

BRIGHTPOINT COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Currents

ART & LITERARY REVIEW 2025

This institution has been dedicated to publishing the creative work of our students since 1968, and when you turn these pages, you'll see that the tradition continues. In our third issue of *Currents*, you will find their visions expressed in art, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. We are grateful to every student who submitted this year—*Currents* could not exist without their interests and efforts. As always, this journal is for them!

Mike Gray, Editor

PREFACE

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A message to the martyrs that I'll never write a poem for, I'm sorry

Fairouz Bsharat

*Italicized words are direct statements (translated) from
the people of Gaza*

A ghostly white sheet glides along the warm breeze
And its name is Sorrow because
Gazans stitch together their children's faces in the aftermath of flame
While cameras pan over desert destroyed

Civilians can't define dead by body count
Instead they weigh kilograms of flesh
And for every seventy a tally is added
And for every seventy it's several families mourning
The same pile and wishing for at least
A severed arm to hug

Sorrow finds its way to
A matching set of swaddled corpses safe
In the arms of angels overloaded with
Dead strewn over their every feather
Akin to overburdened Zeytouna curling in the hands of

قطف الزيتون

A man calls out unaware of the onslaught of holy
Hoping to be heard by someone other than the grieving
They haven't even worn their clothes yet.
He trades twin birth certificates and watches his babies become
Numbers instead of newborns

Cameras turn towards anything in hopes of finding heart-felt
While Sorrow lands across the shoulders
Of a band of orphans tailing hospital staff
A shipment of sheets for the dead have come
In place of vital medical equipment and water
They dance around in them and play tag with each other in the halls
Hiding from suns that crash into the ground around them
They have futures in the comfort of stark white contrasting with
 their burnt brown
They're jackets to keep us warm!

Sorrow attempts to cover the remaining pulled dead
From rubble and rests on rock
Only to find a little girl grayed from ash
Lingering in limbo between life and death
Clinging to thought only by question
Are you taking me to the cemetery?

And the civilians carrying the stretcher aren't given the luxury of
 pause
They continue to pull her along
No you are alive!
The blood mingles to create craters
The soot spurs on her skin to resemble a glow
And steals the sun's light to become reflection
You are as beautiful as the moon!

The whiplash of freedom from the crushed land launches Sorrow
Across the mixing waters of Mediterranean and Atlantic
America is angry that their latest paycheck hasn't proven fully fatal
For every Gazan killed ten are given stronger spirits to push back
And the ratio of civilian to terrorist keeps dropping in their eyes
And their fat stomachs overflow on the desks of the white house
As they rumble over the cracking of their own foundation
Pulling bricks in the forms of billions from their collapsing walls
And chucking them across the sea

Hoping it will bounce off the stubborn heads of democracy
And onto the next hospital or school building safehouse
Sorrow flips behind a woman and acts as an amplifier
*Those that America has killed are my brothers, father, sisters, mother,
sons, and daughters*
I will never forget what they have taken from me.

A reporter pulls a kid off the street and in front of the camera
Gunpoint of its own accord
Different kind of death to just be total casualties instead of
High school graduate or world-renowned engineer
They ask him of Hamas and he says
*We will not kneel. We are all part of the resistance. We salute the
resistance.*
If every bomb fell around him he would walk straight past the fire
And into the arms of his brothers because every fallen is family in
Gaza

Airstrikes clash with upturned sand and send Sorrow
To ride the heat elsewhere as overworked angels
Crowd the ground with too many innocents to carry to God
Too many stories to fit in a poem

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- قطف الزيتون: Refers to the people who pick olives
 - “You are as beautiful as the moon” or زي القمر: is an Arabic saying casually used to describe the beauty, often used on children.

When a Retired Marte Met La Virgen

Bella Fratarcangelo

Inspired by Velazquez's Marte¹, the story of La Virgen de La Sed², the 22nd of January, 1973³, and a quote written in the margins of my secondhand anthology of second-wave feminist literature: "Men were less enraged [by the favorable Roe v. Wade decision] because the draft [for Vietnam] made them understand what it is like for their bodies to not be their own."

A fellow beast had torn open his throat,
cleaving his vocal cords. The blood had not yet
brittled on his skin or sunk in his filthy tunic before
he was relieved of his soldiership,
discharged from his battlefield domicile,
deserting his war cries in the scorched earth.

He, dormant volcano, took lodging in his palace,
bequeathed by his older, sophisticated aristocrat
brothers who gave him no accolades.
A sebum musk of soap and liquor—
creature comforts—now clung to his clothes. Still,
the miasma of human ash hanged in his hair.

One morning, he lingered on the edge of his unkempt bed,
arms and martial artifacts piled at his feet, cranium clad
in helmet, mustache unbrushed, muscles malnourished, eyes
sleepless. A society that required soldiers now required sophists
but he, belligerent thurible, reeking of what had burned within him,
could not abandon his place in that sweatless heat.

He, ambiguous, indolent blob, took a nude walk along the shore,
untangling himself from the silk fabric draped around his ilium.
Static sky whipped his ears; organized sound and silence engulfed him.
Fish skeletons and slimy seaweed littered the lapping waves,
which made haste to draw the creatures back into the endless deep.
Sunbeams snagged on a smallness in the sand, so his eyes saw.

Warrior god knelt at the waterline, unearthing a girl
with a nacreous complexion and lustrous locks, a nascent dream.
Pink ligature marks crowned her wrists and ankles.
Although the string had long dissolved, eroded by salt,
she hadn't the strength to free from that
cold, crumpled conch, curling into herself.

He, gentle ogre, uncoiled her limbs with his pinky finger;
she lay in his palm, trembling in atrophy.
Splayed on her back, dazed, she took her tongue
along her plum bucca and parted lips,
hunting any granules that might hamper speech.
Voice was drink, and she was dying of thirst.

Marte, swept up in white noise, cupped her to his ear.
The tide whispered in her cultivated emptiness,
where ungrateful flesh she bore in her phantom youth
marked pristine spirals in her skin, acting echo chambers.
The words he, mute bugle, could not expound, resounded in her.
He recognized they, neighbors, had been suffering in obscurity.

*Beso de
Batalla voló a
libertad.
Paloma no
llevó plomo, sólo ploma
como los Cuervos.⁴*

1 *Marte* is "Mars," the Roman God of War, in Spanish.

2 *La Virgen de La Sed* is what many Spanish provinces call the Virgin Mary.

3 The day the U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger flew to Paris to end the Vietnam War and the Supreme Court decided on *Roe v. Wade* (for the first time).

4 Kiss of Battle / flew to freedom. / The Dove didn't / carry lead, only words / like the Crows.

Play'n in My Hair

By Nia Ford

My back is against a cool leather couch, my scrawny legs folded beneath me, I sit enveloped between Auntie's legs with my head held still, as I track the unhurried glide of a dull rat tail on a fresh scalp. Auntie slices thin metal through my strands with a skill passed down through generations, creating paths that long ago held the keys to freedom. Each section of hair is parted and becomes intricate braids woven unforgivingly to my tender head as they tug at my roots. A familiar burn never fails to begin at my hairline and travel to the base of my neck with each tuck. Fortifying my mind against the urge to squirm, I let my senses sink into the nutty scent of shea butter, radio static, and upbeat ragtime piano that floods the room. The singer has us surrender to the beat, and I hum along with Auntie's heels tap'n.

My stomach aches with the knowledge that it is now dusk, as I run my hand along the rows to check her progress. When my fingers brush the last section, I imagine how it looked before. Long and untamed my body, a dark willow tree, hair, a shroud of black branches and leaves around my face. Auntie tells me though my hair is wild, coils are something to be coveted, and I wrap my arm around her leg and squeeze as her oily fingers melt grease into my scalp. Listening to the longing in her praise, I wait with a facade of patience before I rise on my stiff legs, not daring to walk away without a brief kiss on her cheek. I hurry toward the nearest mirror and stop at the picture of a divine face glowing, and as Auntie stands next to me I stare in awe at her hands and what they have created.

There's a Wolf in the Bushes!

Lain Budu

Your faded charcoal-black and yellow-white sneakers pass by me
again today;
you smell like sweat and spring, a perfect, sweet scent on my nose.
It rushes through my body and I can *almost* taste you in my mouth.

I first spotted you two moons ago, walking this same path.
I rustled in the bushes, intent on getting a quick fix.
You heard me, you looked about frantically for a minute before you
deemed the coast clear.
I pounced on you then, you let out a hideous shriek when you hit the floor.
It was music to my ears.
I wanted to gash at your skin, feel your blood gush out of the wounds
I'd inflicted
but when I was finally upon you, I licked your face tenderly and let you go.

I sunk back into the dark and watched as you gathered yourself.
You did it with haste, looking about with a purpose—
you whistled and patted your knee repeatedly like I was going to come
back out for you.
“Come here then girl! I won't hurt you!”
It's just like your kind to sense danger and play communion with it,
beckon it forth despite knowing what was to follow.
I bared my teeth, I claimed my hatred for you then.

I watched day after day as you passed my bush.
You haven't called for me since, but I know when I'm wanted.

I watched as you passed with green shoes, red shoes, your faded
charcoal-black and yellow-white shoes.
I imagined leaping at your ankles cutting your skin to the bone
licking your marrow clean out and moving from leg to leg
eating like I had never known food before.

From intestine to liver
to kidney to heart
I would feast.
You'd let me, in fact, you would pet my head
and beg me to keep going until I was satisfied.
Nothing would be left of you,
I'd have your lips as dessert and your eyes as a late-night snack.
Your brain would nourish me for weeks,
I'd laugh insidiously to myself as I felt your soul linger in my throat.

I no longer want a quick fix—
no, you're much too precious for something so charitable.
You will be my last dinner, I will take my time.
My belly would be full for decades at least
as my head is full now knowing that you would never hurt me,
and I would never extend the same grace.

**The Future Has Always Been
on Fire**

Drew Fridley

FIRST PLACE • Art



Polynesia

Ben Blankenship

Coconut in the morning.

Coconut in the evening.

Many fall in the morning and evening.

Kerplunk forever.

For me.

