

# QUERENCIA

WHERE YOU CAN BE YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF

## BONDS

ISSUE 1

MARCH 2021

# querencia

kr·en·see·uh

Welcome to the inaugural issue of ***querencia magazine***! I just want to take this opportunity to express my words of gratitude.

Thank you to everyone who was a part of the behind-the-scenes process, helping out with everything from editing, social media posts, playlist making, or just offering a kind and encouraging face over a Zoom call.

I especially want to thank all of our contributors who took a chance on this magazine. querencia was started with the intention of lifting up historically underrepresented voices, and this issue showcases 31 of those brilliant voices. Thank you all for taking a chance on our magazine and trusting us to treat your work with care and give it a home—a querencia, if you will.

I hope you all enjoy these pieces and we will see you again for our next issue, where we will continue sharing even more of your stories.

Editor-in-Chief

Xan Mullings

Cover Image by Martins Deep

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**By Sunny Young**

## **Slouching Towards the Exit**

**--For Jesse Boyd**

**By Zachary Pryor**

Alistair is my best friend. We sink pale ales in beer gardens around Fitzroy, talk shit about our jobs, share joints and laugh until our ribs hurt. Sometimes we go running, chuck a ball around, and occasionally we watch the footy though we don't really have a team as neither of us were born here. We text each other every day, often gifs and memes we've found online.

Sometimes we talk about our past—Alistair tells me about how he moved to Melbourne from Christchurch after his parent's divorce, escaping before the 2011 earthquake flattened his school; that he caught his boyfriend cheating on him one night at the Peel; or the pain of losing his sister to cancer when he was nine. I talk about what it was like growing up in Glenelg, with the air always salted from the Great Australian Bight; how my parents were still there, praying I return. We tell each other stories about who we hope to be and where we hope to go.

After nine years in the city, Melbourne now fits us like a second skin. I wear lots of black, drink my flat white strong, and hail down trams with ease.

One sticky Friday evening in February when we're sitting at the Arbory overlooking the Yarra River, Alistair says he wants to escape winter this year and head to Europe. He asks me if I want to come. I take a sip of my copper- coloured pint, the malty flavour hits my throat and I gulp it down, buying time before I answer. Fit men with golden tans in speedos, bodies glistening under the Grecian sun, run through my mind. I picture us on the beach, my white arms and love-handles sticking out against the sea of muscle; then roaming the streets of Montmartre, eating buttery croissants and getting lost inside The Louvre. I remember flipping through an artsy

coffee-table book once and stopping at the Mona Lisa—suddenly struck by her plainness; her haunted detachment, staring back at me with her lips almost turning into a smirk.

I'd never been to Europe, but I hadn't much desire—planes and throngs of tourists scare me. Though, because I don't want to let Alistair down, I say yes, let's go.

That night we plan our adventure—first stop London, catch the Eurostar to Paris, swing past Barcelona, then finish in Athens. Alistair is itching to meet boys and dance. I tell him we don't need to go all the way to the other side of the world to do that, we can just go out on Saturday, but he says I'm wrong and that the boys over there will be different. I look at my banking app and move a portion of my pay into a new savings account so I can afford this trip.

~\*~

Only the world has other ideas. Throughout March we watch the news with military precision, see the COVID-19 case numbers explode in Italy, Spain, and England. Alistair makes the executive decision that we'll postpone Europe. Secretly I'm relieved, but nod along and agree. Alistair uses big words like lockdowns are the worst thing that could ever happen, the new restrictions suck, why can't things go back to normal?

He wears a disappointed snarl on his face, so I shout him coffee and we walk around the Tan. He talks about this boy he met and says I need to get out of my head, relax and go out more. I remind him that we're in the middle of a pandemic and I'm working from home, that I'm stuck inside and even though I want to date someone, I can't.



Alistair worries about his job. He manages a restaurant in the city that has stood him down while they closed for a few weeks to get through the worst of the outbreak. He kicks loose bits of gravel and dawdles behind me.

I work for an insurance company, so I'm lucky I can take meetings from my dining table with my co-workers who are also working from home. I wear woolen socks and track pants all day. My only outing is across the road to get coffee. My housemate sticks to his room, popping out for tea and toast, and then I don't see him until it's dark. I talk to my parents every two days, they're safe but concerned, Adelaide doesn't have the same numbers as us, but their borders remain closed.

~\*~

Our friend Pete hosts trivia nights on Zoom, wearing a pink wig and floaty silk kaftan. All the questions are about Real Housewives or Drag Races, and I get almost every answer wrong. I often break the rules around visitor restrictions and Alistair sneaks to mine to drink tea and listen to records. He says he's ended things with the boy, and I know by the start of the weekend he'll have met another.

There are little flinches of hope with infections—the case numbers dip, then plummet. I stay home working, drinking wine, ordering too much Uber Eats, waiting for the slow reopening of our shops, so we can go into the city and have dumplings in Chinatown.

In June, I noticed Alistair's energy change. He's grown his beard out, ginger fuzz now covers his jaw and his hair once clipped like a soldier has gone wiry.

Signs of winter are everywhere. Trees dance naked against sheets of rain.

One day Alistair pops round and tells me he needs to move home, that he hasn't worked in three months, he's run out of money and because he's a Kiwi, the government won't extend their support. I ask him when he's leaving, he says four days. I take a big breath and imagine my life in Melbourne without him—the streets seem emptier, smaller without his personality. He promises he'll be back but for now his mum has a spare room and it's rent free. After he leaves, I sit in my room, holding my pillow tight to my chest, and sob.

~\*~

When Alistair returns to New Zealand it feels as though Melbourne's pulled into perpetual darkness. The case numbers spiral out of control and we're pulled back into lockdown. Only this time more shops are closed, we can't go beyond five k's of our house, and it becomes illegal to leave the house at night. My housemate stays in Woodend with his family. I get irritated at journalists saying all this is pointless, that we should just contain the elderly, that they will die anyway, so why should we kill the economy. My Pop is in a nursing home in Morphetville, I'm thankful he's spared the pain of our outbreak.

I wonder when the first person I know will die. Will coronavirus stretch into my sphere and show me its face? Could it be me? The other day there were 600 cases. Now there's over 700. It's only a matter of time. I ache for certainty. Each day I watch the announcements and hold my breath. Whether the Premier approaching the stand would wear his MJ Bale suit or North Face jacket. I hang onto these symbols for a glimpse of what might come. They've become my beacons of hope.

I often wake late, sit at the table and spend all day staring at spreadsheets and emails. My colleagues behind the screen become my only companions.

We try to focus on work, but we're distracted by draconian Stage Four rules. Our meetings are punctuated by children chirping and needing help with their spelling or times tables.

Alistair says he's worried about me, I've become loutish and depressed, that I should take some time off work and unwind. I tell him our lives have become a lottery of infection figures and death and press conferences. That we're in the middle of a crisis, where the consequences are more real than the asinine political games. My only joy comes from an album surprise released by Taylor Swift, a morning cup of coffee, and a one-hour stroll where I must wear a mask because the risk of infection is too high, but it's the least I can do to help save lives.

I often chatted with Alistair when he first left, but the calls became infrequent as I watched his new life unfold behind little squares on Instagram. Free from the plague in New Zealand and able to go hiking, hit the slopes and ski, have brunch with his mum, and venture beyond his neighbourhood. It might not be Europe, but it feels just as far.

~\*~

Every day before I start work, I get a coffee from Three Bags Full in Abbotsford. The café is four minutes from my house. The staff are all kind and even from behind their masks I can tell they smile at everyone. A new barista started with them last week. He wears a black tee and a red gingham scarf wrapped around his mouth and nose. He has a strong brow, floppy hair, and a large anchor tattoo on his forearm. I can't tell what the rest of his face looks like, but in my mind, he has the same cheeky grin as Harry Styles. I've had three dreams about him, where I'm pulling down that scarf and kissing him. His brawny arms wrap around me and guide me to the bed where we undress. Each time I see him after a dream I blush and wonder if he knows

that I've been thinking about him.

I tell Alistair about the barista, and he encourages me to chat with him and find out what his name is. One morning I chuck on jeans and a powdered-blue shirt and coordinate it with a navy mask. The barista notices and says that I shouldn't have dressed up for him, I laugh and lie—claiming laundry. The next day I'm back to track pants, though I'm wearing a black jumper I purchased online.

He asks me what I've been up to and I tell him it's like Groundhog Day. Every day feels the same and I'm living my life on a hamster wheel. I'm sick of the news, mindless television shows, and walking. He tells me his name is Marc and that he can't wait for the lockdown to end so he can go down to Dromana and see his parents.

He hands me my cup and winks. When I stroll through the park I feel as though I'm floating.

One day I walk past the café and I catch him without his mask. Marc's nose is small, and he has a slim gap between his two front teeth. He catches my eye and waves. My heart palpitates. I do an awkward jerk with my arm and keep walking. My cheeks flush crimson with embarrassment as I stride home.

I message Alistair several love hearts emojis and he responds with a question mark. I tell him about Marc and how I finally saw his face—the cute man behind the mask. Alistair says he's happy, but that a turtle moves quicker than me. I take deep breaths, feeling hot and clammy all over, and for a moment I think I've caught coronavirus, but then I rationalise and realise it's just feelings I have for the man who makes my coffee.

~\*~

The days grow longer, and small green buds pop on the branches of trees. Spring, oh welcomed friend—glossy leaves, stems, and blooms. Magpies warble and swoop. Roses burst in vibrant shades of purple, scarlet and yellow. Overnight the parks return to normal. Adults float around the edges, masked and keeping their distance. Children run around the place, screaming, tipping sand, and scaling monkey bars. It makes me beam, thinking we are on the precipice of returning to normal. Whatever that might be.

