

The Paragon Journal



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A Journal of Creative Arts

The Paragon Journal: A Journal of Creative Arts - May 2020

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All the photos featured in this issue are courtesy of Nam Ngyen



Too Sick to Sing Sean Dever

I.

I sniffle snot and blow back
till the kink in my neck relaxes

and I set another line
along the glass tabletop. Rolled,

a thin tube of *Business Insider*,
uneven, is placed between my forefinger

and thumb.
Coke is still cheaper than Novolog,

test strips, and lancets, and in this high
(unlike my other)

I am doctor and patient.
Bumps no longer suffice

the high I need to escape leathered,
poked, and punctured skin. Marks

from black Sharpie dot my arms,
nerve failure stemming from fingertips

guide the needle marks, veins, snaked in lack of control
as companies bleed me

for my test strips, up \$50
from two years ago,

when my disease was still a child.
Insulin scars crawl across the sides of my abdomen.

I trace them with a forefinger –
white still lining the pad. Blurs

of remaining insulin fill the pen
and I guess the amount of fluid entering

my thigh – remember the counter-effects
of removing control, ketoacidosis

already lively, afire, tearing the fat off

muscles – the needle nestles in –

heart flutters, skips –
head meets hardwood floor.

II.

Waking up, I wince
at the insertion of the IV –

weightless, I wade, internal,
still cling to the release of blow

as saline drills into my veins. Nurses
arrive and documents are signed.

It's here that control is further exerted.
I nibble on the IV, threaten it.

Later, opt for a therapy dog
over endless evening movies –

instant gratification, a final fuck you
to amended reform claiming I maxed

my needs, I've had enough –
too spoiled, too sick to sing.

Self-Portrait as Broken Mirror

Sean Dever

glass in the bathroom // splinters broken knuckles

pierced skin born // when I punched the Honda

that almost hit me // collided body with machine

ribs // two on the left // one on the right cracked

by spiral staircase // heading down to my apartment

while blackout drunk // alone

warm coffee on the nightstand cools // a half-smoked cigarette

kissed into inner-thigh // a constellation of scars

but don't I deserve the pain, the etching of flesh // mixed meds with booze again

mixed booze with meds again // five days pass

no recollection except // an inch of shattered Jack in the gut

20 stitches needed // sewn by judgmental thread and needle

fell off the couch // bottle in hand // pills in other

blood bursting from my cherry-pitted stomach // caked vomit

lining my lips // 18 missed calls // a voicemail from Mom

last week's pizza // still crisp in the oven

Cry the Violet Hour ... Elizabeth Kirschner

Furious, my sister pulls her entire plastic kitchen down, crashes it to the floor, as if toppling a bookshelf. Dishes scatter, are flying saucers.

Watching her, she's a war novel entirely lacking in female characters while I'm more like a table that eats its own legs off because it's fallen in love with the floor.

Weight presses down on me, pushes the air out of my lungs as I yell, "What'd you do that for?"

Jo doesn't answer. Intact in immaculate blackness from head to toe, more marvelous than the Cheshire cat with her portion of life, like a red pearl shining between her teeth, I can see how she wears our mother like a scarf around her neck.

Covered in welts so large, sobs escape from the back of my heart as I yell, "Clean it up," but Jo, she grabs a plastic bag, slips it over my head, cinches it.

When I start to choke, she laughs, pulls the bag off, retorts, "Clean it up yourself!"

Feeling infested, like cocoons are clinging to the back of my throat, I run into the bathroom, gag, spit them out—whimpering, *Don't, don't*.

Out the door I go, beyond the foggy shrubs and into woods the color of tea. The boulders are there, a warren of barren rooms.

As I walk, thoughts stick to my skull, as real as a bruised eye and what I have, there's no name for: mystery, suspense, insects, blood, curiosity, death, like layers of sky—crushed ice on branches sashed with gold, some sun under it, making it all gleam.

Bloodless and bright, some snow petals the ground, which is pleated, like an accordion. Calm as a winter morgue, I find Mom, sprawled, face down, in the snow.

Bracing her, a puff of ice on her chin, she coughs, drops again—I try to prop her, but it's like shaking a doll, *How dare it, how dare it!*

What good is she in her shower cap, pink bathrobe, as I push her shoulders back against the trunk of a tree. Her chest's so cold it cracks—in her shadow-etched face, sticky sap, the color of frozen pee, oozes from her mouth.

My big, messy head doesn't know what to think as she produces cigarettes from the pocket of her robe. Cigarettes and a lighter. Her bones do not make a sound as she lights up.

I huddle next to her. Shaped like an inverted triangle: her gaped mouth, a great white fish on the verge of striking, poised to devour and feed on skin, on all.

"Go home," I say. As I do, a fawn, wet, trout-brown, a dun seashell, staggers up from beneath twigs, sketchy as antennae.

On piano-thin legs, she wobbles, goes under the doe where she sucks on teats long as ringlets. The doe's bulging face, this presses into memory, sticky as jellied cartilage.

Left to rot, my childhood, like the tree's spit-speckled skin—and staticky, that sound my mother makes as she gets up, leaves, her eyes, two small coffins.

Her smell—parasitic ash, swamp woods—runts me until even the hollow my body makes in the scant snow is a slight violence.

Back in my room, softness makes a trap for me, like that scarf I love, the one Jo wears, yes, the softness with which I sink into what disappears, so softly my sister snores while her mouth makes tadpoles.

Her shoulders swell their small tides. I want to trap her sighs, divide the stillness in a Mason jar: breath like smoke against the window—: but I cuddle next to her, listen while the wind chatters down the gutters, noisy as gum balls.

I lose my edges mouthing Jo's name. To love what we can no longer distinguish, to cry the dying violet hour; I think about this as I peel a scab the size of a freckle off of Jo's shoulder.

Through the curtains, I hear a voice, through folds and folds of fabric, a voice, like a slash of lightning—*Am I the most beautiful?* It's Mom, of course.

Am I the most beautiful? comes her voice again. Scratchy, like a broken toy. How can I tell her that her

husband craves me, how when he comes for me, I'm silent as a gargoyle, a grey-green membrane, slimy as a scream, how, as he does what he does, Jo pulls the covers over her head, stuffs her mouth with her scarf.

When he leaves, she stuffs that scarf between my legs, slaps me. That slap, it burns as it hurdles through time and space, like an over-bright comet made out of stones and plastic and boxtops and eggs.

After Jo storms out of the room, I pull the scarf out from between my legs. It smells hairy, is dotted with blood, is moldy Swiss cheese.

I turn it into a sock doll, use a Magic marker to make a mouth, loud as a scowl.

All over the bedroom floor, pieces, a waterfall of pieces from when Jo tore down her entire plastic kitchen. Plastic cookies. Plastic forks that look like claws that have crept out right of hell. Plastic cupcakes, tiny as Tater Tots.

Layered, brazen, I droop my head, heavy with rust. Holding my sock doll, I try to feed her a cookie, "Don't despair," I whisper, "you're almost there."

Why must I tell this? I'm just a girl, who knows nothing. Full-faced, bright as the sun, I gaze through folds upon folds of curtains, which trap the light, cry the dying violet hour.

It's the trapping, and the darkness so huge—but the light—grilled, dished, dazzling, the wish of it, enough.



The Wind Picked Up Esteban Cajigas

Tulua, Valle de Cauca, Colombia // 1949

A shot rang across the fields, echoing off the mountains, and disappearing into the cloudless sky. The ring even found its way to downtown. The children who heard it stopped their playing, looking at each other as if to wonder who'd woken their mother up. Who'd broken her favorite china? Most adults continued their work, too busy to be bothered.

The town of Tulua sprawled within the Valle de Cauca, North West of the Pacific city of Cali. Its tall thin trees mixed with the streets. A town of many birds, pigeons probably heard the shot before anybody else. Screaming, flocks of them took off into different directions.

