



LABY RINTH

COLLEGE OF SAN MATEO • THE WRITERS' PROJECT

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Keep writing. Keep creating. Keep learning.



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Letter from the Editor

The end of last semester was chaotic. But, aren't they all? We worry about our tests, our papers, our grades. We chase deadlines. We worry and work hard. And as we spend endless hours writing essays for our transfer applications, we keep arriving at the same question: have I done enough? After some time, we may find our efforts adequate and rewarding. Most times, however, we wish we could have done more. As we prepare to try again, we learn the most important lessons from those trying times that almost drove us to madness.

This is what Labyrinth is about: trying, failing, and trying again. It is the place where all fragmented individual efforts become part of a beautiful mosaic. Every author and artist enriches our understanding of this experience. They provide depth to its happiness, hurt, excitement, and endless questioning. The greatest part of any journey is realizing you are not in it alone.

We hope this edition of Labyrinth reminds you that every single experience, every single effort, and every single person you meet shapes your story in unexpected ways.

To our readers and contributors: thank you for your continued support. Keep reading. Keep writing. Keep creating. Keep learning.

Gabriela Topete Eng Goon
Editor in Chief



NOVEMBER 13

Photograph by Antonio Stichel



Thoughtful

by Sabrina Vargas

Anxious, Esmerelda surveyed aisle fourteen. Her gaze fell on the overflowing display of Valentine's Day cards, each row filled with endless hues of bright reds and pinks. She barely noticed the people who staggered in and out of the aisle, but the odor of stationary prevailed.

With care, she slipped a card out of its holder and revealed the design of a giant pink heart. Esmerelda recalled her standards for an acceptable card and dismissed the one in her hand. It shouldn't stand out so much, she thought.

Lace, glitter, quotes, and grandiose professions of undying love made Esmerelda dizzy, and now the sight of hearts seemed to cause her gut to churn. She thought it best to put the card back where it came from and move on with her task, no matter her level of unease.

There was a time in her childhood when she anticipated every single holiday—the warm-hearted company of her family during Thanksgiving and Christmas; the perfect personal gifts she took pride in presenting to loved ones. Each celebration was a chance to outdo herself, and she would rise to the occasion with serious effort.

Now, at 25, her enthusiasm for gifting had dwindled. Over the years, the pressure to find gifts better than those which came before became a weight on her shoulders, an ever-growing, nagging obligation to strive for perfection. It certainly took a toll on her self-confidence, because every gift she considered fell short of her high expectations and, in turn, sapped her desire to celebrate any holiday at all.

However, this year was different. There would be no second-guessing because the plan was simple. Get in. Get out. She already felt a bit off during her current search for cards, and any other distraction would only prolong her suffering.

But to her dismay, an old man approached and lingered beside her. He reached for a card next to the one she had rejected and stood too close for comfort. Inch by inch, Esmerelda gave the old man room to ponder his find, but she felt him raise his gaze in her direction.

Don't make eye contact. He's going to ask for my opinion, and I don't have the energy to help him. She pretended not to notice his indecisive aura and settled for an unintentional tapping of her foot. Her ears burned at the sound of "When a Man Loves a Woman," and the urge to hum prompted a pit in her stomach. Ew. The longer she stayed, the more miserable she felt. The music, the people, the distasteful selection of cards—it was all too much to bear.

And yet, Esmerelda fully intended to leave the store with a card. Her friend, Grace, was in desperate need of a reminder that someone truly loved her, and this card had to be delivered to her on the day designated for love. It was a small detail which did not mean much to Esmerelda anymore, but she knew it was all Grace thought about.

Despite the pressures of finding the perfect gift and the constant persistence of holidays, Esmerelda still enjoyed the idea of showing someone that they are both loved and appreciated. She reminded herself that holidays

weren't necessary to show how much she cared because she spent time with those who mattered the most. She also noted that some regard these special days more seriously than others, and they get hurt when it seems as if no one cares. So for today, for her friend, she would play along with the rest of the world once more.

Refocused on her task, Esmerelda searched for something simple, a blank card in which she could write a personal message to Grace. What she noticed now was not a selection of flawed and unacceptable cards. Instead, she saw the little details in each which she knew her friend would love. Her decision became easier, less daunting. In no time, she picked up a card with a black and white photo of two young girls on the cover. They were hugging so tight, it seemed as if they would never let go. Friends for life, no matter what.

It's perfect. She held back tears of excitement as she opened the card and took out a pen from her pocket. On the inside, she wrote this: "I will never leave you to face the world alone. Like this hug, our friendship is everlasting, and my love for you is infinite."

Esmerelda's signature sealed the inscription, and a heart was placed beside it. She chuckled when she realized how cheesy her message was. But that didn't matter. She knew Grace would love it to pieces.





Photograph by **Nafeila Waili**



Media Art by **Abigail Nepomuceno**

Pink Poppies

Allison Hom

“When I saw you, I fell in love, and you smiled because you knew.”

—Arrigo Boito

I've always wanted
to talk
to you
& to know
you.

So,
on St. Valentine's Day,
early in the morning
at the school locker,
my eager fingers
pressed Scotch Tape onto
a thin twig with
fanned pink petals
& glossy, sharp leaves—

my first
greeting
to you.

But little did I know
that you'd search
for a garden with pink flowers,
search for me,
and talk to me
over these
pink poppies.

The Tea Party

by Jack Baumgarten

Arlene handed me the little saucer with a white teacup balanced on it. I took it from her hand so I could hold both the cup and the saucer. There was nothing in the cup. She asked me if I wanted milk in my tea.

I said “yes,” not because I wanted milk, or tea for that matter, but because I would get to see her pour it from the small creamer that she had on her tray.

She was wearing a long, simple cloth dress with sleeves that ended above her elbows and a white lace frilly thing around the end. I noticed that she crossed one leg over the other when she bent to pick up the creamer and pour the milk. I pretended that it was milk, too.

When she did that, I noticed her shoes. They were large boots, black like my Dad’s. They laced almost up to her knee, and there was a metal strap that seemed to bend around her ankle and go up each side of her leg. One of the shoes was scuffed badly on the toe. I figured that was probably from walking up and down the front steps of the apartments.

She always sat on those steps and played with her china tea set and her set of jacks. The Old Crab Lady never came out to chase me away when I was on the front steps with Arlene. I liked to sit there, even when Arlene was in the house, because it was right next door to my own home: a brick apartment building with six units and a garage for only one car.

I was glad that Arlene was there today. Whenever the Old Crab Lady came out from the door at the head of the stairs and found me there alone, she would scream at me in Polish to get out. “Zejdz z krokow! Iz do domu, ktorego

naezyasz!”¹ I knew it was Polish because all the kids on the block had parents who came from Poland. The guys on the team called them “DP’s”² most of the time, except when it was about one of their own parents.

I knew a few Polish words like “Stasza pani.” I thought that that meant “Old Lady.” I could even say “Idź do domu i idź do łóżka staruszka.” I’ve been told that that meant “go home and go to bed, old lady.” But I didn’t say that to the Old Crab Lady because I thought Arlene wouldn’t like it. I didn’t know if the Old Crab was her mom or grandma or her aunt. She sure didn’t like me on those steps though. Whatever she was saying to me, it was loud and accompanied by a lot of arm and finger waving. I never could figure out why she always chased me away, but I always left anyway.

It was funny that I couldn’t seem to understand what Arlene enjoyed about playing house there. Those concrete steps were nothing like a kitchen—at least not the one my Mom had at home.

Arlene seemed to like having me there to pretend we were in a house with tables and chairs and running water, along with a stove to heat water and a sink to wash the cups in. She had long reddish hair and soft hands. I could tell sometimes when my fingers would brush across her palm as she handed me the cup and saucer. Her eyes only looked at my face when

¹ “Come down! You go to the house you’re in!”

² “Displaced Person” or “Dumb Polack” in the vernacular.

she handed me something. I knew that because I found myself watching her a lot when we were on those steps, except when I spoke to her. Then I had to look at my feet.

I liked her eyes, not so much because they were a deep dark brown, but because they seemed to sparkle a little when she looked at me, especially when she smiled.

As she turned to tidy up the cups, saucers, sugar bowl, and milk creamer, I turned to face the street. Five of my buddies were playing ball on the asphalt. They used the covers of two sewers, each in the middle of the street—about 100 feet apart—for home plate and 2nd base. One of the balls they were tossing about bounced off a black coupe parked by the curb. This happened often when they played there, but since the old balls they had were so soft, it seldom caused any damage—at least not enough that anyone would notice. I shuddered a little because he thought for sure that that would bring the Old Crab out and she would chase them all away, including him. He turned to Arlene again so that if the lady came out, she might see that it wasn't him who did it.

