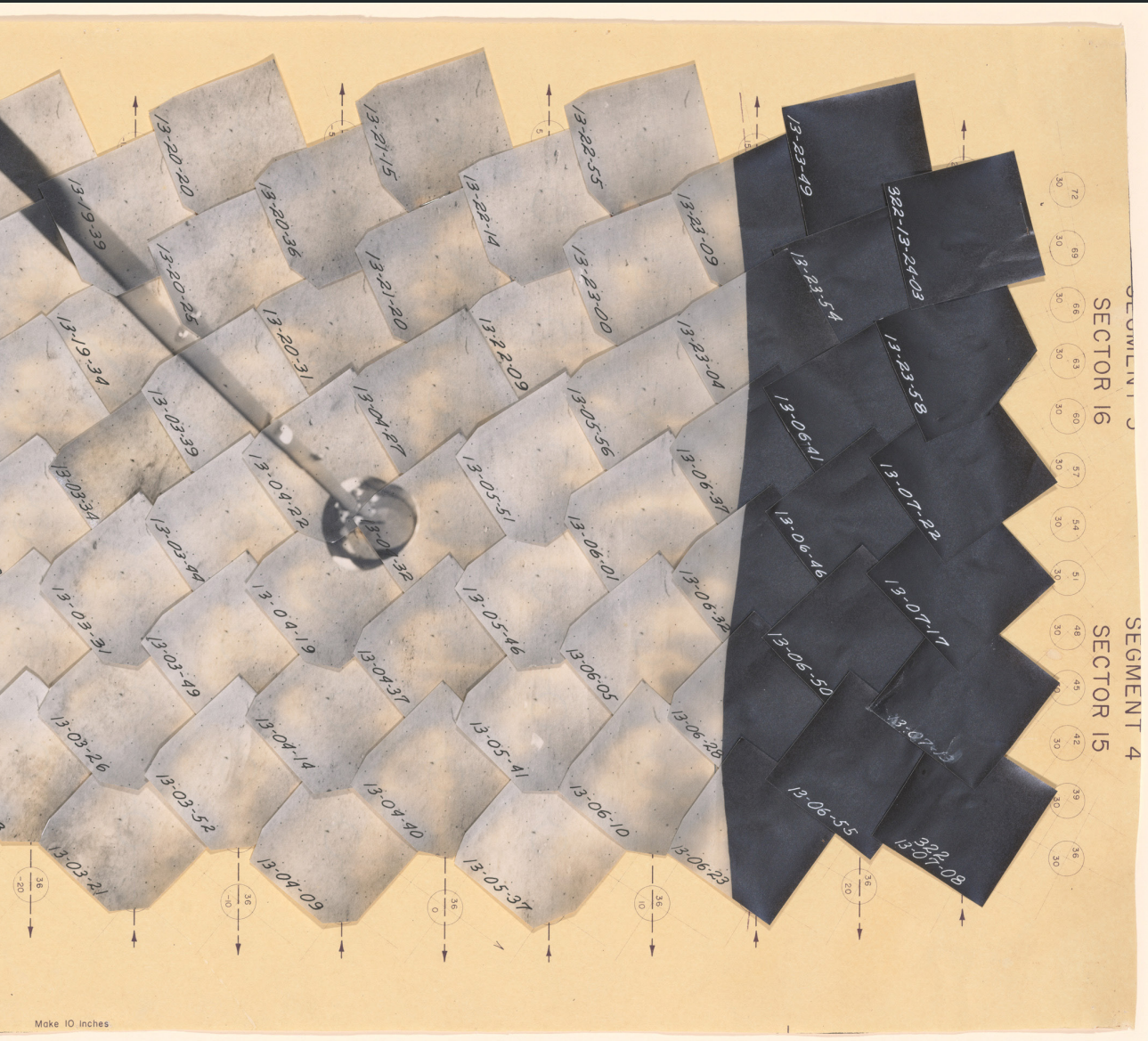




The full Spring 2024 issue—with more stories, poetry, nonfiction, and art—is available at <http://thelitmag.com>. You can also read contributors' bios and interviews with the writers and artists from this issue. Submit to next year's edition at thelitmag.com/submissions.



Cover image: A mosaic of mages of the lunar terrain from the unmanned 1966 Surveyor Expedition series. Images of the moon were taken by a lunar probe that beamed them back to monitors at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, where they were photographed and assembled into the composite seen on the cover. "Day 3, Survey U, Sectors 15 and 16," United States Geological Survey, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1967, Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Open Access.

THE LIT

**THE LITERARY AND ART MAGAZINE
OF LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE | SPRING 2024**

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Casa de las Américas and The Lit LGBTQIA+ Art and Writing Contest Winners

Art awards

“Fortune” by Jino Dority

“Summer Memories” by Len Rivera

Poetry awards

“Treasure” by Isabella Brosi (online)

“We Are the Children” by Saturn Lawson

“Self Love” by Matthew Pacuruco (online)

Prose award

“Cathedrals” by Ethan Velez



“Wings of Love,”
Alondra Barrales
(shawl); photo by
Ethan Velez

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Read the full issue online at <http://thelitmag.com>.

I've been depressed
for so long that I've
forgotten what a
spotless mind is like.

She and I

Victoria Segarra

She wears warm, vibrant colors. I wear cold, muted ones. Her voice is loud and distinct. She often asks me to repeat myself because I'm so quiet. I swipe my card at the station. She hops the turnstiles. She can eat the same meal every day without complaint. I start to gag after a week of the same food. She can hack gaming consoles and fix a computer. Technology infuriates me. I talk to my mother every day. She has gone months without a word to hers.

I've been depressed for so long that I've forgotten what a spotless mind is like. She has never had depression and winces at my descriptions of it. I loathe myself. She is a self-proclaimed narcissist. She likes politics and the news. I find politics terribly disheartening. She has optimism. My sense of optimism died years ago, hence my disdain of the news. She thinks things will eventually get better. I think the world is shit and it's only getting worse.

She does get sad. When she talks about her family's indifference towards her, her eyes get glossy and her voice gets that familiar thickness of anguish. She hardly sees them and they seldom remember her. She is the oldest and the least favorite child. I am the youngest and I'm spoiled rotten.

Her room is messy, with bottles and cups on almost every flat surface. My room is neat, my floors empty. Messy places make me anxious and she knows this, so she makes sure to clean her room before I come to visit. Sometimes her room is still messy and I finish cleaning the rest while she is at work because I know she hates cleaning. When we smoke together, she holds the lighter for me because she knows I'm



scared of burning myself.

We're very different. At first glance, we are an odd couple: she with her big, flaming red hair and long legs and me with my dark brown hair standing nearly a foot shorter. But the things we do have in common are things that we have in common with no one else. Neither of us believes in God or astrology or crystals. We find each other's sense of skepticism refreshing.

I'm creative. I like to write and occasionally draw. She likes to consume content and says she is glad she doesn't feel compelled to create. She thinks it's tiresome. I'm studying creative writing because writing is one of, if not the only thing, I'm good at. I briefly thought about becoming a writer or maybe working in publishing, but I've since realized that I have no desire to do such a thing. I think it's tiresome. I have not a single idea for a story, while she has so many she doesn't know what to do with them all.

She likes to talk. I like to listen. I write much better than I talk. When I talk, I stumble over my words, but when I write I can communicate all of my feelings clearly. Her words are confident, her voice deep and warm and certain.

She picks her nose. She says this is a deal breaker for a lot of people. I find it a disgusting but minor issue. It amazes her that I put up with it. I might have been one of those people once, before I had ever fallen in love, but love puts things into perspective.

To read an interview with LaGuardia alum Victoria Segarra by one of The Lit's editors, visit <http://thelitmag.com>.