Santiago sat on his steps devouring a cob of corn when he heard the gunshot. His school was off for the Summer. People of all ages haggled with merchants on the street in front of him. Santiago looked around but only found silence. He wondered if the bullets had hit their intended targets. What could have happened? He made sure his mother wasn't looking through the open door behind him and jumped to the street. If he wanted to find out, he'd have to tell his mother first. He wasn't like his older brothers who came and left as they pleased. Who knew where they were now? For the last two years, he'd shared a room with them while his baby sister slept in a crib in the master bedroom. A crucifix hung in both rooms.

Santiago shrugged and ran back inside the house. His mother sang as she dried their dishes from breakfast.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"Que?" she said, drying. She wore the clothes pin apron Santiago's father had bought her last Christmas.

"You didn't hear the gun?"

"Mira niño, mind your own business. And please leave your shoes at the door. You're almost fifteen. You should know better than to bring your filth into my house."

"I'm actually going to go," he said looking past his mother at the windows behind her. The sun shone past the tree branches across the street and into the kitchen. He had definitely heard a gunshot, too loud and close for it to have been fired by a hunter.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to ask Juliana if she can help with me with my homework," he said. His mother didn't need to know that he was actually going to Maria's. His mother only had one requirement for Santiago's company: they had to come from a "decent" family.

"You're not going to go looking for any guns right?"

"No, mami." The truth was he was too scared to go look. He wasn't one of his older brothers. He would rather hear about it later like a ghost story. Santiago hadn't heard the police or any other aftershocks. He wondered if the birds had flown back to their resting places.

"You should clean your room before your father gets home. You know he'll like that." "None of the clothes on the floor are mine, I swear," he said, holding up his hands. He figured he could put off the chore until his brothers came back. He said goodbye once more and ran out before his mother could stop him. The humidity invaded his skin and the air like an uninvited mosquito. Bullets of sweat dripped down his back by the time he reached the end of the street. He stopped to wipe his face with an old handkerchief his father had given him. He refused to show up to Maria's with a pool running down his face. Santiago also whiffed his armpits.

A magnifying glass in the sky burned over the valley.

Santiago walked past Juliana's and made sure nobody saw him crossing towards the outskirts of town. He wasn't too far from Maria's house now. Street artisans called out their daily deals. Nobody else seemed to have noticed the gunshots.

Unpaved paths led him up around the hill. He wished he didn't have to lie to his family to see the people closest to him. The sun's heat pulsed through his head and body. Maria's house sat at the end of the road. Her grandfather had built the wooden house decades before. Everyone knew it as *La Casa Embrujada* but there was

no reason why. It was probably to mess with Maria. Every window and door to Maria's house was open. White drapes danced in the air. His footsteps creaked up the front steps. He leaned in to see if he could hear her mother's usual singing. He recognized an old melody he'd heard his father whistle before.

"Doña Fernanda?" Santiago called out from the doorway.

"Entra, entra," Doña Fernanda said, scooting him inside. A pink bandana adorned her head. She wore a modest yellow dress and a pair of red *chanclas*. They stood at the end of the entrance where the kitchen started. "Have you heard from Maria?" she asked. Her eyes widened and she held her breath.

"No, Doña Fernanda, I came here to see if she was free," he said. He worried he wasn't saying the right thing.

"Mira, you need to go home, okay? Maria was just going to the store. Come back tomorrow," she said.

How could Santiago ask anything further without being rude? He nodded and walked back to the door.

"Is something wrong? How can I help?"

"If you see Maria on your way home, please tell her to hurry."

"Does this have to do with the gunshots?"

Doña Fernanda didn't respond. She walked past Santiago, outside, and looked at both ends of the street.

"Hurry home," she said.

Santiago thanked her and walked back down the side of the hill as fast as he could. He looked back and caught Doña Fernanda staring at him as she disappeared in the distance. Now the streets were empty. There were no signs of Maria or anybody else. He knew this was bad by how worried Doña Fernanda was. Adults usually tried to guard their emotions from him. She'd never lost track of her daughter as far as he knew. Maria wasn't one to disappear or disobey. How could you get lost in such a small town?

He didn't come across anybody else on his way home. It was quiet enough to hear the wind crashing into the trees and the alleys around him. Two more gunshots echoed in the sky behind him. They were identical to the ones from earlier. Santiago ran to his door. He wanted to call Maria, but his mother would know he lied. Maria had to be home by now. Had the gunshots scared her? Doña Fernanda's worried eyes superimposed themselves over everything. The thought of Maria in pain made Santiago's bones clench. His door swung open on the first try. "Mami, why is the door unlocked?"

His mother stood at the sink still wiping down the plates they'd eaten on that morning. "Que pasa?"

Santiago turned his mother around and grabbed her by both arms. "Something's going on. The streets are empty," he said.

"I told you not to go looking for trouble," his mother said. "You're not supposed to be like your brothers. Behave yourself."

The sink's water continued splashing on the remaining dirty plates. Sunflowers stretched out from their pots along the windows towards the sun. The kitchen's windows were covered by the clothes hanging in the yard.

A woman's screams cut in from the street. Her yelling made it impossible to figure out what she was saying. A car or two honked as she grew louder. Whoever it was, she was coming closer and closer to the house.

Santiago's mother made her way to the door. "Stay here," she ordered.

The screaming woman burst through their front door. "Ayuda! Ayudame, por favor," she said. Santiago peeked from the edge of the doorway into the kitchen. Señora Elena Castillo, from three houses down, stood there holding her son. His head, feet, and hands hung like *La Pieta* over the sides of her arms. Blood trickled down his limp index finger.

"Help me, help me," she shouted.

Santiago had never seen a dead body before. It happened to be Luis, whom he'd known most of his life. He was more of his brother's friend, but they'd spent many sleepovers at each other's houses. Luis' lips had lost their rosy color.

Santiago came and helped carry him to the dining table. His mother ordered him to go away, but she stopped when he ignored her. The red on Santiago's hands reminded him more of sweat than blood. It wasn't as warm as he'd expected. Did soldiers feel this way?

Elena bent over her boy. Her wails shook them both as she grasped him by his neck.

Santiago realized his friend wasn't dead. At least not yet. Luis tried to whisper and gasp at the same time.

“Luis, Luis, dime, por favor,” Elena cried.

Santiago’s mother tried to cover his eyes, but he pulled away.

There hadn’t been a chance to think the situation out, only react. He’d seen Luis a few hours earlier when he’d come by to pick Santiago’s brothers up in his black Renault. Santiago remembered asking where they were headed. Luis wanted to spy on Pastrana’s farm. He’d even invited Santiago. Nobody messed with Pastrana. He and his family owned most of the officials that oversaw the city. Pastrana collected his own tax on some of the properties in fields in Tulua. The local banks even owed him money. Santiago remembered the way Luis had lit his cigarette before handing his Marlboros to Santiago’s brothers. “Why are you such a mama’s boy? Huh Santi? You’re never going to grow up like that,” Luis had yelled at Santiago. “Come with us.”

Santiago never had a comeback whenever his older brother’s friends teased him, so he shrugged.

Luis now bled on his table. Too scared to ask without giving his mother a heart attack, Santiago wondered where his brothers were, “Santi, go call for help,” his mother ordered.

Elena prayed Hail Marys and kissed Luis on the head. There was so much blood that when she kissed him, it was unclear if she was leaving behind lipstick marks or bits of her son behind. Luis moved his lips with no purpose. “No, no, we can’t,” Elena said.

“Can’t what?”

“The boys hit one of Pastrana’s oldest sons with Luis’ car. Now he’s taken my son. He took my son. He took my son,” she repeated.

Santiago’s baby sister cried from her crib in his parent’s room.

Santiago’s mother began to shake. Her face hardened. The more Santiago saw the adults around him fall apart, the more he felt a part of their world, like he had a seat in their table. They weren’t doing the usual routine of telling him it would all be alright. “Luis was with Marco and Sammy? What happened to them? Where’s the car?” his mother asked.

Santiago realized that everybody around him was in danger. It wasn’t like Tulua was that big. Most of the children played together. His earlobes burned thinking of Maria and his brothers. They could be worse off than Luis somewhere in a ditch.

