone. Our composure was quick to return, and we continued out of the room with a few laughs and exclamations. We turned off the lights and made our way to the parking lot to head home.

As I walked to my vehicle, I received a notification that the earthquake we felt was a magnitude 4.5 and centered just fifteen miles away in San Bernardino. I shrugged it off and packed up, and when I got home, I went to bed.

Around three in the morning, I woke up in the middle of a dream. I realized that maybe there was something remarkable about the earthquake, specifically relating to its timing with this volume of *The Chaffey Review*. With our determination to accept submissions from artists based in the Inland Empire, had we somehow linked both the epicenter of the earthquake and the center of the IE to this anthology? Maybe our announcement opening of submissions of *Ghost Stories* opened a portal in the middle of the Inland Empire making space for the stories of the

dead to be heard. I envisioned the rumble of some invisible barrier between the world that we live in and that of spirits: a great shift in the Earth itself.

What stories would emerge as a result? See for yourself...

Rob Sullivan  
Layout Director

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A special shout-out to religious trauma and queer/Chicana liberation.

We are especially indebted to Michelle Dowd for her expert guidance & thoughtful encouragement. This would not have happened without her! Thank you for your inspiration and for encouraging us to show up and see what happens. You have pushed us towards exploring our inner artists and applying our skills to create, and we are all better for it.

Working on the Chaffey Review has offered an incredible opportunity for personal growth, and for that, we are truly grateful. Many thanks to the CR18 team, from the team, for inspiring mutual artistry, and for being just plain nice.

# Our First Ghost

I left a voice message for Dave the day he died.<sup>1</sup> I don't know if he heard it. He didn't call back. It wouldn't have made any difference one way or the other to what happened next, but it's not the message I would have left if I had known what he was planning. If I had known, I would have said goodbye.

I met Dave six years earlier, under an indoor stairwell at UCLA during the LA Times Book Festival, where we had both darted, looking for a place to avoid the crowd. After awkward apologies, we exchanged a few stories, and I told him about the students at the community college where I taught. He said I reminded him of his mother, back when he was a young boy. That made me feel safe.

A few weeks later, we ran into each other in the Honnold Library at the Claremont Colleges, where I had gone as an undergrad and he currently taught. I told him I liked the Onion article about his 67 page break-up letter his girlfriend couldn't get through and he snapped at me, expounding how it wasn't true. I laughed. He looked increasingly uncomfortable.

"Of course it's not true, it's the Onion," I said. He stared at me awkwardly. "Come on," I nudged, "it's an honor to be lampooned like that. You've made it into popular culture!"

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"Not yet," I said, "but we've met."

He called the next day during my office hours, explaining how he put two and two together and had some books for my students. I laughed and we began a dialogue that would

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace hung himself in his garage on September 12, 2008.

continue for the next several years. Each time he emailed or left a phone message (which he invariably began with “Um, so the thing is”), we would continue wherever he had left off, as if in a conversation that never ended.

Sometimes when he rambled and paced, I would use the hand gesture I had perfected with my dogs and command him to sit. When he complied, I would use my gentlest voice to tell him, “Good boy,” and we would sit in silence and I would try not to laugh.

I told him nurturing is just another word for paying attention, and he knew how to pay attention better than anyone I knew.

I would visit his office while waiting for my son and he would continue to call during my office hours instead of coming in, asking me questions about my students and my dogs, almost interchangeably. I reviewed his syllabi and reminded him what students want most is our enthusiasm, much the way our dogs do. I worshipped the way he responded to my thoughts, the way vocabulary fluttered from his mouth as if from the sky. He was an older artist, at the height of his craft, while I was a young mother, bound to the banalities of the earth. He was idealistic. I was pragmatic. When he told me I talked to him the way I talked to my dogs, I wasn't offended.

How does the heart reconcile itself to its feast of losses?

When I was nine, my friend and I rescued a baby duckling and nurtured him back to health along the Mississippi River. We loved Sippi and we coddled him, and because he had imprinted on us, we believed he loved us in return.

We didn't want to put Sippi in a cage, so we made a small leash with a soft wide leather loop that hung gently around his neck. We took turns leading him, though it was hardly

necessary, because everywhere we went, Sippi followed us willingly. We were two little girls with one little duck between us, and for a few weeks, we saw ourselves as maternal, as indispensable as water. We walked with tender pride along the river, radiant with the kind of confidence that comes with being needed.

I want to tell you as Sippi grew, we began to feel more and more ridiculous, leading him along campgrounds on a leash, that eventually, he began to pay more attention to the natural world around him than to us, and we realized we were holding him back from being a wild duck. I want to tell you we shooed him away along the river, watched him approach other ducks with trepidation, waited patiently until he was ready, cheering when he flapped his wings and flew toward the other ducks, that we watched him go, crying hot self-sacrificial tears.

Some goodbyes are like that.

But the truth is, Sippi died in a campground as a duckling. We let him eat grass with pesticides and he went limp and we held him and watched him convulse until he was stiff, eyeballs open, judging us.

Some goodbyes are like that.

My dad raised me to believe we are what we accomplish, that what matters isn't who we are, but what we do. He said we're all paper cups, disposable and replaceable, that the work we contribute to the world is what we hold in our cups, that the work we do is what we're worth.

Dave also told me his value was in his work.

The man who would have become my grandfather (had he lived long enough to see his son grow up) battled depression and died by his own hand when he was 46, just like Dave.



Neither my dad nor my grandmother would speak of him. But we grew up with his ghost, a spectre haunting the house, reminding my dad where his own story would end if he ever let down his guard.

I told Dave we couldn't spend our lives hiding under stairwells, avoiding our ghosts. But maybe I was wrong.

I have worked with 18 teams of students who each created a unique volume of *The Chaffey Review*. Every one of them has been a challenge and a blessing. I am leaving my current position at Chaffey to pursue creative work professionally.

When I climb out from the stairwell to face my life after teaching, I will lift my cup toward the ghosts who made me who I am.

This goodbye is like that.

In gratitude to you all,

Michelle

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## GHOST STORIES

In tribute to  
DFW  
1962-2008

In honor of The Chaffey Review's original presiding ghost, whose generosity and support of a project so democratically literary held an establishing influence over the history, legacy, and development of this journal: David Foster Wallace.

To echo Michelle's words in the first volume of The Chaffey Review, "Although highly accoladed, he never behaved as though his work – writing or teaching – was more significant than the jobs any of us do."

We like to think that he would have been proud to see his work among the work of our students, and that maybe a little of his spirit lives on through these pages.

# I Bump in the Night

Peter Lechuga

all the tunes  
that my ghosts love.  
Genre phases like the moon,  
spinning wax up above.

Jamming to hip-hop and punk,  
ska and some indie picks,  
dub, jazz, oldies, funk  
and finish with those Jimi riffs.

I turn that fucking bass up  
and let that woofer bark.  
Homies shake off the grave dust,  
break the quiet of the dark.

This a seance on speakers,  
brujeria through a boombox.  
A party in the ether,  
afterlife interlude spot.

I've had too many good friends,  
too young, pass to the unknown  
but when I play their favorite tracks,  
I know they're not alone.



Soul Surfer · Rob Sullivan

# Classification of Ghostly Encounters

Jenna Campbell

1. The Courier: the unexplained message that stops you in your tracks; the lightbulb moment without prompt or inspiration; the tingly realization of direction or truth.
2. The Gasp: the small particle of the soul that leaves your body when startled; the piece of yourself that escapes with a scream when confronted with the unexpected; the response to a shock from around the corner or the eye contact with the unanticipated individual as you burst through a door.
3. The Figment: the girl who never texted you back after prom; may appear in photographs but little evidence of existence. She had a good time though, and your hair looked great.
4. The Imprint: the mold of your body in the sand at the beach. Leave your towel and return from the water to the negative space your body once occupied. The space rarely fits the same way as the imprint still occupies the sand. They are not comfortable to sit on, despite mimicking your shape.
5. The Departed: the beloved coworker; the desk bestie; the work wife; an integral part of office life who found greener pastures and forgot your number. They made life bearable, and their absence has you questioning. No one orders the heart-shaped Post-its, and you wonder if they ever existed.

6. The Reminder: the impression or sign from a love no longer on Earth; the butterfly, the strawberry scent; the whale for our little prince that pops up now and then. The reminders tell our hearts that they were real and known and loved.
7. The Peripheral Glimpse: the spooky ones that leave a chill in the air; the giggle in the deserted hallway or the smashed window with no blunt force. You can't explain it and don't really want to. The thrill may be welcomed or run-from, depending on the day and the danger.
8. The Retired: the versions of yourself laid to rest; the old you who can't come to the phone.  
\*Not the residents of the old folk's home – they're delightful.
9. The Heartache: the shell left behind after catastrophic heartbreak. Sometimes temporary occupations, for temporary sorts of love. Not all love is temporary though, and these haunts may never leave.



The League · Fernando Melgar



# Whiskers

by Tamar L Saramosing

The cat's tail wrapped around my bare leg as I slept and I was sure she was the Devil. I pulled the covers over my head and I whispered out loud to god. *Protect me, please. Don't let the devil touch me. Don't let him hurt me, I'll be good, I promise.* I felt her wet nose and whiskers (that was her name, Whiskers) nudging my head. I had to be brave. I pulled the covers down from over my head and there she was, the devil herself, my cat. I was terrified.

*How did you get in here?*

I was sure, so sure, that the devil was after me. He had a fondness for young and innocent girls who loved their god. I was 10 or 11 and that was the first time I met the devil. I don't care if he was Whiskers in the end. For a moment, for that moment, it was me against the devil and all I could so was hide under my sheet and beg my god to hear me.

He didn't.

I don't think he did. He must have been busy tallying the sins of the really bad people who celebrate pagan holidays and blow out birthday candles. Or maybe he was busy watching people masturbate or having premarital sex. Those bad people needed his loving punishment.

I questioned god, all of a sudden. He sounds kinda mean and scary and monstrous, come to think of it. Sorta like the principal at school, Mr Baceli. He was mean and scary. They both make me question my goodness and fear their judgment. Do they know the bad things about me that I don't? They do, they must. I must be horrible and monstrous too, because I'm born that way. Sinful. Full of sin.

I pulled Whiskers up onto my bed and gave her snuggles. She calmed my panic and then I sneezed because I am allergic to cats. She shouldn't have been in our room. I'm still not sure how she got there. Whiskers was an outside cat. We left her milk and food but she was a huntress. She preferred the gofers and mice that lived on the hillside over canned food any day. She caught birds, sometimes the pretty ones, lizards, rats, you name it, anything she could jump at or swat, she called breakfast. Sometimes, she would tear them open from the neck down the belly to the tail, and leave them at the front door. I couldn't help but examine her generous gifts. I recognized their parts. The intestines, stomach and even the little hearts didn't seem that different from the images on the see through pages in the encyclopedia británica that fascinated me so. Whiskers showed me the truth of life and death in her own feline way. She showed me the inner workings of life in stills. She showed me that death can be a strange gift and maybe it can teach me something about myself. She showed me the secret insides of things. She killed for sport. She ate herself fat. She shared her spoils. She purrrred when she was happy. She wailed and whimpered and demanded to be mounted when she was in heat. She wasn't our pet. She was a necessary member of our little ecosystem and a regulator of nature on our hill. She protected our aguacate and naranjas, mom's fresa and cilantro from would be thieves. She was a wealth of mystery and generosity.

Maybe Whiskers *was* the devil. Maybe the devil comforted me that night, from my fear of god. Maybe the devil is misunderstood. Maybe the devil ain't so bad.

# The Devil Went Down To LA

Aamina Khan

The tiny hands on the watch on my middle finger reach five thirty, ever closer to six o'clock. The motion jerks my head backwards, the familiar tremors running through my body. Alarm bells; I have less than twenty four hours.

I stand on the side of the lit street. The cars on the road are blurred, the people glinting and distorted, dangerously bright in the light. I'm viewing everything through a rainy window. And indeed, drops of water are running down my eyelashes.

For a moment, I think they are tears, and I almost lick one from where it pools in the corner of my mouth, craving the salty taste. But those days are gone, and emotions are now felt like a dying candle: dim, slow, and flickering.

I blink, and my surroundings come back to me in full force; now the lights are blinding, the people deafening. Rain is tapping chilly fingers across passers-by. The cold they feel keeps their coats on tight like beetle shells, eyes blinking from the depths of their hoods. Los Angeles is never too affected by the winter seasons. But I remember the excitement I felt when the temperature dropped below seventy; the extra layers were never really needed, but wanted instead, to conform with the picturesque ideals of winter.

Now I'm wearing a black suit, but I feel no excitement, no cold, no texture.

The minutes on my watch seep through my fingers.

I need to find a soul.  
It shouldn't be this hard, but it's not just any soul I need. I can't just approach anyone.

It needs to be specific. And I'm failing.

This is LA, and under the surface of Hollywood and Beverly Hills, darkness blooms on vines throughout the

city, tendrils reaching deep through the gutters and across scummy apartment buildings, thick with grimy grins, secret hands, bloody knives and oily money.

I hated it before, but now it's a marketplace. Souls are like berries here, blackened and ripe for the picking. But I'm standing on Sunset Boulevard and looking at all the wrong ones. Finding and picking are two different things.

It's hard to find the right circumstances. So I start to move, shoving my hand into my suit pocket so my watch doesn't distract me from my job. As I walk across the street, cars rush through my body in sharp gusts, and a few shops ahead of me, I see another one of my kind snaking their way through the crowds into an alley where a homeless woman sleeps. I doubt they'll have much luck there.

Night is falling fast, which is an advantage. The darkness births solitary stragglers that I can easily approach, their drunken minds blending both of our realities easily.

I pass a restaurant, their rooftop seating allowing me a jagged view of the diners. Dresses and shirts in evening colors glimmer against the cutlery that they lift with surprising grace.

I was never that graceful with my fork when I ate out. But I don't remember ever eating at Sunset Boulevard.

A man with shiny hair lets out a high laugh and lifts his knife to stab into his chicken.

My knife had been smaller, but I remember I liked it because it was sharp, and it fit under her ribs easily.

I pass the restaurant and turn down another street full of small boutiques painted in bright colors with ivy on their walls.

As I get farther and farther away from Sunset Boulevard, more and more demons walk the streets. I wonder for small moments what they're here for.

When we pass one another, our eyes flit over each other like we are ghosts. And perhaps we are, in most ways.

We're all here because of the same thing; warding off hell for as much time as we can while we search for souls to feed the devil. Our silence is acknowledgment.

We love cities, because life maintains that hold over us. Immersed at its edges every day, we consider ourselves separate, but really we remember.

The hours tick into the later hours of night as I drift; first six, seven, eight, then nine.

The cold is biting now, but I can only tell because of the frigid sills and fogged bus windows. And still I pass on, because I can't find the right opportunity.

Fear feeds my movements, the one emotion I still feel strongly. Something is driving me down these streets.

Skid Row is so clogged with demons that I can barely pass through it. Their soft voices rise in waves as they attempt to negotiate for souls. A group of five demons have cornered a thin man with hollowed cheeks and a dark specked shirt, and I can see his eyes flash between them, overwhelmed and frightened, talking aloud in a way that makes other people around him walk away nervously. Everyone thinks the people on Skid Row are crazy, but really they're just fighting for their own souls.

I move quickly past, and soon I'm on sidewalks of roads that, in my mind, are nameless. They stretch on in mazes, the people too many, the shops too bright.

A baby in a stroller spots me, its large eyes widening. I stride closer to it, wondering how I must look. First it gurgles slightly, but as I draw nearer it stills. This one silently notes the flaring brightness in my eyes, the shadowy heat that writhes around my smoky form. We stare at each for a few moments.

I hardly ever approach babies, they are too aware. I used to have one—a baby—and its eyes were green like this one's. I remember mine watched me like this one when they saw me holding the knife, never mind that I had done it for us. I wonder why this one doesn't cry.

The baby tilts its head towards me suddenly and gurgles a small laugh. I jerk backwards and walk away. Pointless. As I walk down a winding street clustered with barred windows and rickety apartment buildings that barely have

enough space to fit even a fragment of a life, something catches my eye.

A shop window.

There are a number of odd things about it. It's unusually clean for a street like this, freshly painted with an artsy, lit up display on its front. Light gleams from its huge glass windows, and I can hear movement inside.

But it's the violin that makes me stop and stare. It's a large and glossy chestnut brown, its strings so dark and polished that they practically hum with invitation. I've never seen something, in all the years I've been a demon, that makes me want to live so much as this violin.

Memories pool, and then rise higher and higher like the music in the shop, until they break and wash over my mind.

A small boy with a violin clutched between his fingers, sheet music, fingers stringing a violin at a funeral, fingers playing it in front of a crib, a baby laughing as music floods a small apartment.

And here I am, a demon standing in front of a violin case. Movement fractures my thoughts, and when I look up, I see a man in the shop. He's standing in the middle of it, a violin in his arms, and his fingers begin to pull the bow across the strings with enviable grace. His red hair falls over a handsome face, eyes shut tight.

Music falls like water from the instrument, flows through the door where it wraps around me tightly.

As the man plays, his figure seems to distort slightly. His body melds and folds with the music, and for the few moments I watch him, they become one and the same. He is a living portrait of rolling, lilting sound in sparkling hues.

Someone with this much talent should not be in a store, they should be on a stage.

He reminds me of someone, someone I used to know. Or someone I used to be.

I can tell from this that he is alone, and as the music dances around him, I stare at his soul. It's large, light, but not completely without blemish, a carbon copy of most of the people I see. When I first became a demon, it was one of

the most surprising things I learned.

When I step over the threshold, I'm not entirely sure of my intentions.

The store is crowded with shelves of records, racks of music equipment, and decorated with oversized posters of famous faces and song lyrics. One wall is hung entirely with guitars. Another has floor to ceiling bookshelves, the books inside organized carelessly amidst odd objects like snow globes and animal shaped plant pots. Small bulbs dangle down from the ceiling, a few of them multicolored to create a small winding rainbow of light across the store's floor.

Gaps in the decor indicate the newness of the shop; I doubt its been open for more than a few weeks.

I shift myself into a corporeal form, but the man does not stop playing. His eyes are still closed, clearly his mind has gone where the music is taking him.

So I walk closer to him, making a small noise with my shoes, which are now visible and slightly shiny. Sometimes I forget how it feels to speak to another being.

The music stops, and the silence is as loud as a cannon.

The man's eyes open, and a for a moment he takes me in. I can imagine how I look to him, I've seen myself in a mirror once.

Black suit, black tie, hair combed back precisely in waves. Strangely symmetrical. The perfect businessman.

I do not look like someone who should be in this music shop at night.

The man's eyes widen, his brows raised. I wonder if maybe he is alarmed, but his body movements say differently. "We're not open," he says carefully.

I smile slightly.

"The door was open," I say, "and I'm not here to buy anything."

"Well, then why are you here?" The man is calm, his eyes flick over me once more. His tone is mildly curious, not accusatory just yet.

I pause, uncertain how to start the conversation. I observe him carefully, and it makes me feel something odd.

It takes me a moment to realize it's jealousy. Here is this young man, in a shop of his own, playing the violin in such a beautiful way that it makes me want to take his place. I could play the violin just as well as him, when I was a young man. Better in fact. When I played, people would stop and close their eyes, small smiles curving their lips as the music let them travel.

At that moment, the clock on my finger strikes one, and I shudder. I don't have that much time now.

This man is my last chance, my only chance.

"You play beautifully," I say.

"Thank you." The words are quiet.

His eyes follow my movements, but he says nothing, his fingers slowly thrumming the strings of the violin.

"I want you to play me for your soul."

The words slip out like an oil stream, black and dense. I'm not sure where they come from, but I don't take them back.

They shiver in the air. I wish I could take them back.

Maybe I just want to play the violin again.

The man is still for a minute more.

"My soul?" He says it carefully. "What will you do with it?"

"Sell it," I say truthfully. "A competition. I've seen you play, but I can play better. Faster. And if you lose you'll give me your soul."

The man smiles. It's a beautiful smile, and for a moment I wish to see into his mind. But as his thoughts drift closer to me, I suddenly let them go. I avoid his conscious as if it is poison.

It's easier this way.

"Very well," he says suddenly, still smiling. "Who will judge the competition?"

I have not thought this far ahead, I realize ruefully. The man seems to understand this, and his green eyes glint with something.

"Aren't there more of you?" he asks. "Why don't you call them? They can decide."

Sometimes humans know. I had not, when I was first taken and I am surprised he does. For some reason I had not



expected the man to know. Again, I wish for a moment to see how and why he knows, and again I fail in my discovery.

I nod. They will be the perfect judges, as they have no reason to care about who won. I have never called another one of my kind, as there has never been any reason to. I do not know what would happen if I did, only that whatever communication was necessary would not be verbal.

“Let’s not do it here,” the young man says. He is still watching me steadily. Turning quickly, he begins to walk towards the back of his shop, where a door is set into the wall. He opens it, revealing some stairs that lead upwards.

“Wait,” he says, as I move towards them. “You didn’t choose your violin.”

It is a startling statement, reminding me that I have the freedom to do such a thing. Where previously my hand would have passed through an object, all is fair in the hunt for a soul.

Even so, I am greatly reluctant to choose the instrument for myself. It feels horrifically revealing, a display of my desires to a human being that is not tied to necessity.

I know which one I want. I long for it in a way that I think is impossible. I am silent, yet my eyes flit towards it.

The man sees immediately. He seems surprised, but then brings it down from its stand. He looks the violin over slowly, his eyes filled with a soft familiarity. His fingers tighten slightly on the handle as he inhales. I think then, that he might not give it to me.

“It’s a beautiful piece,” he says simply, and hands it to me. I hold it the way one might hold their newborn child, with a reverent gentleness edged with disbelief.

Together, the man and I head to the stairs, both of us holding our violins.

We come up onto the roof of the building, a small square surface, lit by strings of overhead lights. Pots of plants border the small barrier around the edges of the roof.

From the green jacket the young man is pulling on, I can tell it’s cold.

Demons have already gathered here, maybe ten of them in all. I do not bother looking at their appearances. My time is running short, already I can feel the painful tension within my body, a slight stretching that runs in the fabric of whatever form I am now in.

I meet the gaze of the young man, who sits down on two of the small chairs in the middle of the roof and is positioning the violin in his hands.

I wonder if he can see our audience. I feel somehow, that he must. I do not question him however, and quickly sink into my seat. I place the violin on my neck, and brace myself for what is to come.

“Are you ready?”

The man’s eyes are a deep, shadowed shade of green. I can see the lights around us reflected in them.

“Of course,” I reply steadily, and he begins to play.

The sounds that pour from his instrument make me feel a pain unlike any other. Nostalgia fills my mind, fills it so completely it takes up every other space and thought within it. There is nothing I can do to stop it. His music is the painful color of my past, and I let it wash over me. When he finishes, I realize my eyes were closed, and when I open them the man remains silent.

If I had wondered what to play, I do not wonder now.

When I take the bow between my fingers, I play my story on the violin.

I often questioned why I became a demon. But that is because I never let myself dwell on how it happened long enough to truly understand. It had all been for my son, a small baby with colored eyes. She would have taken him away from me, and I couldn’t let that happen.

I play the shadows over the carpet in the bedroom that night, the sound my feet made in the dark hallway, the way my heart raced as I held the knife in my hands.

I had never wanted him to see, but there hadn’t been any other way. She had already been in the nursery. She stood in front of the crib, ready to take him away.

He wasn’t anyone’s to take.

The violin trembles as I play the way I lunged at her, took the knife between her ribs. The music rose with the scream of my son's voice. He had only been five. Blood stained the carpet in an arc of splatters, half of it a vivid red and the other half colored black with shadow.

I did not realize she had not been defenseless until my hand brushed against my waist and came away dripping blood, shreds of skin clinging to my nails from where she had hacked something sharp into my side.

I do not remember much else after except the relief I felt knowing I had saved my son from his fate. There hadn't been anything else to feel, as I bled out on the floor.

When the Devil came for me, I did not fight. He presented me with a choice, enter hell now, or feed souls to the Devil until time ceased to exist.

I knew enough about hell to immediately choose the second option, but I sometimes wondered after if I truly did know enough about it. Perhaps it would have been better, for I could not fathom an agony that felt deeper than this existence.

Everything had been worth it to save my child. I don't know where he is now, but he made it worth it.,

Perhaps I played my grief, my terror, the unending loneliness after the shift into a demon. Perhaps I played the way I loved my son. I do not know.

When the song finishes, the demons around me are shivering slightly. Or it looks like they are as their forms gently shake in the air. I wonder what they thought when they watched me play.

The young man is crying when I look at him, tears spilling down his cheeks, falling onto the seat of his chair. I don't know what way I moved him, whether it is horror or grief that makes him cry. It could be neither.

We do not speak to each other afterwards, as we wait for the decision that determines the fate of both our souls.

In the few minutes that we sit there, I briefly realize that LA has quieted. A gentle breeze moves the leaves of the plants side to side and sways the hanging bulbs above us.

One of the demons step forward. His suit is made of emerald green silk, and his voice is very low, almost a whisper.

“You have won,” he informs me. “He is coming.” The rest of the demons disappear into the shadows.

I nod, and the young man is completely still.

“You can keep the violin,” he says. I do not turn to look at him. I do not tell him that I don’t need it, that when his soul is taken and he hunts for souls like I do, I will no longer be able to touch the bow, or rest the violin on my neck. My hands will pass through it, and I will no longer play any more music.

There is a soft gasping noise, and that is when I turn. The man is swaying gently as the Devil takes his soul from him, and those green eyes meet mine for the last time.

The Devil stays behind afterwards, and I feel his amusement.

“I can’t see why it’s funny,” I say. I shouldn’t engage with him, but I need to say *something*.

