



# *The Ram's Tale*

2012



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Fresno City College  
1101 East University Avenue  
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**Tony Cantu**

President, Fresno City College

**Kelly Fowler**

Interim Vice President of Instruction, Fresno City College

**Jennifer Johnson**

Dean of Instruction, Humanities, Fresno City College

**Richard Harrison**

Manager, Print, Media & Communications, Fresno City College

**Ben Lozano**

Graphic Artist, Fresno City College

**Jennifer Franklin**

Website/submissions Manager, Fresno City College

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# Editorial Staff and Judges

## **Managing Editors**

Margaret Hiebert

Michelle Patton

## **Fiction Editor**

Nigel Medhurst

## **Visual Arts Judges**

Robyn Bates

Bob Kizziar

Anne Scheid

Nicholas Spohrer

Kathy Wosika

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# Poetry

*Poetry is not an expression of the party line. It's that time of night,  
lying in bed, thinking what you really think,  
making the private world public,  
that's what the poet does.*

— Allen Ginsberg





## *i am a sixth sun xicana*

Mia Barraza Martinez

### **First Place**

i am a sixth sun xicana  
with a hip hop lisp and a farmworker's limp  
a woman's hips and my father's frown  
weak arms and a good fist  
my mother's hands and your brown eyes  
dirty feet and clean bed sheets  
my breasts shine neon  
and my teeth are falling out one by one

i've worn smoke as earrings and as thin bracelets  
i've gotten drunk and paper cut off of glossy magazine pages  
i've marched in the streets for peace  
i've said no to love and swallowed my words and licked the plate clean  
i found the rabbit in the moon  
but i'm still searching for the eagle and the serpent  
i want to jump head first  
but keep feeling with my toes  
my dna speaks to your dna but we can't hear the cosmic conversation  
sometimes i am convinced of my own magic  
but i can only levitate in dreams  
when no one else can see

i've devoured pesticidal grapes  
and hidden my family behind my heart

i've used so much ink on men  
and eaten so much of white america's toxic dinners  
and was the last one dancing  
and was the only one listening  
and the only one saying good morning to the tree outside my window

i burn sage to get clean

i don't forget the disappeared  
and don't forgive dictators or war criminals or killer cops

i am history's leftovers and i'm crawling to the new sun  
to burn off the veil blinding the eyes of my heart  
which are my eyes

## *tagging clovis*

Mia Barraza Martinez

we tagged clovis  
now clovis is it.

mauro showed us how to turn our jackets inside out.  
how to roll a can, not shake it, if you don't want to be heard.  
we did drive-by's  
pulling up at stop signs.  
stop war.  
stop hate.  
stop stupid.  
watched for cars, open windows, clovis pigs.  
but it was mauro who put in real work.  
solo bombing the budweiser billboard.  
he got blisters but didn't break anything.  
we burned in our shoulders and toes for some kind of justice.  
creating and destroying. smelling like fumes in dulce's van.  
we swung words like dope and hella and fuck yeah.  
too old for this. too old for words sprayed in red. permanent read.  
words that mean what they say like we mean what we say.  
like FREEDOM

## *NEW XICHAN@LUV*

Mia Barraza Martinez

the old love ain't working for us;  
cramping my style, if anything.  
telling me NO, don't do this  
telling me biology is set in cosmic stone  
telling me you and me are an abstraction  
and that reality is diamond ring handshakes and slumber parties are  
for young girls

the old love ain't workin for me;  
not while i'm workin it for you  
and we can't be questioning each other all the time.  
the answers you can find at the corner of my lip if you bite down.  
i can smell in the fold of your ear.  
can't be questioning when the answers are sliding wet  
under your fingers and slipping like secrets from my breath

not while you're workin it for me;  
sweat beads crowd your forehead and trying to drip down to touch my  
breasts  
the way your mouth does

## ***NEW XICANA LOVE***

Mia Barraza Martinez

the old love ain't working for us, two women like us; i eye you in the  
mirror; you say shadow here, contour here, sparkle here...i sit on the  
toilet seat and touch my curly hair; i barely sparkle, rarely shine; hug  
my thrift store 80's jacket; look at my boots, new, christmas swag and i  
see the curves of your body and can feel mine  
    and i see the glow, sun, of your shoulders  
    i see the glow, moon, of my thighs  
    i stand behind you, us in the mirror  
women, we say. vagina, we say.  
vagina, vagina, vagina.  
who do we think we are? we laugh, heads thrown back, her dark hair a  
cascade like silk to her ass, my dark hair a riot of curls reaching for the  
stars.

# *four movements: the fifth is yet to be written, let's write it*

Mia Barraza Martinez

## **Honorable Mention**

### **I.**

i want to stop hurting my mother  
la tierra, this earth  
who cradled my mother  
when she cradled me in the ocean of her womb  
my mother who, covered in dust and pesticides,  
says to me as she washes her hands to eat  
“el agua es lo mas bonito que nos ha dado d'íos”  
and in kettleman and lenaire  
you just don't drink from the tap

### **II.**

are we so different?  
you are afraid  
and i am afraid  
my pores suck in the same thick valley air  
that your pores are breathing  
our nostril hair sways in the same rhythm  
don't you see that you are me?  
and can't you see who we could be together?

can't we see each other the way we see each other  
when we kiss each other?  
(eyes closed and feeling everything?)

this is a call to arms  
arms that link together  
that wrap around shoulders shaking with sobs

### **III.**

we are too late  
the earth is dying  
our sisters enslaved to a paycheck  
our brothers shot dead on mckinley avenue

#### IV.

my poems all sound the same now  
same syllables, same consonants  
same sssssound

sssssolidarity  
a whisper in the darkness of your ear canal

sssssstruggle against  
police pepper spray  
against las manos rojas de sangre  
against u.s. customs agents who touch me and dig in my pockets  
until i am nauseous with disgust

sssssstruggle against paychecks disintegration into dust  
our flesh turned to teflon  
i am scared too  
won't you join me?

# *a time when we bled blood*

Mia Barraza Martinez

1

beneath fresno p.d. white sheet slides  
high fructose corn syrup and food coloring (red 40 lake, yellow 6 lake,  
yellow 6, yellow 5)  
seeps across the sidewalk  
little brown girl with oaxacan eyes watches death  
as it creeps toward her dora the explorer sneakers  
with no recollection of a time  
when we once bled blood.

2

we hit liq.'s, bust back, and scream into open gutters.  
spread our legs across car hoods  
for bus passes and egg mcmuffins.  
hide in our own ear canals and watch our knuckle-hair growth  
on youtube videos from a telescope.  
we drink from liquor puddles in back streets  
and paint red clown smiles across our noses.  
we don't call love anything but bad timing  
and back away slowly.

