

IN
THE
ORDS

CSUMB
Literary Arts
Journal



California State
University,
Monterey Bay

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IN THE ORDS

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Visual Arts

Aleja Fry

I am a fourth year Humanities and Communications major with a concentration in Journalism and media studies. I am from the central coast and love traveling and photography.



Botanical Gardens



Redwoods

Carousel



Underwater

N.A. Doss

N.A. Doss studied mathematics at UC Davis, CSUMB, and Washington State, and is now a faculty member at CSUMB. Aside from mathematics, Doss studies abstract art, poetry, baduk, and music.



Missing

Christina Mabry

A surrealistic piece that represents Mother Nature. Acrylic paint on a 11 x 14 canvas.



Mother Nature

Poetry

Contributing Otters

J.S. Sand

Transfer Student

Yazmin Macias

Yazmin Macias is a third year Humanities & Communication major with a concentration in Journalism & Media Studies. She enjoys writing, astrology, painting, and picnics on the beach.

Conner Reeves

Conner Reeves is an aspiring poet whose work focuses on personal experiences derived from a life in California during the 21st century.

Brandon Stettenbenz

Brandon Stettenbenz is an American writer, photographer, and poet residing in Monterey, CA.

Stacy Leon-Guzman

Stacy Leon-Guzman is a first-generation Chicana writer from Watsonville, Ca. She is a spring 2020 graduate with a BA in Human Communication with a concentration in Creative Writing & Social Action and another in Writing & Rhetoric. Stacy shares her personal narratives to inspire and empower her readers. She has found that the more she shares her own story the more she hears of others coming forward about theirs. She believes it can be a healing and transformational experience to share and reclaim one's narrative.

Elizabeth Wiles

My name is Elizabeth and I am a junior here at CSUMB. Writing is my passion, addiction, and therapy. I look forward to reading the CSUMB writer's community works!

Zackary Urango

A poet that has been working for over seven years, Zack Urango is a hard working boy who grew to be a man through the exploration of poetry. Now, three books later, he does what he can to educate the youth and

teach them there is so much more to life than black and white. Hence, the method to his madness, writing poetry.

Madeline Boettcher

Madeline Boettcher is a student at CSU Monterey Bay. She is currently working towards her Bachelors degree in Human Communication with a concentration in Peace Studies. She is unsure of her career path after graduation but knows she wants to be an advocate for justice issues. She is passionate about promoting women's rights, ending stigmas against mental health issues, and fighting against prejudice and discrimination of minority groups.

Sarah Shine

I write for catharsis and a sense of mental awareness. My poetry is a way for me to briefly journal the things I feel as soon as I feel them. Wherever I go, I'm always ready to write if I come up with something. I don't consider myself a writer, but during uncertain times, it's always been there for me.

M. Allen-Young

Maggie is a Fall 2019 HCOM graduate born and raised in Santa Cruz.

11.12.16
J.S. Sand

Breaking in a new book
Waiting for a bus that won't come
The anti Donald Trump protesters are blocking 3rd avenue
Cutting off the 10, the 2, the 4, the 81
And they're upset, I know it
But there's nothing I can do about it

But there was something I did for myself
Waiting hours to vote in the 2016 election
Besides finishing my anthropology quiz
On primates, paleontology, and natural selection

All I can do right now,
While remaining one small resident
Is make it through my schooling
No matter who is the president

home is the distant feeling of love.

Yazmin Macias

you don't realize how much "home" has become a foreign place
until you return after a long while
and can't remember
what street to turn on to get to your grandma's house.

you spend your days waiting to reunite with faces
that are becoming embedded in memories,
only to find comfort in
your reclusive nature that keeps you tied
to your bedroom all night.

there's pain in greetings more than in goodbyes
because you fester the thought of leaving
in the back of your mind.
every time you return to this place,
the space where you laid your head at night for years,
you feel the connection weakening in strength.
a space where you'll always be tied, yet you can't remember any past
times.

then slowly over time, the place is becoming more of a name than a space.

what resonates more with you are the memories of people who used to live
there,
because you're not only unable to recognize your past self,
but the current inhabitants as well.

being away forces you to create space.
with the ones you love and within your head.
you forget who you once were, your loved ones forget who you set out to
be.
caught between places, wandering endlessly on edge,
i'll always find homes in places i learn to rest my head.

Nacimiento-Fergusson Road
Conner Reeves

Nacimiento-Fergusson road coils
while winding through
the hills of bleak terrain
en route to 101 North.

The woodlands of Big Sur behind;
miles ahead are nothing
but an ancient ocean carcass
haunted by the uncertainties it once beheld.

I once saw a man on this road
holding a tennis ball
with a companion at his side,
docile. He watched me drive past.

His eyes never left the sight of me
disappearing, as the dog's never left the ball,
until they were both swallowed
by the horizon.

Now, two years later,
while passing through these hills
that look like giant demigods
in repose underneath earth's crust,

I find a cloud of ash and dust
rising from the road
as if the Hades himself
were penetrating the surface.

Driving slowly into this dark mass,
I approach a herd of cattle
on the side of the road;
all dressed in their best black.

On the side of the road opposite to them
lay a charred pick-up still coughing up
it's last breath of smoke.
Small scattered flames surrounding.

In the driver's seat, a man
scorched unrecognizably.
I fix my eyes back towards the road
as I leave behind the morbid haze.

The road would uncoil,
and lead me to my way home.

Appositional Growth
Brandon Stettenbenz

At age 8 it was Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs
Aladdin and
Beauty and the Beast
Happily Ever After

At age 10 when my mom threw my dad out of the house on Christmas,
it wasn't supposed to be this way
This wasn't in the Disney cartoons!

At 15 That puppy love cheated on me with my best friend.
Welcome to the dating world

At 19 I was asked out to prom and winter ball
After I graduated high school
Then dumped and never spoken to

At 23 she was my girl for three years
when she confessed she was bisexual
wanted to pursue a woman in her life
and ended up saying that to cheat on me
with another guy three months later

At 24 We lived in my Ford
After two months, the first frost of winter hit
I left colder than that ice on the window

At 25 we broke up twice
She dumped me both times

At 26 I settled for a two week tryst

At 27 I fell for beauty and seduction
Passive the whole time
This trophy would look good right?
Cheated on

At 28 I rebounded for a relationship
Doomed from the start
She moved to South America three months later

At 29 I fell for a succubus
Heart, love, strength, trust, depleted

At 30 I fell hard
A new decade, I think I figured this out
Sacrificed my dreams, school, heart
Destroyed

At 31 Anybody can pick up the pieces
Don't half-ass anything
Cheated on again

At 31 1/2 We soaked in Hot Springs
As our eyes collided under redwood forests
Hope

At 32 she moved out
Took the dog and blocked me

At 33 I started swiping
The slot machine beeps
This is weird

Today
I feel trauma and amnesia
Unapologetically falling in love with
Myself

All these relationships formed an ossification, they allowed a new bone to grow, a crooked, snarly, bone coming out of my ribs and connecting to my heart. Every time it happens again, every time I wake up, every time I fall in love this bone wants to grow, and crack and break my heart for good. I can't love the same way. I don't have a high school sweetheart. I have a bone that is so traumatic when she doesn't call or text me goodnight I lose sleep. When she doesn't stay the night, if I don't kiss her soft lips for one day I panic. If I think about it long enough this bone will pierce me, shake my hands, scare the fuck out of me, and I wake up to a nightmare that she's breaking up with me. Do I just give up? If I stay away from the human species I'll be okay, I won't have anxiety, I'll be wealthy, and live at the gym, no more stress, panic, maybe this bone will decay, or hollow without the calcium of a woman.

Except why give up? When the elixir of love can heal. It may not be a month or two, or even a year but if I can love me, believe in honesty, believe in compassion and empathy, then I can prosper. My heart can grow, grow big enough to pop the ossification. With her, my rock, my bird, in my mind I can achieve anything. Love with the chisel that breaks off that bone, stunts it's growth and caps it off to never sprout again. I haven't smoked a cigarette in 45 days, I have lost 33 pounds, I've been sober for over seven months, I'm happier than I've ever been, and yet I still can't wake up almost every single day like she's going to breakup or cheat on me. Yet perhaps it's the way it has to be for an anonymous alcoholic, one day at a time, control the beast, moderation. It may be uncomfortable but it will grow, grow into a red Rose, with glasses, bangs, and a growing bright red heart that makes me smile and calm every moment her name comes into contact with my heart.