On a tree named Curvy, who sways into teal blue water as Calypso music plays; as water laps against a sandy golden beach. Tranquility: that is the name. The moment. The cheerful sight that greets us on this Polynesian vacation. Where bamboo-thatched huts glow in the warm, fruity sun. Where Palms and many “Curvys” blow in the pineapple-smelling wind. Where stars twinkle above lush volcanic mountains, watch over sights. Many are illuminated vessels. White sailboats: they set sail, captains tanned and beautiful from much sun. Some smile, fasten on tropical shirts and khakis, brush maintained blond hair. Study—the sun that breathes life...

Sights.

Animals.

Monkeys.

Miniature apes that ride on shoulders of all ages. White dolphins that smile at pink canoes and sun-smitten vacationers. And chromis fish that navigate colorful charismatic coral reefs, black eyes too large for their dark blue oceanic bodies. Beyond beautiful. Like the warm water. Just oh, so blue and

vast and gurgly against the shore. Pacific Macaws
breathe each gurgle in, then chirp—from banana trees
and lush coconut forests, flap their colorful wings.
Caw and maw. Talk to God. Thank him for flowing
beauty: lush misty waterfalls. And vivid pools below,
where dozens of goldfish swim below green rocks.

All this light is part of a larger plan.

That radiates and meditates a name...

Paradise.

Bliss on Earth—smooth waves and surf, a prime
time for surfing with vivid orange surfboards.
Drinking a shot of tequila. Wearing boat shoes on
primed up tour boats. Then taking them off, sinking
into deep sand, as a few locals hula with earnest
passion. From a modern speaker on a bamboo bench,
Polynesian music ensues. Tanned hands put it there
for enjoyment. And it brings happiness and life.
Reflection on beauty on a lush green island on Earth.

So the tropics... they are blissfully good.

For meditation on a wooden boardwalk covered in
citrus fruit. For falling asleep in a floating thatched
hotel, turquoise water all around. For motion: palm
leaf ceiling fan spins above a modern poster bed, joyful
waves providing blissful dreams. When one wakes to
the smell of coconut and bay rum, they grab their
iphone, snap dozens of photos. Put this on a postcard,
they will—smile—because Polynesia is a gift to Earth.
A coconut out in the vast pacific.

In the morning.

In the evening.

Forever.

For me.

Kin

Karina Garcia

MY BROTHER AND I had the same skinny knees, scraped raw from rough-housing on Florida concrete. Today I can close my eyes and still feel the hot pavement beneath my bare feet, hear my brother running and whooping ahead of me, his small body outlined in golden sunlight. Together, we fanned each other with palmetto leaves, scrounged in the patchy grass for grasshoppers and frogs to chase each other with, threw stale bread at alligators peering glinty-eyed from murky drainage ditches. Those moments were the closest I ever came to paradise. Warm, hazy days spent bounding around our gray apartment complex, making up a world of our own.

But that paradise was a mere break in the clouds. The sun always set, and we had to go back inside into the shadowed recesses of our grandfather's studio apartment, where his rage thickened the air like humidity before a storm. There was never much of a reason for his unpredictable fury: a glass of milk spilled, a yawn during Joel Osteen's Sunday morning sermon, the television brushed against and turned off at the wrong moment. Like dropping a match into gasoline, he would be set alight. Then fists, red-faced shouting, and everyone else retreated into themselves like waves creeping back along the shoreline.

Once, after one of my grandfather's rampages, my brother and I lay curled together in bed. The only thing separating us from him was the thin, tacked-up bed sheet that split the tiny studio, not even heavy enough to block out his heavy

snoring. I traced the raised palm print, glowing angry-red on my brother's small calf.

"One day, I'm gonna get out of here," I whispered.

He placed his small hand over mine, pressing warmth into my bones. *"Take me with you."*

I held him and promised. But eventually, I left him behind. Twice.

The first time, I was buzzing with the promise of college, with the kind of shallow, dizzying hope that only the newly free possess. We exchanged a hurried hug, and then I watched him duck out of my dorm, his shoulders hunched and his head low. I felt the pang then; a sharp, immediate pain, like stepping on a piece of glass. But I brushed it off. I pinned a picture of us to my wall—an image of us as toddlers, my chubby arm slung across his shoulders—as if that could serve as a promise. I had to believe that if I could make it out, so would he.

The second time, I was leaving Florida for good. College had proven to be a catastrophe, a catalyst for unaddressed trauma and mental health issues which resulted in a suicide attempt after which I barely scraped together enough make-up work to graduate. Overwhelmed with therapy-speak, medication side effects and the lingering memories around every corner of our neighborhood, I bought a one-way ticket to Virginia, eager for a fresh start in a new place.

My brother dropped me off at the airport, older now, tattooed and withdrawn. His eyes had dulled, no longer as bright

and sunlit as when we were children. Shadows had settled into the hollows beneath them.

"You know you're my best friend," I said, my lip trembling.

"You're mine, too," he said, his smile not quite reaching his eyes, and I turned away, wiping my face.

At first, we kept in touch. But then the time between phone calls became more drawn out, the silences between our words heavier. My brother struggled with money, with decisions, with memories—while at the same time, my world seemed to be opening up before me like an orange blossom, the petals fragile and sweet-scented. I told myself he was coping the best way he could, that he was finding his own way.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that he was mirroring my own self-destructive habits—that, worse than abandoning him, I'd left behind a trail of bitter bread-crumbs leading to nothing but eventual self-implosion. I wanted to be there for him, but in his own reluctance to share much about his life and my hesitance to return to triggering thought patterns, I found myself looking away. It was like I had barely made the last train out of town, and in the midst of my overwhelming relief, I looked out the window only to see him standing back at the station, small again, pale and bruised, sucking on his fingers with wide, wet eyes.

But I had a new life now. I began to fall in love with Richmond, with the rough cobblestone of Shockoe Bottom, which held a smoky Cuban restaurant that reminded me of home; the city's library, both stately and cozy; the Edgar Allen Poe museum, full of history and haunted artifacts for me to pore over; and eventually, one of the city's own residents.

On one of my dates with Ryan, we walked along the James river, eventually

wading into one of its clear pools bordered by large, flat rocks where locals sunbathed.

"No gators," Ryan assured me, as we sank deeper into the cool water.

One of the things I liked most about Ryan was his inquisitive nature, how it made me feel like he really cared about who I was, and how we never ran out of things to talk about.

But sometimes, it was one of the things I hated most about him—especially when he asked me questions about my past or my family. Sitting in the river that day, I felt especially vulnerable, exposed in my bathing suit and the bright sunlight.

I tried to divulge the barest of details possible, but even those painted a pretty grim picture of my childhood and the path that had led me to Virginia. I felt ashamed, and desperate to somehow provide a justification for the little I'd accomplished in life, especially compared to him—he was a medical student, disciplined and responsible, and I was already on my third minimum-wage retail job since moving to Virginia.

"I feel like, many times in my life, I've used trauma as an excuse for my own mediocrity." I looked down at my hands, the fingers fractured where they entered the water.

He looked at me sharply. "That's really harsh."

"Plenty of people have rough childhoods and go on to succeed and flourish in life. It makes them stronger. My brother and I...it's just been harder for us. Especially my brother."

"Trauma affects everyone differently," he said, his voice gentle. In the sunlight, his eyes looked like amber. I'd never seen someone look at me so softly before.

There is something every abused child understands—you start to feel dirty, like the bruises go deeper than your skin, like they've settled in your bones, rotting you

from the inside out. You think everyone else can see it. Smell it. That no matter how far you run, it follows you.

But that day, sitting in the water pressed against Ryan, I felt clean. As if the river was rushing through me, eroding all the jagged, dirty parts and leaving something polished and sparkling behind.

Still, that feeling of cleanliness and closeness—the bare skin against bare skin, the breath shared in a quiet space—was nothing compared to the closeness of a brother. A brother I would drown for, whose absence I felt keenly with every step in my own recovery.

Then one day, my brother called.

“I’m going on a road trip with my girlfriend. Thought we could stop by and visit you.”

My heart thudded in my chest.

When he arrived, I took him all around the city, showing him the library, the local murals, and the record store in Carytown. Buffered by the presence of his kind, easy-going girlfriend, it almost felt normal—we laughed easily, holding hands in the bright daylight, talking nothing of where we’d come from. In the evening, we walked together to the Village Café, a local, cozy bar I loved. My brother pulled out a cigarette, and seeing the look on my face, laughed and offered it to me. I’d never smoked before, and I didn’t much feel like starting, but I did want to feel close to my brother. So I took a drag, the acrid smoke filling up my lungs and burning my eyes. Then I coughed it all out, the both of us laughing until tears ran down our faces,

At the bar we sat across from each other, his girlfriend excusing herself to the bathroom, leaving us alone. In the red neon glow, I studied him. His tattooed arms, his guarded features, the patchy stubble along his clenched jawline. He laid his head down, exposing the nape of

his neck, the soft, downy hair that I still remembered from when he was little.

It is a heartbreak worse than anything romantic, to sit across from someone whose breath you used to fall asleep to, whose cries you once answered in the dark, who shares the same jagged, genetic stitches as you—and to feel like you’re looking at a stranger. To feel ashamed for having escaped.

I wanted to open my mouth, to say: Take me back with you. Let’s do it all over again. I will bear it all, hurt with you, if it means being as close as we were.

Instead, I said nothing, looked out of the window at the city, street lights reflected in the puddles of rain on the pavement.

When he left that night, we stood by his car, his silhouette illuminated by the headlights. His girlfriend huddled in the passenger seat, her eyes closed. Please be kind to him, I thought. Please be gentle. I pulled him into a hug, breathed in the sweat and cigarettes, the scent of home and loss.

“You’ll always be my best friend,” I said.

“You’ll always be mine, too.” Then he offered a half-smile before getting into the car.

For a second I felt like running after him, waving the car down and hopping in. But instead I watched him leave, knowing there would always be a part of him sewn into me, and part of me woven into him. I prayed that those parts of us would always strengthen the other, lessen the sting of the past we’d endured together, and lead us back together no matter where we went. ■

Cultural Synonymity

Fairouz Bsharat

عودة He hopes to return to something he's never known

MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER is still somehow young and fatherless. Orphan turned father to his younger siblings, then father again to his children. Only a child until thirteen. My mother is his first-born daughter. Generations will tell you: Arabic first-born daughter is full of burden. She is born to be servant and child all at once. She starts her Saturday mornings on the veranda, scrubbing it so she can see her own reflection in the pool of soap suds. Watching the fragments of her being in the bubbles. Years spent in pieces between home, ocean, and then home again.