3

we face each other  
naked in your bed, room, house  
and i teach your hands how to run like water  
over my breasts.

we undress next to each other  
your bra full and running over  
my bra neat and quiet  
our panties laced  
and we giggle at the history of lies in our reflections.

in the street you drop a quarter  
and i place it in your palm



and we look at each other in the face  
see there are lashes and mouths and freckles and wrinkles  
realize you are me, me is you  
walk away with smiles and nods and thank-yous and beauty

# *Our Grand Canyon*

Red Wilson

## **Second Place**

Dad didn't hug me  
he whooshed past me through the kitchen  
without noticing that it was the first  
time today we've seen each other

and the ouch  
of a hundred other mornings just like it  
echoed in the unbridged  
distance between us

this time I walk to the very edge,  
throw my voice like a bundle  
of rope to the other side  
of the dining room  
where he sits

he interrupts his silence and starts  
to list off:  
all the  
things he  
needs to  
get  
done

Dad, I am standing on the other  
side of our Grand Canyon  
throwing you a rope  
praying that you catch it,  
that you tie it on  
to the part of you that woke up  
when I was born, with the sure hands  
that cut the stubborn umbilical cord  
coiled around your new baby's  
bluing neck

Dad, I need you  
to look at me long enough to catch  
the end of my rope  
and then tie it on  
tight with one of those boy scout knots  
that Papa, your dad, taught you  
that you taught both my brothers  
that you never taught me

Show me  
that I'm not the only one of us  
trying to connect

# *Dearest Cockroach*

Red Wilson

skilled monster  
you scatter masses  
by the mere appearance  
of an ungodly antenna

your power to startle  
rivals the green Godzilla!  
but you pour it  
from a jagged brown bottle  
of inverted stature

what the lizard did to buildings  
you do to entire restaurants  
with dangerously tiny tentacles signaling  
Sayonara

oh terrible shelled surprise!  
imagining your cocked head  
sticking out from a spoonful  
is enough to--

unholy rendezvous  
to spot you on the tile floor  
your six sticky legs about to carry you  
too quickly too close

or worse! to lose sight of your glazed back,  
the teeming legs--  
crawling Houdini, are you creeping  
under the counter or burrowing  
into the cupboards

or worse! sneaking over my sandal  
to stage the sudden  
--prickle--

the latching on of something  
six-legged and smarmy  
scaling bare skin--

I'd rather you be burrowing into  
the cupboards, seeking sugary, veiled sanctuary  
inside a bag of cereal  
ready to ruin Cocoa Puffs for me forever  
in the morning

but, formidable phobia  
if you fear becoming the bulls-eye for my foot  
scurry away assured  
I would not go for that satisfying crunch  
but rather sprint to escape  
the alienating stomach's churning  
you effortlessly stir

to Fear Factor I wager--  
not one figure of civility  
basic instinct's divorcee  
not a calm Obama, unattached Dalai Lama,  
or interested entomologist

while scanning the bathroom floor  
could notice a suspicious black outline  
and then notice another  
and another  
and another--  
and not run shrieking  
mid-pee, half-naked  
out the door

leeches maggots cockroaches all  
shock humankind from Muffet's pedestal  
for this I applaud--  
bravo

# *Ear Drum*

Red Wilson

When I finally go deaf, my drum hide  
will catch its last buzz,

then I, like a spider, will wrap the sound  
and spin it on loop in my record-player head,

to soothe me as my  
cochlear spirals sputter,  
my canal hairs split,

and my precious membrane tears like a web.  
When my drum skin finally shreds,

it will no longer sing out, won't be pounded slapped or  
galloped upon by earth's rhythms, but

I will make my organs into a drum-set, I will still  
feel the heel-toe of hands on my inner  
congas, Oye como va, ba ba

mi ritmo. Listen, when the creature curled inside my drum  
shell finally dies, I hope it crumbles into sand

so I can shake my new maraca  
head, No, the music does not  
end.

# *Boundaries*

Isaac Weil

## **Third Place**

I reach out a hand to touch the maple leaf, and I see light dotting my fingers, but with my stomach suddenly full of breath the leaf retreats. I grab the rope above my head instead, the backyard stopping still into my father's hands. (Why do I call him father; he has always been dad.) I see mom in overalls and a ponytail, bright in sunlight and heat, bending over the pond by the fence, stacking the turtles that live there. And I feel his strength again. He pushes me and I swing in my harness, straining the rope attached to the branch above, the sound of its twisting, and I feel heavy and weightless in a moment. My father sings a song I can never remember.

Steven, the father, smiled. His round face, his dying hair (the patch of skin at the back of his head becoming barren), his large square glasses, his dark slab of nose, eased, relaxed from the tightness common to their experience; he ordinarily held his face tensed and wrinkled. That day, he pushed his son in a homemade swing and sang. The swing was a tie-dyed cloth, looped around the legs of Isaac, the toddler, like a harness, its ends tied to a rope, the rope attached to a branch overhead. It was summer. Fresno was hot. Roni, the mother, slung a net full of muck from the turtle pond, a concrete oval filled with muddy water. Her muscles were comfortable with the motion, trained from years of hauling buckets of slippery trout for California Fish and Game. Isaac laughed as he swung high, and at the apex of his swing he stretched out his hand to snag a maple leaf. But gravity held it just out of reach. Steven swung him a last time and then stopped the swing's motion. He stopped his own singing. His mouth a tight bundle, he walked into the house and washed his hands in a porcelain sink till they bled.



# *Prayer*

Isaac Weil

Let the rain burst upon the roof, let it seep into dreams, let the wind sweep the landscape into barren concrete, a bare foot clinging to wet ground, let the rain reduce to droplets on the awning lip in bare light, let it simplify, bead to transparent simplicity, let the droplets fall in rhythm, contemplative, in their considered time, let them softly hollow pebbles, let the rain snap the bare light through an open window, the opera flutter of a cat's tail against a leg, let the rain crinkle, let it not distract, let it gather in stillness on the asphalt, let it remodel the world in droplets, let it still, let it distill, let it instill, let it be still.

## *Ice Cube Me*

Lyle Nelson

Hot onion rings burn my tongue,  
like your words always burn my soul.  
I am ice and you  
melt me, you bitch. I want cold.  
I like it that way. I don't want you  
near me. Nothingness  
feels good.

I never asked for your warm touch,  
but you give it freely.  
I am not worthy of it or any.  
You are like onion, layer  
upon layer of compassion.  
Who needs it! Leave me alone in my  
own cold, empty room.  
no more fire, heat,  
to warm my soul.