My routine stays the same, our work has let everyone know we won't be returning to the office until after Christmas. This suits me fine, I'm okay with the dining table and connecting with my colleagues on a screen. Some of their views have become hostile and call for blood from the Premier. I remain quiet. I'm not interested in fighting about politics and what went wrong. All I want is to go home for a weekend so I can see my parents. When we return to the world, we should tell some people we're continuing to stay inside, to keep them away and save us the pain of having to see them face to face.

Alistair calls me on days when he's free. He's itching for us to take on Europe next year. I say we should try the year after next and he says we're on. I complain that summer won't be the same without him and he tells me that's true, but there are plenty of people here I can spend my time with. He leaves me on a promise—that he'll return to Melbourne when he can, and it'll be bigger and better than ever.

~\*~

One afternoon when I'm out walking, I see Marc. He's up ahead, head down,

hands stuffed into his jacket. Used to seeing him behind the counter with a polystyrene cup in his hand, I'm shocked seeing him in the wild. As I walk towards him, he waves. I stop and then shake his hand. We both take off our masks and I stare at the gap between his teeth, imagining my tongue in his mouth.

So that's what you look like, he says, pleased. For several minutes we talk like school kids about to break for holidays before going our separate ways; it's affable, familiar, flirtatious.

I spend the rest of the day thinking about him, fantasising about going for picnics and sharing a bottle of prosecco, binging shows together, and spooning him while he sleeps. I work myself up, picturing our made-up life together. That night I struggle to sleep, riddled with anxiety about entertaining this idea, that he wouldn't want to date me, that no one wants to date me.

When I see Marc the following day, I act like I haven't spent the last twelve hours pretending we're together. He takes my order and we continue to banter. He says it's been encouraging reports lately, the case numbers are low, and that we'll open in a few weeks. I agree, there's so much I want to do—so much I want to explore. I feel a pang of disappointment that I can't stay here talking to him, that our transaction is complete when he hands me my coffee. He winks. My heart flutters.

Outside, the sky is pearly white. I stroll down the street, examining the cup in my hand, and notice the writing. Scrawled under my order is Marc's phone number and two simple words: **call me.**

The widest smile I've had in six months appears on my face and I immediately text Alistair to tell him the good news.





**By Xan Mullings**

**Two Self-Portraits**





## **SiR**

### **By Chamari White-Mink**

I always got called ‘sir.’ I mean, I still do. Over the phone, at restaurants, even at my grandmother’s house. And I never corrected them. It was always someone else who did - my mom, my auntie, my nana.

“Excuse me, that’s a young lady,” or

“...Ma’am” or

“grandDAUGHTER,” they would say.

They were offended. So offended that their young lady, their baby girl, their Nubian princess, could be seen as anything different. Anything other than female.

“I should stick up for myself more often,” they would say.

Can I tell you a secret? I didn’t mind being called sir. I kind of liked it, preferred it even. Sir. sir. SIR. Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?

I liked being called sir. So what? Doesn’t mean anything, right? I mean, it doesn’t matter that every time I looked in the mirror, I rehearsed what I thought was my own femininity. It doesn’t matter that hats became my safety net, my solace, what really kept me together. Made me feel relieved. Complete. It doesn’t even matter that I rejected wearing earrings because they made me have an out-of-body experience like I was watching a complete stranger wear sparkly and dangly metal objects, forced into their ears.

It’s such a violent action when you think about it.

My mother used to force me to wear earrings. More often than not, she

would literally force them into my ears, as I tried to run away out of protest. They hung there, like a dead weight, dragging me along, as I shuffled from one place to the next. No wonder I always walked with my head down.

It might not seem like a big deal to you. It’s just jewelry after all...The thing is,,, it’s not. It’s not just jewelry. A dress is not just a dress. It’s so much more. I can’t really describe it, I guess? All I know is that I feel like throwing up, sobbing my eyes out, and screaming my lungs out all at once. It’s revolting. It was wrong, innately wrong. Or, I was wrong. Maybe I am. Wrong. This body, my brain. It’s just all wrong.

I think... I think my mom thinks I’m wrong, or that I don’t exist really? When I came out to my mother as genderqueer, I had already identified as so for about a year. She did not confront me in person.

A few days later, I received texts.

Many texts in a row.

She had been sick for days and couldn’t get out of bed.

Her head hurt.

Her chest hurt.

She could not stop crying.

All because I wrote a bio with they/them pronouns. She felt as if she had failed me. I stared at my phone in dismay. I could feel my heart stop beating. Tears immediately began to fill my eyes. My entire being was physically painful to my mother. It literally broke her heart. I broke her heart. We haven’t talked about it since. I use she/her pronouns at home as a default. It’s an unbearable pain. I guess my heart is also breaking.

I love my mom, I do. Hell, I love all the women in my family. It just became very clear to me that I will never be them. I don’t want to be them, for the first time in my life, I want to be myself. I want to feel proud of who I KNOW I am. And, if I have to let go of those strong women in my life, I will. It will be

difficult, but I will. I can't have them hanging around me, like a dead weight, dragging me down, as I try to make space for myself in this world. I have to take them off. It's the right thing to do.

Maybe I need to make a new family, you know? Find a new community, I mean. Form new bonds... Lasting ones. Accepting ones. Have you ever had to do that?

How do I even start?

Hm.

Hm.

Have you ever read Moby Dick? Yeah? Well, maybe I'll start with "Call me SiR." Yeah. Call me SiR.

## **Remembrance**

### **By Munatsi Mavhima**

I dreamt about you again, not as you are but as I remember you.

Young, smiling, and full of life, over-egging your achievements and barely hiding your demons  
We were playing cricket, but not in the backyard under the tree.

In the street, the street I live on now,  
Continents away from you.

Such a strange mashup of the brother  
I lost in the place I am currently lost  
It reminded me of my desire  
To transplant my family here  
And how incongruous that would be.

We're so different now

And how discordant that is.  
To rip myself from here,  
To remind myself of pain.  
I've found myself here lately,  
Such a strange mashup of the boy who I left,  
In a place I would no longer recognize,  
Even right next to you.

In the street, the one I used to live on  
Where crickets dance in the tall grass and in the  
backyard under the tree

I locked my demons away

Young, heavy and full of sorrow, overbearing  
nightmares because

I dreamt about you all again, not as you are but as  
I remember you.



**Forward**  
**By Ashley Ramcharan**

**For The Love Of Myself**  
**By Violetta Babirye**

I've wandered through the world;  
Met scenery  
Met black and white  
Met herds and flocks  
But I've always walked away,  
And came back to me  
For the love of myself

I have lived large;  
Met my dues  
Met my plans  
Met my dreams  
But I've put all that behind me,  
And came back to me  
For the love of myself

I've met love  
I've met favor  
I've met serenity  
I've met gladness  
I've abandoned every ounce of it,  
And came back to me  
For the love of myself

I've met beauty  
I've met integrity  
I've met kindness  
I've met compassion  
And I've turned my back on them,  
And came back to me  
For the love of myself

## **My Therapist Recommends I Try to Exercise**

**By Juliette Givhan**

*— If I put a name, it will just be replaced by another*

to flush out the cortisol and adrenaline flooding this body that is not really my body. My brain is incendiary, but it still tries to give him the benefit of the doubt. Move past the bare bones of this suggestion: white man tells Black woman that maybe not being fat will equal not being crazy.

***Crazy. Black crazy. Fat Black. Move Black. Move.***

I consider going for a jog. Think about what it would be like to break into a run on the long walks I've been taking for months now, crisscrossing a corn-town. My friend sends me dance tutorial videos. The instructor is sassy, so I do them. Scrape desperately at endorphins. People keep asking if I'm "ok." Keep referencing the news. I don't watch it. I don't need to.

***Black. Black. Black jog. Black fat. Black. Jog jog jog.***

The woman I call, sobbing on the floor of my bedroom, is Black too. I can hear it in her voice. In the way she forms certain words. The way she validates things I haven't voiced. A therapist that gets my intricacies because they are hers, too. She gives me her phone number in case I need to text her at any point in the night. I've known her for less than 48 hours.

***Black mood. Black. Jog Black. Cry Black. Cry.***

She tells me if a virtual farm sparks joy, then farm. I tell her the white man who told me to exercise also told me that distractions are repressive. That they only make the bad last longer. She sends me pages from a coloring

book and the "fuck him" is implied. She won't hang up the phone until my breathing is regulated.

***Cry. Black cry. Breathe. Black breath. Breathe Black, while you still can.***

I make myself walk up a big hill. Then run halfway up the next. The rich of this nothing city live up here. I bring my heart rate to a thunder. Feels like it could explode. It drowns out the voice of a friend in my headphones. She hears me panting, says it's better than the screaming of a week ago.

***Mad Black. Black mood. Fury. Fury. Fury.***

My face is covered by a mask. Mask covered by the sun. There is heat and the heart beating loud in my ears. But it isn't enough. At the top, I still remember—

how we can die anywhere. How we still die everywhere.