7 Grams
Stacy Leon-Guzman

psychedelic means mind-manifesting / expanding consciousness / perception of the self // what these drug laws tell me is that you want to stop us from exploring our own minds / stop us from traversing the depths of our souls / stop me from taking a drug that allowed me to make peace with myself / allowed me to see the light in my wounds / showed me how to hug my body / say thank you body / I love you body / thank you for 28 years of life /

7 grams of psilocybin mushroom tea and I was able to release the trauma trapped inside of me / able to see myself as a little girl aching to be set free / wide eyed, round face, blunt cut bangs, carrying the weight of someone else's shame / that took me 20+ years for me to realize it was never my weight to carry // 7 grams in silent darkness showed me I couldn't get stuck in the why / Why Me? / WHY WHY WHY / as the words danced across my mind in big block letters / I knew there was no point in getting stuck in this endless loop /

be here now // cry / release / as my man held me tight and allowed me to just be / here right now / you are loving awareness / close your eyes and allow yourself to follow the light / let it speak to you, tell you what you need to hear / do not fight the feeling of death that is your ego talking / let it wither away and allow yourself to leave this negative space / just be here / right now / allow this plant medicine to heal you / allow it to show you the love and humanity in all / even in those who have done you wrong //

7 grams allowed me to see all human beings as divine / and yes, him too / I saw the child in him / had compassion for him / and although he committed the same atrocity on my body / I felt sorry for him / the young boy hurting inside / and although at first I didn't give a fuck about him and his pain / and at first, I didn't give a fuck about the cycle of abuse being a real thing / I saw him / and I knew, he wasn't solely to blame // you see, these drugs allowed me to take myself out of the equation / and see him for what he truly was / a young boy fucked in the head with an awakened sexuality he could not contain / and this isn't me saying that it was okay / because what made him the predator that turned me into the prey / is the same shit I knew was wrong from the start / the same shit I did not continue / this cycle ends with me //

these drugs will fry your brain / make you go clinically insane / try it once and you may die / the DEA knows what's right / but here's what I'm trying to figure out / why psychedelics are Schedule 1 drugs / when opioids like fentanyl and oxycodone are Schedule II drugs / I mean, this shit doesn't make sense to me when in 2017 there were 17,029 deaths from prescription opioids / let me repeat that / 17,029 deaths from prescription opioids / It's like the Dr.'s know but only wanna continue to profit / prescribe you a drug for the pain / with a list of symptoms and complications / followed by another prescription / and like a PEZ dispenser they shove these pills down your throat / and tell you we're sorry we can't help you when you've become addicted / what we need is proper drug regulation / proper drug education / an understanding that psychedelics can be life changing / can be lifesaving /

you see, 7 grams of psilocybin mushroom tea allowed me to release the trauma trapped inside of me / allowed me to truly love myself and set that little girl free / showed me how to hug my body / say thank you body / I love you body / thank you for 28 years of life / I know this journey isn't going to be easy but this cycle ends me //

Apocalypse
Elizabeth Wiles

I hate the smoke in the air and in the skies.
I can barely see a thing under its breath,
a dragon's disguise.

I hate the smell of new buildings and crisp walls.
All the tie pins, cufflinks, and red ribbon are
blood on corporate gauze.

I hate these machines we have built to survive.
Locked out but what passcode can save our empty
aluminum lives?

I hate the sight of all the coral wastelands.
Mouths sealed shut; swimmers so parched and still.
Landfills in flaked sand.

I hate the sound of gavels and green allies.
Three months with no change and soon he'll be
back between her thighs.

I hate the laughs, our country is now a joke.
We need to rise against this apocalypse.
No more vile, white cloaks.

The end is coming, look up and you will see,
this world is advanced, bigoted, and not
what it's meant to be.

Mend
Zackary Urango

I carry around my memories
in my wallet,
The same place that reminds me what I'm worth.

In this twisted world
I can't help but think of when I was a child.

Skimming through the pages of my baby pictures,
Flipping through quotes written in my year books,
Scrubbing the videos my father made for me.

It's hard to see that smile.

When I used to live in my own world
a bubble which has since been popped,
Reminding me of my humanity.

When I see my zippo
I can't help but think of the bridges I've burned
In order to make myself feel real.

In my short 18 years of life
I feel like I've seen it all,
But that's only because of what I've lost.

Looking at the charred remains of a memory
sitting in the palm of my hand.

Thinking of all the dreams ripped from my mind
through the nightmares of this reality.

It's as if I'm missing pieces of me
which have been ripped to shreds,
by those who've been part of my history.
But leave swifter than a gust of wind in the desert
forever an elusive mystery,

Never having the chance to mend
the burns and tears
left by the life lived before mine

I'm Sorry for my Silence
Madeline Boettcher

How do you say that a friendship
has ended?

What has transpired is lost.
That times together are better
as memories.

How morals no longer
intertwine.

How growth cannot be sustained
in a dying forest of vines.

How do you hear your heart tell you
when it's time to go?

To feel the leaves crunch beneath the damp forest floor
as you chop the desiccated limbs
of once thriving flowers.

How do you feel your stomach churn
as you contemplate their absence?

Or understand that your forest will no longer be overcome
by weeds
sucking dry the native beauty that once was there.

How do you know when to run?

To glance back at the bubbling nuclear waste
accumulated from years of toxic patterns.

To ignore the chilling cries of those left behind
or feel yourself taking on a mutated form.

How do you grasp when silence no longer feels welcoming,
or taste the residue of unsaid words?

Feel the rage simmering at the surface
of an otherwise cold exterior.

How do you know when to ignite the bridge?

To watch it spew its fiery flame of passion.

To bask in its emanating heat.

To taste the bitter resentment of the flames,
or smell the rotting stench of a decomposing friendship.

I'm Sorry for my silence
 my inability to scream this sad truth.
But confronting the fear of loss
 was greater than my ability
 to keep your heart considered.

But how many times have you
 desiccated my forest,
 mutated my morals,
 set fire to my bridge?

How many times have I
 replanted the flowers,
 reestablished my morals,
 put out your fires?

Boundaries crossed too often to overlook as your own ignorance.
Consideration not had
 not had.

So why then do I feel guilty for doing the same?
My consciousness can no longer be yours too
 yours too.

So, I will light this match
and hope that what emerges from the ashes
will birth a new connection with myself
 Myself.

If You Ever See This
Sarah Shine

Orange Juice

This Monday morning,
Felt more like a Sunday,
Waking up next to you,
The smell of cinnamon in the air,
And your subtle touch,
I almost told you then

Lightning

The electricity in the space between us,
Is almost as intoxicating,
As your lips on mine,
In the moonlight

Tenderfoot
M. Allen-Young

Sister's foot hangs
from the top bunk flung
in thrashing sleep.
She doesn't snore,
but she talks sometimes.
I listen from below.

Mother takes sister's foot,
pushes it over the wooden rail.
Stops and tells me
to take it in my hand.
Sandpaper rough,
dusty from the gravel driveway.

Sister's feet are flip-flop striped.
Shoes lost like years spent barefoot on
grass
gravel
cement.

I wear shoes
now, breaking them in like wild horses.
At home I leave them by the door.

Nonfiction

Contributing Otters

Taya Buehler-Reagan

Taya Buehler is a graduating senior at CSUMB. She began writing through personal poetry, and intends to use her writing through her career in journalism/storytelling.

Anonymous

A student at CSUMB.

Daniel Bandini

My name is Daniel Galy Navarro, and I was born in Madrid, Spain in 1999. I began writing creative fiction in one of my English composition classes in middle school, and I was immediately hooked to the freedom of creative writing. As I progressed through school, I enrolled myself into multiple English literature courses in order to expose myself to a wide range of writers. Great authors like Jack Kerouac, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, and Hunter S. Thompson made me see writing in a different way. I no longer felt chained to the constraints of academia writing, and I began exploring for my own voice.

