

CINDER CONE



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CINDER CONE

Portland Community College SE
Literature and Other Arts

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Letter to John Okada

By Ngoc Nguyen

Hey John,

I can call you John, right? Because this is America and we don't 'hey' seniors where I grow up. Anyway, I just read your *No-No Boy* and find the book very relatable. Your book was the first of what we call yellow writing. As a yellow reader, I decided to do something. Though I can't help but wonder if this letter will ever be mailed to you, I am still shy. But when the situation calls for a letter, I write one.

It's hard to conclude one's feeling about a book in just a few sentences, but if you got another letter from this Ruth Ozeki saying 'only fiction has the power to ask questions that bring the past to life and to record it in all its vibrant confusion and complexity', please thank her for me. I have crystal-clear memories of me trying to memorize the outcomes of WWII for my History exam and they had nothing to do with the pain and shame and anger and hopelessness I feel when I read the letter Ichiro's mother received from her sister, asking for white powder and sugar. My mom's family too, John, had once live off the biscuits and fabrics came from the more prosperous side of the world where my uncles work 3 jobs half of their lives. War turned Mike the American into someone who protested in camp and went to live in Japan because his country treated him like a Japanese. War was also responsible for making brothers being so ashamed of each other they decided to do the exact opposite things. For a while I was able to teleport and live in Seattle post WWII, thanks to you, John.

To be honest, I would never pick up your book had it not been for my Literature of the NW class. I would totally pass on your sad-looking cover if I wander inside Powell's on a Sunday afternoon. It looks miserable. Indeed it is a sad story. My friend and I have a friendly debate on whether or not we should consider your book a NW literature based on the topic and the author. You were born and raised in the NW, so obviously you 'have lived in a place for quite some time, and really soaked in up' (Findlay). You are as deeply rooted as John Rember, Henry Carlile, Robert Wrigley or Jon Raymond. But I argue that since the literature of the region were mainly focused on tribal and Euro-America, we might have to reconsider. Your book definitely speaks to the minority, like Raban with his famous 'my Seattle is a city of émigrés and migrants'. Either way, I am so grateful I get the chance to read *No-No Boy*. No matter how disconnected Ichiro may feel, he belongs and always will be. One of the other reasons, I bet, is that Feb 19 will mark the 77th anniversary of executive order 9066. The president apologized. Our college dedicates the whole section for the order. Our class is one of many ongoing discussions, I assure you. We don't forget. But still I'd quote you on this: 'And the one who is the Negro or Japanese or Chinese or Jew is further fortified and gladdened with the knowledge that the democracy is a democracy in fact for all of them'. Is it really the case? Are we freer than the 'people on the wide continent, living free lives, hunting pine nuts and seed, fishing for salmon, living under buffalo skin, moving when they feel like it' (Rember)?

One of the Vietnamese poets I admire very much used to say he would rather shine brightly for once than have his dimming lights go on for years. I wonder what would you choose? Because I keep thinking about it reading your book. Was it a real tragic that you only have one book ever published? The one that, in order to truly document what your own group had gone through, you had to isolate yourself from friends and family to write? The one that had the world desperately craving for more? Not that I try to make connections or anything, but I was writing the letter literally in a 20 feet radius of the VA hospital Kenji went to. I hope it was better, newer back then because it looks slightly off nowadays. On the way to the hospital, I saw many flags that said 'Keeping the promise' and I thought of Kenji. How many 'Japs' in their rightful mind had gone out there, fought and fought some more, only to come back half human. It hurts to see so many of your beloved characters had to choose between 'dead aliveness or dying slowly'. Was Ichiro your what-if? You served in the U.S. Army so I figure you were the yes-yes boy. When Ichiro's mother killed herself because she finally had the courage to end things that had ended way earlier, did Taro 'die a little' too receiving only 'Ma dead. Suicide'? Lastly, if you had the chance, would you go back and tell your parents not to come to America in the first place, seeing what you see now?

My classmate Jackson told the story of his high school teacher who read a letter of apology from Reagan to Ms. U, also his teacher. I cried. Reading your book was painful, for its striking resemblance to the journey of my own family. I don't know, John. When they are all gone, I will have zero connection to the days they had to eat sweet potato with very salty pork fat. 'There was room for all kinds of people', you said. And I do hope one day I'll find my place in this 'tiny bit of America'.

Warm regards,

Ngoc.

Lexagonal Gem

By Marty Ashley

One Day

By Marty Ashley

The entire pacific northwest
contorted disrupted compressed
As subducted plates snap
With a thunderous clap
Like a cascade of nuclear tests

Crystalline in structure
It glitters when it's turned
Yielding distillation
Of lessons dearly learned

Words polished till they shimmer
Depending on the light
Its facets planes of knowledge
Bathed in mysteries of night

But zero is its value
Until it's oozed between
The gates of gentle reader
Who deciphers what it means

And recreates its essence
In the caverns of their soul
Possessing now a jewel ~
Making poem and reader whole

My Grandma

By Ngoc Nguyen

My grandma is the quietest person I know
Among us lies 70 years of silence and discomfort
With her betel nut she waits for me to get home.

I was the loud kid, I would put on a show
She would not say a thing, she would just shake her head
My grandma is the quietest person I know.

I was not her favorite: 'Tin why your hair uncombed?'
I was a teenager, I was among her many grandkids
With her betel nut she waits for me to get home.

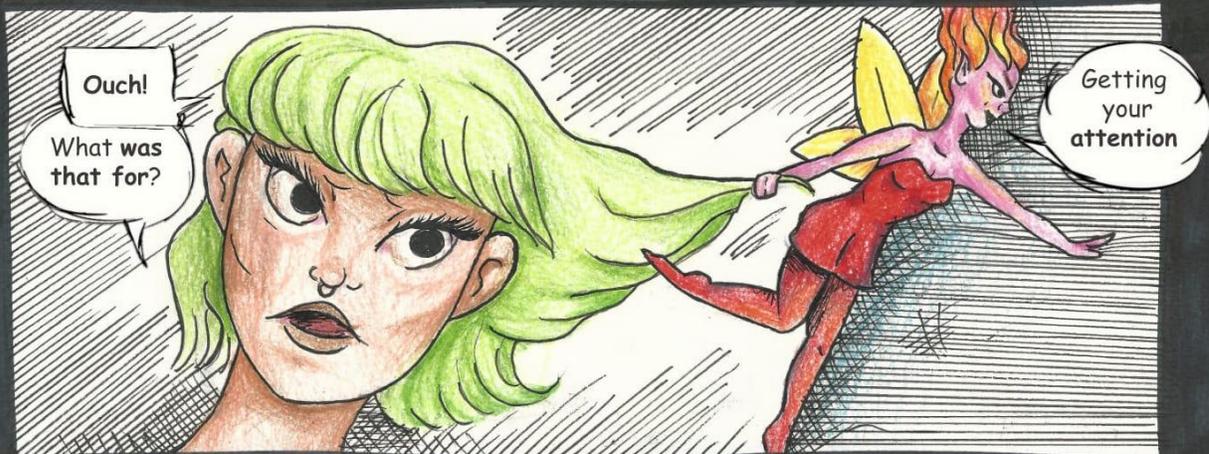
My motorcycle is freedom, I like to feel the wind blow
She was alone in her room, she would look on as cars pass by
My grandma is the quietest person I know.

Months turn into years, phone calls were a norm
We go places, we love to send her cards
With her betel nut she waits for us to get home.

The last time she talked, it was ages ago
I grow up...never really knew her.
My grandma is the quietest person I know
With her betel nut she waits for me to get home.

Untitled

By Aurel BockNelson





Did you know that student loan debt is at an all time high?

it is now second highest, only being topped by mortgage.

\$1.4 trillion is a lot!

better yet, this is all a complex system set up by universities and the government

and use the wishes of the young to fill their pockets.

Instead of focusing on education

schools now focus on monetary profit



Are you excited?



Jaja

By Amaka Agum

The white cloth was taken off me as my eyes took in everything the room. The sunshine from the outside pierced my eyes slightly blinding me. I was quick to notice the man in front of me. He was short and thin. He had light brown skin with white spots splattered across his face. He had an apron with brown stains. His hair was matted and stuck to the side of his head as though he had just rolled out of bed. He wore a chain around his neck with a ring around it. He was the creator.

“Jaja,” he muttered under his breath as he stared at me and scratched his head.

“Jaja!” he said again in a high-pitched sing song voice as he stretched out his hands in a theatrical pose. He cleared his throat.

“Jaja!” he said in a deeper voice with his nose in the air. He walked to the end of the room and back to me. He put his hands around his waist and snapped his fingers.

“Jaja!”

So Jaja became my name. It wasn't odd compared to the others in the room. There was an old man with an elongated white beard and his name was “long beard” and he didn't seem bothered by it. He didn't seem bothered by anything. There was a young woman with an afro in a white dress and her name was “Princess”. There was also a mother and her two children, a boy and a girl. They had gaunt faces and wore tattered clothing. Their names were the Haggards.

There were still others in the room and in other rooms, but I couldn't see them. I couldn't see them because I was right next to a pillar that blocked my view. People poured into the room throughout the week and looked at us briefly then walk into the other rooms. They seemed to spend most of their time in the other rooms and would often walk out with others from the other rooms. Princess called them patrons. The creator treated Princess with great care. He always made sure she was clean, and her frame was shiny. It was not as if the rest of us couldn't speak up about the unfairness. He wouldn't hear us.

Once, two small children came into the room. One of them was stuffing his face with a bag of plantain chips. They both spoke fast Pidgin as the sashayed around the room and their hands gliding across our frames. The child with chips reached out to touch Princess's dress staining it with his oily hands. The creator yelled, shaking the boy rigorously. He spent the whole evening cleaning the stain. He didn't bother to look at the rest of us.

For weeks and months, people would walk in and barely glance at us and walk into the other rooms and walk out with others smiling. One rainy Sunday afternoon, a man and a woman walked into the room. The man was short and round. He wore a very expensive suit with a fedora and he reeked of cologne. The woman looked a lot younger than the man. She wore a red tailored suit with a blonde lace front. The man was darker than the creator, darker than most of the patrons that came in, darker than the two children. The woman was light but certain areas of her body were dark like her knuckles, the creases in her face, and parts of her neck which she caked with makeup. The round man didn't seem to know how to communicate with the creator, he just pointed to the others and said, "zhis?", "zem?", "how much?" Then he'd whisper to the woman and she'd shake her head. Then her eyes caught me.

"Zat one Pascal," she said, pointing her red long nails at me. "I vant zat one." Pascal frowned.

"Pourquoi? vhy Ines?" he asked.

"Vhat about zat one? C'est belle." He pointing to Princess. Ines shook her head vigorously and kept on pointing at me.

"Pascal," She retorted sharply. "You told me zat I could get vwhatever I wanted for zee office."

Pascal sighed as he asked the creator the price.

"One million naira," he said with his chest. Pascal and Ines stared at him with disbelief.

"I'm joking, sir." The creator let out a nervous chuckle. "Four hundred naira." Pascal paid for me and before I knew it I was in the trunk of a car and heading to the airport on the way to Abidjan.

I never expected to be in Pascal's office since Ines picked me out. Pascal's office had a nice view of Abidjan. He made no noise and kept to himself. He was in charge of his workplace as people would often walk in and report to him. Sometimes they'd come in with excuses as to why their work was unfinished and he'd give them a pass. Among them was Ines, who always came in decked with the most expensive lace fronts, clothes, and jewelry. She gave him kisses in exchange for gifts and if it wasn't to her liking. She'd raise her voice or stomp her feet or whine and he'd give her more. In the beginning, I noticed how he'd often take off his ring whenever he knew Ines was coming because she didn't like to look at it.

Once an older woman came into the office without notice and Pascal hurried to put it back on. She saw him do it but pretended not to notice. She wore a long flowing shapeless skirt and a large t-shirt. Her hair was wrapped up in a black scarf and she wore no makeup. She seemed to have a very quiet demeanor, even more than Pascal's. She called him sweet names like "honey" and "darling" in a very faint voice. Pascal seemed to be frustrated with her presence as he sighed and paid no mind.