Arlene didn't seem to notice what was going on on the street. Funny, he thought, the steps where they sat ended right on the sidewalk. There was only a small strip of dirt between the sidewalk and the curb. They were so close to the game and the ball bouncing off that coupe; yet, she seemed oblivious to it all.

Right then, Arlene looked up into the tree near the curb. She seemed enthralled by the old brown leaves moving slowly in the warm breeze. He guessed that she was sad just like him, since he was realizing that summer was almost over, and school would start again soon and he would have to make the five block walk to St. Anne's. He wished he could go to the school just

around the corner. It was called St. Pangreatous or something like that. He didn't know who St. Pangreatous was, but he knew that the sisters there taught all their classes in Polish. That's why his Mom would not let him go there for school.

He thought that that's where Arlene went to school, but he wasn't sure. He never saw her going or coming to school.

Then one of the guys in the street came over to pick up a ball that had crossed over the curb and dirt and sidewalk and into the small garden next to the steps. He stopped short at the sidewalk edge and looked up at Arlene. She turned her head a bit toward him and said,

"It's OK, go ahead and get it." But he hesitated.

She turned and looked at me with those dark brown eyes, smiled, and slightly tilted her head back, making a nod in the other direction. It's funny how she could talk to me that way, and even funnier how I knew what she was saying.

I got up and started walking down the steps to retrieve the ball for the guy in the street, but something bothered me. I looked at the ball lying there beneath the hedges bordering the sidewalk.

To go there, I would have to come close to the steps. So, instead of stepping forward, I turned to the four guys still standing out in the street and shouted, "Hey! You come over and get this. I can't."

I looked at Arlene. Her pretty eyes were nearly covered by her long eyelashes. Her head was turned away from me and the tree and from almost everything. None of the kids moved. I got the ball and tossed it back out over the coupe and into the street. The kid by the hedge looked at me for a moment, and then shook his head from side to side as he walked back out onto the street.

The Old Crab had not come out to chase

"It's funny how she could talk to me that way, and even funnier how I knew what she was saying."

us all away. I went back to the step just below the one that Arlene was sitting on.

She asked me if I would like a cookie with my tea. I was glad that she did that. I wanted to forget something and thinking about an imaginary cookie seemed to help. When I took the cookie from her soft hand, my fingers held hers for a moment. She looked at me and smiled, and it made me feel good.

Just then the Old Crab came out and said, “Teraz Arlene, nadszedł czas na żelazne płuca.”³ Arlene sighed and rose carefully, using one arm on the step above her to raise her hips up. She held the railing as she walked up the steps next to the Old Crab.

The Old Crab just stood there with her arms folded as she watched Arlene join her on the cement porch. She glanced out at the street and stared for a moment at those five kids, now standing still out on the other side of the coupe. I just sat there as I watched her stern scowl while her eyes scanned the street and then those five guys. Just before she turned with Arlene to go into the hallway, I thought she glanced at me with what looked like tears in her eyes.

I walked onto the other side of the sidewalk to avoid talking to the other kids. But one of them, the kid who would not come near the steps, shouted out to me, “Wait till I tell my Mom that you went over there again. She’ll tell your Mom and ‘Złapiesz piekło.’”⁴

When I got home, Mom was busy and paid no attention to me. We only had one bedroom but Dad kept some books from an old encyclopedia there. I believe he got them from a junkman somewhere, and I was glad he did; I liked to look at the pictures of places I had never heard of before.

I could tell that Dad didn’t get all of the books because the ones we had there in our bedroom went from A – E and then J – P. So I guess F – I got lost somewhere. I wanted to read about what that kid’s mom was so mad about, so I grabbed the J – P book. It was easy to find the word “polio.” I didn’t understand all the words that I found on that page like ‘bulbar’ and ‘respirator,’ but I got the idea when I saw a picture of a kid laying in some sort of a long

round cabinet with his head sticking out one end. I wished I could look up what “żelazne płuca” meant, but that book was missing.

I took a chance and asked my Mom. She looked at me funny and for a moment I thought she was going to be mad. She set aside her mixing bowl and pulled me to her side. She brushed my hair back a bit and looked at me like she was afraid.

When she finished lecturing me once again about iron lungs and polio and why I had to stay away from anyone with it, I went back to the bedroom. I felt bad - not so much for Arlene, but for those kids playing ball in front of the steps—and for my Mom, too.

I hoped Arlene’s time in that cabinet would be over by the next day so she could serve tea again. Then maybe she will smile with those brown eyes again.

³ “Now Arlene, it's time for an iron lung.”

⁴ “You will catch hell.”

The Lemon, *Citrus limon* Osbeck



Media Art by **Laura Hoznek**

Sugarcoated

by Athena Eleftheriades

Can you smell it? The smell of freshly baked chocolate cake. It is almost like walking directly into chocolate heaven. It is simply mouth-watering. Your whole body is craving that freshly baked chocolate cake, dripping with melted chocolate icing. Now consider taking a bite out of that warm chocolate cake. However, before you do, think of your most vital organs—your heart, your brain, your lungs. Think, in particular, about your pancreas. Is it any of these organs craving the cake, or is it just your state of mind?

The dictionary defines sugar as follows: “a sweet, crystalline substance, with the general formula $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$. It is chiefly obtained from the juice of the sugarcane and the sugar beet, and is present in sorghum, maple sap, etc. It is used extensively as an ingredient and a flavoring for certain foods and as a fermenting agent in the manufacturing of certain alcoholic beverages. The chemical term for sugar is sucrose.”

Sugar is found in a variety of foods and drinks. There are approximately 56 different types of sugar molecules. Of these, the most common are: glucose, fructose, sucrose, maltose, lactose, dextrose, high-fructose corn syrup, fruit juice, raw honey, and, finally, raw sugar itself. Those which we refer to as added sugars and syrups are incorporated into foods and beverages while they are being manufactured and prepared. Specifically, sugar-sweetened beverages are any type of liquid sweetened with one or more of the various molecular forms of sugar. There are many examples of sugar-sweetened beverages; some which we are all likely familiar with are soda (assuming it is not sugar-free), fruit drinks, sport drinks, energy drinks, sweetened waters,

and coffee and tea beverages with sugar added.

Why We Become So Addicted To Sugar

Sugar interacts with different substances in the brain, influencing and changing their normal levels. Most notably, it affects the level of dopamine in the brain (Wlassoff 2016).

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that plays an important role in our “reward circuit.” In this respect, it is similar to cocaine, amphetamines, and nicotine, all of which are highly associated with addictive behavior. Activation of the dopamine system leads to intense feelings of pleasure which, in turn, can often lead to prolonged cravings. Furthermore, this system is activated by natural rewards and behaviors such as eating tasty, high energy foods, having sex, interacting socially, etc. Once this system is up and running, one often wants to carry out the behavior again and again so as to recapture the same sense of satisfaction as the first time (Reichelt 2018). When we eat something with sugar, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, cakes, and cookies, our brain releases dopamine and we feel a pleasurable “high.” As with other addictive substances, this sensation makes us want to re-experience it, and thus we eat these sugary foods again. However, as we repeat this behavior, our brain begins to release less and less dopamine in order to prevent overstimulation (McKay 2014). This means that there are fewer receptors available for dopamine to bind to in the brain. Therefore, the next time we eat something sugary, we are required to eat more than before so that we experience the same “high” as we did the first time. This results in us

increasing our sugar intake, leading, eventually, to chronic overconsumption.

Refined vs. Natural Sugar

Sugar is a carbohydrate that is digested into glucose and used by the body to provide it energy. However, a big factor that influences our health is the type of sugar that we eat. Despite fruits containing glucose, sucrose, and their primary sugar, fructose, fruits also contain water, vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other beneficial nutrients. Furthermore, “many fruits contain phenols, a form of antioxidants that offers many health benefits including protection from heart disease, cancer and other damaging effects” (fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org). Refined sugars, such as table sugar, agave syrup, and high fructose corn syrup, do not possess the same benefits as natural sugars. Similarly, as one author notes, “added sugar lacks the multiple health promoting qualities of fruits provided by phenols, fiber, vitamins, and minerals” (fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org).