# *Between Walls*

Jennifer Soria

What ghosts glide through  
these sleeping walls on Linden?  
Ghosts of our mothers' fear,  
our fathers' never good enough.  
You and me, refusing it all amid dreams,  
languid breath dancing intertwined, then  
slowly, what light! Tiptoeing, grey, cool,  
cascades over lover's shapes under  
          blankets atop blankets  
knitted by hands that are now the earth.  
The kitten in the wooden box on my dresser,  
transformed to ashes and  
          missing you,  
purrs among the scent of roses and amber,  
perfume bottles laced with dead skin.  
A promise alive in a grandmother's  
abandoned wedding ring whispers  
I still love you, in the 3 a.m. hush of winter.  
A crumpled sock here, your favorite jeans  
live on the back of the saffron chair  
that has felt how many years  
of woolen sweaters.

          Nearby, your guitar in its straw hat  
serenades the empty suitcase longing to be filled,  
longing for the blast of a train horn,  
the blur of naked ash trees,  
pockmarked road signs and  
          so much orange sky.

## *Make-Believe Season*

Jennifer Soria

Age eight summer: an assault of the senses.  
Speeding down water slides on bare butts,  
tiny playhouses and bloody pomegranates,  
ruby seeds popping fresh in our mouths amid fences.  
Jolly Ranchers, Tootsie Pops, to us the mini-mart man dispenses,  
all freckles and sunlight, scraped elbows, crimson cuts,  
we owned the world, you've never seen such struts!  
Big talk and Big Wheels, knowing nothing of defenses.  
    Golden skin on burning pavement between giggling fits to  
the pool,  
on land we are Smurfette and Rainbow Bright,  
underwater, glittering mermaids, upside down we deftly spun,  
crowns of coral and pearl, endless swirling hair and no thoughts of  
school.  
Pearly shells to cover budding breasts long into the night,  
only wishing to be grown-ups, we never get to do anything fun!

## *On the trade winds*

Alfred Erickson

Suppose a humid, tropic breath  
could bloom a flower in your hand,  
any injured, withered blossom  
stained with sticky passion.

Suppose the same hot, sultry breeze  
that blew when you slipped,  
wet, from your mama's womb  
was the end of all violence on Earth.

Suppose the acrid vacuum of the moon  
was a luscious garden of delight  
and trees grew pink and yellow sherbet sundaes  
instead of fruit

and when we put a record on the stereo  
vivid rainbows poured from the speakers  
instead of music  
and suppose that there was peace  
and unicorns  
and suppose  
(god-dammit)  
that you loved me

## *I'd Rather Be Raped by a Woman*

Emily McKay Johnson

my breathing intact, I walked slowly with a bedroll in my hands  
and the deputy guided me to cell number eight, in the corner  
where I would fight tears after unrolling my pack.

a single gray blanket with holes,  
a single cream colored sheet for my mat,  
a single white towel for the shower I dared not take  
but rolled over my eyes

to stain with mascara,  
to soften the blow of oxygen on my capillaries  
they might very well have needed a break.

a single cup and a spoon for my food,  
a single generic toothpaste,  
a single generic toothbrush,  
a single generic black comb,  
this is the ordinance for all  
and for those who often call this home.

the toilet seats had no screws,  
they were a molded piece of steel or iron or titanium  
and I wonder where they were made.  
the bunk beds were blue and soldered together,  
there were no screws in them either.

The noises were loud.  
Because everything is heavy.  
And industrial.  
And manicured so clean.

the women however are nosy and strange,  
yet how can I be so prudish and judgmental  
with my being the same?  
the stories inside are not soldered together  
and the screws that bind them together come undone.  
the people that sleep hear the hum of stark white light above,  
here they breathe in the smell of carbon in the air  
and instinctively ruffle their feathers when the doors are clicked open.

## *red weed whacker*

Gloria Nazzaretta

so much depends on  
a weed whacker  
sitting in a haze  
by the garden full of  
sticks  
and spring weeds.



## *moon's hammock*

Gloria Nazzaretta

I swing, catch  
my breath on the North Star,  
between Joshua Trees,  
in the moon's hammock.

colossal.  
twilight's brilliant  
monument, spacious,  
alone.

almost touching, magnified horizon,  
bigger than my neighborhood.  
Southwest's Yucca Valley twilight,  
opaque half-moon,  
lingering embrace.

this evening,  
remembering,  
I steal away,  
to feel the moon's  
breath,  
brimming desert night.

sprawled close enough to climb,  
golden caramel,  
slung heavy, as dusk collects  
over highway 62,

life's tremulous reminder to  
keep a light grasp on feelings,  
intricate,  
yet  
embedded deep.