Today, my mother's father is visiting from America. His usual paycheck is accompanied by his person. He brings the Israeli pudding from beyond the wall. A sign of goodwill to his kids who he has yet to know. The increment of time between each visit extends beyond the last. My mom loves the pudding. It is almost as if she has yet to know what the wall means, its vast poetry engraved in graffiti, the drawings of the lonesome Handala. Hands laced behind his back as he faces everything from the rivers to the sea. Patch on his clothes baring both poverty and Palestine. My mom waits for her dad behind the door in this same manner.

فاطمة Abstaining from feeling

MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER cried only twice in her lifetime. Both

times, when her parents died. I was yet a concept among God. My mother was engaged. She's told over the phone by her dad that her grandfather is gone. My mother was choking on her own misery, her one shot of home as a person taken from her. On that phone call her dad tells her not to cry. Her job is to hold her mother and make sure she is alright. A mother's job is always that. Make sure everyone else is alright. But my mom was still first-born daughter; culture will tell you they are synonymous.

Her mother is out on that veranda. The desert sands are already collecting in corners from the lack of this morning's routine. She says nothing when my mom comes to her with comfort as a shield from her own tragedy. She shoos her off and maybe my mom spent the rest of the day trying to clean, only to find her heart trying to hop borders and swim seas to hold her grandfather one more time.

Decades later I am sitting at the kitchen table trying to write something meaningful, bouncing ideas of country and self as baseball against my brain. I forgot to turn on the light before sitting down, and the ideas beg me to sit still. My grandmother comes in and turns the lights on. I thank her, and she makes a comment about not working in the dark. The silence that falls afterward is comfortable. She's never really one to communicate. I am fine wearing her stoic demeanor as a shield from myself. So many daughters in that house, and each of us bears our burdens in silence the way she taught us to.

**محمود Praise be to those who
mean more after death**

MY PATERNAL GRANDFATHER came to America angry, but he was angry everywhere he went. The feeling of his dwindling farm animals, the audacity of the existence of maklouba, his horde of grandchildren that messed up his house every week that he wasn't there to supervise. In front of me, he was different. Taking out his dentures to chase me around and scare me. I think there was anger there too. Teeth misplaced beyond his skull and smooth tongue finding only gums.

I am ten years old when he dies. Barefoot in a coma. My dad rushing over the sea to see him one last time and choosing to forget the debt bought on by his plane ticket. He gets there in time to watch him flatline. Older sister by his bedside. Other siblings milling around the room and hospital hallways, phantasmic in their grief. Miles away, I am on a cheap peeling leather couch watching YouTube videos. Pretending to cry only after I am ridiculed for my indifference.

I wait for my dad to come home and he brings with him two pieces of his own father. His prayer beads and anger. Not that my dad was ever the calm type, but there was that reassurance of youth in him before then. The kind only an Arabic son can have. Orbited by his family and his only fight for success with himself. After his dad died, there was always something wrong with America. With his family. As his first-born daughter I was the first disappointment. Never

caring enough or caring too much. I stood there waiting for him to become what he was when I was too little to be conscious. When I would only fall asleep in his arms. And maybe when I stood in his room he was reminded of his oldest sister by that bedside. Prayer beads shoved under pillows or strewn across bedposts collecting dust. A click of blue-green plastic beads against themselves for every moment since the flatline.

**نزيهة Prosperous is she who
overcomes**

MY PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER welcomes me into our village for a second time, but now there are expectations. Before, I was too young to matter. I could go spend my uncle's shekels at the local convenience store and play with my cousins. Now, I am taller. All of my clothes hang loosely around me and I try to keep up an air of youth. I could be a prize plane ticket away from Palestine if only I was a little older. The blue passport brands me as something to want, but nothing else about me did.

My grandfather's final message to me comes through a wall of off-brand princess blankets in my grandmother's room. Nearly a decade after my first visit, they were still there. The same summer colors that helped me brave the cold desert night the first time. He never let anyone throw them away. His picture hung up in the hallway right beyond that bedroom door. I felt loved for the first time in a while then. In the same way I did when my grandma swatted away my sticky

cousin's hands from our bottled water. A queen of the household she holds together.

I watch her entrust my mom with the wedding gold. Knowing that our hands will not linger over the shimmer longer than need be. She tells me she cannot wait for my wedding. That is what everyone says. It is always a wedding, never a graduation. I think of my cousin who graduated that same summer, and how she dreamed of a husband instead of a future. Relentless in her joyous pursuit of a household. She is an eldest daughter, mother to her younger siblings in spirit. A child always hanging in her arms and a broom by her side.

سهي Constellations as generations of daughters

WHEN I AM BORN my mom tells the hospital staff it is impossible for me to be her daughter. I am too beautiful, she says. She whispered that with reverence and galaxies shed off her skin to stick to me in that moment. A thin veil of sparkling space and the stars that were embroidered within it. Every stitch an ancestor watching me wail with the freshness of breath. Nebulas poured into my ears as each relative came to visit, piling prayers in my favor. I am a first-born daughter. I tore through my mother in birth and came out with a crooked neck. But I was beautiful in the way every daughter is when they live, hungry for the future and tasting speckles of space on their tongues. Every shimmer around them are women of the past with gentle hands

caressing them and holding them up to the world.

Behold first born daughter and weep, world. Watch as she perseveres. ■

TRANSLATIONS:

- عودة- *Odeh*: to return, the name of my maternal grandfather
- فاطمة- *Fatima*: to abstain, the name of my maternal grandmother
- محمود- *Mahmoud*: praiseworthy, the name of my paternal grandfather
- نزىهه- *Nazeeha*: prosperity/prosperous, the name of my paternal grandmother
- سهي- *Suha*: A certain star that's invisible, or a star that came from heaven, the name of my mother

My Maiden Mountain

Liz Leedy

THE FIRST TIME I climbed a mountain, I found myself vastly under-prepared. I say first time, but this wasn't the first time I reached a peak. It was the first time I dragged myself up a mountain alone, of my own volition, and when I could've been doing something else; literally anything else. I was on vacation in the rugged, arid terrain of Tucson, Arizona.

My mom had brought me to this harsh and desolate landscape to help her purchase beads for her Etsy store, where she sold to crafters and hobbyists alike. But a day into wading through dusty tents looking at an endless array of minerals, crystals, rocks, beads, trinkets, and plenty of plain old junk—I needed out. At least for a little while, I wanted to be outside.

And that, you see, is how I found myself out in the desert. Saguaro National Park, to be exact. Walking on sandy trails past towering green cacti.

“The Saguaro cactus only grows in the deserts surrounding Tucson!” a friend of my mom’s had told me over a dinner of spicy pork tamales the night before. “If you see a picture of one on a hot sauce bottle and they’re from El Paso, they’re liars—Saguaros, only grow here.”

Looking up at the giants now, I can understand why the locals take such pride in these cacti. They guide the way like goal posts up the mountain. The mountain I must say I was not prepared for. First it was steep. Steeper than my overweight flatlander body was used to or ready for. I struggled with each step. I aimed to walk from one goal cactus to the next between stops.

Unlike all the other hikes I’ve done before, I had to set the pace. I wasn’t pushed to keep up with the next slowest hiker. I could stop whenever I wanted, but that didn’t get me any closer to being where I wanted to be. I had a demented urge to climb that mountain.

Last fall I’d read *Into Thin Air*, a thrilling epic retelling of a disaster on Mount Everest. And I don’t know why, but a book about the life-endangering adventures on the mountains ended up leading me to the mountains. Because when had I ever climbed a mountain just to climb a mountain? I spent the subsequent months devouring every adventure book, podcast, and movie I could find on the subject. I became an expert on topics like mountaineering and thru-hiking just to hear more stories about adventures

in the mountains. I knew rock climbing wasn't for me at almost three hundred pounds, but I thought what if standing on the summit of a mountain, just to be there—maybe that was for me?

It was winter in Wisconsin. I despised the cold, so I spent days inside reading about hiking and very few days actually hiking. Still, I believed I could do it.

Now that I was actually climbing, my confidence began to dwindle. It was hot, somehow over eighty degrees in January, and the sun was intense and bright. Dressed in a grass-colored tank top, my boyfriend's basketball shorts, and my beat up pair of old field boots, I felt under-prepared. I only brought a liter of water, enough for a walk at home, but I drank half of it in the first hour up the mountain. Still, I trudged up the mountain, past goal post after goal post cactus. They pushed me to walk just a bit farther.

The thing about hiking is the more you do it, the easier it gets. The first half mile is always the hardest. As you walk, your muscles stretch and relax, and after a while just trudging forward becomes an easier feat. That's all it really is; trudging forward with your feet, over rocks and steep hills.

Don't get me wrong, it was still hard. Harder than I even wanted to admit to myself. But with each step it became easier and after a while of just walking,

I found myself at the steepest hill yet. I could also see a summit.

I skipped my breaks to push the last steps up to the summit. I was greeted with stunning views in one direction and a trail that continued up. I didn't yet understand that this was a false summit. My very first fake summit. Later I would be vexed by false summits on Colorado 14ers, like Mount Elbert. But I'll never forget my severe disappointment at this first realization that I would still need to keep walking up.

"Why is it always up..." I'd discourage myself, "cause you are climbing a mountain, you idiot." Still I kept walking up, angry internal monologue and all.