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” the Devil says. “But it’s lovely isn’t it? The irony that you destroyed the one thing you wanted to protect. The reason you’re here. It makes all this wandering about rather pointless.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your son, my dear friend. If you had turned around, you might have seen he let me take his soul very pleasantly, just like you did all those years ago.” The Devil laughs softly, and then he is gone.

*\*This story is loosely based on the song ‘The Devil Went Down to Georgia’ by Charlie Daniels.*

# smoke shop spirits

Polimana

black tar torn painted lines  
mark spots where we park  
from gas stations to back lots  
we float, restless spirits  
hungry ghosts starving  
for a cigarette  
streetlamps shine down on us  
they make us aware of  
the weight of light.  
my fingers stretch out, reaching over that  
emptiness  
from the passenger side  
to find your hand waiting  
your voice cuts through the dark.  
“I think  
your shadow  
is beautiful.”



Toilet Door · Fernando Melgar

# Life After Roadkill

Jay Barthelette

He was scattered across the road. It looked like globs of cherry preserves spread on burnt toast.

There were tufts of fur from whatever he had been, matted red. Nobody was sure if he was once something ring-tailed, or perhaps a trundling possum. They only knew he must have come out of the scrub woods that hunched on either side of the road. Perhaps he locked eyes with headlights, and in his blindness, hesitated at the wrong moment. Nobody wanted to do anything about him. They would have had to scrape him up.

He lived on the asphalt for some days. The sun curdled the liquid parts of him. The rain turned him once again into an unpleasant soup of coagulated lumps. The cars, emboldened, drove over him until he was fused with the tar.

*There ought to be a little more than this.*

That was what he thought to himself. His first memory was of an impact, a *thump*, and the sound of a jingling bell. He couldn't remember what had come before. Had he once climbed into the hollow of a tree, nestling in its heart with littermates? Or had he rifled through trash cans that groaned with leftovers? Perhaps he had once dug in the welcoming earth and minded his own business entirely. There might have been worms, fat worms that gushed with juice.

Whatever he had been, he knew now he didn't like all the cars swerving around him. *Now* he didn't like the way the tires squealed. He liked even less the crow that hopped down the dash-lined road. *She* liked to peck at him. She would snatch up strings of red in her beak, and he grew smaller by the day.

One moonless night, he got sick of it all. With a force of will that shouldn't have belonged to the dead, he gathered himself up into a sloppy collection of: squashed meat, splintered bones, clotted brown blood, and one intact eye. The eye was attached to him by a length of pink. It trailed behind him like a bad sort of kite. He had to tear himself away with a noise like shucking corn. Flesh stuck to the road—it looked like spilled chili now.

He decided to find his way.

He went up the lonely, rural road. He oozed along much like a slug, pushing himself forward with a sturdy rib, when needed. He left streaks of himself behind. It didn't matter. He did not go unnoticed. It's just that everybody who saw him go convinced themselves he was: just a rabid coyote to avoid, or a trick of the light, or a clump of leaves stuck together with mud, that, somehow, the wind had contrived to drag through the gutter.

He went until he came to a little purple house, with a mailbox outside shaped like a birdhouse. It looked like it was starving. The sagging roof might have been a stomach, gone thin with hunger. The windows were milky eyes that saw nothing. The lawn was frantic with dandelions and milk thistles. As the stubborn roadkill pushed through the grass, white-tufted seeds stuck to him.

He went up to the window and peered through the cracked glass. He saw: an armchair spilling out soft, white guts through the torn upholstery, a woman made of creased leather, a box fan that teetered back and forth, a red collar on the windowsill.

There was a moth-flutter in one of his lacerated organs—his kidney, he was sure—and he slithered down from the window, up onto the porch. He collected curls of white

paint as he went. He paid no mind to the trail of red he had painted up the steps. It did not matter. He found the door. Not only that, but the door had a smaller door, perfectly sized for his remains.

He poured himself through the door's door and spilled out onto the entry step. The tile was: as white as his protruding bones, deliciously cold, moldy with fine, grey fur, and familiar.

There were: footsteps coming around the corner.

In him: the rising need to apologize.

*I'm sorry. I think I'm back!*

That's what he wanted to say.

Maybe the stooped old woman couldn't hear him over her own raw scream.

Or perhaps he was rudely interrupted by: the steel cat dish she smashed down onto his skull, the fuzzy slipper grinding through him to the tile, the sorrow that cut through it all as he understood that she didn't know him.

He was driven out. The streetlights didn't see him dribble under the rosebushes. He didn't feel the thorns snag threads of flesh. Much smaller, he went away.

The very old woman told the EMTs about it, who told the neighbors, who told their children, who told anyone who would listen.

The children say that this sad, stubborn amalgamation of meat still wanders through the suburbs, leaving snail trails of brown pus. He peers in every window, tests out every cat door, and huddles under the car, keeping watch.



If, late at night, you hear a scratching at your window, don't look out into the dark. Get back to work. Turn up the music on your headphones. Ignore it.

He's looking for a home, and yours looks pretty promising.



Church · Alexis Raisty

# Parked Cars

Cam Santa Anna

In the dead-  
end suburban  
streets, the blacked-

out parked  
cars fortify  
tangled tongues

momentarily,  
like a deer  
who kissed

the smile of  
A headlight,  
laying peacefully

and still  
On the pavement,  
eyes still open;

sort of a  
romance.



Graffiti Hall · Fernando Melgar

# Poolside

Inspired by the Lady Gaga Rendition  
of A Star is Born (2018)

Conseulo

C'mon now Rockstar,  
dance a little longer.  
Put down your drink and  
hold on a little longer.

Don't dive to the bottom,  
at least, not yet baby.  
Let's spend one more night  
out on the town.

I've had my eye on you  
since 1937  
I've watched the sweat hanging  
from the ends of your furrowed brow  
for so long, to say I'm obsessed  
is to say it lightly.

Rockstar,  
Rockstar,  
take me by the hand.  
Swim with me one last time.

We don't need the shallows  
when we have each other.  
C'mon now Rockstar  
live a little longer

# The Trash Can Is Only Ten Feet Away

Jay Barthelette

I know you came to my parking lot,  
to unburden your encrusted soul.  
You opened the jaws of your fortress,  
those rattling, white van doors,  
and vomited up ghostly paper bags  
with crumpled wads within, pressing their faces  
to windowpanes made of gray grease.  
Oh, those bags, bloated up to their crumpled throats,  
filled to the brim with every wickedness.  
Don't choke back the sweet bile, just disgorge!  
Dash that cup against the asphalt,  
let its skull splinter into a skirt of plastic strips,  
let fragrant brown blood gush forth.  
There, let cigarette butts extinguish in it,  
and they'll breathe out exclamation points of smoke.  
The flock will alight on sticky soda ponds,  
like orange ducks with their heads burnt grey.  
Abandon a ramen cup to the pale rain,  
finer than porcelain,  
its mouth opening wide to suck in drops,  
to cook in its gut a soup of swollen worms.  
Let your lunch receipts slip from your pockets,  
the white flags fluttering  
from the lance-shaped leaves of the daylily.  
Near the storefront, see the roadkill:  
a jumbo push pop smashed to strawberry smithereens,  
its crystalline pink guts ground underfoot.  
Discard the tender wintergreen wad,  
let the sun marry it to the tar.  
Here behind the chicken store, I unburden you.  
You are forgiven of the pizza box crouched on the curb,  
with six slices dead in the nest.

And I forgive you the orange condom  
laid out like a neon slug in the mud.  
Never mind the milkshake—  
a Neapolitan libation  
that spat out milky phlegm,  
never mind the swarms of ants,  
those liberal seasonings of black pepper,  
or the snow-spray of popcorn  
that erupted near the highway  
and called down salt-singing gulls,  
or the Budweiser can that glistened  
in the bushes, sapphire-blue.  
I will take every shortcoming  
and bow into the hushed shed,  
breathe in the fetid incense,  
and look to the black-robed dumpster  
whose soft eyes cry mercy,  
who cradles the deadweight in wide hands.  
Through a mouthful of your soul,  
the trash compactor howls:  
absolved.



Clown Popsicle · Alexis Raisty

# In the Hills

Adam Martinez

I drove into San Timoteo Canyon to leave behind this mess I've made. Each passing turn, curvy corridor, wind in the road, bend in the back way, could signal the passing of me. I think of every passive aggressive pupil. The putrid Twitter feed. Even as a mangled wreck, even as I hold my lasting breath, I'll think, *why can't I let things go?* I'll bet.



Skull Rock · Fernando Melgar

# Are You Haunted By the Past: A Poetic Story!

Mayra Melgar

In the dark abyss of memory's sway,  
A journey begins, fraught with dismay.  
I shun the path, with all my might,  
Yet fate compels me, into the night.

Ghosts of yore, with voices dire,  
Whisper of dread, danger's fire.  
To a place I'm drawn, against my will,  
Where shadows dance, and time stands still.

Years ago, yet ever near,  
The past's embrace, dripping with fear.  
A weight upon my fragile chest,  
Echoing words, never laid to rest.

Childhood dreams, shattered by pain,  
Innocence lost, no refuge to gain.  
Tension grips my weary soul,  
In a heart once pure, now black as coal.

Doors wide open, to horrors unseen,  
A little girl's nightmare, a cruel routine.  
A life secluded, marred by shame,  
In the darkness, I seek to reclaim.

Loneliness reigns, in a world so bleak,  
A slumbering soul, too afraid to speak.  
Answers elude, in shadows deep,  
A journey fraught, with promises to keep.

Isolation's embrace, a prison of old,  
Ghosts of the past, stories untold.  
Uncertain present, veiled in despair,  
In this haunted realm, I lay bare.

Where truth resides, I do not know,  
In the corridors of fear, where echoes grow.  
The devils of time, lay claim to my heart,  
In this labyrinth of pain, where endings start.

Hope's existence, hanging by a thread,  
In this strange world, where souls are led.  
Yet freedom eludes, in this prison of mine,  
A captive of memories, frozen in time.

Fear's stench lingers, in veins so cold,  
A heartbeat tainted, by stories untold.  
On an isolated peak, my present stands,  
In a dance with darkness, where fate commands.

Cold sweat beads, upon my brow,  
A thousand demons, they do avow.  
Life beyond, a distant dream,  
In this realm of sorrow, where echoes scream.

Dark themes bind, past and present collide,  
In this symphony of pain, where truths reside.  
Forbidden memories, a burden to bear,  
In this journey through hell, I lay bare.

The road I tread, fraught with despair,  
A path of shadows, with secrets to share.  
Yet onward I go, though the end is nigh,  
In this dance with darkness, where whispers lie.

Forbidden to remember, forbidden to know,  
Yet the echoes persist, in the ebb and flow.  
Chin up, smile, the facade I maintain,  
In this twisted world, where truth is slain.

From womb to world, a journey begun,  
A life entwined, with battles won.  
Echoes of the past, reverberate strong,  
In the tapestry of where I belong.



# Getting Gone

Maya Bravo

You couldn't bring yourself to turn a blind eye.  
You saw my dark hair, skin so fair, and your mind was what  
I occupied.  
Did you make her up? You were looking up, seeing two slow  
dancers in the sky.  
The dancers twirled, said I was a dreaming girl, if I jumped  
you'd think I'd fly.

You told me I was a soul of the night.  
When day struck, I'd leave by dawn, I'd become your black  
swan, and you my daylight.  
Accompanying darkness was something so pure, a serene  
sense of allure, you were the swan so beautifully white.  
I was the stars when evening came to rise, I enchanted inky  
black skies, I became your moonlight.

You took every chance to walk away.  
A personality so tough, when would it be too much? I'm  
here hopeless and decaying.  
I was no longer a dancer, I couldn't give you answers, but  
you did all you could to make me stay.  
After a while, your missteps became miles, and you decided  
to leave me one day.

I would become more tangled than twine.  
You left my mind a ghastly blur, you let a sick suspicion stir,  
you took the borderline mindset as a sign.  
I wasn't ever your swan, now by evening, I'd be gone,  
spiraling and it would completely impair my mind.  
Rocky waves coursed the sea, I told myself they'd been  
caused by me, but now I see we were never really tied.

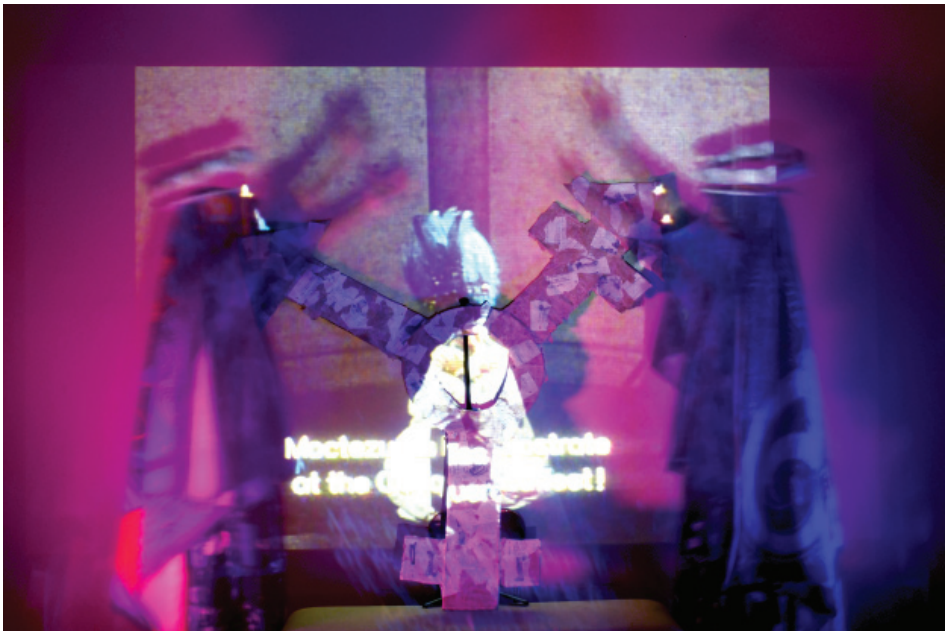
# The Holy Spirit

Angel A Gomez

The spirit that haunts me, haunts many others.  
At a young age we're taught what to think, what to feel, and  
how to love.  
All built over fear, over guilt, and over traditions, in an  
attempt to keep things the way they are, fearing change.  
But I wish not to remain the same.  
I wish not to end up like those that have beat me in God's  
name, I oppose them.  
I oppose the love with conditions, I oppose the gestures,  
I oppose the promises with sinister intentions hidden.  
There is no holy spirit, only the ghost of you that haunts  
me through his name.  
A person who blames their wrongs on devils rather than  
themselves.  
I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!  
You made me hate something that is beautiful to others.  
Made me biased towards those of faith, and all I can do now  
is swallow my bitterness. In the name of The Father, Son,  
and Holy Spirit, Amen.



Queer & Transfemme Nuns · Consuelo



Queer & Transfemme Nuns · Consuelo

# Shadows and Whispers

Tamar Leah Saramosing

In shadows and whispers, I feel your gaze from the top of the stairs or hear your voice behind our son's laugh. A chill crawls up my arms.

I thought I saw you on the drive home from work last night. I can't shake the image from my mind. You turned in front of me from out of nowhere. It was dark and misty. The shapes, the shadow of the too-far handlebars, the growl of the glass pack muffler, were vivid. The way you leaned into the turn and took it too fast...My spirit said to me, "It's him." A bucket helmet and a flannel shirt flapping behind you, my spirit said, "It's him." I lost my thoughts. I forgot to exhale. I was on speaker with Miguel. I had gone quiet. "I just saw Rico's bike," I said. I couldn't say out loud that it was you I'd seen. "Did you hear that?" I asked. "I don't know, Baby. Are you all right?" I wasn't sure what was real. You disappeared into the distance as I gathered myself to focus on driving. My spirit said again: "It's him."

My mind keeps repeating the moment like a reel, then flashes...The lights. I see the lights again, the ones that blocked Highway 95 that night, so long ago, like yesterday.

The moon hung full and heavy over the river in the background. I don't hear the sirens. I don't hear anything. I see the lights of cop cars and fire engines. A snake-like path of headlights wrapped around the winding one lane highway. *They must be angry*, I thought. *It's Thanksgiving Day and dinner time.*

Caution tape and chaos.

They wouldn't let me see you. "Get her out of here," the man in uniform said. A white car with a dented hood and

cracked windshield was facing the wrong way in front of me. "Are they ok?" I ask. "They walked away." said the man in uniform. I stumbled around the car, drawn to you, looking for you, thinking somehow there'd been a mistake. The siren lights were dizzying.

There you were, your silhouette in the street, reflecting the endless spinning lights. "Is that him?" I asked. "Is his face ok?" What a stupid question, but what a beautiful face it was. I had studied it and let it fill me with infatuation like it did when we were new, on the drive out only hours ago. "Get her OUT of here!" he said again, screaming over me, as if I wouldn't hear. I couldn't. "Yes, his face is fine." It wasn't.

A wave of reality washed over me when I realized you were covered, like they cover dead bodies in the movies. A new neural- pathway dug deep into my brain that instant. "He's not ok. I'm not ok." I turned away from the scene that made a permanent mark on my mind, a scene I'd never unsee, a pathway that would take my breath away for years to come. I turned toward the moon hanging full over the river. We'd done everything together. I suppose I should jump. River rocks and rushing water seemed to call to me. I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Stop. No. You can't come. He needs you." I shook myself from the daze of the moment and turned to respond. No one was there, but I knew it was you. *Our baby boy, yes*, and as if my mind and spirit re-entered my body in that breath, *yes, I have a baby boy. He needs me.* Another new reality washed over me. The canvas of my future was blank. The picture I'd drawn was gone. My whole world washed away, down the river rocks and rushing water, without me. I remind myself to breathe. Shouldn't I be crying? Am I?

All I saw were the lights, the spinning, dizzying lights over cop cars and fire engines, and the moon hanging full over the river. The moon that took you home. The moon that watched over us and kept me company that long, long night

## GHOST STORIES

of spinning lights and winding roads. She said to me gently,  
“I’ll take care of him.”

When I saw your bike last night, your shadow and your  
spirit, I looked up to the sky, and there she was, your moon.

# Manic Pixie Dream Thing

Consuelo

Stargirl was my first  
manic pixie dream girl.  
I knew her so well,  
for I knew myself.

She had established a name  
designed by the celestial for her.  
She crafted stories out of strangers  
by spinning narratives  
like the thin air was a basket of wool  
and her body a wooden wheel  
spitting yarn out of her mouth.

Stargirl was my first  
transgender mirror.  
I saw her so well,  
for I could see myself.

Her style of dress was every  
adolescent, artistic, autistic,  
flamboyant, free-spirit, genderqueer,  
hippie, indie, Mexican-American's  
ideal wardrobe.

I was certain I could slip  
into her skin so well.

Stargirl was my first  
sense of liberation.  
I heard her so well,  
her song begged me to live.

GHOST STORIES

I tried to be as authentic  
as I could. Realizing my name  
didn't fit my body, I tried  
cycling through a baby website  
until I found the right one, but

nothing worked.

The Manic in the Dream Girl  
screamed for me to hear her.  
She had been shut out so long,  
nobody could ever see her, except  
me, for she lives in the smallest corner  
of my chest. And she wails

begging to be released.

I demand, "Show me a wallet."  
She asks, "Can I pay with a song?"  
But hormones don't take an e-chord  
as an e-payment because it's not  
enough and there are parts she  
just wants to e-rase but...

Manic Pixie Dream Girl,  
don't you have a solution?  
Don't you always find a way?

You were my moon,  
illuminating the darkest corners  
of my mind. Easing the testosterone  
plaguing this vessel. Showing me  
how to evolve with the seasons,  
how to wax and wane,  
how to sow and reap.



You were the magic  
preserving this fem life  
by keeping alive the heart  
pumping in my chest.

You kept me safe  
from my masculinity  
and taught me how to soften  
even my sharpest edges.

You were my girl,  
no girl, you were me I was  
you. When I had to stand up  
straight, you kept me out of  
line. When I had to survive the  
boys, you kept me walking head held  
high. When I had to perform for gatekeeping  
christians, you stood before me, mouthing my  
lines. But all this time...you just wanted

out? You've only asked for  
one thing. Never too much, just  
one thing...I hope you'll forgive me  
for the lack of

release.

# Everytime I look in your eyes

Fernando Melgar

Everytime I look in your eyes I see past reminders of everything that I couldn't accomplish and everytime I don't see your eyes all I see are mine and I see reflections all over again and it's the same fucking thing every day and I sit here with tears drooping down my face; one by one like the days that have gone by and I say, "hey it's going to be okay " and I convince myself to believe it. That everything stagnant always floated once. Everything stagnant once was driven. And just like a juxtaposition, the night time makes me lose my memory, and I have only to wait until sunrise. And so I follow the light in the dark. Hoping for the silver lining.



# Almost 30

Micah Tasaka

And yet I didn't think I'd ever get here. I never imagined living past my early 20s. Queers die of old age when we're young with living. Living like tomorrow isn't supposed to happen. When we're sleeping under freeway tunnels. And downing bags of pills. And exclaiming a green sky flashing red and blue and deafening sirens. And counting each grain of sand that buries our friends. Before their bodies were ever whole. But somehow I made it out the thickets. My scarred skin and my now clean nails. I still have all my teeth, for godsake. I'm told I'm lucky for living. Living with a whole head of shards. Living like the night I pulled Violet from the train tracks. And stared down demons in her eyes. After some fuck told her she wasn't *really* a woman. Tell me who's lucky. When a tree refuses to be chopped down. Grows bark hard as diamond. Dares the world to try. Then escapes with nothing but all its leaves. And the weight of survival. Crushing what is already empty.

# Chelo

Consuelo

I might be the spirit  
of my tia Chelo.  
She died just before  
the time I was born.

We share the same name.  
I chose it from a crowd of millions  
not knowing she was ever a person  
just beyond the veil.

Not until  
it was revealed that her husband  
was somewhat of a skeezer.

I had no clue how quickly  
one could remedy death  
con la vecina's body,  
but I do not blame her.  
The shame is on  
that foolish man.

I'll do what Chelo didn't have time for.  
Her life was cut too short  
survived by her family  
and that hijo de un malcriado esposo.

Tia Chelo if it happens to be  
that we are not the same spirit,  
at least we share a name  
and that warms my spirit still.

Tía Consuelo  
que descanses en paz.

Gracias  
por la bendición  
de tu nombre.



La Viuda · Tamar Leah Saramosing

# The Blurry In-between

Tamar Leah Saramosing

I find myself at the blurry in-between of what was,  
what is, and what will be.

I have been many things to many people.  
I have given myself over,  
My power  
My voice  
My ME-ness

Submission

in exchange for approval, acceptance  
Sometimes just to keep the peace, their peace-  
A lamb-

to the slaughter.

As Maiden, I searched for ways to show myself  
from behind the burden of expectation.  
Like bursts or sparks, hoping to blossom into flames  
Snuffed out  
Too much  
Too loud  
Tone it down.

I wanted so much to please.  
They said this was the way  
to paradise.  
Manipulation, mastered.  
Muzzled, a dog in training.  
Good was praised, rewarded with false promise.  
Bad was scolded.

Shamed.

They defined good: Head down. No questions.  
Faith, the only answer.  
Wash your robes clean in the blood of the lamb.  
Put on the new personality.  
Deny myself  
My thoughts  
My pleasures  
My expression  
My questions  
I erased myself, before I could become myself,  
to be good  
Never good enough.  
Sin, born evil.  
Good was an unattainable goal designed for failure.

I knew what bad was.  
Jezebel, eyes painted, flesh torn apart by the dogs.

Expression

The voice inside, unmuzzled. My wildness, untamed.  
This was bad, grounds for expulsion.  
Being stoned, like the children of Israel, was no longer  
allowed.

Good girls were quiet, modest in walking with their god.  
Unnoticed, unnoticeable, I tried blending  
Taupe  
Beige  
Tights

Speak up in defense of your god, your husband, your elders.  
Never for yourself.

Be happy  
in walking with your god

I found happy-

in the pearl black eyes of young love,  
in his voice. He sang to me.  
In his arms, I felt safe.  
Ah, young love.

We eloped. I was 18 and married.  
Undefined. Inexperienced.  
Desperately in love-

Lust

We explored each other. Body, soul, head to toe

Together

We found freedom.  
Our rings saved us from their scepter.  
In their hallowed eyes, I was his property.  
So when I expanded, expressed myself, my colors,  
too much leg, too much shoulder  
too bright, too dark  
Too much...

Me

They reminded him of his job to tame me.  
He wouldn't. He didn't. He celebrated  
Me

When he died, I was lost.

Our baby in my arms, fear in my broken heart.  
They opened their book of make believe  
I couldn't (believe).  
They read their scripture. The power it once possessed  
shriveled and died  
as it fumbled from their lips.  
No magic power. No comfort. No truth.

There I was.



In-between  
knowing and unknowing.  
life and death  
collapse of their truth and endless possibilities.

Expel me, please. Set me free, I said.  
In-between what was and what would be.

The caged whispers of my own thoughts became screams,  
set free.  
So many questions.  
Answers, unclear.

The permission I gave myself to ask  
Questions  
brought satisfaction no answers could

My light, ignited, burst with brightness from the void in my  
spirit.  
Clumsy  
Curious  
Honest  
Undefined  
Limitless.

Eve's daughter, fruit in my hand.  
Knowledge, mine to explore.

As Mother, I walked away.  
My faith and my Love died on the same day.

Somewhere In-between the Me I was, and the Me I'd be,  
I was reborn, born at last, wounded, but free.

As Mother, I determined to be the best Me I could be.  
I failed sometimes, but my heart was pure.  
My love was true.

Everything was new.

As grief consumed me and darkness closed in, Eve held me,  
showed me my power, my  
strength.

The nectar of my breast reminded me that life itself was  
born of me.

I sustain my child. I too, sustain myself.

My strength grew as my son did.

My love, not only for him, for life, for starry nights and  
dewy mornings, grew.

And I knew-  
we'd be alright.