“I only came here because I had nowhere else to go. Who’s going to help my Luis?” Elena said. She and the dying looked conjoined. Luis had always been one of the toughest kids Santiago knew. He was also the only one who knew how to drive, which instantly made him popular. Luis got hit by his father the most. Seeing Luis take his last breaths was like seeing some Biblical event Santiago had only heard about in sermons.

Santiago’s mother ushered him into his room and locked the door from the outside. There was no reason to run or hide. Santiago’s father would be home from work soon. Santiago pressed his ear against his door, making out Elena’s prayers and his mother using the house phone. She asked for his father, but his secretary said he was out.

Santiago knelt by his bed and tried seeing God. How else could he keep the men who’d killed Luis from knocking down his door? He heard his mother close all of the windows and blinds. Please keep Maria safe, he repeated in his head enough times for God to hear. About an hour went by until Santiago’s father arrived. “It’s me,” he said, knocking on the door. He opened Santiago’s door and from his face he could tell that Luis had passed away.

“Nobody’s going to bury my boy,” Santiago heard Elena say down the hallway.

The guilt of having prayed for his own safety and not Luis’ health sunk into Santiago. It stung the same way as when he lied to his mom. The idea that secretly, inside, he was a bad person with no moral character made him feel like an impostor around his family.

“Pack your things. Pack things for your brothers too,” his father ordered like a General.

“Where are we going?”

“Anywhere. There’s no destination. We just have to go.”

“Where is Marco and Samuel?” Santiago asked. He’d never seen his father so alert and so low at the same time. From his eyes to his knees, every part of his father sagged.

Santiago wished Maria didn’t know his brothers. That would make the chances of both of them getting caught up in this together slimmer. Instead, he pictured the boys approaching Maria and her friends in Luis’ car.

“They were arrested,” his father said. “They’re downtown. It’s for their own safety.”

Santiago’s eyes wandered around the room he shared with his brothers. Their beds were made but they’d left yesterday’s clothes spread out over the carpet. His baby sister continued crying in the next room. Her screaming made his neck twist. “Papi, I don’t want to leave. I want to stay in the valley,” Santiago said.

“Pack fast,” his father said before leaving and closing the door.

Santiago grunted and got to work. He smooshed both of his brother’s belongings into one bag and his into a separate one. They’d have to share. Santiago got into the back of his car, behind his parents. They offered to bring Doña Elena, but she refused. There was no room for Luis in the car and nobody was going to force her to leave her child behind. She cried so hard you would have thought she was the one who’d been shot.

His father turned the car on and they pulled out of his driveway. They began to leave their street for the last time. Santiago looked up to the top of the trees he’d climbed as a child. He saw the patch of street where he’d always kicked his ball around. He opened his eyes as wide as possible to absorb it all.

His mother cradled his little sister in her arms. She hummed and shushed her like nothing was wrong. After every turn Santiago’s father looked over his shoulder. A chill replaced the tropic air. He didn’t have a home anymore. Tulua was the only thing Santiago had ever known. He trembled, but he couldn’t pick the right words to say that to his father. He couldn’t leave without knowing if Maria had made it home. If he left Tulua, he would always imagine her sprawled out like Luis.

The car pulled into the station. “Wait here,” his father said, switching the car engine off. He handed his wife the keys and ran inside.

“Te amo,” his mother said stretching her hand back to Santiago.

“Mami, I can’t go. I don’t even know where we’re going,” he said.

His mother sighed. “We can’t stay.”

“They’re not hunting me down. I didn’t kill anybody.”

“Santi, calm down. Enough,” she said.

Santiago grabbed his bag, opened his door, and took off. He lost his balance as he ran around the corner. His feet steered him towards Maria’s and his momentum pushed him forward. His mother shouted his name. He could never forgive himself for leaving, but he knew he’d feel worse if he stayed. *Both of them were better off this way*, he thought. This way he didn’t have to leave and he wouldn’t burden them. The souls of his feet burned against the pavement on the ground. He hoped his family would drive off without wasting their time looking for him. *Maria, Maria, Maria*, his brain repeated.

The further he ran, the streets and neighborhoods turned into dirt roads and fields. His knees began to buckle when he reached the hill by Maria’s house. Even the wind was quiet now. Santiago looked around sensing he was being watched but found no eyes praying over him.

Sweat drenched his shirt over his stomach and his nipples. He took off his shirt and hung it behind his neck.

All of the windows to Maria’s house had been closed. Santiago knocked on the door and tried looking in but all the shades were drawn. He knocked again before pressing his ear against the door. No noises could be made out except his own footsteps on the wooden flooring. There was nothing for him to do, so he sat by the door and covered his face before the first tears forced their way out. He didn’t move until the sun started climbing down. He knew he had to keep moving for his own safety and because his thirst demanded it.

The hill stretched on demanding his full concentration. His feet wandered aimlessly without a designated target. To his relief, a breeze combed through the valley.

He found a horse stable by the side of the main road next to a brush of trees. Nobody stopped him from walking inside and exploring. He figured it was empty and sat against a stack of hay. His lungs felt like two empty balloons. He pictured his helpless mother waiting in the car and Maria’s mother looking for her. Santiago lurched over and vomited into a stall. The bones that made up his diaphragm twisted into a knot. He cried in the fetal position until the moon shone through the wooden cracks in the roof.

As his eyes grew heavy, he wondered if Pastrana had caught up with his family. There was no way to find out. He had abandoned his mother. Santiago tried to say a rosary, but without his mother’s help he couldn’t remember the words.

Santiago woke in a pool of sweat feeling lonelier than he'd been in his entire brief life. He even missed his little sister's crying. Although there were no animals, the stench of manure filled the air. The stable hadn't been abandoned long. At least he had a full bag to change from. He wondered if the smell would stick to his clothes.

It took him a minute to realize he might never see his brothers again. The only way he could find out how much danger he was in would be by heading back into town. Maybe Pastrana would respect him if he showed his face in the absence of his brothers. How many men did Pastrana have on his payroll anyway? How far could his family get without any help? They'd have to keep moving.

He sat on a stool and pictured Luis' body hardening over his dining table. Maybe Doña Elena would have news on his family's whereabouts.

He stepped outside, peed behind the stable, and changed into a fresh button-down shirt. He'd dented the heel on his right foot from running. He looked for water but only found rusty buckets on the ground. The morning fog hovered over the mountains. The sun was bright but not burning yet. He dreaded the inevitable humidity. His forehead started sweating preemptively.

The walk back would take about two hours. If he wanted mercy, Santiago had no other choice, he'd have to take the main road back. He carried his bag, switching hands every time he passed a property. His pace quickened as he reached the city square.

Santiago reached the old church and sat on the steps. Bells rang marking the hour. He waited for someone—anyone—to confront him. The weight of the walk persuaded him to take a nap. He found change next to him when he woke up. He realized he was homeless. There was nowhere else for him to go.

After a few hours a patrolman came and stood over him, looking down while managing to avoid Santiago's face. He told Santiago that Pastrana's men had seen his family drive off. The patrolman promised no trouble as long as Santiago's brothers stayed out of town.

Santiago promised to be quiet and stay out of the way. He shook the man's hand and waited for him to disappear down the street. He used his new coins to buy a tamale.

That afternoon the rain forced him away from the church. He tried finding a store to hide in, but nobody let him inside. The store owners whispered Santiago and Pastrana's name amongst each other. The city was less hospitable than the barn. The rain made his clothes transparent against his skin. Santiago stayed away from walking near his house. As much as he wanted to stay, this wasn't his town anymore. Even the parents of his friends looked away from him when he passed.

He managed to live a week off of lentil soup and tamales. He resorted to talking to feral dogs that slept in the plaza. Nobody from his time living there approached him. His breath made him wince and his armpits had never smelled so thick before. Every day he walked over to Maria's and found it empty. The second night it rained he hid underneath an awning by the whorehouse. That's where all the loners went since they weren't turned away. He cried whenever he wondered what had happened to this family. He'd left them for nothing and now he could never change that.

A woman woke him up one morning as he slept against a storefront. She wore a wig too big for her head and poked him with a cane. She wasn't much older than him.

