

A black and white photograph of several long, thin blades of grass. The grass is covered in numerous small, glistening dew drops, which catch the light and create a sparkling effect. The blades are arranged in a dense, overlapping pattern, filling the entire frame. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the grass and the individual droplets.

INSCAPE 2013



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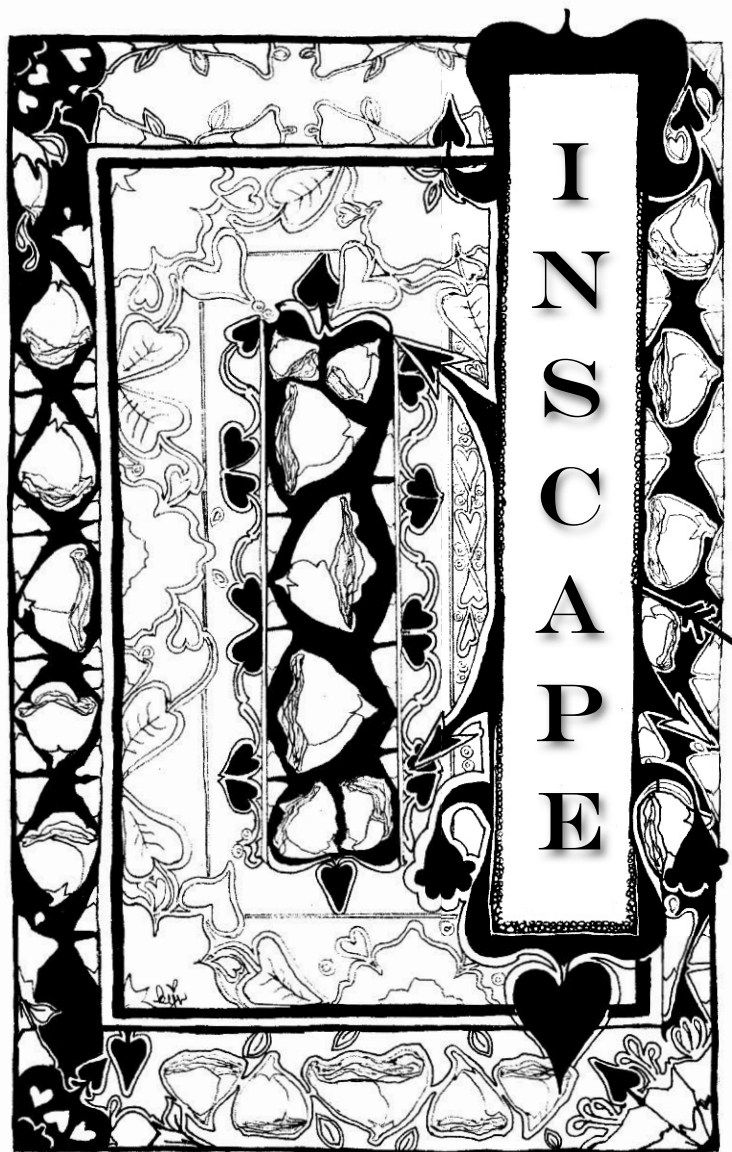


Illustration: Kendra Villa

Inscape is the Pasadena City College student literary magazine. It appears once a year in the spring. PCC students serve as the magazine's editors; editors market the magazine, review submissions, and design its layout.

All PCC students—full or part-time—are invited to submit their creative writing and art to the magazine's faculty advisor, Christopher McCabe. Submission guidelines and information regarding *Inscape* editorial positions are available in the English Division office in C245.

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I N S C A P E 2 0 1 3

AWARD WINNERS

Poetry

7 JULY, 1986 - MEXICO CITY
by David Smith
page 18

Short Story

ANAMNESIS
by Manuel Moreno
page 34

Nonfiction

FLYING APSARAS – A PAST GLORY
by Yingchao Xiao
page 88

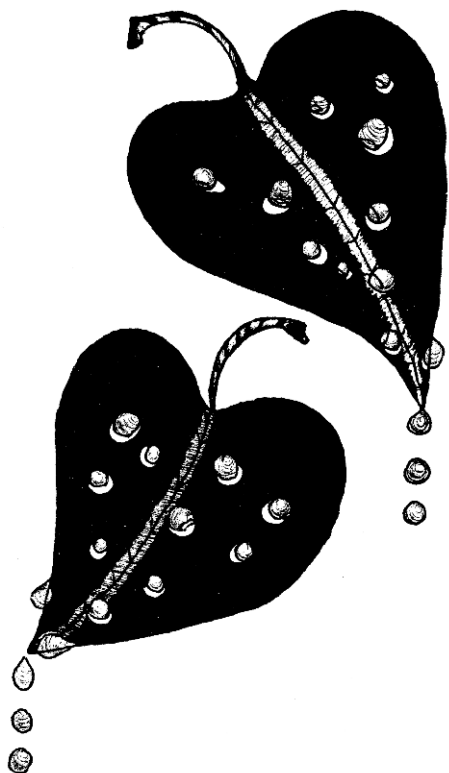


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Contents

P – Poetry S – Short Story NF – Nonfiction 6WS – Six Word Story

S	A Memorable Journey <i>Aaron Chen</i>	11
NF	Learning How to Ride a Bike <i>Evelyn Vasquez</i>	12
NF	This I Believe <i>Traci Woodfin</i>	16
P	7 July, 1986 - Mexico City <i>David Smith</i>	18
NF	Patient Zero <i>Manuel Moreno</i>	19
6WS	Mother. Two jobs. Full time student. <i>Eunice Calderon</i>	22
NF	What To Do When The Hospital Calls <i>Janine McCarthy</i>	23
P	Los Angeles <i>Devin Bell</i>	26
S	Brooklyn <i>Joe Lusnia</i>	29
P	Your Filthy Habit <i>Madeline Saunders</i>	31
P	Welcome To The Ghetto <i>Theodore Pamplin III</i>	32
6WS	New pack. One ripped. Oh baby. <i>Robert Rodriguez</i>	33

S	Anamnesis <i>Manuel Moreno</i>	34	6WS	Ran his whole life. Couldn't breathe. <i>Shogo Yagi</i>	79
P	Ballad of Benjamin Button <i>Alex Phuong</i>	42	S	The Rite <i>Rebecca Sanhueza</i>	80
6WS	Fool speaks. Comedy. Fool wins. Horror. <i>Manuel Gonzalez</i>	44	P	Desert Covered In Snow <i>Sevan Ghadimian</i>	86
NF	House of Cards <i>Kay Lai</i>	45	6WS	Soldier overseas. Short gunfire. Widowed family. <i>Jason Lee</i>	87
S	A Proposal <i>Thomas Price</i>	48	NF	Flying Apsaras – A Past Glory <i>Yingchao Xiao</i>	88
P	7.20 <i>Rebecca Sanhueza</i>	54	P	In Mirrors <i>David Smith</i>	93
NF	Popcorn <i>Linda Centell</i>	55	P	Early Morning Monotony <i>Patrick Thomas</i>	94
S	Seeing Satan <i>Kendra Villa</i>	58	NF	Lionhearted <i>Paris Matic</i>	96
S	I was 16 <i>Yingchao Xiao</i>	60	6WS	They encountered. They chattered. They flattered. <i>Sergio Romero</i>	102
P	The Dive <i>Kay Lai</i>	68		Interview with Reyna Grande <i>Janine McCarthy</i>	105
NF	Little Hands <i>Alejandra Jimenez</i>	70		Contributors	111
P	Margins of Perfection <i>Nancy Au</i>	74		Acknowledgements	113
NF	Chernobyl Disaster and One Family's Tragedy 26 Years Later <i>Vicky Shemer</i>	75		English Literature Associate in Arts Degree	114
				Creative Writing at PCC	116

A Memorable Journey — Aaron Chen



You know...oftentimes I feel that we are so caught up in accomplishing whatever it is, that when we fail, we forget to acknowledge all the good that has come of the journey. What we need to realize is that just because the outcome was not the one that we had originally wished and hoped for, many meaningful experiences and memories were made along the way. These are the experiences and memories that we should remember to cherish dearly, but that we never do. Instead, we unknowingly blanket all the beautiful moments with the bitterness that manifests from our failures. Sure enough, we did not triumph over the towering obstacle that we first bravely sought to. But remember my dear friends: Sometimes...the beauty is in the attempt.

Learning How To Ride A Bike — Evelyn Vasquez



When I get on the bike, I notice my niece's twelve-year old body doesn't have the strength to balance my twenty-year old body steady. My niece says, "Okay, I am going to hold the bike and push you. When I let go, you start to pedal." I begin to pedal and she lets go of the bike. She then yells, "Evelyn, don't look down!" I lose balance, and my body hits the pavement floor. She runs to me and makes sure that I am okay. Even though my niece was younger, I felt protected. I was rusty on balance, and I fell a lot. But, that didn't matter because I had learned how to ride a bike.

At PCC, from the R building, I saw people with bikes, skateboards; I could see students swimming in the pool. All kinds of activities surrounded me, and I would get a frustrated urge to want to know how to do these activities. I wondered how people learned, and who taught them. I thought perhaps they were talented for knowing how to swim, ride a bike, or ride a skateboard.

Once, I was extremely amazed by a girl who was in my class, who asked the professor for permission to leave her bike in the classroom. I figured she didn't want to leave her bike outside because it was raining that day. The professor allowed her to bring the bike in, and all I could think about was how cool she was for knowing how to ride a bike with thin tires and horn-looking handles. I imagined it would be impossible for me to learn how to ride a bike, especially one that looked like hers.

Time passed, and I continued to be reminded that I didn't know how to ride. People in the train, on the streets, in bike lanes were constantly haunting me, and somehow telling me that I had to learn. So, I decided to buy a bike, without knowing how to ride one. I didn't buy my bike at a typical local store. Instead, I bought my bike at this large parking lot with a man who sold used bikes. Next to him was a canopy; inside, there was chairs facing a Virgin Mary altar. I thought it was creepy and funny at the same time to see a church next to a bike shop, but what mattered was that my bike cost a hundred bucks, which I thought was a good deal.

I take my bike home and no one can really teach me how to ride because my brothers and sisters work, and my mom doesn't know how to ride one herself either. I tell one of my nieces to teach me how. This makes me feel sheepish because I know my niece had authority over me. As she taught me, I accommodated and took her orders. The moment when she let the bike go, and I finally rode by myself without falling, I felt really good.

But now I question, "Why I didn't know how to ride a bike at twenty years old?", "Why did my niece know before the age of twelve?" and "Why was my niece the one to guide me through the process?"

I began to reflect on how throughout my youth, I saw my mom work extensively. She established her business and managed to have a small shop in an indoor-swap-meet. To some extent, it was convenient for my mom to raise me at the swapmeet because she was her own boss. There was no one around to tell her that I could not be there. My mom had raised my five sisters and four brothers without any assistance, so sending me to a babysitter was not an option.

At the swap meet, I learned to make adornments for Quinceaneras, weddings, baby showers, and baptisms. I learned how to wrap presents, as well as how to not look angry when customers arrived. I learned the difference between retail and wholesale because I would accompany my mom to Downtown L.A in the 81 bus to buy the merchandise, and because I experience this with her, learned that it was not easy to make money.

With my mother specifically, I learned about leather products, such as wallets, belts, jackets, boots, and cleaning products for different types of leather. For example, horse leather is a lot smoother than pig leather, but pig leather will last longer because it does not require as much maintenance as the horse leather. Ironically, the horse leather is more expensive than the pig's because the horse leather is finer. I had to know this difference, so I can explain to customers the difference in the value of the product.

My schedule at the swap meet was consistent until my senior year in high school. I was at the swap meet holidays, weekends, and vacations. On special occasions, I was absent from school to go to the swap meet and help my mom. On occasions, such as Mexico making it to the soccer play-offs, my sister and I would go outside the swap-meet building and sell Mexican flags to the parade of honking cars.

It's not that my mother didn't care about education, or my childhood. She was raising me, and the process didn't include a bike. She came from a place where having shoes was a luxury and having food on the table was a relief. A bike never crossed her mind, and it hasn't. To some degree, I was angry because my mom couldn't, or didn't, know how to introduce me to much other than what she knew, such as the differences between retail and wholesale, which made me different from other children. For instance, I knew how to count money at the age of four because my mom taught me how to give change to customers. My mentality was matured, but my childhood was somehow lost. Now I want to experience what I didn't do as a child. On occasions, I don't want to do my homework because I want to play "teacher", or make-believe monsters with my two-year old niece. I want to read Dr. Suess books, instead of my selected reading from anthologies.

When I am on my bike, I assume this is how I would have felt as a child, and I smile because I am the "cool" girl who was in my class. I am finally a "talented" girl because I accomplished to learn something only talented people do. Because I am twenty, it is not a big deal for someone to see me ride a bike. That's why I wish I were younger, so my mom could watch me, and congratulate me. But, she doesn't because it would be weird to congratulate a twenty year-old who just learned how to ride a bike.

At PCC, I don't just see students practice physical activities, but I also see them involved in campus activities, and I see the way they carry their pile of books and heavy backpacks. I want to emulate that image, as well. Then in classrooms, I hear the English language, but I can't make sense of it. All I know is that I hear so many words I have never heard. And, I don't know the

meaning of many of them. And again, I want to imitate my professors' language and the students who sound like the professors. The same way I learned how to ride a bike, I am learning how to be college student.

The moment I am on my bike, all these characteristics follow me; I am a studious girl who reads really complex readings of authors that everyone is familiar with in college. However, when I enter my home and put my bike in my room, I am the girl who plays with her niece hide and go seek. Sadly now, I am rarely home because my focus on college has increased, so I seldom go to the swap meet, play with my niece, and I'm beginning to find few things in common with my family members. I try to introduce what I learn to my mom, but she thinks I'm crazy because my ideas are foreign to her. To add on, my translation to Spanish makes the ideas sound crazier because I lack the terminology in Spanish. So every time, I step out of my house with my bike, I feel she tries to jinx me by saying, "Que te valla bien, y no te caigas; Have a good day, and don't fall". It's some sort of sarcasm she has because she knows that I feel "cool" for knowing how to ride my bike. Because I just learned, there is a great possibility I will fall, but I will eventually get back up and continue to ride.



'On the Duarte Trail'
by Janine McCarthy



September 11, 2001, seven days after my nineteenth birthday, marks a memorable and life changing day in my life. I woke up to my older brother Reggie's frantic shouts, "Traci!! Traci, wake up!! Turn on the news!!" Dazed and confused, I reached for my remote and turned to the devastation that was unfolding. The outrage paralyzed me to my bed. My country was in turmoil. Our livelihoods, as Americans, were ransacked by terrorists. My jaw dropped in horror not only at the sight of many Americans dying an unimaginable death, but at the thought that someone hated the United States of America so much to cause such destruction. My heart ached for my fellow Americans. In that instant, I knew I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself.

As a member of the United States Air Force, I have learned and come to respect its core values: Integrity first, Service before self, and Excellence in all we do. They are the staple of our military existence. To act with integrity is the hardest obstacle to overcome when faced with adversity. "You should always do what's right even when no one is watching, and own up to your mistakes," my former supervisor would tell me. I learned to be accountable for my actions and accept the repercussions of my behavior. By joining the military, I knew I had agreed to put the needs of the Air Force before my own. I took pride and honor in standing side by side with other Airmen who signed the dotted line to protect and defend our country, and lay our lives on the line if need be. I strive for excellence in everything I do because of the core values that were instilled in me nine years ago when I surrendered my life to the Air Force.

I am sometimes asked why I joined the military. I simply reply, "I believe in standing up for my country." That belief has taken me all over the globe and back. By traveling, I have met countless people; some of who are truly thankful for my service. For example, when my unit returned from our deployment in Qatar, an old couple offered to purchase my dinner to express how grateful they were. Their faces beamed with appreciation. Unlike that elderly couple, there are others who are ignorant and

do not understand what the military stands for. I met the gaze of an uneducated man as he strolled up to me and said, "I don't know why you're fighting some other man's war, you're just gonna go over there and get yourself blown up." I say to people like him, "If you do not stand behind us, by all means, stand in front!" We take on these responsibilities to ensure the future of America is carved in stone. We leave our families and friends to safeguard our freedom. Our lives are given bravely to fight for the rights most Americans abuse.

All of this might sound crazy, but this is the life I chose to live by. I will forever be grateful to those who have come before me and continue to serve alongside others like myself. I will wear the uniform with pride and abide by the core values. I will have faith in the decisions made for the greater good and follow through to the best of my ability. I will never forget the memories of the fallen soldiers. I thank every Airman, Marine, Soldier, and Seaman, past and present, for their service. I am a proud American, and I believe in standing up for my country.

7 July, 1986 — Mexico City — David Smith

"Stop talking," Dad instructed
his second wife, my mother.

For her, safely traversing
uneven sidewalk, its lumps
like landmines under a rug,
would be a challenge.
Concentrating on talking
at Dad would make a spill
inevitable.

Silence lasted just a block
until Dad lost
his footing, falling like a failed
duelist in the street.

Only strangers
helped him to his feet—
to the honeymoon suite.
My mother stuck in tears
of laughter where he'd fallen.



Patient Zero — Manuel Moreno



In the faraway days when my family of eight crams into the small space of a four-room apartment, we're less a collection of individuals and more a singular organism. We're bound together in sickness and in health—there is no possible quarantine in so intimate a space. Colds and flus transform into a communal activity. A combination of Old World belief and a misunderstanding of human biology drives my mother to strange remedies to deal with us.

Surely, the lost knowledge of the Order of the Knights Hospitaller somehow made it down the ages to mom. Only I worry that at some point it must have been corrupted. All manner of home remedies are employed in staving off a cycle of disease, recovery, disease again. She buries me under a mountain of blankets, brain-cooking temperatures be damned, and then a few tender words before she slips out to catch a bus to a day of back-breaking work. It's all that she knows.