Now, I'm aspiring to become a journalist, following the steps of Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson. I desire to find a perfect balance in my writing where I blend journalism and creative writing, in order to make a strong narrative that entertains and informs my audience. Lord of the Fries is a piece I wrote based off true events that occurred in Madrid. I was out and about with my friends, aimlessly roaming the inner city streets until we ran into a group of individuals at a old Tobacco factory. The outcomes of that day will forever be a memory I will always cherish.

Shaped by the Water
Taya Buehler-Reagan

I can feel the crisp, glass-like water lapping against my feet. I take another step forward, my feet dancing with the fluid motion of the waves. I gaze out to the sun rising just over the horizon, painting an array of glowing yellows and oranges in the glass. The water is so welcoming, and the slight, salty breeze wisps the stray hairs from my ponytail. I look out at the coast, shimmering as the sun rises slightly higher in the sky, a sliver of light peeking just over the horizon. The bluffs glisten and shape themselves to the water. *Shaped by the water*. This setting ignites me. I feel alive here. A brief moment of sleep runs throughout my body, and then awakens at the quiet slap of the next wave. I look back down at the water, suddenly level to my bruised shins. I feel the cool water against my suit, and shiver.

I've never felt connected to one specific place. Beneath the waves feels the closest to a home I have ever felt. My mind begins to wander as I think back to a time I had felt this at peace-- *utter bliss*-- like a mantra on a loop, replaying in my mind. I look out at the incoming tide, which is now mildly disturbing the smooth ocean surface. I can't remember a moment I've felt this way, aside from ever being in this place. All the pain of my life fades here, dragged out to sea with the undertow. The feeling of neglect. The feeling of abandonment. The weight of abuse and misuse. I feel my knees tremble beneath the weight of all the gear on my back and in my belt. I look down at my feet and then back at the shore, from which I came. I think of how far I have come; how strong I am for bearing all this weight on my back; *alone*. I brace myself and walk into the waves, attempting to put on my fins. My shoulders are submerged now. The tide has picked up into a woeful surge, and I place my reg into my mouth. *My lifeline*. My only chance at a complete submerge, only to battle the current below. The waves swallow me, and spit me back to the surface.

I have a predisposition to shut people out when I feel they display any form of negativity. I fear it. I fear I will become it. Because it's all I have ever been shown. The fear of becoming like my mother. The fear of becoming cynical to everything surrounding me. *You're already cynical*. The constant raging fear that if I slip up for one moment, I'll become her. But I would never be like her. *You already are*. I press my feet into the

sand and step forward until I sink. I sink deeper and deeper. The surge rocks me violently back and forth.

The first time I tried to leave I was eight years old, “I’m going to live with my dad!” I didn’t have any more than a second to process what I had said, before spoons and cups were flying from the cupboard. I stood petrified. Steady streams of tears burning down my cheeks. My eyes watched, my body unable to move, as she stormed up the staircase, screaming words inaudible to my ringing ears. I heard the familiar creak of my bedroom door swing open, and felt my feet bolt up the stairs. In the next moment, I was in my room, beside her. She flung my closet door open as I fell to my knees and cried. She threw every-single-thing I owned out of my closet, landing from the lamp to the window, to the door. Hangers were left broken as I wept in the corner; alone.

I face the current and submerge further. I feel the pressure in my ears begin to burn. I feel the pressure behind my eyes start to swell. I raise up a foot to soothe the discomfort. Then I continue my descent. Will it ever end?

I often wondered if the torment and abuse would subside. I wondered if I had the strength to leave. But how could I leave my brother with such a monster. Of course, she had never treated him so harshly. *It’s because you’re not worth it.* I suppose she blamed me for her misfortune, and she acted as though I were the cause of her inability to “make it in life.” *Everything is all your fault.*

I was fifteen years old the moment I promised myself I wouldn’t live with her any longer. The moment I graduate high school; I’ll go off to college, move far away and never look back. A promise to myself that I would soon satisfy. She left my brother and I alone our whole life, for me to raise him on my own. He was nine at the time.

I approached the front door to my house, after coming home from school. Behind the door I heard the distant, familiar yell of my mother, calling my young brother an idiot. “Don’t call him an idiot! He doesn’t know any better!” Before I had a moment to step into the house. *BANG*. She had thrown the coffee maker into the sink, along with every dish on the counter. Without hesitation, a wooden ladle came hurtling in my direction. I dodged. In time to see her storming toward me, and behind her the window, where my sweet brother had been playing, now watching in terror. I was frozen with fear. I felt the burning sensation from the sting of her slap. My cheek was numb with tingling needles. Tears streamed down

my face, and I sensed the metallic taste of blood from inside my mouth. Without hesitation, I reflexively slapped her back. *Shit*. My dad picked me up not long after that, only to be dropped back off at my mother's again a few hours later. It would never end. It's a vicious cycle.

I find a sweet pocket in the tide. The surge has subsided. I feel my body now being caressed by the gently moving currents, as I attempt to nurture my buoyancy.

I was seventeen years old when I left my mother's house. She fought me for days until I packed my things and left. I hugged my brother good-bye. Unaware it would be the last time, for a long time. I didn't see, or speak to my mother for nearly two years. For the following months after I moved out, she threatened to take me to court. "I better still get my child support. If you don't send me a check for this month, you better lawyer up BABY." *As if she could afford a lawyer*. I called my brother every other day for a year. With no response. He didn't understand why I had to leave. And she told him horrible things about me. "She abandoned you sweetheart, just like your dad. Forget about her." He was eleven.

I was nineteen years old the first time I tried to reach out to my mother. I've never heard an apology. And I never will. But I spent Thanksgiving with my brother a month later.

The water is clearer now. I can see nearly fifty feet on all sides of me. The expanse of water surrounding me stretches to mountains of submerged stone. Schools of fish and jellies dance circles around the reef. I feel the pressure releasing as my body adjusts to this new, yet familiar environment. I glance down at my hands, cold and wrinkled yet excited by the sensation of floating. *I am floating*. I grow nearer to the reef; I begin to laugh to myself with excitement as seal swim laps around me. This is the place I feel free. This is the place that will never hold me. This is my serenity and my space of peace.

I have since forgiven my mother, but she will never be my mom. I feel this sense of freedom as I settle into the bliss beneath the waves, gazing outward as I am immersed in the life surrounding me. Beneath the waves in these deep waters, the pain of my life no longer abounds to me. A sweet sigh of relief. *Finally*. We pass around stories of the last two years spent apart and attempt to reminisce on beautiful memories of laughter, and my clumsy brother learning to walk. I swim through reefs and corals, dodging spines of urchins and lion fish. Absorbing the shape of the water.

The Background

Anonymous

“She never liked talking about these kinds of things, never liked talking about the struggles to friends in fear that she will cause a commotion. Her family always instilled in her that whatever happens behind closed doors shall stay locked behind that door. The door that was filled with roach-infested makeshift beds, clutters of old clothes that suffocated her rib cage but there was no denying that there was no such escape from such lifestyle. She was entrapped by them and her own mind, something she wished were easy to ignore and climb out of. But it wasn’t as simple as she had hoped it to be...”

They say that everyone has their own fault, something that makes them imperfect. My family is the definition of imperfection, you could definitely say that we are dysfunctional, but isn’t every family exactly that? Having their own quirk that may be unpleasant to some? Sometimes when I was younger, it was hard for me to relate to some of my friends, especially one of my best friends who lived on Naples street. Even that street sounds fancier than my whole existence. They lived in really old but really nice, two-bedroom house, renting out the bottom half of the house to a tech-savvy employed couple. Both of her parents are happily together, and are all perfectly healthy and happy. I envied everything she had, down to the arguments her and her family would have with one another. Whenever I slept over at her place, I never wanted to leave and I prayed to the heavens that I would have a family just like hers.