Three Short Fictions

Jennifer De La Cruz

Water, Light, Dirt

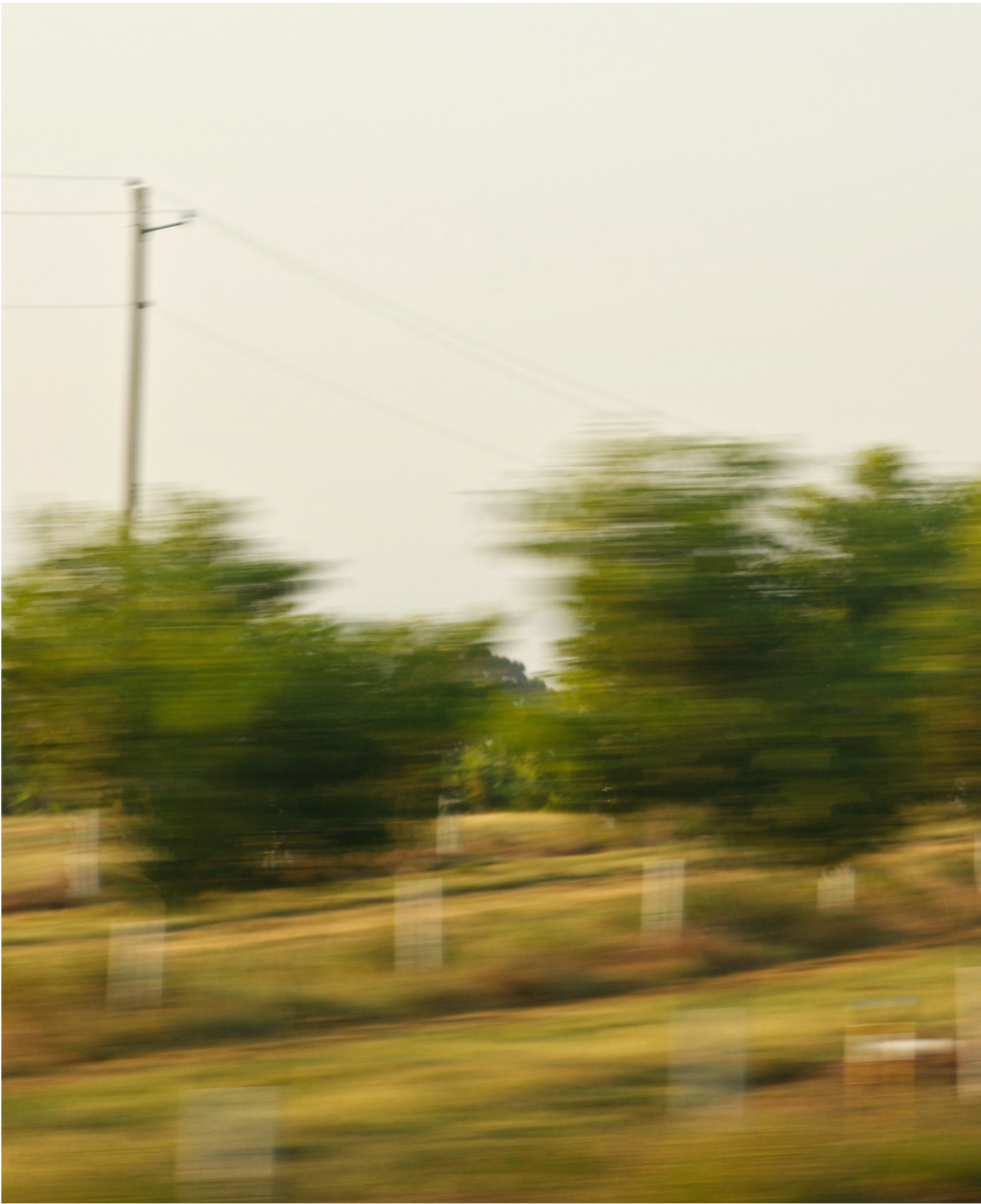
Plants need three things to grow: water, light, dirt. She has given each plant these things in varying amounts. They are defiant and refuse to root. The Crassula bends and dips waywardly. The maroon blooming over the green indicates a sunburn. The Delosperma is thin, leggy, and uncertain like a teenage girl. The Nanouk plays coy—it blushes virgin pink but will never allow her to see it flower. She spends her time chasing sunlight. She loses sleep searching for deals on humidifiers and dreams of fog. If plants need just three simple things to grow, why won't they? The ring of the telephone interrupts the watering schedule. It is her mother calling, asking about her womb.

El regalo mejor

We were all at mamá's 80th birthday party. There were sunflowers made of meringue on her cake. We sang happy birthday in two languages because we are in America now and we won't let her forget it. We ignored the heavy, funereal dress she chose. We ignored the trap door expression on her face. We ignored her hand on her hip as she tilted toward the single candle she blew out with a sigh. 80 years: a lost mother, a dictator, a dead husband, at the mercy of knees that won't let your feet run away. All culminating into *este día glorioso*. We should all be so lucky.

Loved and Wanted

A friend of mine was molested by all the men in her family who had the opportunity to babysit her. All of them. She could never relax around her own brother. She watched him carefully, anticipating his inherent depravity. Her panic expanded alongside her uterus. She wept with relief when she found out the sex. I watched her change the baby's diaper—delicate pink and purple flowers with smiley faces on them. I wondered if the baby was born of euphoria, but I did not ask. She looked at her tiny vagina and smiled. "I would have drowned her if she were a boy," she cooed.





“Georgia Peach” by Isabella Allwood. 2023. To read an interview with Isabella Allwood, visit <http://thelitmag.com>.

On Openness

Victor Garate



I stood rooted in place when I saw my dad waiting for me outside my high school building, his hands stuffed in his pockets to stave off the October chill. It felt strange to see him again after I, a thirteen-year-old at the time, believed he would be gone forever.

The only reason I didn't feel overwhelming shock was because I had seen him earlier that morning as I walked with my cousin to school. My dad stood by the front door, wearing the same beanie and jacket he wore now, speaking to a school staff member, most definitely asking about me. He didn't notice me then. I turned my face away from him as I hurried inside the building.

That was when shock and disbelief hit me. And throughout the school day, the thought of my dad waiting for me outside loomed in my mind, and so did the fear that accompanied that thought. I told my cousin as we scaled the school's narrow staircases, "I think I saw my dad outside."

Seeing him again, I almost wanted to walk away. Stroll straight past him and pretend I didn't know him. But I didn't do that. I moved toward him, slowly, with my hands in my pockets, taking in a deep but quiet breath.

As he usually did when greeting me, my dad held the back of my neck and planted a kiss on my forehead. I didn't greet him back.

"Hi, son," he said. I can't remember for certain that he was smiling.

"Hi," I said. And then, "Where have you been?"

"Let's talk somewhere in private."

Although I didn't say it (and in fact, I would never tell him this), I thought about the month in which I truly thought I would never see him again. The month in which I called him many times, hoping to hear his voice but only hearing the automated one from his voicemail. The month in which, despite insisting to my mom that I was okay and that I didn't need to talk about it, I broke down in tears while on a phone call with a friend. The month in which I worried about how my

As he usually did when he greeted me, my dad held the back of my neck and planted a kiss on my forehead. I didn't greet him back.

mom was going to pay the rent without my dad's income, so I told her, "I don't want to go to soccer practice anymore," and she responded, adamantly, "You're going to that practice."

But it was also the month in which I felt free. I could, without preamble, hang out with my friends. As I was growing up, my dad would often question who and when I hung out. Whenever he questioned the type of people I hung out with, I'd employ the same tired defenses like, "Don't worry, they are good people," and, "they would never get me into drugs or alcohol. I'm not into that stuff anyway." It's obvious to anyone why I enjoyed this new found freedom. But I kept these feelings hidden away; even, to a certain extent, from myself.

My dad and I walked to the corner store across from school and stopped beneath its awning. I can't remember all the words that were said, only snippets. But I know at some point I asked,

Why did you leave? Why did you lie? And then sadness overtook me. I was sobbing against him, feeling the fur of his jacket, my breathing coming shallow and fast. I didn't care that students from my school were walking by, and that some of them would recognize me.

As if to appease me, he'd say things like, "I came back because I care about you and your brothers," and, "If I was a bad father, I wouldn't have come back at all."

Over and over I repeated the same questions. Why did you leave? Why did you lie?

At some point, my dad wrapped his arms around me. But when I looked up at his face, I didn't really see a sympathetic expression there. He looked how he often looked whenever he was stuck and didn't know what to say, his mouth slightly open.

The thing was, I knew why he left. I knew he had gone back to his home country of Ecuador to wed the mistress he swore he never had. But his refusal to answer my questions angered me. I wanted him to rationalize his decision to leave behind my brothers and I.

Finally, my dad said, "Don't worry. I will tell you everything one day."

He wouldn't. The following week as my brother and I sat across from him at a local cafe, we confronted him about his lying. He wouldn't really answer. In fact, he would deny ever promising to give me answers in the first place. Instead he said, "I only said we were going to talk, that's all."

The one thought that came to me then, and that persisted afterward, was, How could someone lie so much? I cried in that cafe, too.

I suppose there was not much else to explain anyway. He left because he loved someone else, and he didn't say anything because he didn't have to. My mom and dad's relationship was broken long before he left. He just finally decided to act. He decided to ditch his age-old idea that a mother and a father were needed in a child's life, even if the relationship between the mother and father was toxic. Even if the relationship between the mother and father had long since turned abusive.

I now know (or I think I know) that by lying to me, he was trying to avoid confronting his own choices. Although he would never admit it, he didn't want to feel shame and he certainly didn't want to deal with my pain. He didn't know, and still doesn't know, how to maneuver other people's feelings. How to reconsider his own choices after someone else challenges them. So he lied. He lied about telling the truth.



**“Sunnier Morning” by
Len Rivera, 2024.**



Mango from Bongo

Raisa Zannat



Photograph: "Mama Nieve and her Aguacate" by Joel Pazmiño, 2023.

My grandmother Razia Khaleque was a strong and resilient woman. She lost her husband at the tender age of 23. After the demise of my grandfather, she was left to raise my father and two uncles by herself. She worked as a single mother for most of her life. At a stage in her life, she decided to remarry one of her co-workers and faced scrutiny from most of her family members. Due to her marriage, my father ran away and started living with his grandparents, and my uncles often made her feel guilty about the decisions she made for herself.

On the other hand, my relationship with my grandmother was quite different. It was beautiful. She loved me unconditionally and I did her. I considered her to be my safe haven. I remember waiting for weekends to arrive. That would mean we could visit her, or she could come over to our place. My mother says that my grandmother always wanted a daughter for herself, but it never happened. Therefore, she had a strong affection for me. But I believe my grandmother was living my father's childhood through mine. The times she couldn't spend with my father she was trying to make up for those through me.

When I was in sixth grade, I remember transferring to a school near my grandmother's house. That summer was extraordinarily special for me. I remember her waiting for me outside school every day to walk me home. She used to cut up mangoes and bring them to me during my break because she knew how much I loved them. At times she would bring multiple containers of beautifully peeled and cut mangoes so that my friends and I could share.