However, the situation is more complicated than simply saying that “natural sugars are better than “processed sugars.” What really matters is intake. The body is unable to distinguish between natural sugar from fruit, honey, and milk and refined sugar from cupcakes, cakes, and sweets. The body breaks down any sugar into fructose and glucose in the liver. Sugars are then converted into glycogen or fat for storage, or kept as glucose in the blood for use in the body’s cells. Too much fructose, glucose, or sucrose may lead to health issues. Therefore, in order to get the best amount of glucose and fructose, it’s best to get it from fruits and vegetables as this will help prevent you from overdosing on sugar while also providing the body with the nutrients it needs. Nonetheless, you should limit your intake of added sugar, regardless of the type.

The Role of Sugar-Sweetened Beverages (SSBs) in the Diabetes and Obesity Epidemics

Obesity is a significant public health challenge in the United States. According to the World Health Organization, as of 2005, approximately 1.6 billion adults were overweight

and at least 400 million were obese. In the United States, from 1990 to 2016, the average percentage of obese adults increased by 18.7% and, as of 2016, nearly 38% of the US population was obese, with 8% falling into the extreme obesity category (ProCon.org). According to the American Heart Association, sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) have been the main attraction in obesity-related discussions and policies. This is because SSBs are the primary source of added sugars and calorie contributors in the American diet. Furthermore, SSBs consist of excess amounts of added sugar. The average can of sugar-sweetened soda or fruit punch provides about 150 calories, almost all from sugar. That’s the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of table sugar (ProCon.org). Over the past 30 years, across the globe, there has been a marked increase in consumption of SSBs. Studies that have been conducted regarding the beverages high added sugar content suggest that frequently drinking sugar-sweetened beverages may be associated with weight gain and obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, kidney diseases, non-alcoholic liver disease, tooth decay, cavities, and gout.

Effects on the Brain and Body When You Stop Eating Sugar

Avoiding added sugar can be extremely difficult, especially in the United States. However, reducing the amounts of sugar in diets means that individuals, as well as the United States as a whole, will be one step closer to reducing the incidence of obesity.

When a person stops eating sugar, at first there will be residual cravings. Depending on how often a person consumes sugar, cravings may range from mild to very strong. This experience can be likened to ‘withdrawal,’ with symptoms such as headaches and nausea. It is necessary for a person to push through this difficult stage.

One of the first things a person will notice after weaning themselves off of sugar is that their head will feel much better. This is because blood sugar levels stabilize and one is no longer experiencing an up and down sugar roller coaster. Furthermore, a person may very well experience a reduction in mood swings. Cholesterol levels and blood pressure may also

drop, reducing the chances of a stroke or heart disease. Very often, cutting out sugar from will result in dramatic weight loss. This is because people generally do not realize how much sugar they actually eat and how this sugar makes up unnecessary calories in their diets.

Therefore, despite it being tough in the beginning to cut out sugar, through perseverance, a person is likely to experience marked improvements in their health.

Putting a Tax on Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

The aim of a sugar tax is to reduce the consumption of sugar in people's diets. By imposing a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, cities and states hope to reduce the health costs associated with diabetes and obesity. California, alongside other states such as Oregon, Washington, Illinois, and Colorado, have implemented taxes on sugar. And within the state of California, the cities of Berkeley, San Francisco, Albany, and Oakland have all implemented taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages.

In Berkeley, the soda tax took effect on January 1, 2015. The tax imposes one cent per ounce on the distributors of specified sugar-sweetened beverages such as soda, sports drinks, energy drinks, and sweetened ice teas. The revenue generated will enter the general fund of the City of Berkeley. A post-implementation study found that sugary drink sales decreased by 9.6%.

In San Francisco, a one cent per ounce soda tax on distributors of sugary beverages passed on January 1, 2018. The soda industry spent almost \$20 million in its unsuccessful push to defeat the soda tax initiative. The revenue from the tax is used for children's physical education and nutrition programs.

Ending the Epidemic

Sugar has been in our diets for hundreds of years. We have used it for a variety of different reasons. However, we have also taken advantage of sugar. Sugar plays a large role in the obesity and diabetes epidemics that exist today. It may not be the sole cause, but it is a factor. When we consume sugar, we train our bodies to become

dependent on it, and hence we begin the downward spiral into addiction. Even though sugar is not cocaine, heroin, or marijuana, it is the one substance almost the entire population consumes in large quantities. Combating the overconsumption of sugar will require diligent policymakers and, most of all, increased public awareness.

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Painting by **Nuri Illini Ahmad**

Art by Dylan Roberts

TO BR CS OO N S



My Indonesia, Lost Girl

by Ruben Miranda

I see her there, a pair of blue-green eyes
Peering from a jilbab, hiding her light.
She stands, beckoning under monsoon skies,
Jakarta calling, always in my sight.

I long for my Indonesia, lost girl
Who hasn't cried in a decade without me.
She's as luminous as a rare South Sea pearl
And brimming with curiosity.

For she wants to know when I'll come to her.
Humid dreams leave her restless, wanting more.
To her pleading, I can but defer,
No longer able to ignore.

Indonesia, cry not, for one day
I'll return, at last finding my way.

Frostbitten

by Dominique Maneri

You couldn't see past the mirror, and the truth was screaming at you. It was terrifying so you retreated, back to the snow and the cold. I offered you warmth and a blanket, but you were much more comfortable in the frigid winter. You idolized the way the frozen crystals glittered under the sun and moon. You loved how the chill bit at your nose, how the powder melted when you touched it. You asked me to join you in the brisk air, and I shuddered. With layers wrapped around my body to protect me, I agreed to wander into the dense atmosphere with you, though I refused to touch the snow. Catching frostbite was a given, and you'd gone diving into it without protective gear. You loved the way your heart beat faster, the way your lips turned blue, reminding you that you were alive. Slowly I took off the layers and immersed myself under the blue moon, making snow angels with nothing but a sweater, jeans, and socks. This delighted you. Still, I refused the skin-to-snow contact. You pointed to a lake, frozen over from a harsh winter but just thin enough to marvel at the life beneath the surface. It intimidated me, to say the least, yet you bounded toward it, seeking the thrill of the ice cracking beneath your feet. For me, it was simply terrifying. How could you be so reckless knowing that living on the edge could take your life? I looked down at my thin layers of clothing, now soaked. I was shivering. You told me that shivering is what it feels like to be alive. I was unable to find comfort in this notion. Quickly, I ran back to my safe haven, picking up the layers I'd shed, making my way back inside to a warm fire and a calm heartbeat. Just before I closed the door, I looked back to see you melt away completely. You became one with the snow and the bitter cold—red-nosed, frostbitten, frozen in time. I'm lucky that I escaped before I was taken, too.



Painting by **Nuri Illini Ahmad**

Split

by Candela Graciarena

I was three years old the last time I was whole.
My parents had finished packing,
And they were checking the last rooms to make sure
Nothing had been forgotten.
I felt happy. Excited, even.
“Vamos a un nuevo lugar, Cande...”
I was so excited I hardly realized I was

Split
In two
When I walked out the door.

On the plane and in my new house.
I was so excited to start preschool.
I didn't see that

I left my left side in Argentina.
Sola.
I hopped to my grandmother's house.
She took me in, of course.
Told me not to worry about my parents.
“Vos vas a crecer y estar feliz aquí, Cande”
“Ok, abuela! Estoy lista para crecer”
As if I could

Become whole again.

I started middle school.
No one noticed my missing arm, leg, shoulder.
But they noticed my name.
“Cand-” “CAndE-” “I'm sorry, how do you say your name?”
I didn't want to say

Candela

Because it's not American. People think I'm American.
My parents say it's better that way.
“Candy. Just call me Candy.”
Even though
It doesn't feel right.

There was another girl in class with my name!
We talked and she liked me!
She doesn't see that I'm

Torn

Between two places.

Some boys did see me.
 My missing half.
 They asked “de que planeta sos?”
 When I answered “aqui”, they walked away.

I almost forgot my name today.
 I was at a checkup in the hospital and
 I wrote Candy.
 That’s not my name.
 Is it?

I went out with grandma today.
 We went to a new cafe.
 I ordered and I said
 “Yo quiero los gnocchis, por favor.”
 “Los de papa o de ricota?”
 “Hay de papa? Pense que solo hay de ricota?”
 She looked at me and suddenly she could see my missing half.
 She was confused and a little scared.
 Almost like she can see

I don’t belong.