According to The National Center for Biotechnology, “In studies of community samples, children of substance abusing parents are more likely to have an alcohol and/or drug use disorder themselves by young adulthood as compared to their peers. Moreover, children of substance abusing parents are at risk for a wide variety of other negative outcomes, including emotional, social, and behavior adjustment problems as well as challenges in cognitive academic functioning.” All my life, I have been living in San Francisco, just between Tenderloin and South of Market Area. I grew up in a small studio apartment with my mom, dad, and brother. Both my parents have always struggled with an addiction while I was growing up and constantly argued with one another. My father during my adolescent years was addicted to drugs, not sure what kind it was because my mother made sure to keep that part of his life a secret for the

majority of my youth. Because of his addiction and the arguments he had with my mom, he was constantly out of the house from days at a time. My mother had her downfalls as well, the thing she clung to the most while I was growing up were cigarettes and gambling. The toxic fumes would fill our tiny apartment, suffocating both my brother and I during the process. It was pointless to try and tell both my mom and dad to quit smoking, sometimes it would result in even more arguments and a slipper to the head. Although we never went to bed without food, we did struggle many times with figuring out what to eat and paying certain bills for the house. Our meals became more and more creative as my mother's paycheck slowly but surely disappeared into the abyss. It was like a stoner satisfying their craving and waking with a terrible stomachache the next day. Money became something too scarce, something that was easily thrown to her entire addiction.

The constant arguments were no help either. It was always about the same thing; money, us moving out, and his addiction to whatever drugs he took. Sometimes the arguments became physical and sometimes it led to laughter and all tension would cease to exist. We were always on a rollercoaster, a never-ending loop of vomit, screaming, and sometimes laughter. Yet there was this one incident that will never escape my mind. I don't remember everything about it because I was asleep for half of the argument. I was awoken by the screaming and yelling from both my parents. They were speaking Tagalog, bickering about whatever there was to bicker about. I remember seeing my dad pushing my mom away from him, thinking that my mom would hit him for some reason. As they continued arguing, my dad's face began to change color, and that was when I knew something about this argument was different from the rest. Within a second, my father's hands were around my mother's neck. My brother saw this and told him to stop and pushed my dad towards the bathroom, knocking the wind right out of him. Out of every fights and arguments my parents had, this was the breaking point. My mother called the police, and my father hid every illegal thing including a butterfly knife under the bunk bed. Tears flowed down both my eyes and my brothers. Minutes later, there was a loud authoritative knock at the front door. My mom opened the door and both police officers walked into our apartment and escorted my dad out of the room. Both officers asked question after question about what happened between both my parents. When they were finally done giving their testimonies, my dad was taken to the station.

We haven't heard from my dad after that. My mom proceeded to get a restraining order on my dad. On the scheduled court date, my dad did not appear. As days went by, I longed to talk to my dad about what had happened and just have his presence around. He was hardly around during my middle school days and this incident made it even more impossible to talk and see him. It wasn't until about a year later when I had seen him. As I turned the corner of the hallway in my apartment building, I saw him laying down right beside our door. He was snoring soundly in tattered clothing and his face seemed lifeless. That image to this day still haunts me, because it was always brought up whenever I got into an argument with my mom. She made me feel as though he was a lost cause, a burden to the family name. I called my mom right away to ask her what to do and I let my dad come in to take a shower. After telling me how he had been homeless all through those months and how'd he has always been watching over my brother and I on the rooftop of our apartment building, my mother showed up from work. The moments went by in a blur and my dad was back in my life once again as if nothing ever happened in the span of those twelve months.

Growing up was always confusing in that household. I questioned my own sanity and everything in between. I didn't notice this but all the in-betweens gathered up together and punctured a hole in my existence, creating a never-ending darkness that is my depression. I mean my mom was constantly judging my appearance, telling me that I was either too skinny or too fat and that I either had to gain weight or lose the weight. She judged everything about me, pointed out all the insecurities I never really knew I had. She tormented me with the harsh words and always used her hands if I began to act out. But this was what Filipino families have done for centuries right? I remember one day our arguments went out of control, similar to the incident with my dad and her. I don't remember what happened that night, but I do remember her throwing me down to the toilet bowl, where I bumped my head on the porcelain. I screamed at the top of my lungs as I felt blood dripping down my head. I left the bathroom and started packing a small backpack filled with some of my belongings, called one of my mentors from the afterschool program I was a part of, and was taken to a safer place for me to stay. I stayed with my mentor for about a week, reflecting on what happened with me and my mother, including the toxic relationship I felt I had with her. Although she apologized a week after and I was forced to reside with her again, I felt

that she never meant any of her apologies because days like these became my normal. A hand-painted dish with the words “Life is a sea of entropy” painted by none other than myself is thrown one day, and then a few years later, I’m forced to walk blocks away from my mother to calm my little “temper-tantrum.”

Throughout the years from Elementary to this very day, I realized that I had a “disorder”. I have depression, something my mother never wanted me to admit. She was in denial. “How could someone so happy and sweet be as depressed as you’re claiming yourself to be?” I myself can’t answer that question, but my gut is telling me otherwise.

I tried blocking all these negatives out of my mind by filling it with things I loved. I got into sports at a really young age to avoid going home early, went to after school programs that talked a lot about hope, future and God. Although I became distant to the religious aspect of my life, I still hold those values true because of who welcomed me into that program and church; showing me compassion and that people are still good in the world. Yet for some reason, these constant insecurities pop in every now and again to remind me of the hopelessness I created for myself. I never know what I am doing, and I fear becoming a failure, a nobody, a nothing. I want to find the joy of little rays of light the world has to offer, but if I am constantly being dragged down with all the tragedies that surround me like violence, addiction, or feeling suffocated by my own surroundings, why is it so hard for me to escape these walls? I want to start anew, and I understand that both my parents migrated here from the Philippines, but why does it have to be so damn hard for a first generation to begin their new life in a strange unfamiliar land to their ancestors? Why must it be hard to establish oneself and find refuge in their own fears and failures? Can I blame my parents or do I blame who I have become to think about life like how I do? I do not want my past to define me, but maybe I’m letting it get the better of me as of right now.

I guess time can only tell.

Lord of the Fries Daniel Bandini

Madrid during the summertime is a beautiful place filled with life, sunshine, and people from all over. The dry hot air fills the streets of downtown Gran Via, keeping people rooted to the local bars desperately seeking to quench their thirst. One can witness the relaxed energy of the city in every street corner, as people converse in plazas enjoying their cold beers under the sun, and kids play chaotic football against the neighborhood walls. The whole city seems to double its population during summertime, as everyone seeks the streets to experience the fragrance of life. Everyone knows that anything goes in Madrid, and me and my rascals lived up to it. We would bounce back and forth between friends' houses and local parks as if it were a daily routine, immersing ourselves in whatever we felt like doing. A youthful freedom I cherished and hoped to never lose as the years pass. There was a lot of empty time placed on my hands during those months of the year, which led me to become familiar with boredom. Being bored is seen by society as a negative state of mind, however I felt boredom was the gateway to something different, something thrilling. The fear behind boredom is rooted to the constant need for instant gratification. Being part of a generation that has been bombarded with constant instant gratification, we have become dependent of the man and his fancy technologies. We are forgetting what it is to be human! So, I say, throw away your television straight out the window and dive straight into boredom and its mysteries. For all we know, the first cave man probably discovered fire as he wasted his precious time throwing stones at nothing. Nevertheless, boredom became my ally during summertime, as it drove me into thinking. I would think about my life, my unattended heart, and my memories which I so dearly nurtured. Maybe that's why the man didn't want us to be bored after all.

I had just returned from my first year abroad in America, and all I had in mind was to meet up with my lifelong friends and roam carelessly around the city. I missed the feeling of being seen as an outlaw, even though I was a professional coward by nature. Growing up in a city can be a hard task for many. The concrete jungles vicious charm will bite you and spit you right back out naked, onto a racetrack with one ultimate finish, that being death. However, survival boils down to the individual's ability to maneuver around the bullshit and not lose his mind while doing so.