Speaking of mango, my grandmother had the perfect little mango tree in her front yard. Comparatively small but reaching the roof of her one-story home. The branches would stoop over to the roof and cover half of its space. During the spring, yellow and orange flowers would cover the tree. And in summer those flowers would turn into

little green mangoes. During the rainy season, the area surrounding the tree would be filled with mangoes that couldn't stand the weather. Often, I would sneak some salt and red chili from my grandmother's kitchen to eat raw green mangoes straight from the tree. I would eat them while sitting on the edge of the roof with my legs dangling over the sides of the cement brim. The mangoes from my grandmother's tree had a very distinctive taste that reminded me of rainwater and wet soil. It always smelled fresh and had the perfect balance of sourness and fruitiness. The neighbors had a mango tree as well but their mangoes weren't as tart as ours. I was strictly prohibited from going to their side or fetching mangoes from their tree, as it was considered a bad manner. But they would stop by with a bag of mangoes every other season as a courtesy and I appreciated them.

Growing up I have always seen mangoes as an essential item in our food list. I have seen my grandmother make pickles out of them. She made spicy pickles by marinating raw mangoes with various spices and dipping them in mustard oil. She also made translucent candied mangoes that looked like edible crystals in a jar. Various kinds of mango preserves have always been displayed in our dining hall like a bunch of prized possessions. No matter the season there was always a mango delicacy to offer. I have seen my father eat ripe mangoes mashed with rice and milk. I have seen my aunts make fruit leathers with sun-dried mango puree which was meant to last for a while, but could never because it would be devoured instantly. I have eaten lentil soup made with seasonal sour mangoes which tasted divine. One time I visited the suburbs and a girl from the neighborhood brought me a jar of dried sliced mangoes that looked like mushrooms. Upon asking she mentioned it was made from mangoes that fell off the tree during a storm. It was then washed with salt, sliced, and air-dried. She taught me how to enjoy it mixed with red chile and salt. Even though hesitant at first after tasting it, I remember having it every other evening for the rest of the season.

Considered the king of fruit in the South Asian region, mango not only plays a vital role within the food system. It also influences the culture, contributes to the economy, and works as a pathway to people's hearts. Every mango season it is expected for the oldest son-in-law

of the family to bring in freshly harvested mangoes into the in-law's home. It is one eccentric practice of South Asian culture. Friends send friends baskets of mangoes as a friendly gesture. Neighbors share mangoes that grow in their individual trees. The economy flourishes tremendously with all the exports that take place during the season.

Happiness is a sense of well-being and contentment. Different people feel happiness for different reasons. For me, it was eating; for my grandmother, it was feeding me. She used to say she feels full every time she sees me smile after eating. Maybe her contentment did rely on my fulfillment. All the efforts she put into making me feel comfortable and safe throughout the small amount of time she was with us left me with a sense of responsibility. It taught me that love and kindness are meant to be shared. It is a teaching that grows within me every passing year. Just like her mango tree that is growing and spreading love through her mangoes. Even though my grandmother is not here, her essence still lingers, and her love is still felt. Every passerby who walks in front of her house carries a bit of my grandmother's love with them. Everyone who enjoys the mangoes relishes a part of the love that my grandmother had to offer. And every time I get a whiff of rain and wet soil, it takes me right back to my grandmother's arms. Where love is abundant and I am safe.

Every passerby who walks in front of her house carries a bit of my grandmother's love with them. Everyone who enjoys the mangoes relishes a part of the love that my grandmother had to offer.

Don't Do That, Rosa

Ethan Velez



Is my husband cheating on me?"

She gives me this look. She was expecting this question, but she was still surprised I asked. She looks like my mother. That is the first bad indication about this place. My friend Katrina swore by it, though, she even offered to pay for it. I wouldn't let her because I wanted her to know I trust her. There is a shadow in the corner of the room that disappears when I notice it.

"I thought you're supposed to shuffle the cards," I say flatly, the way I speak to my mother.

This woman is wearing face jewelry and an oversized Yankees t-shirt. She scoffs at me, but she also smiles. She shuffles her deck of paper cards and six of them fall out. She reveals ten of cups, ace of wands, the chariot, the devil, the magician, and two of pentacles. I smile at her.

"It's possible," she says, and she lights up a cigarette she rolled herself. She studies me through the smoke and I notice the shadow from before has moved somewhere out of sight.

"Do you expect me to cry?" I ask her, and I can feel my throat tightening.

She exhales her tobacco. Her rings have gemstones of different colors. I think about what it would be like to wear them, to be her, to have something of mine.

I start crying. Slow at first, like I'm trying to fight it, and then all at once. I reach into my purse that I know only has a book I've read 30 pages of, a box of my husband's cigarettes, a lighter, a phone, and a water bottle I filled with vodka.

She extends towards me a box of kleenex and I make a scene of hesitating before I accept one. I thank her. I stop crying almost immediately. I wonder if she notices.

"So, I think this is a pretty happy spread," she says in this accent that reminds me of high school.

"I think you and your husband are locked in. Are you suffering financially?"

"No," I tell her, and it's the truth. "He just got promoted. He loves me. He loves me." I drink from my water bottle.

She picks up the cards from her glass table and sorts them back into a neat deck. I can feel the air change about us and I know that, unless I ask another question, it's time to go.

When I stand up suddenly and unsheathe a twenty-dollar bill for

her—ten would have been cheap—she doesn't say a word. Instead she watches me leave her corner shop. I want to believe the shadow stays behind.

I find a text message on my phone from Katrina, who wished me luck on the reading, and another text from my father, who asked if I could reach out to my mother soon. I think about taking the train back

**I'm standing and I'm looking and I'm
watching myself finish the rest of the
vodka. My reflection is not happy
with this company.**

downtown, but it's too easy to order a cab from my phone, and I'm in a black Lexus with a driver who speaks broken English. He smiles at me and I smile back. For the rest of the ride, I'm quiet and I wear my sunglasses.

I open my book. "Art does not have to be huge in order to be important or moving," I read. "Art should be beautiful, but the function of beauty and art is to convey ideas." I close the book after that, because I don't think that Judy Chicago knows that beautiful things are terribly violent. I drink from my water bottle again.

My husband isn't home when I arrive. I'm glad he's not. I feel alone, so I leave my things on our linen couch and take the water bottle with me. Our apartment is clean because the cleaning lady was just here, the view is nice because we live in a tall building, the walls are egg white because that was the color I chose.

I lock the bathroom door behind me. I turn the handle for the bathtub and take off my clothes. I'm standing and I'm looking and I'm

watching myself finish the rest of the vodka. My reflection is not happy with this company. I can tell. I smile regretfully.

The water in my tub is cold. I force my body to sit in it and my breath becomes fast. I'm crying again, unintentionally this time, so I take a deep breath and go beneath the surface.

"Rosa?" I think I can hear. Someone is in the room with me. "Don't do that, Rosa..."

I erupt from the tub and spill water everywhere. The bathroom door is wide open and I can see, for a moment, the last of something trying to avoid me.

I hurl myself out of the tub and I follow it. I won't let it get away this time, I refuse. My mother always said I was too stubborn and I think, for the first time, that she's right.

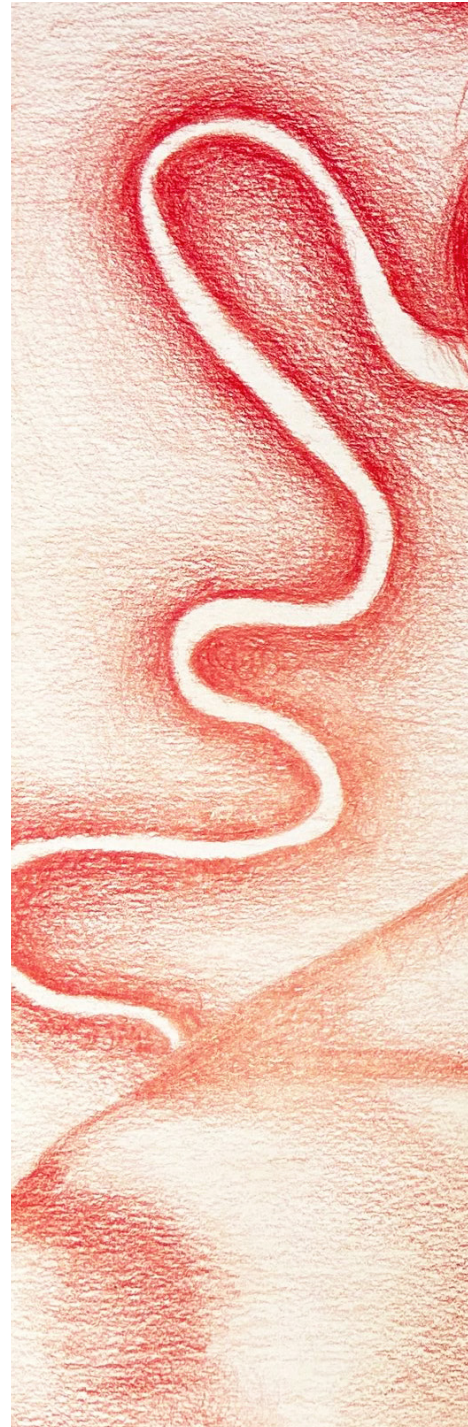
When I'm in the living room again, I hear what sounds like scraps of paper crackling and stacking on top of each other. There is an oval mirror on the far side of the wall where I see the shadow pulling a card, holding it close to its reflection, and dropping it on the floor. Seven of swords, the hanged man, seven of cups. It looks like a person. I can tell it is not.