I was talking in Spanish today.
 Because I fucking can.
 And my friend since February said,
 “Wait, you’re not American?”
 Even though my right half grew up here.
 I try to be American,
 But while my skin tone and voice don't give me away,
 My tongue does.
 Why did I keep it?
 Why isn't it with

The half stuck in Argentina.
 It speaks oddly too.
 As if the two halves of my tongue,
 One-half Spanish and one-half English
 Switched when I split.

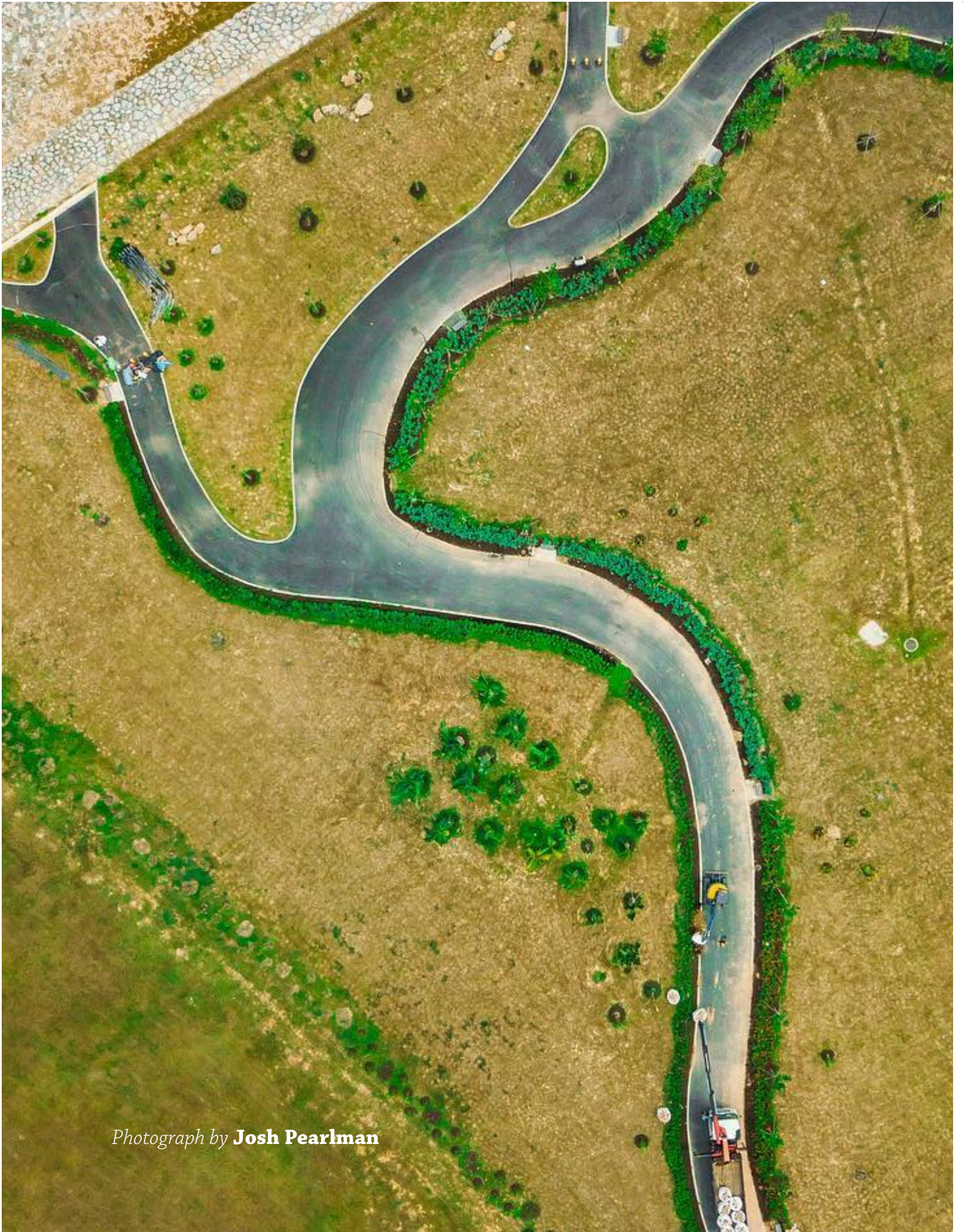
Everyone can hear that I’m foreign.
 But I’m not foreign.
 I’m not.

Why is it so difficult to exist?
 When one half is in Argentina:
 The side that doesn’t feel at home and can’t speak because the accent gives me away.
 And the other half is in California:
 The side that never belonged but should because my life is here.
 No accent.
 But a name that is not mine.

Candy.
 The American half.
 The one who speaks perfect English.
 But also speaks

Broken, accented Spanish
That immediately gives me away.
Candela.
The Argentinean half.
La que nacio aca.
Pero no lo conoce.
Como alla.

I'm not sure when my halves will join.
If they ever will.
But when they do,
What will become of me?
Who will I be?
Where will I belong?



Photograph by **Josh Pearlman**

Crash and Burn

by Genni Zaidain

2:56.

2:57.

You are so tired. You want to fall asleep. Alabama. Bermuda. Colorado. Estonia. No, wait. Alabama, Bermuda....

2:58.

Damn it.

Nick rolled over, further tangling himself in his overheated sheets, which were now damp with sweat. *God, why is it so hot in here?* He closed his eyes, but the glowing red numbers burned like hot coals on his eyelids. He squeezed them shut harder until he saw stars, the familiar feeling of shame burning his face and igniting his body, rolling through him in waves. *Why am I still awake? Why is this still happening? It's been months.* It was paralyzing. Nick felt like he was falling. This bed is too big. Too big. It's not supposed to be this big. *It didn't used to be this big.* His stomach roiled, and he shot upright, swinging his legs over the edge of his mattress. He always slept on the edge.

Nick's clammy hands rubbed his hot face as he recovered from the head rush he'd just induced. Cool night air tickled the back of his neck, making him shiver. It was a welcome contrast on his blistering skin, and he felt himself start to calm down. Insomnia was a bitch. But dreams were worse.

*

He was walking through a meadow. It was early morning, and an ocean of dew glittered on the cool grass, which was a deep sea green in the low light. Nick trudged through the mud, his

shoes squishing loudly on the wet earth. He felt like he was walking in place, until his foot suddenly hit a solid object. He focused his eyes on an old, junky car sitting in the middle of the field. How had he not noticed this before? The car looked like it had been there for years; it was rusted around the edges, and the front bumper was badly dented. It had sunken at least six inches into the ground, where the dirt and rocks had eroded away. What was so bizarre to Nick, what sent a tingle down his spine, was that this car looked familiar. Extremely familiar.

It was his car.

His old, now much worse for wear, dull blue sedan sat there, and he felt like it was staring at him, waiting. Out of sheer curiosity and barely aware of what he was doing, his hand reached out to grab the handle. He looked down at his fingers and almost shrieked.

His hands were warping and melting like hot candle wax. He looked up as the sky grew darker, seeming to close in around him. A low rumbling started in the distance. Nick tried to move, to run, to stagger backward even, but his legs were static and numb. The grass stopped its gentle movement, frozen like his body. The blue metal in front of him glitched, shooting jagged spears in every direction, violently distorting the air all around him.

And then came the noise. Screeching, horrible, inhuman screeching filled his ears. It sounded like nothing he had ever heard before. He reflexively went to clamp his hands over his ears, but they were utterly useless to stop the noise. The sound just grew louder and louder until he thought his head would explode. The sharp glass that had punctured the air shattered, and all at once the

cacophony of sound reached its peak. Nick couldn't see. Someone was screaming. Who was screaming?
Nick woke up screaming.

*

Everything is different late at night. It's one of those in-between places where you feel like you're the only person alive in the universe, and every one of your senses is heightened. It's so dark you can almost see better than in the daylight, and your mind goes to dark corners it would never have noticed in the blinding white. Nick didn't have trouble sleeping, per se, his body had just decided it was better for his mind not to. Sleeping meant dreams, and dreams meant nightmares. They were the kind you can't remember as soon as your eyes open and start to focus. They slip away, like sand through a sieve, leaving flashes of color and grains of dread. After weeks of cold sweats and sleep paralysis, Nick's subconscious had decided to cut out the whole "sleeping" affair altogether.