"Wake up," she said, poking him again. "Come with me."

Santiago brushed the dirt off his face and rubbed his eyes. "What?" He recognized her from the whorehouse. He'd seen her coming in and out over the last few days.

The woman turned and walked away.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Follow me if you want a place to sleep," she shouted over her shoulder.

All of the clothes in Santiago's bag were so covered in filth that he didn't change anymore. There was no point. He picked up his things and ran after the woman down an alley. Men stood around the street reading newspapers with their coffee. Others continued drinking the same *aguardiente* from the night before. The woman led him by the river and into a row of apartments. He'd never come to this part of town before. Not even his brothers or Luis had enough balls to explore this corner of the city. Santiago entered a yellow building and

carried his bag up three floors until the woman stopped walking.

She unlocked a door and waited for Santiago to enter before going in herself. A grey ragdoll cat greeted them and pressed her body against Santiago's shins, extending all four of her feet. She purred even before receiving any love. "You can stay on this couch. I don't know for how long, but I couldn't stand seeing you on the ground like that," the woman said, resting her cane against the door.

Santiago stared back at her without saying a word. He didn't know how to say thank you and all he could think about was water.

"Are you mute?"

Santiago shook his head.

"You're welcome," she said, walking around the apartment picking old plates and cups. "My name's Lora."

Different colored wigs decorated her apartment. There was almost no furniture other than the couch and a wooden table. A moldy smell refused to go away. Santiago tried to stay alert, but he fell asleep before he knew it.

It was dark when he opened his eyes again. The springs inside Lora's bed creaked as if they were being beaten to death. Lora screamed and moaned between calling out for God. The thuds were impossible to escape. The sound of Lora being penetrated disturbed Santiago. It somehow made the apartment stickier and dirtier. His parents didn't even kiss. Santiago heard a man grunt and repeat Lora's name.

Silence took over the apartment until Lora and a man emerged from her door. She walked him outside and came back with a handful of money. Twenty minutes later another man knocked on the door. He was louder than the first man. Santiago thought he could hear Lora crying, but he wasn't sure if it was a good or bad sign.

Four more men came after that. None of them acknowledged Santiago. Eventually, the sound of skin slapping together became familiar and Santiago's ears gave him permission to sleep again.

Santiago lived there for months, begging for change in the plaza, and eating dinner with Lora before her customers came. He never spoke more than a few words to her, but she treated him like a lost friend, always making sure he ate and had enough blankets at night. The grey cat slept on his chest and waited for him by the door every day.

One night in December, Santiago came across the same man who'd spoken to him the morning after Luis' murder. The patrolman stood outside of Lora's yellow building. A crowd sang in unison at bar down the street.

Santiago tried to walk past the man, but the patrolman blocked the doorway.

"Your lease is up, kid," the man said and spat on the ground. "It's time to go. Pastrana doesn't want you around anymore. It makes him look weak."

Santiago sighed. "Go where?"

"I don't care. Get the hell out of here." The patrolman pointed over the mountains.

"Can I get my things?"

The patrolman cracked his knuckles. "You have no things," he said, not stepping aside.

Santiago looked up at the window into Lora's apartment. The cat's faint meow came across from behind the door. Was Lora okay? He was tired of letting go of people without getting the chance to say goodbye. All the money he'd saved was up there in a bag underneath the couch. How would his parents find him if he left?

"Beat it, kid."

Santiago walked to the main bus terminal. He bought a one-way pass to Bogota using the change he'd panhandled that day. He left the town of his birth without seeing another familiar face.

The Broken Branch ... Parker Jamieson

The beach was a trembling hand. It held the frozen land like a snow globe.

"I know you love me," he said. "I understand why you're upset." Noah sat beside Benjamin on a decaying log. Both boys were slightly hunched. They were shaken up by the forecast of the past three days.

"I want us to recall our origin, unlike the ripples over there." Noah pointed at a patch where the water was visible in the frozen lake. "I don't want you to cripple our connection because of resentment. Then, there will be no us."

A cold wind blew. The trees trembled like Noah's fingers.

Benjamin's thin, black hair shook like a fledgling's feathers in the wind. He noticed a branch cracking off of a tree in the small hallow to his right. The cracking was a quiet octave. "I doubt anyone, but I would recognize that sad tree," he thought.

"Please understand me, Benny. I know we weren't dating, so I thought it was fine. I did say I loved you, and I meant it too." Noah looked up at the lake, "and by doing what I did, I replat what should have been. That's not how love works." A large crack in the ice remapped his analogy. An ice slab slid into the wet patch. "Please don't tear yourself out of my life, Benny."

The wind wrapped against the trees. Benjamin continued to watch the branch crack; he was imprisoned by the event. "It's bound to break off the trunk. Reconnection's implausible, it'll just have to grow anew," he thought. He paid no attention to Noah. Noah's words just flickered into formless syllables.

"I... I just wanted to have fun. But *want* and *desire* are wild imps. They swam through my veins and into my heart. I didn't even think about the consequences." Noah hung his head. He looked at the snow below his feet and thought about the other man. His thighs, his shins, his ankles, his feet. "I shouldn't have walked all over you; I confess, Benji, I found nothing more with someone else. I guess inclusion contains a heartier semantic; and, I guess my proof is the lack of exultation."

Noah felt ungrounded. He confused himself. "I didn't know what I stood for—now I understand the moral agency," Noah said. "I can't even remember his face, Benjamin!"

Benjamin was listening to the diaphanous sound of the branch. It harmonized with the dripping droplets. "I don't remember his face either," Ben thought. He remembered only another man laying on Noah's bed and Noah's pants resting on his ankles.

Ben continued to listen to the branch to absolve the red light of his memory. The snow melted. To Ben, the crashing droplets were a symphony muddled with derision. The trees were crying monsters that could not move beyond the patch of land they adopted. They cried willingly, submissively, joyously, and limpidly for a convalescent eureka.

The sun was splayed into a network of miserable shadows. The trees were no different than scalpels. They divided the heart of light into separate worlds like beach glass that could only be felt. It would never be touched, or held in unity like the blood of lovers in their child.

Benjamin knew himself at that moment as the branch. He found no truth in Noah's words. He knew that Noah's clammy flesh wasn't caused by the snow.

The wind blew rigorously, and the branch began to bow. Benjamin heard the bloodless snapping of its marrowless bone.

"What can I do to make you believe me?" Noah said, shuttering from the wind. His hands trembled from the nakedness of the necessity of his carnal volitions. Then Noah looked at Benjamin, was bundled in a black scarf and a dark blue parka. "You in your own world right now?"

The wind blew.

Benjamin looked at Noah, then back to the branch. The wind stopped. Above the cracking branch was another limb that held a muscle of snow. The snow slipped off and landed on the branch that riveted Ben's awareness.

"Ben?"

The brank broke.

Benjamin hung his head. He remained speechless. He took a breath and thought about the value that he adopted from the branch. Then he sat up, removing his hunched back. His agonizing suspicions were answered by his own volition. He smiled at himself in his heart, and his corrugated frustration melted away. He had his own words to say, but the environment spoke much more wisely. He remained silent, rigorous as the wind. “Words crave nothing. Only the body, in which the words melt from, crave,” Ben thought. Words are icy, and the body of consonant and syllable can hardly retain the fruitful appendages that sway in the wind of other’s thoughts.

In silence, Benjamin stood up without trembling. He looked at the branch—a dead limb jostled into the snow. Then he walked away. He knew Noah would find another man. His chest was a taut fist that finally opened.

The ice slab melted, while the frozen music tuned to the precise syllables that reconciled semantic with word. The wind settled down, and the snow melted off the palm of the shore.



Threadbare ... Chloe Morris

ThreadbareIt always starts at the edges. The very threads of a memory tears apart piece by piece, curling together and then separating before disappearing forever.

“No! Not this one! Please, don’t take this one!” a distant voice begs. It is mine.

Aquamarine blue sinks away into white oblivion.

I have lost something, but I cannot remember what.