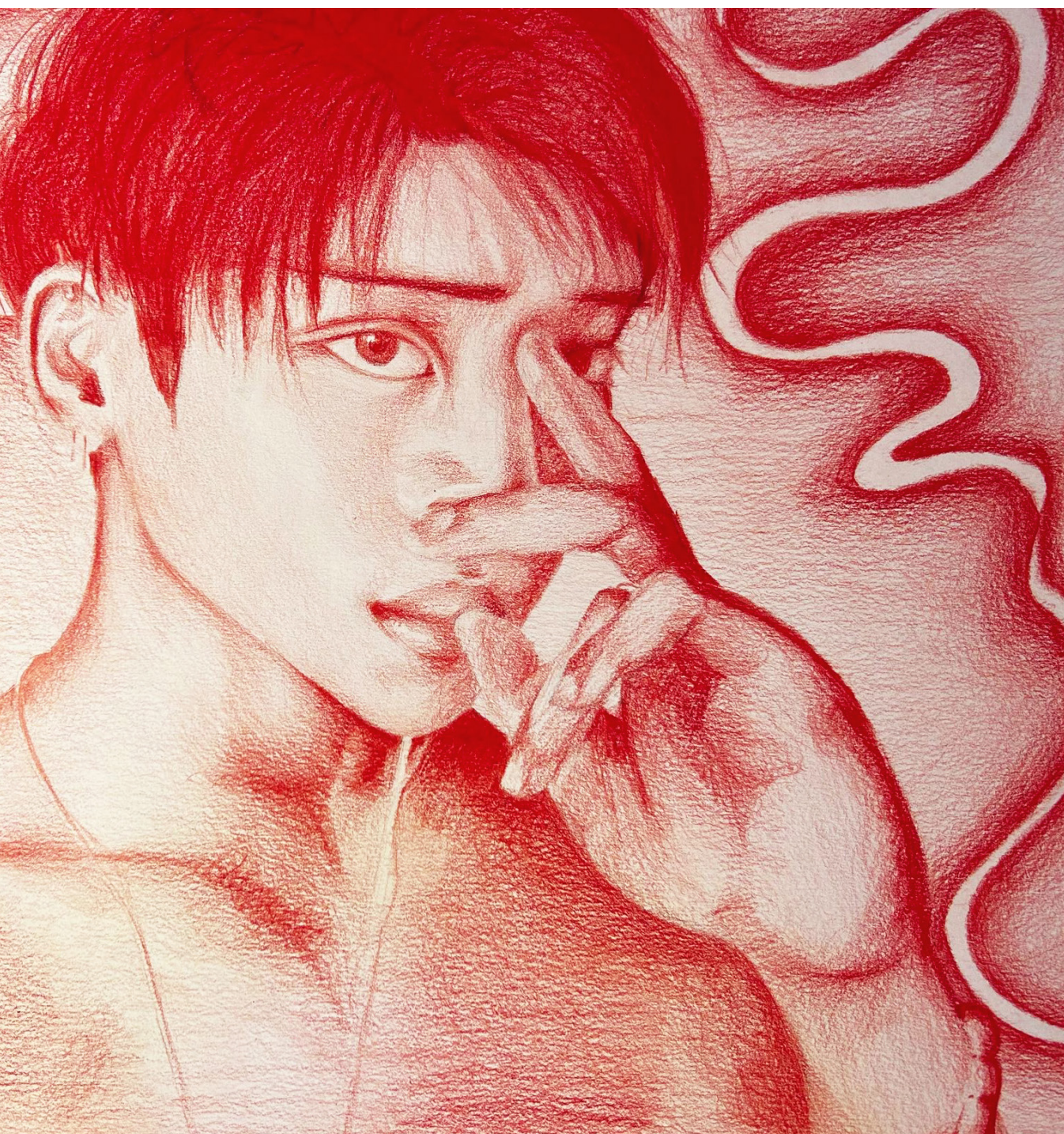
"What did you do to me?" I ask. My voice sounds unfamiliar to me. It is so cold. I'm shaking and water pools at my feet.

I want to believe it is an angel, that I'm finally saved, but it looks at me without eyes and I know I'm wrong. I miss my mother. I think I'll finally call her.

I see the shadow pulling a card, holding it close to its reflection, and dropping it on the floor. Seven of swords, the hanged man, seven of cups.

“Fortune” by LaGuardia student Jino Dority, 2024. Dority writes, “This piece was created in honor of the singer Jonghyun, a staunch supporter of the LGBTQ+ community who passed in 2017. He often spoke about his good fortune in regards to both his incredibly diverse fans, whom he supported in turn, and the positive impact meeting his band members had on him. In this piece, the artist chose to represent the singer monochromatically, intentionally invoking the ‘red string of fate’ folktale, which the singer referenced.”





Going to the Shop

Joel Pazmiño

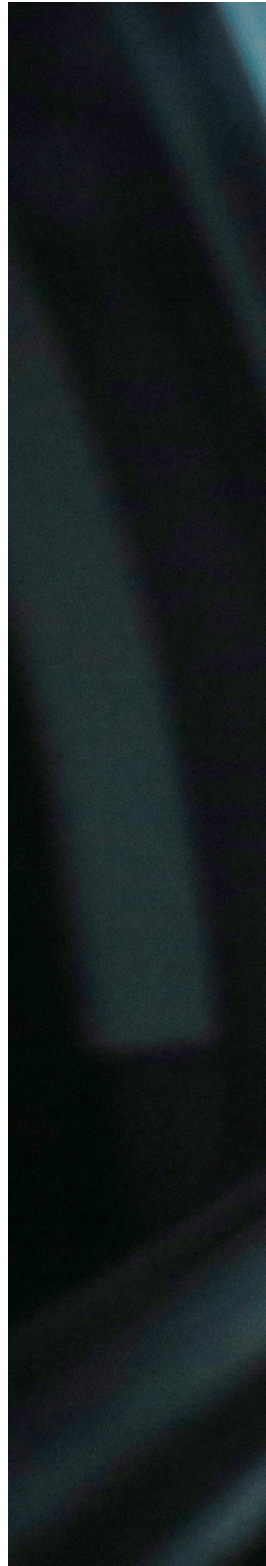
Your mom wanted the pyramid off. And the rosary.” His dad looks over his shoulder at him. His uncle drives the Sequoia. His four year-old cousin quietly snores next to him.

They had planned this day a few days ago. They were to go over Flushing Bay and to the mechanic, to the final resting place, to collect what they left behind in the trunk. But first they wait in the car across the street. He doesn’t think of the metal and the wheel, only that he was there. His fingers twirl around each other. He bites his lip and stares off into the distance. The summer wasn’t supposed to go this way.

It was another morning, like any other, and he changed out of his work clothes and showered. When he was ready, he left to run his errands. He dropped his mom off at her doctor’s appointment, and she asked him about his sleep. “Your eyes look so small,” she said. “Tienes que descansar.” And that’s what he did.

But now his dad is twirling the car keys and points down the block. His oversized shirt ripples in the dry wind. The Sequoia moves off the curb and gets close to the adjacent lane. From the backseat, the view of the road plays like a projection, and he’s back in the driver’s seat. He knows the gravity of what happened that Wednesday morning on the highway, and who’s responsible, and who’s to blame, and what to do, and this and that. He knows. Yet his head aches at the lecture he gives himself, as he swallows his feelings away, as he looks over to the four year-old sleeping gracefully. Suddenly, life is simple. She breathes, he breathes, and there’s those who don’t. He looks at the world through the tinted windows and compares life to a train, and death is the stop you stay on

Photograph: “Rear View” by Joel Pazmiño, 2023.





when you miss the train in the morning. Yet the Sequoia's gears shift into place and his dad is already setting things down on the sidewalk. The bike rack takes in the sun, next to the shovel they used in the winter to break the ice off the tires, and a small red grill he once used at the marina. Then the hood of the car winks at him, at least that's what it looks like since it's bent in half. In only nine days there's rust in the bent areas. In only nine days, after a checkup, the doctor didn't find anything wrong with him.

The car insurance deemed the vehicle a total loss. He learned that the day of the accident. He was in traffic. The air conditioner needed repairs, so the car was hot, even with the windows down and a/c on blast. He drove slowly, a few inches there and a few inches here, fighting sleep, yet he woke up to the bent hood, a tremor that fueled his rage and shook his hands as he looked for the insurance card. The paper trembled in his hands, and his voice broke when he looked out the window for the other driver. No driver, and no viable insurance card. A second later the driver appeared from around the truck unharmed. The driver also didn't collect any info, but wondered about him. He drove off in a frenzy, cursed himself, and parked under a tree. He waited on the curb for hours for the tow truck. With his head in his palms, his shaggy black hair covered his fingers.

"Mijo, come help me with this." His dad struggles to pull a fabric that holds all the cleaning supplies and fluids for the car. They pull it by the orange straps, and he sets it down in the trunk of the Sequoia. When he goes back, he sits in the passenger seat and rips off the religious pyramid from the gear shift. Its transparent features glimmer in the afternoon. He tears off the picture of Jesus from the visor, and his mom's green rosary gently goes into his pocket. When he goes to the backseat, he takes the neck pillow, a blanket, and his old dog's blue water bottle that he used whenever they would go to the park.