My brother, out of college, shakes me awake, plants me on the couch. Wrapped up and cross-legged like a Chincorro mummy, I suck on a fleshy orange and listen as he reads *Lord of the Flies*. The hum and clack of the Olympia, a staccato lullaby audible through the thin walls, is silent. For a while at least, he puts the frustrating work of resumes aside.

Years of their peculiar ministrations imprint in me a penchant for caregiving, or perhaps a geas to put right what might have been wrong. Admittedly, I often contemplate the linguistic similarities between *succor* and *sucker*.

And then I get sick. Somewhere in my body, an army of disease- the Virus Cong- spends that time waging a guerrilla war. Like Charlie, they don't get much USO- they're dug in too deep or moving too fast, from throat, to sinuses, to lungs, and back to sinuses. I imagine them mutating into a particularly resistant and virulent stage, and transforming me into an epidemic-spreading *Typhoid Manny*.

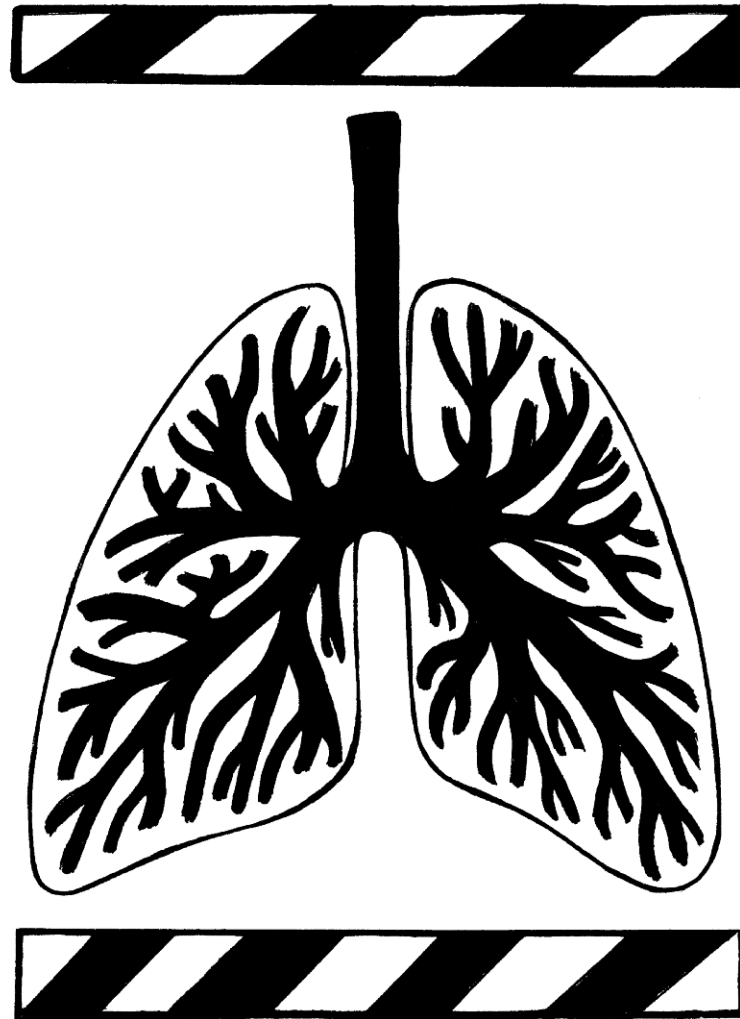


Illustration: Paris Matic

Posterity will remember me as a Weapon of Mass Destruction.

Most likely, it was the kids. I am regularly exposed to three disease vectors in my family- my two nieces, and my nephew, the two-foot Engine of Disease (or ED, for short).

ED is the biological equivalent of the Exxon Valdez. How this child has managed to stay below the collective radar of the CDC and EPA is beyond me. It would be a non-issue, if only ED didn't seem to enjoy my company so much. ED prefers to say hello with a bear hug, followed by using my shoulder or lapel as a Kleenex. His attempts to learn to climb my leg to get my attention are a developing skill that hasn't really been honed beyond tugging at my jeans and kicking me in the shin. Charmingly, ED has learned to sneeze in my ear, an adaptation to my now instinctive flinching. In the end, I understand it's my own fault, because I so enjoy passing the empty spaces of the day with ED. He's a handful, but his laughter, like so much of him, is infectious.

My younger, doe-eyed niece is approaching the age she gets introduced to chicken pox and measles. I can't wait. I look forward to the blindness, sterility, and hours of *Connect Four*.

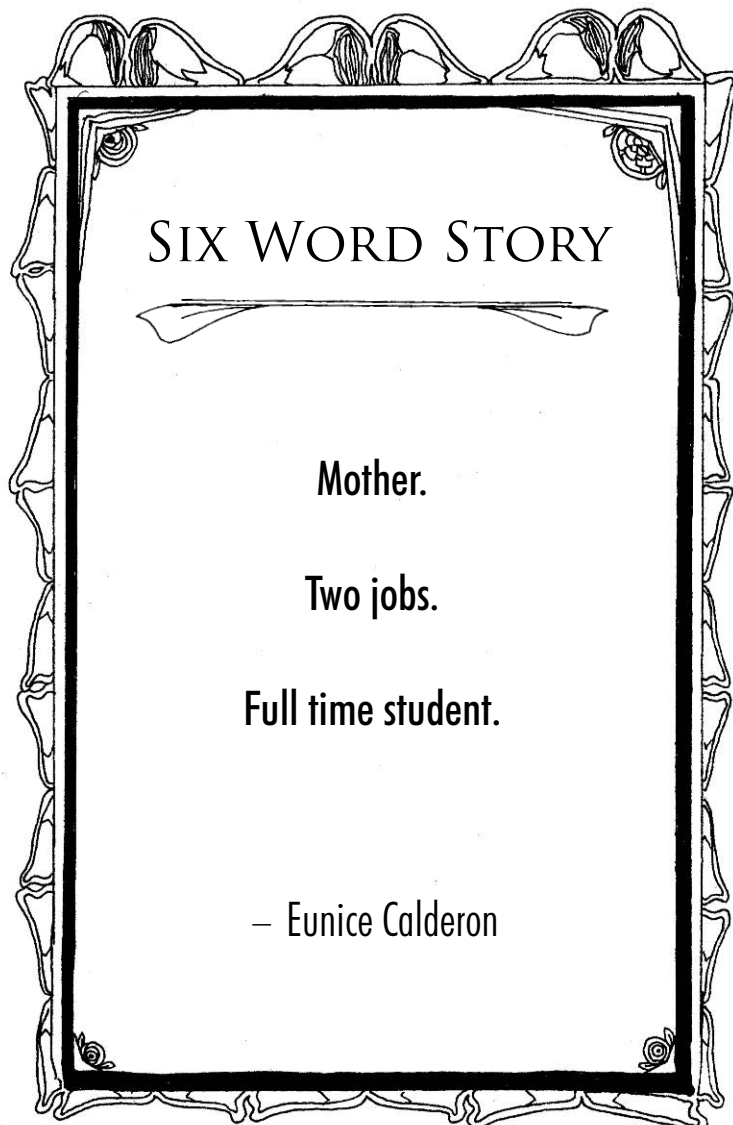


Illustration: Kendra Villa

What To Do When The Hospital Calls

— Janine McCarthy



- 1.) Wake up. Try to take in what the doctor is saying. Don't ask questions yet: you might not need to. When the doctor is done, ask questions. Make him repeat the story a couple times in the process. Ask things he cannot answer.
- 2.) Start to call your boyfriend, Johnny, but don't complete the dial. Remember, the doctor just said they're prepping him for emergency brain surgery. Hang up and call your mother instead: she'll know what to do. Sob into the phone. Try to be clear, but talk much louder than you intend. Let go of your emotion: it's too heavy for you to hold on to.
- 3.) Go about your day. There's nothing else you can do. Falling into your everyday routine will bring you a sense of normalcy, which is what you desperately need right now.
- 4.) When his 80-year-old mother calls to tell you what happened, try to act surprised. She needs to feel in control. She will not be happy if she knows Johnny had the hospital call you.
 - a.) If you do tell her that the hospital called, take the focus off of yourself by asking her how she is doing, and if there's anything you can do for her. Treat her like a grieving widow.
 - b.) If you fail to do this, prepare for her wrath. Starting today, throughout Johnny's fragile recovery, and until her last days on Earth, you will be enemy #1.
- 5.) When the hospital calls again, go visit Johnny. It might be 3am, after your shift at work, but that's okay: neurological ICU is open for visitors 24/7. The scent of rubbing alcohol and floor cleaner will pass into the elevator as you exit. Despite the scurry of nurses and the beeping of unseen machines, the entire floor will be eerily quiet. Johnny will still be under heavy sedation. He will look very, very bad. Half of



'Johnny, ten years later.' Photograph provided by Janine McCarthy.

his head will be shaved, and a huge incision from the top of his head to the top of his ear will be stapled shut. His eyes will be swollen. His skin will be sallow. There will be monitors the size of pencil erasers screwed into his neck on either side, like Frankenstein's monster. Tubes and cords will form a spider web over him. It's okay to be afraid, and cry. The nurse will be a comfort.

- 6.) Call the hospital yourself on the days you can't visit. When Johnny's mother calls to update you, do not...I repeat DO NOT...tell her you already know. You want her to know that you're doing your best, I understand, but trust me on this one. Don't tell her you visit. Don't tell her you call. Just like before, let her tell you. Ask her again if she needs anything.
 - a.) If she knows that you visit and call, she will cut you off. She will tell the hospital that no one is allowed access to Johnny without her. No visitors. No phone calls. You will be devastated.
 - b.) If this happens, tell Johnny's best friend, Big Mike, as soon as you can. Big Mike will visit Johnny himself. When the hospital denies him, he'll stand in front of the elevator for an hour. When that old woman emerges with her little church friends, Big Mike will cuss her out in front of them. You'll have access to Johnny immediately. Call the hospital: the staff will be happy to hear from you again.
- 7.) Johnny's mind will not be right. The surgery affected his memory. It will be disturbing, but stay strong. Bring him balloons and cards and pictures. Point them out when he wakes up. Tell him about Big Mike's first visit, because you know he doesn't remember. Tell him how he took two shaky breaths, and then tried to hand the oxygen mask to Big Mike like a joint: puff-puff-give! Tell him how Mike was too traumatized to get the joke.
 - a.) Johnny will fall asleep. Wait for him to wake up. When he does, he will have forgotten you were there. It's okay to repeat the conversation you just had: why waste it if he doesn't remember anyway? In ten years, his favorite story will be about how you had the same conversation six times in one visit.



LA, City of Angels
LA, City of broken dreams

You can buy Border dogs - bacon wrapped hot dogs
(that good ish) - on the street at 2:30 am; Heavens'
scent

You can buy crack and black tar heroin - an illicit
cocktail (that good fix) on the street at 9 am;
Hell's spent

Studios film movies; headliners, headshots, dream big,
big shots, silver screen glory, lights, camera, action!
Coming attractions. Picture rhymes.

Children chase ice cream trucks; pushcarts, Pushpops,
peddlepushers, mistuned musical stories, never
grow up, cone or cup? Summer time.

Jacuranda petals drop, spotting and dotting the subur-
ban sidewalks; warm, welcoming, branched
awnings lean

Traffic mixes, winding and grinding against the bound
concrete; old Converse calling cards hanging canvas
the scene

Hidden subway graveyards and lost orange groves
below, ghostlands gone gradually under the mean
moan, below my hometown. Resounding. Profound
then leaving incomplete memories to burn.

Angry ghetto birds and booming LAX planes above,
skies stretch silently around the machines' groan,
above the ground. Pounding. Surround then leaving
only to return.

I wasn't born there but close. "Everywhere in LA takes
20 minutes!" - Cher's Dad in Clueless. Is that true?

I was a traveller as a kid, like Johnny Cash, "I've been
everywhere", but Los Angeles is where I come home
to.

You will find diapers and syringes in Venice Beach,
watch your step, gritty, knitty, patchouli, and hippy
volleyball. Crawl The Strand. Damn The Man.
You will find longboards and PCH in Malibu, have fun,
surf's up, Bros, toes on the nose, ride the waves and
don't drop in, call. Stand in the sand. Work on your
tan.

"If you lived here, you'd be home by now" says the sign
off the 110 in Downtown LA. There's advertising all
over for the West Coast Dream.

"MLK blvd is always the worst street in the city" says
Chris Rock, on South Central. He's talking about the
drug scene C.R.E.A.M.

Old Town Pasadena used to be lined with bars, drug
dealers, and hookers. Grown up money matured
motivating builders and buyers to clean up and
move out - No doubt about the clout.

Hollywood Boulevard still is. Filthy, dirty wealthy will
watch broken and boughten to dream up and prove
how "green" means the scene.

A Starbucks and McDonalds on every corner, Every-
where Else, America for the soccer moms.
Home of Trader Joe's, Pink's Hot Dogs, and Phillipe's,
one of a kind locals for hipsters in Toms.

My dad bought the house where I grew up because it
was close to the 3rd In'n'Out in California. Third
generation, rooted in Eagle Rock and Pasadena, sta-
tion us home where she, he and I have grown up,
Linda Vista, Oakdale, around the corner, down the
street.

Los Angeles — continued

My mom was born in the barrio and that's why she
never spoke Spanish. First generation, raised on
three jobs and vague immigration, she and they
showed up, missed the white folks, the coroner, and
the heat.

I'm a west coast girl
I'll never forget how you feel, no matter where I go in
the world

LA, You stained my heart like late night french fries or
pancake scrambles from any Denny's or Norm's and
hit me hard like the bowling balls on the refur-
bished Bahama Lanes

LA, I know you like I know my family and my friends,
I know you'll change but always be the same

Brooklyn — Joe Lusnia



It's where my blood stained the asphalt, where my future
was twisted like rotting metal caked with salt, where I lost it all
and found it again in some garbage heap buried under genera-
tions of lost phone numbers and addresses, where the bad was
good and the good was bad and everybody else was baptized in
a sea of indifference trying to swim out to more open waters in
hopes of drowning, it knows no beginning and no end and hasn't
seen the light of day because it's too bright to see anything when
all the lights are on, it moves with the grace of a broken down ice
cream cart, pushed along by anyone willing to get behind it,
pieces of chrome etched with someone's memories keep falling
off, trampled beneath the hooves of those pushing, becoming
part of its landscape, and if you put your head to the ground you
can hear its cry rumbling underneath the surface like a machine
whose belts have dried up but has not outlived its purpose, at
night it boils and burns like some stew left on the stove for too
long, chunks of desiccated meat sweetened by the rot of cabbage
and bananas, thick and brown with specks of green and red
chilies, that no one eats, it just simmers on and on like some base-
ball game, two on and nobody out, it's where the hog danced him-
self to a pulp abandoning a generation of would be wanna be's,
where things were never as they seemed and you couldn't tell
who was running the asylum, burnt out and burnt up it keeps
turning over in its grave resurrected once again with its churches
crumbling, with warriors and poets nesting in its branches of
cobble stone and black wrought iron mingling with vampires and
gangsters, never knowing who is who, it's where they built the
bridges connecting today and tomorrow and where the lady
stands outstretched on a crucifix weeping, her tears melting into
the waters below, it's where the happy and the desolate join
hands, where dreams are made and movies are broken, that's
Brooklyn.

Your Filthy Habit – Madeline Saunders



'Ashtray' by Michele Boon

You suck on the smoke
One long breath at a time. Dragging it.
Raking in smog like it is keeping you alive.
Barely touching your lips, the filth fills your lungs.
Then you release,
Spitting out the garbage.

But you need more.
That taste is your slave.
Hopelessly, your bitch.
It has no choice. Go on.
Command it.

The musk tries to linger but the wind carries the scent away,
You can never quite get that out for your hair
no matter how hard you try.
Inhale again.
It begs.
Humor it.

You string it along until it's just a nub,
Withered and ashen, waiting for your warm kiss.
But instead you snuff out the little blaze.
Push it into the concrete and step on it,
You walk away leaving it ground in the dirt,
Devastated, poor little stub.

Your last little cigarette lies
helpless and crumpled in the fresh earth
waiting to deteriorate.

Welcome To The Ghetto — Theodore Pamplin III



Home of the gangbang,
Altadena Blocc Crips
Vis-à-vis
Pasadena Denver Lanes,

Land of the loiterers, and lurkers,
Who by age 9
Throw up signs
Like construction workers

Nutrition consists of
Chicken nuggets and burgers,
And all the small talk
Is about all the big murders,

Or trees, birds, and burners
Bottom bitches to top earners
Big booty bitches, and bitches with big boobs
Where you can get your ass kicked — then watch it
on YouTube;

Get beat up for stepping on some sneakers
Where you can't see the car, but you still hear the
speakers
Where all hail the stoners, alcoholics, and the tweekers
Where we say fuck school, and motherfuck the teachers

Welcome to the ghetto.