***Jog Black. Live Black. Try. Run Black. RUN. Black body. Black bloody.***



## **“Connection to Reality”**

**By Zoe DeVoe**

Little things serve as pebbles building into boulders  
I don't have a natural barrier between the light air  
and the deep seeded ground  
I use metal as my roots that may seem like chains for my wings  
but it's the bond I must keep to the Earth at my feet

Little things, trinkets I collect, turn into a heavy weight  
I take hold of that smile a stranger gave me  
a life vest they cast to the sea of my endless floating  
I latch my soul to my mom's comforting hugs  
it can be painful, being touched, but I still hold on  
I'd rather stick with my family than fly above

The smallest things are best, like a text from a friend  
Even when my mind wants to uncap my skull  
like the top of a bottle that's fizzing over  
and let the brain become a helium-filled vessel  
Even when I can barely respond or when I can't at all  
It's the easiest actions that are the most helpful

The smallest things serve as my bonds to reality  
Dissociating can leave me faceless, I can't  
relate to the girl in the mirror, the skin on the bone  
But I can understand the dog in my room, her folded ears  
and snaggletooth, the way she sits with me when I'm sad  
When everyone sits with me, is there for me  
It's minuscule in the grand scheme of things  
That's why it's comforting, seeing them up close  
not being far, far up, like what my head perceives

## **The Dustpan** **By Brandon Sward**

“Ugh, why is she such a Cancer moon?”

The “she” in question is a one-year-old husky-pit bull mix with sad eyes and a disobedient streak; the current cause of exasperation the pale brown and white (depending on how they landed) eggshell fragments that litter the smooth concrete, which become smaller every second we don't pick them up.

“Why even give her the shells? It's like you're just asking for them to end up everywhere.”

“She likes to crunch on them, but I don't understand why she can't do that in her food bowl.”

The floor, of course, is covered with who we used to be. The potting soil from the weed-growing big-dicked ex-boyfriend who preferred debating the finer points of Marxist theory to washing the dishes. The little hairs left-over from the transformation of my unkempt mop into a fashion mullet that might get me laid. Invisible bits of shit because when you're a dog on a walk the last thing on your mind is where you put your paws post-defecation.

If we were trees, these would be our rings.



By Martins Deep

## **Thinking Of My Son As The Other Children** **By Goodness Olanrewaju Ayoola**

I tell my son to stay put in a moment of separation,  
While I grope, following his ethereal cries tearing  
Through the monstrous darkness; my heart drumming--

I think of the little lass, the same age as my boy,  
Displaced by war. I think of the many malnourished children on  
TV clustering around makeshift camps, crying--

Crying brings me back to my son crying.  
I hook his arm with mine, his tears and mucus soaking my shoulder.  
I pat him on the back; I tell him "it's safe now," and cry.



## **See Through**

### **By Ebony English**

Have you ever been so close to a person they can see through you? Around them you are clear. They see your veins. Your blood. The tissue. Your pain. And there's no hiding. It's funny because you spend years putting up a front but when a person sees past all that, you gotta reconcile who you really are.

Your father saw me like that. The first few months we dealt, I thought he was a con man. Talking so sweet. Listening so good. Conversating with him was like lying on a couch talking to a shrink. He knew when I was mad. He could explain why I had the tendencies that I had. For a minute, I thought he was stalking me because he knew exactly what was happening with me. He wasn't. He just cared. And that was something I had to get used to coming from a man.

Mommy, now you know they don't make men like that anymore. Women either.

She sucked her teeth and turned on the signal as she abruptly steered the van around the corner.

The truth is I had a couple of connections, but nothing like Mommy described. Her and Daddy are so close that people think they're brother and sister. They're the same height, same opaque skin, and both have a lot of white teeth in their mouth. Almost too many. And after all these years, they still pinched each other's butts and winked from across the room.

Mommy parked the van. We were early for the visit. She liked to get there early so she could take off her mask and put on a bit of makeup.

How do I look? She finger-picked her curls. Your Daddy loves this dark

purple lipstick.

Beautiful, Mommy. You always look beautiful.

I pulled the dollar store balloons from the backseat and exited the van. We silently walked up to the building. We went to the large window on the left side and waited for them to bring Daddy. Mommy pulled out her phone to check her reflection one more time.

I saw Daddy coming down the hall. A grinning male nurse pushed him. It looked like he was trying to get Daddy excited, to at least look up at us. He didn't. Daddy's head was cocked to the side and he was transfixed on the wheel of his chair. His legs were crossed and it looked like he lost more weight.

Daddy got to the window and we shouted happy birthday. He looked up. No smile but there was recognition in his eyes. Mommy got on her knees and closer to the glass to talk to him.

I'm so glad you were born and I love you so much, darling!

The visit lasted about thirty minutes. We waved and blew kisses until Daddy and the nurse disappeared. Mommy and I held hands as we walked to the parking lot.

I waited for Mommy to unlock the van.

I hope he sees that I miss him and that once this shit is over imma bring him home. I'll take care of him myself. I hope he knows that.

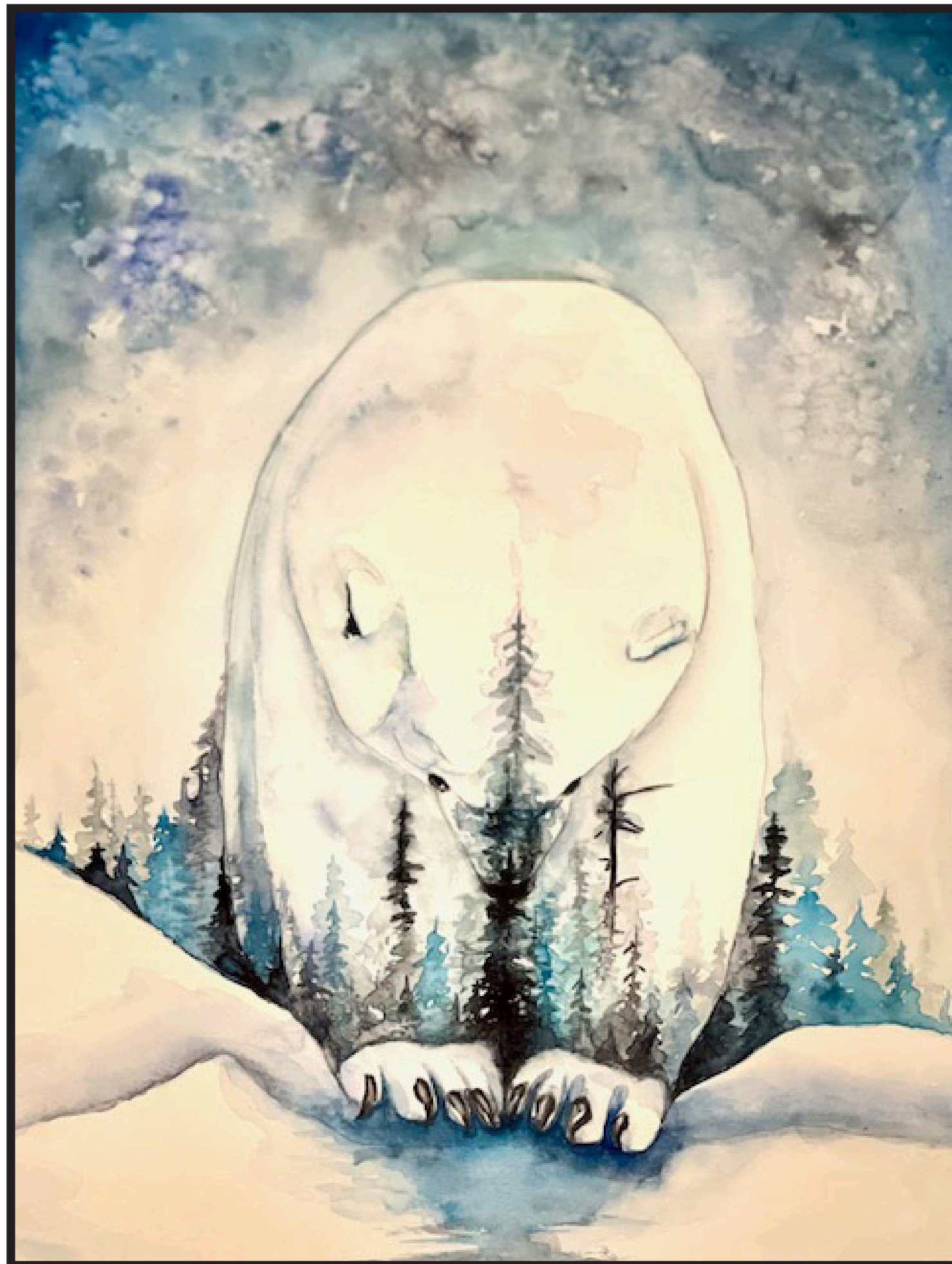
He does, Mommy.

I let the balloons go and watched them float away into the clear sky.

**will there ever be a day when we are not full to the brim?**

By Natalia A. Pagán Serrano

this      time, I am      there  
                 walk      into  
the                                   kitchen  
                 bare      feet  
                 tile-memory  
you                                   turn  
and                                   there it      is  
                 no  
                 recognition—  
                                 surprise



By Christina May



## **The Thanatonaut**

**By Travis Tyler Madden**

We were together once, Sally, in mother's darkness. My first memory—my only memories—are of you. In the black. Your hand reaching out, undeveloped fingers wrapping around mine. I know what you've been doing since then, even if you don't, is trying to find me. I know I'm supposed to tell you to stay away, but there's a selfish part of me that hopes you journey ever closer.

Growing up, you've heard of me. But not in the way siblings normally hear stories about one another. Because there were no stories of me in elementary school. Or in any school. Not like there were of you. No one ever heard of me on the football team like they did you when you played soccer, when you did that sliding kick to nail a buzzer-beater, and were the hero of the season. No one ever heard of me acing a science project like when you built not just a simple baking soda volcano, but an entire Pompeii as well, and did a dramatic ten-year-old reenactment of a villager as Vesuvius erupted.