From somewhere above comes the rumble of a man’s frustrated grunt. Then there is a wet substance on my mouth, my nose, rolling tantalizingly slow down my cheeks. With a gasp my eyelids flutter open to the sight of the empty gray room. There are no windows. No decorations. No hope. The only source of light is a bare bulb hanging like a beacon over my head. The man is here as well, grasping a spray bottle in one hand.

“Sixty-three memories gone. Are you ready to tell me where she is, Miss Thrice?”

Down—that is the only direction in which I can look where his gaze cannot spear me. The floor is nothing but dirt save for a jagged crimson stain. I could study the stain, the way it crusts and flakes, the way the color is now almost black, but the last time the stain and I had dealings, the truth threatened to slink from my tongue. Therefore, the stain is just a stain. I will not consider it as a previous part of me. After all, if I indulged my negative thoughts, there would eventually be more than just blood on the floor.

“Speak to me!” the man yells, the accompanying slap hitting me squarely in the jaw, not an inch from the last bruise he gave me. I must look like a ghoul by now.

I turn my head, spitting out blood, before responding, “I’m not telling you anything. You’re wasting your time.”

“Do you remember how they used to torture accused witches in medieval times, Miss Thrice?” he poses. As the sting of the slap subsides and my mind clears from the dregs of loss, I finally recall the man’s name: Erikson. “How the torture from phase one was so unbearable, mere innocents would confess rather than face the pain of stage two?”

Ants skittering across my skin, snakes slinking up my nerves, bees abuzz in my stomach. Every part of me is crawling. “I do not need a history lesson.” I know as long as I can sass, he has not taken the essence of me.

He walks in deliberate circles around me now, a falcon to his prey. “How they would pull off their fingernails one by one. Need I give more details?”

In my head, I imagine myself tied to a stake, burning, ablaze. I picture a white dress and purple flames and a smoke-filled horizon. I imagine the pain leading up to the fire and debate whether I could handle it.

Erikson ducks to my level, his eyes even with mine. “But you seem to endure physical pain with surprising poise, so I am just going to emotionally and mentally break you until you want nothing more than to die. And then when you get there and beg me to slit your throat, I will refuse.”

The ropes binding my wrists and ankles suddenly seem so much tighter, and I can feel the blood pumping unsteadily through my veins. But instead of shifting from side to side in the chair like I desperately ache to do, I stare this madman directly in the face and say, “Bring it.”

He scoffs, a sinister smile turning up the edges of his lips.

Then the helmet is on my head again, forcing me to relive the day my mother left. That memory I must keep. The helmet causes my brain to replay it for hours. Then it steals away memories of my fourteenth birthday, gone. My elementary graduation, gone. My first kiss, gone. My first soccer goal, gone. My first few sparks of true happiness, what was I missing?

One by one, gone, leaving behind empty husks.

Drip. Drip.

Droplets are splattering onto my feet as the tendrils of consciousness push and pull at me. Blinking hard, my blurry sight reveals water droplets sliding down the wall from the tiny window overhead. It must be raining

It must be raining for the fifth time this week. Or month. Who knows how long I have really been here.

Gray stone walls, the eerie walls of every prison cell I have ever read about, cage me and my ever-present doom.

For a moment I am unable to think of anything. However, as time inevitably skates by, my mind goes back to Tanya. It always goes back to Tanya, to the fact that while I am in here she is out there being hunted. Every day I endure the Destructor is another day I know Erikson's search has been fruitless. With any luck, they will never find her.

Tanya is a certified genius, evident in every memory that remains of our lifetime friendship. At four-years-old, she was working on robots with her father. At ten-years-old, she could build full generators and drones with her bare hands. By twelve she was experimenting and creating her own inventions, each one more wild and impressive than the next.

"What does this do?"

I was thirteen and hiding in the back closet with Tanya. Her mother was having another of her raging spells, and the closet was the perfect place to create a fantasy getaway. Tanya turned a pair of pliers around and around in her left hand, grinning widely at the intricate twist of metal before her.

"It's a superpower," she said in awe. "Remember what superpower I've always wanted?"

"Telekinesis," I replied automatically.

"Exactly. Just strap on this headband, and it'll read your thoughts as commands. Watch." The silver headband slipped onto her head with ease, and I observed with wide eyes as the robot flew across the room, picked up a shoe between its pinchers, and delivered it back to Tanya.

"That's wicked awesome," I murmured.

"Emphasis on the awesome," she declared. Her grin was more contagious than any disease.

The stones behind me have begun to dig into my backbone, so I shift positions. That robot nor any of the others she made are not the reason for our current pursuers. I know exactly which invention landed us in this predicament.

"I don't understand," I remember speaking to Tanya, swiping my bangs to the side. "What does this thing even do?"

I tapped the silver device several times, listening to the rattling echo that proceeded to follow. The device looked like a pair of glasses, a mirror, and a kaleidoscope somehow morphed into one weird looking entity. But it was Tanya's baby. She had built it from scratch, and now she pushed my hands away to keep me from scratching it.

"I think you are better off not knowing. But I'll tell you this: it must be protected at all costs, for the good of society. Anything with power can be abused."

That was one of the last conversations Tanya and I had before Erikson's men shot me down in the forest, out picking berries in my most camouflaged garb. The first time Erikson's 5men came after us, we were living in a ramshackle house on the edge of a tiny town. We barely escaped, thanks to Tanya who managed to dodge a bullet, knock out a couple of the jerks, even spitting on one, and start a fire that allowed us to run to the nearest underground shelter. After that, we had stowed away in the Huntington woods a couple months prior, isolating ourselves in a cabin where we thought no one could find us. What a waste of time.

I slide myself upright on the scrap of a blanket beneath me, fighting past the cold that has permanently crept into my bones. A single chunk of bread sits on the rusty plate in the corner. I chew each bite carefully before swallowing. I have only been allotted one cup of water for the day, so I spare two sips now. Afterward, I lean against the wall and close my eyes.

A minute or an hour or hours later, I feel the temperature in the room increase, like I have been transported to a sauna. Sweat rolls across my pores. My shirt and pants stick to me like honey. That ominous sensation of being watched ripples over me. Digging down into my receding reservoir of courage, I open my eyes.

"Holy hell," I murmur.

In the cell with me stands a man. A man that I still remember, even if I have forgotten a lot of the details. Shaggy hair, tall and slim, a smile like summer. The last time I saw him outside of this prison, he was leaving on a trip up north for a delivery job. Erikson's men nabbed him somewhere along the road.

Chauncey.

I try to back away, but there is nowhere to go. "You're not real." Chauncey sits down across from me, thankfully keeping a safe distance between us. "I watched you die. I watched as he sapped all of the memories from you and as the metal helmet fell to the floor. I saw your eyes go blank. It's the one memory I wish he would take, and it's the one he never will. You're dead." My voice cracks, once, twice, thrice. Sobs must be reigned in. I cannot spare the water loss.

He studies me thoughtfully, taking a rubber band from his wrist and stretching it around his fingers like he always used to do. "Then maybe I'm a ghost."

"I don't believe in ghosts. I don't believe in things I can't reach out and touch." I wonder if he is one of those things.

Chauncey is on his feet again, walking toward me. My body stiffens. "See, that was always your biggest problem, needing tangibility."

"How is that a..." But I trail off as he places a hand on my shoulder, right over where my tattoo had been before Erikson decided to slice into as if it were fruit. Now the tree of life is nothing more than shriveled roots.

He seems tangible, but I feel nothing where his hand resides. "Chauncey... I don't..." Words fail.

"Shiri..." He reaches out to twirl a piece of my hair, like he did when we first met, when Tanya introduced us. I feel the lock dancing in the air, or maybe that is just the dizziness.

"We need to talk about Tanya. Why're you lying for no reason? Why don't you just tell him the truth? You don't know where she is, do you?"

"I have a few ideas, but no." My spine prickles. "Because, one of two things will happen. One, he won't believe me, and therefore it makes no difference. Or two, he will believe me, and I will no longer be of use to him."

The weight of those words hangs in the air between us, a bridge I do not want to cross. Chauncey crosses it for me. "So he'd finally kill you." His hand falls away.