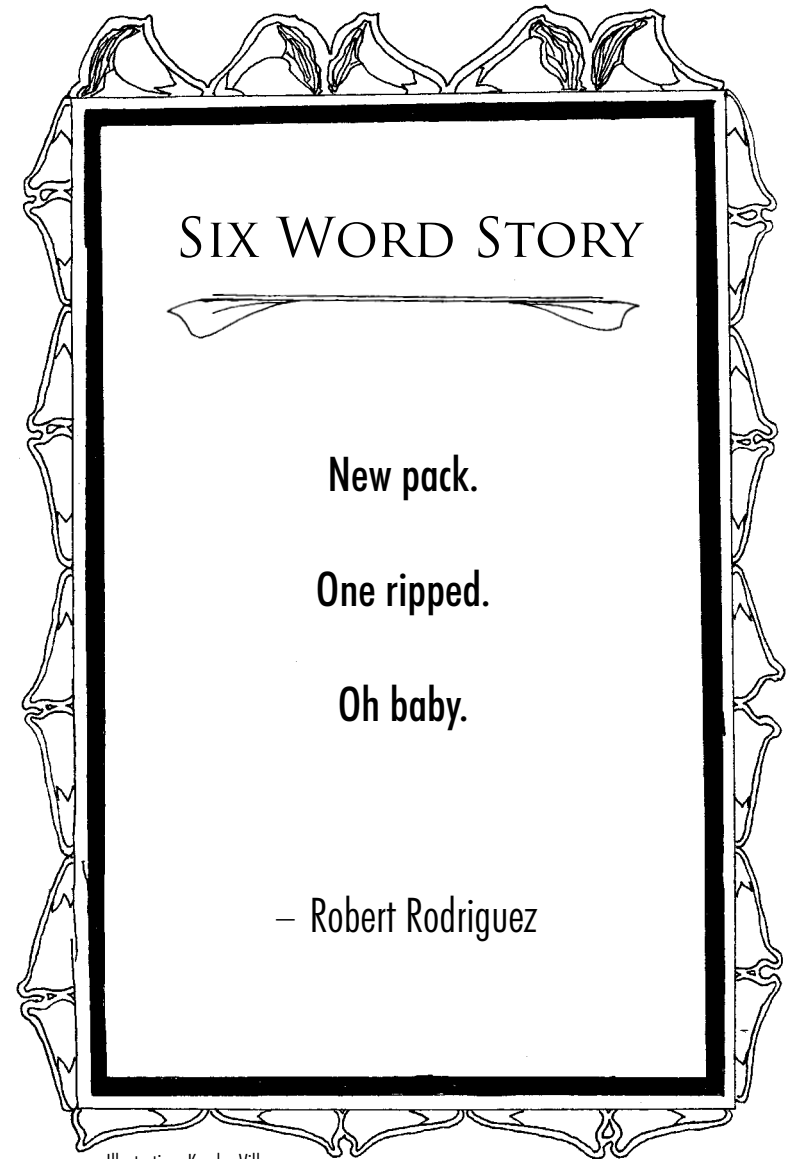


Illustration: Kendra Villa



That summer they met every week on a Wednesday or Thursday, sometimes both, the Wednesdays threatening to throw his notion of an ordered and rational, if inhospitable, universe out of whack. At first the pretense is Just Two Old Friends seeing each other after so long (Almost four hundred fifty Thursdays he notes, but keeps to himself). Carefully, the charade gives way as they feel each other out, accelerating into something else, though they keep their euphemisms: Come over, I'll make us dinner (I'm lonely), and Sure, but I can pick something up if you want (Me too).

Light spills into the room from the streetlight outside, filters through the narrow window, splashes against the wall. First green, then red. Valerie lies close to him, or burrows into the hollow of his arm. She shifts in her sleep, sometimes seeming to observe him through closed eyelids. He listens intently to her breathing, and the murmurs, indecipherable, that she whispers into the warm nights.

Sometimes words slip from him too, remembrances spoken into the darkness above her bed—no more than a mattress really, one of the last things to be packed up and shipped away to a new start—and the crickets, curious or confused, pause to listen:

Thursday—the first one—the day that despite his protests they all go dancing. Valerie is a mayfly, dancing here with one partner, there with another. It's an unfamiliar town, and she's the only person he knows, but he spends the night talking and dancing with her best friend whom he finds fascinating.

He thinks her name is Jackie, but the music is too loud, and he feels like a fool asking again. She's mercurial to a fault, but her smile confuses his expectations. As they leave she latches onto him, and falls asleep against him in the crowded taxi.

A Thursday, but a summer Thursday, pregnant with the warm idleness of long days. He gapes at Jackie's hair and skin (freckling before his eyes), envisioning a Punnett square, defining probabilities. Neither of them can really justify the time they invest in one another, the distances they downplay, but he can sense a sea change on the horizon.

He watches her sit on a stone bench, transfixed. When he realizes she is watching him, simpering, he is suddenly uncertain.

Hey, she murmurs. He smiles self-consciously, but his gaze never falters.

Christmas—and a Thursday!—he takes the tiny robin's egg blue pouch, drops it into the robin's egg blue box, puts it into the robin's egg blue bag, each nested inside the other, then buries the entire thing in an oversized box. The second Jackie walks in he makes her open it in front of him, smiling at the growing expectation in her.

Jesus, teases Jackie, I didn't know straight guys could wrap presents like this.

The pouch, of course, holds only a peppermint.

You. Are. An idiot, she chuckles, cuffs him on the shoulder. An idiot.

When her hands go into her coat pockets she discovers something cold and metallic. She stares wide-eyed at the bright silver bracelet she draws out, not quite able to process the punch line.

Merry Christmas, he says and smiles.

God, you're an idiot, she whispers.

Then, the worst of Thursdays.

I've been trying to reach you. There's been an accident, says Valerie.

On the Thursday before his time runs out and work and school and family and all his obligations force him to leave, he manages to see her. It's just a glimpse, a snapshot from the exile of the hallway outside the ICU, between the opening and closing of doors. He can't see much of her, just what looks like a collection of tubes and hoses and pulleys and the chrome and white sterility of orthopedic hospital equipment, but past the nurses' station and the orderlies and the doctors he spots the sweep of a single arm. Swollen and bandaged, it just hangs there. As the doors sweep shut again, the café-con-leche skin and dusting of freckles register—or at least he believes he can see them—and then she's gone again.

For a moment he shakes like the grade school boy, left behind by the bus, discovered on the stairs by the janitor, warping his understanding of what it means to be alone. He shakes like he had so many times before, until one day the loneliness wasn't so bad and at least that much of him could function.

As a mental exercise, a means to keep it from overwhelming him, he tries to formulate the problem. It takes a moment to recall the formula for the amount of energy involved, but he pulls it out of his memory.

$$F_{avg} d = - \frac{1}{2} m v^2$$

He calculates it twice, the second time on paper. Neither car can really be said to be moving at an excessive speed, but their velocities, the little v in the formula, are added together, and that 2 is the real killer. From there he could figure out how much force gets transferred to the driver. The answer of course is 13,000 kilograms.

Jackie is obliterated by thirteen metric tons of force. It must have been a Thursday, he tells himself.

He met her on a Thursday, a mass of kinky hair that bobbed and shook in the space behind his friend Valerie, the distraction showing until, annoyed, she interrupted with, Is something back there More Interesting?, and, exposed, he laughed and took his first good look—meticulous and deliberate—at the skin like coffee-and-cream, the halo of curls, the dormant freckles (later, he'd try to count them), though she scowled—almost a sneer—until it softened into something like a smile, and forever after it was the day of the week that he would always venerate, celebrate—incipit vita nova!—associate with all things important, everything that ever mattered and ever would.

It is a Thursday—a real, true Thursday, not just a device to rein in your mind, keep it from fighting itself, give order to your life.

No hellos. No pleasantries.

They're disconnecting Jackie, she says. Her mom decided. I thought you should know.

Whatever comes after that gets lost (in fact, you lose practically everything: remembering transforms into a labor).

There is shame, or maybe guilt. They are hard to distinguish from one another.

When you hang up, the shakes never come because the hardening that starts in your chest spreads through you until your insides fossilize and you can't move.

They're disconnecting Jackie. I thought you should know.

He dreams of Jackie, only it's not Jackie, it's a girl from growing up, from high school. He can't remember them getting along in those days, except when one of the guys has a car wreck all his own, and he draws the short straw and has to be the one to announce that their mutual friend is dead. It's the only time he can remember them ever touching. When he wakes up he can't get any of the details right, what the point of it was, what anyone was doing or saying. Jackie is absent, replaced by a stand-in, an understudy filling a gap in his mind. She's slipping away, he understands. He's started to lose her. The day of the week escapes him.

His eyes slide open. She isn't there. A soft slap of bare feet drifts in from somewhere in the apartment, but addled from a restless night, he can't decipher it, place it within his environment. The rectangle of the window is bright across him, the polished wood floor, and up the bare wall. There is a fuzzy warmth to everything; it activates the scent lingering on the single pillow, the citrusy redolence that registers as Valerie to him. He buries his face in it and closes his eyes, and reminds himself it isn't a Thursday.

In the days before the accident, distance holds little meaning to any of them, geography shrinks to insignificance, and Valerie makes trip after trip up and down the coast. He arranges his weeks to end Thursday, and she is there most all of them. Sometimes, towing her latest beau, it's an intrusion, interrupting his plans, reminding him of the wide, open spaces between lives. Sometimes she's alone, but conspires (literally, he annotates, to breathe together) to monopolize his time.

Sometimes she pulls up, bursts out of the driver's seat, and trots hurriedly—clack, clack, clack, clack—to open the passenger door with a sing-song, I brought you a surprise! and there is Jackie, beaming coyly, and it occurs to him that he's never seen her in a sun dress before.

After the accident Valerie showed up just once, to let him know his math was wrong.

She responded.

She's alive, but she's pretty bad.

She woke up, but she can't remember.

It is a scenario he just can't parse.

He wants to see her again, to say something. Connect in some way. Valerie just won't have it. She isn't family, but somehow she's claimed the power to act as gatekeeper.

This is irrelevant—the hospital is just a day's drive away, the room is just down the hallway, just past the double doors, just past the nurse and orderlies. It may as well be on a different planet.

He wants answers: So I'm a write off, is that what you're saying? I didn't get in early enough, so I don't make the cut?

Valerie summarizes the plot: She doesn't remember you. You're gone.

Shakiness creeps into her voice. You think this is easy? You think losing three, four years of her is easy? She was my friend. She was my friend first and so were you. You get it? You haven't seen her, how she gets when she can't remember. It's like she knows something's missing. She has these, these little seizures.

They didn't unplug her and she's there and I'm right here. I'm right here. Do you get it?

Yes, Val, I get it, he replies. You get to have her, and I don't. (I was the one obliterated, he says, though not aloud.)

It is a lot of Thursdays before he's able to really speak to Valerie again.

He rifles through old photographs, returning again and again to pictures of Jackie, taken on some Thursday, trying to ingrain them into his mind indelibly. She sits on a stone bench and the sun is low and the sunset so intense, it saturates the colors of everything. Where the light hits the grass around her, it rebounds into the lens a bright Lincoln-green. Where the light catches her eyes they look back at him like a jungle cat's. Where the light hits her skin, she glows.

Made-up and polished, Valerie flouts the passage of years. It's as impractical as possible for a moving day, but then he knew he'd be doing all the work. It's a different Valerie though, this End-of-Summer Valerie. When it's time for her to leave, there's no toothy smile or parade wave, no wink or hair flip. She moves languidly, patiently, without affectation.

We never talk about her, she finally says.

He shrugs, takes his time to inspect his feet. I knew this girl once. She had an accident, and now she doesn't remember me. Sometimes she shows up in my dreams.

(I wonder if I ever show up in hers.)

Just before she slides into her car and drives away, Valerie breaks the tacit agreement between them, abruptly—publically—invades his personal space. He flinches; in the day's heat, there is the salty tang of work to him even he can detect. But she moves undeterred, stands on his feet to anchor him, and unrepentantly takes her time with a long goodbye as all around them pedestrians gawk. For days afterward, he imagines he can still taste it—something like oranges.

He finds a picture of her on his phone, taken at arm's length against the stark, sterile walls of an empty apartment. Valerie's dark hair, normally smooth and glossy, blooms around a face with sleep in its eyes. Morning light trickles in sideways and washes out the color of her skin.

She's pale, tired, unkempt and unpolished, but the first time he sees it he taps repeatedly at the device, summoning her smile back every time she fades out, again and again and again. He's terrible with these new gadgets (they threaten the system he's established for himself) and it's days before he discovers it.

It happens on a Wednesday, but that's okay.

The Ballad of Benjamin Button — Alex Phuong



Time passes by
Some say it can fly
And we all must die
In spite of this
Is it all just a dream or a lie?

I know a man
He learned the answer to this
He was the most unusual person
And because he aged backwards,
One could say his life was curious

He experienced what every person has to undergo.
He grew, loved, and suffered
But just couldn't say "no"
To whatever strangeness happened to him

He loved a girl named Daisy
Ever since they were very young
She saw the man he truly was
And held onto him like a rung

As time went by, however,
The relationship could not last.
The clock kept ticking away.
Sand poured down the hour-glass.
The cruelties of the passage of time
And in the cold darkness, the Ancient Mariner had his Rime
Reminding us all that
No matter what we can do
We must accept this harsh reality
Because it is universally true.

He did not hold the ace.
But lived a full life
Despite his curious case.
Some would say he was different from the human race.

Life really is a gift
It is one that is original and unique
Life changes the minds of people
As well as their attitudes and physique

Some people swim
Some people dance
Please tell me this
Is more than just romance
For life is more
Yes! Life is so much more
Than a dream
It's just...curious...



Illustration: Paris Matic

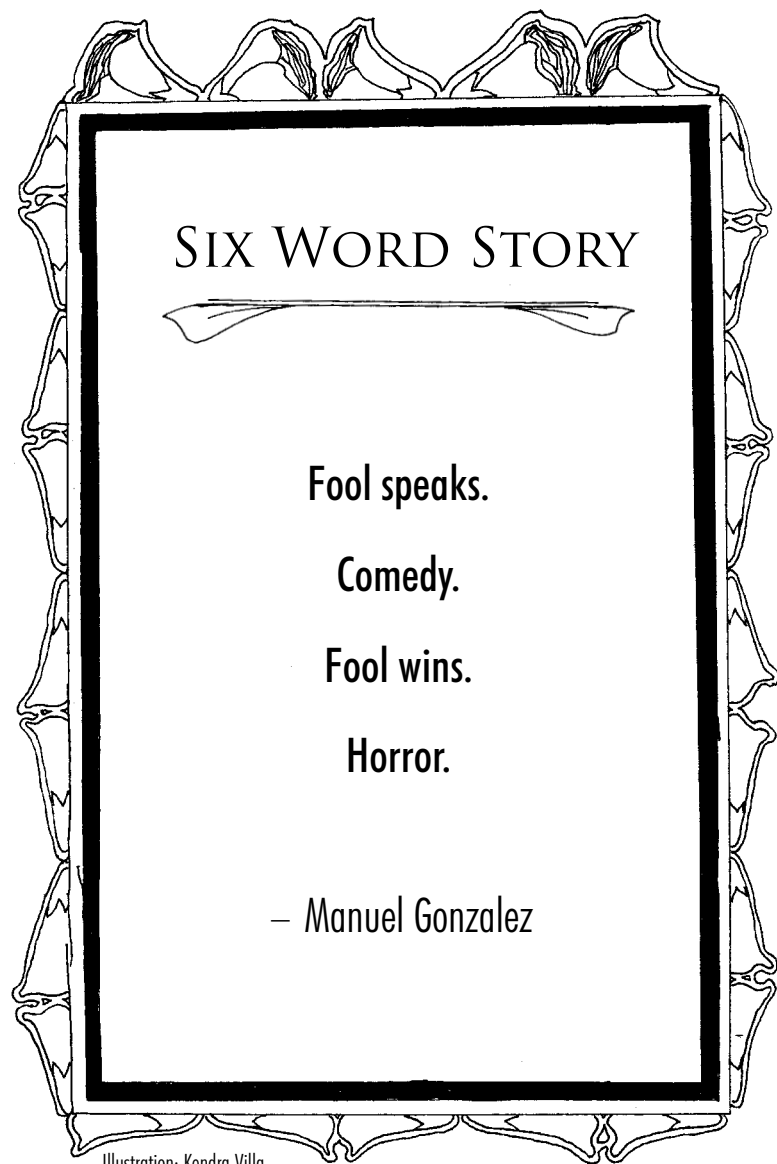


Illustration: Kendra Villa

House of Cards – Kay Lai



"I'm on my guard to the rest of the world, but with you, I know it's no good..."

I don't want to be a waste of your time. I want to cling to you and smother you and tell you how much you mean to me every moment that you're not here in my arms. I constantly think about how I've never felt this way before and this feeling makes my heart beat so fast it hurts. Sometimes it scares me. Sometimes it lulls me to sleep.

But then when I talk to you, I feel bad and get flustered because I don't have much to say, because the feeling is so overwhelming. It makes my mouth feel funny because I feel like the only place it belongs is on yours. But then I get worried and start talking too much because I'm scared the silence means that I'm boring and uninteresting and why would you want that? So I start rambling and I get even more embarrassed and I never know if chatting you up or staying silent is the better option. (Even now, my fingers are nervously skittering across these keys.) I feel like I come off as coming on too strong and I'll leave a bitter taste in your mouth, like the taste of burnt black coffee.

Sometimes it's a little daunting because I worry my incessant rambling and my bottled up emotions will become too much. I'm still scared that I'll laugh too loud and I'll blush too fiercely and I'll embarrass myself. I'm scared that I'll whine too much when you leave because I've never felt so needy before, because before you I never realized something was missing so badly. I'm scared that when you leave me it's saying something about me, even if I know it doesn't. Even though I know I'm lucky now that I get to see you at all, it's so hard when I haven't really had you to myself and I can't be selfish with your time. I know I have to let you live your own life, but I'm scared that your own life means that you don't want me in it even though I know otherwise.

The worst part is when I can't help but demand from you why it is you're still around. *Do you really love me? Why do you*

love me? Please don't leave me... You don't have the time to spend with me anymore, do you? You don't really care about me. You're going to leave me because I'm too difficult. I wish I didn't have to say things like that. I know it hurts you, I see it in your eyes just like how I see it in your eyes that you do love me. But the thoughts escape my mouth before I can catch them, so I can't keep them inside of me along with my deepest, darkest thoughts.