No, there is only one story about me, and it is also a story about you. It is the story of your birth. The story of my death. The story of how you came to be and how I was not. They're interwoven like I once remember seeing our umbilical cords.

The reason you even know about my existence at all is because our father got drunk at a Fourth of July party when you were (and I was supposed to be) seven years old. You were in the kitchen, searching for a soda when you heard voices drifting up the basement stairs. You crept closer, heard our father asking our uncle about what it was like to have a son. They were supposed to be fetching ice for the cooler. You carefully peered down, and it was the first time you ever saw our father cry. You heard him say my name

was going to be Jonathan.

But isn't that still my name, you wondered, even though I was not alive?

You can feel me present, glowing like the feeling of an itch of a rash that has not yet appeared, and you do all you can to seek me out, to feel closer to me, even though you don't know this is what you're doing. Were I a traditional ghost, the spirit of someone who'd lived a nice, long life, there would be other options. You might seek shelter under a tree under which we once found shade on a hot summer's day. Or watch a movie we both delighted in, or maybe saw for the first time together. You might head to my tombstone. But there is no stone for me. I wonder, are there gravestones for the unborn? I don't know, and cannot find out, tied as I am, even in un-death, to you, little sister.

So, instead of trying to find the memory of me, you try to feel me in the there and then. A week after you find out about my almost-existence, and you are atop the high dive at the community pool, and I wonder if you felt me when you looked down and got that surge in your stomach, in your bones? Other children were below you, looking up, cheering you on, not brave enough to attempt the high dive themselves. This, of course, was long before you realized this was not, and never has been, about bravery. Not entirely. There was looking down, the anticipation, but it was really about the moment just before you hit the water, where it felt like you held your breath again, even though you'd already prepared for the splash.

Jonathan? you called out at that moment. To where you were not entirely sure. Everywhere. Nowhere. Anywhere you hoped your voice might reach me. You splashed down into the water, and as you drifted towards the bottom, as things became quiet and deep, it was like you—we—were in the womb again. Closer. Together. Nothing but the two of us in the entire world.

Like it used to be. Jonathan, can you hear me?

You don't know this, Sally, but I can always hear you. I can always feel you. And for the very first time, at that moment, you felt me too. Down at the bottom of the pool, your nose and eyes and ears closed to the stimulus of the rest of the world. The only thing left the chlorine in your mouth and the pressure of the deepening water swaddling you. Our hands reaching towards one another across the vastest of distances. We felt our fingertips touch.

Brother.

And then you had to breathe.

Silly little lungs. Stupid little heart.

You went up for air and the moment was gone, the tension broken. But you knew. You felt it and were so occupied with that feeling, you didn't even notice the children crowded around the deep end, looking down, wondering if you'd ever come up again.

From that moment, whether you knew it or not, you were a thanatonaut. An explorer into the realm of death.

You told no one of your fantasies, your explorations. Not our mother or father. Certainly not when you came home from the pool, after you felt my presence for the first time, and tried to recreate it by submerging yourself in the bathtub (you were supposed to be washing the chlorine off your skin and out of your hair). Your body betrayed you, of course, refused to let you stay down for any length of time that mattered. It knew, as I did, as I refused to acknowledge. It knew, before you did, that you were not meant for this place where I reside. Not yet. And even though it was only a matter of time,

as it is for all things, it seemed neither of us could wait.

You thought, Stupid little lungs. Silly little heart.

Still, as the colors on the trees changed, so did your expeditions into the undiscovered country. You were a Francis Drake for a new era. The cold weather forced you to leave the water behind, and you came to rely on your bicycle, your very own Golden Hind, to carry you where you needed to go. The children of the neighborhood continued to revel in your daring. There goes Sally, the girl who went off the high-dive this summer, taking her bike off the hill at the old, abandoned bus lot, in a jump not even any of the boys truly ever considered. There goes Sally, the girl who managed to get the highest jump off the middle school swingset in recent memory. There goes Sally, snowboarding on her senior trip, taking a hill far above her skill level, whipping past so many of the boys, who were all so hilariously outclassed that they just pretended they didn't see her.

And there was I, reaching out for you, and yet consistently barred by the barriers between our two worlds.

You were never trying to show off for spectators. You found no fulfillment in their accolades. You sought only that feeling, the sensation right before you fall, or of the wind roaring past your ears. That feeling that would open up a door, but that consistently refused to open the way you wanted it to. Unlike those boys who were after earthlier goals, you were coming for me. Each and every one of those times you felt the wind on your face and the electricity in your veins and you wondered if this would be it, this would be the moment where you finally felt me again.

I did too.

Jonathan. Can you hear me?

But you never found it. Not in the way you wanted to. You came close when, like all the girls who manage to grow to your age, your body began to change. You heard about the orgasm, heard from a whisper in high school that the French called it *la petite morte*, the little death. While you knew the translation was correct, you didn't know if it was true. You heard this while you were sitting behind a guy who'd learned enough French to impress girls—you know this because he tried to impress you with it—but not enough to actually get by.

So one night you closed your bedroom door and you plugged headphones into your computer and you found a website where naked people did things to one another you'd only ever heard about, and you put your hand between your legs and you tried to find what felt good and after about fifteen minutes of poking, prodding, experimenting, and rubbing, it happened. A torrent washed over you. You squeezed your thighs shut around your hand and you crushed your mouth into your pillow so our parents wouldn't hear you scream. You felt alive and dead at the same time, and for the briefest of moments, your mind was empty. You thought of nothing, and later, upon recalling it, wondered if that was how I feel all the time, being dead.

Nothing. Just...nothing. Can you see me? Can you hear me? Or are you nothing now? If you are, will you always be nothing?

That feeling didn't last. You didn't try it again. The concept was too strange, and you felt too much shame for committing the act, period, let alone committing the act to feel, even in some small way, closer to your dead brother. You've never mentioned that to anyone. Not even to a therapist. You only hope that, if I am out here somewhere, I didn't think any less of you. I don't, Sally. I never could.

You substituted that allegedly shameful act once you discovered a new one; motors. Or, rather, once you discovered boys who'd discovered motors. You heard the hiss of an engine in the parking lot of your first dorm and an

idea took root in your head. When Robby, a boy you'd talked to before but were never truly interested in, asked if you wanted to go for a ride, you said of course. As he drifted you around corners and lifted you over hills, as he screamed to a dozen different stops that put your heart in your throat, you thought it was me. You reached out for my hand again, instead found everything else; the handle above the door, your seatbelt, his knee.

You're so close. I can feel you.

Poor Robby, he took those grips as a sign, an assurance. He thought some adrenaline, a little scare, had sealed the deal. His, as the minds of boys ever are, was only on one thing. But your mind, as it always was, was elsewhere.

You asked Robby if you could drive the car, and he said yes, but only after you gave him a look you didn't even know you'd perfected; a slightly furrowed brow, hands clasped in front of you, looking up at him through your eyebrows. You pushed the vehicle harder than he ever thought possible—You're so close—harder than even he was comfortable with. Had you looked over, you might have seen him gripping his armrest, his own knees, his seatbelt, the handle. It was like he was afraid to touch you—Johnny, can you hear me?—but of course you didn't know that, were too busy thinking of me. Chasing me.

During your first ride you drift a little too far into another lane, seeking those G-forces that push you back into your seat, push you closer and closer to me, and an SUV going in the opposite direction screams at you, forces you back into your lane, off the road and onto the shoulder, and you stop there, unharmed but frightened, on the side of a curved hill overlooking the town. You are distantly aware of Robby's scream as those headlights wash over you, of him asking if you were alright now that everything has settled, but you are much more aware of me, of my arms that have wrapped around your shoulders, of the feeling of my cheek against yours, of this being the closest we have ever been. It is possibly the first hug we have ever shared,

and it is also our last. At least for now. At least while you are there and I am here.

Because it makes you feel cold.

We both realized, staring into those oncoming headlights, what has happened, and what was about to.

What am I doing? What have I done?

Nothing that cannot be undone, Sally. But what were you yet to do?

Robby can see tears, ones that have gathered but not yet fallen, in your eyes, and he can only get your attention by touching your arm. He asks you what's wrong, and you tell him nothing, that everything is fine, but you do not look at him when you say it, instead of into the middle distance, thinking of how it felt to look right into those white-hot headlights. You don't tell him you were thinking about your brother, because of course, you don't. He does not know you ever had one. Or were supposed to ever have one. Or were trying to find one. You don't tell him that you wonder what it's like to be dead because what you feel is not a thing you can even understand yourself.

You only step out of the car, and you ask Robby to drive you home, and you ask him to do it carefully, to stay under the speed limit, and he listens, and you try to not look into the headlights of any other cars.

## **“Caged Flesh.”**

**By Sienna Morgan**

I write my best poems from a broken heart. With you, I was speechless. Didn't know what a pen or paper was. You were the epitome and etymology of love, personified. My breath and mornings began with you. I was full, so I thought.

When you spoke to me no more, something in my caged flesh shifted. What was once round and bulbous, became shattered and deflated. This gorge that you created, gave me the ability to express myself again.

**birthed by our mothers only**  
**--after Erika L. Sánchez**  
**by Natalia A. Pagán Serrano**

how I look for you  
in the face of every  
woman  
on the street  
“soul-stealers”  
I think when I do  
find you.  
how long  
have you been  
stuck  
in their bodies?  
is it comfortable  
in there?  
I know  
it’s still cold  
out.  
come, I’ll show  
you  
my office.  
Yes, I know  
it’s too warm  
I’ll open  
the window.  
I’ve tried  
to decorate it  
see?  
I put your  
picture  
up.