This made Nick's chest clamp down in frustration. He felt broken. He felt pathetic. They were just in his head, right? People had night terrors all the time. The problem was, Nick's awake-brain couldn't remember the panic his asleep-brain felt. He had no sympathy, no frame of reference. He also felt a tickling at the back of his mind when he would try to picture his dreams. There was something—or someone—he was trying to get to. He almost wanted to go back and see what it was he was looking for. If he could just sleep.

He let out a groan of defeat and flopped back onto his now somewhat cooled sheets. Nick's little outburst had exhausted his body. The early morning haze floated into his dark

bedroom, cutting through the inky black. Nick felt his muscles relax little by little, the knot in his stomach loosen, and he drifted into a shallow sleep.

*

The meadow melted away. It was replaced by the driver's seat of a car. Her car. He recognized it immediately. It smelled like lavender and the seats were made of tan, cracking leather. She refused to get them reupholstered. She was sentimental like that, she had said. Nick figured she just didn't want to be without a car for that long. She was always driving. Nick looked forward and registered that his hands were clutching the steering wheel. The car was careening down a dark, rain-slick road along the edge of a cliff. A road block came rushing up at him, and he turned the wheel hard to keep from smashing through it and off the side of the cliff. But he didn't feel like he was doing it, exactly. It was like watching a silent movie. All he could do was sit there, his eyes locked on the scene in front of him. He closed his eyes tight and waited to crash into the side of the mountain.

But it never came.

He opened his eyes hesitantly.

He was no longer in the car, but rain and smoke invaded his eyes and lungs. He saw light below him. He was in the air, about fifteen feet above the wrecked car, a small fire coming from under the wrecked hood. He could make out the inside through the front windshield, which was spider-webbed with cracks. The old leather seats were slashed, and the cushions were beginning to catch on fire. Nick could see hands still white knuckling the steering wheel. But they weren't his hands. They were smaller, more delicate. And now they were covered in scrapes and dark, black blood. Nick wanted to throw up.

"He always slept
on the edge."

His whole body started to tremble. He kicked his legs wildly in the air. He had to get out of here, away from this. He looked around feverishly, but everything was dark blue and hazy from the water. He was sobbing now, and his body started to sink below the scene next to him, below the roadblock, into the canyon, into the darkness. Then, below him, he saw a rectangle of light pierce the dark. He pushed towards it, like he was underwater. He thought he knew what it was. He prayed that was what it was. An exit.

Nick woke up and immediately a wave of vertigo hit him. He was standing in front of his bedroom door, hand around the knob. He snatched his hand back like it had been burned. *What the hell?* He swung his head around. He was in his room. His old clock radio blinked 4:08 at him. He was fine. He was in his bedroom. Everything was fine. Nick slowly sat down on the floor. He pulled his knees to his chest and rested his head between them, taking in slow, shaky gulps of air, brain filled with cotton. He sat there for a long time.

*

“Sleepwalking, huh? That’s wild.” Jay’s voice sounded tinny and far away on speaker phone, but Nick’s arm had gotten tired as he slowly paced the room. “Did you go anywhere exciting?” Nick could hear the concern under Jay’s usual bantering way of speaking.

“I’ve never sleepwalked before in my life.” Nick’s voice sounded thin, even to his own ears. He tried to adopt a lighter tone. “And no, I didn’t go anywhere ‘cool,’ Jay. I didn’t even make it out of my room.” His lame attempt at humor didn’t seem to put his friend at ease. He could practically see Jay’s forehead creasing in concern and disapproval. “I’ll let you know if I wake up in the middle of any ragers.” Jay chuckled at that, and Nick let out a silent breath. The last thing he needed was Jay worrying too much. This didn’t need to be a bigger deal than it was. Oh, god, what if he tried to come and sleep here? Nick couldn’t handle that.

“Hey, buddy, I think I’m gonna go. I’m dead tired, and a nap awaits me,” he said jokingly, though knowing he was unlikely to get any rest.

“Oh, of course, man! And don’t stress too much. Everyone sleepwalks once in a while. It’s not a big deal.” Jay’s voice was firm, but it didn’t do much to ease Nick’s growing anxiety.

“Yeah, totally. It’s not a big thing. Maybe I had to go to the bathroom and just woke up before I got there. I’ll make sure to let you know if Sleepy-Nick finally gets where he wants to go. I’m fine.”

*

The sleepwalking didn’t stop. In fact, it had only gotten worse. Nick would wake up in weird places, with no recollection of walking there; sometimes, for a few horrifying moments, he would even forget who he was. He never seemed to go far. At first, it was just his room. He would wake up sitting on the edge of his bed, or standing in front of his closet or his door, or just staring back at his bed. The most unnerving part of waking up while sleepwalking was that Nick’s eyes were already open. It was like he had just been really deep in his own thoughts.

He tried everything to solve his sleeping problems. He looked up tips on the internet on how to control his sleep, but nothing worked. To his dismay, he kept waking up farther and farther away.

He moved through his house in fits and starts—down the hall, into his living room, into the kitchen. Then one night he woke up and saw the clear night sky above him. His feet were cold and wet as he stood in the grass, staring out at the street, the front door to his house wide open behind him. It couldn’t have been later than one in the morning.

“What...? Why is this happening?” he murmured into his hands. What if he hadn’t woken up? How far might he have gone? What if there had been a car on the road?

Another night, while willing his body to sleep and hopefully stay put, he thought about his last trip, the farthest he’d ever gotten.

Outside, he was on the road, the pavement cool and smooth against his bare feet. His hands were pressed against his car window. His head banging dully, rhythmically on the glass. “What is it, what is it... How could... I don’t have,” Nick murmured as he drifted off. “I

don't have... the keys... the keys..."

The car keys.

He sat up in bed, slid off, and padded to his door. His head lolling to the side, hair messy, eyes fluttering, glazed over and unseeing. His hands reached for the handle, twisted and pulled.

Nick was running faster than he had ever run before. His feet were pounding against rain-soaked asphalt. He skidded to a stop at the still flaming car. It was like no time had passed since his previous dream. "Keys, Keys... car keys. Where are they? Where are they...?" He ran forward, frenzied, everything twisting around him. He was back in the meadow. His own car replaced hers. He dropped to the ground, hands skimming the wet earth, until they clamped around cool metal. "The keys!" He wasted no time in wrenching open the handle and jumping in. He turned the key in the ignition and pressed his bare foot against the gas pedal.

The car lurched, and Nick's head smacked against the wheel. He bolted upright, foot off the gas. It was dark. He had been asleep. He realized in horror that he had been about to drive. While sleeping. Shakily, he took one hand off the wheel and turned off the car. He was paralyzed. What had he just done?

Slowly, he removed his hands from the wheel and reached into his pajama pocket. He had taken to keeping his phone on him in case he woke up in any strange places. The blueish light of the device calmed him somewhat, and he shot out a quick text.

"Late night drive?"

Jay must be asleep, naturally. It's 2 in the morning.

But Nick's phone buzzed. "Trouble sleeping?" Jay said.

"Mhm," he replied. Nick was comforted that he had been up; he felt less alone. He had been joking about the whole "late night drive" thing, but the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. He was already in his car; he was wide awake, jumpy from his dream, and a quiet, slow drive seemed like a pretty good way to calm down.

He glanced down at his phone again. "Be careful out there, dude."

Nick *was* careful. He drove slow, took quiet residential lanes and dead city streets. The most life he saw was the soft neon glow of closed shops. He didn't think, didn't worry. Everything screaming in his brain went quiet. He only nodded off once or twice; he could forgive himself for that.

At around four thirty in the morning, he pulled back home and walked through his already open front door. He immediately collapsed onto his bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

*

Nick started regularly going out for late-night drives. He slept better and had fewer and fewer bad dreams. He stopped needing lethal doses of sedatives every night just to doze off. He stopped having to get shitfaced to keep from waking up in his driveway. People at work stopped asking him if he was alright. He found that an hour of driving was all it took for him to sleep peacefully through the rest of the night. Yet he usually couldn't keep himself from driving for at least two or three hours. He felt so at peace, blissful even. Sometimes, before he realized it, it would be morning and other cars on their way to work would envelope his own. Being around other traffic made him feel more on edge.

Still, he heeded Jay's warning. He was always careful. He was careful when he drove next to a cement wall and couldn't help but imagine his car scraping along the side of it, twisting the metal and scraping the paint. And he was careful when he slowly passed a row of parked cars, and in his mind's eye, he saw their front's battered and broken.