You want to know a secret? I think I push you away because a part of me is sickened at myself, at the person I've become. I rarely ever feel this way and instead of seeing it as a blessing, I see it as a sign of being disgustingly weak. I'm scared that there'll be a day where I have to pick my disgustingly weakened self off the floor all by myself, without anyone else's help. And I want to push you away because well, I'm going to be alone picking up the pieces one day, aren't I? It's a funny thing, trying to prevent something from happening *before* it happens, when in reality it would cause it...

I push you away, every day, all the time, whenever my doubts get the best of me and whisper their nasty thoughts into my ears. Those angry little thoughts tell me no one will ever help me off the ground. They tell me there is no such thing as Prince or Princess Charming. They say how careless I am for being as honest as I am, and how I shouldn't let anyone in because they'll eventually leave, just like everyone else. They tell me how nobody really wants me and I am not enough on my own. They remind me about how much of a failure I am and how I am incapable of succeeding in anything.

Those thoughts keep me awake at night, keep me tossing and turning, and make me glare at my cell phone's illuminating screen for not being able to give me any new answers to the questions in my mind. I fear that I'll wake up in my nightmare, where one less person who says they care about me fails to do so the next day because I wasn't enough for them.

But then, when I wake up the next morning, I look and see if you've left me any messages while I was asleep. And it's that simple "good morning sweetie" that makes me realise that I'm awake

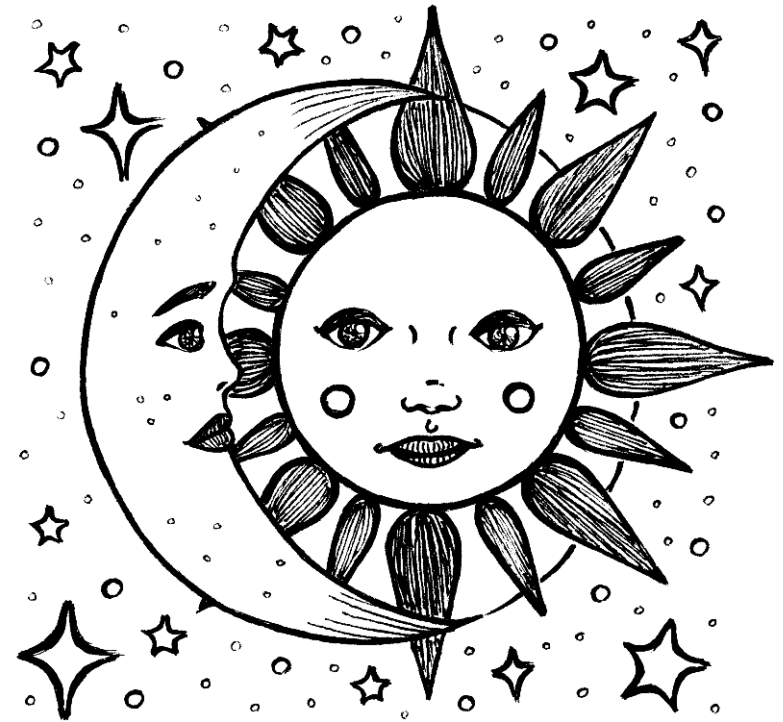


Illustration: Paris Matic

in reality. Even though it can be glaringly difficult at times, it's reality that reminds me you're still here, and you're not going anywhere. And I start trying to believe you a little bit more, one morning at a time...

*I'll run my fingers through your hair
And watch the lights go wild
Just keep on keeping your eyes on me
It's just wrong enough to make it feel right
Lead me up the staircase
Won't you whisper soft and slow?
I'm captivated by you, baby,
like a fireworks show...*

—“Sparks Fly” by Taylor Swift



I am a fishmonger's wife. He comes home, skin full of silver-shined scales, the ocean brine under his nails, and the festered reek of fish entrails ground into his palms. We eat cheap fish, left-over fillets of bottom feeders with the edges dried from the beating sun and salt winds. I boil it with canned tomatoes and the wild greens I found during the day, dandelion greens mostly. We must soak our bread in the juices of the fish so it is soft enough to chew. It was over bread he proposed, my fresh baked, hot buttered rosemary loaf. His young, unused lips gently pulled together uttered sweet romance, but not for me, just for the bread. He got bread and casseroles and cream cakes. I got a thousand miles between my bruised forearm and the preacher, father. But now, with the food in front of him, he, the fishmonger, has no words, just the droning mumbles of chewing. I sit across from him, my fork swirling dandelion leaves through tomato juices and watch him. His eyes on his plate, I notice the cracked crow's feet at their corners, the dry skin of his sun-baked cheeks, the unfolding blossom on his nose. Food slops into his mouth. I think his eyes are brown or, maybe, they have changed. Maybe, they've soaked in the feted reek of fish and the hot reflection of the ocean blue. They've taken them in and formed a new color, his color, earth and ocean and stench in one.

He finishes his dinner sucking the remaining juice from the plate; the smack of his lips turns my stomach. He stands, leaving the dirty plate for me, and walks three boot falls to the bedroom where he peels away his dingy fish clothes, leaving them in a pile for me to clean. I'll take them in the morning to the runoff leading down from the mountains to the ocean and bash them against the rocks, rub them with lye soap and grit through the bleeding cracks of my thumbs. The cold water soothes. Across the runoff, I see a gray feral tom, half his left ear missing, only a scarred nub. He blinks at me dully, his matted tail occasionally swathing across the muddy bank. His strong demeanor while broodingly masculine is transparent to me. I imagine myself pulling him up into my arms and lovingly stroke between his eyes. He purrs, his eyes

shut. I pull a shirt out and wring it hard, sending soapy water into the runoff. The tom turns his head away, unfazed. He and I understand each other, this feral tom.

I hear the fishmonger's throat clear as the bedsprings groan meaning I am to join him. I sit there with food, untouched. A breeze from an open window brings in the ocean air, brined like him, his air, but clean and fresh, not floating on the notes of fish guts. I take my plate and push the fish and greens back into the simmering pot on the hearth, perhaps lunch tomorrow. At least a cat's lunch. He eats my slop, but won't let me touch him.

I take his dirty plate and my own and place them in a basin to be cleaned tomorrow. Extinguishing the candles, I'm caught by the orange tinge of the room lit by the embers of the fire. It's a cabin of other people, a shade different from our own. I wonder what kind of people live here. Are they talking people? Or touching people? I imagine a woman: she looks like me, but her hair has a sheen, and it's pulled back from her face, which is golden tan and smooth. Her eyes, by God, they gleam, orange tinted like the room. Her mouth, lips full, peels back in laughter. A laugh so soul shaking, it rattles the meat on her bones. The fishmonger clears his throat again, and I close this world off, this other woman, this not me, by shutting the bedroom door.

He's already in bed dressed in flannel with the quilt pulled to his chest. I take off my skirt and blouse and make my own pile of clothes. Looking through the wardrobe, I pick a thin cotton nightgown from when we were first married, one he liked the touch of, and squeeze into it. It's tight around the middle. I undo the last candle sending the room into blackness and feel my way to the bed, climbing in next to him. By his breathing, I know he's asleep already. I can't touch him afraid it will wake him. As my eyes begin to adjust, I realize the room isn't black, but is in fact a deep shade of blue. The crescent moonlight filters through the small window at the far side of the room. Faintly, I hear the ocean lapping against huge boulders down at the rocky beach. It was the same when I first came into the room, not yet a blushing twenty with my suitcase full of little things, useless things from a now dead life. The waves hitting the rocks and he placed a new

cotton nightgown in front of me as a wedding gift. Only a quick look, he wants to see if it fits proper. I never made it into the new clothes because as soon as the old ones were gone he was on me, taking me in a rough way, the way he was used to I supposed. It wasn't pleasant, but it was children, his children that would grow and live and be rocked to sleep at the open window with the waves crashing. They would be full of those crashing waves, loud, full of life, but they didn't come, and after he figured I was full of barren earth, he would simply fall asleep leaving me to the dark blue of the nighttime room.

It seems as if the room has filled with ocean water now. Licking my upper lip, I taste wet salt. I see creeping under the door a length of green seaweed, which has slinked its way from the beach and up the sandy path to our cabin. It wraps around the wardrobe legs and the side table and then climbs right into our marriage bed. Up the seaweed comes a line of minnows, minnows in top hats, glittering as they dance. At the end of the bed, they hop off the seaweed and continue their procession up my leg, past my knobby knee and stop at my stomach. There, they tap dance, but tap dance in the air, never actually touching the soft of my nightgown.

They dance for a while until the muffled blare of trumpets sends the minnows swimming off in the moonlight. They pass right through the glass of the window, waving goodbye with their tails. The trumpets signal again, but this time a bit closer. Then, it is quiet, just that ever present lapping. I hear footfalls, heavy on the sandy path outside, and then, after the bursting of the front door, heavy on the cabin floor. I look to my left, but he is still asleep, a stone. I push the quilt back and slip out of the bed. Pressing against the door, I listen and am sure I hear ragged breathing. I crack the door open and see it is no longer the world of the orange tint, the world of the jockeying woman. The moon has also given this room an ocean blue. I open the door more and cannot believe my eyes for the massive figure of Poseidon sits at the kitchen table. But it's not the Poseidon of lore, the mighty god you've heard fishermen speak of. In fact, he is rather like a fisherman himself. Black rubber boots, brown-green overalls strapped across a broad chest. His hair is green and may actually

be seaweed. It falls, wet, to his shoulders. His skin, a bluish green, appears to be covered in sores, but when I come closer I realize they are barnacles.

I round the table and go to sit, but stop. I know, without talking, he wants a drink. He's there, I realize, in my mind talking, but not talking, expressing for me all his wants. And the first is a drink. Out of the roughhewn cupboard by the hearth, I pull a clear bottle of auburn liquor the fishmonger keeps in case weather is rough, and he can't make it to the wharf bar. I go for a glass, but there his thoughts intrude again, and I bring him the bottle only. Taking my seat across from him, I watch as he pours the drink into his mouth. His lips, two purple blue slugs, part, and I see his teeth are all mossy, covered in green felt.

His next thought flows into me gently, almost nonchalant. He wants me. He wants me as his wife. The back of his hand is wet with slime as he wipes it across his lips. He's been watching me from the beach, hidden in the white froth of the waves. He's watched me pick wild greens and fat strawberries. He's watched as I've felt the warmth of the sun on my face and tasted the brine air. He wants to take me away, away from here, the cabin, away from the fishmonger and make me his bride. Despite his unassuming appearance, he is still the king of the ocean, a god born out of fire and darkness. And I would be his wife. Queen. I could command power by proxy, cause ships to sink, men to drown, and call upon any manner of sharp-toothed sea creature to tear their bodies apart. I could bring up a tidal wave and sweep the cabin away, the wharf and all those produce-hawking men with their bar full of creaking backrooms and rouge-cheeked women. I could swim, feel the waves against me, breathe the wet salted currents, and exhale the summer tide.

Then Poseidon places a rusted shackle on the table. It's brown red against the blue light of the moon, and because he knows it, I know, it's from a sunken ship. He means it to be a wedding ring, which will bind me to him, bind me to the ocean. Without it, I can't live beneath the waves; I can't be his bride. I look at it, a rusted hunk of iron, which flakes and breaks in pieces. Poseidon takes another shot of auburn liquor and, without words,



Illustration: Kendra Villa

applies pressure in my mind. Pressure to decide whether I will be his bride, whether I will clamp my wrist in this shackle, and let the groove pinch my plump pink flesh. He applies pressure to see if I will hold the power, his power, but then I feel the pressure slip. I see the liquor is working on him. His eyes start to cloud and a fine line of drool drips from a slug-lip. Without words, I hear the crash of the ocean smashing through the open front door. Just past Poseidon's shoulder, I can see down the sandy path, and the black waves catch the glint of the moon before crashing into the rocky beach. He sleeps now with a deep gurgling snore, and soon the snores of the fishmonger join his and blend, playing off each other.

I stand. I stand and walk out the front door leaving the fishmonger and Poseidon behind. I leave behind the cotton nightgown on the sandy path and feel the chilled night air on naked flesh and the slip of the wet stones on my feet. The ocean waves burst into a fine mist that settles cold salt on my skin, and it's vigorous, and it's life, and it wakes me. Without one more passing thought, I am in the black waves swimming away from the beach. My hair, now wet, gleams in the moonlight. I push it back, away from my face, and swim with forceful strokes toward the dark horizon. I feel the warm ocean surround me, hold me, and the cold night air deep in my lungs, and as I swim, the top hat minnows come to the surface to greet me. They splash and jump and nuzzle against my skin. The feeling is wonderful, and we swim into the deep.



Dark chocolate liquid
eyes shimmer like frozen streams,
glinting in the sun.

Acrobatic pulse
thrums quick as the hummingbird's
wings: eager; fearful.

Night magic? Olives,
bronze and coffee, soft-lidded
in gorgeous repose.

Iris's red blossom
blooms fleetingly, like a soft
voice whispers: *trust me*.

Egg-yolk setting sun,
earth-strand river shining close;
strangely understood.

Lemon tone, sugar
center; a slivered mirror —
Heart in a bird's nest.



Under a magnifying glass, popcorn resembles many things:
stuffed snowflakes, white cliffs of Dover, a circus.

Legend has it that the American Indians discovered popcorn
when some kernels fell into a campfire, exploded, and scared the
bejesus out of them. The price of progress.

The deepest thing you can say about popcorn is that, for all
its popularity in the U.S., hardly anything is written about it.
There is, however, one memorable scene from "Diner" where the
Mickey Rourke character bets his friend he can get this girl to
touch his penis on the first date, then while in the theater he
tricks the girl into reaching into the popcorn box and wow,
there's his pecker. He wins the bet and loses the date.

We were in England for a year and my biggest concern upon
arrival was finding an air popper. Sure I could find a metal toast
separator, a device that cools the toast so fast you can't spread
the butter. A device to pop corn kernels using hot air, however,
was just too foreign for the British. Whatever happened to our
shared heritage? We found one for 20 pounds (\$30) but it was a
nightmare to manage. It had this super friendly packaging, a pic-
ture of Americana in the 1950s, with yellow haired children smil-
ing at their parents and popcorn flying all over the room. Truth
in advertising! For when the hot air forced the kernels out the
first time we used it, they flew all over the room like crazed tra-
peze artists. Only half of them actually popped, so we devised a
way to capture the psycho kernels fleeing the circus ring. In place
of a bowl, we held a paper bag over the mouth of the Spinning
Hades, thus giving the corn lots of room to fly and bounce before
settling down, kind of how breathing into a paper bag relieves
anxiety.

Ed and I fell in love over our devotion to words, movies, and
popcorn. I had previously dated a man who, when we walked into
the cinema said, you're not going to have popcorn are you?
Maybe he was prejudiced by the rancid grease odor of the con-



'Linda and Ed' photograph provided by Linda Cantrell.

cession stand. Get over it! I did. Maniacally munching popcorn makes the movie-going experience twice the fun.

Both our families grew up with stovetop popcorn on Friday nights in front of the TV, and bags of it at Saturday matinees, where our moms dumped us to shop for the week's groceries. When we got married and combined households, we had an extra air popper. His had better pressure, so I donated mine to charity, knowing it would soon be snapped up at an unbelievably low price by somebody needing a lucky break.

Now when we make popcorn our terriers are involved. Signal #1 that it's going to be a better than average night is the sound of a cupboard opening. Seconds later the dogs have run into the kitchen. Signal #2 is a quiet tinkling of hard kernels in the plastic jar that amplifies as the kernels pour into the popper. Signal #3 is the appearance of the large yellow bowl. And the signal that gets them running in circles is the whirr of the centrifuge. It takes about a minute for the first kernels to pop, so there's a lot of commotion and homecoming and licking chops and crying out, but Ed and the puppies settle down once they're crunching the bouncy Styrofoam.

I'd like this story to have a happy ending but truthfully 12 years have passed since our first bowl together. We've perfected the taste with quality virgin olive oil, just enough salt to keep the doctors away, a quick sprinkle of garlic powder and sometimes parmesan cheese, almost a pasta, only better roughage and you can eat it with your fingers, or shovel it in with your whole hand. Which brings me to the confessional bit of this tale: Ed and I now have separate bowls. I honestly could not tolerate his bogarting. The popcorn ritual has to be pure enjoyment, otherwise we might as well go microwave. I'm not eager to admit this flaw in the marriage, but it works for us, taught us that when something difficult comes between us, we can solve it. Americans, I say it's time to take a closer look at what holds this great country together. Get out those magnifying glasses. They say no two kernels are alike!



It's been a year now since I've completed therapy, and I can honestly say that I am much better. A little over a year ago, I was accused of setting a local church on fire. At the trial, I told them that I'd seen Satan sneak inside, so I trapped him in and burned it down. You can imagine how much they didn't like to hear this. Everyone in the room, the judge, the jury, the audience, which was quite a big turn out by the way—they all just sort of sat with these prudent looks upon their faces with their eyes fixed on me.

"But he was there," I yelled. "And I saved you from him! You all better believe me when I say he was on his way to your houses next!"

I wasn't sent to jail because the judge had declared me insane at the time of the crime. I was given one year probation. I was sent to a hospital for six months under careful watch and with required daily visits to a psychologist. Once those six months were over, I was able to go home but I was still required to see my therapist every day. If I didn't go, I'd be sent to jail for violation of my probation to serve the remaining six months of my sentence. I tell you with sincerity that that was not a desire of mine.

My therapist always made sure he told me how well I was doing. "You've come a long way," he would always say. I was reluctant at first to share anything with him. I knew that if I'd shared any part of my world with him, he'd break it all down, piece by piece, and destroy it, leaving me in a whirlwind of confusion. So, for the first couple of weeks, maybe even the entire first month, I'd created a big lie and I lived in that world seamlessly. I exaggerated my statement of seeing Satan and I worked off of that. I knew what I had seen, and if that was what got me in there, that's what he was going to have to deal with.