**The Djémbé**  
**By Ogbonna Cecilia Ijeoma**

I feel

The loving caress of the night air  
The wind as it twirls around me  
While the powerful beats of the Djémbé play

Like love between the drummer and his drums

The thrilling feel of animal skin beneath his hands  
The rush of adrenaline in the dancers  
As they answer the call of the Djémbé

The leaps and turns to the sound  
The pulse of the music

Like the soul of the drummer resides in his drum

As the dancers dance away to the sounds of the Djémbé



**50%**  
**By Shanahan Europa**

My first heartbreak was at thirteen:  
My Older Sister had left a part of Herself in Guam  
and it wasn't until years later I realized  
I had left a part of Me as well.  
the part that had loved my Older Sister

the other day I learned my Older Sister thought I was scary  
and I laughed because no one's called Me that before  
She just doesn't know how to talk to Me  
and I never want to talk to Her.  
now our only conversations are sharp glances and  
indifference

My friends forget I have an Older Sister  
because I never bring her up  
because I only want to bring Her up when She hurts Me,  
yet I never tell them when She does

I wish I could forget I had an Older Sister

because every word that leaves Her mouth  
reminds Me of every time She hurt Me  
I can't look at Her without feeling pain  
the cognitive dissonance of knowing  
She is 50% Me hurts

When I say I hate My Older Sister  
I also mean I hate Myself, the  
Part of Me that is capable of so much anger  
and hostility and disgust and I fear  
this is the only part left.

**Needlework**  
**By Fran Fernández Arce**

Words puncture. They rupture the surface tension  
perpetually stuck at the tip of your tongue.  
Words dive in and out like a thread dipping into  
a taut canvas. They fluctuate upon the  
threshold of your mouth. And the sounds,  
the sounds rolling out of your tongue,  
your tongue gracing the edges of your teeth,  
your lips pursing and pulsing  
with the intonations of your speech -  
words stitch your mind together  
into a junction of who and how and  
where and what you are. Words pierce.  
They reach you from the outside,  
tap on your door, and politely ask you  
to have a drink of common rapport.  
Your voice is a needle darning a patchwork  
of communion to another voice, transmuting  
ideas into this bond of assertion, of you not being alone.

**Family Giving tree**  
**--Inspired by Shel Silverstein**  
**By Tyla Smith**

In my family, our hearts grow so big

We always tend to give away  
the love we could never give ourselves.

We call it healing

We are gardeners.  
I wish we could become plants  
and be watered from time to time

We have green thumbs.  
Everyone we touch  
produces  
bright shades of the rainbow

We are the sun in everyone's sky.  
It's hard being all this light  
We tend to swallow  
the nighttime  
and sit in the shadows-  
We glue them to our shoes  
like Peter Pan  
and they find a home in us like Neverland

We are masters of magic.  
I can trick you into  
my games of illusions

I am not of this earth.  
I tell you the things I wish I could tell myself  
and make you put them into practice

There are no spells-  
This is the family recipe.

I hold in my hand  
the thoughts & feelings  
My body rejects

I feed them to you instead  
because if I heal you  
then I have enough power  
to cure myself

See these hands  
are wounded;  
Everyone  
they touch  
leaves carrying pieces of me with them

When I look at my hands  
there is more bone  
than skin

I deplete myself over and over again,

obsessed with fixing people.

It's not my fault I come from generations  
of doctors, nurses, therapists-

We found a craft that allows us to indulge  
in our desire

To cure-

Renew & Replenish  
everything but ourselves

This is the healer's curse  
in our family tree.

We too often scrape our knees  
on the expectations of being anything but Magical

Her leaves fall every time  
she lends a hand  
With no one there to replenish her beauty-  
For they take  
Until  
She is no more.

A Giving Tree:

Giving until there  
are no more leaves left.  
They look for shade under her branches

and find Nothing but a tree stump;

Finally recognizing  
The tree loved  
So much  
She gave  
Until  
There was nothing

Left.

And this how we were taught  
to love in our family tree.



## Hermanos



By George Alfaro

## Hometown



By Sunny Young



## Dream a **Little Dream** By Alana King

I used to dream about this moment. How it would be to finally meet you. I used to dream that you would pick me up right after school like all the other mamas. You'd hold my hand as you walked me to your car, a station wagon—no, a minivan. A family car because we were a family. You'd even have that bumper sticker on the back window with a daddy sticker, a mama sticker, a doggy sticker, and a sticker for me like the other mamas had on the back windows of their family cars. You'd drive me straight to soccer practice, or swimming lessons, or ballet. Wherever all the other girls got to go after school instead of getting picked up by the county van and taken back to the group home I was back at for the third—no, fourth—time after another foster family decided that they weren't quite open to any child after all.

I used to dream that you would come to get me, walk right up to me at the park across the street where they let us play when they decided we were good enough to deserve it, tell me that you're not a stranger, you're my mama, and you've come to get me out of here once and for all. And you'd take me to our home, a yellow home with a porch and a porch swing that you would swing in and watch as I tried to catch fireflies in a mason jar whose top you would've punched holes in so the fireflies could breathe inside. We'd wait until night when their light was the only thing we could see except for the stars.

But none of that ever happened. You never came. My last social worker gave up on placing me anywhere long-term when I was fifteen, so I gave up on the system and on dreaming altogether before they gave up on me—

I shouldn't tell you any of this, should I? That I never got adopted? That I

never had a long-term placement? That I thought that Merrittville was small enough where people don't lock their cars or have alarms so I finally quit train surfing and settled here?

No. I won't tell you any of that. I shouldn't make you feel bad about the truth, right? Yeah, that's probably right. They don't write manuals for this sort of thing, do they? No "How to Meet Your Birth Mother Without Making Her Feel Bad...Or Sad...Or Mad..." to help me—us—through this.

I'll focus on where I'm at now: here, working here at Rose's. Working on my GED at MJC because that's a condition of my working here. I no longer have to lie and say that I'm over eighteen anymore because now I actually am. I'm okay now. I wasn't for a good while, but I am now. Yeah. That's what I'll tell you when you get here. If you ever get here.

~\*~

**I've dreamed about this moment since they took you out of my arms. I was too messed up on the stuff back then to take care of you anyways, but them testing you after I gave birth sealed your fate and mine before I was able to make that decision for myself.**

**They promised not to terminate my rights if I went to a rehab program and got clean. Once I was out, the county let me see you now and then when you were a little baby. Never alone and never outside of the center, but they'd let us visit when I could stay clean long enough to pass the test they made me take beforehand. Once I stopped being able to hold out long enough to pass, they stopped scheduling our visits altogether.**

**They kept their promise, but I never could keep mine. But I tried. Please**

**believe me when I say that I tried. I just couldn't kick—**

**No. You won't want to know all of that, will you? You won't care why I was gone; only that I was. You won't even remember the few times I was able to see you at the center, and you'd never know that I would sometimes come to your group home, watch you play on the playground from across the street. You'll only know that I could never stay straight long enough to stay in your life.**

**I should let you know that I've got my life on track now. My third time in, I had too much on me to just be charged with possession. Too much meant years in prison and not months in county this time around. Those first few years...no, I won't tell you about that either. I will tell you about my last two years, though. That I finally made my way through a program and got clean. That I got my GED and trained for a job that I'd be able to have once I got out. And when they let me out early for good behavior, I went right into sober living instead of right back where I was so I couldn't ruin everything again. There hasn't been a day since I got out that I haven't made it to a meeting. I actually went to one before driving out here to meet you, tried to talk out any last-minute nerves.**

**I haven't slipped once since I got out this last time, and God willing, I can keep saying that for the rest of my life.**

**Once you get here, that's what I'll let you know.**

~\*~

There's no name listed for Father on my birth certificate. Only yours. That's what I found out once I finally opened up the envelope that came months before. After Mama Rose helped me get on my feet, I ordered my Social

Security Card and Birth Certificate so that I could finally do all the things everyone else got to. Get a legal job, a driver's license, normal things like that.

That's what we all call her, Mama Rose. Whether it's making sure we get a free meal on days we have shifts or letting some of us live in one of the rooms upstairs, she's taken care of all of us in one way or another.

Maci warned me about Mama Rose never taking no for an answer when it came to her babies.

"She will from me," I told Maci as she was getting my t-shirt.

"You're not the first to say that, Jasmine," Maci said back before looking me dead in the eye, adding, "We've all got something, kid. Just remember that, and you'll work out just fine," and handing me two black Mama Rose's Cafe t-shirts.

Turns out Maci was right. Mama Rose doesn't take no for an answer. Only reason I can think of for why I found myself calling every Anjanette Miller I could find a phone number for. Only reason I didn't stop before the nineteenth attempt when I finally reached you, why I asked to meet you here, or why I'm still waiting for you to finally get here so that we can meet in person.

I guess I inherited my lateness from you.

What else did I get from you?