It had been a hard year for me overseas, as I felt my own mind was begging to slip off course in this strange storm, we call society. While I was away working in America, I felt surrounded by such unhappiness. My big leap across the pond proved my naïve ass I was just a punk inner-city kid hypnotized by false expectations. I was so puzzled. Its lands were filled with amazing potential and great natural beauty, but the ugliness laid within its people. It was a society engulfed in greed and envy, while masking it with a face of joy and achievement. Now as I look back with hindsight, I feel like I blindly sold off my future to some street gypsy that taunted me into believing the great lie. As time passed over there, I needed a change of scenery, I needed to return home.

As the plane landed in Barajas, my heart rushed with joy. I felt like a little kid running back to mama's arms. Once I glided past all the airport bureaucracy, I began to make my way into the city by metro. Exhausted, sweaty, and moody, I was in the desperate need for a shower and smoke. The innocent passengers that sat next to me on the train must have been on the verge of passing out. My natural scent was a wide variety of exotic smells that I picked up from all my travelling, I probably smelled quiet badly judging by the passengers looks. Nevertheless, I couldn't care, the bus didn't smell like flowers either. Once off the train in Atocha, I made my way up to my barrio, where nothing had changed in years. The same old streets had the same old activity, were vendors and costumers played cat and mouse. As I trekked up the seventy-six stairs that lead to my mother's apartment on the fourth floor, the dry Madrid summer air began choking my lungs. As made my way to the front door, grasping for as much air as I could, I was ambushed by my family in the main hallway. It was a great surprise to finally see some familiar faces. After we all dined together, I left the scene discreetly with a couple beers and headed straight to my room. My old cave, were I loved, laughed, cried, and slept. It was like any other man's sanctuary, a small quiet space filled with music records, trinkets, and good books. I dropped my body into my chair in relief, as I lit myself a cigarette and opened myself a beer. While Les Mccans "Live Swiss Movement" record from 1967 played in the background, my imagination ran wild thinking of all the endless possibilities that laid before me. Being young and curious, there was something good was bound to happen eventually. I was once again a free man. There was no specific agenda to follow, just the necessity to enjoy life in whatever shape or form it presented itself as.

After a couple days of family acquaintances and unwanted lectures about my future, I decided it was time to give my friends a call. As I roamed around the neighborhood looking for some amusement, I rang Miguel and Xavi, who lived close by and decided to link up at the local plaza. The two fools made their way down Cervantes street waving their hands and goofing around high out of their minds, making sure their presence was known.

“Eyy, que pasa hermano! “It has been a long minute without seeing your face around here, Dfunk,” chuckled Xavi with a sluggish smile.

“Yes it has my man, too long for my taste. It was all one big fu-gazzi” I responded.

“Yeah, its just shit we all have to do sometimes, for the greater future”. He responded as he patted me on the back, as if absolving me of my sins.

“You need the lows for the highs man, that’s the key”. Miguel emphasized. “And when you find that thing that makes you wake up every morning, drive straight at it in fifth gear” he added

“Oh, look at you two drunks. The two wise men filled with inspiration and knowledge of the world.” I responded jokingly.

“Im filled with the smokey smokeyy brothaa”. Xavi responded as he laughed.

We began strolling around the city like hooligans in search for some action. We grouped up with Magno and Mell at a park towards the west of Madrid, were we used to meet up after school and fry our brains as we overlooked the city skyline. There was a little spot further in the bush we used to call the safari, as it resonated the African savanna. It was our jungle and we were its kings. It was special being all together at the safari again after being away for so long. As our shindig began building up its intensity, Magno went down to the corner store to pick up some beers and munchies to keep the troops fed. Sun and beer is a deadly combo for the human organism. One begins to speak about all kinds of nonsensical drunk knowledge about experiences and crazy stories that should remain hidden from the public. The five of us were scattered around the grass as we passed the liter around, reliving the old days. We were all trying to find some meaning in this strange mass of water that floats through space. We wanted some peace of mind, some reassurance that we were all on the right path. The warmth of the sun gave reassurance that we were definitely in the right spot doing the right thing. Mel approached me while he tied

his shirt on his head like Lawrence of Arabia. With the sunglasses and the joint, he looked like some guerilla warrior from the bush. He walked around as he looked for a comfortable patch of grass and dropped straight on to his back. The beers were having their effect, and it was now very visible to any innocent bystander.

“What a big city ey? So much going on at the same time, but we cant see it happening... We cant even really hear from here either, but you know its there. The chaos is still there you know?”

I laughed and looked at him in disbelief. “Since when are you this philosophical Mel? That was a deep one.”, I asked.

“I just think it’s time for me to leave Madrid, go somewhere a bit smaller. Somewhere I can work on my architecture and still have an active live without all the chaos.” Mel continued.

“Seems like everyone is constantly on the move now, doesn’t really feel like anyone has found solid ground yet”, I responded as I smiled at Mel.

“At this age and at this point in life, I feel the ground is always going to be moving. Its beyond our control really. You are just given a chance to take the ride or not. And believe me man, I’m definitely on a major ride right now”, Mel said as he laid back on the grass again.

“You really represent the art of sudapollismo, man,” I pointed out. “At the end, you should do whatever suits you, because you are the only one that has to live with yourself.”

“Amen brother, so excuse me while I kiss the sky yeh?” Mel asked.

“Let me know what it tastes like, you fool.” I added.

Xavi began insisting we should cruise over to a new artsy venue that was a major attraction for art enthusiast in the area. He began describing this venue as a new mecca for us to hangout in. It was a space for free thinkers, outcasts, artist, and musicians to relax and find some peace of mind within the noisy city. The venue was called the Tabacalera, as it was an old tobacco factory that was shut down decades ago. It became a refuge for many street artists to share their art and do as they please without police knocking on their door. Between the city’s finances and the artists, they restored the building and declared it an open space for anyone to enjoy, unless you were a cop. The men in blue were not allowed inside, so one can imagine what goes on in there. Definitely not an ideal place for your average law-abiding citizen. Xavi had us sold within seconds.

We had been at the safari for a while and needed a change of scenery. The whole thing seemed like a very amusing idea for some teenagers simply wanting to waste some time in peace under the warm sun.

As we made our way down calle Atocha, into Embajadores, we saw the old Tabacalera from the distance. I was shocked how bad it looked from the exterior. A big dark structure that seemed to be ready to fall apart, with large broken windows along the whole second floor. A big fence barricaded the whole venue, blocking any view of the inside. I was completely drawn by this place as it seemed so mysterious and spooky. We approached the main gate and knocked hoping some magic dwarf would open and lead us to some kind of heaven. Nevertheless, some grumpy painter splashed with paints all over his hands from his current project, opened the door and scanned us briefly and then shut the door. The painter made himself clear and didn't want us to disturb whatever was going on inside. In major disbelief, we turned around to make our way back to my neighborhood, but we startled upon a group of boys who were heading towards the Tabacalera.

They were an interesting set of individuals at first sight. One of them was rocking long dreadlocks with a Lion of Judah shirt, and his buddy next to him was wearing bright flashy clothing with rings on every single finger. It was like seeing Bob Marley hanging out with some midtown Legazpi hustler. They both approached us while the rest of their friends waited at the gate and asked if we had any tobacco for their spliff. This completely took us by surprise, but it led to a friendly conversation in English. As we began to chat, the natty dread introduced himself as Tobo and his flashy friend was Bryant. Bryant insisted on being called that name even though we understood this to be some kind of joke, judging how his friends were laughing behind him. Bryant seemed to be the joker of the group, as he was constantly fooling around with his clothing and trying to make jokes. As Tobo finished rolling up his spliff, he asked us if we wanted to come in with them into the Tabacalera and kill some time together. We explained our situation to him, but he just told us to quit the whining and get in. One of Tobo's friends opened the door from the inside and greeted every single one of his friends in their local language. I was completely intrigued about the scene in there and who these kids were, but as soon as we got inside, they vanished into one of the many hallways of the old factory.