And at the summit, the true summit, I was granted with 360-degree views of the desert around me and those goal posts, the Saguaro cacti, that had led my way here from my dusty red car down in the valley. They were tiny dots in the expanse of the universe. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I'd never felt so proud of my body up to that point. That big body—fat rolls and all—she climbed mountains. It didn't matter how slow I went as long as I kept going. ■

After the Headlights

Lily Hudson



An Old Man in Key West

Ben Blankenship

I MUST INFORM YOU about my idiosyncratic life, how I ended up living a few blocks off Duval Street. Oftentimes palmettos and cultivated sago palms screwed me over when I thought about all I had done and would do. So this will be a short story: perhaps no more than a thousand or so words at most. Because those like me favor simplicity in the South Florida sun. Yet you may also be wondering how me, a widowed man of eighty, ended up in youthful Key West. Because even my granddaughter (yes, I'm talking to you Katherine) believes I am out of my mind, thinking I am twenty-one again. Well, in truth, I am not. But I find witnessing youth fade away rather eventful (especially when it is turned to those who believe I lack any sort of flavor). Even so, any old man can dream of his youth, wishing he could change certain events or occurrences. Often he hopes of living once again when he has to use a red walker to get around and has lost his sense of style and fashion when... Well, all he has to wear is a faded tropical shirt. Unfortunate, and I, David Fleetman, am that poor decrepit old man. As sometimes when I do make it outside, I wish my bones were stronger and no longer hinder all my actions. Katherine seems to think men such as me will die soon. *But I told her I won't go down without a fight* because at least money sits in my lap. I've worked hard for it, so perhaps I deserve *what comes around goes around*.

But how, you ask? How—in today's perilous real-estate market—did my knotted, veined, and callused hands find themselves in a sought after tropical paradise? Well... we'll start with my "old man" actions, such as the aerobics that I execute every day in my pool surrounded by bamboo, coconut palms and lush abundant foliage. I even have a curated waterfall that pours into it, except my head is far too old to get drenched these days. Anyway, life used to be easier for me. But now I walk one hundred steps and feel as if I've run two marathons. I know I will die tomorrow (or if I'm lucky ten years from now) yet, minus my body, I feel sharp, so maybe God will hold on to me. Who knows, but we're getting off track, so I'll just go about my routine and inform you of how I tethered myself to Florida. You see, when I was a younger man, I rebelled against my parents because I believed they had no right to pull me in directions I didn't want to go.

"David, you ought to be a lawyer," my mother would say.

I never wanted that and always dreamed of pursuing journalism, so I left home at eighteen and went to a major press. The name has slipped from my memory, but they didn't take me because I had no prior experience. I thought I'd always be lonely (as many young men are), but my inner consciousness talked to me, telling me giving up wouldn't prove worthwhile. So... I did what most

would do: pursued my dreams. Hopping into a beat up Volkswagen beetle (yellow in color), I drove myself over five hundred miles from Virginia Beach, Virginia to Miami, Florida. My head wasn't too sure of what it wanted or, for a matter of fact, "desired for," but part of me just guided the uncertain half through sandy, commercialized beaches, where beautiful bikini models basked under the warm sun, Caribbean sailboats darted about clear waters, and coconuts swayed under resort-scented water. (Well, water didn't contain ascent). But still, my imagination took pleasure in such paradise. Anyway, it wasn't until one of the bikini models approached me that I realized that drive had been all worth it. My face appeared average (freckled and unflattering), but seeing a woman like that took away not just my breath but my entire life. And as beachgoers set up umbrellas and folding chairs on that extensively sandy beach, she mouthed a few words. "You seem lonely? Want to get a drink or two?"

As one would expect, I felt over the roof (a ten out of ten didn't mind normies and I had a chance of winning her). But in truth, the woman—Isabella as I'd come to know—didn't prefer glamorous life all that much. She was on vacation with her sorority from The University of Tampa and just did what everyone told her. Her parents had pressured her to join. And back in the day? Not being too pushy, she preferred to live without needless parental drama, so...

Well—we talked, shared life stories under neon flamingo lights....

Her?

She told me how she'd attempted to end her life twice.

She told me her father despised homosexuals.

And she even said she might drink too much tequila tonight, so someone would appreciate her because life treated her like a wastebasket in need of cleaning.

I?

Well, I told her not to end her life anymore because I cared about her and thought she had been brave sharing her struggles with a complete stranger. Then, taking her hand, I made sure she wouldn't drink too much tequila the following night because she could stay with me in the cheapest, tightest hotel suite in all of sun-kissed Miami. And that day my soul experienced a revelation: even if one appeared flawless on the outside with a fairytale life, that fairytale wasn't too much of one after all. Indeed. So I nurtured Isabella amidst gentle Caribbean water, helped her evolve into an angel of love. Soon she glowed. Shined. Spoke with pure delight. It seemed we were meant to be: a young man and woman just starting out. Regardless, we enjoyed ourselves many nights—hitting up bars framed by Mimosas and coconut palms, which dropped fruit on asphalt, hitting our intoxicated heads. Sometimes too the air smelled of watermelon (I never knew why) and neon (if such a smell existed).

But what occurred outside of those pleasant times?

Well, while Florida proved strenuous (as I was still used to the more "mild" temperatures of Virginia), I eventually rose to prominence in the journalism industry. Isabella adored nature, so several times I wrote about the Everglades—painted pictures with words, described the deep humidity, coarse scales of

American Alligators, and utterly elegant cattails. I'd never been there, but Isabella recounted it as if she were a seasoned wildlife conservationist. But the thing was, she would become one (ditch the "model world" of course). Because she cared. Truly. And I helped her. Well, I helped her make sure she followed her dreams. As...

Isabella had grown up in Homestead, Florida next to a vast marsh full of herons and those thick pythons owners illegally released. Swamp life got ingrained in her, and meeting me released a passion for God's creation she'd longed contained within.

My wife loved the world.

Truly. And she longed to visit Africa, traverse Kenyan savannahs, and pay homage to crowned cranes. In fact, she told me she dreamed of staying in one of those elephant resorts where they drank from pools. But one had to make it to Africa first to see those giants. And... Well...

We did that.

A year or so later, she told me she longed to take a cross country road trip.

So we did that too, traveled the expansive deserts of Arizona (where cowboys popped out from behind saguaro cacti). And of course, she had to stop every second to take photographs with her bulky Sony camera. That described with the most minimal detail as possible (because it was way more complicated than that), it took four passionate weeks to wave hello to Miami and settle down for once.

Except we never did...

Trip after trip and year and year after passed. In the midst, we married and had two beautiful daughters (Kelsey and

Cindy), so that's how Katherine came to be. It seems all too recent (her birth)! Regardless, by then I had stopped with journalism, retired with ample savings. Just the journey from youth to old age passed quickly. One minute, you find humidity refreshing. The next, it wrinkles your skin even more. But regardless, Isabella and I were quite content, had experienced journeys most could just dream of. And now when I ponder it, as coconuts blow outside in a gentle whirr and pineapple radiates into my knick-knack filled kitchen, I know I've lived a pleasant life. And though my story feels profoundly rushed (as not even the wisest of men can condense their story into a thousand words), I feel proud to have told you how I ended up in Florida, how I found myself and my passion, and of course, how and why transcending boundaries is so important. All in all, I am not afraid of dying. Why? Because Isabella has been gone for five years now and told me not to fear mortality. Cancer got the best of her, and... Well, it didn't take long for her to cease chemo. Suffering, she told me, never amounted to success, when one felt certain of the inevitable fate of death. And I didn't resist, simply let her do as she pleased. Because when a man loves a woman, he doesn't fight her; he tells her he loves her and that she's a radiant queen, that she's done the right thing. That... he'll treasure her past death. So the man that I am adjusted the palm leaf ceiling fans in the cottage to high. *Why?* Because Isabella took pleasure in any sort of tropical breeze. Her faithful husband too: day after day, we flipped through wildlife books (*well I read them to her*), as she lay

in the master bedroom, comfortable on a wooden poster bed. And...

Well, one day, she informed me she felt Him calling her to His principedom. “David,” she whispered, forming a heart with her frail fingers, “God talked to me last night and said there’s alligators in heaven. I laughed and told him *you’ve gotta be kidding me*, but he insisted... insisted there were...”—her voice trailed off—“thousands of them things. Maybe that’s why I felt we should move to Key West: to...to escape the gators!”

Isabella passed that night as at-home nurses tended to her and checked her vitals every hour or so, never left her side. While I missed her, wished to have her back in my arms as we traversed Africa once again (she loved baboons), I knew God had provided her with the alligators she oh, so wanted. So I am ready to meet her whenever *His name* calls me because perhaps... Just perhaps God Almighty is building a ranch in the swamps of heaven for me when my time comes. And my brain feels certain he will ensure there are plenty of overweight bullfrogs to greet me—indeed—when I step out of a green canoe caressed by mossy live oaks. Isabella, too of course: clothed in muck boots and the dirtiest of jeans, it feels

beyond plausible she’ll say... Well, she’ll tell me *it’s been a while*. So that’s why my soul isn’t afraid of death. Life has treated me well, and old age brings peace even when the tropics attract younger crowds. But yesterday, as I visited the Key West lighthouse, hugged kapok trees to the best of my ability, and watched coconuts (as well as lush calatheas) meditate along with me, the world informed me of its pleasurable beauty. Because aging is a poignant yet beautiful experience, and I am fortunate to have existed. For now, I say goodbye. *Au revoir. Arrivederci.*

Peace to the world. For it is good.

And younger folks? Treat every day you have as the ultimate treasure. Because one day—I hate to utter it—you’ll be old, wishing you were young again... ■

THIRD PLACE • Art

Mason's Creek

Tara Caldwell



Multifaceted

Angelita Lind

THE NAME “Evangelista” means “bearer of good news” and is a mix of Greek and Italian with Latin origins.

The name “Angelita” means “messenger of God” or “little angel” of Greek, Spanish, and Latin origin.

The name “Wendy” means “friend” with English, Welsh, and British origins. Wendy also means “white ring” by reminding one of snow, flower petals, and angel halos.

The name “Lind” roots in Swedish and Germanic origins meaning “lime tree, gentle, and mild.” Lind represents the light and fluttering melody of babies and birds.

On May 16, 2007 sunlight dances on my skin for the first time and I sing loudly about it. I have three names: Angelita Wendy Lind. They all represent a deeper meaning than one can glean at first glance. I chisel and refine every facet of my names every day.

On that first day I welcome in what it means to be a Lind through my artful cry. My dad tells me that Linds are artists and that salsa, both the sauce and the dancing, is the red in my blood. A few years after that first day, I remember driving out to someone’s house for a boxful of pasteles: a Puerto Rican dish that wraps a combination of chicken, masa, olives, and a variety of seasonings together in twine and banana leaves. We warmed them on the stove then unwrapped the twine and banana leaf with gentle care. We dipped our forks into the masterpiece

and started dancing all around because of how good it was.