# *Two-Dimensional Art*

*Life beats down and crushes the soul and  
art reminds you that you have one.*

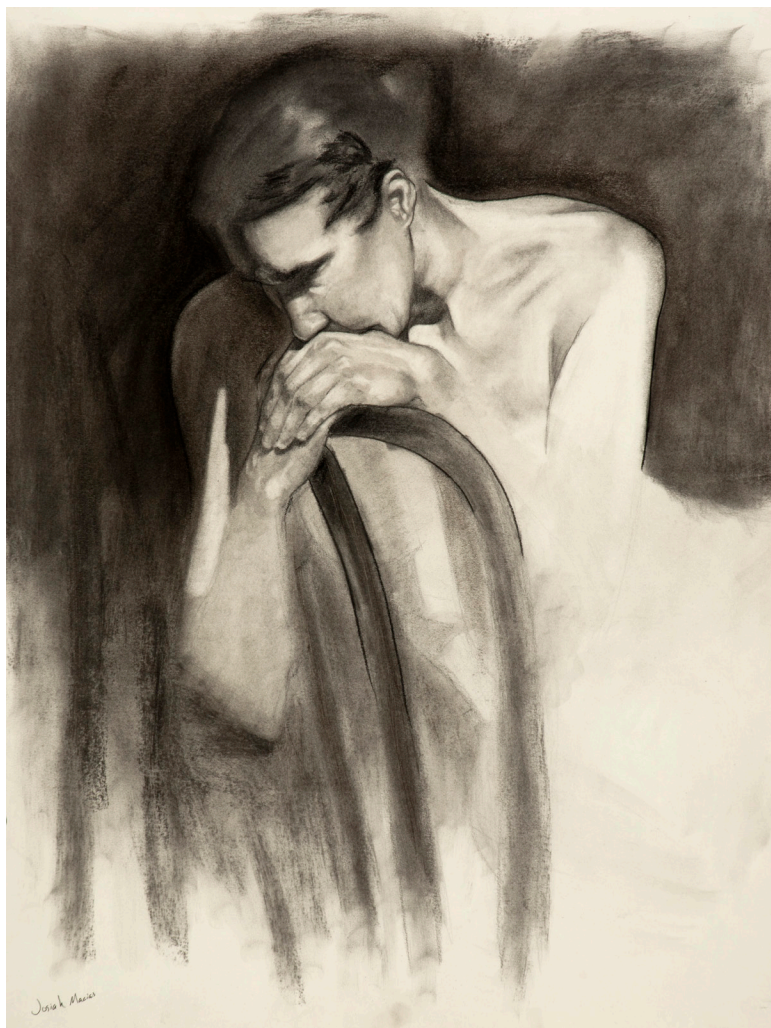
—Stella Adler





*Seated Sophie*

Michael Dominguez  
**First Place**



## *Sorrow*

Josiah Macias  
**Second Place**



## *Cloaked Croakers*

Danielle Mayer  
Third Place





## *Emma Smokes*

Michael Dominguez  
**Honorable Mention**





## *Growing Pains*

Katrice Marroquin  
**Honorable Mention**



*Inside Inn*

Daniel Paz

**Honorable Mention**



## *My Childhood II*

Sansanee Boonyad  
**Honorable Mention**





## *Olivia*

Andreyana Cazares  
**Honorable Mention**



## *Placid Euphoria*

Alex Otero  
**Honorable Mention**

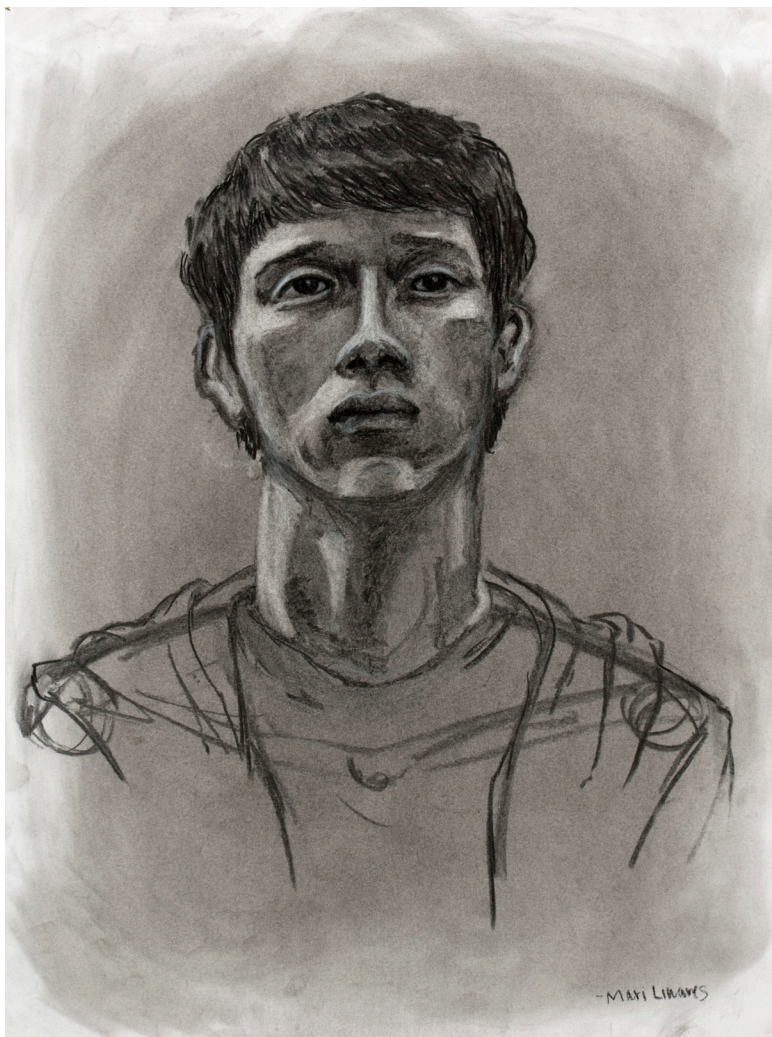


## *Pondering*

John Weins

**Honorable Mention**





## *Portrait*

Mari Linares  
**Honorable Mention**



## *Pondering*

John Weins

**Honorable Mention**





## *The Star*

Sansanee Boonyad  
**Honorable Mention**



## *Tou*

Emily Liang  
**Honorable Mention**







## *Virginia*

Brian Hawkins

**Honorable Mention**

# *Photography*

*No place is boring, if you've had a good night's sleep and  
have a pocket full of unexposed film.*

—Robert Adams





## *Twilight Carnival*

Jesse Merrell  
**First Place**



## *Water Angel*

Travis Rockett  
**Second Place**





## *Library View*

Jesse Merrell  
**Honorable Mention**



## *Perspective*

Jesse Merrell

**Honorable Mention**

# *Creative Non-fiction*

*We write to taste life twice.*

— Anais Nin

# OCD Waltz

Isaac Weil

Reading *Super Sad True Love Story*, I ran into a passage I didn't understand to my satisfaction:

When we were walking home, our stomachs filled with garlic and chili, the summer heat without and the pepper heat within covering our bodies with a lovely sheen, I started to ponder what Eunice had said. It was sad, according to her, that the Asian man did not have a wife or girlfriend to tell him not to drink Coca-cola. A grown man had to be *told* how to behave. He needed the presence of a girlfriend or wife to curb his basest instincts. What monstrous disregard for individuality! As if all of us didn't lust, on occasion, for a drop of artificially sweetened liquid to fall upon our tongues.

But then I started thinking about it from Eunice's point of view. The family was eternal. The bonds of kinship could never be broken. You watched out for others of your kind and they watched out for you. Perhaps it was *I* who had been remiss, in not caring enough for Eunice, in not correcting her when she ordered garlicky sweet-potato fries or drank a milkshake without the requisite vitamin boost. Wasn't it just yesterday, after I had commented on our age difference, that she had said, quite seriously, "You can't die before me, Lenny." And then, after a moment's consideration: "Please promise me that you'll always take of yourself, even when I'm not around to tell you what to do" (Shteyngart 166-167).

So I took off my clothes, to better feel the air conditioner on my back and butt, and to free myself of the coarse fabric, which sometimes drew an itching, burning blush across my skin, and stood, holding *Super Sad* open in my left hand, my right fingering the page, head down, skin hot and naked in the light, ponderous next to my father's old upright piano, trying to figure out, precisely, what it could all mean.