We learned together, how to navigate our new world.  
His tiny hand in mine, we built a life.

Love found it's way to me anew.

He knew all the gods, their powers, their sins.

He gave me books and let me cry.

Never once, gave me answers. He knew I'd find my own.

I fought.

I struggled.

I dove in head first, down to the deep, dark waters of love  
after loss.

He dove in with me,  
with us.

With his love

The kind of love that waters my roots and helps me to grow.

He feeds me.

My belly, my soul.

He lets me shine.

His partner, not possession.

We became a family.

We played. We laughed. We grew together, in this love,

in the home we made, with music and laughter.  
We grew together.  
We grew, together.

A young man with pearl black eyes  
stands ready for a bright future.  
Dressed in black with a song in his heart  
he's all grown up and chasing his dreams...

### HARD STOP.

A new in-between...Who am I now? I know who I'm not.  
I'm not who they told me to be. I'm not who I've had to be to  
survive.

Then, who? What now?

I find myself at the blurry in between of what was, what is,  
and what will be.  
So sure of so much and so little, with confidence in Me.

My days of mothering lay behind me.  
The tools of survival no longer serve, no example to set.

I've spent so much time unlearning,  
letting go, pressing forward, resisting the calls to just be.

The time has come, is here,  
to be, just be  
the glorious and varied versions of Me.

I feel grief again, as a new letting go is happening.

In that grief, a familiar light, my light, empowers me.

I walk in many worlds and In-betweens.

Life and death,  
then and now,  
love lost, love here  
never divided.

I am greater than the sum of my parts.

I am everything I have ever been  
In every in-between.  
What was,  
what is,  
will always be  
the Me I am within.

“The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between.”  
— Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

# I imagine this house is full of secrets.

Jenna Campbell

I imagine this house is full of secrets.  
Generations of whispers and hushed insistence  
The hallways are long, beckoning  
Come inside and see for yourself

We curl up, cozy on the well-worn sofa in the candlelight  
A shawl around my shoulders, fingers threaded through the  
fringe  
Occupied. I am not quite afraid  
But I can't put my finger on it

We are warm inside, bellies full and satisfied  
But the light outside is fading  
And the mist creeps across the lawn  
Rolling out from between the trees

We will stay, unsettled yet content  
We will fill the rooms and toast our glasses  
To us!  
To adventure!

We will explore with curiosity  
I imagine this house is full of secrets.

GHOST STORIES



Sam & Alfreda · Scott Lukesh

# Soup for the Soul

Lois Rocha

A small hospital finds itself alone  
Mid dark thoughts of a grey tomb-stone  
A room in which death fills  
Is where all who lie ill.

Cries against the dyin' of their prime  
Yearning for more and lost time  
A dying man afraid to go  
Into the darkness and the unknown.

A dying man refusin' his ill-fate  
Releases his fear into hate.  
Malicious and mean  
Birth, death, and the inbetween

Into the witches hour of secrecy  
With long, white hair so dreamily  
An old lady offers a bowl—  
for which she calls  
'Soup for the soul'.

'A bowl for thee  
A bowl for me  
A bowl for the living  
And those who cling'  
As she sings, sings , sings.

All feast but none to one  
A dying man who disagrees with everyone  
He whiffs and gags  
Labelin' the old lady a hag.

In life she stands before he  
The old lady bargains and pleads  
'Will you please try  
A bowl—  
For which I call  
Soup for the soul?'

No is his answer.  
No it shall be.

With a sigh she says her farewell,  
for her soup has made others feel well.  
A traveler she must venture  
Left behind was her kind gesture.

Overmorrow is here  
It brings what is near Those who believe  
A cure for wellness  
But not for man  
who was careless.

Death and the dying man are alone  
No one in sight to be shown.  
Outside a raven knocks loud  
Scared he wraps himself in a linen shroud.

In the witches hour of secrecy  
With long, white hair so dreamily  
The old lady returns  
The dying man yearns.

He begs and pleads  
for a bowl  
in which she calls  
Soup for the soul.



And she responds—  
'I am all out of soup  
As you can see  
Right now what I search  
Is for new meat.'

'A bowl for thee  
A bowl for me  
A bowl for the living  
And those who cling'  
As she sings, sings, sings.



Cenando con los Muertos · Tamar Leah Saramosing

# Ghost Towns

Madison Babel

I've built houses out of bricks made of me, built houses made for six, for two, for four, all with my bare hands, all alone

All stand abandoned somewhere miles and miles behind me in old ghost towns I've forgotten the names of now

Each time I left these places, the townsfolk would hold a solemn ceremony, each standing behind a podium and speaking of me as if I were dead

Admitting to what they never would while I'm alive, all because they know that to them this is the death of me, they'll never get to see any moment of me again, this is the end

There's talk of love and hate and that unknown in between space we more often than not exist in, an empty plane of possibility that will now never have the opportunity to cave I think back to moments in my life where I can see it in people's eyes

Where they say something that they know is letting me down, something meant as "I think you have a devotion to this that I don't"

Because they've seen me build these houses before, houses that never become home, or at least never stayed it They've winced each time I've shown them that I'd bend and break for them, they hang their heads down knowing I'll never have to

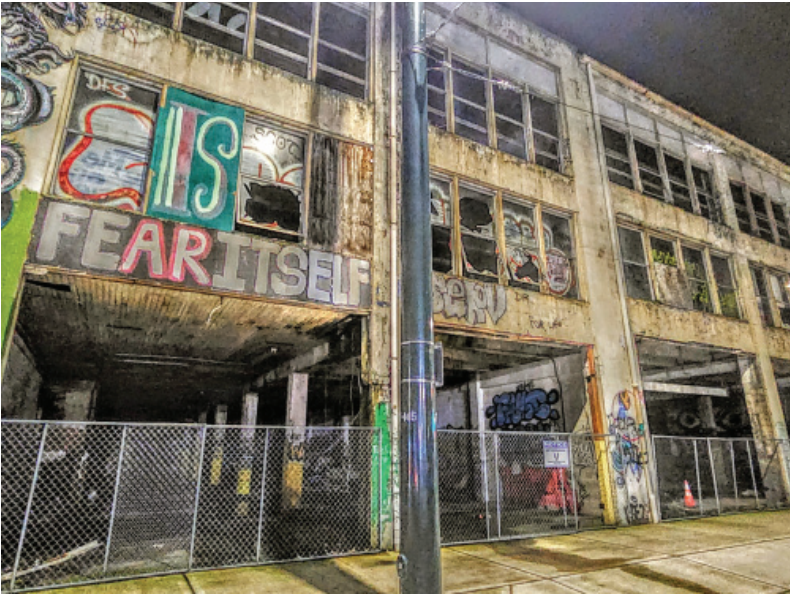
Knowing they'll never even ask, not to spare me, but because that's never been something they wanted in the first place

I've shoved adoration into their hands quickly and violently, in sporadic moments, spread out but overwhelmingly, leaving it all to build up over time to that final moment I've been anticipating but hoping this time would never have to come

Go on living again with the crushing embarrassment of having tried for something at all, I'm still not sure if I try too much or maybe not enough at once at all

Maybe these structures I've just outgrown, their walls too worn thin for me now, they can no longer contain me in a way that feels right anymore, and I become just as restless as the house

In the end I had to leave and find a new space to settle my bones, maybe it'll feel right enough to be buried in the back garden this time around



Warehouse · Fernando Melgar

# Spirit board

Rob Sullivan

With heart shaped Planchette  
    eye on the letters  
An arched path to spell intent  
    pray you be friend not foe  
    break the dead silence  
    Talk to us from beyond  
    Visit us with guidance  
Your whisper's message  
    brings a tear  
    A remembrance  
Of you in the here and after  
    When all is said  
    message done  
    close the portal with  
    good bye

# The Story of Jean Chaussure

Jeff Moore

Ghosts are dead people. They can talk with each other, I suppose, but they don't talk to the living. Sorry. That medium is either working on her acting skills, or it's a spirit, which is different from a ghost. We're not talking about spirits, though; that's an entirely other story. Ghosts are just dead people. Period.

My name is Jean Chaussure, and yes, I know in French that means John Shoes. Dad always called me Jack, so that stuck. I grew up in a shoe family. Well, my father made shoes. Glorious, comfortable, slightly expensive shoes. My mom and I took sample shoes from home to home, showing the quality of our family's product, and solicited the elite class to buy from us. The shoppe's storefront looked every bit like an old cobbler shoppe, but our real product was bespoke shoemaking. As bona fide cordwainers, and we did very well. That's how we could afford for me to go to university. Reading and Arithmetic came easily, but my passion was science. What makes our bodies function. Anatomy is fascinating! But I can't understand Latin; the language of "pharmaceuticus" escaped me.

Fourth term, some classmates and I tried a new pub on a Sunday evening. We sat watching a fellow utterly fail at trying to steal away the attention of a brazen coquette while she utterly failed to chat up an obviously wealthy young man. I say wealthy because he was wearing our shoes. There were four girls sitting at a nearby table watching too, so I invited them to sit with us, and we all enjoyed the show. This poor fellow absolutely scuttled a few more minutes until she finally stood to walk away. I jumped up, caught her in her twirl, and danced her to an open space on the floor. A few songs later, we went back to my table together. That poor fellow's name turned out to be Monty, and when

he invited himself to join the group, no one argued since he bought rounds to make up for acting like a complete idiot. I took the ale with the least froth and declared to the whole bousing ken that the delightfully beautiful papillon to my right was off the market, and any sot who wanted to molest my girl had to come through me and my mates. Don't think ill of me doing that; it was the way things went back then.

The girl's name was Mary Jane Kelly. She went by Mary Jane. Her friends were Mary, Annie, Liz, and Kate. With each passing pint, Mary Jane grew more and more beautiful, and I told her so in limerick and song. She drank my poetry like a thirsty fawn takes to a brook under a rainbow and I told her that. Can I tell you that we were both smitten? So that night I gave her a proposal of marriage. She laughed with her whole mouth wide and her head flung back, which made her ebon hair flutter. Oh, I was gone!

"Yes!" she finally answered. "A thousand times, Yes!!"

Monty stood and shouted, "A round for the house! Our boy's getting' married!" We celebrated for hours that night.

Monty. He had several years on the rest of us. He studied as a Solicitor, but was a practicing Barrister, and he taught part of the time. I asked Monty how he could afford all the booze when he couldn't afford better shoes. He didn't understand, but I told him he'd have better luck with the girls if they saw nice shoes on him. The girls all chimed in agreement.

Relax. My family is passionate about shoes, and I can't say that I don't have a strong affinity for comfortable footwear, but it is so much more than that. You can tell so much about a person by what part of their shoe wears quickest, or whether their care consists of scraping mud off or a careful wipe at the end of the day. Clothiers say a suit makes the man, but would you buy from a man in a fine suit and bare feet?

That night Monty and I struck a bargain. I would provide him with fine shoes every few months and he would help me through the Latin parts of my medical studies. He was also fascinated with surgical studies. “The inside of a person,” amazed him. I think he secretly wished he was a surgeon.

By night’s end I helped Monty buy the sack, and we all walked the ladies to the flat they shared. We all had a great laugh about how the wife of that rich guy Mary Jane was flirting with discovered him there and pulled him out by his ear in front of the whole crowd. Maybe we were too loud since people in their homes shouted out their windows for quiet at that hour.

Over the next year, Monty and I became fast friends. Mary Jane said he made her feel odd sometimes, but I didn’t see it at first. I had him stand as a groomsman at our wedding too. He stared Mary Jane up and down but all the guys did that day; she was amazing. Then I started to see cracks in his persona. He was an angry guy, and always ready to scrap. Once, coming home from the market, I had the beastly luck to be accosted by four blaggards in an alleyway. One sat on the dirt against a wall, asking for help for his leg, so I turned to see about helping him. Suddenly the other three joined him and I was on my back looking up at two knives, two clubs, and the four mongrels brandishing them. Out of absolutely nowhere Monty rushed in like a screaming ape! He knocked two of them down and the other two off balance long enough for him to hand me up and we tore into them. I just wanted to stop them from attacking anyone else, but Monty’s face was a picture of unfiltered glee!

Afterward, I bought him a drink and asked him, “Okay, who were you really beating today?”

He told me that as he was growing up, his mother had abused him and brought a steady string of men through as her paramours, but they tended to abuse him too. He

said that when he let his anger out on men, he was always beating those men.

“What about your mother?” I asked. He didn’t answer.

That year was a difficult one. Even though Latin wasn’t a problem, and I did well at university, my parents fell to cholera in the Spring. They were vaccinated and isolated, but both succumbed to infection from the needle used to cure them. So I left school and took back up our family’s shoemaking shoppe. Mary Jane and I discovered that year that she was unable to have children. It was a blow to both of us, but love conquers all and we found happiness with each other well enough. She and her old flatmates stayed great friends, and Annie married Monty.

Mary Jane came up with the idea of her girls helping with the shoppe. They could canvas the areas we targeted, each with a carpet bag of samples, and with four of them instead of just Mary Jane, we could see a great boon to the business. Monty didn’t want Annie working; we didn’t see her very much anymore at all. They had a place up in Dunwich and only came down to London when he was on a case.

I know what it can look like with a group of women going into businessmen’s homes carrying carpet bags, but gossipers can’t run your life. One day though, an old busybody came out of our parish church and seemed to recognize Mary Jane, so we waved hello to her. That old woman’s whole face soured tight and she spat, “Don’ wave at me, ya wee harlot! I see ya goin’ from house ta house day after day! The Lor’s got His eye on ya’ an’ I do too!”

Just then the vicar came out, wearing shoes we gifted him at the New Year. I whispered in Mary Jane’s ear, “Should we tell the ancient meddler that the Vicar is one of your clients?” He had a puzzled smile on his face as we waved goodbye and walked off laughing.



Another year passed when tragedy hit. And I started to go insane. Dunwich is over 140 kilometres away. With that distance, you have to plan ahead if you want to visit, but Monty and Annie were coming to visit.

They should have arrived midday, but in the early afternoon, we heard an alarm raised down the road from our shoppe. We ran to see what was what, and found Monty and Annie kneeling beside the road. Annie had her face buried in Mary's chest, sobbing. Mary's neck was almost completely severed, deeply cut from side to side, and her head hanging backward so far that her vacant eyes stared at us upside down from her lifeless face. I shoved two of the police out of our way, Mary Jane pressed ahead and grabbed Annie, turning her to hold her tight. Mary's body fell onto Monty's leg and to the ground, and I saw a flash of light to my right. I looked up and saw Mary standing there looking at us! Nobody else seemed to notice that the dead woman before them was alive right next to us, mouthing words I could not hear. Then she pointed at Monty, and as I looked at him... Have you seen someone crying but their mouth formed a smile? This was not that. I recognized the same glee I saw when he helped me beat those muggers long ago. Mary looked from me to Monty, and put her finger to her lips, silencing me before I said anything that would place me in a sanitorium.

Commissioner Warren arrived sometime shortly. So did the county-appointed coroner who seemed more like a detective who performed medical examination as a hobby. Our home was only 30 metres away, so I asked the commissioner if we could go there to wash up and he could talk with our friends there. Mary Jane took Annie to clean her up while Monty described the events in gruesome and vivid detail. The coroner commented to the commissioner rather than to anyone else, "Every detail fits the wounds." Then they left.

Mary's ghost hadn't followed us to the house; I guess it stayed with her body. But it was real! At least I thought surely it was real. Nothing else seemed to be insane, so it had to be real.

An understandably shaken Annie fell asleep on our settee, and Monty sat at our kitchen table staring at the half-empty bottle of Bank Hall in his hand. Half a bottle of single malt, and his hands were rock-steady. And I saw the smirk on his lips. If hate was a liquid, I felt it pour over me like a vat of hot honey. Somehow in my heart, I knew what I couldn't know. Monty killed Mary. Suddenly, Mary's ghost appeared behind Monty. She smiled, nodded, and disappeared again. Now I knew I had to tell Mary Jane.

In the morning, Monty said that he had an appearance in court in two days, so he would take Annie back to Dunwich. I knew it was a lie since they had a vacation planned with us. Mary Jane objected, saying that Annie needed rest and she was welcome to stay with us. She didn't say Monty could. She just mentioned Annie. I think Monty caught the omission. They left.

The commissioner came by the following day saying he wanted to speak with me more about the murder. Mary Jane and I sat in our parlor with him for an hour repeatedly recounting what we saw. I didn't mention my suspicion about Monty, and of course I didn't bring up Mary's ghost. But I was never sure commissioner Warren fully believed us. After he left, I couldn't wait any longer and told Mary Jane about Mary's ghost. You may not believe me, but she was fine with it! She had an aunt who saw them all the time when Mary Jane was little, and no one believed her. But that meant she also believed me about Monty. And that meant trouble for Annie.

The next morning we sent a portorage with an extra crown for discretion, to secrete a message to Annie telling her

she was in danger and to come right away. We heard no answer for a week until a messenger brought us a note at the shoppe. It said, "Jack, I love you so. Leave Mary Jane and be with me. Love Annie."

We rushed to the police station but when we arrived, the commissioner seemed to expect us. Annie's body was found a kilometre from our home early that morning, with a copy of the same love note pinned to her collar. I blurted out, "Monty did it!" and two frightening things happened at once. Annie's ghost flashed into view standing behind the commissioner's desk, and Monty screamed, "Jack!" He was right behind us.

There is no escaping an accusation. Oh, the person being accused can escape it, but when you're the one accusing someone right in front of them, you can never say you didn't do it. My best mate, my Latin tutor, a barrister of good reputation and wearing very nice shoes was a murderer, and I was accusing him of murdering his own wife to a commissioner who had worked with Monty in a dozen cases that went to court. Of the two of us, I had a sore lack of credibility in the room.

Mary's ghost faded into view next to Annie's, one with her arms folded in front of her, and the other with one hand on her hip impatiently tapping a single finger. An officer took Monty out of the office into another room, and the commissioner started interrogating us. Mary Jane told the commissioner how well she knew Annie, but he cut her off.

"Oh, I know about you an' your little group of 'shoe-sales girls,' Lassie," he sniggered. "Hmph! More like gaggle o' geese. I should arrest them, and every single one of those perverted men whose marriages you've ruined! Me Mum's given me all the information I need about your courtesans!"

We both realized it was his mother who saw us as we all exited church that day. It infuriated me that the commissioner had my wife and her friends judged as prostitutes. My ghost friends looked like they were silently laughing, and Annie actually hiked her leg up on his desk pointing at her foot. I looked him up and down and blurted out, "And you're wearing the very shoes they promoted, Mister Warren!"

He went pale, flubbed some words, and said something about it not being a fact, but he had heard rumblings, and you never know what fire there is with smoke. I quietly said, "You need to investigate Montague. He's got reason to be angry at the world, but he'll strike again. Mark my words!"

We were released to go back home. Outside the station we were met by three aggressive men with notepads and pencils. They plied us about our motives for murder, about our cadre of prostitutes, and why those particular girls if they were part of our team. At one point I saw a flash, and for a, well, flash, I thought it might be the ghosts. It was a photographer catching us for the Daily Telegraph and Courier. Mary Jane and I were about to be famous.

Or notorious.

Aside from the newspaper scandal, and the resultant drop in business, things stayed quiet for a few weeks. That's not entirely true. We received an obligatory visit from the commissioner who questioned us as a group, watching us from face to face. It took half an hour before we pried out of him that his office had been receiving taunting notes from someone claiming to be the killer, calling himself Jack. And one of the notes included a package containing a partial human kidney. It had to be Annie's, since her body had also been cut open, but that was a fact that was kept from the public. We apparently passed the commissioner's inquiry,

because he left.

Liz and Kate stayed with us; they lost their flat when the owner saw their names in the paper. They helped us convert the parlor into something good enough to call a second bedroom.

I remember specifically that it was September 29<sup>th</sup> when I just couldn't sleep. I went into the kitchen and got a glass of milk from the ice box, put some butter and honey on some bread, and went downstairs to the shoppe. I ate in silence, sitting at my worktable, then I let my hands work the leather while my mind wandered. I whispered out loud to the empty room, "Why can't I hear you girls?"

"Us?" came the reply. I fairly jumped at the sound as Annie and Mary slowly appeared. They looked comfortable. Satisfied. Peaceful. No marks on their necks, and clean, monochromatically off-white, clothes. "Why couldn't I hear you before?"

"Too much noise out there, Jack."

Is it odd to have a conversation with two dead people? The verdict was still pending if I had or had not lost my sanity. I simply went along with it.

"Monty's got to be stopped, or he'll do it again."

They sat there smiling at me like I should have known something else. I have since learned that being dead gives one extraordinary clarity from that point of view. There are no filters that the living use to function day-to-day; without them life would be impossible and constantly distracted. I overlooked their smugness about my ignorance, and asked, "What?"

“He has, Jack,” Mary said. A soft flash, and Liz and Kate’s ghosts appeared next to the other two.

“You’re upstairs in the parlor!” I hissed.

They had quietly snuck out to meet two of my old classmates from university, Fenn and Clark, and didn’t want Mary Jane and I to worry.

“Well, that worked well. Didn’t it?” I snarled. “Where will they find your bodies? In our parlor upstairs? Is Mary Jane going to discover you in our home lying in bloody puddles?!”

“Relax, Jack,” Kate answered. “No. We got separated after the tavern, and...”

“We didn’t get separated, Kate-lass,” interrupted Liz. “You went off with that handsome boy to see if he’d follow up on his promises, you did!”

They both giggled like they had not met their deaths an hour earlier. My mind reeled so violently that I almost fell from my stool. Suddenly, the four of them were propping me up at the worktable. They could touch me as well as talk to me!

I am certain that most people in history have never dealt with a murder in their own circles. We hear about them. And each of us have family or friends who precede us into the next life. But murder? No. How about four murders of good friends who worked with you, and knew your wife longer than you have? No. I don’t think so.

And here I sat, in my shoppe, talking to four dead ladies like it was breakfast. “Where are you,” I asked them. I had to have something to tell the police.

Neither of them could explain where to find their bodies. Fenn was hit from behind before Liz’s head was covered

with a black bag. Kate was alone when she was bagged, but thought she heard water when she felt her neck slit. October went without incident. Mary Jane and I walked numbly through day after day, not really paying attention to hours or food or sleep. The town started crying out for Commissioner Warren's resignation due to his lack of success finding this self-proclaim, "Ripper."

On our anniversary - November 8, we received a telegram from Monty commanding me to appear at sunrise at the top of Tower Bridge on the Thames. Construction wasn't even completed there yet, but I had to go. Monty wanted to play his last card.

I had provided Carte with five pairs of shoes over the last two years, and as a favor he opened up a beautiful room for us at the Savoy, even though he was still refurbishing the site. It gave us a place to celebrate our anniversary, and to hide. I left before dawn the following morning.

I walked toward the bridge. Mary Ann and Annie were on my left, and Liz and Kate walked with me on the right. Just before I got to the tower site, I saw a flash of light and Mary Jane was walking with us too. She grabbed my arm and told me everything was going to be alright.

When we got there, I climbed up to the top of the most complete of the bridge's two main towers. Mary Jane's body lay on the wooden beams in front of me, a dark pool growing beneath her, and seeped between the wooden cracks. I looked to my left and she smiled and mouthed, "I love you."

I grabbed Monty around the waist and leaned over the edge. "Let's die," I whispered. "Okay. Thank you." Weirdly, he answered.

That was about 130 years ago. They still call him Jack the Ripper. The commissioner was too lazy to finish the job and

## GHOST STORIES

resigned. Monty didn't get away with it though. I can tell you his new home stokes fresh fire for him daily. The papers still called the girls prostitutes, but they don't care. None of us do.

Because ghosts are just dead people. Period. Mary Jane and I – and our friends are all doing fine. You'll find out. See you soon.



*fragment.1* · Emmanuel Comacho Larios



# White Lies

Fernando Melgar

Yes, I killed him. yet  
he still lives. on  
in my memory. scrutinizing,  
calling a life disposable. death  
forever untethered to any reality. in memoriam  
of what I couldn't fulfill. whispers,  
and here I'll die again. | finally, about a place that I can always  
call home.



Koi Fish · Alexis Raisty

# The Macabre Chef

Mayra Melgar

In the depths of the kitchen's dark abyss,  
Where shadows coil and hiss,  
The chef's cauldron boils and seethes,  
With secrets that the darkness breathes.

There in the eerie depths of a kitchen's gloom,  
The chef concocts a sinister perfume.  
Beneath the flickering flames' wicked dance,  
Ingredients merge in a macabre trance.

A concoction of terror, a brew of dread,  
Where nightmares dance upon the thread,  
Of twisted fate and sinister designs,  
As the chef's hands weave haunting signs.

Boiling and bubbling, the cauldron seethes,  
With every drop, a darkness breathes.  
Lime-green vapors swirl, a noxious brew,  
A concoction of terror, dread anew.

The stench, a foul assault on the senses,  
Yet still, the chef toils, with no pretenses.  
For in this brew, a magic lies,  
To lead the way to infernal skies.

With trembling hands, I raise the cup,  
The elixir of nightmares, bottomless sup.  
Hesitation grips, but I dare not falter,  
To drink this potion, my resolve must not alter.

Down the hatch, the liquid flows,  
A descent into darkness, where terror grows.  
Wretched and heaving, consumed by fear,  
I drown in the depths of the chef's frontier.

But the horrors don't end with the brew,  
For a menu of nightmares awaits, it's true.  
A feast of fright, a banquet of dread,  
Where even the bravest lose their thread.

From Sleepy Hollow bark to pretzel owls,  
Each dish a nightmare, each bite a howl.  
Serial killer cakes and bloody cookies,  
A culinary descent into the spooky.

Ghoulish cocktails, dripping with gore,  
A toast to the night, forevermore.  
But behind the facade of sweet delight,  
Lurks the chef's sinister appetite.