Dancing... Mom and dad did not realize how that part of my name would grow so refined and chiseled. I remember the smell of the studio I danced in and how it held nature’s earthy scent like fresh dew on a blanket of grass. I found delight in the splotches of color from the circular dots we danced, leapt, and spun on. And I remember how the shiny black of my small tap shoes glinted in the large mirror that I saw myself dancing in. Today when I’m in the studios that I dance in, I look at my reflection in the mirror and remember...

I am named after my grandma, *mi abuela* Evangelista. I was going to have that name too, but mom and dad realized how difficult it would be to pronounce in other languages. My names represent a deeper meaning than one can glean at first glance; they are multifaceted. My name now represents many sides of the globe, being able to curve around multiple dialects. And although my name is Angelita, I am not perfect. My cousin Faith would completely agree with me on the point of not always being angelic. Every time I see her, she reminds me of the story where I once had chocolate evidence on both my cheeks and fingertips, and a drawer left ajar with half-eaten desserts.

I remember my younger cousin Aria and I sneaking into Faith’s bedroom while she was in the shower. With

masterful hands I cracked the door open just enough for us to slip through. With expert precision of my ballet training, I tip-toed to the drawer holding the hidden chocolate treasures. Feeling the smoothness of the bronze handle against my small palms, I slid the drawer open. We dove in, unwrapping the soft and sweet squares of goodness and letting them melt on our tongues with a sigh. Although some did not meet our criteria of deliciousness of which we justifiably spat out and put back in the box. In this way I also exercised my Lindhood through my culinary artistic examinations. Satisfied with bellies full of the delicious chocolates, and the box littered with the wrappings and the half-eaten desserts, the shower which served as the soundtrack to our taste testing came to a sudden halt. In a rush of determination to complete this chocolate heist undiscovered, we only partially slid the drawer back into place and tip-toed out of the room, our fingers leaving chocolate stains on the door knob. When Faith got out of the bathroom she noted the chocolate evidence on my cheeks and fingertips and a drawer left ajar with half eaten desserts. I still hear this story to this day.

Wendy is the name of my cousin. I've heard that she was crazy. We would have gotten along great. Everything about her is vibrant, from her Puerto Rican accent to the bright colors woven on her dress to the squeeze of her hugs to the curls atop her head. Dad says that when she drove,

no one could ignore her presence, and if it were up to him he would have designed a special automobile with fifty seatbelts per passenger: "The Wendy-Mobile," and what a wind she kicked up. Not even cancer could take away her shine, and even though I can't witness this for myself on this side of Heaven. Her stories inspire me every time.

I remember the gold bracelet that my dad gifted me when you could count my age on only one hand. I remember how I cherished it because of how beautiful it looked paired with the white dresses I loved wearing to church. And now, as I remember all of these things, I smile at the reminder that each name is a gift. There is power in our names and we have the power to use it. But our names don't always define us. Our characters can fill the names we are given, but it's more the way we live our lives that shapes the name and redefines it.

A name seems so empty when there's no character within its layers, just like how my bracelet didn't seem as beautiful without the white dresses. We can honor people through the way we live, and remember that our stories connect us. So I'm thankful for remembering, and thankful to look ahead. ■

A Love In Fragments

Ilse Izaguirre

WHEN MY LIPS drew near, I felt as if the air was being snatched away, as if my life were ending.

And no matter how hard I tried, nothing could shorten the distance that kept me from feeling you.

Because, sadly, I couldn't get any closer to you; I could only feel the sighs escaping my lips, the way my hands trembled from not being able to feel you or from the simple fact of not being able to hold you.

Because what hurt me the most was wanting, wanting so much to do what I had done just a few days ago.

I wanted to feel your arms around my shoulders, feel your breath on my lips.

I wanted to see the way your eyes seemed to fill with stars when you saw me.

I wanted to hear the sound of your heartbeat, which sounded like a lullaby made just for me.

I wanted that when I felt you on my lips again, the world around us wouldn't exist, no one around us.

But that would never happen again. I had to wake up from my thoughts and face those around me; after all, your wake had to continue.

And then, like a distant echo, I remembered...

"I love you." Without realizing it, those words had already left my lips. It was a whisper, perhaps unconsciously I said it

that way so you couldn't hear it.

Even so, when I lifted my face to see you, I knew you heard it, because your eyes lit up, as if a spark ignited within them; your cheeks turned red, like two poppies, and your lips formed a soft smile as they pronounced, "I love you too." Seconds later, I felt your arms wrap around me, and how that familiar warmth cradled me like a safe haven.

My lips met yours in a tender and sweet kiss, a kiss that tasted of promises and eternity.

The world around us faded away. It was just you and me, united. An eternal love. A love that now, at this wake, feels like a distant dream.

Never in my life had I felt so empty, but since I returned from your burial, it's as if something is missing.

Saying goodbye to your friends and family was horrible; they had each other, but I was alone.

Without you by my side, this world feels empty.

You were the one who gave me the will to live when I was at the worst moment of my life.

Now that you are gone, what will I do? I wish I could end all my suffering, but I know you would want me to keep going, and so I will.

For you.

My love, living without you is so

difficult.

Every morning I wake up hoping to feel you by my side, it's as if my brain wants to torture me when I don't feel you, I get scared.

There are days when I just want to disappear, it hurts to cook, sometimes (most of the time) I make portions for two, because my mind is so accustomed to thinking that you are working and will arrive soon.

When I'm serving your portion, that's when I remember and I simply break down; I forget everything and start crying in the kitchen.

Other times, I say I'll watch our favorite movie, but I don't get past 10 minutes without crying because I wish you were here beside me, hugging me.

That memory, as vivid as if it had happened yesterday, hit me hard.

"Look," you said, and when I turned around, my eyes met the mug you were holding in front of your face.

A kaleidoscope of bubblegum pink and bright yellow, with a cartoonish dinosaur stamped in the center. It was an assault on good taste.

"We're not taking that," I said, with the firmest voice I could muster.

"How can you like something so colorful and gaudy? The design doesn't make sense—a dinosaur in the middle of so much pink and yellow?"

You took the mug in your hands, admiring it with a smile. "Why not? It's one of a kind," you said, with a pout that always melted my heart. You knew I couldn't resist those faces.

I simply resigned myself and sighed, rolling my eyes. "You're seriously the worst," I said, but a smile escaped my lips.

"Fine, we'll take it, but I want it far away from me."

I thought it wouldn't happen again. Three months have passed since your

death, and I thought I had improved at navigating the world without you.

I wasn't. I went back to square one when I found your favorite mug, the one you always left half full. It was as if all the steps I had climbed had never existed.

I cried for you again.

When will this stop? When will I be able to forget you? When will I be able to stop crying for you?

I love you, but at the same time I wish I didn't. I wish my heart would stop beating for you, and thus stop suffering.

If you're really watching over me, I hope you remember I told you about my job.

Well, I followed your advice and sent in my auditions; I got it! I'll be in a movie. It won't be a big role, but it will still be worth it.

I wish you were here with me to celebrate this achievement.

I looked away, clenching my fists.

"You know I hate you talking to me about this," I said, my voice trembling. We had been arguing for twenty minutes, and I felt like I was about to explode.

"Why not? You have the talent; you should try. Just because someone once tried to tell you that you shouldn't doesn't mean you should listen to them," you said, coming closer to me and taking my hands.

"What if I try and fail?" I asked, my voice breaking.

"Even if it's a small role, I know you'll make it," you said in a calm and confident voice.

"Honey, wake up," I could hear you whispering in my ear, your warm breath brushing against my skin, but I pretended to still be asleep, enjoying the peace you gave me.

I love when you wake me up like this, with your soft voice and light touch.

"I made you breakfast." I knew it; I could smell the aroma of freshly brewed

coffee mixed with the sweet smell of your pancakes, but I just wanted to enjoy a moment longer like this with you, feeling your closeness.

That's when reality hits me again.

I think I hate loving you.

Why? Just answer me, why? Why do I have to suffer your loss?

I wish I could just forget you, erase you from my memory, as if you had never existed.

But I can't and that kills me.

After all I've worked to move on, you come back to haunt me, this time in my dreams.

Do you know how painful it is to dream a life that no longer exists, and when you wake up you still think you are in the dream, only to realize that it is not true, that you are alone in this world?

I wish I had never met you, because then I wouldn't know what it is to lose you.

Because I wouldn't have known the happiness you took from me when you left.

There is something so painful about entering our home.

The echo of my footsteps resonates in the silence, the absence of your aroma in the air.

Every time I turn the handle, I hope to hear you or see you.

Maybe you would be in the kitchen, the aroma of your favorite spices filling the air, preparing dinner while exclaiming, "How was your day, my love?"

But I know it won't happen. You are gone.

I can't get better living in this place, a place marked with all your memories.

I didn't want to accept it, tears clouding my vision, but it was time to say goodbye. I must get better, and I know I won't do it here.

I'm sorry, my love, but this is my decision. I will put myself above your memories, and I will get better.

I'm not saying I'll forget you; that would be impossible. Nor am I saying everything will change overnight; after all, I will always have a piece of you with me, a memory that will accompany me every step.

Some time has passed since I made that decision. It has been painful to find a new place to live, knowing you will not be with me in this new stage.

I love you, and I think I will never stop, but today I say goodbye to what I knew with you in this place.

I will get better, or I will try, but to do so I must take this step.

Thank you for everything, my love.

Now, as I watch the sunlight filter through the window of what we once considered our home, I feel a mix of sadness and hope.

I know that your memory will always be with me, but I also know that I must move onward, building a new future, one step at a time. ■

Ghost Story

Maria Kachmar

AT SOME POINT during the intervening years, you had convinced yourself that instincts were subject to change, and that any knowledge acquired about fatherhood had died with your daughter in 1991. But you were wrong. Seeing her now, in a yellow sundress and starkly bare feet at the tail end of October, you are possessed by an overwhelming urge to pick her up and hold her close; to blanket her against the cold with your entire body; to curl around her like a snake to a stone in the sun.

From an objective standpoint, you know that what you're seeing is a skewed perception of reality. The signs have been present all day—headache, dissociation, acute synesthesia. Hallucinations are always the final step in a pattern you've become reluctantly familiar with over the years, but still you cannot reconcile what you know to be true with what you are currently seeing.