Eunice was asking Lenny literally to live for her, to stay alive for her. This was his obligation: to take care of himself, for her sake. And now,

staring at the uneven keys of the piano, I thought of my parents. My mother always on my Dad about his weight, guilted him for eating that hefty French dip at La Boulangerie or for ordering a Starbucks' whole cream latte, all in the effort to diminish his almost perfectly round belly, which he nicknamed "the hemisphere," or "hemi" for short.<sup>1</sup>

And even more fundamental, their eternal argument, Dad's OCD. My mom incessant: he must try to get a handle on it, the stress will give him a heart attack, it's ruining our marriage, his life, our friendship, he's becoming abusive, dysfunctional, he can't even leave our house without us attending to him. And, of course, always *the question*. The question that germinates in the most selfish and selfless part of ourselves (which I imagine resides somewhere at esophagus' end); the one that spreads tension across the chest and plucks, as if a cord, at our breathing; the question I knew my mother had asked herself because I had asked myself: Why, if he loves me, won't he make the effort to control it?

I thought of recent incidents, long after my Dad had moved into his own house a few blocks down the street. I thought of his frequent visits to my house (which I think he still considers his home), and how the night would end.

Always the same ritual.

First, the hour-long stare at the stove, body poised at the head of the kitchen as far away as possible from the shiny black knobs that govern the gas flow to the burners. His arms held carefully away from his body, wrinkles forming just above his nose lifting the bridge of his glasses, he would watch the knobs like a goose watches a fox, ever ready for flight. This desperate vigilance to prevent the cooking gas asphyxiating me and my mother in our sleep.

Then, a long motionless *listen* to assure himself that the air-conditioning had been turned off; the noise might keep awake the neighbors; who knows, one of them could be a surgeon and slaughter his patient on the table the next day due to lack of sleep.

And next, his caress of our sleek Apple airport, to certify that it was, indeed, free of printer paper; the damn thing got so hot it might just burst the 8 ½ by 11 kindle aflame, and then the whole house would go up.

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1 Incidentally, it is very risky quoting one of your favorite novels in your own creative piece. The pressure to perform. Your own work never lives up to the work of those you admire.

Either my mother or myself would escort him out the front door. I let him out most nights, as I felt myself the necessary cushion that allowed my father and mother to remain so close. But on rare nights, often winter nights, I would say, “No mom, you do it. I’m tired. I always do it. You do it for once.” And alone in my bedroom I would shake my tie-dyed comforter, spread the feathers, clinging in a thick roll at one end, evenly beneath the cloth, hoist myself onto my ridiculously tall bed, wrap the feathers and sheets around me, and curl up righteously on my stomach. I would hear them hug, exchange a voiced “Love,” the hinges swing and the door thud. Then my dad would check that the door had been locked.

*Clunk, clunk, clunk. Clunk, clunk, clunk.* The unsatisfying waltz he tugged from the handle, the heavy oak door straining against its frame, and the vital winter air, which I knew remained in the foyer after his exit, amassing its chill across the slate tile floor.

Pull, pull, pull. *Clunk, clunk, clunk.* In all my memory this waltz never achieved its final cadence. “I can’t take it anymore,” would cut it short, my mother shouting in exasperation, a little wild with concern, and a thimble of hostility prodding her voice into wavering. “OK OK I’ll go home,” he would say through the door, through the cold. And the beat would cease before its end. Dad would drift off the porch to linger in front of my bedroom window. I could divine his bulk through the screen: wisps of hair waving from his head, his shoulders broad with worry, his pants tucked into his socks, and his stomach, his hemi, bulging taught and circular. He would stand alert and silent, a dark eminence against the pine trees, growing in our dark and silent soil.<sup>2</sup> He would stand against the spicy wood exhaust flowing from the next-door chimney, and against the security light affixed to the garage across the street. Thumbing my ipod, I would pause the playback of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* or *All Creatures Great and Small* (the British accent always a reliable anesthesia), and twisting my elbow into the sheets, resting my head on my palm, I would say, “Dad?”

A breath.

Then, “Yes?”

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2 My mother, the lover of nature she is, had replicated California’s coniferous forests in our suburban front yard: wood chips, pine trees and granite rocks, obstinate in the face of the lawns and palms of our neighbors.

The situation, this sixty-year-old man lurking in the yard outside my bedroom, I would laugh.

“What?” Dad would say. And his chuckle would be rendered as precisely as right angles on drafting paper.

“Go home Dad. You need to sleep.”

Then, after three and a half heartbeats, “OK, OK.”

“Dad, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’m really busy tomorrow. I have a meeting with the lawyers in the afternoon.”

“How about coffee in the morning?”

“Yeah...yeah that should be OK. Just don’t call me too early. I won’t be able to sleep if I think you might call and wake me up”

“I won’t call. How’s ten sound?”

“Ten’s good. Right. OK. Ten. At Starbucks.”

“Yeah.”

“OK. Good. Ten O’clock.”

“Yeah.”

“At Starbucks.”

“Yes.”

“Ten O’clock.”

“Go home dad.”

“OK OK OK. Front door locked?”

“Yes.”

“Phone on the hook?”

“Dad, you need to sleep.”

“OK. OK. You’re right...It’s just I don’t want the cats lying next to it on couch and getting cancer.”

“Good night.”

“You’re right, you’re right. Good night...Love.”

“Love.”

I wouldn’t tap the play button again until I could hear his engine, see his taillights glow like a red UFO through my window. Then I would turn my face to my pillow, the familiar smell of sweat in the heat of my blanket, and sleep.

# *No Country for Nomads*

Carlos Corona

I was seven years old when my mother finally got the money together so that I could join her, my brother, and my sister in the United States. My mom had asked my grandma to take me to Tijuana, where my uncle would join us to take me on my journey across the border. My grandma hated to see me go; she had raised me ever since I was six months old. She did not agree with my mother's decision but knew I would have a much better life if I went. "Doña Chuy," as my grandma was called by every kid within two blocks, relented to my mother's wishes and prepared me for the trip.

My grandma and I boarded an old blue bus with a white rabbit painted on the side. The bus was almost full, and only a few, empty side-by-side seats remained. The seats were old and tattered. They smelled musky and looked uncomfortable but the rest did not seem to fare any better. We took the first ones we saw. My grandma filled the aisle seat and shielded me from the barrage of elbows as everyone crammed the bus. The diesel engine soon roared through the snaking road, and within minutes it had rocked me to sleep.