These drives had become everything to Nick. Driving during the day wasn't the same. He began planning his whole day around where he would go in the early hours of the morning. He absentmindedly participated in conversations with coworkers, contributing less and less to meetings. He started to get less and less done, but no one said anything. Grief, or whatever. But Nick felt the best he had in ages. He would just hum mildly to himself, lost in his own thoughts. He forgot to keep

up appearances with friends and coworkers, even with Jay. He no longer cared. Nick just wanted to drive.

*

He'd only started crashing recently. First, he'd merely bumped a low pole. Naturally, a feeling of dread shot through him. What kind of trouble was he going to get into? Then he recalled that it was the middle of the night and no one was around to see him.

As he drove away from this minor fender-bender, an image briefly flashed into Nick's mind of his car so twisted and mangled that it hardly resembled a car anymore. It looked like something out of his now but half-remembered dreams, and he bristled at the thought. Yet he couldn't deny the eagerness he felt at imagining it.

Soon crashing became essential.

He couldn't feel relaxed unless he crashed.

He clenched the wheel, tense and sitting ramrod straight, driving rigidly down alleyways and roads until he found a suitably strong but unimportant structure to hit. It was a strange and objectively alarming compulsion, but as soon as Nick heard and felt the crunch of metal and saw the damage, the warmth and calm that filled him flushed out any misgivings. He didn't even need to leave his car anymore to see the dents; he could perfectly envision the mangled polygons in his mind.

Once or twice he hit a parked car.

*

Jay started to wonder about Nick. *All of that beautiful, shiny metal.* He'd been vague and antisocial lately. *Crunching and bunching up, the noise...* He looked awful. He was gaunt and pale with blue under his dull eyes. *It was just like before: beautiful. He just couldn't see it then...* Nick said he'd never felt better.

"Hey, buddy. You okay? Lately, you've been kinda..." *The falling, clinking little bits and pieces.* "...distant." *The heart-wrenching lurch.* "Nick." *Bending, warping, breaking.* "Nick!" *Through the back streets, forest roads,*

mountainsides. "NICK!" *The—the—oh, god.* "Hey man, talk to me!"

"I—I was in an accident," Nick blurted out, abruptly pulled from his reverie.

"What?!" Jay exclaimed, sounding relieved to hear Nick's small voice come through the other end of the phone.

"I was... ah, uh, man..." *Fuck. Fuck. What have I been doing?*

"Nick? Nick, what? What happened?" Jay's voice raised in urgency, trying to keep Nick on the other end.

Everything was too bright. The lights blinded him, small noises from Nick's room yelled into his ears. *What's happening to me?* It was like in his nightmares, when everything was alright but also felt so, so wrong. He brought his hands up to the sides of his head. *What's wrong with me?* "I was—was out, uh, driving... last night, late last night... I'm alright. I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine. What's going on? Late last night? What were you doing?"

"I was, I just..." Nick felt a wave of relief crash over him. He desperately wanted to talk to someone. He kept his dreams and sleepwalking and obsessive driving to himself, but this was too much. Everything was too much. Too much.

"It was a hit and run, and I..."

"Nick..."

It was too much. Nick couldn't tell Jay anything. If he saw his car, saw him, what he'd been doing... Nick must be losing his mind. For real this time.

"Nick?..."

"I, uh, I'm gonna go," he couldn't handle it. Hearing his friend so concerned—it was too much. He couldn't explain himself. Not to Jay. Not to anyone. All he wanted to do was go for a drive.

"Nick?"

A drive would calm him down.

"What are you..."

Why was Jay so upset? Jay should drive more.

"Come back, please! What the fuck, I want to talk to you—"

Nick disconnected the call.

*

He drove slowly at first. He had recoiled

when he saw his car, saw all the damage, but reluctantly got in, anyway. It looked scraped and scratched everywhere, just like he felt: scraped raw from the inside out, emptied. He had been for months. He didn't know where he wanted to go. He just needed to drive. He didn't trust himself or the car anymore.

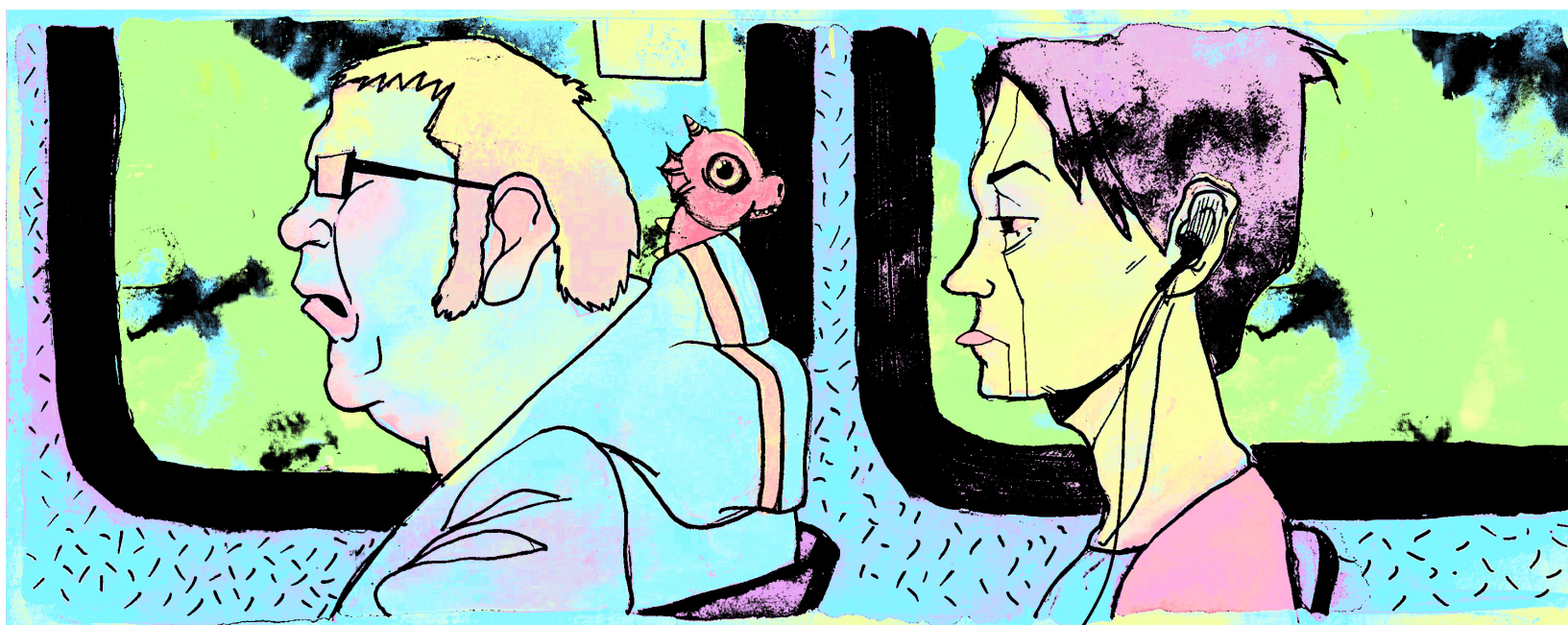
*

Everything was soft. Bright, sunny. The sky was so blue. Nick didn't keep track of time anymore. Before he knew it, it was getting dark. Angry black clouds blotted out the sun, and swollen droplets splattered on his scratched windshield. More and more came crashing down until Nick could barely see. He was on autopilot now. He was going up a mountain. Around and around in the rain, on the slippery pavement. He careened up the road, foot pushed all the way down on the gas. It struck him as familiar, but he couldn't remember why. He smiled. Life was funny like that, he guessed. But he could move this time. He was in his car. He imagined her in the seat next to him. This was what he had been waiting for. *I've always loved driving, Jay. No, I don't remember any reason why I would stop doing this.*

A blockade came rushing up toward him. He sped up, smiling wider. The sun was out. Had his car always been blue? It smelled like lavender. Everything was bright and slow. She was there. Everything was good. Just like in his dreams. *Am I dreaming?* Nick crashed.



Photograph by **Jose Pizarro**



Media Art by **Bradley Williams**

The Aging Ballerina

By Matthew Fitzgerald

white whispers in the strands of my hair
small cracks in my porcelain skin
pointes that can no longer point
glimmering eyes that have seen through time
posture so held it no longer holds
toes so broken they will not bend
memories of a lustrous veneer
ballet of a debt come to collect



FAMILY KMKY ENNES

Photograph by Anayd Zarah

How Is It Possible Not to Adopt a Tiger?

by Aida Leonardo

When I tell you we all need a tiger,
I mean when I asked my brother about his girlfriend,
Who had just met Mom for the first time a week earlier,
He told me he loves her eyes the most,
Which is probably why he said he can't love her when she is far away,
Can't remember how her satin skin caresses his upper lip,
Years ago, around the time when my cousin called our brown skin ugly,
"But don't worry, that's how the white boys like it."