"I never realized you vere into zhings like zis," she gestured to me. Pascal ignored her. She noticed this but kept on talking.

“Ve’ve been married for five years and I keep learning new zhings, eh Pascal?” Pascal sighed again. Their conversation went on like this every time she visited. She’d ask him a question and he’d sigh, nod or shake his head.

One morning, the woman came into Pascal’s office with a small boy. The boy ran up to Pascal and gave him a hug. Pascal wore a smile on his face when he laid eyes on the boy. Then the boy saw me and let out a loud shriek. He hid behind Pascal and clutched him tightly. The boy kept on shrieking and screaming which caught the attention of the secretary who led him out of the room.

Later that day, Pascal covered me up in wrapping paper. I spent months in the darkness wondering why the boy was scared. I had never seen what I looked like. I wanted to see what I looked like. I must look quite unpleasant because I remembered Pascal’s reluctance to buy me in the first place.

Pascal took the wrapping off and there was an older man standing next to him. The old man nodded his head and shook Pascal hand, telling him that he like what he saw. Pascal helped the man put me in his car. On our way there, I tried to catch my reflection in the windows and glass doors of the building but all I saw was a silver frame and sometimes a black background but not myself. I was getting impatient, I couldn’t move, and it was starting to frustrate me.

I ended up in a young woman’s apartment. The apartment was painted white, the furniture was white, the curtains were white, everything in the apartment was white. The woman was very beautiful, even more, beautiful than Princess. Her beauty made me forget about wondering what I looked like. She was very slender, tall, and dark. Her hips swung gracefully when she walked, and the clothes hung effortlessly on her body. There were large pictures of her around the apartment, posing in different poses. She often hosted expensive parties with young people decked out in extravagant clothing. They drank lavish wines and ate finger treats. The guests would often come towards me and talk about the odd thing hanging up in her living room. They didn’t seem as terrified as the boy but most of them did raise their eyebrows as to why the young woman had me in her living room. The young woman seemed normal for the most part but one evening, she started to argue with someone.

She screamed in annoyance. “Ignace! How many times do I have to say it, leave me alone!”

I looked over in the direction she was screaming at and there was no one there. She did this more in the next years that followed. She’d speak to a man named Ignace and sometimes she’d speak to a woman named Sheila, who she seemed to be comfortable around and sometimes to Brandon, who she was very scared of. Brandon told her to take me down.

“Brandon, she’s wonderful. I can’t take her down,” she pleaded. Brandon must’ve done or said something to scare her that she swiftly took me down and dumped me on the sidewalk with the word “FREE” taped to my frame. It rained that night and the water seeped through my canvas and giving me a little tear on my left side. When morning came, and people filled the streets, I could see their faces twist with terror or disgust when they saw me. Little children strayed away from the sidewalk I was on. Babies clutched their parents’ clothes in fright sometimes they started to cry. I wondered what it was about me that made the children scared, the babies cry, and the adults twist their faces in distaste.

A taxi cab drove past me and then backed up. An old woman in Ankara clothing came out of the back seat and picked me up. She looked at me and smiled lightly. She put me in the taxi and took me to her home. The old woman lived in a small house away from the people in the town. She lived with a small boy in a wheelchair. The old woman waited on the boy hand and foot as he ordered her around. The boy often sat in bed and rang a bell and the old woman would come running to answer his calls. The boy wheeled around the house with his nose in the air. The old woman often took breaks in the day to get things from the market. She was always brought back something for him to chew on. She did everything that he asked except for one which was to take me down. One night, the boy woke up and complained to the old woman that I gave him nightmares. He talked about how hairy I was and how my face gave him terrors, but the old woman would retort that this is the one thing she had and liked that she didn't share with him.

The boy would swing his arms and scream at her, but the old woman ignored him. A rainy day came, and the old woman took a trip to the town. The boy wheeled into the living room with a bat in his lap. He stared at me with rage and disgust as he took in deep breaths. He took the bat and swung it across my frame. He kept on swinging at me till I fell off the wall. The swinging didn't hurt but I felt it and I knew he was trying to get rid of me. The boy dumped me in the trash and wheeled back into the house. When the old woman came home, she took a slipper and smacked the boy across the face. I didn't know what happened to the boy or the old woman because I never saw them again.

I ended up in a room that was like the one I was first in. There were others like me, but they weren't as nice as Princess or Long Beard. They often ignored me as they talked bad about me, so I hung there broodingly. Most of the patrons that came bought most of the others in the room until I was the only one left. One day, there was a familiar face that came in. It was the creator. His hair was combed and had patches of grey in them and he had grown a beard. His white spots had turned into patches on his skin. He still had the chain with the ring around his neck. He came in for supplies but when he laid his eyes on me, tears poured out of them.

"Oh, Jaja!" he cried. The other creator gave the creator a questioning look. I didn't care about what I looked like anymore I just wanted to go away with the creator. The creator asked for my price and the other one told him to just take me.

I lay in the backseat of the creator's car. I thought about the others I was going to see again. Hopefully, they had not been sold yet. I read the streets signs happily which drifted from French to English to French and English again. I started to hear the familiar languages of Pidgin, Igbo, and Yoruba in the streets and it made delighted, I was home.

We stopped at a small house at the end of a cul-de-sac and the creator took me in. The room was unfamiliar and strange but at least I was with the creator. He hung me up opposite the doorway to the bathroom. In that bathroom, there was a small round mirror and then I got what I wanted.

My frame was silver, and my background was black. My face was covered with long thick brown fur. My eyebrows were long and stuck out of my face. My pupils were pitch black and my eyes were sunken, they seemed like the type of eyes that followed. My smirk was wide, mischievous, and slightly devilish as it showcased my sharp jagged teeth. My color had washed off and ran down to my frame. It gave the appearance that my body was melting off. There was a patched-up tear on my left side where the boy's bat had cut it in. A large pink bow sat on my head as if it was there to make me look less frightening.

Koi

By Mandy Andersen



Outer Worlds

By Conrad Wolfling

Thousands of them
Planets
Homes
Hanging from the sky

None like the other
Yet so familiar
So similar

Maybe a dream?
I've had
You've had?

To cut them from their root
Destruction after all
Only is a form of creation

Gravity

By Conrad Wolfling

Beautiful mountain pass
Ridges far beyond what the
eye can comprehend
Rolling fog below
In and out of sight
Lifting up and down
Levitating before me

I couldn't tell you how much it
hurt
To sit and stare
Feel hopeless

Pulling down
Farther and farther
Till I lay at the bed
Cold beneath me
Unable to breathe

No se bailar

By Carlos Moran

Soy de cultura grande y compleja,
E estudiado victorias, tragedias, y historias de injusticias mutuas.
reconocidas, recordadas y celebradas.
Se de varios artistas de varios medios; cantores, compositores, poetas, pintores y actores.
Todos reconocidos, recordados y celebrados.
Yo también celebró esta cultura,
pero no se bailar.
Soy de familias grandes y numerosas.
Mi familia está compuesta de tíos, primos y hermanos, abuela, primas y sobrinas;
y también está compuesta de amigos; amigos míos, amigos de mis padres, amigos de mi hermana y amigos de amigos.
Todos los que conviven bajo nuestro techo durante la cena, son familia.
Y en la familiar, siempre hay un músico o un borrachin que sabe como darle sazón un convivio,
pero no se bailar.
Soy de celebraciones grandes que ocupan varios días del calendario.
Se festeja la vida y la muerte, la alegría y la tristeza.
Las victorias y las derrotas, los contrastes de la vida.
Y en toda fiesta se encuentran las bebidas.
Son noches de desahogo y de escape.
Para cada celebración se escucha cierta canción y se baila cierto danzón,
pero no se bailar.
Soy de comidas llenas de color y de sabor.
Colores que atraen a los especuladores,
olores que satisfacen el corazón
Y con sabores extraordinarios llenos de historia.
Cada quien tiene su receta del mismo plato, cada quien tiene su sazón.
En la cocina se escucha el ritmo del cocinero,
pero no se bailar.
Soy, pero no soy;
Por que no se bailar.

Don't Look under the Bed

By Zoey Hatjes

When someone you love dies, the concept of time dies along with them. You find that it's no longer linear, and you start to question if it ever really was. My dad died when I was 13, that's about 2 and a half years ago. Some days it feels like yesterday but today it feels like I found out a couple minutes ago. It's an isolating ache in my whole body. An ache that if you haven't experienced it, you wouldn't really understand. This goes for all of my friends at school. They try, bless their hearts, but I can see the annoyance on their faces if I talk about him too much or if I start crying while eating my can of pringles. You might have guessed it, the smiling pringles guy somehow looks exactly like my dad.

I can't predict when my grief will rise to the surface, but if I could it would make my life a little easier. My brain feels like it's made up of millions of rooms. Behind each door is a different memory and sometimes, most of the time, I don't have control over which door gets opened. Sometimes it's a gentle reveal and sometimes an unkind force thrusts it open and knocks me down. It's not like I don't have good memories of my Dad, but I call bullshit on only remembering the good times after someone dies. It seems like people just force it and want to forget. For me, I have discovered all of the shit I have stuffed away deep in my subconscious. I miss the idea of a dad, not my dad himself. At least, I don't think.

I went to see my therapist today, and this is why I'm writing. He suggested to tell my story with words instead of carving my pain into my inner thigh. I guess I can see where he's coming from.

In his office I was looping on what the coroner's told my mother when they first saw him. Once I heard the story of him lying there, on that stupid green couch, I started to obsess. The corners painted a picture of a guy that had been dead for a day covered in his own puke. My therapist told me to write about a memory that's "happy" instead of dwelling on an image I didn't even see. I don't know how to do that really, so I'm going to do the best I can.

Here we go.

* * * * *

I remember my Mom being gone. I remember my Dad laying on that ugly green couch drowning himself in Smirnoff disguised in plastic water bottles. I would watch his skin melt and his thoughts fall from the embers of his cigarettes. His face was puffy and red like an odd looking blowfish. He couldn't see me that night. His eyes wouldn't focus on anything except the TV and I didn't know if he was even watching it. I stood in the same room as him at the front door with my face pressed up against the glass peering out into the yard.

I kept my Teletubbie suitcase against my side and I gripped the bag tight with my tiny hands. I was convinced that the four of them were conspiring a plan to help me leave but they never told me what it was. They just kept smiling.

I felt like I had been standing there for hours trying to conjure up a scenario that was never going to happen. My face was cold and all I wanted to do was sit down but I needed to prove that I would be ready to leave at any moment. I watched the sun move across the sky and at this point I had to wave goodbye. The moon was rising, and I had no intention to leave my station. I had to show my mom that I was a dedicated daughter and was ready to jump in the car when she came back. I promised myself I would do everything she wished so she would never need to put me on a timeout again.

I awoke from my fantasy to the sound of quickened footsteps that approached behind me and I peeled my face off the door. It was my brother.

"What are you looking at?" He asked attempting to conceal glass jars underneath his skinny arms leaning over my head.

"I'm waiting for Mom to come and get me. She forgot," he grabbed my hand and took me outside. My Dad mumbled after us but his words were swallowed by an excited football player screaming at him from the T.V.

"You know she's in San Francisco with Auntie. Now," he handed me a jar, "we gotta catch them before they all disappear."

My eyes began to focus around the porch light and once I saw one, I saw all of them. June bugs were buzzing around our heads and crawling within the blades of grass beneath our naked feet. I watched my brother's hands grasp at the air around him. His hands reminded me of Staryus, ready to attack.

I knelt down and grabbed the ones by my feet and began stuffing them in my jar. My smile broke through my crusted snot.

I was dancing. I was laughing. My toes found the cement walkway as I chased after the huge brown bugs that were trying to follow the light. It was easier to catch them that way, all clustered together, slowly killing themselves.