By morning we had arrived at the station. A big sign read: "Central Camionera, Tijuana, B.C." I grabbed my belongings; they weren't much. Everything fit snugly in a small grocery bag. Inside the bag were: a set of extra clothes, a water bottle, and two cold burritos wrapped in napkins, nothing else. My nubuck sandals, with tire tread soles, had been left behind. In their place was a pair of white, knockoff Nikes that grandma had bought me at the *Mercado*. "They'll make you run faster," my grandma told me. "Para que le ganes a la migra," she added, so you can outrun I.N.S.

After a quick breakfast, mixed with hugs and kisses, I was handed over to my uncle. I cried my eyes out as I waved goodbye to my grandma. Although I could not see her face as she boarded the bus, I knew she was doing the same. My uncle simply told me to man up, "aguantese como los hombres," he would say. Night quickly came, and when it did, we were on the move. Before I knew it, I found myself quietly crossing the border atop my uncle's shoulders. It was eerily dark, but we managed to stagger our way down the banks of a canal. This small body of dirty water was the only thing that separated me and



America. The water smelled like the foul rags my aunts used to scrub dishes. Out of the corner of my left eye, I saw an old inner tube that lay motionless, as it stuck to a pile of rubble; perhaps someone's trampled dreams of making it across. With Nikes in hand, and pants rolled up, as not to get them wet, we managed to make it across the border. I had nothing to my name at that point. The clothes on my back and the grime beneath my untrimmed finger nails were my only souvenirs.

As the sun rose in the San Joaquin Valley, México awoke with fewer people. We arrived in Fowler on a damp but sunny day. It was a small, quiet town outside the city of Fresno, and it was now my new home. Money was exchanged before my uncle and I were let out of the car. Five hundred for each was the going rate in 1989. My mother hugged me. I hardly knew her, and so I did not hug her back. Sadness had started to creep inside me. I missed everything and everyone. Most of all, I missed my *abuela*.

It took about a year and a half to get accustomed to the *gringo* way. My sister and brother taught me the ropes. Their friends became my friends, and I soon made my own. I embraced Nintendo, McDonalds, football, and Thanksgiving. I stood proudly every day for the pledge of allegiance even though I could hardly pronounce the words, let alone make out their significance. Every now and then, a few kids would remind me that I was a foreigner. They introduced me to terms such as: wetback, beaner, and border-brother. At first, they did not bother me, partly because I did not realize their meaning, partly because they did not apply. I would try to rationalize the comments, "I am neither from the border, nor did I get my back wet," I tried to explain to them. To me, my legal status was a minor detail, a bump on the road; besides, I had a plan to become "more" American. I had watched Sylvester Stallone in the movies: *Rambo*, and *Rocky*. He was my hero. I wanted to be just like him. After all, in *Rocky*, he was nicknamed the "Italian Stallion," yet, there was no one more American than he. I concluded that it would be too difficult to become a boxing champion; it would also be too painful. After watching *Rambo II*; I decided I would become a soldier, Rambo knife and all.

The years came and went. In a drop of a hat I was eighteen, and I now had a green card in my wallet-a real one this time. I was a bona fide resident of the United States of America. This entitled me to come and go as I pleased, so in the summer following my high school graduation, and before shipping off to boot camp, I returned to México.

As I recall, the plane touched down a few minutes past noon. My grandpa stood waiting at the baggage terminal, looking no older than when I had last seen him. He was a man of few words, and simply shook my hand, as he patted my back. He wasted no time, and said he would circle the pick-up truck while I waited for my luggage. After loading the bags, he awkwardly patted me on my back once more, and then we were on our way. Everyone was outside as we pulled up. Childhood friends, family members I did not recognize, and of course, my grandma. We did as before, when we last saw each other, we cried; though this time they were tears of joy. “Bienvenido a casa,” welcome home, she said.

Inside the house, a meal fit for a king awaited us. The rickety table could hardly stand as it supported steel pots of *chile verde*, rice, beans, tortillas and a coffee flan for dessert. I ate like a hungry hostage, not once minding my manners. My stomach was quickly heaving with satisfaction. “No más,” I said. No more. After dinner we all talked for a while. My aunts teased me for using o.k. and yeah instead of *sí*. At the same time, my cousins tested my English proficiency, firing off words left and right for me to translate; as if they had any point of reference to gauge my knowledge. My grandma silently clutched my hand as she caressed my hair. She knew that I had changed a lot, but said nothing. She just smiled and listened to the nonsense of the conversation and the sporadic bursts of laughter from my aunts.

For the first couple of weeks, everything seemed to be as it once was. Though, before long, I became restless. I missed the amenities that California had to offer, and that I now lacked in Mexico. The stores on every corner, pizza on the weekends, water parks, and locking doors in bathrooms were all nonexistent there. Needless to say, I was miserable and made no attempt to hide it. To add to my despair, I had to do my fair share of the chores around the house. It was tough work. My twin cousins looked gaunt and tired from years of the same routine, yet they were unrelenting. Their sun beaten faces and calloused hands told stories of countless hours picking apples from the orchards, or some other back breaking work. As they worked and I rested, they would half-jokingly say, “Ya no eres mexicano, te rajas muy rápido,” you are not Mexican anymore, you give up too quickly. They were somewhat right; how could I be completely Mexican if my heart and soul were on the other side of the border?

After my trip to México, I came back with a bigger sense of appre-

ciation for the mundane things in life. This time, when my mom hugged me, I returned the gesture. I owed her at least that much. Almost immediately, I settled back into my American life, and once again put Mexico behind me. Tucked it away in my back pocket, and rarely checked to see if it was still there.

It was the summer of 2009. I was then twenty seven, and already with a combat tour in Iraq under my belt. Somehow, in my never ending quest to become the ultimate patriot, I found myself at it again; this time in the outskirts of Kandahar City. I stood there in silence, with beads of sweat running down my brow, as I scanned the horizon. The air was dry with a faint trace of scorched tire and goat droppings. Every breath I took was half air, half who knows what. Grains of sand dug in between my teeth and gums like small troops preparing for an assault. "We're going to miss chow again!" yelled my gunner from the turret, "No shit!" I yelled back.

Another breakdown had halted our convoy. We were providing security for local nationals as they delivered supplies and equipment on their shabby tractor-trailers. The jingle trucks, as we called them, were constantly breaking down. As a maintenance crew provided assistance, a cluster of local kids approached our lead vehicle. The interpreter and I immediately rushed ahead to intercept them. "Water, please mister!" They all cried in unison as they saw us. I tossed them a couple of bottles from the side of the vehicle and asked the interpreter to get them to leave. "They just kids" he said in broken English. "I don't care. Get them away from the convoy," I barked back. I knew better. I knew a kid was just as capable of killing someone as a grown-up was. All they needed was three key ingredients; a little training, coercion and intimidation.