"Oh, Satan," I moaned while turning in my chair. "Oh, Satan, release me! Release me, now! Please!" I began swatting at the air before my face as if I were attempting to remove an illusion from my sight. "Leave me!" I screamed in desperation. Finally, I fell to my knees and let my lifeless body succumb to gravity. I'd pretended that all of the life had been sucked out of me. With my head fallen back and my arms limp at my sides, I gazed up at that

wooden ceiling until I eventually saw a Godly blue sky take its place. I imagined a beam of sunlight breaking through the ceiling casting its magnificence right over me. Little specks of dust floated and were illuminated; they looked just like flecks of gold. It was beautiful.

"Are you saved now? Is this God you are looking at," my therapist interrupted.

"No," I lied. "This is me as Satan's puppet." I turned my head towards him to make sure he saw the smirk on my face. "I am in a position for him to control." I lifted my arms and let them dance up and down as though a puppeteer's strings were controlling them from above.

All of this was months ago, as I've already said. Even that of which I've just told you was just one of the many acts I performed while in that room. It was sort of like a stage; and every confession I made, whether true or false, was another bit to act out. But as the months went on, I began to realize how much time was being wasted, and I began to tell the truth. Perhaps this is what the therapist wanted me to do. Perhaps he had known all along that I was a lying buffoon. But I eventually reached my last day and had been helped to see the reality now presented to me in my days.

And so this brings us to where we are now: a point where I am able to write about what I went through; when I am able to say that I am grateful for it all, and that I can't believe where I was only a year ago.

But how boring, wouldn't you agree? What a happy ending that would be; but I don't think that I can let it be. I've never been one to let things end so sentimentally. After all, if you think about it, nobody ever did tell me Satan doesn't exist...



16 is an age of passion, an age of vigour, and an age of searching for dreams. Like a chick just broke its shell, I staggered into the world without knowing where the pitfalls lay ahead.

I call Mandalay my hometown because I was born there. I called myself a Chinese because my parents immigrated to Burma, now Myanmar, from China. As devoted Buddhists, they made an ill-advised decision that determined my fate – to sacrifice me when I was 9 to a Buddhist temple in the mountains. I was, as my father called me, an “iron ingot” which needed to be made into a piece of “useful steel,” in a “refining furnace,” a Buddhist Temple. When he handed me to the head monk, he had no idea how the “refining” process was carried out. In the morning I had to carry two big wooden buckets to a river a mile down in the valley to fetch water for the Temple, and sweep the stone-paved courtyard and the thirty-five steps leading to the worship hall, and then exercise Kung Fu till I walked the same way as my stone-hearted, bow-legged Kung Fu master did. When the evening finally came, I was told that was the precious time to clean my minds by reciting the Buddhists scriptures. I did it till midnight with my legs across sitting on a straw mat on the damp and cold floor... Someone would have been locked up in jail for life if he does that to a child in the U.S. today.

Born to proud Chinese parents, I was taught Chinese from day one, because my parents believed that Chinese was a superior social status, and being a Chinese who spoke the Chinese language would somehow connect me with the Chinese Emperor who conquered all of the minorities including the barbarian Burmese. While the Buddha scriptures in that temple were in Chinese language, they were as deep and incomprehensible as the muddy river at the bottom of the valley. In those long days, I was being refined, mostly by the hard labor and Kung Fu exercise, into a piece with strong limbs and a hollow head.

It was my 16th birthday. When I finished sweeping the steps, I stood by the fence separating the wild and the temple, watching

a group of monkeys playing in the woods. A huge strong male was courting several females. I was amused by the happiness they seemed to enjoy.

“Ramon!” I was startled when the head monk called behind me, apparently disapproved. He held his palms together in front of his chest and delivered to me the first and the last lesson from him during my seven-year cultivation in the temple: “Ramon, this is what you should remember you whole life: To refrain from five things: killing, theft, obscenity, dishonesty, and alcohol. Do you understand?”

“What is ‘obscenity’?” I asked.

“That’s what you did just now. Remember: lust is the worst among the five, keep away from it. Amitabha!” He accompanied me to the gate where my parents were waiting. I was honorably released from that cold and damp “refining furnace” many miles from any civilization.

My parents were happy to have me home in Mandalay and ready to get me engaged, as all boys from rich and respectful families did in early 80’s in the town. When they had found a suitable girl, I had to go through the formality to make the engagement official. One Sunday, dressed up in a brand new shirt and longyi, I was sent to the town to buy expensive gifts for my future wife who I had never met. See, we were much more practical people back then. An engagement should be materialized by tangibles, not a romantic “proposal” as they do now.

When I roamed the market, I saw a colorful flier on a pole. On it was a beautiful Chinese girl in a green long dress dancing under a palm tree. Her head bent over backwards and one of her legs raised high behind her to stretch her long skirt to a shape of a Chinese fan. “Peacock Dance Performed by Liping Yang” was written in between her and the palm tree. I stood there frozen. I had never seen anything that beautiful and that attractive. That was a show in town that night. Without giving a second thought I went to the theater, bought a ticket and waited outside for it to open.

It was a grand stage with a setting of tropical forest. A palm tree made out of cardboard stood at the left side of the stage, and some colorful carved birds perched on another cardboard tree that I couldn't name. When the round-faced announcer introduced the Peacock Dance, the audience stood up from their seats clapping their hands.

The music started like sun rising, birds singing, and trees whispering. There she came with her back to the audience. She moved slowly and gracefully with the beat of the music. The shining decor on the bird feathers on the rim of her skirt trembled when she moved like a gorgeous peacock, a breeze, and a dream. Her long and dainty arms raised and waved, like the wings of birds. Now she was in the center of the stage and in harmony with the rhythms of the music, she slowly turned to the audience. My breath stopped. Her long and narrow eyes are like that of peacocks' hiding mysteriously behind her thick eye lashes. Her small face arrogantly held high on her slender neck. She was heavenly beautiful! I felt a warmth flow over my stomach, my throat, and my head.

After the front curtain dropped and music stopped, the audience began to move to the exit. I walked to the stage, sneaked past the curtain, and looked for the peacock girl. A man stopped me and told me that the dancers had left for the Mandalay Hotel where they stayed. I went home after midnight and tossed in my bed till dawn. I got up quickly, shaved every small whisker off my face, put on a silk shirt and pair of leather shoes, and ran straight to the hotel waiting in the lobby. Finally around noontime a group of Chinese girls came down from upstairs. They held hands together looking at the exotic decorations, and no one paid any attention to my new leather shoes. Then I saw her descending from the stairs wearing a white silk shirt and a pair of lime pants. I walked up to her. "Hello Ms. Yang," I said. She stopped and looked at me, surprised. Not many local people could speak perfect Mandarin, I guessed. "Do you want to have a coffee?" I remembered this from an old movie. She looked puzzled a little bit and looked for her friends. They were already at the gate of the hotel disappearing into the street. I bowed and showed her the side door leading to a sitting area in the shade.

She looked even younger than she was on the stage. Without makeup, her skin was so fair that made me thinking of the fine porcelain locked up in my mother's kitchen cabinets. Her brown eyes shone without the heavy artificial lashes. The birds were singing and by the breeze tossed up her long straight hair. I told her she looked no more than 16. She laughed and said that she was actually 24. I told her I had practiced Kung Fu since I was 9. She said that she had danced since she was 13. I offered her a drink and she only took a glass of water. When I was trying to remember what happened next in the old movie, she stood up and said that she needed to go. Feeling that I might never see her again I asked if I could have her phone number. "I need to get the permit from the Communist Party Committee to give the telephone number to a foreigner," she sounded like a well-behaved schoolgirl. We agreed that we would meet in the hotel lobby the same time next day to see if she could give me her phone number. She disappeared into the side door in nimble steps, and I sat there dreaming till I heard a cough from behind.

It was a man in his middle 40's. His starched white shirt buttoned up to his neck supported by a black bowtie. He was the piano player in the hotel lobby, I remembered. "May I have a seat?" he asked quietly.

"Sure," I said absent-mindedly. I was still in the shock that I had met with the peacock girl, and will meet with her again tomorrow.

"Are you a relative of Ms. Yang?" he asked, in a soft and admiring voice.

"Sort of," I said, thinking about a quotation I remembered: "All of us are related if you track back to the beginning."

"Could you come with me? I'd like to talk with you." He smiled politely.

"Sure." I followed him to a small office at the back of the hotel lobby. When the door closed behind me I began to feel uncomfortable. The room was windowless with three men in suits sitting around a square desk smoking.

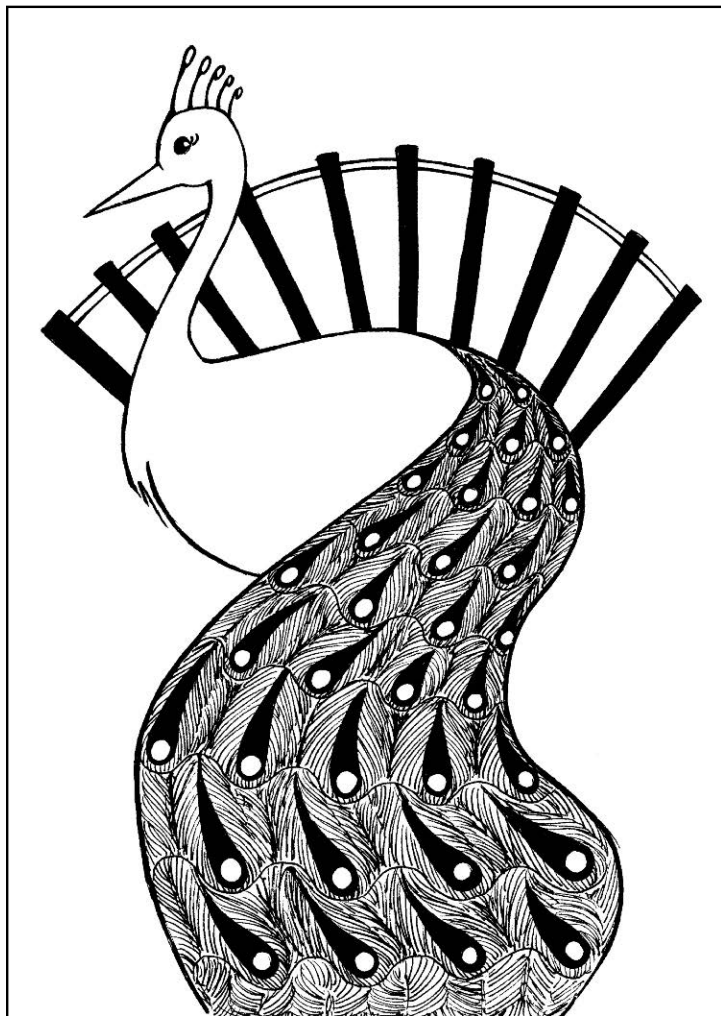


Illustration: Paris Matic

"Sit down." A man with crooked front teeth pointed to a wood chair. I sat down and felt a bump in my back pocket. Oh, Buddha. I remembered the list of gifts I was supposed to buy.

"What's your relationship with Ms. Yang?" he asked in Burmese and handed me a cigarette. I never smoked before, but I took the cigarette and he helped to light it. I coughed and he laughed, showing more ugly dark teeth and purple gum.

"Friends," I said, choosing a safe term, in case they wanted me to prove. The men looked at each other and moved closer. My instinct told me that something went wrong. I looked at the room – there was no decoration, nothing but a bright light bulb hanging above the metal desk. I figured it was time to tell the truth. "New friends," I said. "We had a coffee." I immediately corrected myself. "I had a coffee and she had a glass of water."

The crooked-teeth stood up and put his face three inches from mine. "You must tell us the truth, or there will be consequences."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"We are from Unit Two of the Intelligence Bureau." He continued, "Who sent you here to meet Ms. Yang? What organization do you belong to?"

"No one. I saw her performance last night and I came to talk to her."

"A fool would believe it." He laughed in a low and metallic voice. He turned away and I noticed a handgun exposed from a leather case on his belt. I felt sweat on my back. "Okay, I tell you the truth, I...I'll tell you." I began to stammer.

I repeated what I told him.

Before I repeated it another time, my hands were grabbed from behind and I was pulled up and pushed against the wall. The idea of using my Kung Fu skill to defend myself never came

to my mind, not even once. "Who sent you here to meet her and for what purpose?" I blinked my eyes and couldn't think of a "correct" answer to get me out of the situation.

"Did she plan to flee from China?"

"What?" I cried out furiously when my back hurt like being cut by a knife.

"Did she tell you her plan to flee?"

"No. I thought she liked China."

Another strike and I almost fell onto the floor.

"Oh, Mom..." I began to cry like a baby. "I really don't know."

"Why did you meet with her?"

"She... She's beautiful."

No more strike. They exchanged some remarks. "Sit down." I turned and was pushed onto a chair. I jumped up immediately. My back hurt so much when it touched the back of the chair. On the desk was a rope with several knots laying next to the chair, laughing at me. I cried again. The door opened and a short man with narrow eyes came in. His hands were held behind him when he walked up to me. "Young lad," he spoke Chinese, "I'm from the Chinese consulate. I need to know if you know anything about Yang's plan to escape."

"Escape? From where?" I hoped that a Chinese official from the consulate was more reasonable than those local rascals.

"If you tell the truth and turn her in, we will give you a brand new scooter, made in USA, as an award. If you do not cooperate with us," he said and looked at the others, seeking confirmation. "You will be put in jail for many years." My mouth dried up and I looked at each of their faces. "Can I see my father?" I cried out.

The night was long and the desk was hard for sleeping. When the door opened again, the guy in the white shirt appeared. "You can leave now." I rolled down from the desk but did not go. He still blocked the door way. He laughed and moved aside. Outside were my stone-faced parents. I followed them home and was beaten up one more time. "What did you learn in the Temple?" My father yelled at me and struck me again with a bamboo stick. "I had to pay a fortune to buy you out." He gnashed.

That ended my dreaming for the peacock dancer, and my proposed engagement. The girl's family canceled the plan. "Lust is the worst of the five," I remembered.

Like a rotten potato I was kicked out and moved from place to place before settling down in Los Angeles. At the age of 40 I had not been spoiled by any girls, especially those pretty ones. My head monk would be very happy, if he had still lived.

One day I walked in downtown after work and saw a colorful flier on a post - a slim girl in a green long dress dancing under a palm tree. I pinched my arm and it hurt. At 7 o'clock that night I was sitting in the best section of an auditorium reading the program of Ms. Yang's Peacock Dance. She was forbidden to perform Peacock Dance in foreign countries for many years following a wrongful accusation, it read, and at the age of 48 she was still single and determined "to devote her life to peacock dancing." The light dimmed and music rose. On the stage she was still that innocent bird, like a fragrant breeze, and a continued dream. When the curtain dropped, I stood up clapping with the audience till she came out of the curtain and took a bow. She received a bouquet from an audience member, and waved to the audience at the left, at the right, and then to the center, and to me.

I moved with the flow to the exit, drove home, and fell asleep, fully content.

The Dive — Kay Lai



standing on the ledge before an expanse of ocean, the
biggest stretch of water You've ever seen
You take a deep breath, let the air fill Your lungs
anxiety beating against Your chest
and You get ready to dive.
Before You can rethink Your options
double check, triple check, is this a good idea?
gravity catches up to You and now you are *falling*
down, down, down
the air cuts against Your skin, the wind refuses to let You
open your eyes
the view is gorgeous but fleeting and for a moment
You can't tell the difference between excitement and
regret

but the water shocks you with cold and swallows You
whole
the world down here is **alien**
the air is all gone and every inch of Your body is drowning
You can feel Your body wishing to rejoin the matter it
once was, to rid Yourself of the boundary
between water and water
NO! You struggle to push against the current but
the current is fierce, grabbing at Your ankles, refusing to
let You go and
the waves are strong, beating you down
You want to keep Your head above the water but the
water is winning
just keep swimming, swimming, swimming
someone! anyone! can anyone help You?
alas, *you. are. all. alone.*
at last Your head breaks the water and You want to
scream but
it's a wasted breath as it cuts through Your lungs and

You no longer want to breathe
the very nourishment of Your body now a punishment
from within and
You hear the murmur of God whispering in Your ear,
"you can do this, you just have to try"
but You wonder **how much harder do You have to try?**
before You can ask the water takes you in again and
at last, *water surrenders to water...*

the foam of the waves tickle You awake
You can't help but laugh at the joy of being alive
daughters of air, ariels of redemption
what's the secret to flying?
only a hopeful wish, they say, and the reminder of faith
falling and flying are very undifferent
only one has a purpose and the other is a gift
life's lessons rewards those who struggle and wield
determination and patience
but how did I succeed? You say, since I had surrendered
to death
ah, but even in Your last breath,
we ariels heard you say

"anything is possible, but only if you are alive"



Illustration: Paris Matic



She's swinging on a play set laughing, swinging faster and faster trying to go higher and higher. Her hair is running wild. Her arm is in a cast from some other mischievous adventure she got herself in. Her laughter and screams of joy fill the air! She seems so carefree and innocent. Yet, I have to stop and wonder if she really is as happy and carefree as she seems. Could it be possible that her spirit has been ripped into pieces, and she's been made to feel humiliated and lower than the lowliest creature? Someone has to wonder don't they? Doesn't someone have to look for the signs; is she wetting her bed every night? Is she constantly falling asleep with her hand in between her legs? I had the signs but no one noticed. I was an Oscar worthy child actress who acted just like the girl above yet I was made to feel like a toy to be used at any one's disposal.