We began to explore the inside of this mysterious venue, and our

minds were blown away by the vast amounts of art everywhere. There were half sculpted molds laying around the floor carelessly. Paints of doodles and more complex elaborate graffiti's filled every inch of the main hall. Everything was disorganized yet the beautiful colors filled the corridors with life. The bottom corridors lead to rooms filled with bright graffiti with strong political messages. One of the murals had Spike Lee's face drawn on it with shades of black and white, and he was holding up a sign that said, "This is Legazpi". I could tell this was the ideal refuge for many artists, who simply wanted to express their ideas in peace. The whole place seemed like a guerrilla bunker for anarchists. However, the real thrill waited for us outside in the main patio. We needed a break from the art inside, so we headed outside to the patio for some fresh air and a couple cigarettes. Our friends Tobo and Bryant were hanging out with ten other guys on top of a hand-built quarter pipe against the main fence. They had their spot all built up for their summer experience, with a crusty looking plastic chair holding up the big stereo that was blasting French rap. We became the center of attention as we were the only white boys in the whole yard, roaming around clueless. We were unsure whether to approach them and join their shindig or just keep minding our own business, until Bryant spilled out a great performance for our introduction. He slid down the quarter pipe with his half-torn Ipanema flip-flops and called us in with a friendly whistle. As we made our way towards the group, we heard the older members of Bryant's and Tobo's group discuss this invitation while they gave us cautious looks. Bryant chased us with his spliff and wrapped his arm around Mell inviting him to take a hit at the quarter pipe. After some brief introductions, we felt it was a nice gesture to invite them all for a smoke as they were already in the process of their second spliff. The energy suddenly became smooth, and all the uncertainty from before disappeared. Miguel, Magno and I split up and began our own individual conversations with the guys we sat next to. The kid next to me was a 19-year-old young man called Mbaye, from Ghana. I had never met a person from Ghana before as their country is 4 thousand kilometers away from Madrid. We began chatting in English as his Spanish was still in its initial stages, nevertheless his English was better than many Spaniards. We discussed about football, and how football was his passion and his sole reason for being in Madrid. He told me he played semi-professional football back in Ghana and wanted to try out for a lower division team in Spain. He seemed like some big hot shot from his hometown, who crossed

his pond for a greater opportunity. We shared our views on European teams and who we thought were better. It was truly amazing how well we connected without even knowing each other. We shared such different backgrounds and cultures, yet our stoned conversation about football paved a middle ground for a great conversation.

As the spliff slowly made it our way, we both started talking about deeper topics. The laughter and the good vibes had us all talking about life and its wonders. Nevertheless, I felt Mbaye was holding back a deep secret. I could feel his inner conflict, and I couldn't help but ask what his story was. Mbaye seemed very cautious about his words. He would take long puffs and just stare around the patio aimlessly with a faint smile. "I see some shit man. My journey here has been long", Mbaye told me. I instantly could feel his distress, but my curiosity kept on pushing for answers. Mbaye then confessed he was one of the immigrants on board the Aquarius ship that just docked on the east coast of Spain two weeks prior. He even pulled out his immigration papers showing he had legal asylum in Spain for 45 days. I had been tracking the news of the Aquarius briefly on the news, but it baffled me to meet a rescued member of the voyage. He was one of the many West Africans that survived the journey across the Mediterranean from Libya seeking a better life. The Aquarius vessel carrying 629 rescued refugees was rejected from ports in Italy and France, until they reached Spain in June. The vessel carried out rescue missions all throughout summer, picking up any refugees they would find in the water. Mbaye described the voyage prior to being rescued by the Aquarius as a living hell no young man should ever live. This spun my head 360 degrees and left in a dazed state of mind. I was on the borderline of getting a yellow. I couldn't find the words to respond, all I could offer was an attentive ear to listen to his remarkable story. As Mbaye kept the spliff on rotation, he began describing his experience in Libya as a wild survival journey. He explained how one of his friends is still in Libya after the authorities raided their camp and broke both his legs. Libya to him was living hell. It was a country filled with corruption, where authorities purposely target immigrants and hunted them with violence. He later went quiet and began staring around absently again. That was my cue to stop being a drag and asking to relive such memories. I felt I owed him a positive twist to the end of his story, but he beat me to it saying how happy he was to finally be where he is. No sane mind could understand the hate towards individuals like Mbaye. We shared so many human qualities with each other except

our skin color. I couldn't understand how Mbaye and his friends were seen as a threat to European political interests. To me they just seemed like kid's eager to work and rebuild a new life a thousand miles away from home. His story resonated so much with mine, but our paths were drastically different.

Bryant skid down the quarter pipe again, showing off his amazing balancing skills while intoxicated and reached over to the music stereo. He increased the volume under the request of the general public Everyone was having a great time enjoying the peaceful afternoon sky. Tobo queued Bob Marley's Midnight Ravers track and began skanking to the beat. We were in our safe haven where no race, no war, no authority could ruin this moment. Whatever was happening in that space in time, we proved everyone that unity was possible. By now we were all high as a kite and erupting in uncontrollable laughter. Bryant was giving all of us a bit of a show with his intense West African moves while Tobo just bobbed up and down behind the stereo, enjoying every bit of the song. Miguel and Xavi alongside their new friends rushed down the quarter pipe to search for a ball around the patio. All the talk about football got everyone going for a small match. The old grumpy old painter came out with a big smile on his face carrying an old Adidas ball that had seen better days, and handed it over to Tobo. It was a scene worthy of freezing for eternity. I felt like a kid drinking from the chalice of life again. One does need the lows in order to enjoy the highs... As the warmth of the Madrid sun began to fade behind the old red walls of the Tabacalera, we all rallied down to the concrete. Tobo and I set up some goals with some bricks laying around, and the game was on.



Fiction

Contributing Otters

Philip Nakashian

Philip “Philly Kash” Nakashian is a full-time writer and peanut butter enthusiast. He is inspired heavily by Lemony Snicket and Kurt Vonnegut.

Delaney Temple

Delaney Temple is a second year student at CSUMB with a major in Human Communications. She is from Santa Rosa, California and although she desperately misses home, she loves being only a few minutes away from the beach. Ironically, she often dislikes communicating with other humans. She has an addiction to french fries, but also believes that chocolate fixes everything. She hopes to one day be a fiction editor at an established publishing firm and publish her own novels.

Dungeons and Growing Pains Philip Nakashian

This was it—the best date Harrison Mann has ever been on. It doesn't matter that this was the *only* date he's ever been on, because cherry blossoms were *literally* raining down on him and the girl of his dreams, Cindy Lophopper.

They paddled away in their swan boat on the serene waters of Chunter Lake.

Harrison couldn't help but stare at Cindy, her dirty blonde pigtails, her centimeter-long eyelashes, her thousands of freckles (which looked more like stars than birthmarks).

"Harrison?" she asked.

"Yeah, Cindy?" he answered.

"Why are you paddling so fast?"

"Uhhhh..." he said, very articulately, "I'm just happy."

"Well," Cindy replied, "I've got news for you."

This was it. She was going to profess her love for him. Finally! After three years of admiring her, she *finally* felt the same way about him as he did for her. She opened her mouth to speak.

"I don't want to be with you anymore, Harry... you're too nice."

"Wait... what?" he thought, "How can a guy be too *nice*?"

Just then, a nearby duck starting quacking in a staccato rhythm.

"Quack—quack—quack—quack."

Harrison Mann woke up to his alarm clock, signifying the end to his paradise and the start of yet another day at his literal nightmare—another day in the sixth grade.

"Of *course* it was a dream," he said aloud, "God, what a trope."

* * *

That night, Harrison was happy to be with his two best friends, Anna and Geoff. It was Friday night, which meant they were doing what they *always* did on Friday nights—play Dungeons & Dragons and drink root beer until their eyes got too heavy for them to think straight.

Harrison loved playing Dungeons & Dragons with Anna and Geoff for a few reasons: One of which was "escapism." He got bullied at school

on an almost daily basis, and this was his way of getting away from that truth. In reality, he was short. So, naturally, he played as a seven-foot tall Aarakocra warrior, which is basically a giant dude with wings and a bird-face.