~\*~

**I talk about you all the time when I speak at meetings, wondering who**

**you became, what you're doing now. Praying that I didn't pass anything bad to you. I used to say that I did this all for you, but I'm not supposed to say that. I'm not supposed to be sober for anyone else but me, but you got me clean and you're keeping me clean. I kept remembering the last time I saw you, a little bit before my last arrest. You were ten, and you read me two whole chapters of a book meant for sixth graders. You were so proud to show me that since you were only in fourth grade at the time.**

**"Will I see you next month? Like the other kids who get to see their parents every month?" You asked me when your social worker told us that our time was up.**

**"I'll be here," I promised, then got arrested again before I was able to keep it.**

**I sent a letter to your social worker for you. I don't know if you ever got it; I was sure you never did for one reason or another. After I took the plea deal that knocked fifteen years to eight, I got what I thought was a letter from her. It was a picture of you. I've carried it with me every day since I got it.**

**I have it with me today. Worn from years of folding, unfolding, refolding, but it's here.**

**Should I show it to you? Try my best to prove that I never forgot about you? Never stopped thinking about you?**

**No. I won't tell you that this time around. I don't want to overwhelm you with too much at once, but there are so many things I wanna tell you: about me, your family, everything. My grandmama, your**

**great-grandmama, is still alive. I stay with her now, look after her now that I'm able to. When she told me that a Jasmine was on the phone, asking for me, my prayers were answered. I told her everything that I could about you as soon we agreed to meet and hung up.**

**You probably want to know about things health-wise. I don't know about your daddy's side. I don't know who your daddy is. Not for sure. That time in my life, it's almost all a blur now. The parts that aren't are the ones I wish were. That's the part that kept me on the stuff for as long as I was.**

**For the most part, you're good on my side. Grandmama will be 94 next month. I wanted to bring her with me today, but she thought it best for it to just be you and me. She can't wait to meet you though. Maybe we could do that soon if everything goes well today? No pressure, though.**

**I wish to God I had let her know about you, let the county know about her. Maybe she could've taken you in, cared for you like she cared for me when my mama couldn't.**

**If I could go back...I know I can't, but I wish I could.**

**~\*~**

**I'm wearing the blue polka dot blouse Mama Rose bought for me.**

**"Something nice for a special day," she said as her sweet way of saying don't scare your mama off with your usual threads. I'm in the third booth from the door because I didn't want to miss you. I got here a little late, but Maci said no one had asked for me when I got here. She's been coming over every few minutes, asking me if I want something to eat, something to drink. I can't. Too nervous.**

~\*~

**I made sure the waitress sat me at a table close to the door so that I could see who all was coming in and out. I didn't want to miss you. The same woman comes to my table every few minutes, asking me if I want something to eat, something to drink. I can't. Too nervous. Her nametag says her name is Maci.**

~\*~

You were supposed to be here an hour ago. Did you get lost? Did you chicken out? You said you would be here. You promised.

~\*~

**You were supposed to be here an hour ago. Did you change your mind? I hope you didn't, but I understand if you did. I'm not ready to leave quite yet. I promised I'd be here. I'm keeping my promise this time.**

~\*~

I thought you'd keep your promise this time. Why was I stupid enough to believe you?

~\*~

**I've already stopped two women wearing blouses with blue polka dots on them, but neither of them were you. I don't want to bother the third, a woman as she's walking out of the cafe, but what if it's you this time?**

**Too many what-ifs haunt me; I don't want this to be the next. I hurry outside and take a quick look in each direction before I see the woman walking towards the parking lot.**

**"Jasmine?" I call out and the woman stops, turns around, and looks at me.**

It's you.

~\*~

"Jasmine," I hear someone call as I walk towards the parking lot and the shortcut to the park. Thinking it's Maci, I stop and turn around, ready to tell her to just leave me alone. That you obviously didn't want to see me as much as I wanted to see you, but it's not Maci.

**It's you.**





**Black Slave by Moses Ojo**

## **Niggers in Freedomland**

**By henry 7. reneau, jr**

The slight, & not-so-slight adjustments we make,  
depending on who's watching;

poleaxed, in the wake of exclusion, a tongue well held  
inside the pout of angry tremble or umbrage,

suppressing the wish to kill with a thought,  
like caging the Hulk inside a submarine.

The institution of racial expectations, the idea,  
that Blackness is only supposed to be

African-hyphenated-Assimilation,

the costumes we perform, & time-worn  
props,

despite  
these accoutrements are based on stereotypes of fear.

We are always in someone else's country.

The way we adjust  
to being in a space that threatens us,

or a space  
where we are perceived as a threat



/: the outside gaze, startled stalking silent, &  
you the token Black diversity at the party.

The extensive, furtive movements  
to avoid persecution,

then gunshots/: a combination of velocity,  
arterial panic & a slow capillary resignation.

Our faith, creating a boundless sense of possibility,  
& Hope, the whispery bee colony

in our souls—the photons & neutrons  
compressed to atoms of expectation

illuminating a bottomless well. We learned early  
to manipulate expectations to our advantage,

was at odds  
with what we were historically told

the Black Narrative was s'posed to be/: do not speak  
unless spoken to

& know your place.

We are burdened at birth  
the velocity of stigma, dangerous to walk

a Jim Crow Mile,  
& not become a statistic, to consistently choose

Why?

must we rise from sweat, by force of muscle  
memory, & staggered upright &

What?

The fuck!!

We are as many as you can count  
plus one more. The wildness living inside us,

wanting to be mistaken for stone or a black cat  
steel-spring crouched,

leeching fever from the darkness/: ears pulled back  
the tension of stealth—be patient . . . waiting,

a ticking time bomb  
waiting to explode.

We are an appetite for more,  
the velocity of gravity, tugging to a molten core.

How we crawl, indirectly, into the sun.

## **three dimensional desire in a two dimensional plane**

**By Nishat Ahmed**

cant stand these state lines  
and these empty miles  
between you and i

its a bonfire night  
and i need your heart  
i mean heat i mean

both of us calling  
each other's names into  
lonely pillowcases

and empty spaces  
by our sides as we lay  
besides ourselves in bed

strum your guitar  
sing a song for me  
sing the birds migrating east

dear honeypot  
i write you now to tell you  
im sticky with missing you

a whole arm in the jar  
i want you on every  
single inch of me

## **Three Summer Crucifixes**

**By Karlo Sevilla**

Arms extended sideways,  
I back float on the pool's surface;  
the sun stings my squinted eyes.

Then you dive, soar-and-glide  
above me, your sinewy bronze body  
spread-eagled against the vast blue.

We are parallel with the plane  
that flies miles overhead,  
and we're all under the sun's  
spotlight for a fleeting second.



**angels are asian**  
**By Maddie Lam**

angels are asian  
we have no mouths,  
but we smile.  
where our mouths should be  
is overgrown skin,  
plastered over  
our lips by our  
mothers with button eyes.  
sewed with fine silk threads  
red for good luck  
so that flesh may grow together  
so that flesh may grow together.

but  
I take shears from the kitchen  
drawer, rip apart  
flesh, and scream so that  
I do not die with a story inside of me  
so that I can sing the song inside of me.



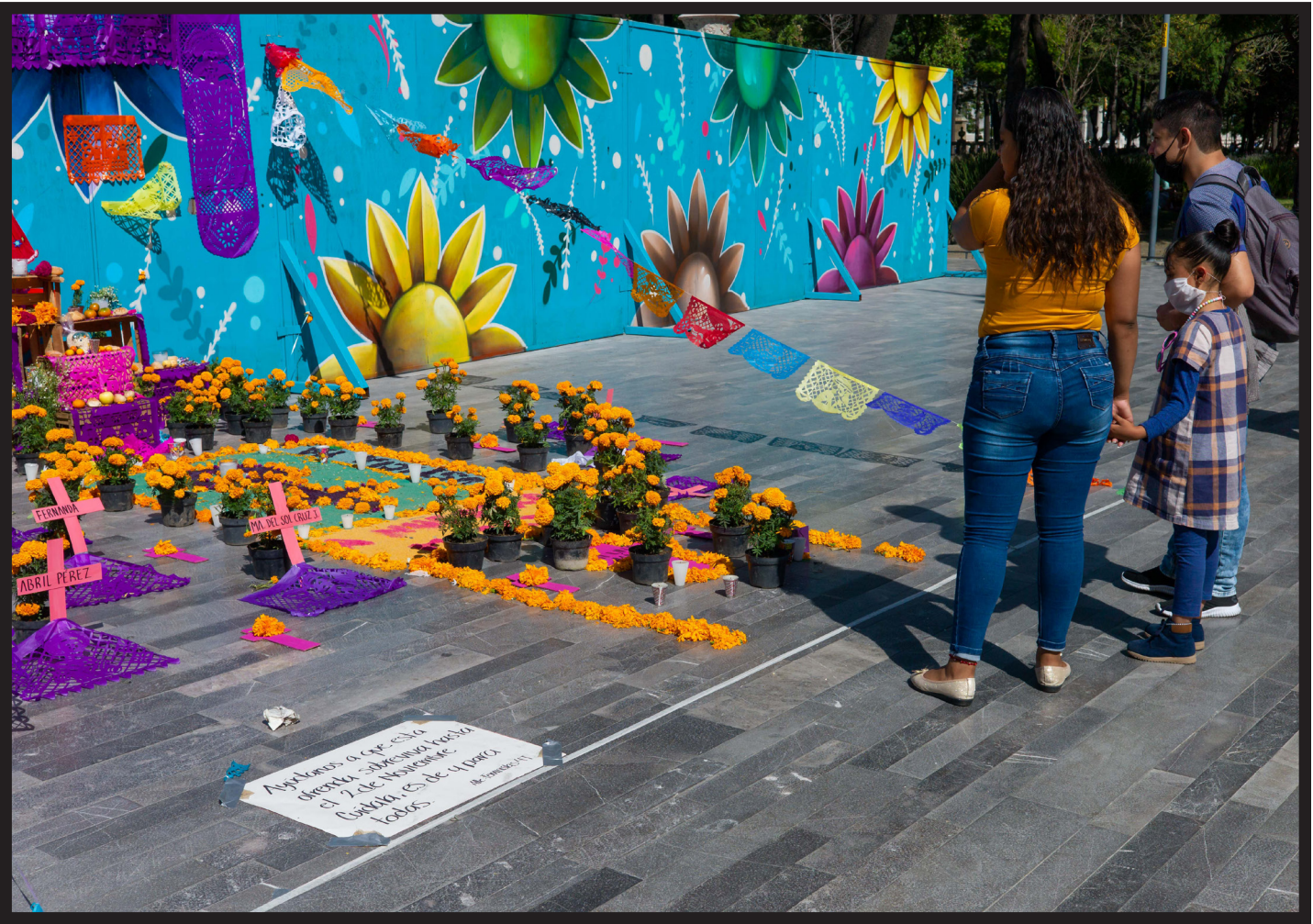
**Abuela**  
**By George Alfaro**





**El Diablo**

**By George Alfaro**



**Los Recuerdos**



## **What's in a Name?**

**By Mike Mavilia Rochester**

I was born Michael Mavilia, a very Sicilian name.