Spooky churros snakes with eyes of coal,  
Stare into your soul, a ghastly role,  
In this macabre feast of fright,  
Where every bite is a chilling sight.

Dracula's Teeth Salted Caramel Cookies,  
Bite into your fears, no time for rookies,  
For each morsel is a tale untold,  
Of blood-soaked dreams and souls are sold.

Zombie Wafers, Tombstone Dippers,  
Straw-boo-rry Ghosts, the horrors glimmers,  
In the flickering light of the chef's lair,  
Where terror reigns without a care.

Consumable cranium, a feast for the brave,  
A meal of nightmares, a soul to save,  
From the clutches of the chef's wicked hand,  
To break the spell of her sinister band.

Serial killer cake, Zombie brain jello,  
Crunchy Noodle Spiders, Pigs In Coffins bellow,  
A chorus of terror, a symphony of fear,  
As the chef's dark feast draws near.

But amidst the dread, a glimmer of hope,  
A plan to end the chef's dark trope,  
With a list of recipes, a menu of fright,  
To banish evil into eternal night.

For her plan, a vengeance twisted and dark,  
To end the feast with a final spark.  
But remorse grips her tainted soul,  
As she surrenders to fate's cruel toll.

A letter penned in regret and sorrow,  
For the lives she's led to the morrow.  
But the chef's fate is sealed, her deed done,  
A specter of terror, forever on the run.

So beware the chef, and her spooky guise,  
For in her kitchen, evil lies.  
And should you taste her wares, beware,  
For you may find yourself in her snare.



Monument · Barny Peake

## ...and so on

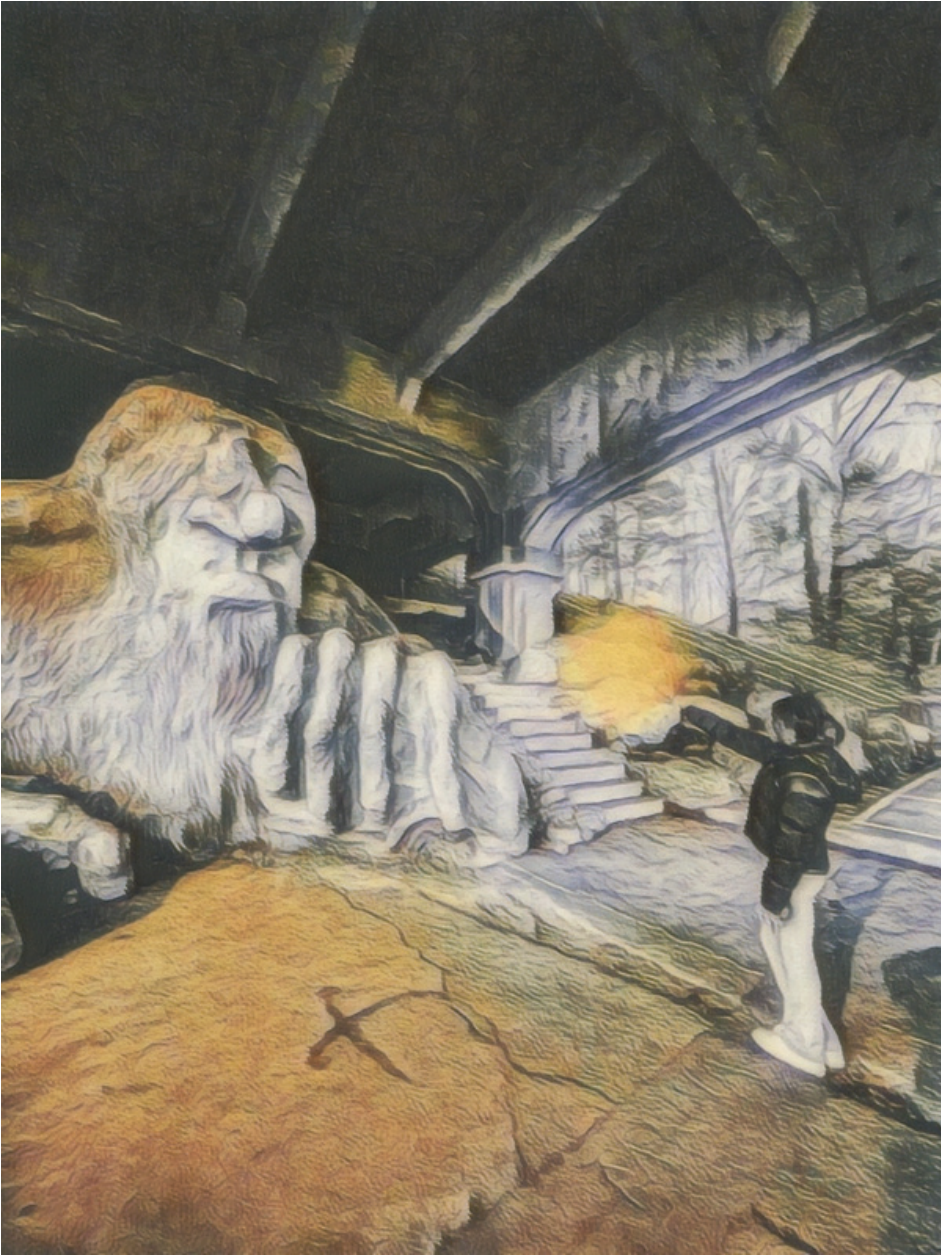
Micah Tasaka

you should come. bring offerings. to the palace i am  
 becoming. so far from my hometown. the sky above  
 is nothing but memory. forever fading. like fireworks.  
 exploding. emptying. the moon of shadow. i strike matches.  
 i let my native tongue. fall out the gaps in my teeth. i now  
 sound like the frogs croaking. or the birds singing. and how  
 often. have i caved in on myself. like this. folded the edges  
 in. regretting. in front of heaven. the shape of my layers. the  
 blossoms. extending outward. forgetting they are flowers.  
 and in remembering. the main reason. i shed skin to begin  
 with. i wander. away from home and back again. it is not so  
 simple. when laying next to. an entire sun. speaking without  
 creating ash. of my words. whenever i open my mouth. and  
 yet here i am. becoming less popular. each time i choose. to  
 stay at home. pouring tea in the kitchen. writing dreams of  
 leaving. on every other. piece of scrap. dog-eared. crummy  
 spiral bound. until i am flooded. in notebooks and scribbles.  
 and can't distinguish. my highest from lowest moments.  
 without feeling. like all i've ever done.

is sift rubble  
 is scrub remnants from skin  
 is attempt fire with wet wood  
 is swallow an entire ocean  
 and still feel as if i am filled

with absolutely nothing at all.





Under the Bridge · Fernando Melgar

# It is always the forest that is enchanted

Jenna Campbell

It is always the forest that is enchanted  
Full of fairies  
And wizards  
With cauldrons full of potions

It is always the forests  
The floor covered in mushrooms  
And woodland creatures  
Inhabiting the fallen limbs, a crumbling shelter

It is always the cottages  
With thatched roofs  
And mystics with wise words  
A knock at the door

It's the stuff of folklore  
And magic  
That taunts the cities  
Exiled

Drive long enough on the road  
To the long stretch of sky  
And the trees that close in  
And you will find it

It is always the forest that is enchanted





Banyan · Tamar Leah Saramosing

# Behind the Branch of the Banyan Tree

Aamina Khan

Zayn had been waiting for so long. Frustration pulsed through his veins, the steel of his gun pressing deep into the skin of his palm. The night was cold, his breath plumed in a delicate mist before his face, shimmering in the light of the full moon. The thin cotton of his *shalwar* was doing little to shield him from the biting chill. Nights in India were usually haunted by heat long after summer had faded away, and the thickening shade of the trees around the cliffs' ledge only added to the unusual temperature. Around him, the dark skin and tense thoughts of his companions brushed against the shadows, all of them watching the ground far below.

"She will not come," Rauf murmured suddenly, rising softly to his feet. At six feet, with a white scar across his eye that glowed in the darkness, he presented an admirable face for the leader of the hunting party. "The wind is blowing our scent right towards her, she will not emerge from those trees until we have gone. We must use other tactics."

"But she's hungry," one of the other men protested. "She *must* come to the carcass soon."

"No," Rauf said. "She has already gone farther towards the river, I know it. But she cannot cross it, for it is too deep and wild for her to swim."

"So, we split up and surround her." Zayn rose from his crouching position, muscles delighting in their relief. He knew Rauf was right, he always was. The man had an inherent, unfaltering knowledge of tigers. He also had something Zayn didn't. Respect for them.

This one was a particular prize. It was a female devil of huge size, daring enough to clear half a stock of cows, and one who would fetch a beautiful price at the market.

"Yes," Rauf nodded. He pointed to the carcass far below, a

hunk of deer with horrifying gashes splitting the sides, the pool of blood of still visible against the blackened rocks. "If all else fails, we will come back here again."

"It would be wise to split into-" one of the men began.

"I'll go alone, *bhai sahib*," Zayn said suddenly, murmuring the term of respect used for an elder man. He met Rauf's eyes, letting him know he wasn't afraid. Zayn had done this for years, he knew how to hunt, to make heavy, panicked breaths slow and to walk without making a sound on a floor threaded with leaves and branches. Besides Rauf, he had killed the most tigers in his village, almost twelve others.

He wanted to kill this one. Alone.

The other men around him protested, but Rauf raised a hand. "If Zayn wishes to kill the tiger alone, he must try. I'll give you this chance, Zayn, but if you think for a moment you cannot kill her, then you leave."

Zayn nodded. But Rauf dropped his voice lower. "Do *not* be reckless."

"Yes, *bhai sahib*." But Zayn gripped the hilt of his gun tighter, and he knew he would either come back with the tiger or with a gash in his skin.

He left the group of men swiftly, moving down the small cliff and into the jungle. His movements were elfin, carved with intent, and his eyes were as sharp as the jungle owlets swooping against the stars.

Banyan and curry trees created a second night above his head, the dense canopy just barely able to let in the nets of silken moonbeams. It was bright enough that Zayn needed no other source of light, but his eyes were used to the darkness, to the jungle. Animals shifted their shadows in every corner, panthers and monkeys surveying the intruder with lazy interest, their tails flicking startling tunes against the leaves. The air was damp and spicy, and Zayn breathed it in as he watched the ground. He walked for what must have been an hour, straying from the path and following an odd instinct he somehow wholly trusted deep amongst the trees, where there was more gloom than light. Past dens and the rattle of snakes, through deep mazes of branches and moss

slicked ponds that Zayn traveled like a child walking with its mother.

He did not doubt his ability to find her, nor did fear weaken his steps. His hard-won skills had honed his mind with an unfaltering arrogance, and just as Zayn was certain that no animals would harm him in the jungle, so too did he believe that he would be selling a tiger's pelt in the market tomorrow morning.

Minutes trickled by like water in cupped hands, and the night matured into its full witching hour as Zayn sought out a sign.

Finally, sunk into the dampened ground against broad leaves, were paw prints. Large and clawed, the perfect match for a tiger. Zayn crouched low, ants scurrying against his fingers as he pressed them into the print. The mold was not firm, he smushed the sides with one push. They were recent, and he knew what that meant.

She was here.

His entire being tautened, body thrumming with adrenaline, his ears straining for every sound. He was so close, the gun in his hand already loaded, anticipating the blood against his hands. There was something incomparably wonderful about killing a tiger. Ending the life of something so powerful and beautiful, with just a single press of a trigger.

He walked with a slight crouch, following the paw prints between two colossal trees.

*Snap.*

He went still.

Behind the trunk of a tree, a shadow emerged, movements as graceful as a morning mist. The moonlight washed away the darkness as she stepped into the light, illuminating a stunning fur coat rippling with rich stripes of onyx. Shadows submerged the emerald of her eyes into a glowing black. She made no sound as she padded closer, swift and predatory.

Zayn watched her, stepping backwards. She'd appeared so suddenly, he thought. She'd known he was coming.

He could just shoot her now, he thought. He could do it.

The tiger stopped moving. It simply watched, and for a few moments the man and animal were locked in a silent, unknown acknowledgment. Something radiated from her, her eyes darkened, and suddenly he saw every other tiger he'd ever killed, scarlet pouring from their wounds, their whimpers ripping the air.

*Coward.* The word flashed against his mind.

Zayn felt the gun tremble between his fingers. The tigers' eyes flicked to it, her fur quivering.

*I'll kill you.* But the thought did not strengthen him, because he knew it was a lie. They were too close now, too close for him to shoot her without the tiger being able to lunge. He had been foolish. So *foolish*. Walked too close, too fast. His heart sounded like a beating *tabla* drum.

And now he began to move backwards, as far as he could, but each step he took the tiger only took another towards him. Intelligence sparked a fire in her eyes, and Zayn had a bizarre feeling she was aware of everything he was trying to do. And Zayn knew, in that moment, he wouldn't kill her.

*Couldn't* kill her.

A snarl, white and deadly and drifting as smoke, broke from her mouth. Her teeth glinted. And then she pounced.

A shot fired.

Zayn didn't hear the bullet clatter as it missed; the tiger's paws were against him. They were heavy as the surrounding silence, heavy as the knowledge that he would die in a matter of minutes. He was pressed against the trunk of a tree, and yet Zayn did not scream. The tigers' face was against his, she let out a massive roar that sent saliva deep into the pores of his skin.

And then a different sound broke the air, shrill and wailing. The roar faded away, and the paws dropped from Zayn's chest. He let out a single breath, disbelief twisting his features. She was letting him go. The tiger was letting him go.

She had turned towards the noise, her tail a snake lashing in the air. A low growl.

And then she faced Zayn, who was still immobile against the trunk. Her gaze flashed with something indiscernible.

But Zayn swore there was something smug about her, as she took one last look at him.

The screams started again. And the tiger reared her head in a sudden motion, her fur bristling, and then she launched herself into the trees.

She had left. No, Zayn realized suddenly, horror tracing fingers down his spine. She had fled.

Another burst of sound from afar. Another shrill scream.

And Zayn listened, and listened again, his fear giving way to confusion.

It sounded...like a *baby*.

He breathed hard for a minute, shock and fear still paralyzing him.

And suddenly he was running, running through black and branches towards the sound, an overwhelming urge consuming him. The cries sounded nearer, and then he burst into a clearing where a colossal banyan tree stood, branches and trunks intertwined in a mound of snakelike shadow.

And the cries were right here now, right where Zayn was.

He walked closer. And then Zayn dropped to his knees and let out a cry.

Behind the branch of the banyan tree, there was a child.

A boy, no more than two years old, sweet curls fringing his forehead, brown eyes screwed in torment. His brown cheeks were plump and smeared with dust, and the only thing covering his body was a muddy black cloth. Zayn stared at him for a moment, completely lost for words. How on earth had a child gotten here, so deep in the woods, in the middle of the night? And where were his parents? Apart from being dirty, the child was unharmed, which was nothing short of a miracle. The animals in the jungle were hungry, they wouldn't have stopped to consume something as small and vulnerable as a baby. Someone must be close; someone must have simply left him here for a moment.

And he called out; once, twice, twenty times, but there was no answer. And Zayn knew he couldn't leave the child here by itself.



He was still screaming, but in slightly softer tones, his dark eyes watching Zayn's movements. He drew it into his arms, patted its back, stroked his hair. The baby clung to his neck, tears wet against his cheek, and quieted so suddenly Zayn was startled.

Holding the boy tight, Zayn walked for a few minutes, not knowing for sure what he was doing, but trying to find someone or something to explain the sudden appearance. At last, he was forced to conclude that no one was there, and that the child had been left alone, abandoned. And Zayn would have to take him back home. He almost smiled at the strangeness of it, what they would say when he returned, not with the bloody body of a tiger, but with a child.

In his surprise, the tiger had been forgotten, but now fresh images of snarling teeth and flashing eyes filled Zayn's mind, and he took a deep breath. The sound of the screams had frightened the tiger away, he realized. In a way, the child had saved him.

The boy gurgled, squirming in Zayn's arms. He held him out in front of him, looking into huge dark eyes.

"Who are you?" He murmured. The baby only let out a whimper. Zayn lifted him onto his shoulders, feeling tiny palms grab his hair.

He walked slowly, bouncing the child. His thoughts were as dense as the trees and no less intimidating. Rustling sounded behind him in the leaves. Monkeys, probably, he thought. The baby made a loud sound, like a laugh.

What would he do with the child? They'd take him home, bathe him, feed him...he'd go to an orphanage, perhaps. The rustling was growing louder now, but he didn't look around. The little fists in his hair tightened.

Zayn was searching for the path; the trees were beginning to confuse him. He stopped for a moment to look around, and the irritating rustling ceased. The leaves underfoot were strayed in a thick carpet, and the earth was wet, the heels of his shoes sinking into them. It was completely silent now, and it was this that startled him out of his thoughts. No birds, no frogs, no monkeys.

The child was still clutching his hair. He was silent as well. Zayn stopped and reached a hand to the face of the baby and found his soft cheek. Patted it. The boy didn't make a sound.

He knew the path should have started here, right where that deep gorge was. And the tiger's footprints, they should have been here too. Frowning, he started walking forwards. The rustling noise started again.

Irritated, Zayn whirled around to see what was doing it, the baby heavy on his shoulders. But there was nothing behind him, nothing but moonlight and growth. His brow furrowed, and turning, he started walking again.

And there it was. That same noise, something against the leaves. Rustling-no, Zayn thought suddenly. *Dragging*. Dragging through the leaves, and it was following him. His heart picked up a beat.

He stopped.

So did the sound.

Goosebumps erupted, one by one, across his arms. The baby made a soft cry. With infinite hesitancy, he turned his head without moving his body.

Almost six feet behind him, little feet were curled against the ground. Zayn almost cried out, they looked dismembered. But they were attached- Attached to legs.

Legs that were slithering in the grass.

Legs that reached six feet behind him.

Legs that drew all the way back.

Back to him.

Back to his shoulders...

Back to the baby.

The baby's legs were as long as four king cobras, dragging in the leaves.

There was nothing then, but Zayn breathing and realizing and seeing the legs, and feeling the *thing* on his shoulders.



And then Zayn screamed. He *screamed*, and he threw *it* off his shoulders so fast and violently he strained his arms. There was a hissing sound, and something loomed, a figure, a face, and Zayn didn't look, didn't even think he breathed because he was running so hard through everything and anything. To get away. But he felt it, something whirling alongside him, and suddenly something pulled at his ankles.

His gun flew from his fingers, somewhere unknown, and Zayn fell hard against the ground, a root slamming into his forehead, almost knocking him unconscious. He was flipped over, blood threading through his fingers, dripping down his lashes, blurring his vision.

Pain. Panic.

But he saw something in the corner of his eye. A tiger with emerald eyes, whiskers meshed against the long trees.

And then a face. The face that burned horror into every nerve in his body. And then he fell away, into nothing, pulled by arms and branches and the darkness.

And then Zayn was gone.

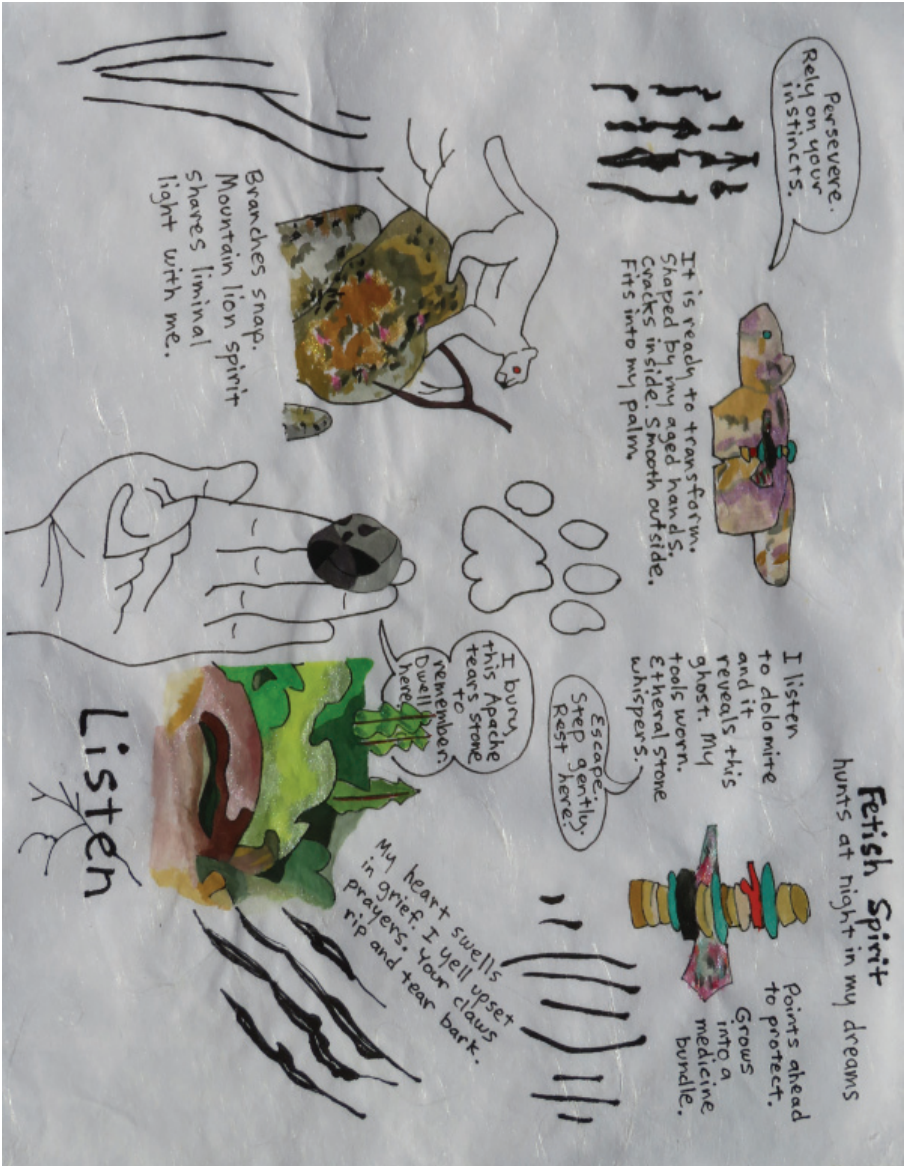
Nobody ever found his body, deep in that jungle. And nobody ever killed that tiger, because she was never seen again.

# A Crow of My Own

Adam Martinez

I haven't stared death in the face in a long time—  
Not with my adult eyes; not since the 90s; not since Mago.  
Though I have lost a few ancillary limbs, my backbone is  
still intact,  
But for how long? I couldn't say.  
I'm not longing for that middle place.  
I'm afraid  
To listen to Mount Eerie,  
To listen to *Benji*,  
And I see my own tender lifelessness in "Hope There's  
Someone"—  
Yes, I'm not longing for the crow to look at me.

I wade in mental lagoons  
And wait for the morning.  
Will it be my mourning?  
Will it be theirs for me?  
Will it be the darkest night of my soul?  
Will it be my long goodnight?  
The anticipation is killing me  
And my eyes are too dry  
For a staring contest.



Fetish Spirit · Cindy Rinne

## Two Ounce

Polimana

“I’m just too stupid to die,” he would remind me. He would remind me of this every time he did something that could have gotten him killed. I’d seize up, hold him hostage with my eyes like they were my hands, my fists. His demeanor wouldn’t falter, because his demeanor never faltered. His face would split, orange slice smile, and he would laugh his laugh all buried under two decades of nicotine and tar. I could never catch him off guard. I could never trick him into honesty.

Once, in a dream, I was on my way to receive an award; the journey was treacherous, and my spirit was low. I had to climb great basalt towers along the shores of the Land of the Long White Cloud, and I had become very weary. I collapsed upon the rock, I fell before what seemed to me to be a great chasm. Then he came to me, with his big shithead grin, held out his hand. Helped me up.

“I can’t do it. I can’t do it anymore. I won’t make it.” I began to weep.

He spoke: “Well, my boy, sometimes you just...have...to...*jump.*”

“It’s too far!” I cried. “I’m gonna fall.”

He laughed, that laugh. That laugh. “Yeah, that’s the idea, partner.” A pause. A kind look, a slow kiss from eye to eye. “Come on, now. I’ll go with ya.”

I knew that if he went with me, then I would be okay; this was because he was just too stupid to die. So, we went. We did not die.

Nothing could have prepared me for the day he would wise up and disappear, except that I always knew it was coming, since he never was as clueless as he claimed to be. I knew it was coming because it was always coming, because there was nowhere for him to go but down. Yet I was unprepared.

The last thing he told me was that he was in Utah looking up at a sparkling new moon sky, but I knew he was lying. The last thing I told him was: “Just share your location with me, I never know where you are.” His laugh lives only in my dreams now.

# Relapse in the Shadows

Kade Lukiyo

The quiet was so loud  
it became a song I dare not speak over  
each note described a piece of my real face,  
the one I tried to avoid for so long.

Is this the day?  
Every day is a battle I fight to live.  
I wonder if this is the one I lose  
what I wouldn't give to be hollow,  
to hold nothing beneath my skin,  
nothing to protect from the world.

Swords, spears, and arrows  
dance through the air  
as I debate with myself.  
One day at a time,  
just make it home and go to sleep  
even though  
I'll probably have to fight again tomorrow.

I'll carry the same shield I always bring with me  
wherever I go, who I talk to  
It filters me  
gives me a false sense of shelter  
But once in a while truth pierces it  
When I can't help it  
On a night like this one

when I can feel the shame  
pulsing through my veins  
and my past makes each heart beat feel heavier  
I would give away  
all these blood and organs if I could  
so I could finally have nothing

but here I am  
about to pass out  
wondering how one ends a war  
falling asleep  
humming along to music  
no one else can hear.



La Viuda · Tamar Leah Saramosing

# The Scream

Michelle Dowd

*Truth. The real truth only comes years later, when finally one day your body feels safe enough to feel it.*  
~Tom Spanbauer

The screaming started a few weeks after I had my thyroid removed, and a few weeks before my former lover broke in and destroyed our family home.