Every time a bug went in, another would fly out. My hands were too small to cover the mouth of the jar but I didn't care, I just tried to catch them faster.

I heard my brother's rushing footsteps.

"How many did you get? I at least got 10. It was a really good turn out tonight," he said in a very businesslike tone. He lifted them up to eye level and peered through the glass to study them better. We watched them crash into each other. They whipped each other with their bug wings and used their bodies as levers to crawl up the sides of the jar.

I glanced at mine just in time to see the last June bug lift itself up and fly away.

"I had a lot too. They just didn't want to listen to me when I told them to stay," he smiled at me and emptied his accomplishments. One by one they took off from the ground and stormed the light hanging above our heads.

"Get in here, it's late!" Our Dad yelled somewhere within the couch cushions.

The door slammed shut behind us. The house reeked of a strange food. My Dad was hunched over a black tray that had different compartments separating the moosh he was shoveling into his mouth. He washed it down with more alcohol. I watched the tv dinner drip off of his peppered mustache as if in slow motion. He didn't look up.

I don't remember why I was scared, but I remember my brother leading me to our room before I started crying. I remember the feeling of my smile being painfully chipped away. I remember accidentally elbowing Tinky Winky on my way out. I didn't care though. He had a stupid face anyways.

My brother grabbed my mom's pillow, a flashlight and a Star Wars book that had a raised cover of Jabba the Hutt.

We wiggled ourselves underneath the bed and fit perfectly, as always. We laid side by side pushing the wooden bed frame up with our feet. Most kids learned to be scared of the monsters that lived under their beds. We made it our home. Just the two of us.

"We'll be safe here," he whispered.

"You promise?"

He put his arm around me and wiped my tears with his shirt.

"I know you're younger than me and all but I'm glad I have you. I feel safer with you and I promise I will protect you from anything. Remember this is our secret place. He's never been here before. It's only me and you and that's the way it will stay. I promise. Okay?"

"Okay," I nestled into his shoulder and clutched my Mom's pillow to my chest. He then cleared his throat and opened to the first page. I listened to him make up stories that coincided with the pictures until I fell asleep.

My Handbag

Written by Kobra Azizi

Photo by Alex Khamsouk



Today, fashion is represented not only clothes but by the handbag as well. A lady's handbag is one of the major accessories of today's fashion world. My handbag is traditional and handmade. Before I came to the United States, my mother gave it to me. She made and embroidered it by herself. It took two weeks to make this bag. This gorgeous handbag is made of different threads and colors, such as, white, green, red, and blue. The fabric of my handbag is cotton. This pretty bag is very unique, special, and it is a memento for me. When I wear it, I can feel my mom and it makes me so happy. My handbag is considered a fashion statement that can make style. Using this stylish bag, can easily carry my important personal belongings along with me. I can easily keep my wallet, cosmetics, and so many other valuables which I need on a daily basis. Most Afghan women like to use embroidery handbags because it shows their culture. In addition, they usually wear this handbag with traditional clothes, which are called Afghani Gand. Afghani people also wear this handmade bag on different events like wedding parties, on Eids, and at New Year's. It represents Afghani customs. Generally, handbags play an essential role in my life. I can't go anywhere without my handbag. Accessories are an additional feature that tells about my style, sense of confidence, and approach to life. Therefore, having the right ones for a desired look is quite essential.

Embroidered Handkerchief

Written by Sayed Moosavi

Photo by Rebekah-Anne Rees



I received a gift from my sister while I was traveling to the United States. The gift she gave to me was a handmade embroidered handkerchief. I watched her embroider it. This was a two week project, which had several steps. In the first step, she drew a flower on a piece of paper, like they do in tattoo shops. Then she transferred the design to the cotton fabric. In the second step, she pasted the drawing of the flower photo on to the cotton and started sewing the special material such as silk, wool, and special sparkly white string.

People in my country use embroidery designs for many things like hats, trays cover, cushion covers, women's head dress, jackets, pillow cases, table cloths, and window curtains. The history of this embroidery goes back to the nineteenth century. Back in those days, the Afghans exported their embroidery to several countries like China, India, and some parts of the Middle East.

Today, it's a good occupation for many Afghani women who make embroidery in their homes and then sell them in the market. The majority of Afghani women do embroidery while they are in relationship. For instance, they make special embroidery with hearts or flowers and later they give them to their loved ones. Some make embroidery for their best friends or family members. This is why I received mine from my sister.

It is one of the most beautiful gifts I have that reminds me of her and who we are. I will be keeping the gift till I go back home and show her that I am still have the embroidered craft handkerchief. The distance can not take our love away since I have already spent four years in the United States

Ethiopian Oromo Culture Objects

Written By Hayat Husen

Photo by Cece Hall



I have three important cultural objects in my house. My mom gave me these objects when she learned I was going to go to the U.S.A. She told me to keep them in a safe place. These objects can be found anywhere in Ethiopia, but they are only from Oromo culture. In Ethiopia, we have about 84 cultures! These objects are a little bit expensive to buy because they're handmade. I have three different kinds of Oromo cultural objects. First, "Qori" is made of hardwood and beads. It is a bowl you put food in it, but it's only served for holidays, weddings, and for special occasions. Second, 'Fala'ana' is used to serve on special occasions and for the head of the house like the husband. Third, 'Borati' is a pillow. It's made of hardwood and beads. "Borati" Oromo people use it as a pillow, but I never used it. Specially, when women put butter or oil on their hair they use "Borati". Finally, these objects are very important for me and for Oromo people because they remind us our culture. Also, these objects were passed from one generation to another. These objects are our identity and describe us. Also, these objects can be used for decoration. To sum up, these are my three objects I took them with me from my country Ethiopia. They remind me of my mom and my Oromo culture.

“Non La”

Written by Thi Tran

Photo by Heidi Banks



Today, I want to tell you about a traditional object from my country, Viet Nam. It's a palm_ leaf conical hat called “Nón lá”. From its name, we can know its materials easily. It's made of simple and available materials such as palm leaves, bark of the “Mộc” tree, and bamboo. To have a perfect hat, people need to have skillful hands and take a long time for making each hat. I borrowed this hat from my aunt. She had carried it from Vietnam as a souvenir. Actually, Vietnamese people usually wear “ nón lá” to protect them from the sun and rain, and they also use it as a fan when it's hot. In my country, it's easy to see the images of these conical hats. For example, farmers usually wear “ nón lá” to work in the fields, students with conical hats go to school everyday, and vendors on the streets or sellers at the market also wear the conical hats. Moreover, many beautiful ladies like to wear “ áo dài”, Vietnamese traditional clothes, with “ nón lá” to go to the special places like pagodas and take many pictures. These people believe that this will make them become more beautiful and elegant. From these things, I believe that “ nón lá” is a meaningful symbol in Vietnam. It has become synonymous with the Vietnamese for hundreds of years. For me, when I see the conical hat, it always reminds me of my memories in Vietnam as well as the time when I had studied in high school. At that time, I always wore “ nón lá” with a white áo dài to go to school by bike. Those days were so great and leisure. Therefore, the image of “ nón lá” is always in my mind as well as most Vietnamese people's minds.

Art

By Conrad Wolfing

I don't understand art
Nor do I feel the need to explain my own
I looked into theirs
And saw only a reflection of myself

I used this moment to fix my hair
And read the words, "In honor of the world's first solid blue record"
I don't care what's scratched into it
Only what I saw on the mirror like surface

Something I've spent a lifetime forming
Maybe not art
But unique
In what ways I don't feel the need to explain

What's in a Name?

By Tuna Cole

Some time ago I was visiting my children (and theirs), trying to get acquainted/make a connection with my youngest granddaughter (then, +/- four), and we were testing the waters as to what she might call me:

"Can I call you potato nose?"

"Sure, you bet."

"Uhhh, can I call you... fat head?"

"Yep, not a problem," though I might have winced a bit, that one hitting close to home, if you know what I mean.

After one or two more rounds in like fashion—"elephant ears?"—I let slip, "Sweetheart, you can call me anything; just *pu-leeze* don't call me Late for Lunch." And I don't really have to finish the story, do I?

My precious little contrarian, sheer triumph radiating from her eyes, bolted off the couch and rocketed around the room, hooting, "Late for lunch! Late for lunch!" to peals of laughter—well, a few guffaws, mostly, a snigger or two thrown in—from sundry attendees.

Still in use among *seven* grandkids, it continues to be my proudest appellation: *Grampa Late4Lunch!* Trite and hokey, I concede; I guess you had to be there. And talk about ironies, I cannot recall *ever* having missed out on a midday repast due to a tardy arrival.

I'm Fine

By Hayley Williams

I say I'm fine with a shrug
It's impossible to voice how i feel
They'd ask are you alright?
What's this chicks deal?
In my head something is slowly snapping
Splintering like wood
Sticking to those i touch like glue
They say it's painful
They try to remove me
But i burrow in deeper
Until the sting is unbearable
But i can't remove me from myself
I try
And i run
And i fuck
And i plead
But days like today i feel like i can't breathe
Everything hurts
My nerves exposed
God forbid anyone come close
I need the presence of another yet i feel so detached
"Stay the fuck away"
"No wait, please come back"
desperation to feel loved
Has me ripping at the seams
I'm weighed down by stones that drop heavily on my skin
Leaving me bruised, dirty
I try to wash myself clean
I try to present myself regardless
I find i fall apart instead
My seams unraveling once again
My face blazes scarlet
How could i be so naive?
To think you wouldn't too see
Another stone drops
Splinters dig deeper
I need it all to stop

Hope can be hurtful
New beginnings a broken promise
I need to move past this
Tired of trudging through molasses
I lack the will to get up
My heart a heavy thump
So that's how i feel
What do you think?
Don't mind me unraveled at your feet
I swear I'm fine

The Simplest Way to Travel through Time

By Jacqueline Clark

I had been dreaming of this moment for as long as I can remember. Ever since I was a little girl, I would always flip through the pages boasting the works of Vincent Van Gogh, and most particularly his infamous “The Starry Night”. As I turned around and admired the beauty of this masterpiece for the first time, my gaze is instantly drawn to the tangerine moon in the top right corner. The texture around its fragile curve gives life to the glow. The moon is just one small part of this creation's appeal. Now, the swirling of twilight blues creates a whirlpool before my eyes, and my focus is redirected to the next dominant part of the atmosphere. There in the middle, the clouds are churning, pulling in light blues and swirling at the center. This is nature's reconstruction of yin and yang in the heavens. Surrounding this ceremony are yellow, orange, and white stars scattered throughout the background. All eleven of them were crafted carefully with precise thought, giving each star its' unique blend of colors. At the center of nearly every star, there is a light red or burnt orange, and the colors fade out from that point making it almost three-dimensional on a two-dimensional piece of withered canvas. Seven of the stars shine higher than the remaining four, but the lowest star of them all claims attention for it is pure white surrounding a singed titan heart. It rests gently above the cypress tree, which is clawing hastily up towards the night sky. The cypress bends and twists around its base, looking for the sunlight to give its branches direction. At the highest peak of the marsh green and woodland brown growth, the cypress climbs to the sky as if it could touch the three stars that are nearest to it. It is powerful and it is bold, making the cypress look almost watchful over the small town tucked into the hills beyond. I can hear the wind blowing through the grass, and with it comes the scent of dusk and dew. The wind drifts down to the pale church on this starry night, and the entirety of the town is restful. Some houses in this valley show signs of life through illuminated windows. Their delicate walls and slanted roofs add more color to this peaceful scene; there are rustic reds, touches of a dark gray with hints of green, and blues in the shadows. Beyond the town the dark hills are rolling, their foliage dancing in the nights' swift breeze. Just above the horizon, but not quite as tall as the stars, the sky shows signs of light. There is a yellow haze blending with those shiny blues, their glow glistening a silver flash. As I stand in the museum, time is frozen and I am for only an instant standing in that same field with the great artist himself. We are hand in hand, and when I turn my head to look at him the moment vanishes. I am returned to the present, standing in a crowd of people and looking forward to this scene embedded on canvas. The first time I saw “The Starry Night”, it took my attention and swallowed me whole.