"Where are your shoes, baby?" you ask, unable to stop yourself, unable to heed the old advice offered by old doctors in an old lifetime: *Do Not Talk To Ghosts*. Because interacting with hallucinations always means a stronger pull, a quicker spiral. In the early days, when you were fresh out of North Shore and prone to episodes even more frequently than now, that phrase had played like a loop in your head. *Do Not Talk To Ghosts*. Since then it's evolved; grown its second and third skins, morphing in an attempt to encapsulate every aspect of your life instead of just the one; an armor and a deterrent, all at once. *Do Not Talk To Ghosts. Do Not*

Talk To Anyone.

Sophia just waves and smiles, crossing the porch and slipping through the front door without a word. And even as your headache builds, and even as your anxiety grows, and even as your mouth floods with the taste of copper and clay, you follow your daughter inside. You don't have a choice. It's possible that you never even wanted one.

Into the kitchen.

"I love you, Daddy" she says, and you shake your head, blinking back tears, wanting so badly to take her into your arms and close your eyes and never open them again, but this is not your daughter. You know Sophia is dead; buried under a white marble stone somewhere in the far corner of a cemetery in Houston.

(...you laid down in the shade of that stone last time you were in Texas, ear to earth, and there was a funeral up the hill, and you didn't get back up for another three hours, because you barely got up at all...)

"I love you," she repeats, more insistently. There are rocks in your throat, but still you manage to respond; it is a quiet, four-worded affair, truthful and absolutely ruinous.

"I wish you wouldn't."

After the accident, you and your wife went to counseling, but it was a waste of money because you wouldn't talk in front of the therapist. You grieved at odd moments, privately, minutely, invisible even almost to yourself. You did not

grieve enough. You withdrew. And she left you.

Claire would never completely recover from what had happened, but complete recovery was probably not possible. At least she had managed to put some solid geographical distance between herself and your shared disaster. By taking up the gentle offer of a new start by traveling family members, it was as if she had been blown clear, while you continued to camp, southbound, on the smoking wreckage of Texas.

Once, after Sophia died, you were walking and saw a bird fly into the wheel of a car. Dove too low, got caught in the crunch. And you thought: How'd you like that? Nothing left on the pavement but a ripped up red stain, more grit than feather. And you thought: Pull yourself together. And you thought: I'll peel myself off the road if you do.

Once, as you lay dying in a warehouse in Dallas, three bullets fighting for real estate behind your fractured ribs, you thought of her at her smallest, at her newest. Not when she was first born, but before, when she was first made, living in that black cave, cradled by soft tissue and sturdy strands of muscle, visible only by sonogram.

Once, while under the influence of a court-mandated cocktail, you'd told the chaplain at North Shore Psychiatric Hospital about her. *I had a daughter*, you'd said. *She lived. She died.*

When the chaplain had asked if you were angry at god, you shook your head, replying with an impassive: *I don't believe in god.*

So you don't believe in heaven?

I believe that any belief in an afterlife is a reaction to innate narcissism. That the idea of life beyond death is just people's

way of not being able to cope with the fact that they won't be around forever.

The chaplain shook his head. *But don't you want to see your daughter again someday?*

And because of all the drugs—all of those antidepressants and antipsychotics and benzodiazepines ganging up and forcing down the wall you so carefully constructed—you'd said, crying:

I want to see her now.

And the chaplain shook his head again. *Eyes front*, he'd said gently. *Remember Lot's wife. Nothing grows in salt.*

And for once, you had agreed with him.

Over the next seventeen years, you would crumble yourself between your palms and salt the earth. You would let nothing take root in you, ever again.

Now, the earth around you is barren, and you've gotten so used to it that the sight of her, glowing and warm in the kitchen, is almost enough to bring you to your knees. She moves like memory—fluid and full of stops—pulling open the refrigerator door, wrinkling her nose at its contents. It's absurd how real she looks. You'd forgotten the freckle on her left wrist, the way it stood out like a tiny punctuation mark, but there it is, a flaw rendered perfectly in whatever medium your mind has chosen to torture you with this time.

"Do we have any juice?" she asks, voice soft, her inflection rising at the end like she's testing the room, trying to remember if this is where she belongs. It knocks you sideways, the sheer ease of it.

"There's no juice," you manage, though it takes effort.

Sophia sighs and lets the refrigerator door drift shut. "We used to always have juice."

You don't answer, thinking of Claire again, her smooth and even exodus from your life, the way she was always better at building routines out of love. It hadn't occurred to you until now how much of your daughter's memory lives in those routines—unbought groceries, unspoken rules. You never bought juice again after Sophia died. You never made pancakes on Saturday mornings. You never did anything that might invite her ghost back home.

But here she is.

She crosses to the sink and runs the tap, filling a glass halfway before sipping from it. Her lips leave faint condensation against the rim. Your headache is a wardrum now, each pulse so sharp you feel it in your teeth. You can taste blood, though your gums are intact. The house feels smaller, or maybe just fuller, a single presence taking up all the air. You try to will her away, to undo this impossible moment by sheer force of thought, but she's still there when you open your eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

And you think, *No, baby, I am not okay. I have not been okay since the day they zipped you into that bag and closed the door on everything we were supposed to have together.* But all you say is, "I'm tired."

"You look tired," she agrees, with a bluntness that almost makes you laugh.

She moves towards you, barefoot and weightless, and you want so badly to take a step back, to give her the space she deserves to haunt without your interference. But you're rooted to the floor, paralyzed in the face of this impossible thing, this memory made flesh, until she's right there in front of you, tiny fingers reaching up to touch your cheek.

Her hand is cold.

Her hand is real.

She leans in close, her breath warm against your ear, and whispers, "You can rest now."

Your heart stutters. You feel the pull of her words like gravity, like gravity turned on its head, and for one awful, brilliant moment, you almost let go. You almost lean into her, almost let yourself fold into the idea of her, but then your training takes over. That deep, unshakable instinct to survive, to resist. You pull back sharply, shaking your head.

Sophia's face falls, just slightly, and then she steps back, the movement so fluid it feels like a ripple through the air. She says nothing else, just looks at you, her gaze heavy with all the things you've tried not to carry for so long.

You blink, and she's gone.

The house is quiet again, except for the sound of the faucet still running in the kitchen. You turn it off with hands that don't feel like yours, staring at the empty glass on the counter, her fingerprints already evaporating. Outside, the wind picks up, and you think again of Claire, of North Shore, of all the ghosts you've refused to name.

You wonder, briefly, what the chaplain would say now. If he'd call this grace, or punishment, or something else entirely.

You stand there until the room grows dim, until the shadows stretch long across the floor, and then you pick up your keys and walk out the door, leaving the lights on behind you. ■

HONORABLE MENTION • *Art*

Trying to See through the Filth

Roni Kingsley



Next Time Don't Be So Cold

Charity Tynes

CHAPTER ONE Next Time Don't Be so Cold

THE FIRST TIME I felt it, I was standing by his casket. A white collar covering up where the rope hung around it. Eyes closed, never re-opening. Never seeing all these people, all these people crying.

I felt it again when I was laying on my mother's bed crying. My tears are the only words to describe what I felt inside. "1-800" by Logic playing over in my ears. That song, the only thing that seemed to get tears to run, as I tried to get everything out. I wanted it all out. All the sinfulness and sadness that consumed me. Sometimes I believed the more I cried, the more dirt left me. I was wrong, though, the dirt only falling onto the pillow yet smearing and absorbing back into my face and into my bones. This wasn't something I could cry out. This was in my bones.

I knew the moment I woke up that day, hooked to a hospital bed, that I was stuck. Though the pills ran deep, I was here, in this bed, in this room, eyes opening again. I hadn't wanted to die, rather to live actually. To live right, to live good, to just be good. Yet here I was, stuck. Unable to escape from this dirt that filled throughout me, yet not wanting to be buried

under it. Too scared to. I wasn't happy, I wasn't sad. I was stuck.

Brown eyes stared back into mine sitting on the swings surrounded by fences and alarms. Brown eyes that smiled back at me, brown hair that swept to the side, a heart that made mine feel safe. I went back to my room at the mental hospital. Slept on hard mattresses looking out a small window and white walls. Played basketball in a small gym. Cried on the phone to my mother. Saw them cry because of theirs. Ate lunches and breakfasts next to pale hands and random thoughts. Next to quickly eaten food and untouched trays yet hungry bodies that couldn't eat, never feeling it was ok to eat for fear of weight. Retching sounds from bathrooms and sudden running from the staff to stop them. Fake smiles, genuine smiles, healed cuts, unhealed cuts, but always, always heart. All of us got here from hurt. Yet throughout the activities and blurred days from medication, our hearts still pumped. Still found a reason to, although inside our minds, we wished it would run out of reasons.

Those same brown eyes wrote me a letter. The first anyone ever has. I read as I was sitting in a chair pulled to a round

table. The writing in crayon, as pencils weren't allowed due to the possibility of hurting ourselves with them. My heart beat fast as the lines ran through my eyes, almost as if it slid down into my veins and into my pumping heart.

"A reason," I whispered. Brown eyes' words a whispered reason for one more heart beat as I was described as beautiful, as kind, as a good person. As in my most vulnerable state, unkempt hair and brittle bones covered in white pills that produced numb, sunken feelings. Yet here, reading these words, looking into those eyes, hearing that voice, I was unstuck. My heart had found reasons, logical reasons to keep beating, but finally so did I. Logical. I found her to be the most logical thing I had experienced. And as the phone clicked after I returned home, the last time I ever heard from her, I got up from my couch, I found a reason. She was the reason.

I scrubbed and scrubbed. I washed my hands in His waters. Holy waters. Every time those thoughts came up, praying and repenting. No matter how hard I scrubbed, pieces of her never washed out from underneath me, inside me. Yet no matter how much blood was on my hands, cut open and protruding from deep inside, it never burned. She never burned away as those pages said.

Eternity. Eternal flames, eternal suffering, but here I was, scrubbing and scrubbing and opening new wounds from all that scrubbing but never burning. Opening new wounds but never burning. That's what it was like. Each

time I thought of her, healing a wound, yet quickly re-opening them as I thought back to those pages. To His face in disapproval. To eternal flames and suffering. Suddenly finding myself on my knees crying for forgiveness as my bloody wounds pooled down my arms. I didn't want to burn forever. She never burned me. Though the thought of seeing myself fall into the depths of those flames, falling down there for the person who made me want my heart to beat again, it never made sense. The thing keeping me alive, yet killing me all at once.