He wasn't focused on their adventure, though. He was thinking about the dream he had that morning. He was also thinking about homeroom that he attended *after* the dream, because while he was too embarrassed to say anything to her, he could have sworn that Cindy Lophopper (you know, the girl from his dreams) gave him what Holden Caulfield calls "the eye." He didn't particularly like *The Catcher in the Rye*, but he read it for a book report that year and since then, felt he could identify with Holden Caulfield, even though Harrison thought J.D. Salinger was a total hack.

"Harrison?" Anna asked, waving her hand several inches from his face.

"Huh?" he replied, embarrassed. He knew his friends knew *him* well enough to know what he was daydreaming about.

"Come on, man," Geoff said, "when are you going to realize that Cindy Lophopper isn't going to make the first move? If you wanna date her, you've gotta ask her out, yourself."

"It's true," Anna added, "*I've* never asked a guy out, but if I had to *choose*, I'd rather have *him* ask *me* out instead."

Harrison was red with embarrassment.

"Can we just get back to the game?"

"Right," Geoff tried to be as supportive as he can without letting Harrison off the hook *too* easy, "Harrison, do remember what our characters were even doing?"

"Uhhh... fighting?"

"Good guess," Anna said, "but entirely wrong. You guys were skulking around the caves of Huraquek, the Goblin King."

"—Yeah! The Goblin King!"— Harrison finished the sentence with her as fast as he could, "I knew that... uh... and we're after his treasure or something?"

Geoff was fed up. "Harrison, if your heart's not in it, maybe we shouldn't be playing tonight."

"Geoff is right," Anna added, "we can play some other time when your mind is off of Cindy."

"Guys, that's crazy. And by the way, you do realize that if our lives

were a movie, we'd *totally* be failing the Bechdel test right now... except we're dudes talking about a girl."

"No, Harrison. *You* two are dudes. *I'm* a girl who hangs *out* with dudes. There's a difference."

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"...Did you invite anyone else to your house tonight?" Geoff asked.

"...No... should I answer it?" Harrison replied, knowing full well that answering the door at this hour, no matter who you are, is most unwise.

"It's probably just some kid doing a prank," Anna said with an air of certainty.

"I'm gonna answer it," said Geoff ceremoniously, "It's what my character would do."

Harrison stopped him, "Uh, yeah, except this is *my* house. If anyone's gonna answer my door, it's gonna be me... or my parents... but they're out of town for the weekend, so me."

The three of them approached the front door. The doorbell rang again. Harrison's cat, Sir Licks-A-Lot, scampered away from the foyer and into the kitchen, his eyes glowing in the dark as he glared at the three kids with an almost human-level of concern for their well-being.

The doorbell rang once more. Harrison reached for the knob.

"WAIT!" Anna yelled, "Have you weighed out the pros and cons of answering the door? Seriously, what *good* can come of this?"

"Anna's right," Geoff had to agree, "Who in their right mind would knock on someone's door around midnight?"

Harrison stopped in his tracks, "You've got a point," he said to his friends. "BUT! It could be Cindy!"

He turned the latch excitedly, and the door was kicked wide open from the outside, sending Harrison, Anna, and Geoff flying onto the floor.

Before them stood the meanest, dumbest eighth grader they knew— Adam Gygax—an acne-riddled bully who looked about as much like an orc as a human could. His personality didn't help.

"Harrison Mann..." he sneered, "I heard you were ogling my girl, Cindy, at school today."

There was a moment of silence and confusion.

"Wait? What?" Harrison was flabbergasted, "You rang my doorbell at midnight and kicked my *door* down because you *thought* I was looking

at Cindy?”

“I’m not playing, Mann! Cindy’s mine, got it?”

Geoff tried to deescalate the situation, “Look, Adam, we didn’t even know you and Cindy were dating.”

Adam ignored him. He pulled out a bundle of firecrackers.

“I’m gonna burn your house down,” he said.

“O.K. He’s cray,” Anna said with a surprising amount of calm.

Adam lit the fuse on the firecrackers with an oversized lighter, threatening to toss them onto the three kids. He stomped toward them menacingly as they cowered in fear.

But then Harrison’s cat, Sir Licks-A-Lot, pounced onto Adam’s head, meowing ferociously before jumping off and back into the kitchen. Anna, Geoff, and Harrison realized this is probably the most exciting adventure they’ve ever had. They then decided to turn this into the greatest boss battle of their lives. Geoff got up first and kicked Adam in the groin. Anna was next, pulling his shirt over his head so that he couldn’t see where he was going. Harrison knew that this was his moment of glory. He snatched the firecrackers from Adam’s greasy hands and shoved them down the bully’s underwear. He then turned Adam around and gave his butt a little kick so he went scampering into the street, the sound of firecrackers igniting in his pants echoing across the neighborhood. This sound, paired with the regretful whimpers of a poorly misguided teen, was bittersweet music to the ears of Anna, Geoff, and Harrison, who didn’t *enjoy* inflicting pain on others, but were relieved to have mustered up the courage to defend themselves and their favorite place to hold game nights.

“Do you think he’ll call the cops on us?” Geoff asked, a little sweaty from the thought, as well as the encounter they’d just had.

“No,” Harrison laughed, “They would ask where he got the firecrackers. He may be a low-level orc, but I don’t think he’s *that* stupid.”

“Hey, what was all that about him dating Cindy?” Anna asked.

Harrison grinned. “She can have him if she wants, but I’m feeling pretty confident about asking her out on Monday.”

The Island Delaney Temple

“Don’t hit any manatees!” my father yelled as we began to float away from the Palmetto Bay harbor.

“I promise we won’t! I love you!” I called back, waving until I could no longer see his smiling face. I turned to Will.

“Vic, what if we *ride* the manatees?” Will teased, maintaining a straight face.

“Did you remember to bring your saddle?” He cracked a smile and gently shook his head. “Guess we’ll have to wait until next time then.” I sat next to him on the cushioned bench and he pulled me in close to him. The feeling of his strong arms around me would never get old. As we watched our beloved hometown drift into the distance, we chatted and joked, laughing until our stomachs began to grumble. I pulled a crab sandwich out of the cooler for myself and a turkey one for Will.

We were sailing to Nassau, Bahamas to celebrate over 2 years together. During our trip, we would relax on the beach, go snorkeling, and explore the island. I couldn’t wait to spend a whole week with the man I love, free from parents and obligations, something we’d never experienced. My dad had been teaching me how to sail since I was a little girl, one reason we’re so close, spending hours upon hours on the ocean together. He finally felt I was ready to take the boat out without him. Although, he spent an entire weekend debriefing Will on the “ways of the sea” as well.

I’ve lived in Palmetto Bay my whole life and it would’ve felt claustrophobic if it weren’t for the wide-open ocean so close to my home. I fear I would’ve gone crazy without the constant reminder of the adventure of the sea with the refreshing breeze, crashing waves, and sand that got in everything.

Stomachs full, we watched the sunset on the horizon until long after the solar star had gone to bed. I would never tire of the sky’s beautiful colors, fading from pink and orange to purple and blue each evening. This sunset was as marvelous as any other, but something about being alone on a boat with my loving partner made it that much more magical. After tightening the sails and confirming we were still on course, Will and I headed down into the small bunk room below decks, just big

enough for our bed and some storage. I fell asleep quickly to the lulling sound of the waves, feeling safe and comforted that my love was right there next to me.

In the middle of the night, I awoke to Will shaking me.

“Baby? Vic, sweetheart, please. Victoria, wake up!” I shot up in bed, my mind swirling with confusion and lack of blood flow.

“What’s going on?” I asked, although it didn’t take long to realize that we were in the middle of a storm, and a big one at that. It was shocking I didn’t wake up sooner. “We have to get onto the upper deck and secure the sails.” My stomach dropped as the boat suddenly lurched and Will grabbed me by my arms, forcing me still. I looked deep into his piercing green eyes.

“It’s too dangerous up there, we just have to--” He was interrupted by another lurch of the boat. “...wait the storm out until it calms down.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled my face into his broad chest. It was rare for me to be fearful, and I was used to feeling out of control, but something about the look on Will’s face made me wonder if we’d survive the night. He was always so calm; his nerves were contagious.