**The paper trembled in his hands,
and his voice broke when he looked
out the window at the other driver.**

When they finally finish, his dad and his uncle speak to the insurance guy about the car keys and license plates. “Don’t collect just yet,” says the insurance guy. But they already collected everything they needed. So he entertains the four year-old, holding her hand as she looks at the car with him. She walks to the front and traces the bent, rusted, edges with her little index finger. As best as she can, she explains to him what happened to the car. “The car hit another car, and the—this part bent,” she says. He nods, and her innocence gives him a weak smile. “You should be more smarter,” she says again. He nods in agreement.

He sees his uncle walk away, holding the sleeve of the steering wheel, and then observes his dad looking at the car, holding the keys, standing still for a short while. His dad steps to the insurance guy, returns the keys. When the footsteps go away from him, he stares at the car. The four year-old patters her feet away as well, and he still stares. Dollar signs, long work hours, and a lot of saving, is all he sees.

“Hurry up. Or we’re leaving you,” the four year-old smiles before running off in her glittery pink shoes.

What else is he going to leave behind? A memorable date to the beach? Sex in the backseat? The moving landscape on his drive home from a morning hike? A series of laughs and serious conversations with friends? Or with someone he fell in love with? Or the solitude of driving home alone at night after a nice, long, smoke? He’ll leave it all behind. The car now can surely rest.

Can I Have a Dream?

Danaiya Odom

Who do dreams belong to?

The hopeless?

The restless?

The silver spooners?

Or do they belong to the stars?

To a place beyond infinite imagination.

A place where only the most optimistic reside.

I want to grab hold of these dreams.

Keep them close in my clutch.

Hold on so tight they can not be swiped

By the hopeless.

The restless.

The silver spooners.

So I can be among the optimists and the stars.

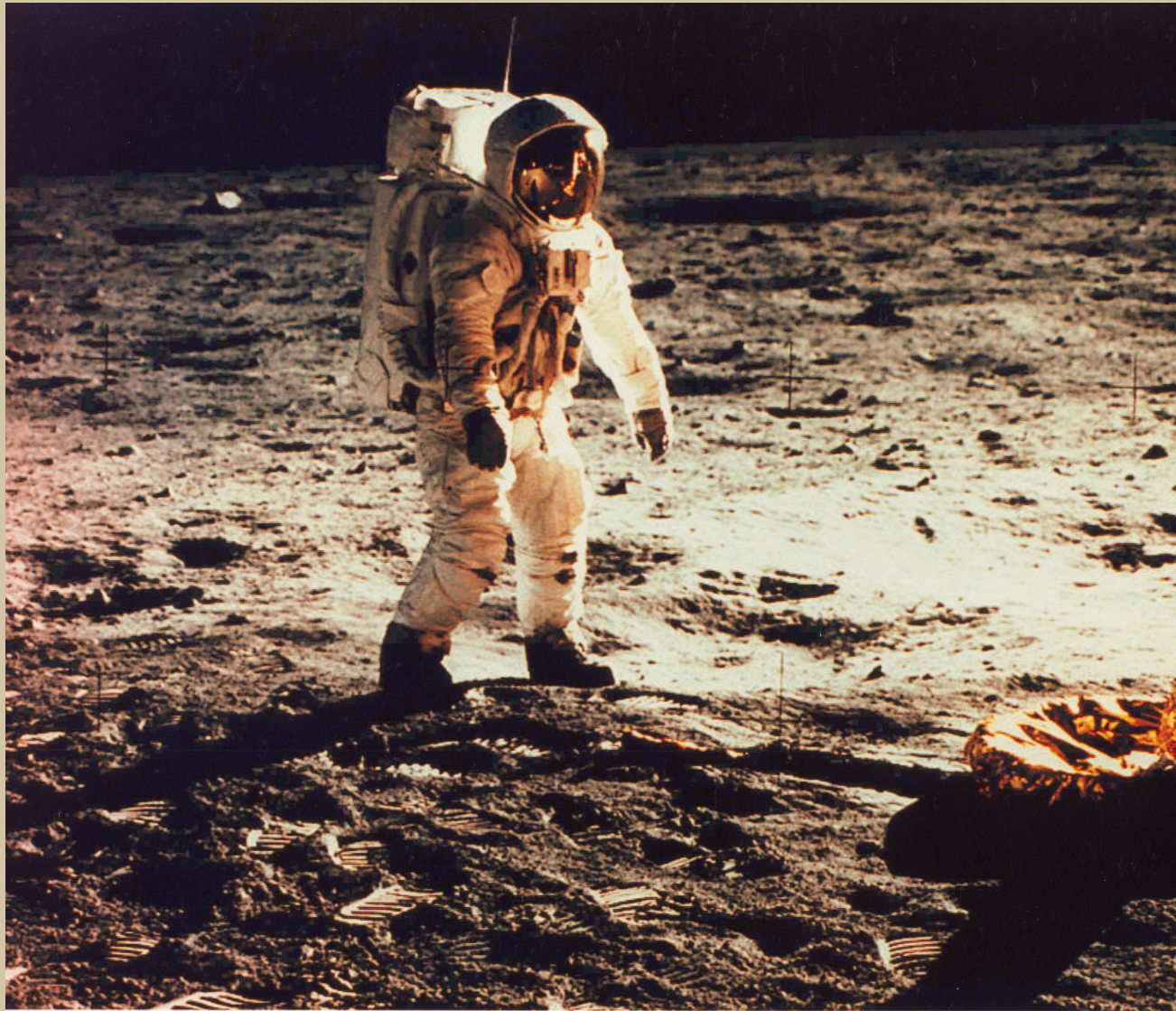
So I can escape the reality I'm subjected to.

So I can be where the most precious dreams belong.

—Sincerely, a dreamer.



“Pride[ful]” by Matthew Pacuruko, 2023. To see more of Matthew’s work and read an interview with the artist and poet, visit <http://thelitmag.com>.



Why Astronauts Are Sad

Matthew Pacuruco



Why are astronauts sad?

Well, for one man to do the job
they have to conquer what's in front of them.

That can be a black hole
eating them whole.

It can be an asteroid
colliding against them and bursting into pieces
or it's simply the oxygen
—not enough to breathe in
and out of their lungs.

In the midst of the pure black sky,
a multitude of unimaginable dust,
the stars are an escape.

The amount of pain to distinguish
which star is the one to be followed.

One might explode a man's universe
where the unknown is brighter.
Another might inherit a man's dream
where the darkness is engulfed.

Over a cone of fast light comes sadness,
a chaos that consumes many things.
(An astronaut is supposed to know this part.)

What happens here
is the awakening.
Whether they're in this deadly point
or up in the cosmos
unpredictable reality does it for them.
Surviving and coming back resourceful is the goal.
However absorbed as a star
is the end for you.

No matter the routes that are taken
a wish upon a star is only dreamed upon.