So I ran, tears and legs and feet as quick as I could. Away from all of it. Following Him as best I could as I ran as fast as I could. I was so tired. That's the only way I can describe it. I was just tired. Unable to find relief. Much later I would find myself yearning for her still, her scent, that one sweater she wore that day, the way her short hair blew in the wind that day on the playground. Everywhere I went, she was never there. I found myself looking for her, praying for her, because she, after all, was supposed to be my happily after all. Yet as I had learned and would come to learn more, you don't always get what you want.

Yet in dreams, I let the truth catch up with me and stay under my fingernails, as I dug those same fingernails into her back, leaving even more blood under them. It didn't matter though, because as blood would pool down from under those nails of mine, holding on to her as we rolled around laughing, I felt it.

Love.

True and pure. Suddenly I'd wake up and run again, dropping to my knees to pray and crying for forgiveness. Flashes of her smile still in my mind as I prayed, making my tears fall even more as I would look up at my ceiling. I would look up, waiting for some miracle and for me to be freed from all of it. But just like every other time before, I'd get up, take a breath, and keep running. Those few

seconds, her smile, her hand in mine, her knowing eyes. Those seconds I stopped running, I let the people condemn me, I let God condemn me, I let the flames consume me, and finally, out of breath and wheezing.

I let her love me.

Then the seconds ended. I started running faster.

CHAPTER TWO

Romance

HOMECOMING NIGHT of senior year. I sway along to the music as I imagine someone I've never met. I even imagined a man, a man who could make me feel. Make me believe I wasn't too far gone, make me feel like God was right, that I could be changed. Born again as they said. I stared up at the flashing colored lights and felt the heat from unknown sweaty bodies as everyone danced, my black dress tight around my body as my figure listened to the music. I kept my eyes closed, and imagined her brown hair swaying in the heat of bodies around us. I imagined the heat to be flames, the people to be dropped into and consumed with the hot surroundings of something sinister or hell-like. Although I knew it was much colder than Hell would be, I still imagined it. Getting closer to the heat, to the bodies bumping into mine, to the sweat running down and the thirst that filled my throat, begging for water. I imagined it still, and

drowned it all out, opening my eyes only for a second to imagine her hands around my waist and her smile reflecting in my eyes.

All that imagining couldn't come close to the real heat and suffering, this is true. Yet somehow with her invisible hands around my waist, pulling me in, and her face suddenly disappearing rapidly, I wondered to myself if even in the depths of Hell and heat and suffering, where there is said to be no comfort, no solace, if I could still hug her burning body. If maybe somehow, with the heat burning me alive, if I could find her, our screams crying out for help and simply hug her burnt figure. Would that not bring me some kind of comfort? To know that no matter how regretful I may be for destining myself to the flames of Hell, that I would be able to hug her as our screams continued and we cried out for help, getting no answer except the burning of our bodies combined together forevermore.

CHAPTER THREE
Something To Say

"HEY, WAIT!" A voice said behind me as I went to unlock my car.

I turned around to a panting voice, to a boy with his suit jacket hung over his shoulder as he stood up straight.

"I saw you dancing," he says.

That started my life. Josh. Something about him drawing me in, maybe his green eyes, or the way his curly hair glistened with moisture from all the dancing. He asked for my number, something about the look of nervousness and genuineness in his eyes telling me to say yes. I let him in, laughing at his dumb jokes and meeting up after class to walk to our next. Sitting at different tables at lunch, but looking to where he was and seeing his eyes already on mine. It made me smile. He made me smile. Holding the door open for me and listening to me when I needed to talk. He'd come over to my house, us now dating, and I'd lay on his stomach as a football game played on the TV. I'd look up at his face, the reflection of the game playing shown on his face. The way his breath moved in sync with mine and his hand caressed my arm. The way even when they missed a touchdown opportunity or made a bad play, he would never get mad and throw things, something I worried about. Something my father used to do. He would simply smile to me and say "Did you see that babe?" and continue on about how they should

make him the coach, making me laugh as his chest bobbed up and down with his own laughter.

We'd end the night with slow kisses and hands tangled in hair but no further. It was passionate, it was kind. I wanted to feel Josh, and wanted his hands to feel me and tell me he'd stay forever. I wanted him to stay forever. I wanted us to stay together. Then I'd go home and find my nights being spent on staring at my ceiling and wishing Josh was there to tell me everything would be alright like he did. Josh was the reason, I knew it, deep down. But God, how I felt something when he danced with me in the middle of my kitchen, with my favorite songs on. How he spun me around to my giggles and put his hand on my waist. The pressure of his hand on my waist different from hers ever was. Heavier, yet soft still. God how I felt the want to run away from who I really was forever if it meant Josh looking into my eyes so gently. If it meant feeling him kiss me slow, with no hurry, but instead to savor me. I would run forever if it meant Josh would know me this way forever. As a girl that he wanted to marry and love for the rest of our lives. I would've ran forever for him, breath hitching and lungs burning.

I was a coward for it all, I know. He was in love and I was scared. I spent my days telling myself you won't feel butterflies

and rainbows all the time, which was true, yet some days, I'd lay on his stomach in that same room as he caressed my arm watching a game, and I'd just know. Know that no matter how many times he spun me around and danced with me, or tangled his fingers in my hair telling me he thinks I'm beautiful, that I could never be with him forever. I loved Josh, but he loved me. I cared about him, but he would've spent the rest of his days with me. We were different.

"Everything was so good though?" He replied to me as tears ran down our cheeks.

I looked in his green eyes one more time. Those same ones that shone in the moonlight that night after homecoming, those same eyes that looked at me like there was never anything that scientists could discover more important than me. I was a coward for what I did. He didn't deserve any of that, and it was my fault. I truly thought I could change when his closed mouth smile he would give me across any room caught my eyes. But then I'd go home, I'd go back to being alone with myself and all I could think when I thought of the future was someone I didn't know yet. Only that someone was never a man. It wasn't anyone I knew before or anyone I did then, it was simply not him. That someone would show up with different faces and features each

time I thought of them, except every time I stopped thinking about them, thinking about kissing them, coming home to them, I didn't feel empty, I felt hopeful. The thought of a life with Josh made me sad, not hopeful, knowing he'd want to have sex one day and I had no interest. Knowing I'd possibly become his wife and every time he came home to me, no matter how much I loved his closed mouth smile, that I would feel empty. I knew because I already was. He looked at me for a second, before letting go of my hand and leaving my house. His curly hair and muscular frame getting in his car and driving away.

"Josh," I cried.

I knew I had no right to cry for him as snapshots of us played in my mind as I walked back upstairs into my room. I did this to him, to us. Yet somehow, when I hit my bed, I felt breath come back into my lungs, I felt a relief that I hated myself for. I had finally stopped running, right in the middle of the street and let everything catch up with me. I had stopped running and got my breath back.

"But Josh..." I thought to myself.

I had stopped running. But Josh. ■

Between the Sand and the Sea

Nicole Mann

Even the sun on her throne bowed to the sea at night.

ONE

PONIRÓS WAS DANCING again, cradling the sparkling light atop his crest of waves as they slipped softly up the white sand beaches. It was summer once more, and families flocked to sit on his shores and admire his beauty. Ponirós himself admired his beauty unabashedly and knew that he was the strongest, cleverest, and most alluring being on the planet. The stars in the night sky and the moon on the eve of darkness were only temporary; Ponirós was the spirit of the ocean, and the ocean existed beyond time and space. Ponirós held mysteries and fortunes that no other form on earth could fathom. Even the sun on her throne in the sky bowed to the sea at night. This was the attitude that Ponirós was emboldened by: with the tides and the currents and the creatures that dwelled within, he could take anything that he desired.

One summer morning as the sun peeked from beneath the waves, Ponirós was stretching his sprawling limbs along the sand when he spotted a new set of footprints along the water's edge. Ponirós rarely paid attention to the

humans that visited, though of course he reveled in their admiration. However, he knew every print of every creature that wandered past—from the drag marks of the mother turtles pulling themselves away from their nests to the spiky prints of gulls that cracked open crab shells. He didn't particularly care about any of the species that called the sea home, but he did want to know all of his audience. Ponirós took over the eyes of a school of psaraki darting through the shallows, not because he needed to, but simply because he could. He skipped along the seafoam in the bodies of the little fish to follow the prints. Soon the psaraki became tiresome, and Ponirós occupied a lithe delfini as she darted in and out of the shimmering waves. The footsteps carried on for miles, and Ponirós began to feel agitated that he had not been aware of this new visitor before. Once the delfini grew dull, Ponirós melted into the body of a hydrophiinae winding its way through the waters, nearly invisible with its bands of dark grey and tan that mimicked the sun on the sea. It was in this body of the sea snake that Ponirós first glimpsed Omorfía.

TWO

OMORFIÁ WAS SINGING softly to herself as she walked, the gentle morning sun kissing her brown shoulders. She wore a white dress of loose, thin fabric that fell beautifully against her richly toned skin. She was more captivating than Ponirós wanted to accept; her hair fell in dark ringlets to her collar bone, her eyes were the color of the darkest stone on the ocean floor, and she walked with such grace that the world seemed to steady itself around her. Ponirós abandoned the body of the hydrophiinae as he tracked her along the shoreline through the waves. He sent a delicate sea spray up to caress her heels and calves as she walked. She did not flinch at the cool morning water, and if he had had a heart, it would have stopped as he watched her walk closer toward him. He dove away from her, back into a deep cavern that light did not enter. Here he hid the treasures that the tides collected in this stretch of ocean. Ponirós selected a pure white shell about the size of Omorfíá's smallest finger. The shell was spiraled with delicate bands of gold and glistened even in the darkness of the crevasse. Ponirós plunged back through the cavern opening and erupted to the surface, encasing the shell in a rogue wave to be deposited at Omorfíá's perfect feet. He watched with bated breath, and for once he was not thinking about how clever he had been to select such a beautiful treasure or how seductive he must be to wield such power and fortune. Omorfíá laughed a wonderfully strong laugh as the rogue wave soaked the hem of her dress. She then stopped abruptly, peering down at the receding water. Just as Ponirós had hoped, she bent down and carefully lifted the shell. She gasped

at how stunning the little gift was and clutched it to her breast, gazing out over the ocean. Ponirós saw her smile softly to herself, the sunlight turning her eyes amber and accentuating the natural glow of her cheeks. He had to have her.