Pollinator

By Mandy Andersen

Reminders from the Rain

By Jacqueline Clark

“Khubkuhn-ka!” I pleasantly spoke to the bus driver, thanking him as he took our bags and we boarded the bus. It was a tropical and arid early April day in Krabi, Thailand. My partner, Mitchell, and I were headed north to Bangkok on a fifteen-hour overnight bus trip. The sultry air undoubtedly made everyone scarcely more irritable than they should be when in such a stunning country to vacation. Sand was sticking to nearly every exposed part of my body, and my hair was knotted and crusty from the boat ride in. We couldn't resist going for one last swim in the ocean, for we knew we would not see it again anytime soon once we returned to America.

We had left America in the previous September, fleeing from the confinements of everyday life and society. We wanted freedom, and in those seven months we experienced more freedom than we knew what to do with. Life was grand; we had traveled to the other side of the world and seen the most awe-inspiring sights that we would have never imagined at home. We lived near the ocean, ate strange food with names we couldn't pronounce, slept in huts on the beach, and saw spiders larger than our hands.

At this point in time, we still had another two weeks remaining in Thailand before our visas expired. We settled into the bus, getting comfortable and making small talk with our fellow passengers. Like us, they had this wild look in their eyes from knowing freedom so intimately. There was nothing mundane about this bunch, we were carefree and knew not of the plague of worries that would await us the following morning.

Our bus departed for the long journey and the majority of us slept on and off. The bus made a surprising amount of stops along the way, and not for the passengers but for the driver's amusement and what seemed like a handful of errands. I could tell that some people were getting agitated after they noticed that the bus had stopped for the fourth time. Imagining the waves and my pineapple cocktail, I drifted back to sleep hoping that the morning would come sooner. Every time I woke up, I would look across the bus at Mitchell clenching our backpack, which housed everything of critical value such as our passports, wallets, visas, computer, chargers, and phones. He slept with the bag between his legs and touching his chest, ensuring that no one could get inside to take our most precious items. The rest of our belongings were placed in bags in the storage cabin below the bus. We had heard stories of travelers being robbed or pickpocketed in Thailand from a few different associates we came across while in New Zealand. We didn't want to take any chances.

I still couldn't shake the sense that something was awry, so I continually woke up again and again until I saw the first sign of light early in the morning. The road became less like a roller coaster and more like a freeway as we neared the endless concrete jungle that is Bangkok. The buildings towered over the seemingly diminutive bus as we drove through the streets.

I woke up suddenly as the bus slammed to a stop and the driver began shouting with haste in Thai, ushering about half of us off for the first stop. We groggily got our belongings together and made our way to the sidewalk. The driver threw our bags in a big pile on the ground. His impatience alone should have been an indicator of his foul plan. But it was too late, and as he locked the bus door someone shouted:

“Wait! Stop the bus! He robbed us!” and the small sea of faces instantly went dark. As the bus began to screech off, I looked over to see Mitchell fighting for our backpack. A strap had been closed in the bus door, and he fought with all his might to keep a hold on the bag. Suddenly, the strap came loose and he fell with a harsh thud to the dirty concrete as the bus disappeared into the unending flow of morning rush hour. He victoriously raised the bag, still in one piece with our valuables guarded within. We looked around to see that everyone had been robbed, each bag torn apart and looted for valuables. A pit grew in my stomach, knowing that I had ignored my instincts from before. Nearly everyone looked devastated, some had even lost all of their money and passports. Despair hung over our group, as the city was slowly coming to life under a pink cloudy sky. I began to look through my bag to determine what went missing, but to my delight, the thief had been unable to open the locks on my bag. Mitchell was not so lucky. His bag had been raided and he was missing various trinkets he had purchased for his family, a watch, a relatively small amount of cash, some clothing, and... a shoe?

“Why would he only take one of my damn shoes?” he asked, flustered. “Sandals are not going to be ideal for where we are headed next, it looks like we will have to do some shopping before our flight tomorrow.” I nodded in agreement, dazed and still trying to piece together all the lunacy that occurred in the last ten minutes alone. The temperature began to rise and sweat slowly beaded on the back of my neck.

I felt terrible and sorry for those who had been on the bus with us, especially those who lost their documents and wallets. I imagined that this feat would now take up a large chunk of their time here, as they scramble to recover their missing documents. Trying to orient myself, I realized that we were dropped in a random part of town, far from our hotel. Someone from our bus came up and offered to split a cab, a wonderful idea considering the circumstances. Our new extension, Nico, was from Mexico City and had been in Thailand for a while. The incident that had occurred didn't seem to phase him so much. We hailed a cab and the three of us squeezed into the air conditioned back.

Our cab driver spoke with broken English and a smile. He told us crazy stories of other people who he had driven around that were robbed in other fashions, some much more dangerous, and others, much more idiotic. We all laughed, forgetting the empathy we could share with those on the butt end of the tale. Even after this rapid escalation of events, the four of us rode through the city grinning.

“You, girl, I am going to give you Thai name,” I was intrigued, and ready to take part in the driver's game.

“Okay, what are you thinking?” I asked.

He said two words in Thai and told me to choose one. The second word sounded like “fun” a little bit, so I went with the second option.

“What does it mean?” I asked curiously.

“I believe you say it... rain,” he replied, slightly unsure of his pronunciation. Rain. The thought comforted me.

Mitchell and I were the first to reach our destination, and our new friends dropped us off at the hotel. We unpacked our bags, exchanged contact information with the gentleman from Mexico City, and said our goodbyes.

“Sawatdii-khap, Fon!” the driver enthusiastically said before heading off to the next destination.

Fatigue was hitting us both like a wall as we walked into the porcelain tile hotel. Our room was far from ready, as it was not yet 5 AM in Bangkok. We reluctantly left our bags at the hotel desk and went out in search of breakfast. As we walked down the dusty streets, we found a moment of peace as we realized that the city had never been this quiet. With no particular destination in mind, we turned left off of the soi (street) and onto the main road. Within several blocks later, we almost couldn't believe our eyes as Mitchell's uncle was walking towards us.

“Kevin!” we shouted as we neared him. It was 5 AM in Bangkok, a city with over eight million residents, and we just so happened to walk right into the one person we knew. Life is sometimes funny in this way. He had been out for his morning walk and was sweating profusely as the heat crept into every corner of the city. We asked him where we could find *American* style breakfast, eager for some pancakes after two weeks of noodles and fish for “breakfast”. He gave us directions and said he would meet us there shortly after he washed up. The diner was like a small hall, with a bar in the middle and a few tables around the walls. Pictures of vintage American cars, Elvis, and baseball players hung on the walls. The familiar scent of bacon pleased our senses as we melted into the bar stools. Our food came out right when Kevin arrived, and told him our recollection of the last seventeen or so hours between gulps of orange juice and shoveled bites of pancakes. Kevin has been living in Bangkok for over ten years and was surprised by the craft of the bus driver and also proud of us for keeping our valuables on us.

I still look back on this morning and recall it with tender fondness, for we learned some compelling life lessons. Our preparedness, awareness of surroundings, and gut instinct kept us secure in a foreign country. We were on the safe and lucky side in comparison to some of the other passengers who were on the bus with us in this unfortunate scenario. As young travelers, this lesson comes to all, some harder than others. Today, the rain follows me with this reminder to laugh it off and to let go. We learned significant life skills in Thailand and much about the world around us, chiefly how lucky we are to have grown up in America. We knew to stay thankful and to appreciate the fact that things could potentially be much worse. Even when things are bad, your mentality can set you free and create a new perspective. Throughout all the craziness, Mitchell and I knew to keep our heads high and to count our blessings, not our losses. I suppose that the greatest lesson that comes out of this is just a reminder to smile and to be thankful for all you've got, and not to worry about all that is lost (or stolen). Sometimes life is all about taking a minute to dance in the rain.

Pollinator 2

By Mandy Andersen



Squirrel

By Seth Willis



Becoming a Sister

By Coley Rojas

Being an only child had its perks. Christmas mornings with piles of presents stacked up taller than the tree just for me. Stocking overflowing with goodies. Grown ups circled on the couches to watch me perform my famous Jim Carrey impersonations. All eyes on me. I was living the life. Sure, it'd get a little lonely sometimes, but my wild imagination never left me feeling bored. It was just Mama and me. We choreographed dance routines to Abba in the living room and watched all of the best cold case files, with a Disney movie palate cleanser. Mom and I liked variety in our entertainment. It was the two of us together. Everything was perfect. I was ten years old, and little did I know, my whole life was about to be turned upside down.

I remember when mom sat me down and told me she was pregnant. She told me I was going to be a big sister and that was a lot of responsibility. Responsibility? I'm ten! I wasn't ready for that kind of pressure! Things started to change slowly around the house. My epic game of Mousetrap in the corner was replaced with a changing table. This kid wasn't even here yet! How dare they take away my play space? Where were all of my toys going to go? Mom's belly got bigger every minute. I started to get nervous. Was this new baby going to replace me? Was my mom not going to love me as much anymore? All everyone could talk about was the new baby. I wasn't quite sure I was ready to be a big sister.

Then it happened. It was the 4th of July. Grandma and I sat at the hospital all morning. I tried to sleep, but I was too nervous and I had to make sure my mom was okay. After what felt like an eternity, the doctors told my mom that I had to leave the room and wait in the waiting room. I was very upset. I wanted to stay with her. I remember feeling angry and scared. No. I definitely wasn't ready to be a big sister. When the nurse came out, she told us that we had a new baby girl in the family. She asked if I wanted to hold her. I was very nervous to meet her, but I said okay. The nurse took my hand and led me back to my Mom's room. She sat me down on a chair and brought the little bundle over to me. The nurse told me I was the very first person to hold her. As she placed her in my arms, she asked if I was excited to be a big sister. I think she could tell I was nervous by my lack of response and the look of dread on my face. She giggled and proceeded to tell me that I had the most important job of all. We were going to be each other's everything. She was going to want to be just like me. My new best friend. I knew this was true the moment I looked into her eyes, as she dozed off in my arms. They were so big and beautiful. I immediately felt a wave of love and a protectiveness over her even though we just met. Again, I feel right there with you! All of the fear and doubts I had washed away the minute the nurse put Alexis into my arms. My epic Mousetrap game could find a new home. I was ready to share everything with her. I knew then, without a doubt, I was ready to be a big sister.

A Time for Thanks, 1999

By Zooney Hatjes

The tree outside of our living room window had turned into an open wound. When the leaves finally started to shed they looked like drops of blood falling onto our house. I thought it was beautiful, we all did.

It was November 22, 1999, both my Mom and Grandma's birthday, and two days before Thanksgiving. My Mom always claimed to not remember her age when the time came, and because of that, for at least five years I thought she was 32. It didn't matter much to me. All I knew was that pie was going to be eaten at some point during the day and I had a handmade card I had worked on when they weren't looking. My Dad helped me trace my hand onto a piece of construction paper and I turned it into a turkey, with colorful feathers and a smiling face.

My Grandma sat next to me. We were snuggled up under blankets getting ready to continue our embroidery. I was still in my pj's that were littered with teddy bears. Her stuffed animals were placed in a perfect line on the arm of the couch waiting for her to talk to them. I watched her shove folded napkins in her sleeves and look around as if someone was going to take them away.

Once the napkins were safely out of site she rested her hands on her round tummy and began to look at the patterns that she had already brought to life with thread. Her glasses slid down her nose and her wrinkled flesh gathered together like useless old rags.

I was in the process of threading my needle but was having trouble fitting it through that impossible hole.

"Dámelo," she said reaching out to take my red string away from me, "mira." She put the tip of the string in her mouth and got it on her first try.

"Wow," it was magic to me.

"Takes practice, sweetie. Here you go," I wiggled my toes that didn't quite touch the ground, excited to finish my trees. My grandma started mumbling something in spanish to a person that I couldn't see. All I knew was that she was definitely angry at them. She was always angry at them.