For three weeks, on and off, at what felt like random intervals, the demon would come to me and sit on my chest in the night, dense with the weight of an anvil, slowly draining the breath from my lungs.

Paralyzed, I would watch it compress my chest, pinning me to the bed, siphoning my lifeforce, eliminating my breath in tiny increments, my body frozen everywhere except my eyes, which continued to blink and dart and roll, furiously fighting against surrender, refusing to accept death at this creature's gnarled hands.

But eyes aren't much of a defense against a demon, and I would feel myself begin to fade into the sheets until somewhere in my throat the scream would begin to form and escape my mouth in a barbaric, primal roar that didn't let up until it exhausted me into a little ball of quivering quiet.

When the screaming began, my husband would turn on the lights, and see that nothing was there. He would shake me gently, and then more aggressively to get me to wake up, while I continued to scream without words at this thing, screaming at this thing to get off my chest.



I had no control over the scream, where it started, or how it ended.

The scream was a sound outside of me, just as the words of my husband ordering me to stop screaming were sounds outside of me, as he instructed me to wake up, trying to convince me I was dreaming.

But it wasn't a dream. It was an assault.

I could hear my husband's words along with my scream, both of them alien and intrusive, like an out-of-sync audio track in a foreign film. My throat remained constricted, tight, strained, and raw throughout the weeks the demon visited me, even on the nights I wasn't screaming.

I didn't find the gash across my neck, nor the stitches, nor the healing, nor the knowledge that my vocal cords had been stretched apart particularly relevant.

I didn't know why the past wouldn't stay in the past. The scream was just a visitor, like everything in my life in those days, a crescendo in an orchestral score, the sound of a woman rising to fight for herself.

I continued to get up every morning and whispered my way through work, waiting for the next assault.

# The ghost of hope

Pete Campbell

The ghosts of who we used to be  
haunt our waking dreams.  
they promised it would be better by now  
then go bump in the night  
when everything is quiet  
and life opens up to chance.  
that's when the shadows appear  
to dance in the corner  
almost hidden but never gone.

It's not so much fear, but sadness  
that grown life is so boring.  
old me promised more,  
his youth vanishes in the cracks of my face.  
when I stare in the mirror  
the mirror stares back.  
don't summon the ghosts by asking  
'who am I?' three times  
because when living feels like dying  
even hope turns painful.

It cries out in the darkness  
for morning to come but you look at the clock  
it's only twenty to one  
the long night has only begun.

I have to get through this  
my children are young  
alive in front of me  
play the ghosts of who they'll become.

# Dad

Barny Peake

The morning after you passed, my first conscious thought when I woke up was a question-- are you still here with us?

I wonder about the afterlife sometimes. The question of what happens after breath leaves our body and if we live on in spirit-form. As the body dies, does our essence rise and join a collective energy or consciousness? When I went to church as a child, I believed God to be a giant bearded head in Heaven and when we died, our translucent bodies would float up and join Him to live out eternity on beds of clouds in the sunshine. That was my image of death and afterlife. My impression was mostly good, other than the scary stories and horror movies with monsters lying in wait in dark forests or grungy alleys. I thought ghosts were just superstitions, stories of haunted graveyards and old buildings, people being scared of the dark, I thought.

There are real ghosts. I know this now. They inhabit decrepit houses and move silently in the night. White phantoms with dark eyes that seem to look through you into your soul. Their haunting screams are enough to send grownups running in fear. Yes, I know them well. I kept one in a cage in my backyard. I was not afraid of this ghost. In fact, it was more afraid of me. The ghost had been injured and was passed on to me so that I may care for it. After months of standing in the enclosure with it, trust grew between us. His fear replaced, out of necessity for food, by a tolerance of my presence. I gave him sustenance and he began to understand I was there to help him, or so I believed.

One night, when I was walking out to the flight cage, I saw my ghost flying away in the night. Running to the enclosure, I found him sitting there, startled by my sudden approach.

Barn Owls mate for life. By their bond or midnight calls to each other, my owl's partner had found him, and they were reunited yet kept apart by the slatted walls that were built to keep him safe during his recovery. In time, my owl healed fully and was released back into the wild near my house. I like to believe the two white phantoms found an old barn to haunt to perpetuate the legend of the terrors in the night. In these ghosts, I believe.

It was not a barn owl or anything else that I could explain with science or logic that happened the morning after you passed. Between slumber and coherence, my first conscious thought - are you still with us? The thought was a feeling, more than language, it was a yearning for connection and confirmation that what I had lost, was not gone forever. The thought and feeling formed in my body, but I knew I would never know the answer. And then you responded. It took me several moments to understand what happened. What was that? Suddenly, I was wide awake trying to get free of the sheets around my body. A sudden noise, a thump or something heavy falling on carpet. Was it a phantom fragment from something I was dreaming? On the floor next to the bed was a book, *Up Front* by Bill Mauldin, a political cartoonist whose illustrated World War II soldiers were featured in newspapers across the country. Within a fraction of a second of the thought, the feeling forming in my body wanting to know if you were still present in my life, this one book out of a hundred others on the shelf toppled to the floor. This book, written by an author born in New Mexico, just miles from where you closed your eyes for the last time, depicting soldiers in the trenches...this was the single volume that fell. You were an Army pilot.

Why and how could a single book that was securely in its place along with many others topple off the shelf that morning? Then, Mom called me to her room. She was sitting in bed with a book in her hands, which was typical. I was about to ask why she called me in when I saw it. A

hummingbird was hovering in the middle of her room. It was not startled when I entered the room, seemingly unafraid. It flew to the closed window and landed on the sill, then took off again and flew towards the bed landing lightly on top of the open book in my mother's hands. With folded wings it looked curiously at my mom in her bright colored pajamas. The screen door leading out to the deck off my mom's room was closed and the open windows had screens on them. How did this hummingbird get into the room? It's rare to see a hummingbird at rest, but to see one inside the house, unafraid, and sitting like a houseguest or a pet resting on the book in my mom's hands was bewildering.

The image of this moment is very clear in my mind. But what haunts me to this day is seeing my mother's recognition of familiarity in this tiny delicate bird. There was a comfortable calm between them. Two souls, bonded for life, in recognition of each other after fifty years of marriage. It was as if my Dad had just walked into the room.

I crossed the room and opened the screen door. After a few moments, the hummingbird took off and flew across the open threshold, translucent wings ablur heading toward the clouds and sunshine. I've heard a host of ghost stories. Some of the good ones were told around a campfire like the tale of the Watkins Beast, a lone mountain lion with exceptional intelligence that was said to have teeth like a sabretooth tiger who roamed the mountains outside Cuba, New Mexico and tracked a local farmer like prey. I trained and cared for owls who have been mistaken as specters haunting old buildings, terrifying trespassers, white wraiths emerging from the shadows with ghastly screeches. Throughout my adult life, I did not believe in ghosts or spooks or the human spirit persisting in the afterlife. It defies sense and reason. But I cannot explain what happened the morning after you passed. A book toppling to the floor and a hummingbird behaving unlike any wild animal I have ever seen. I still wonder about the afterlife sometimes, but the thought I felt,

the question that materialized in my mind, were you still with us, was answered.



Padre · Barney Peake

## Rift pt 2

Micah Tasaka

There is the difference of time  
going forward, moving back  
the nectar that drips  
off her honeyed lips  
will leave rifts in their leaving  
but will never run out of water  
to smudge the golden doors closed  
as this poet knows  
growing older is the only option.

Seeing my seeds all planted  
the flowers stretched  
higher than hills  
the harvest packed into  
bags on my back  
let the rowing keep  
pushing me forward  
where once I used to wonder  
when I would see the top  
the peak has hit  
the come-off spiraled and  
is now building back up.

We used to believe in magic.  
We used to be  
so much more brave  
sipping up the pieces of  
foreign glass  
after the blast  
after the blast  
alchemized memories  
turned sticks  
to lie in rubble  
to be forgotten  
and never picked  
out our teeth

Out our thorns  
and sides  
wounds festering  
closing our eyes  
to the great aftermath  
of keeping on  
making each bump  
in the road feel small  
I will count my  
sins on the palms  
of both hands  
and be forgiven  
without confession  
because I've already said it  
loud and clear  
if you were listening.

The next horizon's glistening  
granting unearned salvation  
transform me into light  
transform me into light  
on the backs of  
secrets whispered into closed  
palms sent up to stars  
if I find where I'm going  
will I learn to love all this dark  
and feed my soul  
a balanced meal.



As distances surging between  
all my / selves /  
leaving the tender pieces rotting  
out of sunshine sunk beneath  
ribcages, beneath closed eyelids,  
between dead lips sealed shut.  
The voice is no longer speaking  
the inspiration dried up  
unmemorized yet still  
vaguely in the back of my mind  
if I still keep reaching  
if I still keep believing  
in ghosts

maybe  
they will continue to haunt me.



Tracking · James Nelson

# Letter to Laurie

Tamar Leah Saramosing

There are no words  
there are no meals,  
or flowers,  
or poems,  
or hallmark cards  
that can begin to express  
the layers and waves of emotions  
that wash over us  
moment to moment  
when we lose  
someone we love.

There is something unspoken and purely understood though,  
when two people, who have tasted loss meet eyes:  
A transparency that wasn't there before.

I can see you now  
and you see me.  
The vulnerability,  
the strength behind it  
and the open wounds.

Absent souls,  
empty eyes,  
blurred thoughts,  
and that haunted, peripheral vision.

I see you now,  
and I see the cocoon you are becoming.  
I too, died to myself  
when my love  
was taken away.

As this pain permeates you  
from bone to flesh,  
from breath to excruciating breath,  
the cocoon of grief envelops you.  
It buries and burrows,  
and smothers and swarms  
and the you you were  
is consumed with darkness.

This darkness that you have found  
I have been there too  
I have the scars, some open wounds  
and the wings to prove it.  
This darkness,  
this pain,  
the excruciating breath  
and strangled heart you've developed overnight.  
This nightmare you wake up to  
does not  
will not define you.  
It will change you,  
this I swear...  
How, depends on you.

For now, sweet sister in pain,  
know that I see you,  
that my own pain honors yours,  
my tears honor you tears,  
the scars over my heart,  
honor the open wounds in yours.

Mis consejitos:  
Remember to eat,  
even if you're not hungry  
even if it's just a bite.  
Your body, your loyal companion  
through this life needs nurturing  
to carry you through this.

Drink water in the morning  
and warm, herbal tea after sundown.  
Remember that others are grieving also, and grief, at times,  
can be selfish.  
Brush your teeth and have a shower without worrying about  
how long it's been.  
If something absolutely must be done, do it slowly and  
carefully and until it's done,  
preferably with the help of someone you trust.  
Grief makes us rather absent minded.

Write.  
Sing.  
Cry.  
Ugly cry.  
Don't judge or swallow your tears  
Talk to him.  
Honor your feelings,  
all of them,  
even the ones with no names.  
Know that you are whole,  
you are loved,  
and for the times you cannot be well...  
just be.  
I love you. My heart is with yours.



Pulse · Barney Peake

# God is With Us (انعم هللا)

Maya Bravo

In light of unborn children, your view on life is pro  
So would you glance this way if I looked like someone you  
know?  
You don't think you're evil, you can't be born that way  
But do you think I was? What can I do to grant my stay?  
Man or woman, son or daughter, younger or elder  
Yet we are all the same when we look for new shelter  
To those who aren't afraid to watch, thank you for your deed  
Though I am sorry to say that we will still be forced to bleed  
We thank you endlessly for wiping your smudged lens  
But even brand new eyes can see this as a wrongful cleanse  
Let us live in breathing hearts for protection and safekeeping  
The beats they contain go on for new angels sleeping  
They say God is with them, and God is with us too  
But it's different because I got to see Him sooner than you  
He didn't expect us so soon, but He is happily our host  
We are not gone, please keep your memory, we are not ghosts  
And so I say, from the river to the sea  
May all of who is left of our people be free

# Mourning

Damon Ford

I think I've been lost in the dark,  
trying to find my way to your heart.  
I think I was blind to the part,  
when I saw you cry in the park.

When I speak you don't hear.  
It's not your hate that I fear.  
Has it been days, months, or years  
since when last I saw clear?

It looks like frames blurred to shutter  
through the screen of a tv. My mind flutters,  
could it be that I'm dreaming?  
It's hard to remember,  
was my life so fleeting?  
Is this what it's like  
to not have any meaning?

I'm fading away,  
I feel my life is incomplete.  
I'd go up to space,  
or find a way to compete.  
I'd be at the table, oh,  
where was my seat?  
So whom could I pray  
to finish my story?

I wish to pin a medal to this world.  
You see, it's got a knack for  
weaving new depth to its lore,  
yet leaves us hungering for more.

# Jackrabbit

Ashlynn Armendariz

At a time where little, if anything, was permanent, Dolores could count the constants on one hand and still have two fingers to spare.

There was her big sister, whose orbital pull could rival that of the sun, and the actual sun itself. It rose up over the horizon every morning, splaying itself out like a golden blanket welcoming the masses into its folds. Like clockwork, it would eventually slink back to the furthest reaches of space, granting the moon its turn. Daylight savings be damned, the sun could not and would not be stopped. That brought her a great deal of comfort.

Last came the Earth, which was still rotating on its axis last she checked. It was spinning when she went to bed the night before, it was still spinning when she woke up that morning, and it would continue to spin for the foreseeable future. Dolores knew, more or less, that her world was not on the brink of collapse.

Reminding herself of these constants usually helped. Usually. They did little to stop the current beating in her chest, rampant and rapid. So intense, the damn thing threatened to jump right out of her throat.

She could picture it, too. Standing in the middle of a tiny convenience store, hacking and wheezing until a still pulsing heart burst out of her mouth. It would splatter against the linoleum floors, seeping into the liminal spaces where tile gave way to the concrete foundation.

Dolores placed a hand across the thump, thump, thumping of her chest. She pressed with deliberate firmness, digging her palm into the skin beneath her t-shirt. Because sure, spewing up the most intimate parts of herself *sounded* poetic. Cinematic, even. Putting it into practice, however, would be inconvenient at best. And likely make her sister sad, which Dolores wanted to avoid if she could help it. Compartmentalizing spared them both misery.

“Hey,” came a voice, gentle as the hand now on her back. “You good?”

Dolores startled from her trance. “Yeah,” she lied, “I’m good.”

Slowly but surely, her racing heart subsided. Dolores could finally ground herself back in reality. She felt a hand intertwine with hers. One assuring squeeze was all it took to breathe life back into her world. Her sister, Leticia, followed it up by swaying their linked arms.

“You sure?”

No. “Yes. Why?”

“Really?” Leticia didn’t buy it. A quirked eyebrow proved as much. “Because you’ve been zoned out for five minutes.”

Dolores felt her heartbeat pick up again. “Did anyone notice?”

“Nah, you’re good,” Leticia assured her. Dolores knew she was lying, but appreciated the sentiment. “Here, gimme what you’ve got.”

Dolores had an armful of plastic-wrapped cakes and cookies. They’d been driving for the past few days, only pausing for the occasional bathroom break, and were in need of a sweet treat.

Leticia took the packaged sweets and said, “I’ll pay. Why don’t you go wait in the car?”

Reminded of their trip and its purpose, Dolores grimaced. Usually she’d complain about being a perfectly functional (and legal) young adult, insisting she no longer needed coddling. If she let her mind refocus, though, the exhaustion would set in. Already, she felt her body sway.

So she simply nodded. Spared one last glance at the isles piled high with sugary confections and salty snacks, then made a beeline for the door.

But not before catching a glimpse of the television, hoisted behind the front counter. *Investigators stumped over a string of interstate murders*, the headline read in big, bold lettering.

Dolores stopped dead in her tracks, dread instantly pooling in her gut.



The sound of the convenience store made it impossible to catch the audio. Captions filtered across the screen instead. Lips pursed like a fish out of water, the news anchor silently prattled on. “A brutal homicide last month is believed to be the latest in a string of murders spanning five years,” his lips—and the captions—read. “Investigators urge the public to come forward with information connected to any one of the victims thus far.”

On cue, eight photographs appeared on the screen. The captions prattled their names off in rapid succession, as if they were little more than passing afterthoughts. One stood out among the rest, though, having seared itself into Dolores’s mind long ago. It was nestled between the photos of a disgruntled gas station owner and a chubby-cheeked attendant.

Staring from the screen, in all her former glory, was her mother.

It was taken shortly after Dolores’s middle school graduation. Her mother looked happier than she last remembered, but not by much. Her mother wasn’t known for being sentimental.

Cut from the image was Dolores herself, but a sliver of her arm could be seen along the edge. Entirely hidden was Leticia, who stood behind the camera beaming with pride. Middle school graduations weren’t meant to be taken too seriously, but Leticia never got that memo apparently. She had the uncanny ability to turn even the most mundane achievement into something worth celebrating. If only the same could be said of their mother.

Mind wandering elsewhere, Dolores felt phantom pains sear themselves across her left cheek, along her scalp, anywhere nonexistent fingers once left more than just bruises.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. She sucked in a long breath and blinked away the guilt as best she could. Shaking hands were shoved into coat pockets, but the anxious tapping of her foot could not be stopped.

“Believed to be the work of a serial killer,” the anchor

continued alongside the rapid captions, “investigators also warn that he will likely kill again.”

With another shaky exhale, Dolores barreled past another customer and right through the automatic doors. She couldn’t get out of that place fast enough.

They were cruising through the city now—or, well, *a* city. Dolores wasn’t sure which one. She’d taken a nap after Leticia sang an old lullaby while driving. Leticia had that sort of effect on Dolores. She always knew the right words to say or things to do that would soothe those pesky nerves. It’d been easy to fall asleep after that.

With Leticia now blasting the radio to stay awake, it was back to lucidity.

Chest dully pounding, Dolores carefully pried open the glove box. Out flopped a neatly folded map. Well-worn at the edges and along the folds, she had to take great care not to tear it in her haste. A detailed portrait of the United States was now splayed across her lap. Jagged lines marked the state borders while printed stars symbolized their capitals. Additional red marks were etched across whole states. California, Wyoming, Arizona, Louisiana, the Carolinas—each crossed out with thick marker strokes, meant to be excluded.

“I know it’s your turn to pick,” Leticia spoke, “but I’ve got a place in mind.”

Brows furrowed, Dolores eyed her sister. “You do?”

“Yup,” Leticia replied. She paused to swallow a mouthful of a mini-bundt cake. “Want it to be a surprise?”

Dolores considered it for a moment. “Guess that depends,” she said. “Are we going somewhere with a lot of people?” She always did hate crowds. If they were going somewhere big, she usually needed a day or two to brace herself.

“Just one,” Leticia answered. “He’s nice, though. Promise.” With a reassuring smile, she ruffled her sister’s

dark curls, even as Dolores tried swatting her hand away.

“Seriously,” Dolores said. “Where exactly are we going?”

Leticia drummed her hands against the steering wheel for dramatic effect, then proudly announced with far more enthusiasm than warranted: “Ohio!”

“Yeah,” Dolores immediately deadpanned, “because Kentucky wasn’t bad enough. Let’s drag our sorry asses to *Ohio*.”

Leticia frowned, which wasn’t all that convincing with chocolate crumbs around her mouth. “I have a friend up there. We can crash at his place until I get back on my feet.”

Dolores huffed indignantly. Leticia gave her an all-knowing look, one she’d perfected after many years of being an older sister. They’d performed this song and dance before. Dolores didn’t like that Leticia insisted on undertaking the lion’s share of responsibilities and decision making. Leticia didn’t like the thought of Dolores stressing herself sick. If they rehashed this argument again, it would ruin an otherwise fine day.

“You have friends in Ohio?”

“I have *a* friend in Ohio.”

“Fine. You have *a* friend in Ohio?”

“We went to school together. His family moved senior year, but we stayed in touch.”

“That’s depressing. Like, genuinely. I’d hate my parents if I was him.”

“Hey, be nice! At least we’ve got somewhere to stay,” Leticia scolded. “Jackson’s a nice guy. Besides, Akron won’t be so bad. Did you know it’s the Rubber Capital of the World?”

Dolores rolled her eyes. “Remember what Mom used to say?”

Dolores saw the corner of Leticia’s mouth turn up in a grin. “How could I forget?”

In unison, the sisters loudly recited: “I’d rather be dead in California than alive in Ohio.”

There was a bout of laughter shared between the sisters.

Leticia threw her head back and laughed loudest of all. So genuine, so lively, that it briefly made Dolores forget what they were even talking about. Her sister was good at redirecting her emotions like that.

Once their laughter died down, Dolores was left with the memory of a dead woman. Not just any woman, she realized, but her mother. *Their* mother. The mother who tucked her into bed and read bedtime stories as a child, who chaperoned every school field trip, who fed and clothed and housed her as any parent should.

She was also the mother who often raised a hand as punishment. Who flew into a rage if tears followed. Who made Dolores hate herself more than any school bully ever could. *That* was the mother Dolores remembered. Not the victim splashed across the news, garnering sympathy.

Right as the heart palpitations threatened to continue anew, Leticia was lurching in her seat. One hand on the steering wheel, Leticia used the other to pull Dolores into a hug. She kissed her sister's cheek for good measure, squishing their faces together until Dolores groaned in protest. Dolores was also trying to push her off, as any self-respecting little sister would.

"Ugh, you're crushing me! Get off!"

"I love you," Leticia teased in a sing-song voice. "I love you, I love you, I *love* you."

Dolores rolled her eyes for the umpteenth time that day, but managed to smile. Even if she couldn't shake the apprehension lingering in her gut, she could pretend for her sister's sake.

"Yeah, whatever. Love you too, weirdo."

Turned out, the skies in Ohio looked the same as anywhere else. It became a canvas of vibrant colors, of pinks and purples and baby blues at sunset. Dusk embraced its inevitable slumber as the moon readied itself in the sky above. Usually lulled by one of her constants, Dolores

couldn't relax. Unpredictability kept her on edge. She'd yet to grow accustomed to the stranger helping her unpack.

Leticia's friend—*Jackson*, Dolores recalled—was basically a recluse. His closest neighbors were separated by miles of farmland. He apparently liked it that way, or so he said as he chatted each sister's ear off.

"I basically get to do whatever I want," he explained, lugging a duffel bag up his front steps. "Gets lonely, but not lonely enough to go back to the city." Dirty blonde hair swayed in the breeze, illuminated by the dim lighting of his porch. There was a disarming smile on his face as he turned to Dolores and said, "Cool, huh?"

Dolores didn't answer. She couldn't. Not with that treacherous heart pounding fervently, proving to be an anxiety-inducing distraction. She felt like she was about to vibrate right out of her body. Instead of her heart, it would be her skeleton skittering out and spilling everywhere, bones no longer aching. It was tempting—oh so tempting—to let it.

"Hey."

Leticia nudged her shoulder. Just like that, Dolores felt her soul seep back into her body. Jackson could be heard clambering inside the house and chatting to himself. Dolores felt her mouth start to pool with saliva, like she was about to suddenly be sick.

She noticed that Leticia looked a little worse for wear. Tired in a way that hung heavy on her shoulders and threatened to drag her body down.

"Get some rest," Leticia said, smoothing her hands over Dolores's mane of unruly curls. She pressed a kiss to her forehead and suddenly hugged her close. It was something she always did whenever she wanted Dolores to worry less, to leave the brunt of the world on her shoulders.

If only it were that easy.

As it turned out, Dolores couldn't rest. Not a wink. At first she attributed it to Leticia slipping into the living room with Jackson while she laid in the guest bed. Dolores lost track of how long those two were together, their voices lost to the white noise of the air conditioner's thrum. She didn't

want to intrude either, worried she might upset Leticia by interrupting conversations between old friends. So she remained rigid in the bed, inhaling the scent of the musty pillows beneath her head.

Even when Leticia eventually returned, serving as a lighthouse amid the storm raging inside Dolores, the younger struggled to go to bed. That terrible, rampant thudding inside her chest was proving to be a nuisance. It made her bones ache and her teeth chatter. Her limbs felt like they were pulsing right alongside her heart, rippling beneath the skin.

Dolores needed space to calm down. To think about her constants; about the sun, the earth, and her sister.

Feet acting on instinct alone, Dolores ventured out to the living room. It was a foreign space, but gave her room to take long, deep breaths. To press a hand across the thump, thump, thumping of her chest like before. She pressed with deliberate firmness, digging her palm so deep that she hoped the pain would outweigh the stress threatening to breach the surface.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

Dolores’s head shot up. Jackson padded toward the couch, clad in sweatpants and a loose tee. “Neither could I,” he continued, taking her silence as agreement. “I was hoping one of you would be up too. It’s nice having someone to keep me company.”

She didn’t like this. Small talk with people she barely knew always made Dolores anxious. She ran her hands along her bare knees, nails lightly digging into the hard bone there.

“I don’t feel good,” was all she could manage. Her heart continued battering inside her chest, growing more incessant. She was teetering on the edge of a breakdown or a heart attack. Maybe both. “Might wanna keep your distance.”

Jackson’s expression shifted. Brows pinched, he looked genuinely concerned. “You coming down with something?” he asked, leaning in with a hand raised. “I’ve got some

medicine in the bathroom if you—”

Right as his fingers were about to brush her skin, she flinched. It was instinct more than anything. Mostly a result of her mother’s parenting. Lucky for her, Jackson pulled his hand back.

“Whoa, my bad. Didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

“It’s fine,” she said curtly. “I’m just...on edge.”

“*Oh,*” he murmured. He sounded as if some unknown puzzle piece was clicking into place. “I get it. This is about your mom, right?”

Dolores resisted the urge to physically recoil. “What?”

“I know how you feel,” Jackson assured her, except he most certainly did *not* know how she felt. “I mean, my parents are still alive, but I can put myself in your shoes. Or your sister’s. You two went through a lot.”