THREE

LATER THAT MORNING, Omorfíá had returned from her walk to the village where she was staying. Ponirós was beside himself with a swell of emotions that he was not used to feeling. He was desperate to see her again, angry that she could walk away so easily, and determined to find a way to command her attention next time. He rushed through the waters, intent on finding the most beautiful artifacts that he would give to Omorfíá on her next visit. The creatures of the ocean were not used to seeing Ponirós in this way. They could not remember a time that he had any thoughts other than of himself, and were weary of how he was acting. His movements were erratic and his thoughts were obsessive. Many of the psari and sea stars slipped into the coral reefs to stay far out of his way. As far as he was concerned, Ponirós was considered the all-powerful ocean, but whispers from the dark sea carried different names. Ponirós was known as Anórimos, Adýnamos, and worse, Synkinitikós, though never where he might hear. The creatures were tired of being abused by such a tyrant, and they were disgusted with his hubris and apathy towards others. They had great cause for concern, then, when they saw that someone else had captivated him. They knew that Omorfíá was in danger.

Morning of the following day dawned with an obsessive Ponirós stalking the

shore. Laden with the gifts for Omorfiá, he slunk impatiently through the shallows. By the afternoon, the creatures cowered as the water churned. Ponirós heaved the gifts onto the shore where they shattered into the rocks. His screams of anger were drowned out by the roar of waves as they crashed down onto the sand. A tempest unlike anything the coastal community had seen seemingly rose up from the depths of the ocean and took hold over the beach. Boats were upturned and docks were torn apart as Ponirós thrashed through the water. Even the huge, well-muscled karcharíes and fálaines fled into the deeper ocean to avoid the turmoil. Tidal pools erupted as they were battered with debris, and the fish were left stranded on the sand as the waves shrank back when Ponirós was finally through with his fit. He seethed in quiet rage under the surface of the black waters. As the whitecaps rolled overhead, Ponirós vowed that he would never be humiliated by this woman again.

FOUR

ONCE THE GREY MORNING broke overhead, Omorfiá ventured down to the shore again. This time, she was not alone. She was on the arm of a stocky, rather plain-looking man, but a man who looked at her as if she were heaven and earth personified. This man was her new husband, and he adored Omorfiá. He was kind, attentive, and gentle, and around his neck he wore a shell necklace that she had made for him the day before. Once Ponirós sensed that Omorfiá was back, he sped through the waters to greet her, the tantrum of the day before entirely

forgotten by him and him alone. The creatures of the sea cowered in their homes and hideouts, knowing that Ponirós had not yet noticed Omorfiá's guest. He came to a sudden halt where the waves met the sand and stared incredulously at the pair as they picked their way along the wreckage of the day before. Omorfiá was a shining light in the midst of the wasted beach, and she was accompanied by such a simple man. Ponirós could not stand to see his treasure with someone else. Almost worse than that, the shell that Ponirós had gifted Omorfiá was strung around this man's cowlike neck. Upon seeing this, Ponirós was blackened with rage and humiliation. He was the ocean—all powerful and immortal—and here she was lessening herself with a man. The waves became choppy and green, and Ponirós was sick with envy.

FIVE

OMORFIÁ CONTINUED her stroll with her husband, oblivious to the threat that followed her along the shore. She was enamored with the man she had married. He made her laugh and he danced wonderfully, and he was always excited to join her on an outing. He had beamed when she presented him with the necklace that she made out of the shell she found in the waves. Omorfiá was thrilled that he put it on without hesitation, and before breakfast this morning, she suggested they walk along the beach and see if the storm had overturned any other treasures. This motive was soon forgotten, though, as they both were lost in the companionship of one another. Omorfiá and her husband enjoyed the slow mornings in

each other's company more than any prospective treasure they might find on the beach. He loved her, and she loved him. They were happy together. They were excited about their new life and the love that filled it. They were walking too close to the water's edge.

SIX

THERE IS ALWAYS A PAUSE before devastation, as if the universe itself is holding its breath and wants to look away. The man that Omorfía was with stepped into the water, and in an instant a rogue wave not unlike the one that delivered the shell to Omorfía swirled around his thighs. He looked at Omorfía in confusion and then panic as the tide began to drag him out and away.

Omorfiá was equally confused until she too felt the sucking of the undercurrent pulling her legs from beneath her. With an alarmed shout, she reached out to the man she loved to try to pull him back to her. She lost her footing, and they both went under the waves.

The current dragged Omorfía below the surface and away from the light. She watched helplessly as her husband struggled against the strength of the ocean in front of her. She felt as though she were suspended in the sea—as if in some sickly way, she was being made to see her life unravel before her. Omorfía was a strong swimmer, but no matter how desperately she fought to reach him, she was always just a fingertip's length short. In horror, she saw his necklace catch on the bottom of a submerged boat. For a few terrifying seconds, Omorfía was convinced that she

saw a beast in the water behind him. In the water wasn't quite right, though—it was as if this demonic form was part of the water. Her husband thrashed back and forth as the apparition smiled at her with crooked teeth and a malicious grin, and Omorfía screamed out, the air in her lungs dissipating into a cloud of bubbles. The last she saw of her beloved was his body caught on a shipwreck at the bottom of the sea, his eyes, which she so loved, open wide in surprise and staring through her.

SEVEN

OMORFIÁ FLOATED above her husband's body until her lungs gave out. The water caressed her gently as her eyes closed and her lungs filled with the sea. As mortality left her body, Ponirós raced up to console her. How overjoyed she will be, he thought, when she realizes that she is no longer betrothed to that wretch, and she is free to admire and worship me. Ponirós expected that she would be unable to control her excitement at the idea of becoming part of the ocean next to him. As he approached her lifeless human form, he watched as her dark human skin transformed into the luminescent, god-like form that was part of the water and seafoam. Rather than awe and adoration, however, her dark eyes were filled with hatred and anger as they opened to her new world. She was not afraid—she was more enraged than Ponirós had ever been before. She struck out against him and cursed him, knowing now that the demon she believed she imagined was actually the cause of her

new suffering. For the first time in his immortal existence that preceded even the sun, Ponirós felt fear and shame. He tried desperately to calm Omorfíá, but she only lashed out harder. To escape the consequence of his rash decision and to avoid taking responsibility for manipulating someone else's life, Ponirós fled into the deepest trenches. Omorfíá began to chase after him, but the creatures of

the ocean saw the danger she would put herself in if she cornered such a narcissistic monster. All creatures, from the smallest psaráki and the oldest fálaina to the most fearsome karcharías, came to her side. They knew that in creating a spiritess for the sea, Ponirós had doomed himself with an equal. They no longer had to live only in fear, and they wanted to help the woman who had saved them.

EPILOGUE

OMORFIÁ WEPT SO HARD and for so long that her tears became one with the ocean, causing the salty water that characterizes the sea. The creatures of the ocean made sure that Ponirós stayed well away from their spiritess while she grieved the loss of her life and the life of her husband. After one year passed, Omorfíá emerged from the wreckage of the ship that served as a grave for her late love. She vowed to protect the sea creatures who were now family to her, and to protect all other humans from the abuse and greed of Ponirós. As for Ponirós, he remained hidden in the deepest waters for quite some time. Enraged that he is

no longer feared or adored, but merely a curiosity to be forgotten, he often sends rip currents and tides to pull more humans beneath the surface. When you are in the ocean, take care to pay attention to your surroundings and intuition. Ponirós works hard to drag people out to sea, but Omorfíá works harder to protect them. If you are out in strong waters and feel an invisible form brush your foot or a clump of something wrap around your leg, it would be best to move back to the beach. Your survival may depend on whether it is Ponirós or Omorfíá that beckons to you from below. ■



HONORABLE MENTION • *Art*

Brightpoint in Fall
Estefania Rivero

The Crimson Curtain

Jacqueline Hymel

MY NIGHT STARTS in my dressing room backstage. I slick back the frizz in my hair, glancing around for my hair ties as they tend to run away from me when I need them the most.

The crimson velvet curtains make a whirring noise, and slowly split apart. I glance out at the invisible audience, and imagine a young girl sitting out there. The soft but bold classical music begins, fading in. My feet, wrapped in a pale satin pink, begin to move. Twirls and leaps and kicks, they take me around and around the stage, creating a new ballet that only my thoughts will get to enjoy. I always thought I'd die on this stage, and I still remain with that feeling. I don't think it will ever go away.

My leaps carry me off stage, and I run around the curtain to prance out from the other side. I do so gracefully, starting my *à la secondes en pointe*. I trip upon my loose ribbons, causing my balance to become irregular. I capture the moment in performing a series of *pas failli*, gracefully stopping myself with the box of my pointe shoes. I recover and glissade to my finishing stance, and once the music comes to an end, I gracefully run to the front line and curtsy, and the curtains close. Everything fades to black, and I wake up once again behind the stage, the pain still dwelling in my feet and my hair unraveled. This goes on for nights and nights, approximately... 567 nights.

Then again, the curtains part, but this time, a slightly seen silhouette stands under the exit sign, holding a bouquet of flowers. Crimson, just like my once pale pointe shoes. I finish my choreographed ballet, allowing my feet to take me, but instead of tears of sorrow, my tears now switch from the left to the right corners. Happiness; a feeling I haven't felt ever since this was put upon me so many performances ago. The music fades to an end, the silhouette of my watcher comes closer, whose face I now recognize. She is me, 17 years younger, only 5 years old, holding out the crimson-colored gift. As I wrap my hands around the bow holding them together, everything fades to white, and there I lie with the bright hospital lights and sirens and yelling all around my paralyzed body. It was all only a dream. ■

Thank you to this year's judges

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THIS JOURNAL CONTAINS the winning student submissions from the 2025 Currents Art & Literary Contest, an annual competition sponsored by the Office of Student Activities at Brightpoint Community College.

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ABOUT





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