Estranghero

Tai Coronación

Estranghero

Perpetual foreigner

Words that are permanent on my body

A tattoo for everyone to see

But when I look in the mirror

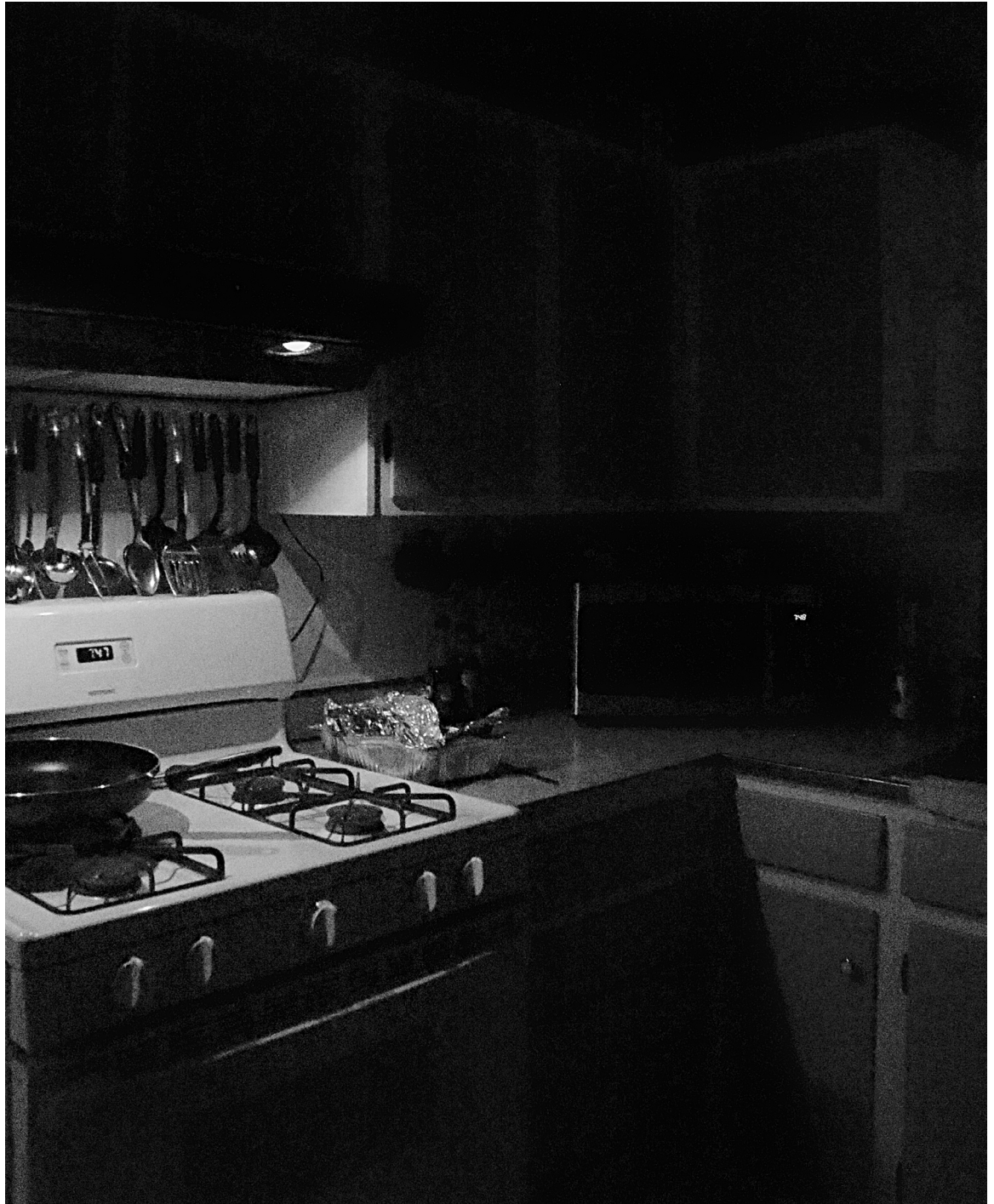
All I see is me

A little Filipino girl

Her worldview so narrow

Little did she know

She would always be estranghero (stranger)



Photograph: "The Smell of Oil" by Isabella Allwood, 2023.

Otra Vida

Emily Ramos

For parts of my childhood, my mother was a vampire. Vampires by the laws of fiction are said to deteriorate in the day and become mighty at night. I believed my mother was as nocturnal as a vampire too. That a part of her was this creature that couldn't be fully seen—someone I couldn't fully recognize. She was like an engine that roared into life by the sleeping souls of our town.

The mornings would be a series of tiptoes, arguments with my siblings in hurried whispers, glimpses of my mother sleeping with her makeup still on through the make-shift curtain door. Sometimes, I took more than just glimpses and ventured closer when I knew she needed the rest. Forgot-to-sign permission slips, report cards, and other school documents would be scribbled in her sleepy cursive signature. My hands would crimp the edges of the thin paper tightly as I tried not to wake her after succeeding in my early morning adventures. She desired nothing more than to just stay asleep, but my siblings and I were critters that needed to be taken care of. She pulled out of her desire to give us what we needed at the moment. Those mornings always had foggy air with a scent that I did not like. Something musty, thick, sour, bitter—traces of other people's beer. The smell never came directly from her but rather from what her clothing touched.

Just after dinner ended, she would be fully awake. Music would fill the apartment, clothes would be loosely scattered all over the bed, and her makeup bag would be neatly laid on top of the small bathroom

Sometimes she was forty, sometimes she was twenty-five, but most of the time I would just agree with her lie, “Tengo treinta. Next year? Thirty as well.”

sink. I would sit in a white metal chair—most of the time, a book in hand—and I would watch her. I would look up from the pages of my book and watch as she patted foundation over her dark under-eye bags. Immortal as a vampire, I could never understand her true age. Sometimes she was forty, sometimes she was twenty-five, but most of the time I would just agree with her lie, “Tengo treinta. Next year? Thirty as well. Until I die, I will remain thirty.”

My mother was beautiful, still is, regardless of her age, or her chosen age. For a long time, there was never a trace of acne, blemish, or scars on her skin. Her cheeks were smooth and soft to the touch. I would often stare as she picked up brush after brush and let the pigments of color cover the tan of her skin. She would say she was never taught how to use makeup, but she would finish with an enchanting glow each time. Melodies would twirl along to this nightly ritual. She would sometimes sing with the lyrics. Every night in this small moment of peace, she would let the music drown out the world as her mind concentrated on the night that called for her. She spent a lot of time thinking when she was awake, but she never spoke her thoughts out loud.

This night was different. The lights weren't working, so there was no choice but to stick long white candles in every corner of the house and pray no one trips over them. My mother wasn't playing music and her ritual was disturbed by an odd mood. My mother said quick buenas noches and vete a dormir an hour earlier than usual. The kiss I left on her cheek is engraved inside me like carved words in a silver ring.

While my siblings slept, I played dead. I listened as her phone rang. She was quiet for a long time, listening, before she started talking. Her

voice would pick up in some parts and in others it would break. Her shoes would stick and unstick from the floor. She was pacing the adjacent room. “Que voy hacer?” My English and Spanish were starting to intermix without my permission and it broke every fragment and syllable apart, matching that of the current atmosphere. Then, the air grew quiet. I heard her flat shoes being tossed into the closet and her jingles of jewelry quieting. It wasn’t morning yet, why is this happening now?

Too curious to stay in bed, I tiptoed over to where she sat on our old couch, my feet light on the ground from habit. I wanted to ask what was wrong but nothing came out of my mouth. She stared at me with confused red puffy eyes. A scolding is what I was waiting for. To be told to go back to bed and not stick my ear where it doesn’t belong. Instead, she took a deep breath and smiled. It was small but it eased parts of me regardless. My mother tends to push people away as a form of protection, but at this moment, she was letting me in. “Wanna come with me?” She asked. She replaced her white button-down shirt with a simple red t-shirt. Her calloused feet weren’t covered by flats anymore, but by sneakers barely touched. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“To the ‘night restaurant’, I have to pick up my last paycheck.” She blew out a candle as she walked towards the front door. “Ya no quiero trabajar de noche, estoy cansada...”

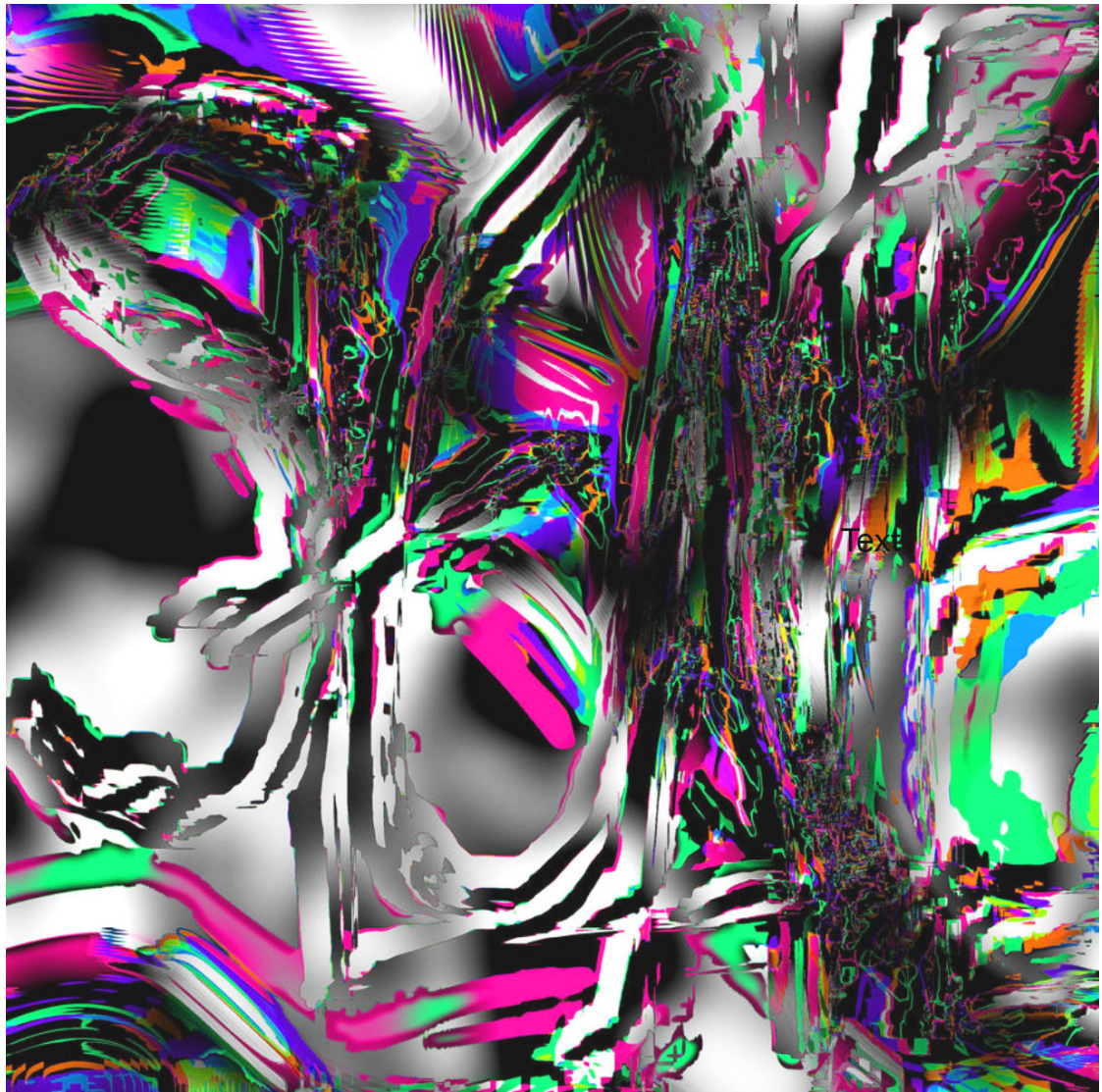
I stopped seeing her as a vampire that night. I took her hand and walked to the bus stop headed to New York, saw how empty the streets were, and how lonely the night felt. The thoughts that swirled in her mind passed onto me. She kept so much to herself when she didn’t need to. All those nights I thought of her happily traveling through the night and rejoicing with the moonlight, dissipated. In front of me wasn’t someone immortal, but rather a single incredibly tired mother trying her best to provide for her kids. The night was her only company. She was doing what she could to get a steady job, even if it meant giving up her days.