Dolores blankly stared at him. Once again, Jackson took her silence as permission to speak. “Leti told me about what happened,” he explained. “Man, it’s rough. Losing your dad to cancer, then losing your mom to some psycho.”

Oh, Dolores was definitely going to be sick now.

The more he spoke, the harsher her heart rattled. The tell-tale thumping caused a roaring in her ears. His lips continued to move. Her heart continued violently pumping.

Then he placed a hand on her knee, squeezed, and asked, “Want a shoulder to cry on?”

Maybe this would be the moment her heart finally leapt out of her throat. It’d spare her the discomfort and repulsion festering inside her. Free her from the jackrabbit hammering inside her ribcage. Absolve her of what she knew was about to happen, because the frantic heart locked up tight was, at last, springing free.

Dark, blood-red spots clouded her gaze, floating in and out of her vision. The pumping of her heart, hot and visceral, roared in her ears. Or maybe that roar was her, hunched on top of the couch now, fingernails digging into Jackson’s arm before he frantically snatched it away.

*I tried,* she thought miserably. *I really did. Even harder than last time.*

*I know*, a voice responded in kind. *Now let me in.*

Her mouth watered. That incessant thumping became downright euphoric.

Warmth blossomed beneath her skin. There it was, sudden and inexplicable, encompassing her in a sensation she knew all too well. Something she attempted to quell every time her heart beat wildly in her chest, but could only placate for so long.

It was the thrill of the hunt, come to sate the beast within.

Before Jackson could scream, Dolores sunk her teeth into his jugular.

It was the silence that roused Leticia.

No matter where they put their heads to rest, the routine was always the same. Dolores was infamous for her snoring, not to mention her tossing, turning, and blanket-stealing. It came with the territory of sharing a bed.

Then again, it wasn't the lack of Dolores in bed that drove Leticia to get up. It was the fact the apartment was no longer filled with the sound of bodies floundering or bones crunching.

With a low creak, a bedroom door opened. Leticia craned her head out into the empty hallway and called, "Lolo?"

Met with more silence, Leticia left the bedroom.

The hallway was painted red and rich with blood. Equally bloody handprints lay scattered across the hardwood floor, against the walls, anywhere that could be reached. Small, almost indiscernible crescent moons were clearly carved into the open doorway. Unmistakable was the metallic scent hanging heavy in the air.

With a deep breath, Leticia made peace with her guilt. Welcomed it like an old friend.

There suddenly came a low, guttural growl. It reverberated through the entire apartment and settled deep



in her bones. She willed herself to move, acting against instinct.

Moonlight cascaded the living room in an otherworldly glow. Furniture was upturned, casting haphazard shadows over the scene. Also illuminated was the body crumpled on the floor, or what remained of it. Of Jackson.

His torso was carved open. So was his throat. A gaping hole marked where his enclosed heart should be. Emptiness remained where entrails were typically found. An arm and half a leg were missing. Sharp, jagged cuts into flesh revealed the sinewy muscle beneath—the bone, too.

Leticia caught movement in the corner of her eye. Something vaguely human-shaped shifted in the shadows. Its body creaked and groaned with every movement. Almost as if physically struggling to justify its own existence, wishing to shrink in on itself until it could disappear entirely.

When the shape finally lurched forward, moonlight revealed the creature in all its gruesome visage. Skin dark as the night stretched tightly over disfigured bone. Limbs attached to blood-soaked claws were contorted beyond human comprehension. A maw lined with razor sharp teeth hung open, revealing the sweetest parts of its victim that had yet to be swallowed.

Were it anyone else, the sight alone would push them to the brink of insanity. Humans had a habit of driving themselves mad when confronted with the unknown. And this, in all its terrible glory, was the living, breathing unknown.

Leticia stared up at the creature with a mixture of determination and uncertainty. “It’s okay, Lolo,” she said, holding up outstretched arms. “You can come out now.”

It arched its body forward, but made no sound. Instead, it snapped its neck into an unnatural position and twisted its head. Dark eyes were suddenly beneath its open mouth. Blood oozed from between its teeth and trickled down its gaunt, skeletal cheeks.

The beast stared down at her, blinking its bulbous eyes owlishly.

Then came a quiet hiss, or maybe a caged scream being set free.

Before her very eyes, Leticia watched the creature bending back into shape. Talons became slender fingers. Gangly, unsightly limbs returned to the softness and shape of a human. The beastly skull peeled away to reveal the truth: Dolores, dark locks matted to her face. Now standing in front of Leticia was her baby sister, quaking from the aftershocks of transformation.

The sight brought Leticia back to when it first began. Visions of blood and gore flickered through her mind. She blinked once, twice—

Her baby sister was still standing before her, but no older than thirteen now. Pale faced and slack jawed, crimson droplets spilled from quivering lips. Seeped into the dark carpet to squelch beneath Leticia's bare heels. Clung to the bits and pieces that once made up their mother. Trickled between the liminal spaces where fabric gave way to cracks in the concrete foundation.

Big, brown eyes began filling with tears. Back again was the Dolores who was freshly eighteen but still a baby, still *Leticia's* baby. "I'm sorry," she croaked. Her voice was just above a whimper. "Leti, I—he—"

"I know." Leticia knelt beside her sister. She cupped Dolores's cheeks and pressed a kiss to her sister's forehead. "I know, Lolo. It's okay. You couldn't help it."

That made Dolores sob. She threw herself into the arms of her sister, her protector, her constant, and wept. Leticia let her.

No matter how frequently Dolores fed, it was never easy. Leticia knew the guilt threatened to consume her sister. Someone as tender-hearted as Dolores was not meant to be a killer. How unfortunate, then, that that was what kept her alive.

Powerless to do much else, Leticia hugged Dolores tight. Held her close. Chased away what remained of the beast as it began to slink back into the furthest reaches of the space known as Dolores, granting the human her turn.

“C’mon,” Leticia murmured, urging her sister to stand. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

They’d need to move quickly. Clean the place as best they could. Leave no indication they’d ever been there. Remove any shred of evidence. Thankfully Leticia had perfected the art of cleaning up messes five murders ago. The ninth would be a cinch.

At least Dolores would know peace. If only for a brief sliver of time, her baby sister wouldn’t be plagued by that incessant thrumming in her chest. It’d give Leticia enough time to figure out where to get the next meal, how to keep her sister afloat when she was drowning too.

It would be okay. *They* would be okay. She had Dolores and Dolores had her, and that was more than enough to live off of.

# Today, I Opened a Wound

Keighla Ramirez

I opened a wound of mine today.  
It was healing and now it bleeds

As I lay myself on the white, protecting me  
I can only hear the throbbing of my heart  
drifting me into an internal sleep

Let this sacred nectar pour out of me.  
My heart is now thrown open

Let this blood stain the white that surrounds me  
I shall not die  
My heart is a bleeding pomegranate



# Our New Home

by Paul Rodriguez

i can see the blackbird watches the small green strawberry  
and old aloe  
the aloe was planted by my father's mother just  
after the last world war  
i carried its weight with me here  
the single berry bestowed by  
those before i came here now for first night  
the previous tenants  
they left it alone in the ground for me to watch over  
in this, our new home

as for now  
and the world being all there is  
chances are she will change color of clothes portending by  
season  
my children will sleep here tomorrow

standing watch  
i noticed there are too many stars  
the blackbird, too, watched as she  
flew away with my eyes  
i saw myself there from within the warm and light, liling air  
buoyant between the heavens and the limits of our language  
i kept my body alive, blind in the dark, i know not how

from where does this piano play?  
forgotten harmonies follow and remain so perfectly in indigo  
shades scattered  
linking every city from which one departs in between notes  
and deep reds  
were there here or there souls who heard similarly how  
sounds sunset  
upon the loss of limit?  
i find it impossible to lose its chase and trail

maybe the ancients now deep in the earth  
also watch that light become a soft blue push  
in the calm tilt of a swimming pool in Claremont  
where once i heard  
electric pool-light like one eye humming  
under the sway of a new song  
in a land now foreign, again

maybe even now  
that same ashen avian, she still sings with winged-word how  
my eyes remain lost to me  
Grecian epics and Roman oaths of mystery lack this  
    possibility  
the blackbird has secrets  
maybe here, now the blackbird waits in a cave below  
here and now with whispered promises of deathlessness

there are many foreign words of promise foregone by  
    blackbirds  
underneath the ever so slightest hint of water and sky above  
i, for one, fear that it can still be  
that it will be forever  
here, where the single green strawberry grows  
near the newly transplanted aloe  
where is the joy in living forever?  
the blackbird lasts longer than the sounds and colors of place  
from whence it comes or shall return  
there is no palace, save this new home  
our new home

# The Monsters Inside: An Inner Battle!

Mayra Melgar

In the chilling abyss where shadows reign,  
A child descends from the bus, bearing silent pain.  
With a flower gripped tight in a deathly embrace,  
He races to the door, a mask on his face.

“Happy Birthday,” he murmurs, his voice hollow,  
Dreaming of escape from the darkness’s swallow.  
Faraway promises, whispered in dread,  
As the monsters inside claw at his head.

A pre-teen enters, with a smile so sly,  
But beneath the facade, the demons lie.  
Laughter echoes, a sinister sound,  
As the darkness within begins to abound.

The teen returns, his facade still intact,  
But within him, the monsters viciously attack.  
Alone in his torment, in silent despair,  
As the grip of the monsters tightens without care.

Exhausted, destroyed, yet he soldiers on,  
Though the monsters within have already won.  
Blamed, judged, he longs for release,  
But the darkness inside brings him no peace.

In the night, they come, haunting his dreams,  
Tearing at his soul, ripping at the seams.  
Invisible chains, binding him so tight,  
To the horrors within, in the depths of the night.

But amidst the darkness, a glimmer of light,  
A hope that one day, he’ll win the fight.  
For though the monsters may rage and roar,  
He knows deep within, there’s still more.

But despite his resolve, the horrors persist,  
In the night, they come, a relentless twist.  
Ghosts of his past, haunting his mind,  
Dragging him down, leaving him blind.

In the darkness, he's lost, a mere shell,  
Caught in a nightmare, a living hell.  
But he'll keep fighting, he'll never give in,  
For he knows that one day, he'll finally win.

With courage and strength, he'll face the night,  
And banish the monsters, reclaiming his light.  
For in the depths of despair, he'll find his way,  
And emerge from the darkness into the day.

And so he battles, with all his might,  
Against the monsters that haunt him at night.  
For he knows that one day, he'll break free,  
And find the peace he so longs to see.

In the realm where shadows and monsters reign,  
Mental illness is real, a relentless chain.  
But therapy and meds stand close and near,  
To banish the darkness, to calm the fear.

Armed with confidence, he takes a stand,  
Facing the monsters, with a steady hand.  
For he knows they hold no sway,  
Over the light that now guides his way.

On the road to recovery, he strides,  
With life tools close, and fears set aside.  
Life gets better, people do care,  
Reaching out, they're always there.

So let's make a deal, to face the night,  
Together we'll conquer, with all our might.  
For in unity, there's strength untold,  
And in the light, we'll find our hold.





Cerberus · Isaac Manzo

# How to Write An Email to a Ghost

Cam Santa Anna

“How does it feel to be dead?” Joy typed into the empty white message box. Her Ghost lover waited for a moment to reply to her message, as ghosts normally do.

“It’s kinda like laying in a pool with your eyes closed, it’s a weird and tingly experience you feel from the toes up. And it tastes like cumin with hints of something floral, maybe lilac? There is also this constant ringing, not like a buzz-type ringing, but like a doorbell. And you can’t ever find the door, but you know someone is ringing to get in. It is nothing but everything at once. I think it’s different for everybody, like how people see colors. You would love it Joy. You love weird things like this,” the Ghost Lover typed back.

All Joy could think was how romantic this all was. The Ghost. The messages. The secrets. The candles. The excitement of seeing notifications. I all felt so new to her.

It was nearly two in the morning and her room resembled a burning building, cheap candles from Ross hugged the corners making it smell like something between apple crisp and fresh linen. Joy was bent over the computer at her desk typing away and Iphigenia, her mother, peeked into her room. Iphigenia couldn’t sleep again. She could never fully rest if her daughter was not resting, some motherly instinct or something like that.

“Finals seem to be kicking your ass?” Iphigenia remarked.

“Yeah, this literature class is insanely stupid,” Joy responded almost as soon as Iphigenia stopped talking. She was still looking at her screen.

Joy is lying. She is actually reading a Reddit post about someone falling in love with a ghost. It is barely getting to the good part, too. Iphigenia knows she is lying, but Joy is nineteen, and every girl needs her privacy.

“Why do you need to light so many candles at night?” Iphigenia asked as she stepped into the room and started pinching the life out of the flames hugging her room.

“You are going to catch this damn house on fire, Do you remember what I told you about my neighbor growing up?” Iphigenia asked.

Iphigenia had a story for everything and anything. One of her many neighbors growing up was lighting the loose ends of fabric on her sweater to make it look prettier, or for the fun of it, or maybe to spite her mother. It changed each time. She would sit at her desk and just light for hours. She ended up letting one of the thin loose ends burn a little too much and caught her body on fire. They only could identify her body from her teeth.

“She wasn’t even lighting candles-” Joy said.

“You can still catch on fire. And look at this room. There are clothes everywhere, I haven’t been able to see your bed clearly in God knows how long, and I can barely even walk in here. How do you live your life like this? I worry about you, Joy,” Iphigenia said,

Joy slipped on her headphones. “Joy, I am talking to you,” Iphigenia barked

“Can you shut the door when you leave?” Joy said. The Reddit story was getting good again.

“I love you, Joy,” Iphignia looked down at the ground when she said this.

She waited for a moment for her daughter to respond.

“We are all that we have, you know,” Iphignia sighed and went back to her bed.

The door slammed shut and the candles hugging her room blew out at once. “Time for bed” said the Ghost Lover. Joy snuggled in between her sheets and stared at her computer until she fell asleep.

No one knew how the dead could talk but it still happened, through the internet. Nothing changed besides

the headlines: *Is ghost-powered software ethical? Ghost Therapy, the next BetterHelp? How to Exercise your computer in three easy steps. I Found my Husbands Killer through Ghostfinder and you can too...* At first, people were excited but when things like this happen people need to make money somewhere, and most of the time you have to shell out a portion of your wallet to talk to the dead. They never knew their names or when they died, but they knew other things like their favorite ice cream flavor, what you ate for breakfast, or what it was like to live without a body. It was all so vague. It seemed more like a party trick or something to do when you watched everything on Netflix. It was exactly what Joy craved, though. Especially after dating Greg.

Greg kissed like a frog, and not in a fairytale-type of way, but in a ‘there is a tongue down my throat’ type of way. He was always distant too, and couldn’t hold a conversation longer than five minutes. He only wanted to talk about basketball or video games, or even worse, made jokes like, “Wouldn’t be crazy if we had sex right now?”.

Joy wanted more.

It was hard for her to find more because everything around her always seemed *off*. Picture frames never seemed leveled, music never sounded good, and food tasted just like food. She came to the conclusion at the young age of twelve, that life was just *off*. What more could she do? Better luck next life, she thought.

Joy didn’t have time for thoughts like this. She had to get to class. She started her first semester at the city college after losing a bet with her mom and now she is stuck getting some degree in anthropology or sociology, or one of the other -ologies.

Joy threw on the shirt with the least amount of stains with a pair of sweatpants, and ran down to the kitchen. She turned on the skillet and cracked an egg. In the sludge that sizzled in the pan was a streak of red hugging the yellow

yolk. It kinda looked like the letter “H” as if someone carved it in with a dull knife on a park bench. She cracked another in the pan. The blood spelled ‘T’ and the white around the yolk started to bubble up. “H-I” sizzled at Joy. No eggs for breakfast, she guessed. As she reached for her coffee, she felt another hand pull on it and she jerked her body back. The mug crashed to the ground and shattered into two equal slices. What was left was a coffee stain that spelled “H-I”. Joy stared for a second and the stain stared back. She remembered she was in the kitchen and quickly cleaned up the mess before Iphigenia saw and ran out the door for her class.

Joy sat in class and thought of all the things she could have been doing with her time. She could be talking to her Ghost Lover, or watching fifty-five TikToks she wouldn’t remember, or liking all of the posts of all the people she went to high school with that she will never have a conversation with. Anything is more productive than hearing a lecture about the politics of fishing, at least that’s what she thinks the lecture is about.

Joy felt like she was being watched in class.

She felt like she was being watched almost everywhere now.

Her head got used to jerking back to catch the pair of eyes that rested on her, but now she lets them rest. It’s a heavy feeling, but Joy likes heavy. It’s all so romantic, really.

Class is over and she kept her head down. Greg is in the same class as her and he started dating that dumb bimbo Chelsie. Joy wasn’t jealous though, she had everything she ever wanted right at her fingertips.

Greg waved his hand at her signaling for her to come closer. She pretended she didn’t see him and kept walking, but Greg picked up his pace.

“Hey, Joy,” Greg said as he tapped her on the shoulder.

“What do you want from me?” Joy asked.

“Oh, Jesus. I just wanted to say there are no hard feelings,” Greg said.

“I didn’t ask if there were hard feelings” Joy responded.

“Jeez, look I am throwing a Halloween kickback and just wanted to extend an olive branch,” Greg said and handed her a flyer.

It was bright orange and had a drawing of a ghost on it. She crumbled it up, put it in her pocket, and kept walking.

“So what is your favorite song?” Joy typed.

“We didn’t have music the way you guys have it now. It was something on the piano though, it had three chords that would go back and forth and back and forth. It was hypnotic. I also like The Smiths now,” the Ghost Lover typed back.

“How do you know you’re dead?”

“How do you know you’re alive?” The Ghost Lover typed.

Joy has never thought about this. She doesn’t feel alive, most of the time. She watched on a small rectangle screen people she once knew move to new cities, sneak into bars, smoke cigarettes, and kiss strangers. Joy, most nights, was like a dead spider, curled with her arms, surrendered on her bed. Does this make her any more alive than her Ghost Lover? Joy felt her life slip away most days. What is worse, knowing that you are dead or not living your life? This scared Joy more than anything.

“Were you an artist before you died?” Joy typed to her Ghost Lover.

“I don’t remember, I knew I made something important. I was important before,” He typed back.

“Did you enjoy my gift?” the Ghost Lover added to the chat.

“The coffee mug? I have to talk to you about the coffee mug, actually,” Joy typed.

“There was also another one,” typed the Ghost Lover

“The eggs?” Joy typed.

“It’s another gift. All of the eggs in the fridge are double yolks. It is a good omen,” the Ghost Lover typed.

“Look, I appreciate your gifts but I live at home with my



Mom. I can't have things like this happening," Joy typed.

"Things like what?" the Ghost Lover responded.

"You don't think it is a little strange to mess with my breakfast?"

"Do you not appreciate my gifts?"

"I do but if my Mom sees stuff like this she is going to freak out," Joy typed.

"Are you not proud of us, Joy?" the Ghost Lover typed back.

"I am but sometimes it is a little much," Joy typed.

"You are all that I have, Joy. This is the closest way I can be with you, Joy," the Ghost Lover typed.

Joy's heart started to pound. She heard her neighbor's wind chimes sing. She didn't know wind chimes could sound so good.

"I understand, I want you to be here with me" Joy typed.

Joy wanted just to hold the Ghost Lover's hand and take a long look at him.

She imagined that he was pale and lengthy when he was still living. He seemed Victorian, with a slender malnourished face and deep blue eyes that were sunken into his perfectly symmetrical face. She imagined he wore a rugged farm outfit that was filled with paint stains from his art studio. His hands felt bony and calloused. She could have been there holding his hand and staring into his deep-buried eyes.

"I am with you. I'm with you everywhere you go." Typed the Ghost Lover.

Joy only ever had two friends and they haven't really talked to her, or she hasn't really talked to them. It was always one thing or another: Work has been so busy, School has been so much, or there are a lot of things happening in my life right now. What good are friends if you're not really friends?

Joy tried not to mind, but seeing her friends living their lives, going to parties, and posting unfamiliar people on social media ate any free time she had.

Maybe Joy wanted to prove to herself that she was capable of more than just sitting at her computer, or that she had an actual life worth posting about, but she found herself at Greg's Halloween party.

Joy stole the bottle of scotch that Iphigenia kept underneath the kitchen sink and was taking fake swigs in front of everyone. She was dressed up as a black cat but moved through the house like she was a horse.

Joy hasn't been inside Greg's house since they broke up. His house had tall ceilings that made you feel so small and huge windows that let you see deep into the forest behind his house. It felt emptier somehow.

She never knew where to put her hands at a party, does she keep them in her pocket? Would it look weird if she kept one hand in one pocket and the other free? Is she standing too close to the door or not close enough? Do people stand the whole night?

Joy escaped to the sunroom. That was the only thing she vividly remembered from Greg's house. The room was sunken three feet from the rest of the house and had glass walls on three sides and a thin glass ceiling. The room was left completely unfurnished besides a thick brown shag rug, that made you feel like you were laying in a pile of moss. Today it was furnished with three unfamiliar faces, four candles, eight cans of beer, and an Ouija board.

"Do you think this stuff still actually works?" said one of the strangers, who was more glasses than she was face.

Joy sunk into the conversation they were having. She managed to squeeze in between two of the strangers without them fully acknowledging her. Joy wore her invisibility well, sometimes.

"Yeah, but it's like texting someone through a carrier pigeon," the stranger said, he wore a bright green shirt that said "I'M WITH STUPID" with an arrow pointing down at his crotch.



“Then why do it?” asked the glasses.

“I don’t know, it looks cool,” the stupid man said.

He pulled out his phone and shot the candles and Ouija board. What’s the point of doing something if you can’t photograph it?

“Are you guys ready?” the stranger asked, he was dressed up as a burglar with a line of black paint smeared at the level of his eyes.

He pulled out a planchette from behind his back. The burglar slapped it on the board in front of them. They all gave each other a silent stare and put the tips of their fingers on the planchette. It felt like Joy was touching a block of ice. The planchette started to slowly glide, and the stupid man grinned from ear to ear.

C-O-L-D

“Do you think it needs a sweater?” the glasses said, squinting down at the planchette floating underneath their hand.

“It’s a fucking piece of board. How can that get cold?” the burglar said.

He did have a point. Ouija boards can’t get cold, hopefully. It was nearly fifty degrees outside and the sunroom had thin windows. Or maybe it just felt colder.

C-O-L-D

“Maybe it wants a cold one,” the stupid man said.

He took a sip of his beer and started to cackle over the idea of a ghost craving a Modelo.

“Maybe we should pour one out for him,” the stupid man said.

J-O-Y

Joy froze.

“J-O-Y, do you think he might be happy?” the glasses asked.

“Maybe he is excited for Christmas.” The stupid man remarked.

The planchette started to glide on its own. The burglar scooted back and watched the movement carefully jerk to each letter. Two of the candles extinguished and the burglar

stood up.

J-O-Y-I-A-M-H-E-R-E

“Who the fuck is Joy?” the burglar barked.

J-O-Y-P-L-E-A-S-E

Joy stood up and her eyes were locked on the movement.

“What’s your deal?” the burglar took a step closer to Joy.

He started to feel a tightness in his nose, and a smear of red came down his nose. It complemented the black streak very well, Joy thought.

“Fucking freak,” the burglar said, as he ran to the restroom pinching his nose and holding his face to the sky.

Joy felt like she was being watched again, the eyes were heavy like a thick sunbeam hitting her back. She looked at the floor and saw a stain of nose blood in the shape of a heart. Joy smiled at the stain and ran home. She went straight to her computer and opened her messages.

Joy has the same dream every night.

She is eating at her dining room table.

It’s dark.

There is a bowl of mushy peas. She has never had them before.

The room is filled with white oleander flowers from wall to wall.

It smells sweet.

Her Ghost Lover is beside her eating from her bowl. He is wearing a white sheet over his head with two black holes where the eyes belong.

He is staring at her.

She is staring at him.

They lean in closer.

She goes to pull off the hood.

It’s Iphigenia under the sheet.

She stares and takes a bite of the mushy peas.

Weird, right?

Joy told Iphigenia about her dream excluding the Ghost Lover part.

“What the hell are mushy peas?” Iphigenia asked.

“I think it’s British food,” Joy said.

“You know oleanders are a good thing to dream about,” Iphigenia said.

She paused for a moment and stared at the floor.

“Have you been having trouble sleeping, Joy?” Iphigenia asked.

Silence took over Joy’s body.

“You are going to say I am crazy, but every night before I go to bed I feel my bed shake, and it’s not like there is a loose screw or something. I checked. It feels violent” Iphigenia said.

Joy looked down at her double-yolked breakfast, it was smiling at her.

“Maybe you are crazy Mom,” Joy said.

“Well, it runs in the family,” Iphigenia laughed back.

“How was the party last night? Did you meet any cute boys?” Iphigenia asked.

“Kinda, me and this guy have been seeing each other for a couple of weeks now and we went to the party together,” Joy said.

“Mom, how do you know if you are in love?” Joy asked

“You will know when it happens, I don’t think you can feel it in a couple of weeks. There is a difference between desire and love. Love is much more than wanting to spend time with someone, it cuts deep, and it hurts. Love is seeing for someone for who they truly are and loving every inch of them. It’s okay if the person is a girl too. I dated a few girls when I was your age too.” Iphigenia said.

“I think I am in love,” Joy said.

I mean if she could love a ghost for who he is, does that mean she is in love? Really in love? Joy has never felt this

feeling before. It's like her insides are being eaten from the inside out. And she wants to listen to music with cheezy lyrics about love. She wants to scribble poems and lay in bed and know that her Ghost Lover is watching.

"With a boy, right? Just making sure, I feel like you've been a little secretive recently" Iphigenia said.

"Yes, Mom, it's a boy," Joy responded.

"I don't think you are in love."

"You don't know what I am feeling."

"Joy, I've been nineteen before. I know exactly what you are feeling. Love takes much more time than a couple of weeks. You are infatuated not in love."