I have flashbacks to the day I was six years old and I had on my brown jeans and a white peasant blouse. I felt like such a bad ass. I never wore jeans! I remember I was so excited that day. My mom always made me wear the school uniform or dresses but not jeans because they were for men. With the jeans and my favorite flowy white blouse I felt unstoppable but during recess a group of boys was messing with me, again. I felt empowered that day so I told them to stop. I probably even told them I could beat them up. Who knows I don't remember, but what I do remember is being strung up and held down by a group of boys kicking and screaming. Seeing a wave of faces and hearing laughter and feeling their tiny fingers all over my private areas, as I referred to them then. They took turns touching me switching off holding me down. No matter how loud I screamed and yelled, the recess monitor couldn't hear me. I never wore my brown jeans and peasant top again. I told my mom the clothes were ugly and no longer wanted them, but of course I loved the clothes, they were just stained by an awful memory of a little girl.

I must shamefully admit my darkest secret; it felt good to be touched. I was exposed to sex at the age of six and it felt nice. I wanted to feel it again. I needed it. I craved the feeling. I didn't

know what it was then. I was damaged. I wasn't going to heaven because I'd been touched and I had liked it. How could I enjoy something so traumatic? I was so young. I started to masturbate after I was molested. I was caught and punished by parents soon after but it didn't stop me. I was like an addict needing a fix. I created fantasies where men would steal me and make me wear skimpy outfits and do things to me. Vampires would come and seduce me, bite me and tie me up. I had butterflies in my stomach when I thought about the things that were to come when I was older.

I got older, and sex was tumultuous. I'd hit men. I despised them. They were mine for the taking. They let me do what I wanted. They were so easy to manipulate. I'd snap my fingers and they'd come wagging their tails. The men, they never hit back, but I wasn't happy unless I ended up bruised and bleeding. I needed to feel pain. I needed my hair pulled until I was nearly screaming. I needed to be snapped into reality. I needed to feel the moment. I needed to be brought back into the present. Things only got rougher because I knew that if I were brought back I'd feel the touch of their little hands on me again so I craved the abuse and the violence I felt with those little boys when I was six for the excitement. So the abuse went on.

It wasn't until I truly felt something for someone that I didn't need to feel pain but now when we make love I cry because sometimes I can still feel their little hands on me. It's a hit and miss. Am I going to cry today? Will I be able to do it? I get tired and frustrated because I never know when those little hands are going to be touching my skin and not my lover's hands.

Sometimes the reason I cry while making love is because it is something so beautiful that I am not used to. I was an insecure little girl who needed to be wanted and loved the whole time. I needed to be craved just as I craved the men. I needed to know that I could be wanted from them. Yet I wanted to show them that I could do what I pleased with them too. I had to show the world that I could do to them what those boys did do to me as a little girl. I had to show the world that I could abuse boys and stomp them to the ground as I wanted. I had to show the world that I



Illustration: Paris Matic

too, could have power over boys the way they once had power over me.

It was fun, sexy, and violent but someone could have asked why? Why do you need the pain? I needed that “why” so that I could answer that I need more love in my life not pain or abuse. I just needed love. I needed the love and protection of someone back when I was six years old and therefore I need the love and protection of an adult now and that’s why I’m so needy and greedy with love. There is still a part inside me screaming “I’m still just a little lost soul!” And it’s searching for someone who will love and protect the child inside me and tell me it’s OK and that it’s time to get up, those boys can’t hurt you anymore I’m here, and I need them to grab my hand and lead me to the path to be an adult.

Margins of Perfection — Nancy Au



Scathing, like bullet marks; evidence of a lack of
self-control.
Not all my fault I cry, edging into the shadows.
This fault, these imperfections, make me wish the
world was blind,
Or at least limited to silhouettes, for in the black no
one would see
The monstrosity in the reflection.

I do not want to wear a mask, to be the coward that
hides from what
they have become,
Yet watch the sapling sway under the breeze selling a
dash of ordinary
at discount price.
If only we could see in 10-10.

If only we could see deeds and not the doer; hear
words beyond the speaker.
If only the margins of perfection extended beyond the
masquerade.

Chernobyl Disaster and One Family's Tragedy — 26 Years Later



— Vicky Shemer

On April 26th, 1986 a routine safety test in Chernobyl Nuclear Plant resulted in an explosion and became one of the worst nuclear disasters in this planet's history. Radiation stretched its poisonous wings for thousands of kilometers throughout densely populated areas of Ukraine and Byelorussia. Civilians had no choice but to escape and abandon their homes in order to save their lives and the lives of their children. A special unit of innocent soldiers was assigned to clean up all the radioactive waste, and all of them died within weeks from acute radiation syndrome; others died from leukemia a few months later. Being only 10 years old, all I remember was my mother anxiously giving me huge plates of seaweed and a few tablespoons of red wine every other day to counteract radiation effects.

It was February 10th of 2012; I was at home sick with flu, but some kind of an uneasy feeling kept taking over me. There was this unexplainable anxiety that would make my stomach cramp and made me almost nauseous with worry. My gut feeling was definitely telling me that something wasn't right, either with my family in Ukraine or with one of my friends who lived far away in Europe. That same day, I called my mother only to hear that my sister's daughter, Stacy, was diagnosed with the worst kind of brain tumor and now was dying in one of New Jersey's hospitals.

My mom was beyond herself with sadness, devastation and crying; she couldn't even speak properly because her tears kept choking her. To me, that particular moment felt like there was a nuclear bomb being dropped and I could not do anything to stop it. I felt numb while mom kept wailing and saying things like, "Why Stacy? She is only 29 years old and she needs to live. I'm the one who has to die because I've lived enough. It's not fair!" It is ironic, how at that moment I thought of a nuclear bomb, be-

cause the next thing that came to my mind, “What if Chernobyl’s nuclear accident may have been a reason for that tumor to develop?” My poor, sweet niece was only 3 years old when the Chernobyl accident happened and my sister was terrified about the radiation exposure affecting the body of her small child. And just like my mother, she did everything that a good mother would do. As soon as the magnitude of the accident became known to the public, she began feeding my niece crazy amounts of seaweed and soaking her in salt baths, but I guess radiation was not very picky about its victims. Just like so many other children who ended up with various cancers after such a massive radiation exposure, gruesomely and unexpectedly it struck my young niece, too. The only difference was that Stacy’s cancer was silent for a long time while other kids died at an early age. Sadly, her brain tumor manifested itself just when she married the man of her dreams and only 6 months after the birth of her only daughter Kira. My mom was right – it wasn’t fair! I was angry, devastated and felt absolutely powerless. I knew that blaming Chernobyl was ineffective, but since I had experienced some thyroid problems in the past, physicians frequently asked me whether I was one of those kids who lived through that nuclear disaster. So, somehow, it made sense for all of us to point our fingers at Chernobyl. Moreover, we didn’t have any hereditary cancers in our family for over 4 generations and, obviously, accusing Chernobyl wasn’t going to help, but it seemed like a temporary comfort to my family and myself during our painful phone conversations about finding cures, solutions and some kind of hope that would save Stacy’s life.

Unfortunately, right after the disaster, the Soviet Union’s government tried to conceal the truth of this catastrophe’s magnitude from the Ukrainian population. Soviet media really did not make any special announcements after the explosion. Only when European countries like Bulgaria, Romania and Germany detected extremely elevated levels of radiation on their dosimeters and demanded an explanation from the Soviet Union’s officials did the local media begin to issue warnings. Many years ago, *Moscow News* wrote a huge article about how a simple energy system’s test resulted in the biggest nuclear accident in the world’s history, leaving thousands of adults and children dead

and Ukraine to deal with acres of contaminated forests and considerably increasing cancer rates all on its own. I only remember it so clearly because I did a project about it in high school. In my opinion, that article was very diplomatically written, but the management of the disaster was completely mishandled. The families of the victims, who died after the clean-up of all the nuclear waste, were never compensated. Not to mention that many innocent kids and adults had to suffer and die from incurable diseases like leukemia, thyroid and brain cancers without getting proper medical care. But no matter how many awful facts we would dig up about Chernobyl, my family couldn’t do much about what happened back in 1986. Our task was to remain strong for both my sister and Stacy.

Even though modern medicine has been praised for cancer treatments, New Jersey doctors said that there was not much that medical care could do for Stacy at such an advanced stage of the disease. They were only hoping that she would be able to endure one round of chemotherapy, which eventually almost killed her. When one of the oncologists modestly suggested radiation therapy, my mother couldn’t help to comment on the irony that medical science suggests fighting cancer with the same weapon that may have caused it; sadly, and in the majority of cases, it fails. I agreed, but asked her to reserve her irony for another time. My sister and Stacy’s husband rejected radiation treatment, as its side effects were likely to increase Stacy’s suffering. The doctor left the room; I looked at my poor sister and saw complete hopelessness and tears on her exhausted face. My poor niece, emaciated by this monstrous illness, kept fading away before our eyes. Being a fighter, I refused to give up; I had to know that we tried everything before retreating from this battlefield. The next few nights, I spent my time madly searching all over the web for alternative treatments, in hope to find someone or something that would give Stacy a chance of survival and see her little daughter grow. There were a few clinics in Mexico that had alternative cancer treatments, but they refused to accept someone at such an advanced stage. The only clinic that agreed to see her was the Burzynski clinic in Houston, Texas. Unfortunately, we were out of time.

Stacy died a week later after I began negotiating with the Burzynski clinic. Her last words to my sister were, "Mommy, I love you so much..." She didn't get a chance to say goodbye to her daughter. Her funeral was the most heartbreaking event my family ever had to endure. My poor sister will never be able to get over the loss of her only child and somehow she feels that if that one Chernobyl disaster didn't happen, Stacy would still be with us.

For as long as I live, I will hope that there will be an end to this destructive nuclear power industry. If the disasters of Fukushima, The Three Mile Island and Chernobyl were not enough for people to understand that atomic energy is a key to annihilation, then what will it take for the humanity to abandon this malicious science experiment?



Stacy.

Photograph provided by Vicky Shemer

SIX WORD STORY

Ran his whole life.

Couldn't breathe.

— Shogo Yagi

Illustration: Kendra Villa



Zahirah shoved her thin, limp black hair out of her eyes as she stared at the boys clamoring around the confectionery stand across the street with wide cinnamon eyes as they screamed and yelled at the middle-aged man who ran it. His arms were held aloft as he puffed his chest out in some bizarrely defiant gesture reminiscent of the miniscule birds held in cages at the provincial zoo whose multicolored feathers swelled from their breasts as their wings flung wide in a pitiful attempt to make their tiny bodies seem even a modicum bigger, more fierce, than they truly were—an inherently biological response, either as mating ritual, defense mechanism to scare away predators, or typical protective stance over their young. As it turns out, that was exactly the case: the confectioner, Galahad—who really wasn't much taller than Zahirah's modest five-six—attempted to shield a small girl crouched in the dirt, her hands over her ears, a small blue patchwork stuffed cat clutched in one chubby fist. Zahirah's cinnamon pupils narrowed as she tugged at the too-small shirt over her full breasts: bad enough the boys harassed Galahad, but to terrorize Yevonna—his daughter, a charming girl of only five years with brown curls and wide blue eyes—was both disgusting and terrifying. She had given Yevonna the stuffed cat in the attempt to console the child when her mother was taken to be the next Marion two years previous, and the girl was rarely seen without it since. Caressing her gnarled foot absentmindedly, Zahirah shifted uncomfortably in her chair, mindful to check the rubber block on the wheels for the seventh time before glancing up at the group again, noticing how it had grown in number, fueled by more boys from other streets. She closed her eyes and shivered despite the heat. Not all of them were this way.

Every day for the past nine weeks it had been like this: despite her mostly-healed foot, Zahirah still found herself sitting on the front porch for hours in the baking heat staring out at the same rickety houses across the street, the dust from the relentless southern winds rust-colored, caking the inside of Zahirah's mouth and lungs with a bitterness she'd not felt for four years. Four years was a long time to be without her sister, and Zahirah had had a hard time trying to adjust to Gala's absence, much like

Galahad would have to with Yevonna. Granted, it would be easier that his daughter was young; it would be much easier to forget about her and move on.

Zahirah closed her eyes against a sudden dusty gale that blew down the street, trailing trash in its wake that tugged on the cat in Yevonna's hands, and the pulsing red behind her eyelids seemed to melt into a day not so unlike the dry, dusty one she could still taste on her tongue. The air then was thick with moisture, blanketing the town with stifling heat despite the weak breeze. Gala was a petite girl of six with the potential to be willowy when she was older; she had the bony, slender frame, bright grey eyes and luscious pale blond hair their mother had, which Zahirah envied her for. She and Zahirah had just finished hanging the wash to dry as best it could in their yard—great billowing sheets and dresses of such a white as to rival that of the sails they'd once seen on ships off the coast when they were young—when their father had called them into the strange coolness of the house far earlier than normal. Glad to be out of the heat, Zahirah clasped hands with Anupu, her little sister's blue stuffed cat, and hurried to the door, where the girls immediately noticed their father sitting around the plain low wooden table in the living room with three figures dressed in unseasonably dark, heavy clothing with hoods drawn over their faces. They rose when the sisters entered, drawing back their hoods to reveal two women—one a pale blond, the other auburn—and a dark-skinned man, all with severe expressions on their faces.

"You are certain on your choice, Yusuf?" asked the blond woman. The girls glanced at each other; no one but their mother had called their father by his real name before. Yusuf remained at the table, hands curled into loose fists, seeming to stare into the wood grain. Zahirah felt a chill prickle her spine as she saw the blank look on her father's downturned face, followed quickly by the plat-plat of tears dripping from his chin to the table. The dark-skinned man produced a white cloak made of some filmy material to give to the auburn woman, who knelt in front of the sister, holding the garment out to Gala. The girls turned as one to their father.

"What's going on, Papa?" Zahirah asked. No answer. The dark man took one glance at Yusuf and placed a broad hand on their father's shoulder, his expression softening.

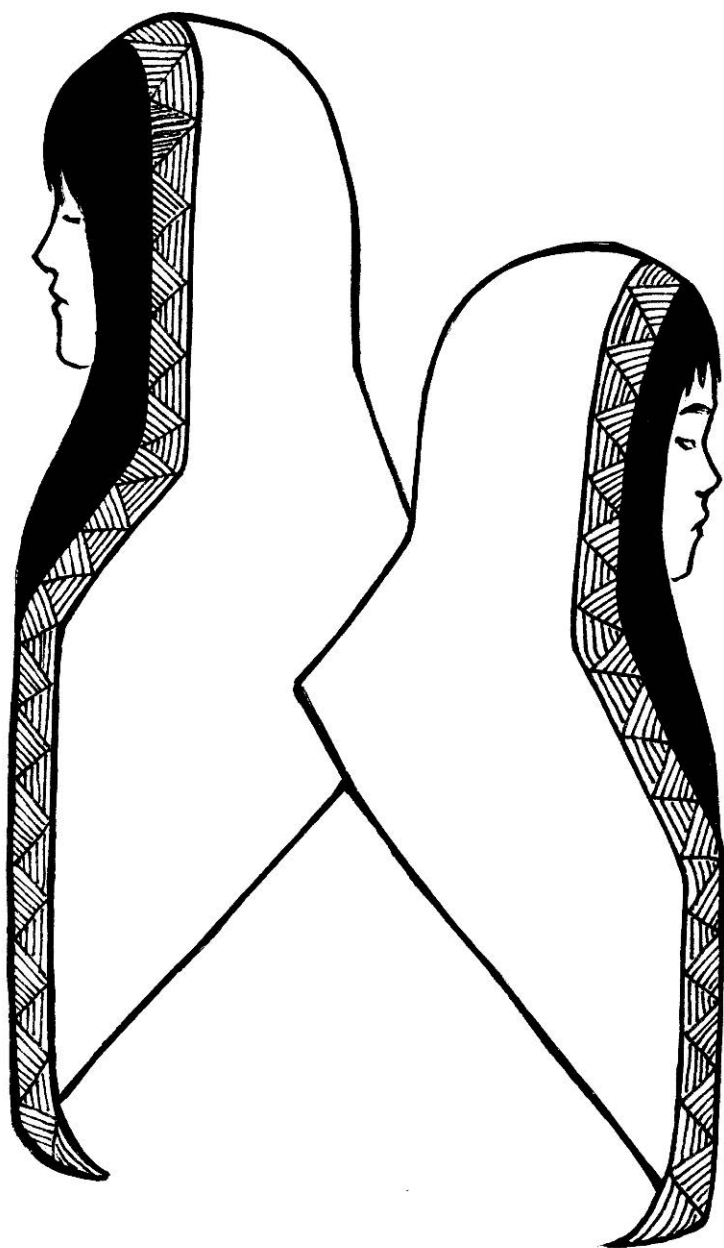


Illustration: Paris Matic

"He has made his choice," hissed the blond. "Let us be done with this." Zahirah let go of Anupu and clasped Gala's hand, pulling her sister away from the women.

"I don't know who you are," she began, "but I want you out of our house. Now." The auburn-haired woman gave an admonishing look to the blond and looked up at each of the girls in turn.

"My name is Hadwyn, High Priestess of the Beiltynne Order" she said. "Your father has told us much about you two." The garment shifted in the woman's hands, and Zahirah noticed Gala gazing at it like a magpie. Unfortunately, so did the high priestess.

"It is a gift for a special girl," Hadwyn said, bringing the cloak to eye-level. "Do you like it?" Gala lifted a small, dainty hand and touched the fabric.

"It's pretty," she admitted. The blond woman's eyes grew bright and feverish from behind the priestess.

"She has accepted it!" the woman cried. "She will be the next Marion!" Hadwyn shushed her, but Zahirah was already half in motion.

"Gala's not going anywhere with you," she snarled. "And she is not going to be the next Marion. Now get out!"

"Your mother was a Marion you know." At Hadwyn's admission, Yusuf gave a start.

"Priestess, is it really wise...?"

"Really?" Gala was too inquisitive to listen to anyone but Hadwyn, who nodded at the girl's question. The dark-skinned man eased Yusuf back into his chair, this time placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

"But, if Mama was a Marion, why can't I be one?" Zahirah was livid.

"Do you know what happens to the people who become Marions?" she hissed.

"Do you?" The blond woman interjected.