We both got to work. We introduced color into our black and white worlds. Right when I started to really focus is when I heard it. The highest uninterrupted pitched sound. It was like the sound the TV makes. I turned and looked at my Grandma's ear to see the plastic beige colored hearing aid about to fall out. She couldn't hear, so it didn't bother her. I've tried to put it back in before but I was young and didn't know how, so i was told never to do it again.

I threw the blanket off and marched to my parents bedroom.

"Mamma! Grandma's hearing aid is about to fall out! Can you fix it?!" My mom's closet had regurgitated all of her belongings. It took me a while to be able to even focus on her. There was an open suitcase, half full, and she was hastily throwing more of her stuff inside.

"Not right now," she paused and looked towards my feet. "Can you throw me that shirt?"

"What are you doing?"

She then looked up at me. Her green eyes were red but she still smiled. She lifted her hand gesturing me to move closer.

"We're gonna stay at Grandma's for a bit."

"Why?" I asked.

"Don't you like grandma's?"

"Yes, but why?" I felt her sadness, and she knew it.

"It'll be fun, some of the family will be there for Thanksgiving," she looked down at my hand and started to squeeze it.

"But why?"

"Just for a little while."

“Why?” She took a deep breath and sighed. She always hated when I asked that question, she told me it was a phase and that she was looking forward to the day that I grew out of it. She also knew that I wouldn’t have asked if she just told me the truth. I think that’s what frustrated her the most.

We heard the front door slam. My Mom flinched. I didn’t like when my mom was scared. She started to frantically finish packing and I threw some of the stuff I knew she would never take with her back into the closet.

“It’s okay, Mamma,” I put my hand on her leg. She started to cry. “We can go to Grandma’s for as long as you want. It’ll be an adventure.” She kissed me on the cheek.

“Thank you sweetheart.” I glanced at the bed and saw that there were three suitcases. One for me, one for my grandma and one for my brother who was at school.

“It’s okay, mamma,” I grabbed my suitcase to set it by the front door.

I found my Dad already sprawled out on the couch, with his briefcase set on the coffee table and his pager still clipped to his belt. He turned his head towards me when I set the suitcase down and he smiled.

“Hey you,” he reached out his hairy hands towards me. I ran to him. I tossed my tiny body onto his and he wrapped me in his arms. I listened to his heart but his watch kept interfering with the rhythm.

“I love you,” I said with my face buried in his chest.

“I love you,” he kissed the top of my head. I heard my Grandma shuffling to the front door talking to my mom. I heard the screen door open and close. Open, close, open and close.

I didn’t move and neither did my Dad. We laid there until the last time that door opened and my mom’s voice broke the silence.

“Alright Zooey, time to go now.” I didn’t look up. My Dad’s body shifted and before I knew it, he was carrying me. I felt the warmth of the sun being whisked away by the autumn wind.

He set me down and I looked up at him. He wasn’t smiling but God knows, he was trying to. We stood outside of our home he had painted blue. There were cracks running through the driveway from when the earthquake hit a few years prior. The garage door still had dried eggs plastered on it from Halloween and the rotten pumpkins sat next to the overflowing garbage can that never made it to the curb.

I grabbed his wrist and looked at his brass watch.

“Now,” I said sternly, “don’t worry Daddy, we’ll see each other for Christmas. Right? It’s not too far away. It’ll be okay.”

“Right,” he nodded and hugged me.

I climbed into the maroon subaru. He shut the door of the car he had bought after selling his motorcycle, when he got married and wanted two and a half kids. The life that America had promised. The life that didn’t calculate in the pain of living and the constant need to lock away childhood trauma with the booze, the drugs and the abuse.

There he was, alone, in front of an empty house under that red tree we all thought was beautiful.

I watched him until we turned the corner. I knew what was happening, but I remember thinking that I was still young enough to act like I didn’t. I was 7, and really, how much can a 7 year old actually understand?

Big Pink Montgomery Park Building

By Joseph McKinney



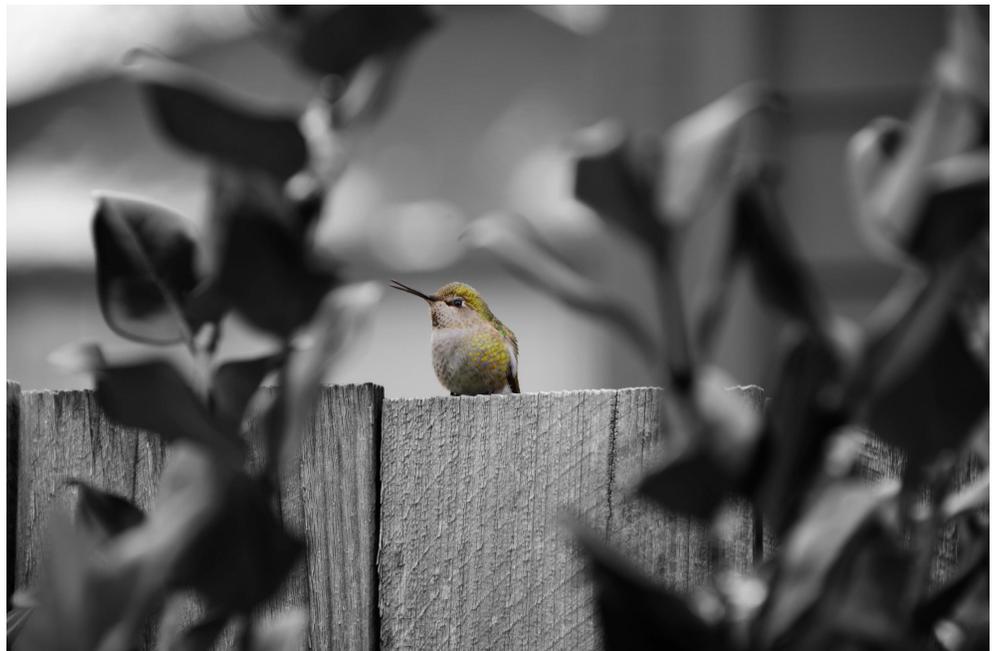
Lotus + Mud

By Emily Martin

I am leaving love letters in places you will never think to find them
Like in the seconds I linger with arms around your waist
And the hesitation before my kiss meets your cheek
And the smile I send you across the room.
Darling, you dare not read what I write here.
Your heart is too fragile to handle the oncoming wave
The flood gates are leaking notes into your pockets
Dripping script into your papers
You are oblivious but you know too well
The swelling wave in my eyes.
The crash of my fingers to your skin is the ocean coming to meet the shore,
I'll slowly draw you into the depths.
But I know like second nature that disasters happen with no warning
Someday you will find your body floating to the surface,
A fragile lotus.
Only then will you find the letters I leave you here today.
You will wish upon them like shooting stars, hoping they will crash in my front yard
Star dusted pleas of "I found them, please come home."
And maybe I will,
Maybe I won't.
But today I am crawling up to meet you like a note in a bottle,
I am cracking open like seashells
To show you this shrinking pearl.
Last time I kissed you
I left you a poem that ended with,
"You promised me, someday, you would show me the sea."

Hummingbird

By Seth Willis



Angels Rest

By Seth Willis



Let the Trees Hold You When You Can No Longer Hold Yourself

By Cat Sandoval

As a child, the stand of trees in the far corner of our two acres within city limits afforded me a secret getaway from the yelling and sounds of breaking glass that echoed through the halls of my home. Together with my dog, I found comfort and solace in the shady damp corner where our fence met with the neighbors'. The quiet was intoxicating. I listened to the trees and made friends with the birds.

As a mother, so many years later, the treed parks that studded Portland's cityscape were my reprieve from the monotony of days spent at home with a toddler. There I would commune with the green things that dared to grow wild and free- muscling their way into space and time. I was thankful for their reminder to keep stretching upwards, even through the harder years.

The wide blue eyes of my preschooler taught me how to see the simple things and to revel in the magic that lived in leaves and flowers. Together we learned about the world around us. On a ladybug walk we learned that Doug fir cones are riddled with what look like the tiny behinds and tails of mice tucked in between their papery scales. The verdant euphoria that runs rampant in so many Portland front yards became fairy homes, we shook hands with the lavender to carry her scent with us as we walked, the periwinkle blue stars of borage were eaten for courage.

We both grew and our family shrunk to two. We forged new traditions in the lush woods of the mountains. Holidays that I no longer felt connected to were spent with our feet on trails. Easter was a celebration of the return of spring and a reminder of our cyclical and ever expanding lives- we collected experience like a tree collects rings. The spray of waterfalls in the Gorge masked the tears that wet my face when I thought of the family that I wished I had while I tended the one that I was nurturing myself- more rich in love than any that I had ever known.

The first kiss of my new lover was gifted while standing tall under a red cedar that stretched higher than I could ever dream to. Our love dug out of the mountain snow and rushed along the river in summer as I stuffed rocks into my pockets never realizing that the weight of my pockets would never feel as heavy as the loss that was to come.

Unless you have experienced it, it's hard to describe exactly how the sound of a gunshot can ring as both the loudest thing you have ever heard and also the most empty void of silence that you have ever known. I've shed tears at the sight of deer dead on the highway and for the flurry of feathers that explode from a bird who should have given a barreling mass of metal the right of way. I've stood in awe at the way a fallen log offers herself up as home to the small beings that move in once she lies down to rest eternal. A lovely, symbiotic sacrifice. Death and life are intertwined, it's true. The dance is delicate and beautiful- a necessary give and take.

But, the dance of death is not beautiful when you watch your lover die at his own hand. The dance of death is not beautiful when you are helpless and lost and alone.

I ran. I ran with feet that carried me out into our dirt road without any conscious thought or understanding of what I was doing. I have no recollection of the sounds I made- if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear, does it make a sound? If a woman screams into the night and no one is alive to hear, not even herself in that moment, are those screams audible?

I know now, that in that moment of horror, my body was taking me to the place that felt like an embrace even as there were no more arms to hold me. Barefoot standing in wet mud with rain falling down upon me and clouds blocking the stars that are always there even when we cannot see them, is where I made my call for help. My own screams suddenly audible to me. I snapped back into the here and the now and unfeelingly felt the shock of a life forever changed.

The next year found me in the woods time and time again. It's no wonder- I've been surrounding myself with trees for decades. I've learned to let them hold me when I cannot hold myself. Each hour spent confined by the walls of my therapist's office was matched with hours spent wandering the woods.

Lying flat backed on the earth is the most literal grounding of spirit and soul that one can attain. The dry dirt of summer's hottest days sucks up tears with more skill than a kleenex could ever dream to.

Deep grief is softened when you surround yourself with beings that don't attach judgement to emotion. I met a kestrel whose space I was likely invading on my daily wanders into his woods. He never flew out of sight when I came to give my tears to the trees but instead would wing himself up onto a nearby branch as I released a river of sadness and loss out of my eyes, providing an audience for my bottomless sorrows. An unlikely friend but one rich in understanding of the variety that humans cannot attain.

After experiencing a fear so deep that it settled into my very bones, the songs of the coyotes at night ceased to illicit the same response. I lost of my trepidation of the night woods. I craved the darkness, longing to be surrounded by space that matched my mind. I wonder what they thought of the soft fleshed human venturing into the night unprotected to release her own howls to the sky in a feeble attempt to accompany their otherworldly cries. I like to believe that their abrupt silences were moments of a wild honoring of a pain that they could understand. One that they could feel. Barking into the night is a release unlike any other that I can compare and we humans do it far to rarely in my opinion.

The lightning storm that ripped through the sky two weeks after he left this earth felt like a visual representation of what I wanted to do to the world- explode energy that would tear across the sky with terrifying reckless beauty demanding attention and acknowledgement of a love that burned hot and wild but was oh so fleeting . Watch. This. Feel. This. Just as quickly as it appears it is gone. Gone like the last breath that you feel pass through your lovers lips as you press yours to his in an attempt to breathe for someone who will never draw another breath.