"Why can't I be in love Mom?"

As soon as she finished this sentence the plates and silverware cabinets flung open. Plates and forks started to slam into the kitchen floor at full speed. All of the fine china started to pile up in little tiny shards. Iphigenia screamed and ran outside, narrowly missing a fork in her foot.

"What did I say about leaving that stuff away from my Mom?" Joy spoke to the shattered pile of plates on the floor.

Joy was definitely feeling the pain part of love now.

"Joy get the fuck out of that house right now!" Iphigenia screamed from the front yard.

Joy ran out behind. The eyes felt extra heavy on her back.

"What the hell was that?" Iphigenia said under her breath.

"I think it might have been an earthquake," Joy said.

"Earthquakes don't do that, there were fucking plates flying at us," Iphigenia said.

Silence took joy.

"I remember reading something like this on Facebook and something it wasn't natural. There is something demonic in that kitchen," Iphigenia said.

"I think you are being paranoid Mom. You can't believe everything you read off of the internet," Joy said.

There is blood coming from the sinks. It comes out thick and chunky, like boiling maple syrup. Iphigenia was washing the dishes when it started to happen.

Her hands were sticky and burnt red and she screamed. Loud enough to wake up Joy from her sleep. Iphigenia started to stumble through the house, the walls felt tighter. Was the house always this dark? And why does it smell so sweet?

Iphigena pinballed between the walls. She hit her head on the corner of a small gilded picture of a cat they kept in the hallway, and she ran to Joy's room covered in blood. She was barely able to form a sentence.

"Joy, something is seriously wrong," Iphigenia said.

"What happened Mom?" Joy asked.

"It was coming from the sink, something was watching me, I think I need to sleep" Iphigenia began to mumble. She started to walk to her room grabbing the furniture and walls.

Joy ran to her computer, opened her email, and went straight to her Ghost Lover.

"I love you, Joy" the Ghost Lover typed.

"Why is there blood coming from the sink?" Joy typed.

"Do you love me, Joy?"

The doorbell was ringing from the kids doing trick-or-treat outside.

"Can you do something for me, Joy?"

"What?"

"I need to know if you love me."

Her chest grew tight like a guitar string that kept being tuned and tuned and tuned.

"I do love you." Joy typed.

"You are the only light I have found in my death. If someone told me that this is heaven, I would have believed and died sooner. Iphigenia and I can't be here together. We need to go" the Ghost Lover typed back.

"I can't leave here."

"That is the only way we could be together my Joy" the Ghost lover typed.

Iphigenia's door slammed shut. The doorbell was ringing from the kids doing trick-or-treat outside.

Joy was pinned to the ground by the weight of her decisions.

The house became quiet and the kids outside screamed "Trick-or-Treat".

Joy refreshed her email for the third time in a row. An ad for GhostFinder.com popped up: "BLACK FRIDAY DEAL UP TO 50% ON ALL SERVICES: CONNECT NOW". She has not heard from her Ghost Lover in over a month. Food still tasted like food, picture frames were still slanted, and Iphigenia still couldn't sleep well. She stared down at her phone in her lap and refreshed her Instagram.

Greg is single again. He deleted all of his photos with Chelsie in it.

Joy gave her black screen a smile and sprawled herself on her bed.

Maybe Chelsie made him a better kisser. There is only one way for Joy to find out.



Thrift Shop Ghost · Alexis Raisty



Silly Lil Ghost · Alexis Raisty



Skinny Man Head · Rob Sullivan

# I Died 9 Times

Fernando Melgar

I died once on the school driveway, as I was waving goodbye.

I died once in Oildale when I couldn't finish that tune.

I died once in that old house, who shared my loneliness.

I died once when I left everything I knew for something  
different.

I died once as I looked into your eyes to witness *I wasn't  
worthy.*

I died once when I came back home and found I hadn't  
changed.

I died once thinking of my mother's womb as I forgo safety.

I died once when I hung that rope around my neck.

I died once in retrospect as I looked back at it all.



# I Am Feeling Betrayed

Josué Emmanuel V Muñoz

My spirit's dismayed  
I'm feeling betrayed  
Why you so stiff?!  
Why am I stiff?

I am feeling betrayed  
I thought I had slayed,  
the Catholic demons  
that had overstayed

And now it's their screaming  
I hear on replay  
-watch out for illusions,  
That get in the way.

I'm feeling betrayed.  
I'm feeling betrayed  
Why you so stiff?!  
Why am I stiff?

Now I see it so clearly,  
Ancestors & angels creating a riff  
So that my erotic don't fly off a cliff  
Flapping my wings with misguided "what if's?"  
Looking you in the eyes

from the back of my head  
I gave you my back  
Now a part of me's dead  
All of these thoughts

Race through my head  
But I know of your love  
So I blame me instead  
I am feeling betrayed.



Gasping for Air · Rob Sullivan

# trained

Charles Purcell

Clocked in libido eradicated yerba purchased  
Hit two pens outside the sliding doors then back in again  
High marks from each boss I was  
born PG and I shudder when a car parks within a mile of me.  
A decade into retail and I am less here than when I began.

Regular customers take it personally when I can't make out  
their face  
There have been no memories to keep besides the  
same exact words each time to get them out the door as fast  
as possible  
Do a lap on the sales floor vape in the stockroom check your  
steps come back stretch  
gather the energy for another Hi, Welcome In  
Home is where you can purge the day.  
9 hours of working to immediately fall asleep in roku city.

Whether it's ringing up twice my paycheck on groceries  
Watching someone spend 200 dollars on a single bottle  
A young couple trying soju on a whim  
The dudes buying whiskey shooters insisting every morning  
it's for coworkers  
I am responding with the same glassy eyes, lilted voice, and  
quaking heart.  
Polishing the visage of others I am struck again with the  
feeling  
There is a visible separation between us.  
You proliferate hustle culture because you are allowed  
I am stuck wondering why there is a screen on the roof of  
this oubliette.

Aspiration was my earliest weakness  
childhood of early gratification weighed down by unsteady  
optimism  
I was stoked to be anything at all but the recommendation  
was always welding not writing  
Priorities coagulate into simply becoming synonymous with  
scenery  
The gifted child who tries to blend in with the adults loses  
out on feeling young and is forever  
drunk trying to pull a chain buried under the riptide

I want a taste of what's real but I will always end up spitting  
it out  
Perhaps more couch aligned than brimming with the light I  
seep from others  
Downward persuasion rustic plaster floor sitter  
contemporaneously  
Gun to my head my first words are Hi,  
can I help you find anything today? The loneliness is invisible  
Somewhere along the line my most recurrent fantasy  
became solitary confinement  
A main character discreetly feeling for the bar of exit door  
in a dark theater  
No more lights or stimuli to judge and rank nor transactions  
to notarize  
Close your eyes and listen to the room breathe as you  
imagine  
being in a different one.

# Various Exegeses of a Graduate School Poetry Thesis

Adam Martinez

A textbook example  
Of the physical manifestations  
Of deteriorating mental health

I'd read about the way Joseph Conrad would be bedridden for  
weeks  
After completing a novel  
I guess he mourned Kurtz

Pomp and circumstance and mimesis

Sitting on a white ledge  
Dressed in all black and gold,  
Insides speckled with jet-black ills and inkblot hopes  
Held together by a string

It's my black organ  
Filled with plumes of thick gray smoke  
Swirling out of golden pipes  
Playing pummeling symphonies  
Of love and death and violence and sex  
And I am the phantom  
Here lies my fractured mask and I am  
Ugly and unashamed  
Frightened and emboldened

Don't ever try to revise your narrative  
Learn to live with it and let the dust settle  
From those crumbling walls  
Plaster it back together  
But leave the holes  
They build character  
You're still whole

A trophy  
Everything I thought I couldn't be  
From PTSD to consequence  
Nothing I dreamed I'd be  
From poverty to profession  
Everything I never knew I had in me  
Everything my parents taught me  
And a distraught me  
And the lack of kinship  
And learning to love once more

# The Ghost in the Data

Tom Hill

The language of truth,  
revealed in space and time,  
ever unchanging.

Uncovered by great prophets.  
Collected in sacred tomes.

Essential today  
as the invisible hand  
shaping our lives.

It is the tool of my craft:  
precise and unforgiving.

And it will not lie,  
but only with perseverance  
will sooth be revealed.

For base men will misuse it  
to misconstrue and mislead.

Still I seek the real  
beset not by banal lies  
but a puckish sprite.

A hunger for the perfect,  
to have all the right answers.

But I know this haunt,  
for it is my own self doubt  
using my own voice.

It is me, the imposter,  
I'm the ghost in the data.

# Yes, Mistress

Consuelo

I'm stabbing a yellow highlighter  
through the back of my brain.

Annotations riddle my body  
with the insufferable ailments  
of academia's dedication.

Unfortunately, I seem to have signed  
my soul away. Married to textbooks,  
'till death do we part. Beloved  
books, my ball and chain.

Devoted love, be the Morticia  
of my dreams. I am Gomez  
in cotton-blend pinstripes.

There's a yellow highlighter  
sticking out of my forehead.

In the center of the library  
I have been chained  
to aisles G 15.4 and D 514  
of Fiction and Biographical.

My body is hanging limp and low  
so my knees can rest  
on this cum-stained carpet.



THE CHAFFEY REVIEW

Neon yellow honey bee blood  
is oozing from every part of my body.

My wife approaches.  
Her scythe engraved with inscriptions  
from *Beowulf* on the blade is dragging  
next to her wedding dress train.

Arching down, she grabs my chin  
and whispers, “Look alive darling  
it isn’t even midterms yet.”



Queer & Transfemme Nuns · Consuelo

# I Tried to Get My Dead Grandmother to Do My Homework

Charmaine Phipps

*"I have heard (but not believ'd) the spirits of the dead  
May walk again: if such thing be, thy mother  
Appeared to me last night; for ne'er was dream  
So like a waking." – Shakespeare, A Winter's Tale*

Throughout my life I've reached out to my dead grandmother for help. If I was writing a hard paper, agonizing about my impending divorce or laying on my office floor (sure I would never be able to dig myself out of debilitating depression), her spirit came to me.

My grandmother Mabel died in the 1940's, and at the time, the voices of dead women like her could be heard reverberating through courtrooms across the US.

They, along with my grandmother, had died from botched illegal abortions but not before they were interrogated and pressured to rat out their accomplices. If unmarried, they were also forced to identify their lovers with the threat of being publicly shamed for their "indecentcy."

These dying declarations were considered legal testimony because the women believed they were "about to leave the world – and meet their maker," as one coroner reported. They wouldn't dare lie as they bled out, officials hovering over them believed.

What must it have been like to stare at the ceiling, faces of interrogators all around, being emptied of your life's blood, your secrets, and all possible hope of getting out of this.

Sometimes the testimonies were taken while medical care was being withheld – a tactic I can only imagine was used to add urgency to the inquest. If the investigator vowed that the woman knew she was dying, her cadaverous confession was allowed into a trial long after the funeral flowers had wilted and been tossed away.

My grandmother Mabel died this way, hemorrhaging after an illegal abortion in 1941 in Colorado. She was not an unmarried “delinquent girl” (as single women were characterized). She was an ordinary woman with a job, a husband, and an eight-month-old son asleep in his crib. My father.

When I was ten, I asked my father how his mother died and he told me he didn’t know. “People just died more back then,” he said.

Eventually I found out the truth.

Over the years, in moments of my own frustration or loneliness, I’ve reached out to my dead grandmother for support. The first time I felt her presence, I was sitting in a pea green dorm room at an oak desk with a Smith Corona typewriter from Kmart silent in front of me.

Flickering fluorescent lights made me feel like I was imprisoned in an asylum for the mentally deranged. I was sure I could not finish the essay (or report or whatever homework was looming over me.) My deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and anxious mind paralyzed me until I gave up and begged for Mabel’s help.

The typewriter did not, to my dismay, magically come to life, like it might have in a Disney movie. But, with Mabel suddenly in the room, the lighting warmed. I breathed deeply and felt her calm presence with me.

I was 21, only a year younger than she was when she finished nursing school. We would both get married at 22.

By 24, Mabel was already juggling motherhood with her career and marriage. In the photos of her last months of life, she seems young and happy and perfectly coifed. She stands tall and strong and with an elegant updo, gazing at her baby son. She had it all together.

They put “internal hemorrhaging” as the cause of death in her obituary, stating that she “was ill only ten hours before her death” as if she was a medical phenomenon. There was no mention of an unwanted pregnancy.

I am guessing, with her medical training and the help of a friend, she thought everything would work out. In most cases during that time, it did work out. I have no doubt that she did not intend to make her child motherless.

I’ve asked the ghost of the woman in the photos about her motivations, accusing her of abandoning me (her future, needy, anxious, depressed granddaughter).

I imagined her responses: “We were broke.” “I wasn’t ready.” “I didn’t mean to leave.”

For whatever reason, she sought help in ending her condition and keeping her life as it was – a husband, a job and just one child – for now, at least.

After the procedure, it is said that she came home presumably fine. But before long, when the bleeding wouldn’t stop, they dragged her off the floor and rushed her to the hospital.

At 33, when I was desperate to get out of my marriage, I paced and cried most late nights alone. During those

months, I spoke to Mabel a lot. I walked the living room while everyone slept, quietly sobbing and desperately seeking a solution.

I had a young child asleep in the other room, and I felt that my life was no longer my own. I couldn't go back to my husband's bed. I couldn't move out. I couldn't even calm my racing pulse enough to go to sleep. I was her, only I was ten years older, and even though my options were going to create a lot of sadness, none of them were illegal.

It was at these desperate times, my face in my palms, I would feel Mabel's cool cheek on mine, her hands cradling my head as I suppressed sobs. "I don't know what to do," I would tell her.

"Shhhh. It's okay. Take a deep breath. Close your eyes... that's it. Deep breaths. Lie back and go to sleep. It will be okay."

And I would rest ... for a bit.

Soon after Mabel's death, my grandfather would hand my father off to an aunt and enlist in the navy. Four years later, he would return, newly married, and take his son and new wife to another state where they would have five more children.

The couple raised their six kids and went on without Mabel. They had birthdays and Christmases. They moved a few times, took new jobs and eventually had many grandkids and great grandkids.

I often wondered what it was like for my dad. At not even a year old, the kind woman who loved him disappeared. He was handed to another kind woman who loved him. At four, he was picked up by strangers and taken on a road trip

not knowing if he would see either of his first two mothers again.

The dying declarations extracted to use as testimony had a standard format. "I am Miss X. Believing that I am about to die, and having no hope of recovery, I make the following statement, while of sound mind and in full possession of my faculties."

Full possession of her faculties. A woman dying, more often than not leaving other children behind, half emptied, being pummeled with questions, was declared to be in possession of her faculties. I can only imagine that later, as her statement was read to the court in a murder trial, the jury would feel sorry that she had suffered this gruesome fate. She was seen as a victim of a crime. Some might say she had acted in self-defense - a victim of the laws that denied her medical care.

At 42, I begged for Mabel's help when I was stricken with a debilitating and horrifying depression. For months, I struggled to find a way each day to get out of bed, off the floor, into the shower, and into work. At one point, not having yet found the right combination of anti-depressants, I just ... gave up. I held my hands out, palms up, and I gave up. "Mabel, if you are here, I want you to know that I give up. I cannot do this anymore."

What had it been like for those women to give up? They were told there was nothing left to be done. Did they feel a sense of peace in those last moments, knowing they didn't *need* to fight anymore? Did the giving up finally give them a sense of agency in their lives?

Mabel would not let me give up. She had worked hard and made a difficult decision in order to have the life she dreamed of, and it was cut prematurely short. Mine, with all my resources and support, would not be cut short. With

her encouragement, I would drag myself out of the bed, off of the floor, into the shower, and into work. She would make sure of it.

It would be years before the cries of dead women echoed through enough homes to bring about change. Tired of the reputation as the “capital of abortion,” Colorado became the first state to enact a legal abortion law years before Roe V. Wade and the rest of the country. The law wasn’t by any means an answer to the problem, as the rules associated with it were still very restrictive, requiring sign-offs by at least three physicians, but it was a start.

Today, the hard-earned access to comprehensive safe medical care for women is either at-risk or already denied in many states.

The echoes of dead women’s cries can be heard rising from the graves.

Mabel never did do my homework for me. But she has sat next to me my whole life letting me know that I am capable of doing it myself.



Mabel · Courtesy of Charmaine Phipps

# ¿Comprende, Duende?

Peter Lechuga

You little jerk.  
Trickster,  
hiding items behind  
fixtures.  
I know you  
skitter  
in the dark.

Trying to make me look  
stupid  
in front of my love, like reverse  
cupid?  
You sit on a throne of what you  
looted;  
single socks and small things kept in your nook.

While I sleep, you  
rustle and you claw.  
I hear your  
knuckles on the walls,  
the creepy  
chuckles and guffaws.  
It's all a preview

showing the one  
reason you exist.  
To cause trouble and  
heaps of pure mischief.  
If I ever find you,  
please, gnome, just know this,  
you're done.





RIP · Barny Peake

# cowboys all round a campfire

Polimana

Dewdrops extensive on the great wide fields, we descended upon the plains. The sun had not risen, would not rise yet for another several hours or so. So that sky was painted chalk blue on account of the new moon, no competition. Stars don't like competition, that's what I always say. So when the moon is turned round, yeah, they shine brighter; and even the shy ones come out. We descended like that, under their self-conscious cottony light. Down, waaay down, scaling the steepest tread of the foothills, our crew went; over treacherous terrain we lowered our bodies. Then we saw it, oh yes.

There stood the spectre, swan white and aflame, steam arising alllllll around her for the dew overheated by her feet! A steaming ghost e-vap-o-rating allllll the droplets touching her swan-white skirt! You wouldn't believe it, friends, our breath all together stopped dead in our throats, so infatuating was the sight. A real, living pearl; an abalone girl; even breath must stop in the face of such an *image*.

But we pushed on. We *did* push *on*. Got near the ghost, nearer still til we could just about make out her smell from between the curly mesquite and sagebrush and so on. I'll tell you this: the spectre *was* enticing, smelt like hungry jasmine abloom in the nighttime, petals allllll open and inviting, yeah. We had heard, from the *real life* accounts of these townspeople whose stories so moved the others that they took it upon themselves to demolish the strong-held demoness, that she would be like a bleached flower or something romantic like that. I myself was more moved by the reward offer, but nevertheless. About her scent we had heard ourselves. Only the strongest could go, so, for on

account of the factor of temptation and all that! Yeah, so, it was me, Randy the bootman, Jess who's Hec's mistress, and old Carlos. You know, he's been thinking about joining the brotherhood, that one, being so pious. Useful kinda non-skill in a romp like this.

Right, where was I?

Oh, yes, the spectre. Oh, yes, a temptress most definitely. But our hearts were set on her elimination. She *was* guilty of terrorizing the children, a sin neither forgivable nor forgettable. The children needed to be protected, see; encounters with the ghoul would wager an unfavorable outcome on behalf of the children individually and society at large by rippled effects! That's what the old fellas in the town were saying, anyway. I do know of course that effects can travel a great distance, just like rings from a stone skipped across a pond, I know that's true.

Well, anyway, we didn't have the slightest clue what to do about a ghost, really. That traveling fella always carrying the good book round town, he told us we should throw some holy water at her in Jesus' name, and he was terribly convincing, that fella. So we thought, okay, holy water'll do just fine, yep. The fella dumped out his own personal flask and filled it up with water from the creek and blessed it his *own* self, and that's how we knew he was a real man of God, for he wouldn't know if he'd ever see his flask again. And that weighs heavy on a man.

So, once we were in firing range, Jess who's Hec's mistress, pulled the old flask out of her boot, and she tossed it to Randy, who dropped it. Slippery fella, that one, for a man of leather. And Carlos must have called upon his celibate powers because I've never seen the boy do more than stand on his toes to reach the books at the top of the shelves at The Nook in town, and here he was, dodging and dashing and ducking to pick up that old flask where it hid in the tall

grass. Now, he got the damn thing. Problem was, he was dodging and dashing and ducking for no reason, because the demon-ghoul-ghost-spectre did not move, had no reaction *what-so-ever*. And we all stopped. Breath caught again in her glory and her patience. She made no move to defend herself from our aggressive approach. Her peace was suddenly quite obviously radiant throughout the field. But... how could we stop *now*? We were so close. The others were caught up in her flowing skirts and jasmine per-fume.

Not me, oh no.

Well, of course I could see the distractive appeal, as well as anyone I could see it. And the moral woes of that town, no sir. They were none of my concern! I was a drifter, naturally I wasn't so attached as all that. But the *reward* was hefty, and the willing so *few*. The reckless, maybe, so few. Dare I say, the bravest...just me? For the others cowered in her fiery presence, and it was yours truly who swooped in to snatch the flask from old slack-jawed Carlos, unscrewed that rusty cap, and let loose on that demoness.

When I tell you—how she ex-pan-ded. The spectre grew wide and spread apart all over the field, warm bright air encompassing us, a star gently dying, whistling good-bye. Just in an instant. And the whole place went black. That's why we call it Black Fields now, yep. Nothing grows there anymore, ever since that night, 18 new moons prior to this one. I got my reward, but it didn't feel too good keeping it, since I knew what I really had done. The town gave me my reward for destroying a terrible spectre, but she was no spectre. That night I know I killed an angel. Field's dead. Yep, be careful not to kill your angels, that's all I'm saying.

the mist  
Jenna Campbell

the mist creeps in  
it is morning but there is no warmth  
no sunshine or blue sky  
the air is heavy, mysterious

comfort stays inside with the blanket  
and the fire, crackling  
there is a different embrace  
on the road

my steps make the only sound  
aside from my breath  
a haunting rhythm, persistent  
cutting through the silence

as if the mist is closing in  
muffling the sounds  
stilling the movements  
halting and haunting

I can only see as far as the step I've just taken  
and the one I'm about to take  
there is nothing beyond that  
just white and light; I shade my eyes

I am not alone  
there is a presence, stealthy  
there is weight in the mist  
it waits and it watches

nothing appears  
but I know  
so I just keep walking



Park Walk · Fernando Melgar



# Old Pavement

Consuelo

I'm tripping on old pavement.  
I've been down this road before.

I refuse to water  
plastic gardens, but  
Beautiful, you sparked a light  
in my eyes and like an infection  
the light spread to my heart.

You see, Beautiful,  
my ribs held a hollow space;  
my skin stretched over a shell;  
and sure, my lungs would expand  
but nothing was there  
except for a dried up heart  
connected to brittle veins.

So moths moved in.  
They flutter about  
and made nests in my arteries.  
At least, that was until  
by the light, which later  
turned into a flame.

The light set my heart ablaze.  
The fire gave the moths hope  
(suicidal idiots).

As I walk down this old road,  
I curse the joy in my chest.

Beautiful, I don't water plastic gardens.  
The trees can never bear fruit,  
but they sure are awestriking.

Maybe I'll just watch for a bit...

# #GRWM

James Nelson

Every morning in my mirror— Standing with me—  
I see a ghost.  
Every day I feel my attention— Tugged—  
In a thousand divergent directions— None of them good.

I would like to blame this On the ghost.  
But earlier, I lied to you— The truth is:  
Every morning in my mirror— standing—  
I see a ghost.



Dyad · Jenna Campbell



# Amargosa Opera Hotel

Adam Martinez

Spirited ballerina  
Lady at the junction  
Death valley dancer  
In the hollows  
Behind the mirrors  
Phantasmagoric features  
Matinees in the morgue  
Murals on the walls  
No family but the ones you painted

And the cat in the lobby

This building is your forever  
In the wind  
In the dust  
In the air I breathe  
As I try to envision the movement  
And energy—  
They say *it* never leaves.



Wisp · James Nelson

# Time Machine

Jenna Campbell

There is a time machine here.

The vanilla-scented pines stand in a straight line, ready for the next assignment. They are proud and strong and tall. Walking past them is a battle of will every time. Will I carry on walking to the next meeting, the next appointment, the next block in my schedule? Or will I be drawn in, sidetracked and distracted by nostalgia? The scent takes form, a wall of soldiers diverting my path. I think their name is Jeffrey. The branches move as if to music and I wait to be captured in their arms, snared by the enticing perfume wrapped in crackling skin.

The shaded bench whispers to me most days, gentle and coaxing.

It is easier to pass by when the bench is already occupied, holding space for friends catching up or frantic flipping of notecards for a last-ditch study session. Sometimes the bench is a place for a serious phone call or reading a letter. But when the bench is empty and the sun is warm - warm enough to heat the vanilla bark, amplifying its tempting aroma - I am powerless against the draw of the joy and memory of the time machine. The effort required to continue on my way is far greater than my capacity at that moment. The vanilla soldiers stand like ghosts. Proud and strong and tall. Unseen but vivid. Persuasive.

Sit here for a moment and go to the places you've loved.

There is a breeze today and the winter sun welcomes me. The bench sits ready for me; a gracious host. My ethereal companions soothe me with their comforting warmth as I sit and step back in time.

The trail is well kept and there is magic everywhere. I am suddenly small, and the trees stretch toward the sky, the tops of them out of sight. The vanilla ghost hovers here too, proud and strong and tall. Her protective gaze following us along the trail. The insects are artists here, building tracks in the wood fallen after fires tore through. Those who skate on the water create patterns. Circles. Mesmerizing but short-lived. The ants march in lines toward the berries and the sticky sap. Coming and going. Making. Effortless. We are enveloped in the scents and sounds of the forest. Too young to recognize the depth of this moment.

The time machine replays childhood memories through my seasoned adult eyes. My grandmother tells me of the doodlebugs and names the trees, showing us their unique features. Our senses keyed up, overloaded with touch and taste and smell. We press our noses to the trees and the vanilla no longer floats around us. We breathe it in. It belongs to us. It is part of us now.