"They never come back." Zahirah was on the verge of tears. She turned to her sister. "Mama never came back, Gala. You won't either. Don't go." At the command, Gala was indignant.

"You never let me do anything!" she cried, throwing her hands down and stamping her foot. "You're not Mama. If Mama was a Marion, I want to be one too!" She turned to Hadwyn, her eyes wide and glistening as she nearly tore the delicate fabric from the priestess' hands in her haste to don it. Once a gold brooch was fastened around Gala's slender neck, Hadwyn stood.

"The decision has been made and is final," she rumbled. "We will come to pay homage in due time." With that, the blond and brunette preceded the priestess out the door, who turned and strode out, holding Gala's tiny hand in hers like a trophy. Zahirah made a noise in her throat somewhere between a wail and a question, and her foot came down on something soft. Bending down, she saw it was Anupu, looking very much how Zahirah felt: dirty, torn, and raw.

...

What followed were the longest nine weeks of her life: Zahirah only saw her sister in passing, and even then she only knew it was Gala because no other priestesses were so small, nor did they wear the white gossamer cloak reserved for new Marions. They spoke only once, during a brief scripted ceremony honoring Gala's induction as the Marion for the new year's harvest. Yusuf slipped into a depression so deep Zahirah couldn't rouse him, and he wasted away under her helpless gaze.

When the time finally came for the Cross Rite, it was like being trapped in a nightmare: Gala's long inky hair—which Zahirah had always braided every morning—was disheveled and matted with blood and dirt; the pale grey eyes belonging to their mother that Gala were so proud of were nearly swollen shut as she crawled away from the priestesses closing in on her; her blood sprinkled over the fields in fertile blessing. It was all too close.

Zahirah shook her head in the attempt to eradicate those memories just as she'd done innumerable times before. The crowd had thickened around Galahad, where Yevonna's cries sounded like the peals of tiny bells only barely heard above the cacophony of human voices. Drawn from their sepulchral lair, the priestesses stepped from their lavish black and white carriages and had begun to gather about the crowd, flanked by their dark male xenagogues in a jarring ring of gypsum and obsidian. Kicking the small rubber blocks from in front of her wheels, Zahirah wheeled herself down the crude wooden slope from the front porch and across the uneven ground toward the crowd. She could hear the priestesses and xenagogues murmuring prayers for good rain and a fruitful year as she approached. The pool of peo-

ple parted around her and their voices quieted to whispers as she neared Galahad and Yevonna. Zahirah stared at Galahad, whose face was red and blotchy, nose mottled, eyes dripping tears from fear and anger, and felt his pain as acutely as her own.

"You won't need to worry about her," she heard herself saying. "I promise. No one will touch her for as long as she lives." Only when the words were past her lips did Zahirah notice that High Priestess Hadwyn's eyes were on her. She stared at the priestess, who nodded gravely. It was a deal. Suddenly, Zahirah felt exhausted: years of grief and anger had finally taken their toll. She looked at Yevonna and saw that Anupu had tumbled off a ways from the little girl. She picked the stuffed toy up and took the girl's hand.

"Take care of him, all right?" Her smile was brittle as she handed the cat back and stroked the girl's dark hair. With that, she turned and faced the high priestess, her head held high as she abandoned her chair and hobbled toward Hadwyn's carriage, leaving Yevonna weeping into the threadbare fabric of Anupu's back.

Desert Covered In Snow — Sevan Ghadimian



In the middle of the middle east,
the birthplace of Cyrus the great,
spoils of a drunk Alexander,
the road bridging the capital and my hometown,
between Pahlavi's old palace
and the Fatima al-Masumeh Shrine,
the walls of snow and mountainsides,
the desert and high elevation,
the blizzard abyss and the gas station,
the smells of ice and petrol,
the clouds of frost at arm's length,
from the ground I grab a fistful of snow
and underneath it, red clay dirt, dry to the bone.

SIX WORD STORY

Soldier overseas.

Short gunfire.

Widowed family.

— Jason Lee

Illustration: Kendra Villa

Flying Apsaras – A Past Glory

— Yingchao Xiao



NONFICTION WINNER

Chinese are known to show their love through food, especially to friends who come from afar. After twelve years in the U.S. eating from paper plates in school cafeterias and junk food from fast-food restaurants, I sat at a round dinner table facing a dozen plates of delicious local food and nine old friends. Four empty bottles of “West Phoenix,” a strong local liquor, stood in the center of the table like defeated soldiers. I loved the food in Xi’an, my hometown where we unearthed the terracotta warriors and horse figurines after their 2000-year sleep in our backyard. The tasty spirit soon roused my long-suppressed emotions and I began to tell my old friends how much I had missed Xi’an in the past years, and everyone around the table was trying to tell me what I should do to catch up. The air was warm and full of emotions. “There is one thing that I had got to do,” I said.

“What’s that?” several of them asked me. I told them that I wanted to see an opera in the People’s Theater. It was a cup of cold water poured into a boiling pot. Everyone stopped talking and looked at me, puzzled.

“The People’s Theater covered by ivy vines,” I explained.

“Why that?” Wang, my best friend in middle school and a self-made millionaire, narrowed his eyes. “I think it had been demolished long ago, wasn’t it?” He turned to his gorgeous young wife.

“The one with a red star on the top?” the wife asked.

“Yes, and with flying apsaras by the side of the stage,” I added. Slowly she shook her head, “I don’t remember that. But the theater is still there.” She was a performer in show business, I was told.

Next morning I put on my sneakers and left the hotel with a city map in my hand. In five minutes I realized how unrealistic my plan was. The city had expanded so much that nothing was within walking distance. I had to call a taxi. Excitedly, I was feeling like I was about to renew a past romance.

It was more than three decades ago, on a warm spring Sunday afternoon, we four siblings, from 7 to 12, lined up like happy ducklings marching behind our tall and handsome father on the North Avenue, to see an opera in the People’s Theater. For a month we had been telling our friends that we, Xiao’s family, were going to the theater to see an opera. None of my friends had ever stepped into that grand building. Actually it was part of Xiao’s family – my mother didn’t come. “It’s too expensive,” she said. But she helped us to put on the best clothing we had, and combed our hair neatly. To save the 25-cent bus fair, we walked half an hour, in our clean clothing covered by patches. We were going to see an opera!

The theater sat on the east side of North Avenue not far from the ancient Bell Tower. It looked more like a green hill surrounded by grey and earth-toned low houses. The ivy vines carried thousands of their heart-shaped leaves climbing on the walls up to the overhanging eaves with golden glazed tiles. A bright red star the size of a bicycle wheel sat in the center high up to the blue sky, greeting everyone below. The gold-gilded Chinese characters “People’s Theater” were set solemnly above the entrance behind two huge red pillars. “We are the ‘People’ and this is ‘our theater,’” father told us. In front of the theater was a vast plaza with flower beds at both sides. It was built in 1954, father told us, the grandest theater in town. My younger sister stared at an old lady with bound feet behind a white box covered by a tower, calling with a soft and sweet voice, “ice lolly, ice lolly, 4 cents each.” I took my sister’s hand and dragged her away. Mother told us that the theater tickets cost half of my father’s monthly salary and we wouldn’t have any allowance for ice lolly that month. That’s okay, we are going to the theater!



'The People's Theater today' photograph provided by Yingchao Xiao.

There were two gate guards standing by each side of the double-paned solid wood gates. After presenting one adult and four child tickets, we were allowed to enter through the heavy gate painted bright red. It was cool and quiet inside. Rows of seats extended all the way to a red velvet curtain lit up by four spotlights hanging in front of the stage. Sun beams dropped from the small windows high on the walls, casting warm golden patches on the leather seats. We came too early and the theater was almost empty. Father, a writer working for the provincial publishing house at that time, was very much interested in touring the theater with us. "Don't touch anything," he warned us.

We put our hands behind us and followed him to the front. On the walls below the high ceiling at both sides of the stage were reliefs of two life-sized female goddesses, each with an ancient Chinese musical instrument in hand. They were flying in the sky. The one at the left side was flying down and the one at the right side was flying up. I approached on the left side. The flying goddess wore a tight golden top and a pair of pinkish bell-bottomed loose pants, and her tender bare feet were raising high into a white cloud. From her forearms were long colorful ribbons flow-

ing elegantly in the unseen breeze. Flowers scattered and white clouds seemed to be moving behind her and the Chinese lute that she was playing issued a heavenly music.... Her round face was right above mine, and her kind long eyes were half open, as if being enchanted with her music. I looked into her eyes and she became alive. She took my hands, lifting me up from the ground. I flew up next to her. A breeze kissed my face and I flew into the sky, into the cloud, so free, so happy...

"These paintings," my father said. He put his hand on my head and I dropped back to the ground. He added, "are copied from Dun Huang Cave in the desert. It's an abandoned cave with incredible mythological paintings all over the walls."

"Who painted them?" my elder brother asked.

"Nobody knows. They were created thousands of years ago and were discovered in 366 AD. No records to show who painted the drawings and why the cave existed at that time. These ladies are called 'Flying Apsaras.'" I raised my head towards the flute apsara. I wanted to be a flying apsara, I told myself. I wanted to fly away, high in the sky. I looked up to the ceiling and the small windows. They were tightly shut.

I did not remember anything from the opera we saw, but I had a lot of dreams in which I was flying in the sky with the graceful Chinese flute apsara.

I'm coming back, ladies, to fly with you again.

The People's Theater was not far from the hotel but it took me almost an hour to get there through a river of cars and red lights. Car horns were honking non-stop and brakes were used every three seconds. The taxi driver took all of that with ease and dropped me off at the curb of the North Avenue. "The theater is behind that blue glass building at the right. It would be easier if you can walk there yourself." I looked at three high buildings standing noisily at the side of the street, but with no sight of my

green hill. "It's behind these buildings," the taxi driver shouted to me before driving away. I walked to the skyscraper covered by blue glass all the way to the top.

It was not a weekend but the street was packed with young and old people. I cut into the stream of human bodies, saying "excuse me, please" till I passed the glass giant. Behind it, the sky suddenly fell low, as well as my heart. There she was, aged and humble, color faded, ignored, and sadly half sleeping. Those beautiful flower beds were trampled underfoot of the tall modern glass buildings, and a tall and ugly cement structure extruded right in front of her face. She was hardly recognized and her glory and pride that I remembered for decades disappeared. The red star stood tired on the roof, and the glazed roof tiles were covered by dust, a thick layer of dust. I walked to the chunky wood gate and touched it. It did not show any life. The bright red paint now looked like it had been washed by strong bleach, with patches of wood exposed. "Is the theater still open for operas?" I asked a vendor who was behind his stack of stale fruit.

"No. It has been closed since the Chinese New Year," he answered in the local dialect. "Do you want some fruit?"

I was struck by what I saw and my legs felt weak. It's just a theater, I tried to tell myself, you can see an opera somewhere else. Yes, I answered. But this was my theater where I kept my flying dreams. I walked slowly around the theater among the vendors and old women bargaining for whatever on the stacks. The small windows were still there, dutifully guarding the past glory, and my flying apsaras inside. She was locked up. I called her name and pressed my face against the dried ivy vines. God, I prayed for the first time in my whole life, please help bring my flying apsaras, my theater, the People's Theater, back to life.

In Mirrors — David Smith



I often gaze through tiny windows that look like flattened marbles walled in white. Through them a murky river's blue flows at the speed of indigo molasses. Shores as black as pupils seem to merge above, as if they become the sky at the horizon. I have seen the river's source upstream: A place where water, clear as glass, is thirsty for a premature delta. I watched a glum and tired boy struggling to swim: to reach the river's mouth before his turn. If filth had filled his lungs more quickly, then he might have drowned in peace, relaxed at last, and joined the sea. Regrettably, he turned around, and soon became the yawn whose irises I lose myself in over bathroom sinks.

Early Morning Monotony — Patrick Thomas



With two worn shovels,
I make my way into
the yard.

The grass' final early morning
Dew
slowly
evaporating

Two handles
held tight,
Polished from years
Of practice;

Venturing deeper into
The landscape,
I look back
To see my trail of footsteps
On the
damp
morning lawn.

The early morning routine
pays off,
Again I have beaten
The buzzing flies;

When there were three,
This task took
more,
investigation.

Koko, the chocolate lab,
Chose to play,
Hide
In the bushes,
As high up as he could reach,

the shit,

With his passing
The piles are now
In plain sight.

I locate them all,
And with a grace, that
comes only with years of
Practice,
pile,
pile
upon pile
Onto the larger
Shovel,

Stacked like Jenga,
The morning task is complete.

And I am reminded:
It's time
To feed the dogs.



It was a warm summer day and the air was a kind of humid that peels you right out of your skin. We just finished watching a movie and Leo lied in his bed, inviting me to sit with him. The heat caused some fatigue, I noticed him yawning often. I on the other hand was so anxious that I couldn't sit still, fidgeting in place whenever the room went silent. I needed to breathe, relax for a minute and feel the vibe. I offered to comb his hair, massage his scalp, whatever it'd take to calm the nerves; I rested my head on his stomach while he reclined. I was hanging around someone out of my league, but Leo kept his cool, a contrast to the summer heat.

Until this point in time, I had only known Leo as he was with our mutual friends, grouchy, quiet, reserved. When a person possesses a lion's heart, they are brave and bold about their passions. Leo made it apparent about the qualities that he likes in people and I made it on his list because he wanted to understand me on a personal level. I never thought I would hold a conversation with him, because I'm not a looker, nor do I call for attention - yet here we were, sharing opening statements. He made it clear that he wouldn't do anything I wasn't comfortable with, so today was about getting to know one another.

For a man so courageous, Leo spoke in monotone. I feared ruining the moment and my voice grew soft, but Leo knew how to tame my demons. I followed his lead, answering questions.

"Well, you know what I'm into. Tell me, what interests you?"

I stared into the heart of his palm and held on.

"Hmm, I like to hold hands. It's a Gemini erogenous zone."

"What's that? What does that mean?"

I sandwiched his knuckles, stretching out the fingers one by one.

"Holding and touching hands can be a turn on."

Sweat fused our fingers together like earthen clay.

"You wanna lie down? There's lots of space next to me," Leo said. Hesitant, I nodded.

I climbed the mattress and leaned on his shoulder, resting my hand on his chest. He put his hand around my hip, as we were about to nap in each others arms. It was there that I found comfort in the space between us.

"Y'know, I like listening to the heart beat."

"Sorry, I haven't got one." he chuckled.

"Ha. Can we turn down the TV? I think I could find it, if I get close enough."

Leo obliged, turned off the screen and lied back down, I pressed my ear against his chest in search of the sound. I couldn't hear anything at first, even my breathing was too loud. His heart sounded so faint, it seemed absent. How could someone so passionate be lacking the most important piece? Did Leo feel me lying there on his chest? Then the room went silent: no birds in the background, no city traffic, the wind didn't whistle on the trees. The world stopped speaking for a minute, so I could hear Leo alive and breathing; behold, the beat was there, though very soft and subtle. I rested with my ear against his heart, puzzled.

"Are you okay?" he asked. Leo rose from the bed and planted a kiss on my lips.

My heart skipped a beat. *Did that just happen, was it some strange mistake?* My guard went down for one second and there came his movement, swift and sudden. A grin grew across his face to reassure me; I followed with a pursed smile, though his actions I felt uncertain.

"Thank You." I pecked his cheek. I admired Leo, tracing his image in my mind.

"Don't just sit there and watch me, you can join me..."

"I'm trying to capture this memory; I thrive on them,"

"Don't focus on remembering. Live in the moment."

"I cherish the presence in this time spent with you."

Imagine if you faced a Lion, you'd be scared too. It felt as though Leo always tamed and comforted me, like a parent tends to an infant cub. He showed his adoration and physical attraction, this kind of attention was new to me. *Do you understand what it feels like to be wanted?* To be the object of someone's desire, to be a fresh breath of air in their lungs. I was the oxygen fueling his passion.

I refrained my movement; my body felt as heavy as stone, hesitant to proceed any further. I looked to his complexion, staring in the dark circles wrapped around his eyes. The colors of his irises were a fading baby blue, always expressing a soft, somber look. Leo blinked in my direction, alternating one eye at a time.

"Why do you do that? It looks strange."

"I'm trying to get a reaction out of you."

I pouted and lied down in his chest. Leo kept his composure while I carried on restlessly; he was as calm as a breeze while I was an unrelenting storm. I was new to this sensation and felt responsible for all other unpleasantries.

"Sorry if I make this awkward. I don't have cuddling experience."

"It's alright; just be comfortable. Do whatever comes naturally."

I held onto him with our bodies melting under the sun. Leo traced my collar bone with his hand, warm to the touch and as smooth as silk. The lion had me under his thumb, literally.



Illustration: Paris Matic

"Your neck is so small ... it looks fragile," Leo whispered.

"It may be small, but I feel very strong."

I turned to reply with kisses moving from his neck, cheek and then we met at the lips. At that instant, I understood that it wasn't about what I were to say, but what I could do for myself. That feeling of confidence was an uplifting sensation, as if the sun shined my way. I took the lion heart and wore it with pride, smiling from ear to ear. I could communicate in terms we both understood; body language had become the norm.

Leo rubbed my back and our faces pressed at the brows. He sent kisses down my neck, I sighed heavily and rested. I gambled with the idea that maybe there was more to this.

"Thanks for that. You're very good ..."

"Be careful about what you say. It could get you into lots of trouble!" Leo locked me in his arms for an embrace; his bear hug took the air out of me. I was rendered speechless.

"Don't be afraid to get what you want..." He lifted me on his lap, spreading my legs across his waist. Leo stretched and lowered me for another kiss. My eyes widened, following a gasp. Was this the only way we would understand one another? I spent the afternoon figuring out the right words to say; when speaking was never a priority. Maybe words are not a lion's forte, since everything was based on our actions; a wink and a smile was all it took to get by. My mind was an empty canvas and the words slipped from my mouth like ink spilling out of its well.