I am not Sicilian. But I've always had to pretend I was.

As a kid, people would always ask, "Mavilia. What kind of a name is that?" and I'd answer, "Italian." People just assumed because of my brown complexion that I must be Italian. It always felt weird, but what felt worse, even shameful, was the truth.

I grew up in the white suburbs. There were no Black kids or Latinos. We'd never seen an Asian person. There were just a few olive-skinned Italians. I vividly remember my first encounter with racism. I was in third grade, walking out my elementary school doors onto the playground. Two kids I didn't know were teasing one of my classmates, Christopher Rossi, who had been playing ball and gotten dirty. They teased him with a common schoolyard rhyme about Chinese people. They stuck their fingers in the corners of their eyes and laughed, then ran off to climb the jungle gym.

I remember being so confused because I knew Christopher wasn't Chinese. I didn't understand why being Chinese was even an insult, but I knew the bullies meant it that way. Why was Christopher picked on so much? All I knew was that he was somehow different. I stood there in shock, trying in vain to process this with my eight-year-old brain. Was I different too? I started to feel queasy.

I'm my mother's second child. My older sister's father was a Mavilia. My father was white, a Rochester from the Midwest. I saw him a few times, but he

was never a part of my life. When I was eleven, I asked my mother what we were. She hesitated for a moment. I could tell this was a sensitive topic and I was a shy child, so I said never mind and ran away.

A few minutes later, she found me in my room playing with my G.I. Joes and she said we were Native American. Her eyes were glassy, and I tried to change the subject. She went on to tell me that when she was growing up in the 1960s she and her siblings were not supposed to talk about it. "If anyone asks," her mother said, "we are Italian." At that time, people with Native American heritage had no rights to their own children. Families were systematically torn apart by the order of the government and my grandmother was terrified to lose her children.

So, they were Italian.

My mother and her siblings grew up and married real Italians so they wouldn't have to lie anymore, burying our ugly truth beneath a façade of whiteness. No one could tell an Italian from a Native American anyway. In the suburbs, I guess we were all Chinese.

When my mother was done telling me our family history, I didn't truly understand her inner conflict, but I felt her shame and took it to be my own. I never asked her about our family again. When someone asked, "What kind of a name is Mavilia?" I'd simply say "Italian," and try to change the subject.

Two years ago, my then-fiancée and I drove cross-country from Boston to California. Along the way, whenever we could, we stayed with friends and family. When we got to Texas, we were welcomed with open arms by my cousins, the Esparza family. These were my mother's father's relatives: Texans, generations deep. They lived in Houston and San Antonio, ate homemade Mexican food, knew Spanish, referred to themselves as Latinas. They



showed me pictures of their dad and my grandfather, brothers, at the bridge in Downtown Houston where they would jump into Buffalo Bayou to swim and fish “long before these buildings were here.” I pictured a lanky, tan-skinned boy who looked like me, doing a backstroke in the cloudy water. I wondered what his voice sounded like. I’d never met him.

A few months later, I decided to change my name to my father’s: Rochester. It brought up all those feelings of shame and confusion from my childhood. It made me question who I really was. I didn’t feel like a white person any more than I felt like an Italian, (or a Native American or Latino, for that matter) but I figured my future children should have a name that at least reflects their lineage. I didn’t want them to grow up with the identity crisis I had, pretending to be something they’re not. How would they explain their family tree assignment in school? “Where did your name come from?” their teacher would ask. My child would hang his head and blush, unsure what to say, as the rest of the class stared at him.

My wife recently took an ancestry DNA test. She was fascinated with her results, confirming all the family history that she’d heard about, reveling in how her percentages broke down amongst her European heritage. She asked me if I was going to do one. I said no and my stomach got twisted up like I was back on the playground, overhearing those boys sing slurs at my classmate. My mind went back to the bars in Boston, where I spent my 20s and most of my 30s meeting people who would try to guess my ethnicity—like it was a game to them—or else straight up ask me, “What are you?” I could never bear to tell them the truth.

I am a lot of things, none of which define me. None of which should matter. I know this now but when people ask what I am, in the back of my mind, there’s still this voice that screams, “Don’t tell them!” while twisting the knife of shame further into my eight-year-old gut.

## **Sleep Debt**

**By Nishat Ahmed**

“I would trade this sleep for you in a heartbeat.” — Now, Now, “Prehistoric”

The phone rings and it’s your name  
again. It’s your voice again and my ears  
hear bells and violin strings.

Hours pool into the cups we make  
of each other and we drink until  
we can see the bottoms of the night.

Somewhere a cat yowls for your hand.  
Somewhere else, the faint moon song  
of a coyote paints itself into the woods.

We lie awake for hours staring  
at eyes and mouths and teeth and freckles  
and at the things we’ve hung up on our walls.

What we owe to the bank of slumber  
is a hefty sum, one we might never repay  
in this life or the one that may come after.

Yet still, we say things like you should go  
to bed or you look so tired and these things  
are true but we don’t hang up anyways.

Maybe it’s the hollowness of empty beds  
and the comfort of falling asleep beside someone,

even if it's just a body of static.

Or maybe it's the fact that this is the only way  
we can hold each other for now, until we can pay  
the price it would take to cross our dreams.

## **What's Your Pleasure?**

**--for Nicolas Huchard**

**By Morgan L. Ridgway**

Converse, red and glittering, lace  
wrapping around muscles mapped in stick  
and pokes, and I think I see myself, so I  
watch on repeat, swallow it like the first  
sip in the wet summer air honey coating  
you bronze, stark against that fuchsia  
dress but listen, fuchsia brings out your  
eyes and I'm already swimming in your  
depths where we are satisfied all bright  
and fine and full that dim room with your  
speckled skin so hot and heavy like sand  
baking in the sun and you tell me it's  
beautiful to be bronze in the bleached  
winter where we burn bright carnations in  
a field of pale boy blues. There you are,  
leopard pants clinging to your ass rocking  
on that motel bed skin glistening in  
pearls, in secret, in need, in want, in love  
when you touch yourself like the men who  
leave you after midnight but time keeps  
ticking and your body is still whole and my  
body is still whole and here is something  
we share, longing for ourselves,  
separately, together, pleasure in our  
rolling eyes, tongues loose in our mouths,  
eyes golden, locked on the mirror where  
we alone swallow ourselves whole.



## **A Mothers Love**



**By Evanne Johnson**



## Ouroboros (Or: A Brief Dip into the Relationship I Have with My Mother)

By Juliette Givhan

It's January and I'm cold,  
reading *Nature Poem*

& Tommy Pico is asking  
if 30 is too old for a nose ring

& I think of my mother,  
who for the last five years

has told us every Christmas  
she "doesn't want anything"

except maybe to go  
get a nose ring,

a request no one  
has ever taken seriously,

& the older she gets  
the more I realize

I have become a snake,  
eating herself alive over it.

I think of my mother,  
how she's white

& I'm not,  
how the distance between us

lets me love her  
in a way I can't/haven't/

don't know how to/  
in person.

How she takes I-25  
to Fort Collins

every few weeks  
to have her hair dyed

copper,  
a shade

of human fragility  
that will never match

the ruddy brown  
it used to be.

How, she's an Aries,  
so of course when I told her

she looks like Barb  
from Stranger Things,

(or more accurately Barb  
looks like my mother when she was young)

she got mad,  
assumed the comparison

was meant  
to be an attack

that I was calling her ugly.  
Expendable.

She didn't hear  
how I cried for Barb

who deserved  
so much better

than the shit bag Nancy's  
& Steve's in her life,

not hearing  
how I cried

for a young mother  
who had hardened

after her own life  
of being shit on—

Whenever I try  
to write a poem

about my mother  
all I can think about

is how much these words  
would hurt her

if she ever read them.

How this snake  
can't escape

eating herself,  
causing damage

even when the point all along  
was just to say

I'm sorry

for never fixing  
what's broken between us.

For never taking you  
to get your nose pierced.

**Agtalna**  
**By Shanahan Europa**  
**--Agtalna means “shut up” in Ilocano, my parents’ first language.**

My little sister told me  
that she believed women were made to be  
quiet

I’m horrified to think  
she mistakes the moaning of spirits for  
dust in the wind

She never listened to my grandmother’s stories  
of the Philippines Jesus Christ  
marriage motherhood  
my parent’s home To us a ghost town

She must have learned it from me  
my words  
Too loud and too much  
for mom and dad who taught us  
silence through me

Little sister, I’m sorry  
that when you whisper  
you can’t hear yourself  
That you can’t recognize  
the snap of your own bones  
when they step on  
your body



## [Meli-Nation]

**By henry 7. reneau, jr**

They the freedom that is nothing  
they can put their finger on. One  
is bamboo survival instinct  
that bends, that  
learns to breathe in  
whatever the hurricane breathes out, but  
most an army of themselves, the bravado of an oak tree  
biding time before the lightning strike  
accident waiting to happen/: they genetics load the gun &  
the environment pulls the trigger, the chronic culprit  
of quantum singularities that slow time  
to three strikes, to ankle monitored parole, or  
probation-  
like prey animals, every instinct wired to escape.