Nature has always been my refuge from the storms of life, but she has also reflected myself back to me. In doing so has taught me that there nothing wrong with me and that we are to embrace the parts of life that are most wonderful as well as most terrifying.

Indeed, a muffling of life can be found under the canopy of a tree shaded corner, but the sun always shines brightest when you leave the shadows. Forests make the best playgrounds for children- and their mothers. The spray from a waterfall in spring is the original holy water. It's okay to feel emotions so big that they could light up the sky like a bolt of lightning. Trees fall, and people do as well. Perhaps kestrels grieve for their fallen homes the way that a woman grieves her fallen lover. Perhaps just as new life springs forth from the body of an uprooted Doug fir, so too can new life come forth from the grief soaked dirt soul of a woman who howls with the coyotes.



Bridge in Secret Garden

By Joseph McKinney

Highway #42

By Daniel Patton

"Where are you? You said that you'd be home before dark." she said, cupping the phone between her shoulder and her cheek. "I told you I'm tired of waiting up for you. I'm done."

"It's not my fault, I swear. It's a work thing." He was starting to sweat now, he could sense the iron in her voice.

"Let me talk to your boss..." He heard the cigarette lighter snap sharply shut as if to punctuate her speech. "You know you're not coming here."

"Why baby? You know I'm on the way home, I can't let you talk to anyone. I'm alone." He always sweated when he lied, he was starting to drip.

"You're not coming to this house, you're up to something again, I can tell." she snapped. "I know better than to trust you."

"I just need to see you one more time. Something happened on the way home from work and I don't want to talk about it on the phone." Falling on deaf ears, his pleas sounded hollow even to himself. The panic that he felt rising almost put the rabbit in his blood. He did a slow count to ten and reflected that perhaps some of those old timers at the county mandated meetings sometimes weren't entirely full of shit.

She was really getting worked up now and could see the veins pulsating in her forehead through the phone like he was there and trembled. "No! Last time you came by on some secret agent shit you got my house raided and your son saw them haul you away in handcuffs. What kind of example do you think that sets, huh?"

"That was before, this is now. I'm trying to keep it straight. I'm trying." His words sounded hollow and weak. Reconciled to his fate, he accepted it in as much dignity and decorum as he was capable of. Slamming the phone hard enough to crack it his facial expression was grim. Checking the coin return he headed back to the car and prepared to get back on the road. He had no destination now, no clear plan. All he had was this truck and the will to live.

He had to get off the street soon, there was a quarter tank of gas left and the truck was running hot. A full moon cast a pensive light, silhouetted by dark clouds that seemed to chase each other across it's lunatic face. Cool desert air caressed his face as he rolled down the window and flicked out the last butt of his last cigarette. The radio blared and the signal waxed and waned, punctuating the sermon of an ecstatically prosthelytizing christian A.M. radio host.

The topic, when audible, was of the fire and brimstone variety, condemning apostates and sundry others. Mike assumed that he fell into this category, and a few best left unsaid, and left the radio on as penance. Just tonight he had coveted quite a few men's wives, and if that was a sin, then he was surely going to burn.

Not that he believed that superstitious stuff, it just sometimes seems out here on these lonely east Texas highways that you can almost sense the malice of the land itself. As if the very rocks bore an vendetta against all trespassers. The road stretched in front of him forever in a never ending truncation of yellow interspersed with ultra high glow street lights guaranteed to leave a spot in your eye. The occasional reek of skunk suddenly filled the cab of the truck and then was gone just as quick. An armadillo bolted across the road, at the next to last minute, narrowly missing a gruesome death.

The awkward trundle of the armored beast was unhurried as Mike slammed on his brakes and swerved to an unsteady stop. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette only to find the empty pack. He disgustedly threw the reminder of his rising need onto the floor of his truck and the reverend came on full force. "Repent, sinner! For thou art nothing but an empty wretch without j...!", boomed the radio. "You and me both pal." He quipped, feeling clever.

As the choir came back on it occurred to Mike that perhaps he wasn't that bad and that anything would beat a christian radio station at 2am. Driving with his knees he fiddled with the radio and swerved. At 1400 on the A.M. band he caught the tail end of a cumbia. At 1500 it was zydeco. As he was came back around the bend of the dial into christian radio territory again the truck jumped like it was bitten, slamming down hard, shooting sparks into the night sky.

The previous day flashed in his mind. She had told him not to leave, that he had already stretched his luck to the breaking point. He never listened, not to anybody, not even himself. He'd been out of control for some time now. Tonight he may have gone too far. They never told him how much he was carrying, or what. All he knew was that his truck has taken double the amount of gas before they'd put something in the tank. It had taken 12 gallons previously, half that kind of volume translated into pounds. He tried not to think about it. All he had to do was cross the checkpoint and he was home free. She'd be in Monterey in a week and this would all be over.

Thoughts cascaded in the instant after the collision and it was all he could do to fight the wheel as the truck begin to fishtailed sideways. The wheels locked as he turned into the curve ever so slightly, pulling it back into line just as the truck slid gracefully into a shallow ditch alongside the highway as a huge cloud of dust began to settle.

Hearing came back first, before his sensibilities. He sat stunned for what seemed an eternity while vivid images of angry judges and jail cells flashed. His mind went to the pistol under the seat and he began to shake. His bones ached with longing for home and safety. He knew it was a long way away.

It was less than a year since he'd gotten out of prison and it had taken this whole time to regain some shape, form, or fashion of trust with Lucy. He called her from jail this last time and she didn't even cry. What would she do this time? Would she even answer?. Gingerly, he opened the truck door and stepped down, looking for damage that might get him pulled over as he went. There appeared to be none and he thanked the devil under his breath. He prided himself on his driving ability yet he had nearly totaled a truck on a deserted road. Mostly deserted road.

Whatever he had hit had been big. Looking back towards the highway he couldn't see anything, although the road was at an elevation and he had traveled quite some distance while struggling to regain control. He had a sinking feeling in his gut as he told himself, "It's probably just another armadillo or something. A coyote or a deer. Trash panda?".

He found the shoes first, complete with socks, an artifact of the violence of the collision. His breath caught in his throat as the reality of the situation crept in with the cold. The shoes stood dead center of the road, pristine, as if carefully placed there. Walking closer he scanned the road from front to back. It remained deserted.

Hope flitted across the surface of his mind and found no purchase as he told himself that, perhaps the shoes where just left there. His eyes chanced upon a glint of metal in the haphazardly tangled bushes lining the ditches on either side of the road. Shaking, he steeled himself for the approach and it was with a sense of impending doom that he picked up the shoes and began the slow creep towards the unknown.

It was impossible to see the bottom of the ditch so he was forced to clamber down into the ankle deep cold mud. Chilled to the bone, he dropped the shoes and reached, with trepidation, to move aside a large branch and seized hold of what appeared to have once been a camo jacket and pulled. He slipped face forward into the bundle, treating himself to a nose full of stale urine and cheap liquor. Yup, there was a person in there and they weren't moving.

The panic tasted like cat piss in his throat as he dry heaved violently and saw stars. There was a shovel in the trunk and no one believes ex cons, right? He could get the gas can out of the trunk and burn him like his uncle did that time in mexico last year. These are crazy thoughts, he told himself. This wasn't murder, it was an accident. Why not just call the law and tell them what happened?

Crossroads come in life, junctures where a single decision can cast shadows all the way to the end. Immutable. A gamble, but one that he could take into his own hands. He didn't have to wait for anyone to save him or tell him what to do. He had been in power and the die was cast, it was time to cross the rubicon. Accident or not it had been his hand that had ended a life. It felt strange, not like he'd thought it would feel. Yes, there was fear of the police and incarceration but something else as well. Something slowly creeping and not guilt. He felt nothing as he contemplated the avenues of chance opening and closing in his mind's eye.

With great effort, he wrestled a dead weight that seemed metaphysically greater than his own onto the road from the ditch. Accompanied by a great ripping, a frail man spilled out of a filthy bundle onto the roadway in a tangle of limbs all akimbo. Mike stood panting, short of breath, trying not to retch again from the smell.

The man was small and frail, nondescript in a frazzled kind of way. Feeling for a heart beat Mike noted the small razor cut on the mans chin and the faded army fatigues with name carefully stitched. Sgt. Rivers it said. This man had had a family, a life.

"What am I doing?", he asked himself? As he patted his pockets absentmindedly, looking for a cigarette, the failure to find one was that much more dispiriting for him having forgotten that he was out. "God Dammit to hell, will this day ever end?"

Cursing under his breath, he struggled work up the nerve to tear his feet from the spot on the road where they appeared to be indelibly affixed. His face appeared frozen into a grotesque rictus of lowkey panic as sweat poured down his face, dripping off of his nose and pooling under his neck and armpits, making him feel soaked and cold. The shivers that wracked his body were not a by-product of the cold, they where the result of reality crashing down. His mind drifted to her again. She had begged him not to leave. She had had a feeling, the spooky bad kind that seem like a passing comment until hindsight vindicates them as prophecy. She had been right the night he went to prison. She had known a full day before it happened that her sister would die of an overdose. Now this. He told himself, that if there were a next time, he would listen. If there was one. Thinking of her now, he could smell the shampoo in her hair and feel the old butterflies in his stomach.

He could leave now and no one would be the wiser. Unless someone spotted him standing here like kaine himself over abel. Mike reached into the man's tattered coat to feel for a wallet, or anything really to tell him who this was and what he should do. He knew he should leave. Some seed of empathy was growing and that was dangerous. The man was stirring some now, miraculously alive. Mike could see he was bleeding from his ears.

"Don't move. You were hit by a car. Can you hear me?" Mike said and the older man sputtered and coughed. "I'm going to get you some help. I can't call the ambulance for you, there's no phone. I can't have no run in with the law any way."

The old man shrieked when Mike picked him up, loud enough to make him jump and drop his charge ignominiously. The second time was silent as Mike gripped more firmly and raised the surprisingly heavy old man into the back of his pick up truck. Mike had heard that after a car accident you weren't supposed to move the neck or the back or something so he stretched the old guy out as carefully as he could in the back of the truck.

Contemplating the dingy grey carpet covered cab of his truck, Mike thought that the injured man in the back was the last of his worries. Daylight would be coming soon and he wouldn't put anything past his uncle, not after what he'd done in the desert. He might send the troopers straight for Mike to cover his own tracks. After all, a little luminol under these truck carpets would reveal everything that Mike was running from.

The adrenaline from the accident was fading and his thoughts were clearing. Now and he'd be able to think clearly. The emotional roller coaster that he'd been on had exhausted him and he realized for the umpteenth time that he was very much at risk. How many felonies was he on the hook for right now? Not counting the DWI that he was surely guilty of? He had plenty to answer for. If he brought this man into the hospital and they found out what had happened, the police would question him and put him in jail for god knows how long. But what is the alternative? He had the man in the back of his truck now and he was on his way to get him help. Wasn't he?

Mike had never considered himself as the type to hurt somebody. Then again, he never considered himself as the type to go to prison either. Glancing into the rearview mirror, he started up the truck, slipped it into first, and jerkily accelerated away as the old man in the back slid into the wheel well of the truck with a muffled thump.

He felt guilty now and his blood ran cold. He wondered why he'd picked up this man up at all? Why not just leave him on the side of the road? Had he truly meant to save the old man? Perhaps he'd seen a flash of redemption when he realized that the old man was not dead. That there was still a chance to save him. He had a choice to make. Take the old man to get medical attention and face the consequences of the law, or dump the old man in the desert and face his own conscience.

It wasn't a decision to be taken lightly. He knew that to not help the old man was as good as murder. He also knew that no one could, and that no one would, punish you like yourself. He'd seen the burnouts with ten thousand yard stares and knew that there was always a price to be paid for decisions. The old man was moving a little in the bed of the truck and softly groaning. The static from the radio hissed. Miles passed and still Mike fought with himself and still the old man remained oblivious.