To read an interview with Emily Ramos, visit <http://thelitmag.com>.





“Summer in the South”
by Isabella Allwood. 2023.



Just Look Away

Caleb Hogan

You shower in your self pity
when you look in your mirror
at your fucked up teeth,
the ones that never got the braces they needed.
The longer you look,
The more it becomes self hatred,
you want to punch yourself in the mouth as hard as you can
until your snaggle fangs pop back.
You can't escape the feeling when you leave.
After you curse your reflection,
you turn on your TV
and see actors with manufactured perfect smiles
in between advertisements for Invisalign.

You couldn't repair your broken air conditioner
for nearly a full summer.
Spending many nights sleeping on the floor,
because you think it'll cool you off
but you wake up drenched in sweat,
with fleas biting your legs.
You give up on sleep and turn on your TV
to watch an episode of The Simpsons
where the family buys a pool during a hot summer
in between ads for Orkin.
And you finally throw your remote
when you see an ad for a new kind of mattress.
It supposedly reduces excess body heat.

It's the end of the month
you're staying up until midnight
waiting for your link card to refill.
You've been making peanut butter sandwiches
out of stale crackers all week.
11:50 rolls around and you head to the store

When you get there, you're too hungry to think straight.
You've waited too long to eat,
while watching ads for junk food.
It's all you can think about.
You blow most of your food stamps on chips, soda, and TV dinners.

One day you finally lost it.
Jon Taffer from Bar Rescue is on Fox News
talking about people like you
in some fucked up analogy,
"They only feed a military dog at night
because a hungry dog is an obedient dog."
Your veins pump hatred instead of blood.
tremors of pure rage control your reaction
You pick up a hammer and smash his head.
First your screen turns white,
then it loses all signal.
Shards of glass spew from the demon
like fragments of skull.
They cut you, but you can't feel it.
You rip it from the entertainment stand, toss it to the floor,
and animalistically bash it to death
like you've been waiting your whole life for this moment.
By the time you stop
you finally feel sane again,
but the blood and shards of glass
cover your floor
like a violent piñata party.
It looks like a murder scene.
You barely even remember why you did it.

Midnight Mistress

Alessandra Ventura

How often has the moon beheld me from afar
eagerly waiting for my phone to glow?
How she must laugh,
as she watches me giggle
at yet another 2 am message.
“Midnight Mistress,” she calls me,
as she watches me bare myself
to the depths of my soul,
unraveling secret after secret
until I am all laid out
for greedy eyes to soak in.
I deal in intimacy:
in whispered dreams
and stolen kisses.
The light of the moon does not help,
romanticizing my dalliances,
sweeping me up into a starry sky,
dancing amongst the constellations.
I won’t be the person they wake up next to,
that much I know.
But the effulgence allows me to pretend
that perhaps I can be more
than just a paramour.
But then the sun explodes in the sky
And there is no hiding from the harsh glare.
And I see those moments for what they are.
Just a made-up fantasy of a Midnight Mistress,
hoping for something real in the darkness.

The Art of the Anxious

Alvi Chowdhury



[Declamations: a public speaking tradition at The Brooklyn Latin School rooted in the belief that strong oratory skills are essential for leadership, where students recite a memorized passage of literature.]

The students transformed the room in preparation for declamations. The familiar tables, which were originally set up for work in groups, were now clustered together like an unwilling herd. The chairs, set up in straight rows like an auditorium with the attention to the front of the room. A palpable sense of tension filled the air.

Our names, etched in order on the blackboard as we take our seats in the front row. I waited for my turn, as other students performed their pieces with gusto and impeccable delivery, while others stuttered and faltered through it.

My hands were becoming sweaty as my heart was racing. I tapped my foot in an attempt to calm the nerves. I couldn't evade it though. The roller coaster's ascension, that moment when gravity yanks at your insides, threatening to drop you into the abyss.

And then it happened. My name echoed across the room, a summons to the edge. I rose, legs unsteady, and faced my audience. An uncertain smile and a nod to recognize their existence. The first lines came out, like the lyrics of a song stuck in my head. But then—a brick wall. A stumble, a falter. Panic grabbed at my throat.

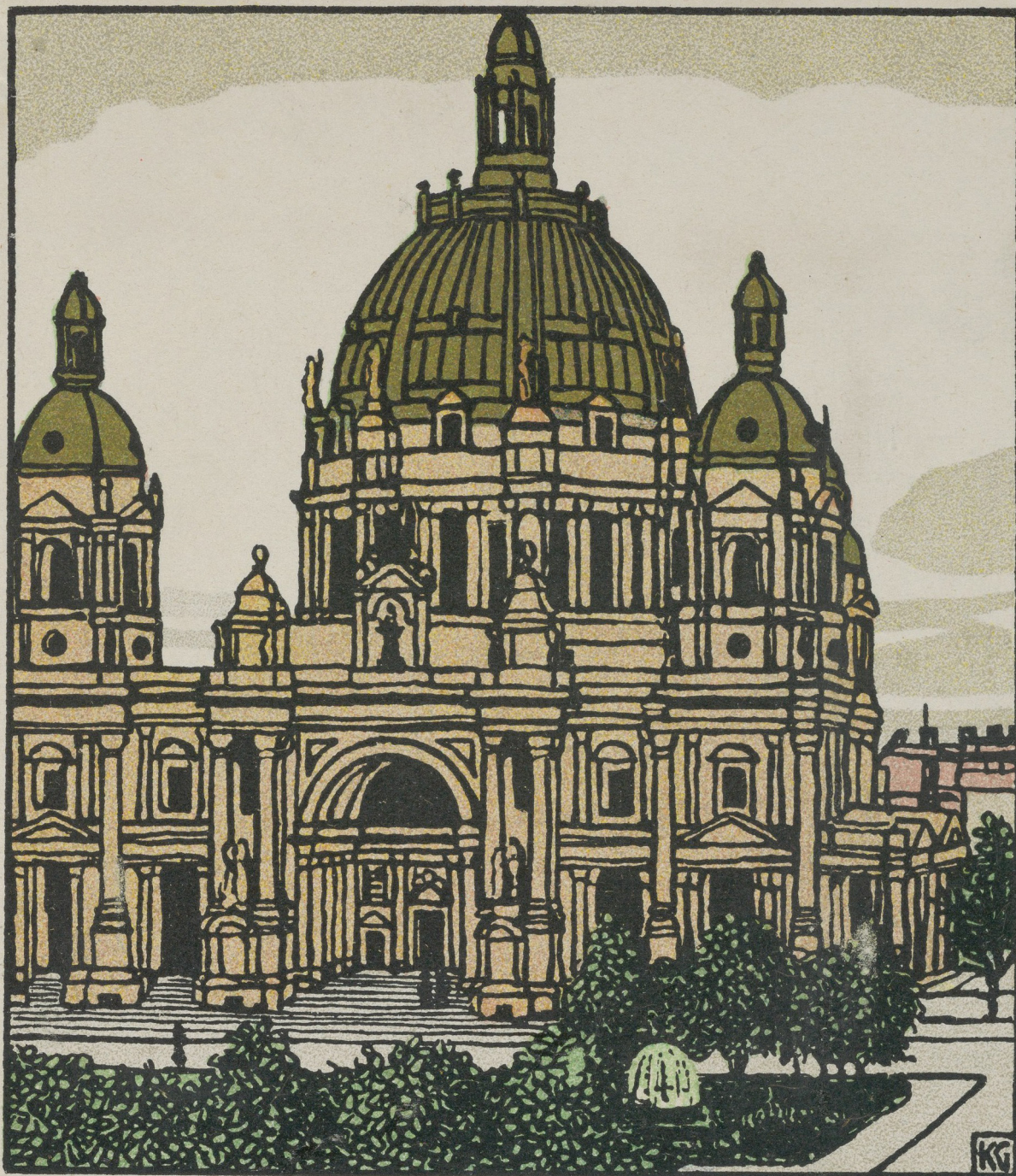
Time stretched, elastic and cruel. For a suspended breath, my thoughts cleared—a stillness before the fall. Nothing would ever feel as raw as this. Blank glances pierced into me, staring at my vulnerability. What were they thinking? Did they perceive the trembling in my voice, the shaking in my hands?

I tried again, the words slipping like sand through the palms of my hands. But my mind succumbed to its fate, like a defeated soldier. The squeeze of fingernails on my palm. The swaying back and forth of my body, seeking refuge in the motion. I glanced at my teacher with eyes imploring for mercy. Could she halt this public execution? But, she rejected my unspoken desire. Thirty more seconds of this soul-crushing exposure. "Thank you," I muttered, slipping back into my seat.