My heart seems to tumble out of my chest. "I'm not ready to die."

"But are you ready to live without your soul, because that's what he's doing. Every memory you lose chips away a bit more at your very being until you become nothing. Do you want to live like that?"

I have no answer.

Instead, I stare around Chauncey to the iron bars, to what is on the other side. Freedom.

"Do you believe in miracles, Chauncey?" Silence greets me, long and painful. "Chauncey?" I refocus my attention on where he sits, or rather where he sat. He is no longer there.

The room is once again nothing but an empty cage, and the world a dark, dark place.

"The ghosts can't get ya if you close your eyes and think of hummingbirds."

"How does that keep the ghosts away?"

"I don't know. It's what Thomas told me."

Thomas, Tanya's brother, was exactly four years older than her. Same birthday, same noses, same routine of he making up and convincing his little sister of tale tells, I would learn at a later date.

The floorboards creak beneath our sandaled feet, each creak like a bullhorn in this thunderous silence. Tanya just had to be a daredevil. *Let's go to the creepy house on Tenth Street like Thomas did, she had said. It'll be fun.* Never in my life did the definition of fun involve an abandoned house with cobwebs decorating every corner.

"Let's go upstairs. Maybe we'll find something cool!" Tanya whispers, her black hair shining like a raven's wing in the intruding moonlight.

"Those stairs look like they couldn't support a squirrel," I respond, watching her bounce up the stairs as if she is not prone to the laws of gravity.

"Great. Great, just great." I surrender, climbing the stairs much less gracefully, cringing at every groaning step.

Upstairs is a large alcove with a bay window overlooking what used to be a sprawling estate. Tanya stands

in the window now, her attention glued to the remnants of a garden. I go and stand beside her.

“Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?” she says in wonder.

The overgrown weeds, ground-ridden terraces, and cracked fountain do have a certain beauty to them, a sort of sad beauty. “Or sorrowful,” I add, to which Tanya nods.

“Sorrowful beauty,” she declares.

We are still admiring the view when arms wind around our waists and begin dragging us backward. Screams like coyotes tear out of us, rising up and up and echoing off of the spacious walls. We are being hauled toward the door, where I am just positive we will be killed and buried under those squeaky floorboards.

At the doorway, Tanya grabs ahold of the wall, fighting with all of her strength not to let go. I follow her lead, and we cling on for dear life. Eventually our captors drop us, and we go sailing to the floor. My knees hiss in protest at the connection. Tanya does not even give the pain a second thought before turning to face our assailants.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” she bursts, standing up and placing a hand on each hip.

“What?” I glance over my shoulder to find none other than Thomas and his best friend Brody. Upon recognition, they both begin laughing hysterically.

“Gotcha!” they shout in unison.

And though we both try to resist, Tanya and I find ourselves joining in on the laughter, laughing at our own naivety and false fear.

A torrent of happy remembrance floods through me. Then, curling edges. Frays in the seams.

Blank. My mind goes blank.

Lingering feelings of joy remain.

The Destructor begins playing another memory.

The inky night sky looms overhead, the moon full and the stars winking down at us. The ground beneath us is unforgiving, but at least the blanket is soft.

Chauncey’s arm is just grazing mine as we stare at the infinite space. Out of the hush comes a slight rustling sound, then a major rustling sound.

“You know, you’re going to die young from eating too much chocolate,” Chauncey teases, looking over at me as I pop a piece of chocolate bark into my mouth.

Savoring the flavor, it takes me a full minute to respond. “I couldn’t think of a better way to go.”

A shooting star ripples across the sky, a trail of glitter appearing and simultaneously vanishing in its wake. When I look over, Chauncey is staring at me, his ocean eyes mirroring the moon.

“I love you.”

I bolt upright, my neck cracking and my jaw unhinged. “You what?” I exclaim, my mind screaming rewind, redo, but I cannot stop this.

“I love you,” he repeats, the expression on his face flickering from sweet to hopeful to concerned, finally landing on painful realization.

“I-” the stutter drops off there. My lips move, shift, but I can hardly think, let alone form legible words.

Chauncey leans away from me. “Why can’t you say it?”

On my feet, walking, power walking toward the trees, toward the car, in circles, circles. Everything spins: the woods, the grass, my head, my heart.

“Come on, Shiri.” The thumps behind me indicate that he has followed me, but I cannot focus on the colors long enough to distinguish his form. His hands are on my shoulders. “God forbid you don’t see it, so it doesn’t exist. God forbid.” His raised voice somehow seems so faraway, on the other side of a rift, separated by a land of rain and hail.

He has let go of me now, but I can still feel the imprint of his hands on my skin. There are tears in my eyes.

“You’ll believe in oxygen but not in love.”

Chauncey stomps in the direction of our tent, and Tanya emerges from its folds, her eyes concerned and on me. I am frozen. I am a sculpture, a sculpture of ice in the middle of a star-riddled universe.

“Shiri?” Tanya’s voice pulls me out of the unknown, recentering me in a moment I would rather deny.

“I couldn’t say it.”

Tanya walks toward me, halting to put an arm around my shoulders. She leans her head against mine. “That doesn’t make you weak. That doesn’t make you cruel. I know you. He’s in your heart.”

A tear trails down my cheek as I lean against her. “I don’t know if that’s enough.”

The Destructor hovers at the edges but does not disintegrate the scene. It must not understand how I can treasure such a seemingly dreadful memory. After reliving the moment six times, the Destructor rips it apart from the outside in.

I am floating in a deserted galaxy, and I feel absolutely nothing.

The galaxy begins to swirl, and I open my eyes to the gray room going around and around and up and down. A clicking sound sends my gaze in its direction, straight toward the opening door.

A blaze of crimson enters, the shape possibly human, but it is impossible to tell through this sudden haze. By the time I distinguish that there are three figures, one dressed in the brightest red, they are coming toward me. Eventually, I can hear someone saying, “Shiri. Shiri! Come on, Shiri. Talk to me.”

My head rolls over to a second chair beside me. When did that get there? My vision momentarily clears to reveal a girl being pushed roughly into the seat. Long black tresses, a thin nose, high cheekbones. I do not know how I met her or why she chose to dye a single streak of her hair burgundy. I do not remember much about her, just that tingling at the back of my spine that she is important, familiar. There were walks, infinitely long conversations. I know they happened, even if there are no supporting details. But that, that is enough.

“Tanya?” I utter.

In response, she nods vigorously. “Yes. Don’t worry. They don’t have it.”

“Have what?” I ask, my brain searching through a limited memory bank.

“The soul machine. They don’t have the soul machine.”

Ten seconds later, Erikson returns. The next thing I know, he is punching me straight in the face, and all goes dark.

I wake up muttering the words “soul machine” on repeat, as if saying them multiple times will magically reveal their meaning. When I find myself conscious and back in the prison cell, Tanya is there as well, her fingers nimbly twisting something gray and dully shiny.

“What are you doing?” I question, examining what I realize to be some type of wire.

She smiles, actually smiles. “Remember how you used to complain how underwire is good for nothing and a torture device?”

“Yes...”

“Well, at least on the first count you were wrong. Get ready for a breakthrough, Shiri.”

I stare at the wire, then at the locked cell door, my mind churning. “You really think that’ll work?”

Tanya grins, one eyebrow hitched. “I’d bet on me. That and the old nail I keep in the secret compartment of my boot. We’ll wait till tonight.”

“If there’s anything left of me tonight,” I whisper, realizing that beyond my stint in this cell and that gray room, there is not much else. “Tanya... what does the soul machine do?”

She sighs, picking at her fingernails. “I thought you might ask that. I guess there is no reason to keep it from you now. It allows you to see into a person’s soul. It reveals their aura, their true intentions, as well as their secrets.”

“I don’t understand. Is it even possible to define a soul?”

“To some extent, yes. The auras showcase personalities, a huge part of a soul. The mirror on one side can play memories that are at the very core of who we are. In other words, your strengths, weaknesses, defining characteristics, secrets, all displayed in the moments that shaped us.” Noises in the hallway, passing and then receding. “I meant it as way for individuals to get in touch with their souls, find themselves, you know? We spend so much of our lives soul searching. I just wanted to save us some time.”