And by white boys, she meant Shinta's husband, who snarks,
And whines, and growls,
And his towering height, his colossal needs, and his conquering heart,
Suck the air out of everything around him,
And Shinta, whom people had called lucky,
Followed the trail of the crumbs he had left behind to make herself feel full,
And with her painful smiles, her clanking bones, her swaying gait,
She gives and gives and gives.

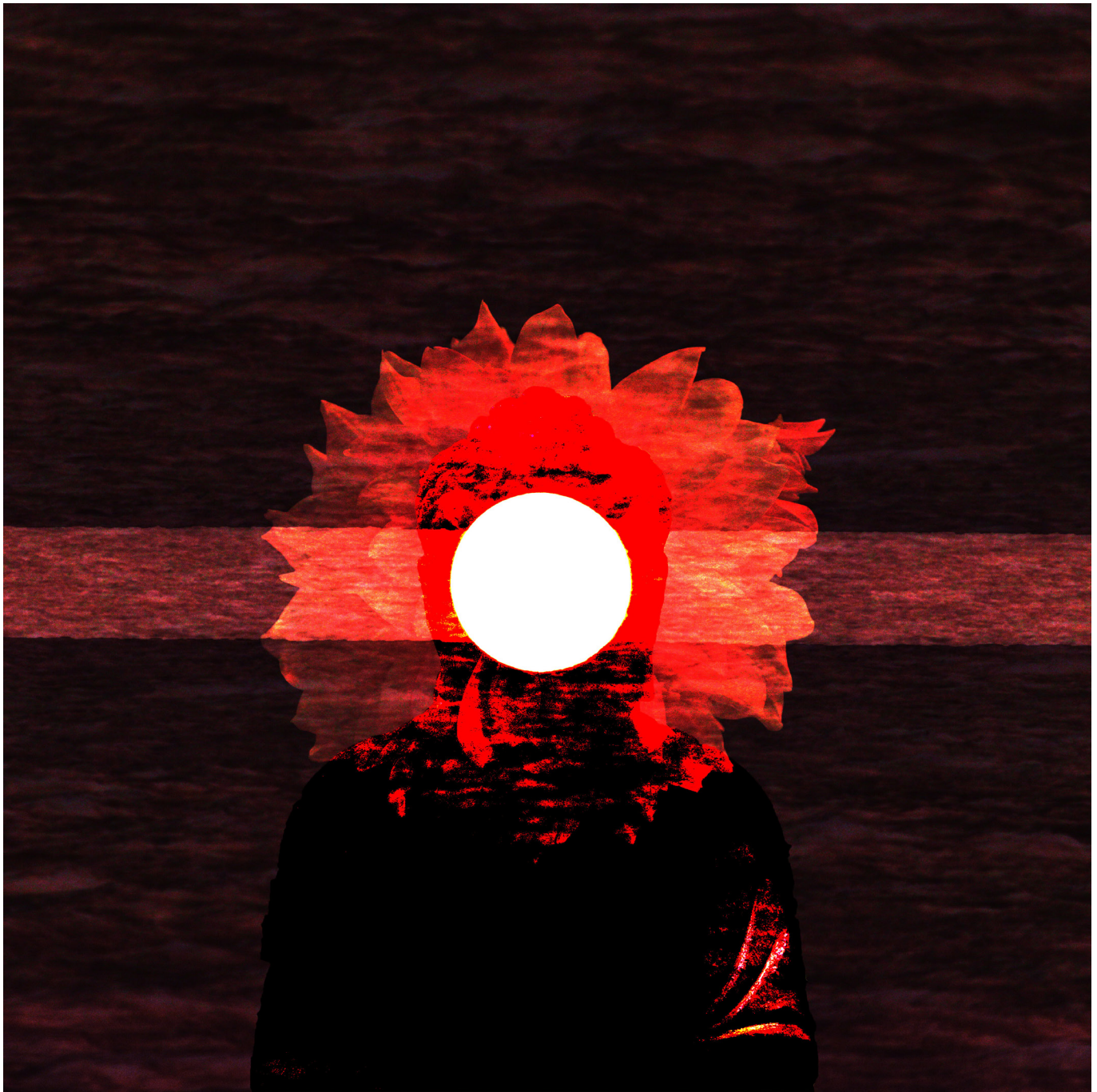
So when I tell you we all need a tiger,
I mean I want to know when we have come too close to a predator
To know when it is safe to open our mouths and breathe freely,
When they think we have taken too much space
To know what it means when he calls us beautiful after the first encounter,
That moment when you and he lock eyes
And circle each other, with you debating
If it's safer to cower and make yourself look small
Or turn your back and run.

But he can still stalk, and pounce, and prey.
It's how he protects his territory,
How he comes faster when you bleed.
And being a woman or a girl means you bleed a lot.

So when I tell you we all need a tiger,
I mean I want to know when enough is enough.
But you—you and your unguarded heart
Thought you could tame the beautiful beast,
Whose stripes conceal his wounds.
At night, when he is the most active
And you, the most vulnerable,
Still you hold him every time he calls your name.

And when I tell you we need a tiger,
I mean, last year, when I came home,
I had a conversation with a man,
With a permanent black bruise on his forehead,
Who, after telling me that a woman can't be a Muslim without wearing hijab,
Told me to pray harder then,
As if you can bribe God,
Pillage a village and feed it leftovers.
But my heart has lived in the forest its whole life

So when I tell you I need a tiger,
I mean I don't just want to know how to escape the jungle,
But burn it to the ground, collect the ashes,
And plant the trees again, one by one,
Nourish them with my sweat,
Make a river out of my blood and tears,
And, like rice plants, the more I weigh, the closer I stoop to the ground.
And in the end, once my bones become as frail as twigs,
My hair falls down like petals,
I will lay my body down
And watch the world be born again and again.



Media Art by **Jose Pizarro**





Media Art by **Antonion Stickel**



Drawing by **Alisone Garnica**

The Almond Pit

by Justin Huwe

One sullen almond has crept into my chest
He's taken root and introduced himself
Insisted he's my heart
Made me call him sir
And cook him a nice dinner
He told me I must keep him fed
Cause he can't repair me on an empty stomach
So he'd like a gallon of water a day
To keep his demons
(And mine)
At bay
So every morning he gapes me open
And ushers in the ocean
But when I sputter and choke
Moaning and pleading
no no no
He throws himself
Against my lungs
Makes me gasp in pain
Then forces in more water
Till I can stand it no longer
And when I hurl it across the floor
I must do pirouettes in my vomit
For love has always been a lost art to him
And in his frantic search
I've become his muse
The subject of such vile abuse

I Like Potatoes

by KaungZin Thu

“That's gross! You've got hairs growing off your mole,” my younger brother pointed out to me in the middle of our family dinner.

“Don't say such things; growing hair on your mole is considered good luck,” my mom replied back.

“Don't talk while you're eating.” My dad gave a sharp reply to both my mom and brother.

The daily family feud at the dinner table had begun as I stared blankly into my dinner plate with just a potato on it. Now, potatoes all grow from the ground and have to wait all their life to get picked up by farmers for consumption. Seventeen years of my life have been like those of a potato.

I was born looking like a hideous mutant with a large mole on my left cheek, causing my whole family to cry because they thought I was born with a birth defect. I grew up “fairly well,” in a society full of conservative and traditional people who taught me that “potatoes are to be eaten only, they are not meant for anything else.” To be a good potato you have to be careful not to get your skin too rough. You have to know your sole purpose: that you are only meant to be eaten. In human terms, the purpose of the potato is to grow old, get a job, start a family and keep going until you die.

As a young boy, I was educated in a socially acclaimed international school. I was then taught that potatoes could be used to charge phones, which was a big shock to me. I eagerly told my family and relatives about the newfound possibilities of the potato, which resulted in me getting knocked on the head. All of them said, “Silly boy, a potato who does not fulfill his duty faces only terror and despair; a potato who does not follow the norm is a spoiled potato.”

I have to live in two different worlds at the same time. At home, my family and relatives are very religious and traditional. At school, everything is open for discussion, and they encourage new and innovative ideas.