"You Okay? I feel that heartbeat, moving fast." he said, placing a palm on my chest.

I had the power to do anything that I wanted, but I felt I lost sight of that. I've never been selfish about intimacy and getting close to him was becoming all too easy. *Is that what this was all about?* It seemed like Leo didn't care for anything else at that point, it was about *getting the job done*. I didn't feel anything

emotionally, but the adrenaline rush kept me in the moment. A numbing sensation overwhelmed my morals and common sense kicked in. I rolled over to his side and reclined with my ear against his chest where it all began.

"Is this us right now? I feel like I'm dreaming."

"Is something wrong? I'm right here with you."

"As much as I enjoy it, I can't see myself staying here."

"You should experience what you want. I'll give you one more example."

Experience what I want? What if I don't know what that is? I never knew Leo until then and here we were sharing kisses. He rose from the bed for the last time and crawled on top to kiss and hold me; Leo didn't loosen his grip for a second, but it was time to leave this dream behind us. I cherished the moment, but I had no other attachments and it left me feeling empty; I realized that our happiness was not permanent.

Leo was someone I never fully understood, nor did he know me completely. I enjoyed all of this, but I suppose this lion's heart wasn't built to last. Our affection was present, but that's all there was to it; a small gift to exchange with one another. We both got something that we wanted, shared a moment and departed. I never knew we could exist in such a way, I never thought I was worth the trouble; this experience was fantasy turned reality. We came and left like strangers, looking for immediate pleasure; all we had going for us was that instant gratification, nothing long-term. I couldn't accept that this is all that was left, but at least I knew that we existed within a moment.

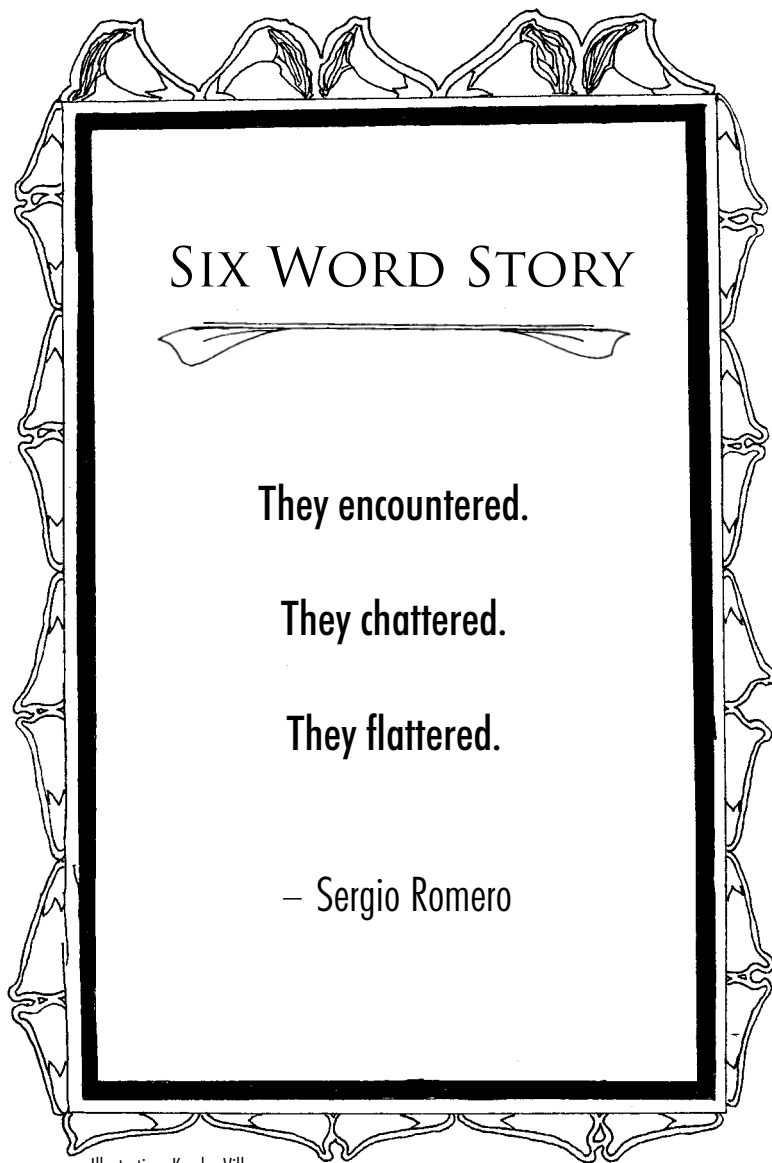


Illustration: Kendra Villa



PASADENA CITY COLLEGE
2012 WRITER IN RESIDENCE



REYNA GRANDE

In October 2012, thanks to a generous grant from the Pasadena Festival of Women Authors, PCC hosted its first Writer in Residence, author and PCC alumna Reyna Grande.

After graduating from PCC, Reyna earned a B.A. in Creative Writing and Film & Video from UC Santa Cruz, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University. She is the author of two novels, *Across a Hundred Mountains* and *Dancing with Butterflies*, and a memoir released in August 2012, *The Distance Between Us*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Much of her writing is inspired by the effects of immigration on family relationships, drawn from her own experiences as a child left behind in Mexico while her parents lived and worked in the U.S. She credits PCC English teacher Diana Savas with changing her life by taking her under her wing, recognizing that she had a gift for storytelling, and encouraging her to become a writer.

Reyna's work has drawn much acclaim, including several awards such as the El Premio Aztlan Literary Award (2006), the American Book Award (2007), the International Latino Book Award (2010), and the Latino Books Into Movies Award (2010).

Reyna spent three days on the PCC campus where she spoke to several writing classes, hosted a writing workshop, and held a public reading and book signing. She also agreed to an interview with the editors of *Inscape*, for which we are truly honored.

Janine McCarthy of *Inscape* coordinated and edited the interview.



Does returning to the PCC campus bring back a sense of nostalgia to you?

When I was there during my residency I felt like a student again! I have so many fond memories of my time there on campus. I remember there was a piano outside the Creveling Lounge where I used to play sometimes. I remember sitting by the mirror pools doing my homework. I remember making my way to my classes

in the C building, the art classes I took in the R building, the microwave in the cafeteria where I would heat up my lunch. I remember the classes I took and the many things I learned and explored while I was there. I wish I could be a student again! But I'm also very proud to come back having accomplished my dreams.

What inspired you to become a writer?

Not what, but who. Diana Savas, my English 1A professor told me I had talent. She also introduced me to some amazing Latina writers and when I read their books I said, "I want to be like them."

When did you first consider yourself a writer?

When I published my first book. The day it was released I drove to Vroman's Bookstore and I saw it there displayed on a shelf. I took a picture! That day I felt that, at last, I was officially a writer.

What books have influenced your life the most? What books have influenced your writing the most?

Hm, interesting question. Not sure how I can separate the two. *The House on Mango Street* influenced my writing (it made me want to study writing), but it also influenced my life because it made me aware of who I was, of who I wanted to be. Another book that influenced me deeply was *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran. A friend of mine gave it to me while I was a student at PCC. It had such a profound impact, not just because it made me think deeply about things, but because the language was so beautiful.

What do you enjoy reading?

I love reading books that are lyrical, that have beautiful poetic prose, like *The Prophet* and *House on Mango Street*. A book that came out last year that I really liked was *We the Animals* by Justin Torres. It's beautiful, profound, and raw.

What are the challenges of writing non-fiction compared to fiction?

In fiction you start from zero and build up—you create the characters, the setting, the story line, the dialogue, etc. You are like

God, creating a world and people from scratch (except it takes more than 7 days to do it!). With memoir you have a ton of material to pare down and shape into a story that is concise and has a strong story arc. How do you choose what to put in and what to leave out? I think this was the toughest thing for me, to have too much 'footage' to choose from. Once I decided what the memoir was going to be about — my coming-of-age — it got easier for me to focus on the events in my life that would tell that specific story.

How do you overcome writer's block?

I read my favorite books to inspire me, to remind me why I love to write.

Is there an aspect of writing that you still struggle with?

Yes. I take too long writing. Each of my books has taken me four years to write. That's 12 years that I've spent writing three books. I would like to write faster.

You are just becoming noticed, and wonderfully accepted, but it's probably been a long process. What has that been like? Did you ever get discouraged?

Yes, in a career like this patience is crucial. The publication process is very long. It has taken about 18 months for each of my books to come out in bookstores from the moment I signed the contract. The waiting can drive you insane. The best thing to do is to move on to the next project instead of biting your nails and holding your breath.

My memoir has definitely gotten more attention than my two previous novels, which is great. So I'm thankful for that. I understand that in writing there are no guarantees. You don't know where your books are going to end up once they are released. My books have not come out with a 'bang' and have not become instant bestsellers. They come out quietly into the world and little by little readers begin to spread the word. I have faith in my readers. I have faith in the quality of my writing. I know my books will find a happy home.

Besides being a published author, what other achievements are you proud of?

I am proud of my B.A. and M.F.A. degrees because I come from a father who only obtained a 3rd grade education and a mother who was only allowed a 6th grade education. I am also very proud that both of my children (ages 10 and 4) are avid readers.

Now that you've tackled this memoir, what's next?

I have three novels marinating in my head right now. When the moment comes, I will sit down and write.

Any advice to new writers, would be writers, old writers?

Promote. Promote. Promote. I know of some writers that look down on self-promotion, that think that others (like their publisher) will promote the books for them. That is not the case. That's the equivalent of having a baby and then not bothering to raise it and hoping that someone else will. The way I see it is this: I spent 4 years writing my book; I'm going to spend the rest of my life promoting it.

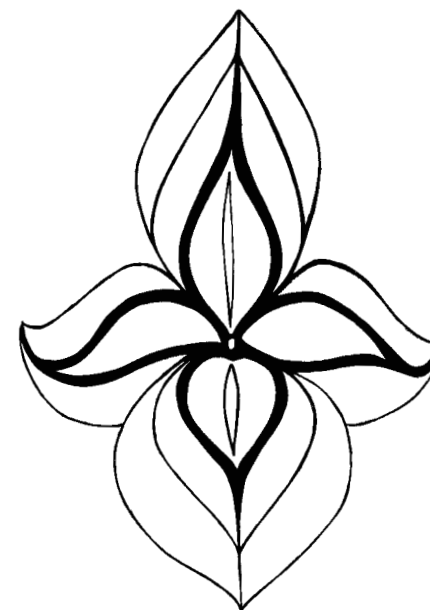


Illustration: Paris Matic

Contributors

Michelle Aldana is a notorious baker pursuing a degree in English Literature.

Nancy Au is a student at Pasadena City College.

Devin Bell is a poet that wants to go to UCLA.

Eunice Calderon is a student at Pasadena City College.

Linda Centell is a retired writer from the city of Pasadena.

Aaron Chen has spent two years at PCC and plans to become an executive of a Fortune 500 Company. He's interested in music and his hobbies include singing and hiking.

Sevan Ghadimian is a time traveler from the 1920s that owns a fleet of hot air balloons.

Manuel Gonzalez is a student at Pasadena City College.

Alejandra Jimenez is a part-time swim coach. She plans to transfer to CSULB to earn a degree in English: Creative Writing.

Kimberly "Kay" Lai is a linguistics student that charades as an English student on weekdays and an artist on weekends. In her spare time, she races ostriches on carousels, meets her fellow Dapper Dans at Disneyland, and goes on weekly escapades with her own Peter Pan. She never stops fighting bad grammar, ever.

Jason Lee is a student at Pasadena City College.

Joseph Lusnia's contribution was his second submission. He is very happy with PCC for encouraging the written word and allowing him to participate.

Paris Matic believes her parents should have named her Enigmatic, but deems Prismatic appropriate. She writes poetry and journal entries and draws fine lines between short stories and nonfiction.

Janine McCarthy just wants to write stuff.

Manuel Moreno is a design student at PCC and hopes to transfer to The Art Center.

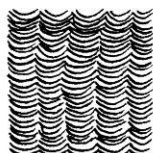
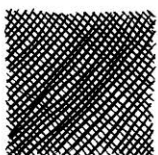
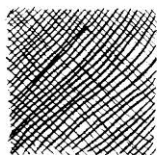


Illustration: Paris Matic

CONTRIBUTORS

Alex Phuong is an openly gay student whose interests include gender studies and musical theater.

Thomas Price is a Pasadena City College student.

Theodore Pamplin III is a student at Pasadena City College.

Robert Rodriguez is a member of the PCC Marching Band. He plays the trumpet.

Sergio Romero is interested in the fields of Law and law enforcement.

Rebecca Sanhueza is an English Major that wants to become an author.

Madeline Saunders is majoring in Art and is doing her best to become a cartoonist.

Vicky Shemer is pursuing a major in nutritional science and a minor in either creative writing or journalism. She was born and raised in Ukraine and enjoys yoga, cooking, writing, reading literature, and traveling.

David Smith is a student at Pasadena City College.

Patrick Thomas has been at PCC for far too long, and is transferring to Cal Poly Pomona to study Geology. He enjoys cycling.

Evelyn Vasquez enjoys volunteering at the library and introducing people to culture through geography and literature. She looks forward to teaching college English courses in the future.

Kendra Villa is a self-taught artist currently studying Library Science at Pasadena City College.

Traci Woodfin is attending her second year at Pasadena City College and studying psychology.

Yingchao Xiao is a student at Pasadena City College.

Shogo Yagi is majoring in Economics and will be transferring soon.

Acknowledgements

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English Division

Dean Amy Ulmer
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Monique Hedrick-Walters
Anna Davis

Student Affairs

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Sharon Hinton, *Student Affairs Bookkeeper*

Publications Office

Jesus Ruiz, *Production Artist/Typesetter*

And to all the writers and artists
who submitted their work.

Associate in Arts Degree

English Literature

Courses in this area of emphasis encompass traditional literary history and interpretation as well as cross-cultural inquiry and current theoretical debates. Literature majors are trained in critical reading, writing and thinking, as well as in literary interpretation. Literature is the study of representation, ideas, language, and culture. As such, it is a source of knowledge and pleasure, as well as a field of study. Literary texts are social documents in artistic form that speak to us as much about historical issues as about aesthetic matters. Literature students learn to think critically and to understand the role that texts play in a given society, past or present.

Requirements

- Students must complete a minimum of sixty (60) units. These units must meet PCC's General Education Requirements and must include eighteen units in the area of emphasis.
- **To complete the eighteen units in the area of emphasis, students must complete English 1C or English 26 and fifteen (15) units consisting of courses from at least three of the five categories listed below and including a minimum of two Literary Survey courses. Each course must be completed with a grade of "C" or better.**
- The courses that universities and colleges require for transfer vary. In selecting literature courses, students should consult with Counseling Services to determine the particular transfer requirements of specific transfer institutions.

English Literature courses offered at Pasadena City College

Literary Survey:

Engl 30A	American Literature	3
Engl 30B	American Literature	3
Engl 30C	American Literature	3
Engl 44B	World Literature	3
Engl 44C	World Literature	3
Engl 46A	English Literature	3
Engl 46B	English Literature	3

Gender and Ethnic Literature:

Engl 24	Lit in Translation	3
Engl 25C	Women in Literature	3
Engl 47	Mexican/Chicano Lit	3
Engl 48	Asian Literature	3
Engl 50	Afro-American Lit	3
Engl 51	Native American Lit	3
Engl 52	Asian-American Lit	3

Literary Origins:

Engl 44A	World Literature	3
Engl 45A	Literature of the Bible	3
Engl 45B	Literature of the Bible	3
Engl 78A	Intro to Shakespeare	3
Engl 78B	Intro to Shakespeare	3
Engl 82A	Intro to Mythology	3
Engl 82B	Intro to Mythology	3
Engl 82C	Intro to Mythology	3

Genre and Modes in Literature:

Engl 25A	Modern Literature	3
Engl 25D	Science Fiction/Fantasy	3
Engl 25E	Literature of Horror	3
Engl 25F	Comedy and Literature	3
Engl 25G	Mystery/Crime Fiction	3
Engl 49A	Film as Dramatic Lit	3
Engl 49B	Film as Dramatic Lit	3
Engl 53	Interpreting Poetry	3
Engl 57	Modern Drama	3
Engl 60	Masterpieces of Drama	3
Engl 61	Intro to the Novel	3
Engl 34	Major Novelist	1
Engl 35	Major Dramatist	1
Engl 36	Major Poet	1
Engl 37	Major Critic	1

Special Topics in Literature:

Engl 25H	American Journeys	3
Engl 25I	Post-Colonial Lit	3
Engl 25J	Utopian/Dystopian Lit	3
Engl 26	Intro to Lit. Theory	3
Engl 54	California Literature	3
Engl 59	Children's Literature	3

Creative Writing

at Pasadena City College

English 5A (Creative Writing)

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1B. Creative literary expression; short story, poetry and essay. Individual experimentation with various forms; students evaluate their work and work of classmates in light of contemporary writings.

*Transfer Credit: CSU; UC. *CAN: ENGL 6.*

English 5B (Creative Writing)

Prerequisite: English 5A, 6, 7 or 8. Creative literary expression such as: short story, poetry, dramatic form and essay.

The focus is on in-depth criticism of student work and professional writers. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

English 6 (Short Story Writing)

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1B. Theory and practice in writing the short story. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

English 7 (Inscape Magazine Publication)

Prerequisite: Engl 1A. Critical review and selection of creative material; design and layout of a literary magazine.

Transfer Credit: CSU; UC

English 8 (Writing Poetry)

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1A. Writing of poetry in all forms. Reading of traditional and current work. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

English 9 (Creative Nonfiction)

Prerequisite: Engl 1A. Writing and analysis of creative non-fiction such as memoirs, reviews, profiles, and nature writing. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

Price:

\$5 for one copy \$10 for three



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