The possibilities of what a malicious being could do with such a device take shape before me. Power

hungry people like Erikson could use the device on influential people to expose their true selves, to seize control, to use their weaknesses and their trauma against them. Before long, nausea writhes in my stomach, forcing me to take deep, intent breaths. Throwing up is not an option.

Tanya seems light years away as she mumbles, "I just wanted to know who I am."

I have not looked in a mirror since I have been here, and with my brain minus its threads, I wonder who I have become. If only I could use the soul machine to reveal my true reflection. If only I knew.

Two young girls dressed in black. The sound of an organ in the background.

One casket. One drugged out mother, one absent mother.

An angry soul. A distraught soul.

"He was the good parent. It had to be him," Tanya says as she listens to the buzz of grieverers around us.

"It's always the good ones," I agree. Not days ago I had come home to an empty house, my mother's belongings gone, a note of apology and a bit of money on the kitchen table. Now with Tanya's father gone and her mother a shell of who she could be, I know Tanya feels as abandoned as I do.

Tanya and I sit alone in the right side of the sanctuary, a wooden bench unforgiving beneath us. She is fidgeting, her fingers constantly drumming a beat against the wood and her leg bobbing like a fishhook. I have never seen her fidget before.

I can tell what is about to come out of her mouth is important by the way she purses her lips first. "Shiri? Can you make me a promise?"

"Of course." My answer is instinctive.

"Promise me you won't leave. And that you won't spontaneously die if at all possible." She is looking at her wrist, where a bracelet dangles with the insignia of a lion. I gave that to her when we were seven and somehow at seventeen, it still fits. "Cause I can live without them," she motions to everyone in the room, including family members that have all but forgotten her existence, "but I can't live without you and our friendship." She groans, leaning her elbows on her knees. "God, I hate death. It makes me all soft."

I nudge her shoulder with mine. "Ditto. To the first part, ditto."

That night we gather our belongings and take off with our camping gear. We know we are not coming back. Lots of people moved to cabins and transitioned into more rustic lifestyles after the war that year, which drained our resources and made the simple life seem like an easy way to eek it out. Tanya and I become two of those people.

Walking along that night, our arms looped together, we happen upon an old friend of Tanya's named Chauncey, who joins our crew. But the moment that I fixate on, that I cannot move past, is the shooting star that darts across the sky, the first shooting star I have ever seen. Tanya, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye, says, "It's for you, to remind you to keep hope."

"Why isn't it reminding you to keep hope?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Because, I don't need a sign to tell me it can only go uphill from here. I'm Tanya freaking Anderson. If I can survive this, well, I can brave it all."

And I can tell she means it. I look at my trembling fingers, think about the dad I never had, the mother who left, the home I lack, and the money I am in need of, then I look right back at Tanya. My tremor gradually subsides.

My thoughts are on fire, flames eating away the words, the sights, the sounds.

Another thread of my being bared and devoured.

The snake hisses at us, his eyes fiery pits. The last time I saw Erikson this irate ended with me mourning the loss of a tooth.

"Where is it?" The guttural screech ricochets off the walls, bouncing about several times before dying.

I still cannot figure out why he believes I know where to find the machine. But here I am, strapped in a chair next to Tanya, whose head is lolling after her first few rounds with the Destructor.

"What exactly is your plan here?" I spit as he moves the Destructor over to me. My muscles involuntarily

ense, but I do not let on that fear has found me once again.

“You and Miss Tanya here seem so adamant on protecting one another. So I wonder what would happen if I took away that link, stripping away your friendship, creating a pair of desperate strangers.” Now I see why I am here. Mostly as bait. “Take away the love, leave behind the answers.”

My heart thunders, racing away as I struggle to control it. Despite every blank in my mind, Tanya has always remained.

Before I have time to contemplate further, the helmet is on my head, and the Destructor is creeping around a scene of Tanya and I dressed in our hunting attire. One by one I feel my mind forget. I feel myself clinging to leftover emotions of a life that is no longer mine.

No life is mine. What life?

There is blood on the seat, blood on the floor. Blood on the girl next to me. The gray walls, I see now, have streaks of brown, black, red. There is nothing plain about them.

I am looking over at a girl Erikson calls Tanya, who is wearing a rebellious expression as she stares down the deliverer of our nightmares. He wants me to forsake this girl, give him information that will deliver her death. But upon gazing at her, positive emotions bubble to the surface.

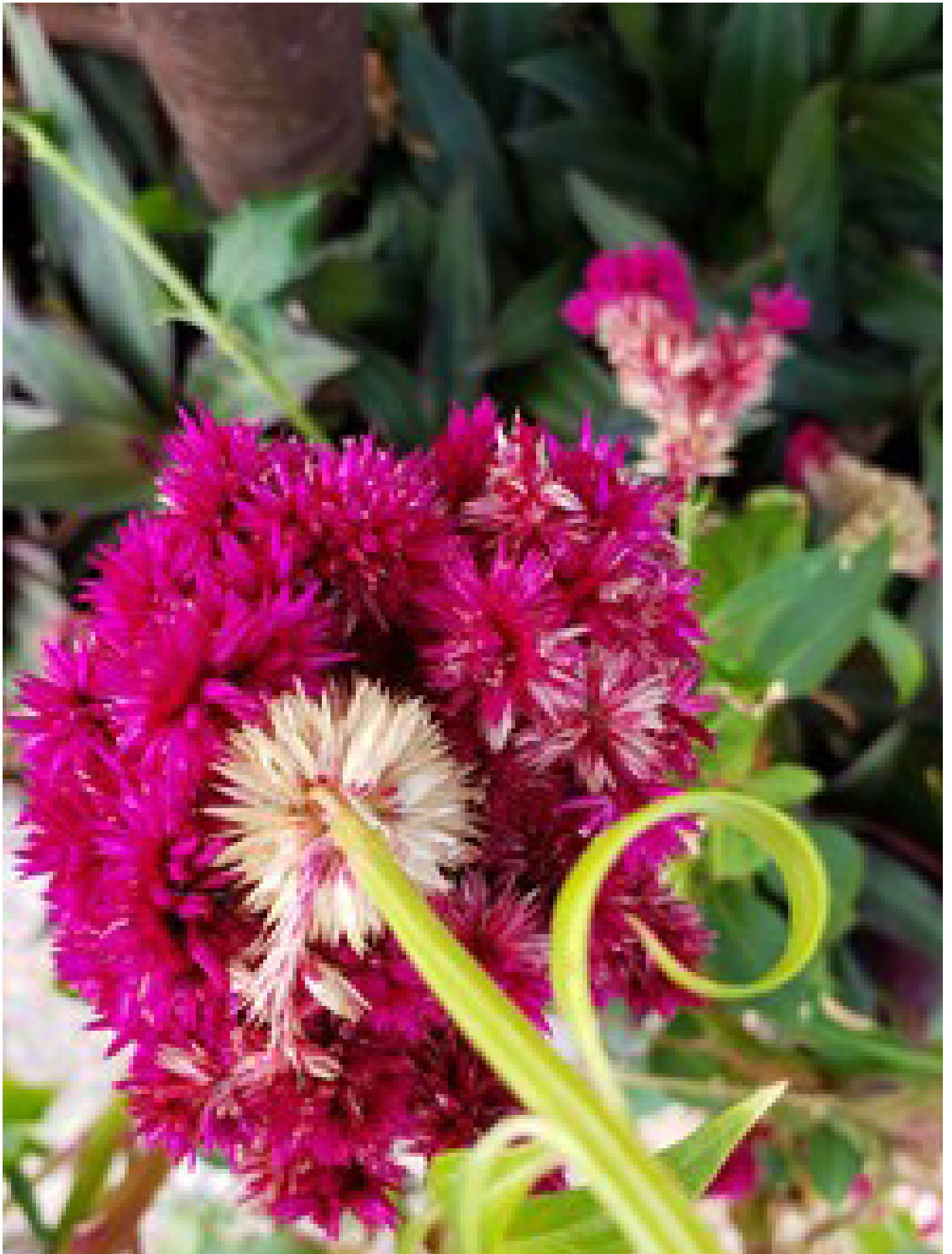
“I may not remember how I met you, our times together, or the struggles, but nothing can make me forget that you are my friend, that I love you,” I whisper.