In the end, I decided that I wanted to be my very own version of a potato. Because, even if a potato which many thought was only meant to be eaten can charge phones, then I can find my very own place too. That's why I like potatoes.



Painting by **Nuri Illini Ahmad**

Family Legends

by Steve O'Sullivan

Friends

Arnold and Steve were the same age, almost exactly.

Arnold Wong and Steve O'Sullivan had been best friends since the Wongs had moved into the green stucco house next door to the O'Sullivans on Martin Drive in San Mateo. Since then, both families had moved into the new Foster City community.

Steve Wong, Arnold's father, was the pastor at a San Mateo Baptist congregation, and his wife Linda worked with him there as a teacher and musical director. For a minister, Steve had an infectious joy in life and an astonishing sense of humor that was awesome to behold.

Linda Wong was reserved, and slightly aloof, but at the same time, she was kind, with the soul of a teacher. She engaged the boys in conversation that was above their level in words and thought, engaging them in a little dance that always left them brighter at the end than at the start.

The Wong family and home allowed Steve to feel safe when he was there. There was never any rancor; a muted love permeated the home.

Arnold was at Steve's, or Steve was at Arnold's just about every weekend for sleepovers, and just general clowning around for what seemed like their entire lives. Arnold's parents, Steve and Linda, were both well-educated and kind; Steve Wong had a freewheeling sense of fun and adventure that Steve gravitated to, once challenging his eight year-old son Arnold (under Linda's patiently askance gaze) to a battle in their front yard where Arnold had a blow torch, and Reverend Steve had the garden hose....

The Reverend won.

The Rev and the boys laughed at the silliness of it all, and Arnold was soaked.

Finally, as if nothing unusual had happened, the Wong family, with Steve in tow, went to lunch.

It was the Sixties; we had the Vietnam war and Laugh-In on the TV.

You had to be there.

The Last Saturday Morning

When Steve, age 11, got home from school one overcast Friday afternoon, his mom was at work as an assembler at the Raychem production line, and he didn't expect to see her until about six-thirty that evening.

Steve went about his usual after school habit of ignoring homework (for as long as he could get away with it), assembling a well-engineered peanut butter sandwich, and then hiding in his after school shows with his brown Puggle Gaylord snoring at his side on the tan carpet of the living room floor.

Steve's father, Dan, came home from work unexpectedly early, around 4:30 in the afternoon, and Steve could feel that something wasn't right.

Dan was wearing his cheap grey suit and thin black tie as usual, smelling of cigarette smoke, Aqua Velva and coffee, but something about his ruddy face, the mist of perspiration on his bald head, a slight push in the cadence of his speech, gave Steve a sense of unease. In an almost off-handed way, he addressed his son.

"Hey bud, how was school?"

"Pretty good," Steve replied. "Why are you home so early?"

"It was a slow day at work, and I just thought it would be fun to come home early and take you out to McDonald's for dinner?" This was unusual. McDonald's was reserved for Sundays after Mass, and only then, if Steve had paid attention during the sermon....

As they sat in the restaurant eating silently, Dan spoke up again, with a seemingly capital idea out of the blue, "Hey, how would you like to spend the night at Arnold's tonight?"

"I thought I couldn't this weekend? Aren't they going to the movies tonight?"

"I checked with them, and they have had a change of plans...." He arched an eyebrow at his son.

"That would be cool!" Steve chirped.

And they were off.

When they got to the Wong's house, Linda met them at the door.

"Hey guys, how are you? Come on in!" Linda ushered them in through the front door, smoothly guiding Steve toward the hallway with a slight touch to his shoulder, "Steve, Arnold is in his room."

Then, turning to Dan, "Big Steve is in the kitchen."

Steve went off in search of Arnold, and the treasures in Arnold's room, and the adults got together to chat....

Steve could hear the parents talking in the kitchen, across the hall and living from where he and Arnold were playing.

It was about 6:30 PM when Linda swooped into the room, and told the boys to get in the bath. Together. Which they had outgrown several years before....

"Together!?" Arnold shot back. "We're too old for that! You said!"

"I know what I said, but you two need a bath, and us adults need to talk."

This made no sense, the boys reasoned,

as a) it was too early for their baths or showers, and b) what's this about taking a bath together for some reason? This did not make sense.

As Linda shepherded the boys from Arnold's room to the blue tiled bathroom, Steve was sure he could hear his dad quietly sniffing in the kitchen.

"Is my Dad ok?" Steve asked.

"Yeah sweetie, he's fine. I think it's been a rough day at work."

"Is Mom ok?"

"Your Mom's fine dear." Linda never addressed Steve or Arnold using endearments; the Wong's familial love was evinced through action much more than words.

One interesting thing about the bathroom was that the boys could no longer hear any trace of the quiet, and maybe tearful(?) conversation taking place in the kitchen. Before long, Silly Soap combined with warm bathwater fully took over the boy's attention.

Later that night, after his father had left, Steve and Arnold were left alone in the home office with the TV, as Arnold's parents talked softly into the night.

The Wong house was quiet or the rest of the evening.

When the boys got up that Saturday morning, it was raining. Hard. Water came down on the roof and sidewalks in such a way that it made a soundtrack for the morning; it was isolating, as though it had set this house adrift, away from those around it.

As the Pink Panther adroitly foiled the plans of The Inspector on the small color TV in front of them, and well-fortified with Captain Crunch, Steve and Arnold viewed the goings on in the office off the living room.

There was a knock at the front door. Linda answered.

The boys continued to eat as very light

"One interesting thing about the bathroom was that the boys could no longer hear..."

conversation came in from the entry hall. Linda came to the office door, "Steve, it's for you; your Mom is here."

Silently with nary a glance, Linda left the door.

And Steve went to speak to his Mom.

Rain

Mom never set foot over the threshold for the ten minutes we spoke. With her white windbreaker zipped up to her chin and her brown curly hair wrapped in clear plastic, she stood motionlessly under the eaves of the house, her arms tightly crossed over her chest.

"Hi Mom?"

"Steven?"—she always called me Steven when she was upset, which I hated because it usually meant things were not going to go well for me..

Her voice was tentative, breathy. But through the sadness in her voice, there was also something else.

I then realized it was the terrible, consuming fear I had seen in her so many times before. It came through in her green eyes, how they swept from side to side, not really focusing on me. She was listening not to me, but for something else.

A car door closed somewhere on the slick street behind her.

"Shit!" she muttered as she whipped around.

Then she spun back to face me, her eyes finally landing upon me. Behind her, I saw my mom's teal Chevy Impala, its engine still running. "Steven, son, I need you to come with me right now..."

"Mom, no..." I protested.

She reached across the threshold to touch me, to grab me.

I stepped back. But there was no 'back' to go to. Everything sped up. I had nothing to hold on to and neither did she.

"I can't let him do this to me. I have to leave. I want you to come with me," my mom rapidly sputtered.

I had seen him do "bad things" to her innumerable times. I heard the slaps. I saw him lay her out with a soldier's punch to the eye. I heard the cries through the walls of my room with the

covers over my head and my little blue Panasonic radio tuned quietly to KYA. I had pushed him off of her; I had called the police to our house many times. It took me a long time to figure out that cops don't listen to the little boy who says that daddy was hitting mommy. And they certainly never listen to the woman who says that daddy was hitting her.

As I tried to grasp the idea of going away, to a different and maybe better life, I also remembered the other things.

I realized lifetimes later that Mom needed some control over her life, she needed an outlet. She didn't have it at work, and she didn't have any with my father. But she somehow knew intuitively she could have it with me.

I remember when the screaming started, when my room was messy, or when I left toys in the living room. When I talked back.

I remember becoming adept at reading the pitch in her voice, feeling and eventually learning to see when her storms were going to take me along for the ride.

And finally, the beatings. Sometimes, internally, she would go away; she would diminish into her soul. Then she would start screaming... and then she would swing.

I saw what my father had done to her, but he had never done that to me (yet). I tried to stop it. But I couldn't. I felt what he had done to her the welts, the bruises. I became aware of the rock hard core of my soul.

And now I tried to stop my mom.

But I couldn't. My voice was a tight whisper. My throat, inside my neck, wrapped in duct tape.

"You have to come with me. I'm your mother." Her voice broke. "Please?" she pleaded.

"I can't."

I can't remember everything I was thinking then—it was so long ago. But I can remember knowing with all the certainty that an eleven-year-old boy can muster that I couldn't go with her.

"Steven, I love you."

"I can't."

She hugged me, I think.



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