The gas light was small and Mike didn't see it until it was almost too late. By the time he noticed that the truck was running on fumes there was less than a mile of gas left. The parking lot was empty as he trundled in, wheezing and coughing as the dregs of the tank burned. The old man was silent and Mike wondered if he'd died. He fished his card out of his wallet and swiped it at the pump. Selecting regular he placed it on automatic. He took his coat off and threw it over the pitiful body in the back of his truck and walked into the store to buy cigarettes.

"Newport 100's, softpack." He growled at the disinterested juvenile delinquent behind the counter. "All I have are hard packs, you want em?" said the clerk. Mike wordlessly threw the money on the counter with and left without a word. He violently packed his cigarettes, slamming them into his palm again and again. He opened the pack and a highway patrol officer slowly drove by while his life flashed before his eyes. He noticed that his legs were shaking, knees lightly knocking. Mike felt naked without the piece he'd left in the truck.

Trying and failing to look nonchalant, he jumped into the cab and pulled back onto the highway, dissolving into what anyone listening would have described as incoherent babbling. "PRAISE JESUS!!", Screamed the radio, loudly enough to obscure the hollow thwunk as the truck pulled the gas line clear from the pump. "Man was created pure in God's image until woman tempted him with original knowledge. We are impure creatures Sin..... in god's image..... Satan!"

Mike slammed the radio hard. Blood began to drip down his wrist and splattered onto the dashboard as the volume knob separated from the radio, raising the volume a few more notches. Still cursing under his breath he finally noticed the frantically flapping gas hose dangling out of the gas tank. The smell was strong and Mike thought to himself that he could practically feel the the blue and red lights dancing in his rear view. For now, they were only in his head.

Pulling onto the shoulder of the road he removed the hose and spat at his victim. He realized that he was reconciled to murder. It was better than going back to jail and losing everything. How would he do it? Leave him for the coyotes and vultures, hope exposure gets him? He might survive that and be found. He could run him over with the truck again but that would make it obvious that a vehicle was involved. Blood was hard to wash off. If they check the cctv cameras that line american highways, they'll see the only truck on this road tonight and he'd be a suspect. Trapped. He could choke him, like with the belt he that was wearing. That was awful close. He didn't know if he had the heart for that kind of thing.

The smell of gas wafted down the side of the truck to his nose and he thought to himself, "Fire cleanses things", the headlights burned in his eyes. "Hey man, you still with me?" Mike shouted through the open back window. The harsh wind responded as if channeling the unconscious heap in the bed and the vehicle rocked precariously. "You better say something quick. I gotta make a decision. If you don't convince me otherwise, it's you or me."

Mike glanced at his reflection in the mirror and saw a gaunt, hollow eyed mask of desperation staring back. The old man remained silent as Mike spotted a dirt road ahead and slowed down to turn. As he made the corner a thin wailing rose to his ears. Slamming on the brakes, he was already out of the truck as it slid to a halt. “Just die won’t you? Nobody wants you. Nobody cares about you. You’re just another faceless parasitic bum. I’d be doing you a favor” Mike told himself. He had to wonder if he was addressing the wreck in the back.

He shook a cigarette loose from the pack, expertly, and fished in his pocket for a lighter that did not exist. He was blind to the irony of this situation, even though it was the perfect metaphor for his life. Disgustedly throwing away the never to be lit cigarette he picked up a stick from the side of the road and viscously jabbed his unknowing wayfarer in the ribs, only to be greeted again with silence. He felt the old familiar glow of guilt spread through his body like some slow acting venom. His resolve was broken and he realized that the choice had been made for him; he had to help this man, if he could, and the consequences be damned.

Back on the road, Mike felt strangely light. He knew that he would not end tonight in her arms. He knew that one way or another nothing would ever be the same. A fatalistic calm settled over him and he was numb. The radio was on hymns now. They blared at top volume now, lending a surreal quality to the night. Coyotes tapped in the distance and there was pinon smoke on the wind.

The first indication to Mike that something was wrong was a slight stutter in the engine. He pulled over to the shoulder of the road and let the truck idle, listening for unusual knocks and pings, hearing none. The truck seemed fine as he pulled onto the road and began to accelerate. The smell of gasoline faintly wafted through his consciousness.

When Mike saw light flash in his rear view mirror he instantly assumed that it was the highway patrol come for him and he fumbled for his pistol impotently. The stark panic that flooded through his veins as he saw that flames were shooting from under his truck, swamped whatever relief he may have felt at not being pursued. Slamming on the brakes Mike leapt from the cab of his truck screaming. He had time to reach through the window once for his gun but the fire drove him back before he was unable to save anything.

The man in the back was an afterthought that came to Mike just as the flames began to spread through the badly rusted truck bed. As the old man in the back of the truck’s clothes began to smolder Mike reached to save him and fell short, burning his hands. Hopelessness flared as flames raged and tears flowed. The smell of burning flesh filled his nose. The old man began to scream in earnest as the ammo that he’d left in the truck began to touch off in a cacophony of explosions. Mike’s last thought before the flash of light and darkness was of her cool hand on his forehead as she whispered in his ear.

Sunrise at Sparks Lake

By Joseph McKinney



Legal Harness

By Benjamin Johnson

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

- *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article One, 1948.*

“The higher courts took interests in case yours, Samasunj. Will be a public hearing,” she says, wishing both that she spoke Urbanian better and that he spoke English.

“So the .. uh... appeal worked?” Samasunj croaks out.

“Yes. You aren’t liberated yet but you have chance to prove the case. If don’t work, nothing more to be done. No worry, there are people supporting you,” the guard says through the window slot into the cell.

“How long has it been?”

“Four years since you leaved,” she says.

Samasunj pauses for a moment, thinking of the four long years spent away in the prison.

“Will they return the ansible? Surely none of them speak Urbanian,” he probes in hope.

“Is likely. No legal language,” the guard stops for a minute, attempting to formulate her sentence. “I regret that can’t him speak better. You deserve free communication,” her hand reaches through and he clasps it for a moment. The warmth of fellow humans.

“It is okay, I am not angry. It is nice to speak with someone at least. You have been an excellent friend while I have been stuck here.”

There is a noise, causing her to look around.

“Other guards coming, must leave. Stay strong! You are not onely!”

“Wait - I still have not learned your name!”

She is gone. You are not onely. What a silly phrase, he supposes there could be some truth to it but here in this prison he has never felt more alone. He wishes that she came more often to tell him of the world. His beard has become too long pent up here. The walls of the cell are cold, grey stone cut into by patterns of moss and one light in the ceiling. It is dim and fluctuates. Sometimes they decide that he, the prisoner, deserves light. That rare gift from above is amplified by the moss - his only friends here. It mirrors back at him what little there is, that which the guards suppose he may receive. Though, the moss are poor conversationalists. They lack the ability to truly understand his intent, instead preferring to mock him. They laugh at him for getting captured, for coming down to The Earth, for believing in the spirit of exploration. Curse Star Trek and their lure, he thinks, their fabrication of understanding. The Terrestrials don’t even understand their own art! T’ejem warned me they would. I wonder if they’re okay.

A new guard appears at the slot, looking in to ensure his ward is under control. Feeling satisfied to see that Samasunj is in his usual position of sitting on the ground, he reaches into his coat and brings out a small, red, rubber ball. Bap! Bap! Bap! The ball goes bouncing up and across the walls of the hallway and onto the door of Samasunj. The door shakes with every strike, annoying him. Though, there is nothing he can do about it except submit to the constant shaking.

The ball comes to rest in the guards hand and he passes a mirror through the slot.

“Pick it up,” he says, though knowing full well that Samasunj does not understand the words. Shaking the mirror in his hand is enough to make Samasunj understand and he rises to hold it. The mirror is light and dainty in his hand and he runs his fingers down it, feeling the smoothness of it, an antithesis to the rough cement. The guard scolds him, slapping his hand. Samasunj stops his caress and holds it up, so the guard can see himself. He pulls out a bottle of oil from another pocket in his jacket and he runs his hands through his hair and molds it into the desired shape. Samasunj thinks it’s ugly but says nothing.

Two new guards walk up to the one before. Samasunj hears whispering in the hall and the first guard, not stopping fixing his hair, responds in turn. After what seemed to be an eternity to Samasunj, the first guard wipes his oily hands off on Samasunj and retreats from the window, shutting it as he goes. Samasunj turns away from the door in contempt, expecting his torture to be over and to finally be able to retreat to his own mind. Instead, The guards open the door and drag him out, into the dimly lit - but nonetheless lit - and moist hallway. They place Samasunj in tight, metal shackles around his arms the two new guards holding the chains that keep him at bay. He sees the first guard and his finely kempt hair and the pair make eye contact. The guard sticks out his tongue and turns away. The pair holding his shackles bark at him and push him forward, causing him to almost fall onto the grey floor. The guards giggling and saying mush! Mush! Mush! All the while laughing and their wonderful joke. The group begins marching. Samasunj chooses to count the steps, 1, 2, 3 -

102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107. That was all there is. In front of him stands the ladder, another grey thing in this infinitely grey world he has lived in. The hallway is damp and musky, the smell of human sweat hovers over every single hair in the nostrils, covering and overwhelming. Other doors line the hallway in solemnity, carved into each door is the window slate, like the eyes of a warrior staring down at him. All the while, the pair had been chatting amongst themselves and laughing, Samasunj being unable to comprehend, fails to realize they had been talking about what kind of fish is best for deep frying. Though, he was able to pick up that one vehemently supports something called salmon, whereas the other says cod.

All around him is the grey, stone infused cement that has become a second home to the prisoner, the patterns and intricacies molding and folding over each other. He can almost see a person in it, though he dares not to search into the stone, to find the person, because it taunts him. He closes his eyes to escape.

“Do you think she’ll hear him out?” one guard says to the other.

“I think so, the support is pretty vocal that he needs to speak,” the other says, shrugging at Samasunj.

“Well, it won’t be our business for much longer,” the first says. Samasunj opens his eyes to see one of the two escorts begin to climb the ladder and the second signaling him through a wave of the chain, to ascend, but he wonders to what? Is it at last his time? Rung by rung, he goes to meet his fate - whatever fate that may be. The ladder is cold and rough, and there is clearly not often use of it. The leaking water has found its way onto every surface and the steps leave iron shavings upon his hands and feet which open miniscule tears in his skin. He notices for the first time the sleek black gloves to match the uniform of the guards. He winces every step forward forced to take and his back shivers from the constant stream of water down it. One of the guards notices and jabs him with their gun and then again after he winces. The guards do not believe he gets the courtesy of complaining. So be it then, Samasunj says to himself.

From deep underground, the Stone-person finds Samasunj, it regards him. He stops for a moment and they make eye contact. It is T'ejem. They look exactly as they did the day he decided to leave. Their maw open, casting shock into the universe.

“But Samasunj, why do you want to leave?” they had asked him then, “No Urbanian ever leaves The City.” They now ask the same question with their eyes made of stone. They bang on the wall, fists raised, smashing into and distorting the very greyness itself. Their blows force the wall to comply to their will, directing it outward - but never piercing. They begin to whisper things to him, through the stone, but there is another voice with theirs - the voice of The Obelisk. He whisper things back, all the while clinging onto the ladder for dear life. The guards, unsure of the reasons for the pause, poke him and force T'ejem back, into the stone. Voices still linger as he continues the ascent.

At last the first guard reaches the exit - a small, circular metal door carved into the ceiling. Samasunj did not see it until now as the light was barely vibrant enough to see one's own hands. The guard nearest to it unbolts the door and knocks. In return the bolt on the surface is unbound and the group is able to progress. One by one, the caravan takes their brave first steps into a large amphitheater of marble.