And that is when it hits me. I do not need a device to light up auras, to shine me into the deepest recesses of someone’s soul. I see her soul now in the tears in her eyes, in the way she grips her hands together despite her bindings. And I know she must see me as well.

Glancing at the Destructor’s helmet now on the corner table and thinking of the wire and nail hidden skillfully in the blanket of my cell and Tanya’s boot, I take one long look at Erikson before smiling ruefully.

“Whenever you’re ready... bring it.”





Ode to the song that haunts my dreams ...

Eliot Claire

miraculous little firefly
of memory, flitting
through the sieve
of my punctured lungs;
I always move too
slowly to ever catch
the words, the melody
always teasing my tongue
and its muscle memory, lips
twitching in the badlands
between frustration and relief

mystical minuet from
highway to haunted streets
to the hollowed out neighborhoods
I once recognized;
I stumble so easily between
universes, the slip-knot
of time untangling too quickly
to stay all in one piece
or one story; the way I watch
my idle hands transform into
ravens with broken necks, still
spellbound by all those
secrets brewing beneath the
surface, unspoken

celestial serenade of cryptic
crescendo just out of reach
of my trembling
fingers; afraid as they
are eager for that sudden
dawn, the awakening
I know must come
once I can feel
that lost song make
a home within my bones;
after all, these dreams
each are wrought from
ancient monuments to nostalgia
stitched together in
some desultory timeline

delicate and ethereal,
this is how you must

hold memory: tender and earnest,
twisting and spiderwebbing from
second to second, how
tantalizing, how sacred and vital,
how mesmerizing and mad
this is how you must
remember: first, with the
open fist of your
diaphragm as eternal
expansion

how phantasmagoric
and fatal, how blithe,
how breakneck and bracing
to lose myself in
the universe that
envelops me
each time I drift to sleep

and that impenetrable
melody, leaving me
forever wanting,
forever aching for that
unreachable understanding,
for that sudden
surrender to dreams



Unbecoming ... Eliot Claire

I wanted my words
to be sacred, wanted
to use my rough
palms and blistered
fingertips, wanted
to leave behind
a single candle that I
could point to, to say

*yes, I am made
of darkness, but watch
how I ignite, l
ook at my
night and name any
reflection the moon*

we spit lies with rose
petals ground between
our teeth, the bitter
perfume just enough
to taint our words
pink, and the gnashing,
the gnawing, the glorified
pinning back of wings

*yes, I am unspeakable
with my lowered
noose, but look
at how the rope still dampens
with spring, look
at the universes
unfolding between
frayed fibers, look
how the earth
writes her own
name in each crevice*

I wanted to spark
an unbecoming,
how my own
lungs sense their
unraveling.

*yes, I praise holy
all of the gods that
I have been, hemmed
in and pinned back.*

*yes, now we praise
holy what we know
to be the unpinning,
that glorified
surrender
that sacred
release*

Letting Go ... Simon Maddrell

Rucksacks. Parachutes.
Paper ideas matched.
Knotted stories fired.
Ill-hanging shiny suits.

Handshakes. Kisses.
Hard beliefs softly held.
Flamed lips scorched choices.
Rippled echoes burnt.

Falling. Sprouting.
Brown leaf thoughts torched.
Chestnut truths blazed.
Youth spluttered defiance.

Bonfire of futilities. A
shen vulture seared flesh.

Pistols, Stamens, and Spikes ... Hokis

“The only way to hug the cactus.”
Her inebriated lips casually spill
over the lap of IT.

“I guess this means you must hug me.”
IT speaks.

“With each puncture, you will learn to breathe.
My intent is not to hurt you,”
IT/s tell/s.

{I am certain IT seeks to not collapse into breath}

She hears IT’s stories,
the eyes for interconnections.

{I don’t trust your sense-is-able}

The wisdom in her pained-past stories are quieted.
If woken, they could speak
through her artist-hand:

It all matters - even the nothing.
OH! Especially the nothing.
Each structure of nothing, love
keeps the everything cactus alive.
The patterns repeat from core to sky.
Making love.

{Please, only if you feel truly safe}

Without the hooked central spine,
She would not see inside.
Without the unusual flattened spine,
her soul loving hands would not touch.
Without the varied spine,
she could not open to needed lessons.

Even the cactus
requires roots.
A single burly taproot.
Tendrilly, independent spine roots.

*{Remember, the rare adventitious roots ought to be reserved for those few
who receive your heart’s naked love}*

Fucking a cactus,
is a demonstration in the streets.
Soon forgotten, in the noise of the noise.
Loving a cactus,
THAT is a lollapalooza.
Leaving remains,
sticky love-soaked memories.

Propelling us forward.

Pereskia flowers open to the sun.

{Turn towards your doubtful desert-rain's whisper:

“Are the words ‘fucking’ and ‘love’ reversed for IT?”}

There is more to a desert earth flower,
than the point in which the spike enters her skin.

The structure of nature,
mimics throughout

the everything of the nothing.

{This rising ancestor, again, speaks:

there is no everything, in this form's nothing}





The Artists ...

Sean William Dever is a Boston-based poet, educator, and editor with a MFA in Creative Writing with a focus in Poetry from Emerson College. He teaches College Writing at Emerson College and Poetry at Boston Architectural College. In addition, he also works as a Professional ESL Tutor at Northeastern University. He has recently been published or is forthcoming from HOOT, Stickers, Unearthed Literary Magazine, Coffin Bell Journal, and Fearsome Critters Literary Magazine among others. Sean is the Poetry Editor of Coffin Bell Journal and the author of the chapbook, *I've Been Cancelling Appointments with My Psychiatrist for Two Years Now* published by Swimming with Elephants Publications.

Elizabeth Kirschner is a writer and Master Gardener who has published six volumes of poetry and an award-winning memoir, *WAKING THE BONES*. *CRY THE VIOLET HOUR* is from her short story collection, *EVEN THE DEAD SUFFER BUTTER*. She lives in Maine.

Esteban Cajigas is a writer who recently moved to New York City, and he recently received an MFA in creative writing from Antioch University. He writes from the place of a first-generation Hispanic immigrant trying to give his culture a voice, and his poetry and journalism has appeared in publications such as *The Boston Globe* and *Foliate Oak Magazine*.

Parker G. Jamieson is a poet from Woodlawn, NY. They love to bask in humanity, and as well they love the anthropomorphic fable of human life. They go to college at the University @ Buffalo for English and Philosophy. They hope you enjoyed reading their work.

From a small town in eastern Arkansas, Chloe Morris currently lives in Indianapolis, where she is earning her MFA in Creative Writing-fiction at Butler University. She received her Bachelor's in English with a Creative Writing Specialization from Southern Methodist University. Her poetry has been published in *Turnpike Magazine*. Some of her passions include fantasy/science fiction, mythology, medieval studies, and songwriting.

Eliot Claire is a nonbinary South Florida native who works as a Crisis and Domestic Violence Counselor in Chicago. They studied poetry at the University of Miami under Maureen Seaton and John Murillo. Their work can be seen in *Mad Hat Literary Magazine*, *Verity La*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *The Cape Rock*, and others.

Simon Maddrell, born in Douglas, Isle of Man in 1965 was brought up in Bolton, Lancashire. Living in London for 20 years he moved to Brighton, UK in 2020.

Simon explores existence through the lens of living as a queer Manx man, thriving with HIV.

His debut chapbook, *Throat Bone*, is published by UnCollected Press in June 2020

Hokis is an American poet of Armenian descent. As a writer and Senior Editor of *Headline Poetry & Press*, she works to amplify under/misrepresented voices. Her upcoming collection "*OnBecoming*" is a poetic memoir detailing her rise from personal and political trauma. Creative nonfiction as foreshadowing preface, and other published works, found on hokis.blog.