We walk further down the trail toward the tree that cars used to drive through. I can't remember if my grandfather ever drove through it. I want to ask him but the only reply is the sparkling sun through the endless trees. I can't hear the answer.

I find him only with the time machine. He is not down the street or on the other end of a phone call. He lives in the invisible concrete of my mind. My heart reaches for him and softens under his smile. Hello sweetheart. It delights in the ho-HO of his laugh. I hear his stern insistence that there is always room for ice cream and his demands for us to "hush for a minute so the child can speak already. Goodness sakes."

You will not meet him now. You won't see him, but he is as real as the pines. Proud and strong and tall. He meets me in the time machine.

Oh, you whom I love more  
than myself,  
Ali Mehilba

Oh, you who occupy all my heart, Why does the night lose  
its Stars in your charm? Why does the eye speak of your  
beauty? My sweetest and dearest words are all for you.  
Oh, you whom I love more than myself, Oh you whom I feel  
closest to, Whether I am yours or you are mine.

Oh, you who traveled through my mind for years,  
Oh, you who planted longing in my heart,  
Oh, you whom I forget who I am when I see you, And forget  
all others when I'm near you. Oh, you whom I love more  
than myself, Oh you whom I feel closest to, Whether I am  
yours or you are mine.

Oh, you whose love took me away with it, I wandered and  
lost years with it, How many times I complained to the  
heart of its cruelty, And then returned, and said, "I love you."  
Oh, you whom I love more than myself, Oh you whom I feel  
closest to, Whether I am yours or you are mine.

Let's travel alone like this, oh God, Let's dance for our  
nights, Let's find the universe's flowers around us, Let's  
rejoice with them, and let them rejoice with us. Oh, you  
whom I love more than myself, Oh you whom I feel closest  
to, Whether I am yours or you are mine.

ياللى باحبك أكثر منى

ياللى ف قلبى تماللى مكانك  
ليه الليل بيتوه ف دلالك  
ليه العين بتقول ف جمالك  
أحلى و أغلى كلامى عشانك  
ياللى باحبك أكثر منى  
ياللى باحس ف قربك إنى  
إن أنا منك

و انك منى

ياللى سافرت ف عقلى سنين  
ياللى زرعت ف قلبى حنين  
ياللى با شوفك أنسى أنا مين  
و انسى ف قربك كل الناس  
ياللى با حبك أكثر منى  
ياللى باحس ف قربك إنى  
إن أنا منك

و انك منى  
ياللى هواك غربنى معاه  
تهت و دبت سنين وياه  
ياما شكيت للقلب جفاه  
و ارجع تانى

و اقول أهواه

ياللى باحبك أكثر منى  
ياللى باحس ف قربك إنى  
إن أنا منك

و انك منى

يالله نساقر كده و حدينا  
يالله عشان ترقص لبالينا  
نلقى زهور الكون حوالينا  
نفرح بيها

و تفرح بينا

ياللى باحبك أكثر منى  
ياللى باحس ف قربك إنى  
إن أنا منك

و انك منى

# Autumn Moon

Tamar Leah Saramosing

It's morning, a new day. A subtle breeze, like a song, makes the leaves dance and glisten in the Autumn sun. My coffee, unfinished, is cold. My feet, wrapped in wool socks, are cold, too. A pocket of sunshine calls to me and from the comfort of inside, I heed the call. Chico, my 15 year old chihuahua mutt, follows me. The sun is warm on my face, like promise, as I sit in my swinging chair next to the lemon tree.

This week has been hard. Always is. Thanksgiving is when he died. My first husband, the first father of my son. Grief changes us. Grief changes with us. The body is a story, a spiral of stories that come and go with the seasons. Fall, a time of retreat, of gathering, of shedding our leaves and rooting down is part of my story, my body.

As the air becomes brisk and fresh and the leaves change their color, a sign that they are dying, falling to the ground to serve as strength for the roots, I feel called to do the same. I am reminded of a time that changed me. I am reminded of my roots. As the leaves fall, the roots spread and strengthen. I hold space for the process.

I died that day. That Thanksgiving Day in 2004. A piece of me I used to know died with him. Like the leaves in fall. I was naked like the trees that line the streets. Who I was, the Me I knew, or thought I did, was dying and her stories and truths about life and death were falling to the ground. It was a long Autumn and a longer Winter. I stood in the chaos of falling leaves, trying to capture and carry and console what was no longer a part of me, unaware that these leaves, my leaves would serve to make me a stronger tree. I held on, afraid to let go of something that would only and always be part of me. I focused on the fallen leaves and not on the roots that needed tending, to save the tree. Me. I am the tree.

I died in the Autumn when my leaves changed and fell to the ground.

I resent the term *Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger*. It's not always true and it's a messed-up way to dismiss the work and self-investment overcoming tragedy and trauma requires. I'm not stronger because something tragic happened in my life. I'm stronger because I took charge of how I would rebuild myself. I made hard choices. I failed a lot. I had the privilege of the undying support of my family. The healing makes us stronger. Not the wound.

I am reminded of how far I have come, sitting here, almost 2 decades later. The moon, his moon, shined full last night and into this morning.

When he died, I could hardly see. The shock was debilitating in every way. There were lights spinning over fire trucks and police cars to close off Highway 95. They wouldn't let me see him. "Get her out of here" I heard a man in uniform say before I said, "Is his face ok?" What a strange question to ask. Yes. I knew he was lying as I stared at the broken windshield of the other car. Arizona doesn't have a helmet law. "Are they ok?" I asked, pointing to the wrecked car. They walked away from the accident without a scratch. I was glad no one else got hurt. White lights, like a snake, lined up for as far as the eye could see. Drivers, likely frustrated and angry, late for Thanksgiving dinner, or missing the game, wondering what the hold-up was about. Maybe they announced it over the radio news. Someone told me it was on the local news. The world stopped for him, or traffic did, for a few hours at least.

A surge of reality hit me when I realized that it was him off in the distance, his silhouette in the street, covered with what I imagined to be a blanket. It was probably a body bag. My heart thumped inside me like it was trying to escape. I sweat through my sweater and coat. I turned away toward the rushing water down below. Without a thought, I began



to walk toward it to thrust myself over. We did everything together. It seemed natural, obvious. I wasn't thinking clearly. It was a way of finding him. I felt two hands grab me from behind, gripping my arms. "You can't go. Niko needs you. You have to stay". I stood still and slowly shifted my gaze. He wasn't in the river. I wouldn't find him there.

The river was sprinkled with tiny little lights that seemed to have intention, a place to go, a job to do. I looked up to see the brightest, most beautiful full moon, hanging heavy over the desert as if about to burst. It was the moon sending lights to dance in the ripples of the river. I turned to see who stopped me, but no one was there.

The moon that night, like an angel of death, promised me hope. That moon, our moon, his moon, saved my life. Perhaps it carried him over to the mysterious Next.

The Autumn moon has served as a beacon of light and hope for 19 years now. It reminds me that I have a life to live. That sparkles of light still dance on river waters and that beauty shows itself in the worst of times if you stop to see it.

I go inward in the Autumn. I think a lot. I write a lot. I stare at the moon and listen for wisdom. I sit in the warmth of the sun's rays and absorb what I can to continue to grow.

The sky is bright blue with water-colored clouds. The sun has receded behind them and a chill has set in. I'm not ready to go back inside yet. I remember to look up. The leaves and their colors are dancing in the breeze and in the scattered sunshine. They crackle as they sway when a gust of wind kicks up. Chico is sniffing around the yard like a starving scavenger. He is neither starving nor scavenging. He is curious. I admire his curiosity.

The moon will wane and the Winter solstice will arrive before it waxes full again. Winter solstice, no matter the tradition, Christmas, Diwali, Hanukah, is a celebration of

light, at its core. The year's longest night brings gratitude for the light of longer days. The birth of the sun, or if you prefer, the son, a promise. Promise of brighter days, new growth and work ahead to tend to our soil and our roots.

Today, as the November moon begins to wane, I find peace, a settling, knowing that light always returns.

Nov 24/2015, in my parked car after work, under his moon:

The Frosty Moon, they call it.  
Or a Hunter's Moon  
Some even call it the Mourning Moon  
Me, I call it your moon.  
I used to tell Niko that you lived there  
That every time you shined its fullness down upon us  
That it was your way of saying hello  
Every year as the day approaches  
That I miss you the most  
The day that hurts the same  
No matter how long it's been  
I look up in the sky  
And there it is  
Your moon.  
The moon that lit the sky  
On the darkest night my soul has known  
I howled at your moon  
From the depths of my pain  
With paralyzingly fear  
I howled at your moon  
I cursed it for taking you from me  
But no matter what I felt  
No matter how much I cried  
Your moon always came back  
It didn't give up on me  
Your moon gave me promise  
Your moon heard my cries  
Your moon kept trying to tell me  
That everything cycles

Life death life  
Life death life  
Your moon comforted me that night somehow  
though I fought with great resistance  
It felt like the light of angels promising to look after you

I looked up at the sky tonight  
And I saw your moon again  
The same full moon that swept you away  
Reminding me still  
of the ebb and flow  
The pain and the growth  
Embracing and letting go  
Reminding me still  
of how short  
how long  
forever can be  
Every time I see your moon  
I see it all again  
All of it  
All at once  
Joy pain joy  
Life death life  
Light dark light  
And I feel like dying  
And I feel like living  
And some day  
When your moon takes me away  
I will have lived  
I will have loved  
I will have learned  
That there is always dark  
And there is always light  
That they are lovers  
Like we were  
Torn apart  
Together always

# Always (death anxiety)

by Adam Martinez

In a waking dream the veiled silhouette draws nearer and  
the lights stop blinking.  
Life is an episode of *Six Feet Under*  
The crushing weight  
Like going to your daughter's high school to fix her parked car,  
Jacking it up  
And crawling under  
Only to become a poetic anecdote  
To illustrate the topic sentence.

A sunset is just as lovely anywhere  
So long as you're alive to see it.

I'm still afraid of being struck by lightning  
Having a tree branch fall atop my head as I'm running  
in a park  
Having an icicle stab my brow  
As I'm walking up to the door of the home I worked so hard  
to own  
After a hard days work  
Getting shot on the freeway  
Having a student shoot me in the face because I gave him a  
bad grade or because  
I'm an agent of the "liberal agenda"  
Words fall on a flat line  
—.  
Dying for something that has nothing to do with me  
Or maybe death has everything to do with us  
Always.

## CONTRIBUTORS

### literary works

**Aamina Khan** is an avid reader and writer of fiction, and since she was a small child she has loved telling fictional tales. Inspiration often strikes during late night drives, and with both her cat and large cups of green tea, she aspires to continue weaving stories that are both dark and whimsical.

Adam et al. (**Adam Daniel Martinez**) is a multidisciplinary creator from the I.E. He is a published poet, recording artist & performer, and professor of English at Chaffey College. His pedagogy & praxis is directly informed by his experience as a poet and rapper.

**Ali Mehilba**, a psychiatrist by profession, has penned poems since the age of nine. With four poetry books and a renowned album of music, collaborated with a leading Middle Eastern artist, his literary prowess extends beyond verse. An accomplished writer, he's authored over 1200 articles and several reference books on numismatics.

**Angel A. Gomez** is an author, writer, journalist, and is simply trying his best. He's a lover of basketball, libraries, and hikes. He is often found camping under a bridge.

**Ashlynn Armendariz** is a recent Chaffey College graduate attending UCLA for her B.A. in English. As an aspiring writer, she hopes to contribute rich, complex, and diverse stories to the literary scene. Much of her inspiration stems from horror in all its forms, which quite literally bleeds into her writing.

**Barny Peake** grew up in the Southwest, living in an adobe house on a dirt road with cottonwood trees and mountains for a view. He feels fortunate to call the mountains home

today, where Nature nourishes his spirit and ensnares his mind.

**Cam Santa Anna** (@CamSantaAnna) is based in the Inland Empire and is a maker of many things. Writing poetry and ghost stories happens to be a few.

**Charles Purcell** moved to the opposite side of the state for spiritual and medical independence only to find themselves in a county desolate via a doctor shortage. Charles Purcell is referring to this period as “mid-blossom.”

**Charmaine Phipps**, a native of the inland empire and a lifelong learner, devotes herself to reading, writing, teaching English, and immersing herself in art and nature whenever possible. Her work teaching literature in prison has made her a believer in the therapeutic powers of writing.

**Cindy Rinne** is an interdisciplinary artist. Sometimes text from her poetry comes alongside the imagery or is expressed in performance. Nature, life, and myth serve as inspiration . Time is split to reveal the secrets - the sacredness of the soul. I glue, paint, and stitch memories layering and obliterating.

**Consuelo** (she/they) is an I.E. based cultural worker. Consuelo exists in a realm of digital, analog, and the written word, and she loves to utilize the different mediums in her work. They are currently working on their debut poetry/ photography book—Water Damage—and debut EP—FLUTTER. Insta: @con\_suelo

**Damon Ford** is an Engineering student here at Chaffey, who also loves Art History and global music culture. In addition to usual hobbies involving consuming entertaining stories in media, he enjoys writing poetry to the melody of songs he produces on FL Studio, telling his own stories through metaphor of common life experiences.

**Fernando Melgar** resides in Montclair, CA where he balances practical college life and a constant inclination for escapism. An avid journaler, poet, non-fiction writer, and novice photographer, creative endeavors are his attempt to reconcile the two

**James Nelson** is an artist and scientist residing in the Inland Empire. He enjoys a clever mind, a pretty turn of phrase, and the perpetual pursuit of Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment. He is in awe of the casual beauty surrounding him and of the seemingly effortless artistry of those he meets.

**Jeff Moore** is a professional voice actor, speaker, and writer. His inspiration combines history with imagination and motivation. "Life is messy," he says. "Full of love, fear, beauty, violence, faith, redemption, and hope. There are plenty of spectators and participants. Be that second one and make a difference.

Based in Southern California, **Jenna Campbell** is a writer suffering the incessant malady of permanently affixed rose-colored glasses. She survives on a balanced diet of morning lattes, adventure stories, romance novels, and the sparkling warmth of golden hours. Jenna lives in the Inland Empire with her husband Pete and their two daughters.

**Josué Emmanuel Muñoz** (they/them), a SoCal based Xicanx transmedia storyteller and mindful media educator from West Chicago. Raised Catholic, Josué's adult life has been a decolonizing journey on the way home. Josué loves engaging intergenerational audiences with words; they are partnering with Community Literature Initiative to publish a poetry book.

**Jay Barthelette** lives and works in San Bernardino County. Thanks to the power of stories, she managed to survive childhood. She holds a special place in her heart for:

cryptids, monsters, spooks, ghouls, weirdos, oddities, phantoms, the unloveable, the forgotten, the outcast, and things that go bump in the night.

**Kade Lukiyo** is an Inland Empire based painter and poet originally from the LA area. Although many of his early paintings were landscapes, most of his current works are abstract. He's heavily influenced by his Black and Puerto Rican identities and the ancestral artwork of his peoples. His poetry is free verse; combining metaphors and imagery with discussions of politics, racial and cultural identity, queer/trans identity, mental health, and human emotion.

Based in the Inland Empire, **Keighla Ramirez** is an upcoming queer artist, musician, photographer, and writer who has developed a passion in exploring the complexities of the human experience through her work. Ramirez is a first generation Mexican-American enrolled in Chaffey College, in pursuit of Creative Writing. She leads the dark-driven rock band, Dove Serenade.

**Lois Rocha** spent her adolescence and adulthood growing up in the Inland Empire. Her love of poetry began after reading 'The Road Not Taken' by Robert Frost. This inspired her first poem about guacamole. She hopes that her writing will lead her into a successful career in film and television.

**Madison Babel** is a 16 year old aspiring writer and photographer from Chino Hills. She is inspired by the lyricism of artists such as Elliott Smith and writers like Iain Reid and tries to incorporate their style into her own work. She is working to expand her knowledge in both mediums.

**Maya Bravo** is a nineteen-year-old college student, writer, literary editor, and archivist. Having previously studied film and media, she now studies English, which has further uplifted her writing skills and ability to analyze the literature she loves. Her writing inspiration comes from



the poetic nature of her favorite films and written material. This volume contains her first (though certainly not her last) published works.

**Mayra Melgar** is a multi-talented individual, excelling as a teacher, chef, nanny, and personal assistant. With a passion for health, she serves as a nutritional coach and chef, specializing in low-calorie cuisine. She has worked globally, including for high-profile families and non-profit organizations, while directing Miracle Music4Kids for 16 years.

**Micah Tasaka** (田坂舞花) is a queer, nonbinary poet, artist, and reiki master from Colton, California. They are author of *Expansions* (Jamii Publishing, 2017). Micah is a Director at Rainbow Pride Youth Alliance and works with Poetry Out Loud San Bernardino County. [www.micahtasaka.com](http://www.micahtasaka.com)

**Michelle Dowd** is the author of *Forager: Field Notes on Surviving a Family Cult*, which showcases her life growing up on an isolated mountain in California as part of an apocalyptic cult, and how she found her way out of poverty and illness by drawing on the gifts of the wilderness.

**Paul Rodriguez** dreamed of being a poet since he was a child. He later got distracted by falling in love with the study of philosophy, religious studies, and music. He especially admires the poetry of Stevens, Dickinson, Hughes, Rilke, Borges, Neruda, Lorca, Garcia, Keats, Shelley, Nietzsche, St. Paul, Psalms, Qur'an, Plato, Aeschylus, Homer.

**Pete Campbell** is an Australian living in California with his beautiful wife and two young daughters. He has a background in writing for film and advertising. Tiring of what he came to call 'capitalist propaganda' he left ad-land and now mainly writes poetry to stay sane in an increasingly turbulent world.

**Peter Lechuga** is a poet, writer, emcee, and teacher. With LionLike Creative Education, he teaches poetry to students across Southern California, providing an outlet for their creativity, and publishing these young authors' works into books. In his fleeting freetime, you can find him hiking and spitting freestyles in the hills.

**Polimana** | Growing up with orange trees and stars in their eyes; raised by a commanding and charismatic chapter of musical elders; their siblings and hundreds of thousands of cousins all together an artist collective maturing simultaneously; red swiss army knife peeling and unpeeling memories backwards and forwards and everywhere else. Yes!

**Rob Sullivan** is based in Southern California and his work is inspired by exploration of self through various mediums, including digital art, photography and design. But with every day comes new learning, and while his career has been focused on graphic communications, he is still searching for inspiration to create.

**Tamar Leah** was born at home in Los Angeles to Jehovah's Witness parents. Married at 18 and widowed at 29 with her infant son, she abandoned religion to find healing of the spirit and mind. Yoga instructor, hairstylist and writer, Tamar lives in the IE with her husband and son.

**Tom Hill** is a data scientist who has spent the last 20 years wrangling data at tech companies. He is a resident of Upland, father of two, an avid cyclist, and as of today a first-time published poet.



Veronica and the Ducks · Alexis Raisty

# CONTRIBUTORS

## visual and audio

**Alexus Raisty** | Veronica and the Ducks • Koi Fish • Clown Popsicle • Brain Vomit • Silly Lil Ghost • Thrift Shop Ghost • Church | Veronica: She went around, looking through thrift stores and found a Victorian doll that kinda looks like a porcelain doll and also found a pink duck covered in roses. That's a toothbrush holder and thought that it would make a good reference model for the painting. All the shadows are in a single color | Silly lil ghost: She wanted to make something really cute and simple and when thinking about it, she thought a classic sheet ghost would be a fun draw. She also gave it cute socks. The little ghost does not like people staring at her hence all the eyeballs. She used Alcohol markers | Brain Vomit: This one was inspired to take a break from all the pieces that she made in the Student Invitational 2021. Instead of thinking of what to draw and what meanings it may have, she decided she was just gonna draw and have fun with whatever came to mind. She also experimented with Painting with a fork, and she used nail polish to make it glittery | Clown Ice Cream: After experimenting with how to carve a wood block, she decided to keep things very circular and round. She thought a clown would be a good way since they have circular features. She likes a red cherry nose, and it reminds her of the ice creams from the ice cream truck | Koi fish: After making a mono print of an alien dog in a spaceship, she decided not to waste ink and did a ghost print where she added water and random leaves from the parking lot. She ran it through one more time getting a different mono print. She thought it was super cool, but an alien dog can become something fancy like a Koi fish. If you look super close into the fish you can see the green little dog. Alien is like a spirit animal of the fish. It is random | Church: At church on a weekday, the playground was empty. One of the swings was gone and the lighting made it look like something was there.

**Barney Peake** | Padre • Pulse • RIP • Monument | Padre: Preserved in stone, the Father looks away from the naked child loosely held in his arms. Faith will provide and protect | Pulse: Flowers are a fascination, with bright colors, scents, and textures. Manipulating the grain, light, and tone, this elegant bloom awakens with a haunting energy, looming out of the page, as if crawling or clawing its way forward | RIP: A tear in the cavernous darkness reveals a sliver of light, a glimpse of hope and wonder about the world beyond. Alas, the riches of Nature remain just out of reach | Monument: Evening light in the Fairmount Pioneer Cemetery (1876). The Jeffrey tombstone rests in the shade of overhanging tree branches, but outside the shadow there is life. Specs of light dance into the darkness, doves shuffle through the underbrush, and a lone coyote runs through the yard-- proof there is life.

**Consuelo** | Queer & Transfemme Nuns • Wings of Morning Dew | Queer and Transfemme Nuns  
Projecting the film *Yo Peor de Todos*, Consuelo is a nun traversing through Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz's time in a convent. Convinced she was a nun in a past life, Consuelo experimented with long exposures to convey her feelings surrounding religious trauma surrounding queer, trans, and Chicana identity |Wings of Morning Dew: Inspired by hyperpop artists like SOPHIE (may she rest in paradise), atmospheric music, and drawing from her experience writing poetry, Consuelo wrote "Wings of Morning Dew" asking the question: What did the 1/3 of angels say as they fell from heaven?

**Emmanuel Camacho Larios** | *.fragment.1* | This image reveals paraphernalia left by the creature dubbed as .anónimx. Sightings of this creature have presented specifically in Southern California. Their true nature and physical form are yet to be determined. They shroud themselves in a bandana and signature mask made of natural stitched

fibers resembling corn husks. Recent sightings depict the creature's evolution through metamorphosing masks and erratic movements.

**Fernando Melgar** | The League • Skull Rock • Under the Bridge • Toilet Door • Porch Light • Park Walk • Graffiti Hall • Warehouse | Since youth, Fernando has had an insatiable curiosity for what is just beyond the physical world; things that aren't readily seen at a moment's notice. Exploring human motivations, faults, and stand-still moments, it is through art that he sees reason.

**Glorbo** | Deadbeat BF • Jib | Deadbeat BF: Aims to criticize people who live parasitically off their partner only to leave them behind when life start shifting positively. It was inspired by a tik tok celebrity whose partner let them work full time on making art only for them to cheat once they gained a crumb of internet success | Jib: Struggling to be trapped in depressive isolation while longing for one's significant other to come home and help drag them out of the trenches. It began as an instrumental track but later was shaped into a full-fledged song while practicing before a show.

**Isaac Manzo** | Cerberus | Isaac is passionate about the arts and solving issues in the community through telling motivating stories through illustrations. Isaac hopes the exhibited work can inspire his audience to persevere in their journey. This process takes courage but can help to honor our own ghost story and legacy in this lifetime.

**James Nelson** | Tracking • Wisp | Tracking: An experimental image born from the serendipitous nighttime occurrence of a power outage, dense fog, a strobe-capable flashlight, and an agreeable athlete. Tracking contemplates the stillness of movement and the movement of stillness. It interrogates the relationship between intention and action while wondering just how many selves lurk within

| **Wisp**: Emerging during a spontaneous experimental photoshoot documenting a lovely young Jedi exploring her limits with a newly forged lightsaber, Wisp wonders whether at this moment she was channeling Pegasus, a Centaur, or the dark side. The truth remains unknown. What is clear is that this girl is on fire.

**Jenna Campbell** | Dyad | Drawing from playful whimsy, Dyad connects with the nostalgia and delight of childhood stories: sheer layers and fine lines layering the sweetly spooky.

**Kaitlyn McCarthy** | Moody Flower Poetry | This dark and somber piece of different textures, colors, and emotions was made for exploration. As it came together, she began looking to create something that looks how grief feels. The pain of a loss in your eyes wearing you down. To the truly terrifying unknown of what happens when our time is up.

**Scott Lukesh** | Sam & Alfreda 1948 | While locking up the historic home of Sam and Alfreda Maloof, the light of a stained-glass door caught my attention. What catches your attention?

**Robert Sullivan** | Skinny Man Head • Gasping For Air • Soul Surfer | Experimentations in digital art. | Soul Surfer | Explores activities beyond some dreary castle or cemetery to haunt for eternity. Every ghost should enjoy themselves in the afterlife. | Skinny Head Man | A conceptualized version of a shadow figure I actually saw creeping down a wall towards me in an old house. | Gasping for Air | The ghost the struggles with the loss of sensation associated with the involuntary act of breathing.

**Tamar Leah Saramosing** | Cenando con los Muertos • La Viuda • Banyan | Cenando con los Muertos: My mother and son at La Placita Olvera on Dia de Los Muertos. We honor our loved ones and ancestors with painted faces



embracing death. The living, though, must eat | La Viuda: A Self Portrait - Till Death Do Us Part - He was 32. She was 29. Their son, three months old. The canvas of their future was wiped clean in an instant. Widow, Viuda, the unwanted honorific. A Self Portrait, years later, captures the woman inside, struggling to break free from her veil, its cumbersome and lifelong implications, and embraces somehow its beauty | Banyan: The Banyan tree is a symbol of eternal life because of its ability to support its expanding canopy by growing roots from its branches. I think life eternal requires sacrifice.

Front Cover Image and Design: Consuelo  
Back Cover Image: Tamar Leah Saramosing  
Back Cover Design: Consuelo