As the kids scurried off, one stayed behind and curiously approached me. He was about six, looked dirt brown, dirt poor, and weighed no more than fifty-five pounds. He hesitantly blurted something in Pashtu, and waited for my reply. Bewildered, I looked at Rami, our interpreter, for assistance. "He ask where you from?" Is it not obvious, I thought to myself. "U.S.A." I spelled out as I pointed to the static red, white, and blue on my right shoulder. The little "hajji" shook his head as he pointed to my three day old stubble, and then my skin. I knew what he meant and needed no translation for that. Rami, now laughing, gave me one anyhow. "He say you not American." This annoyed me. I slightly raised my weapon and gestured for him to leave. He rapidly understood, just as I had understood his mannerism. He

had overstayed his welcome and he knew it. In a blink of an eye he vanished from our presence.

What transpired after that was like a dream. This kid was no suicide bomber, yet he had managed to blow asunder the sense of equality I had created thus far. That imaginary feeling of identity was now in shambles. This kid, thousands of miles away, had just shown me that my camouflage uniform was not enough for him, not enough for anyone for that matter. No flag on my shoulder could define me nor label me. I would never truly meet the criteria for what I had yearned to become. I had wandered from my roots, and did not fit into the mold of any country. Old voices came back to haunt me. They spoke to me. Echoing that I was not Mexican anymore, called me a border brother, and then, past neighbors from California joined in; referring to me as “the Mexican fellow from two doors down.” I was banished, to many; I was neither American, nor Mexican. In a sense, I had become a nomad with no real homeland, and no real destiny. I was the by-product of the search for prosperity, which went horribly wrong. I was a drifter to the fullest extent.

A loud call by my platoon sergeant interrupted my trance. “Mount up! We’re rolling in five!” The nomad had to get moving again, and so I did.

# *Fiction*

*Fiction is one of the few experiences  
where loneliness can be both confronted and relieved.*

—David Foster Wallace

# *Brief Glimpses of Joy*

Daniel E. Arias-Gomez

A dim light kisses her shoulders as I watch her gaze upon the sea of street lights crashing on the other side of the crystal. The world that swims in darkness outside seems so far away. Her bedroom is a different planet. I feel like an explorer on a journey through this unfamiliar place. And now, after traveling on strange lands covered with the dust of her scent, I set up camp in the valley that sleeps at the feet of her bed. I watch her much like a kid would watch the flickering arms of fireworks in the night sky as they desperately try to outshine the cheeks of the moon. Lazy seconds rise up to the ceiling along with the inviting, dancing smoke of her cigarette. She sits like a muse posing for a painter, but there are no colors that capture her distant eyes or the beautiful dark tone under that same ugly light. Her only response are occasional, nervous glances with eyes that refuse to give away anything.

As time tumbles down around us, the small paper roll between her lips continues his short race to meet her mouth, like a lover reaching ever so slowly to kiss her. The blinking of the shy embers at the tip of the cigarette rises and decreases like the tide of a calm sea, or the beating of a dying heart, or the melody of a slow song, or the rocking of her chest as she breathes in colorless air that comes out of her mouth tinted in slithering shades of gray. My muscles feel like the rusty cogs of a long abandoned machine. My mouth is sealed. Fearful that if I make the faintest of noises, the scene that glances over me might break like a mirror dropped to the ground. So I stay still, like a lioness with her eyes fixated on her pray. Letting a word escape now would be like screaming in the middle of the concert of a brilliant pianist. And so I bunker down and wait until the storm of my feelings is over.

The moon leaps slowly across the sky as the cigarette's life comes to an end. She puts it out with a swift, silky movement of her arm and turns her smooth face to me. There is a fine line of confusion in her eyes, as if she couldn't understand why I would even want to spend the whole night looking at her. If she only knew.

And then, with sudden force, her face shifts into something that lies between pain and relief. She mutters words so softly. They feel like the memory of a dream long forgotten in the ocean of my mind.

"I don't think I can do this anymore".

The moment has passed. The glimpse is over. As I walk away, I glance up one time to see if I can catch a small vision of smoke escaping through her window. I see nothing. I drift away on a red boat that swims on waters of regret, and then I slowly melt into the sea of street lights that keeps on crashing against her crystal.

# Only On Thursdays

William Christensen

Patrick spun his black fedora in his hands, his fingers brushing over the Reel Big Fish patch he had sown onto one side of it and the white rabbit patch he had sown onto the other. He sat on a bus bench at Shaw and Blackstone and waited, as he had done on every Thursday for the past two years. The cars driving by blew exhaust-laden air into his plain-looking face and gave him a bad taste in his mouth. He would have spat to get rid of it, but he didn't, just in case she walked by at that precise moment. He wiggled his cell phone out of his fitted pants to check the time. It read 3:28 pm. He picked up the colored sketch he had been working on of a woman with orange-red hair that spilled down like liquid warmth and happiness to the midpoint of her perfect hourglass figure. He looked at it, sighed, and put it into his satchel.

Todd and Oliver sat two benches away from him, watching Patrick as he waited, as they had come to do from time to time when they wanted to check up on him. Patrick had scolded them about sitting too close to him, because they might ruin the moment if she walked by.

"This is stupid," Oliver spat in disgust.

"What? That he's still waiting or that we're watching him wait?"

Todd asked.

"Both. We shouldn't be here because *he* shouldn't be here. I've had crazy dreams before, but I've never taken them *this* seriously."

"But this is true love we're talking about. It's sort of a serious thing."

"Sort of a *stupid* thing. True love can only ever exist in fairy tales. It's an outdated concept from an age of naïveté."

"Well, I wouldn't say *that*. True love is theoretically possible."

"Don't give me any theories, Todd. True love isn't good enough to be a theory. It might be a *hypothesis*, which would make it *hypothetical*, but it's not even that, so it's just an idea or a concept, and a bad one I might add."

"If you feel that way, I can't persuade you," Todd said, "but you should at least think about the dream itself."

"What about it?"

"Well, dreams are generally pretty vague, sort of like a fortune cookie or a horoscope. They're subject to interpretation, with all these layers of hidden meaning, which is all dependent on the dreamer, of



course; but Patrick's dream was clear, precise, *direct*, with no room for error or misinterpretation."

"Except for the part about which Thursday it would be on."

"Well, there is that little hiccup, but you can't expect perfection, especially not from dreams."

"So what's your point, Todd?"

"Well, what if there's something to this one? What if there's some truth to this dream?"

"Look, we've talked about this before, ok? Dreams are just stuff your subconscious coughs up at night. If you want to find meaning in them, you can go and pay a thousand-something dollars to a shrink and sit on his couch for an hour or two every week for a few months and he'll tell you something terrible about yourself that you can't change because you're thirty-two years old and pretty much set in stone."