We held each other, tightly pressed together, until the waves calmed to a swell instead of a crash. There were several billows that I feared would capsize us, but somehow we were always righted again. I couldn’t tell if the storm lasted two hours or two days but I was grateful it was finally over. I was exhausted, mentally and physically, from the stress of the storm, and all I wanted to do was fall asleep in Will’s arms, but I knew we needed to go to the upper deck and make sure everything was okay.

On shaky legs, I slowly followed Will up the steps and into the bright sunshine. I heard Will let out a breath that could’ve been relief, shock, or both. I brought my arm above my eye line to block the harsh rays and noticed some strange shadows on the wooden deck. They were almost transparent and my mind grasped for an explanation.

“Vic, you’ve got to see this,” Will uttered with amazement. Once my eyes had adjusted to the light some, I relaxed my arm by my side and cautiously began to look around. We were missing one of our sails entirely and the other had a huge rip down the middle. The tiller had broken off so we had no control over the rudder, but all in all, it was a miracle more

damage hadn't been done. We had spare sails in the cargo and I'm sure Will would find an ingenious replacement for the tiller.

What was the most shocking though were the tens of strings that were tied to the mast that led high above us to a cluster of balloons. It looked as if the storm had presented us with a balloon bouquet. I wondered if that was what had saved us from overturning in the storm; I was in disbelief and awe.

"How do you think they got there?" I let out a laugh and hugged Will. He seemed to be too deep in thought to answer, so I asked, "What are you thinking?" an urge for him to think out loud and let me in on his mental processes.

"Unbelievable..." I guess I wouldn't be getting any insight out of him at the moment. I scanned the horizon, realizing that we were probably far off course to our destination. Despite not having any working sails, we were still slowly drifting onward. I released Will to go find our compass. I held the heavy metal device in the palm of my hand and waited for the needle to stop spinning but it continued to go round and round the dial. I figured our cell phones would be useless as well, but I checked just to confirm.

"Look at this." I felt Will approach me from behind and raised the compass so he could see.

"Look at that." He rested his chin on my shoulder, a familiar and comforting weight, and extended his arm past me to point to a spot on the horizon. I followed his gaze to the only thing in our sights other than ocean and sky. It was an island, with trees and sand and hills and something else that I couldn't quite place. As we gradually floated closer to the island, I realized that the specks of color I was seeing were more balloons. They were scattered everywhere, along the beaches, in the trees, and even floating above the highest peaks.

Before we knew it, we were a hundred feet away from the land mass. Will and I quickly worked to drop the anchor and blow up our emergency raft, eager to paddle to the island and explore. We packed up the essentials, not knowing if there would be food or even traces of civilization anywhere. However, we only had a few energy bars and a couple apples for nutrition. From the distance, it didn't look like a human had ever stepped foot on the island. I noticed that all of the balloons still appeared brand new; there weren't any deflated in sight.

“How have they not lost their helium yet?” I asked as we paddled to the shore.

“Something tells me, the normal laws of physics don’t apply here.”

Once on land, we dragged the raft far enough onto the beach that it wouldn’t float away. I reached out to touch one of the balloons, my childish curiosity overpowering my discretion.

“Be careful, we don’t know—” Will stopped abruptly and I let out a guffaw.

“You sound so funny,” hearing my own voice, I laughed even harder. “We both sound funny!” We collapsed on the sand in a barrage of giggles. We sounded like we each inhaled a full balloon of helium.

“I think I know why the balloons haven’t run out of helium,” Will said once we’d finally gotten our breath back.

“Is that even possible? That there could be so much helium in the air?” I tried to think back to my high school science classes and failed to come up with an explanation. Will shrugged, as clueless as me. We brushed off the sand and began to move inland. As we trekked through the woods, I noticed an abundance of flora but no sign of any fauna. One would think a lack of activity would be eerie, but the climate was tranquil with the calm floating balloons, light breeze ruffling the leaves of the trees, and the distant crashing waves. The lack of humanity was refreshing.

We hiked for forty minutes in silence, absorbing and discovering our new environment. I was just about to suggest that we take a rest from our hike when we entered a large clearing. We emerged from a spattering of tropical trees and balloons and, in front of us, were a crystal-clear lake and a magnificent waterfall crashing down into it from a cliff to our left. Balloons dotted along the cliff’s side. Will and I shared an excited look, and I knew he had the same idea.

“Cannonball!” we yelled in our squeaky voices as we stripped off our clothes and ran towards the water. Given that the lake gradually extended from shallow to deeper water, neither of us could succeed in much of an actual cannonball, but we didn’t mind. Soon, we were splashing each other and diving beneath the waterfall. Will began to chase me and I squealed and dove, zig-zagging to escape his grasp. Eventually, he caught up to me, grabbing my arm and pulling me close. Chest to chest, we breathed hard from our foolery.

“I love you,” I said quietly, and Will kissed me in return.

Noticing that the sky was beginning to darken, we decided to make

camp for the night, building a small shelter out of palm leaves under a banana tree.

Curled up together with our emergency blanket in front of the fire, Will said, “As much as I love this place, we can’t live off bananas and tree nuts for the rest of our lives.”

“I’m sure we would manage,” I offered, “but yeah, we should probably head back in the morning. We’re out of energy bars too.” I crumpled the last wrappers from our “dinner” and shoved them into a backpack pocket.

“Shit!” Will sat up abruptly. “How do we even get home?”

“Oh, I trust the ocean.” Will looked wary but didn’t disagree. He relaxed back into me and soon was sound asleep. I could feel my consciousness fading as well, but I wanted a moment to stare up at the stars and savor the extraordinary day.

In the morning, we awoke to a beautiful sunrise over the lake, the light shining through the transparent balloons and reflecting off of the foil ones, still not a single cloud in the sky. We drank from the clean, pure lake and each had a banana for breakfast. Reluctantly, we packed up what little things we had and began a slow trek back to the beach.

“Where do you think all the balloons came from?” Will asked, a question I’d been pondering since we arrived. I considered it once more before responding.

“I think they’re all of the lost balloons that children have accidentally let go of, the ones that floated away into the stratosphere without a second thought.” Will opened his mouth to respond, but upon arriving at the beach, we stopped dead in our tracks. Our sailboat was not where we had left it, anchored close by the shore, but hovering several yards above the waves, held up by a bundle of balloons. Not wanting to, but deciding it was our only choice, we collected a bunch of sharp rocks to attempt to throw at and pop the balloons to release our boat back into the ocean. It took several trips back to the shore, but eventually we lowered the boat into the water once again. Then, we were able to replace the broken sail and Will tied one of the raft paddles to the rudder as a makeshift tiller.

As I suspected, the trusty sea took us back home by early afternoon, this time without the storm. I was relieved to see that our compass and phones were back working like normal as we entered the

harbor. It was as if nothing at home had changed because, for everyone at home, nothing had.

“Back so soon?” my dad asked, having been expecting to not see us for a few more days.

“Yeah, well the storm last night was kind of intimidating, so we decided to play it safe and head back early.” I thought about the possibility of Will and me continuing our vacation after our detour, but Nassau would’ve just been disappointing in comparison to what we discovered.

“What storm?” My dad looked confused. Will and I shared a look.

“Must have just been an isolated thunderstorm,” Will said, thinking quickly, which may have actually been true, but neither of us was about to give up our secret.

After securing the boat and unpacking our things, we lay on the beach together, reflecting on our adventure. We watched yet another gorgeous sunset, fingers curled around each other’s, admiring the purple clouds floating above. I wondered if we’d ever return to our hidden paradise and decided that we would, someday.

“What should we call it?” Will asked, thinking out loud.

“The Island of Lost Balloons?” I suggested.

“Not so subtle,” he laughed, “but I like it.”



Old Flame

I was born the day I met you,
and threw the matches all away.
you walked in and lit me up,
so much more than just a flame.

I died the day I left you,
picked the matches up off the floor.
I set my heart on fire,
the way you once did before.

~ Elizabeth Wiles