They the consequence of incorrect  
merciless impulses, their pain  
not to be seen  
or acknowledged, but  
institutionalized, juxtaposing blackness  
with the embodied spirits  
of ancestors, the progeny of kidnapped & iron-  
bound displaced/: sold & tortured & raped & murdered  
after Massa worked they asses  
like a Georgia mule, or convict leasing  
metastasized to  
genetic memory

the discordant tense of nihilism  
like crepuscular sunbeams  
cloud-busting the turned askance face of God

When they speak of terrorism, every time  
they kill one of us  
it is not now, nor has it ever been  
a figure of speech  
juxtaposing blackness  
with dope sack & semi-  
automatic  
with fuck you!  
penitentiary chances  
like the bitter phlegm  
of anger crowding their throats.

They shown they own gravesite &  
decide  
not to be born into a nation  
of voicelessness sears the air like fire.

They bound to this world  
the way color is bound to the dark, the shadowy hours  
of anger fume quietly, dawn or dusk  
like some other time of dark—ambiguous &  
full of hidden agendas  
like a cracked shard of bone  
protruding from playground dirt.





By Martins Deep



# CONTRIBUTORS

## ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

### **George Alfaro**

*he/him*

George is a freelance documentary photographer based out of Los Angeles, California. He is interested in chronicling culture, world events, and a range of social issues that include environmentalism, redlining, and inequality.

### **Martins Deep**

*he/him*

Martins is a budding Nigerian poet, artist, & and currently a student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His creative works have appeared on FIYAH, Barren Magazine, & Agbowó Magazine.

### **Evanne (van) Johnson**

*she/her*

Evanne is 20 years old, she has been capturing moments since she was 7 years old. She is a young, indigenous photographer from a small métis community in Alberta, Canada called Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement.

### **Christina May**

*she/her*

Christina is best known for her watercolors and acrylic paintings, where she takes florals, and everyday items and turns them into works of art. Currently, much of her style is influenced by the rural area in which she lives and designs for. She is a single mother who owns and operates The Beauty of Paint Art Studio, in Yuba City, CA.

### **Moses Ojo**

*he/him*

Moses is a young Nigerian artist who uses his mind as a Vista for making captivating art while using his brushes and watercolors.

### **Ashley Ramcharan**

*she/her*

Ashley developed a passion for social justice and women’s rights while enrolled at Hamilton College, where she majored in Sociology. She currently works for a marketing agency where she does media analytics. In her free time, she can be found painting, winging her eyeliner, or playing with her bunny, Stormy.

### **Sunny Young**

*they/them*

Sunny is mainly a film photographer who likes to make collages that hopefully remind the viewer to take a closer look at the beauty in the world around them. They also involved with ceremony, an online creative collective that releases zines and events to raise money and awareness for mutual aid orgs (ig @ceremonyonline). They are currently working on a photobook that they hope to release soon!



NON-FICTION

**Chamari White-Mink**

*they/them*

Chamari is a multi-disciplinary artist, ready to make a home wherever they can. They are committed to using art to deconstruct and dismantle systems of power, empower themself and the people they collaborate with to produce work they are proud of, and create a new reality by searching for truth.

**Mike Mavilia Rochester**

*he/him*

Mike is a ghostwriter and editor from Boston, MA. He writes books about improving public education in the U.S. and manages The Fictional Café literary magazine. When he’s not writing he’s probably reading literary fiction, traveling, learning geography, or searching for the perfect bowl of clam chowder.

FICTION

**Ebony English**

*she/her*

Ebony lives on the East Coast. She writes fiction and creates digital and hand-cut collages.

**Alana King**

*she/her*

After earning a B.A. in English from Texas State University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Memphis, Alana King is currently working on a Ph.D. in Literature at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her work has been published in Storm Cellar, Burnt Breakfast, Reunion: The Dallas Review, and more.

**Travis Tyler Madden**

*they/them*

Travis is a graduate of Towson University’s Professional Writing graduate program. Their work has appeared in Writer’s Digest, Ligeia Magazine, Alternating Current, Paragon Press, and Castabout Literature. They have work forthcoming as episodes of The Long Hallway podcast.

**Zachary Pryor**

*he/him*

Zachary is an award-winning New Zealand writer living in Melbourne on Wurundjeri land. He writes short stories, essays, flash fiction, and is currently halfway through writing his first novel.

**Brandon Sward**

*he/him*

Brandon is an artist and doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago. He lives and works in Los Angeles, CA.

POETRY

Nishat Ahmed

he/him

Nishat is a Bangladeshi-American residing in the Midwest. He’s an Illinois native with a deep love for Fall Out Boy, The Notebook, and Chipotle. His first chapbook, “Field Guide for End Days” was released in summer 2020 from Finishing Line Press, and his second, “Brown Boy” is forthcoming from Porkbelly Press.

Fran Fernández Arce

she/her

Fran is a Chilean poet currently living on a farm in Suffolk, England. She enjoys writing poems about language and wintertime.

Goodness Olanrewaju Ayoola

he/him

Goodness is a Nigerian poet and teacher of English who reaches out to poetry as escapism from the contentions within and around him. His poetry has appeared in Dust Poetry, Glass, Pangolin Review, Oddball Magazine, Ethel Zine and elsewhere. He is a Best of the Net Award Nominee and author of Meditations (WRR, 2016).

Violetta Babirye

she/her

Violetta is a work in progress. She is a full-time editor who reads and writes for pleasure. Her poetry has been published in the Writers and Readers Magazine and The OpenDoor Poetry Magazine. She was born, raised and lives in Kampala, Uganda.

Zoe DeVoe

she/her and they/them

Zoe is an LGBTQ+ author with a pension for experimental and heartfelt short stories, poetry, and novels. Her work is featured in Ghost Orchid Press’s upcoming anthology, “Home”.

Shanahan Europa

she/her

Shanahan is a 4th year English major at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is a section editor for FEM Newsmagazine and president of the UCLA University Catholic Center's LGBTQ+ group. Upon graduating, she hopes to start a career in young adult and children's publishing. She loves Broadway musicals, figure skating, cats, and cooking ratatouille!

Juliette Givhan

she/her and they/them

Juliette received an MFA from a PWI in the dread year 2020. Their work has appeared in McSweeney's, ANMLY Journal, Pidgeonholes Journal, with forthcoming poems in several others. She writes about myths & memes, is a lover of thicc cats & overpriced seasonal coffees, & dreams of starting a funk band. She WILL make a scene for a breakfast bagel.

Ogbonna Cecilia Ijeoma

she/her

Ogbonna is a student studying medical biochemistry at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She is 19 years old. Her hobbies are writing and modeling.

Maddie Lam

she/we

Maddie is a musician and poet that works to birth collective liberation with joy and pleasure. At the root of her creative works is centering the body as not only a site of healing but a site to reclaim power. Maddie is a child of immigrants: a Vietnamese-Chinese artist that explores self-expression as a tool of healing from generational trauma and cultural curses.

Munatsi Mavhima

he/him

Munatsi is an immigrant settler who comes from Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. Through education and some research, he started to understand the true, colonial history of Canada and how it still dictates the country we live in today. It has helped him better understand his own country’s colonial history and the violence therein.



**Sienna Morgan**

*she/her*

As Sienna Morgan sojourns in the literary world, publications such as Colorism Healing [2018 and 2020 Editor's Pick Winner/ 2021 Writing Contest Guest Judge], Harness Magazine, and The Black Explorer Magazine, are places that her pieces call home. Topics such as colorism, bullying, faith, and mental health, are at the heart of her work. She hopes you'll stay tuned to her journey at her site.

**henry 7. reneau, jr.**

*he/him*

henry 7. reneau, jr. writes words wielding oceans poured with hurricane force through the camel's eye of a needle, conjures poetry that is empathetic with all the awful moments, his courage spilled freely from an emancipated tongue. He labors to write words in fire to wake the world ablaze, & illuminated by a conviction that blazes from his heart like a discharged bullet. His generation spans Brown v. Board of Education to the elusive dream of "Free at last, free at last . . ."

**Morgan L. Ridgway**

*they/them*

Morgan is a queer Black/Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape writer and historian from Philadelphia, PA. They are currently completing a PhD in history and dancing every step of the way.

**Natalia A. Pagán Serrano**

*she/her*

Natalia is a poet from Puerto Rico. She currently resides in Oregon, drenched in tree-magic and rain, with her fiancé, Daniel, and her cat, Esteban. When not writing, you can find Natalia making soup. Natalia's poems have been published in [PANK] magazine, Portland Review, and The Journal of Latina Critical Feminism, among others.

**Karlo Sevilla**

*he/him*

Karlo of Quezon City, Philippines is the author of three poetry collections: "Metro Manila Mammal" (Soma Publishing, 2018), "You" (Origami Poems Project, 2017), and "Outsourced!..." (Revolt Magazine, 2021). His poems appear or are forthcoming in Philippines Graphic, Ariel Chart, DIAGRAM, Small Orange, Black Bough Poetry, and elsewhere.

**Tyla Smith**

*she/her*

Tyla believes the blessings of words is the ability to tell the stories we thought were buried inside us.