"Sounds like that comes from personal experience."

"Shut up!"

From his seat two benches away, Patrick chuckled. He pulled out his phone again to check the time. It read 3:29 pm.

"Hey, look," Oliver began, "even if the dream was for real and he does meet the best-looking babe in all of California, the true love thing still isn't going to happen. It's impossible."

"I know, you've already said that," Todd replied.

"Oh, I'm not talking about the concept of true love; I'm talking about the logistics of it. In the twenty-eight years Patrick's been alive, he has accumulated *zero* experience with the opposite sex."

"Not entirely his fault. He had to focus on school and work. He's going to be the CEO of a big company someday."

"No, it *is* his fault. Remember when I introduced him to Julie?"

"He was waiting for the dream girl. He didn't want to be the guy that breaks up with a girl just to be with another girl."

"But it would be *true love!* That would make it all ok!"

"Dude, don't be like that."

"All right, all right, I'm sorry. I was just trying to help him."

"He didn't want your help."

"But he *needed* it. He doesn't know how to read women's cues, or how to talk to them or act with them, or do the things that foster a relationship. How is he going to talk to her if she shows up in the next -" he paused to look at his phone "- thirty-something seconds?"

"I'm sure he's thought about it. He's had two years to think about it."

“All right, so say he does meet the girl and that she’s single and that she’s interested, the odds are still against him. He’s going to have the idea that she’s his *true love* and he’s been *alone* for twenty-eight years. I know you don’t know what loneliness feels like, but let me tell you, it *hurts*, so much that it can make a man desperate.”

“Hey, it isn’t my fault Donna and I are high-school sweethearts. I just got really, really, really lucky.”

“Well, all the luck in the universe won’t save Patrick from himself. He’ll want to rush the relationship, and if she doesn’t like that, he could lose control and become overpowering. I’ve known some nice guys who fell in love and turned into monsters. If it doesn’t work out the way he expects, bad things could happen.”

“I can hear you guys,” Patrick said aloud, purposefully not looking at them.

“What if she discovers all of the pictures he’s drawn of her?” Oliver continued. “Nothing says ‘stalker’ like a bunch of drawings that were made before they introduced themselves.”

“I can hear you, Oliver,” Patrick said.

“I don’t want to see you crash and burn, dude,” Oliver spoke directly to Patrick. “You’re a good guy and I can’t see that happen to you.”

“I thought you guys had accepted this already. Apparently not,” Patrick said as he put on his fedora, got up and began to walk away.

“Patrick, he means the best. Don’t leave,” Todd pleaded, but Patrick was already crossing the street.

He strode angrily over the blacktop; his head was down, his fedora shading his face. He wrestled with the things that Oliver had said, afraid that the two years he had spent waiting were in vain, or worse, that they would cumulate in disaster.

It was a pity that he didn’t turn around just then. It was a pity that she walked just behind him as they crossed the street, her orange-red hair trailing behind her, her hand resting on the Reel Big Fish patch that had been sown onto her art satchel. She looked at him, her eyes drawn to his fedora, and it was a pity he did not see her smile.

But Todd and Oliver saw her.

“PATRICK!!!” they shouted to him, jumping off of the bench and charging to the crosswalk. Then the lights changed, and cars barreled across the intersection, dividing them from their friend. They shouted and waved, but Patrick did not turn around. He continued down Shaw, but she went left and walked down Blackstone.

Then Patrick checked his phone again. It read 3:31 pm. He sighed and turned around to look over the traffic and assure himself that she wasn't there.

And she wasn't.

*Oh well, he thought, next Thursday...*

# *The Noise of Sleep*

Lindsey Huffman

“Now come along I’ve got two spears,  
I’ll poke your eyeballs out your ears.  
I’ve got beside two curling stones,  
to crush you to bits, body, and bones.”

Creature hates the ocean. When we went, he wouldn’t go to the end of the pier. Water rumbled under his feet even over the roar, he heard the slabs of wood creaking and swaying. He stepped back, his Doc Martens came untied, so he tripped; no one saw. His heart slapped against his sternum. Ran his fingers through his hair, pulled up his cuffs, and sat on the nearest bench.

Rat curled up behind the passenger’s seat of the VW. 1971. Chipped, burnt red paint. His hands were shaking and his feet were dirty. The ear piece of his glasses had broken off, so when he rolled onto his side, they slid down his nose. The hole in his pants was covered with a patch of some obscure noise band. Any description of him would be inaccurate.

Moose fumbled with his snare drum. He tried to set it perfectly on the stand, even though he would be taking it off in only an hour. His sleeves were rolled above his elbows, thrift store teal. For four years, the knots built up on his head, creating a dreaded mess. They looked nice. I hoped he wouldn’t bleed tonight. He always bled.

Bear smiled. Dropped a cymbal. Forgot to tell anyone what time to show up. “Goddammit, Bear.” Laughing, he walked down the street to get a pastry from a Mexican hole in the wall bakery. Cono. Who knows what they put in those things, but they were good and they were cheap. Looking at his feet, Bear decided to stop walking around barefoot.

They all met up in front of the blue lights. Creature took off his shirt. An upside down cross was revealed, Sharpied on his chest.

“hide bodies in dirt sacks along the ocean floor  
dig them up when we are lonely  
dig them up when we want more”

God watched their shows every night.. Even He had been interconnected with the guilty pleasure He has created through time and sound. Atmosphere.

People ran from the room. I always stayed. I wasn’t afraid anymore.

I had gotten used to the volume, the bruises, the shards. Rat lay on the floor, exactly where he belonged, kissing the dirt he had put there with his presence. Bear bruised his heels. Creature held his head. Moose stood up and screamed. I couldn't tell you what was going on. Ballerinas lit themselves on fire.

“Liar”

The audience took stones to their eardrums. Music box. They were more concerned for instruments than lives. Than souls.

Rat hung from the rafters, spitting on us. Exactly where he belonged. Moose lay on the floor, lips bleeding. Bear picked up Godzilla's body parts. Creature laughed, hugged a bystander.

I'm not sure what it was that drew me to it all. I'm not sure what it was about Rat. I'm not sure what Creature really meant when he spoke. We all loved Moose, and Bear had the hearts from them all. No one else knew. No one else could stand on the pier, shake like a tragedy, knot his hair, walk barefoot in a Broken City.

“just babies swimming blinded, gagged, a list of plans, a concrete concept of life and death”

I always stayed. I have to cut Bear's fur, now.

# Colophon

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