The urge to cry stung my eyes, a desire to display the suffering and gather some pity. But men don't cry. Instead, I wore the weight of shame, a symbol of my survival.

And so, I sat there, the abyss behind me, the echoes of my stumbling still reverberating. The room recovered its original configuration, But I retained that moment, the summit, the plummet, the fragile smile etched into my brain like a scar.

To read an interview with Alvi Chowdhury, visit <http://thelitimag.com>.



BERLIN

Der Dom

Cathedrals

Ethan Velez

I was still quite young when my mother told me about her dream where she found me having sex with another man. Since I was born I could identify the subtle, non-verbal, blink-and-you-miss-it displays of what my parents were thinking and feeling. When my mother told me about her dream, I saw her bewildered eyes, her lowered lips, her shoulders turned away from me. I concluded I needed to apologize to her, so I did.

I found myself apologizing for many things that way. My grandmother didn't like my father, so after I was born with his face, I apologized to her. When my father made me in his image, I apologized to him. When I fell in love for the first time, I apologized to her. Christopher Isherwood once described this medium as a series of little deaths: the denial of yourself for the endorsement of others. When I read this in his book, I wrote in the margins: "repenting: the denial of yourself for the endorsement of Christ?"

I saw the face of God in my mother's love. So like many before me, I abided by God, I strived to make Him proud. I never disobeyed my mother. I was always there to protect her. That's why her dream scared the shit out of me: because she had revealed to me the person she didn't love, maybe even resented, and for a moment he looked like me. For a moment, I stopped being her son. For a moment, I fell from the grace of God.

I was too young to know that the face of God was in all beautiful things, in the mundanity, in the night. All the beauty and the blood-

shed, too. I saw it in my first kiss, in my first real fight, in orgasmic sex, in the validation of a good grade, in a spliff with my morning coffee. In these moments, I didn't feel compelled to apologize. In these moments, I lived where I once died. When Christopher Isherwood stopped suffering little deaths, he went to Berlin. I went to San Francisco.

I flew out to celebrate my birthday with my high school best friend. The neighborhood he lived in was frighteningly reminiscent of old Washington Heights: colorful street vendors, people on beach chairs under the sun, music playing from a kitchen window nearby. It had a heartbeat, a subtle thump you could feel beneath the pavement.

I was taking this all in the morning after my birthday. I spent it alone, leaving my friends behind to look for the cruising park. I learned about them from Al Pacino in *Cruising* and I read tales in John Rechy's *City of Night*. I knew that cruising was queer history, that it was a dance. I also knew it sounded terrifying, and that I needed to know more. I trusted my trip to San Francisco to include impulse and bold abandonment of my senses. I found it in this park: this primal museum display of men with other men.

In the beginning, I wanted to repent. This wasn't my first sexual or even queer experience, and yet I was again overcome with this need to apologize. I suddenly remembered through my upbringing that sex was wrong and humiliating. I felt untoward. I avoided everyone's eyes. Then in deep breaths, I could smell fresh dirt and just-trimmed grass. I was back in my body. My mother wasn't here, I told myself, so neither was God. Neither was shame.

**I saw it in my first kiss, in my first fight,
in a spliff with my morning coffee. In
these moments, I lived where I once died.**

Was I willing to exist outside of shame?

I learned rather quickly that cruising was about patience and gratitude. We exclusively communicated in this subtle, non-verbal, blink-and-you-miss-it language I knew so well. I felt alive when I nodded or shook my head, when a hand stroked my arm or touched my shoulder. Eye contact felt glorious, smiling more thrilling than sex. The first man to look at me was tall, handsome, and patiently waiting for me to look back at him. (I found this to be the most appealing trait about him, that he was kind.) I pretended I loved looking at shrubbery until I couldn't. When I finally looked back, we shared a smile, as if to say "Isn't this so funny?"

There were buildings to the north of the park that hovered over us like a jury of unblinking giants. I imagined what I looked like to them, standing over a kneeling man who worshiped me in ways I previously thought was reserved for God.

On the flight back to New York, it was five am eastern time, and I was thinking about it all. Was I willing to exist outside of shame? Had I done that in San Francisco? When I landed, I started noticing my face in the reflective surfaces at JFK. Had I changed? Did I want to?

My mother was happy to see me. She waited for me at pickup and her joy from having me back was infectious. "I don't know when you got so grown up," she said endearingly, and it was somehow the greatest compliment I've ever received.

The parts of myself that are still afraid of the fall from grace exist in the Virgin Mary portrait above my bed, in the Saint Michael emblem in my foyer. In their company is the cock ring I bought in San Francisco, a framed photo of Al Pacino in the Godfather, a Tom of Finland print on my wall. I don't apologize for the contradiction, I don't want to. It's here, too, in this complexity: the face of God.



We Are the Children

Saturn Lawson



We are the children
Of those who suffered through slavery
The ones who fought against segregation
The descendants of Tubman and Bridges
We are the children of those you couldn't lynch

We are the children
Of those who threw the first stones
The ones who were victims of the trans panic defense
The descendants of Johnson and Rivera
We are the children of those who proved it wasn't "just a phase"

We are the children
Of those who are so often fetishized
The ones who are the most underrepresented
The descendants of Sappho and DeLarverie
We are the children of those survivors of corrective rape

We are the children
Of those earning 84 cents to a man's dollar
The ones deemed property of their husbands
The descendants of Addams and Curie
We are the children of those you failed to burn

We are the children



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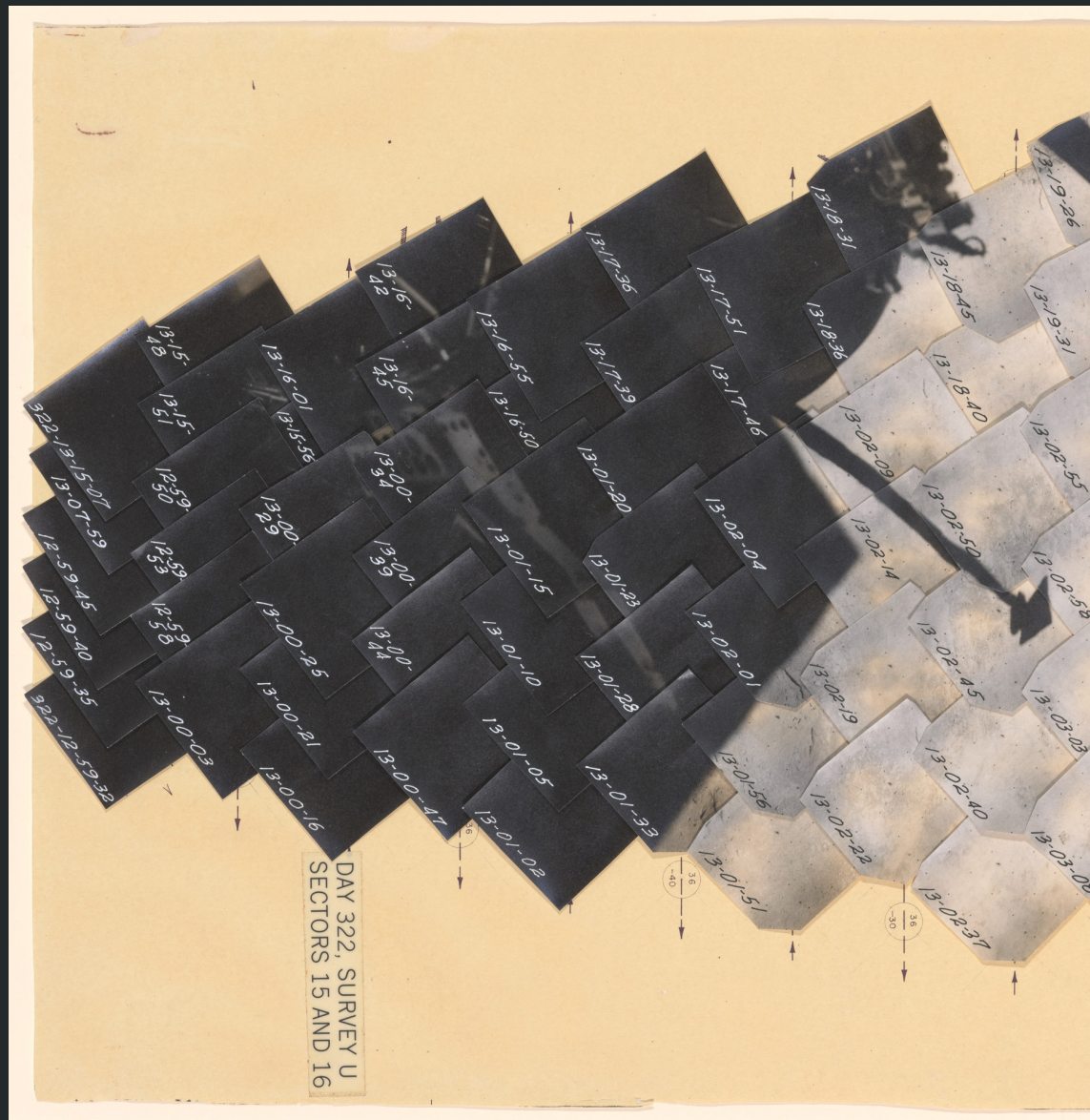
“We Are the Children”: Photograph of Marsha P. Johnson (left, in dark dress) attending a Gay Pride parade in New York City in 1982. Courtesy Barbara Alper.

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Line drawing by **Binita Shrestha**.



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