Vague shapes and colors return to Samasunj’s eyes and he sees the inclination of the outside world. There is a blue shape above him with a bright object that causes even more squinting. It must be a very sunny day. He places his hands above his eyes to shield them. It helps and eventually my eyes, so used to the dark and the musk of the cell, come back to vision and he sees where he is at last. Black and white are just grey separated, Samasunj thinks

Through his muddled eyes from being underground for four years, he sees reaching all around, stretching, a myriad of eyes, melting, bleeding, mixing into one another, all fixated upon one thing: his body. He can't find their features, which are blurred and unclear but the divisions between them spring up once and a while and he can find the suggestion of humanity in them. Directly in front of him, looking down at him dividing the two wings of the theater, sits another pair of eyes. This pair is dressed in a long black, flowing robe that waves as they speak with their hands, under which he sees the occasional glimpse of bright, multicolored clothing; a judge. So it *is* time.

Behind Samasunj and the rest of the gathering stands a massive tower, stretching into the sky. It is entirely made of the same cement as the cell except this tower is checkered with windows to the outside world. Though tinted and distorted it stands above the amphitheater in solitude. It too stares at Samasunj. Directly in front of him, though in the ground, is a large wooden sideways cross.

Four new arms grab Samasunj and the two original guards return to the earth. This new pair lead, pushing him forward and the whisper of the crowd begins to crescendo, a differing melody than before. Far more different than that of his home. They throw his body down into a blistering hot chair - another stone creation - and his torso and arms land on the table ahead of him. He can feel the creeping sensation of splinters enter into his already open wounds, but the beard and hair he has been forced to grow protects his face from any further harm.

The whispering from The Obelisk becomes more clear but equally distant as before. As if one was shouting from mountain top to mountain top. Moreover, all around the theater is the piercing sound of something whispered and something dangerous, as if a thousand authors refuse to speak their mind and get to the point.

The Judge's arms finally come to a rest after minutes of continual movement, as if they expect some great answer, some *thing* that they hunger, yearn, crave for. He simply looks back at the strange person, with no answer to give. They sigh and bark something at one of the guards. Their features are masked behind a helmet which leaves no impression of a human. From a series of pouches and pockets and boxes emerges the ansible, which they slowly - unclear of its powers and limitations - hand to Samasunj. It comes also whispering, yearning, reaching out to be felt once again. It carries the voice T'ejem, clarifying its lowered tone. The crystal comes to rest around Samasunj's neck, feeling grateful to be back; the last gift from T'ejem. Samasunj feels for the first time in four years a renewed sense of self and resistance. It is a rewecolmed sensation but the device itself acts as if nothing has happened since last they touched. A steadfast nature.

"Do you understand us now? Good. Am disappointed that you never learned our language, especially after all the time you spent here," The Judge says, in her easy and flowing yet nonetheless jarring English. Her eyes pierce through Samasunj, not really wanting an answer.

"I am a historian, not a linguist," he mutters, staying away from making eye contact. "And anyway, I was not in a position to learn the language considering my situation. I am told that four years of solitary confinement is not good for one's mind."

"You will refrain from disrespecting the Judge," the bailiff says, hitting Samasunj on the head for such insolence. This outsider clearly has no respect for the system. Samasunj says nothing in return, not truly understanding the nuances of a trial.

"One more outburst like that and you will be found in contempt of court," the bailiff says.

"Enough, let's just get this over with, I have something far more important to attend to later today," The Judge says, filing her nails. She wonders what kind of acrylic she wants. The Judge slowly but assuredly puts down her nail file and looks at Samasunj once again. Banging her gavel twice, calling attention to all assembled she begins in earnest. The whispering of the crowd assembled slams to a halt, but not The Obelisk and T'ejem - in fact he hears them grow louder. Reluctantly, she begins.

"Samasunj of Urbania," slurring together the parts of the name, "this special hearing has been called in order to assess the appeal claim you made on 20th October, citing corruption and a mistrial on the basis of institutionalized prejudice as per Jones v. Mayer Co. If you are found guilty in this court of law the original sentencing will proceed and this whole *thing* will finally be over, do you understand?"

As she recites this, Samasunj sees her eyes begin to melt.

"I do," he says, head slouched over staring into the table. It's really quite a nice piece of woodwork, though it would be nicer if it were polished and not slightly broken and rotten in some places.

"You are accused of illegal immigration, tax evasion, theft, drug trafficking, sabotage, espionage, assault, withholding vital information for the safety of our country, collusion with the enemy, smuggling fish out of the country, instigating civil unrest, conspiracy, and failing to pay parking fines, how do you plead?" she questions. Samasunj looks up at her, playing with her fingers, eyes falling down her face and then snapping back into place. She decides that she wants long, nude acrylics.

"Not guilty. Everyone single one of those charges is a lie and based in xenophobia," he says, passively but nonetheless assuredly, knowing full well that there is no possible way any of those can be true. He simply took a train ride here.

"The accused will withhold comments until it is their turn to speak," the bailiff commands, with the always present strike that follows.

"bailiff, restrain that man. Prevent any more out bursts until it is his time to speak," picking up a hair brush and removing her long, flowing, white wig to brush her equally long hair.

"Yes your honor."

Samasunj remains motionless, looking down. Four years ago he may have tried to resist but not now. They broke him into passivity and he knows it. Instead, the ansible itself begins to scream at him to resist and to fight. Perhaps later, he says.

The bailiff violently forces open his mouth and shoves a rag down his throat, scratching all the way; an enforced vow of silence. He explores the reverse negative space now freely given to him. The entire courtroom except for one mouth remains silent during this process, no one even making a sound. The Judge smacking her lips, chewing on a piece of gum she evidently craved breaks into the atmosphere of silence in the air. Smack, smack, smack. The message from The Obelisk becomes clearer, but it remains far too muddy to understand. There is a truth it must tell him. Oh well, Samasunj says in his mind.

"The defense will now read their statement," The Judge commands, words muffled by a presence.

One of the jury members raises to feet with a sheet of paper and begins to speak, voice unhindered by anyone or anything - even The Obelisk pauses its murmuring to listen from its infinitesimal distance. Where could it and home be? Are they coming for me? Samasunj says. Though, he tries not to think about it. There is no space for hope here.

"Your honor, this man has committed no crime," the juror begins, starting firstly at The Judge and then at Samasunj, smiling only once her gaze falls on him. Samasunj looks down and then back up at this person. From the murk he saw earlier, he is able to see their features becoming more distinct and he begins to understand this person's life, not noticing the faint glow coming from the ansible. "In fact, the only crime committed here was the inhumane and illegal seizing of the most important thing a person has - their body. This man has been tossed and turned throughout the legal system of this country without counsel and without a framework to understand it for four, long, arduous years. His people, the Urbanians, possess no such concept as 'crime', and therefore he has no way to understand the very idea of a 'crime' and how that plays out in our societal context. In fact, the defense is outraged that instead of simply sending the accused back home or working out a legal framework for their migration, this system has chosen to arrest him and put him on trial for something outside of his understanding.

"In addition, this person has not been provided with the legal rights he has! He hasn't even been granted a lawyer simply because he's different! Moreover, all of the claims made against him have been shown to be falsified by factual evidence, yet this system refuses to acknowledge the evidence in support of this seeker. The video evidence from the *day* he was arrested clearly shows him simply stepping off the train - nothing more. Yet, it seems my colleagues across the isle can find any reason to arrest a foreigner. Therefore, the defense calls for immediate repatriation to Urbania on the grounds of gross misconduct on behalf of the entire country," she pauses for a moment to let that fragment linger in the air a little bit longer. "We would like to apologize to Samasunj on behalf of all reasonable people from this country. After all, he's human too. The defense rests, your honor."

Samasunj sees her returns to the murk of before, joining with the other eyes on their side of the theater. There are shouts of support and opposition all around, cascading and reshaping in new modes and harmonies. The Obelisk resumes its murmuring and he now is able to sense something, a power growing nearer and nearer. It dances on his arms and he starts picking apart the words of the message. The opposition violently rejects the proposal, some even going as far as to throw pieces of food at the others, or at Samasunj, a tomato landing near to his throat. Evidently they were ready.

“Thank you, now the prosecution,” The Judge says, picking her teeth. One of the pair of eyes rising out of the darkness into the light. This one too, carries paper with them but their form does not fully emerge. Instead, they remain an abstraction with the rest of eyes on their half of the amphitheater.

“Your honor and other members of this grand jury, this man is a criminal. It cannot be understated or ignored,” shouts of agreement emerge. Samasunj sees a new figure rise out of the marble in front of him. The figure walks towards him and he sees it is T'ejem, who finally pierced through. He sits next to his old friend on a chair made just for him and places his hand on Samasunj's shoulder and begins whispering the same message from before.

“He came here with malicious intent,” the prosecution continues. “He is a very dangerous outsider with every intent to install revolution in all corners of our land-” the prosecutor says. All the while, the ansible continues its glow and some of it starts to enter Samasunj. “-our country. Look what they're capable of! This quote-unquote *man* has a necklace which allows him to translate into *every single language*. Every single one! If they're capable of that, what else can they do? They are dangerous and it is us versus them! I've seen it, you've seen it, hell, he's even seen it in his own '*country*'. If you can even call it that, I'll be damned before I recognize some commie-anarchist floating city with *magic* a country. This man is a dirty liar and a plague on our well earned peace. Your honor, you must see this man through the fullest extent of the law.”

“A well spoken and just statement! Order Order! The defense will withhold from further outbursts,” says The Judge, spitting out her gun and bringing peace to the amphitheater after the defense begins levying the flaws they found in the statement of the prosecution, this time without throwing food.

“The accused will now speak,” she says, shifting her gaze in annoyance and disinterest to Samasunj. This dreamer and his deranged defense will have their time.

His throat is unbound with the bailiff ripping out the gag. He takes a deep breath in and waits for liquid to return to his vocal chords. At last it comes and he cautiously speaks.

“I was no—”

“You have used up all of your time. Perhaps you should have considered speaking earlier.”

Samasunj is astonished at this and something from long ago wakes up in him. He had forgotten it but now remembers it: indignancy. With less reluctance now, he continues. “I *was not able to*. The gag dried my throat.”

“Let him speak!” one member calls out.

“Order, order,” she says banging her gavel twice.

“He deserves a chance!” another claims, whole body appearing to him.

“*Order*. Order!” more banging follows.

“Let the spy remain silent!” one of the featureless shouts.

“Order! Order!” Even more banging

“Bring out the harness!” one of the prosecution says

“There will be order in this court!” she says, standing up and smashing her gavel. Pieces fly everywhere but it is not enough to deter the overlapping shouting.

“Let him return!”

“Enough!” she screams at the top of her lungs. “There will be order or I will find you all in contempt of court and you will join him on trial! Replace the rag and take his device,” she says, straightening her wig. After which, silence fills the void except for T’ejem, refusing to stop his message. He continues And Samasunj now learns the first of three words: “urulan”. The Judge takes advantage of the space created by her threat and continues. “The court will take a recess in order to consider the defense. Return the prisoner to his cell,” she says. The defense knows full well what she plans.

* * *

The party walks back through the underground passage and throw Samasunj back to home-in-exile.

“You’re in for it now,” One of the guards says to Samasunj. He just ignores him. He sees no reason to engage them, even if he can not understand English anyway. He takes his usual position, facing towards the door sitting crossed legged. His limbs sting from the running water that slowly but surely trickles down his legs and his shoulders, into recently reopened wounds. There will probably get an infection, he thinks: how unfortunate for him.

“Why did you decide to come here? You should have never allowed yourself to be forced into this terrestrial farce,” he says to the air around him.

But he remembers there are far more pressing matters: the moss growing in the cell. There is a dent made into their pattern by the opening of the door, but still they seem to be doing well. He apologizes to them for their treatment from the guards, and he sees them glow back in response. He understands it as exoneration and is glad. He would not want to anger them.

He can no longer hear T’ejem and The Obelisk reaching out and he wonders if they are not contacting him, after all no one else hears it. But at the same time he knows they are not tuned into the power of The Obelisk like him. It is like T’ejem said that fateful day, they can not use the ansible because they do not have access to its power. All that power and time put into the making of the device and it remains in the hands of people that can not use it. He remembers T’ejem and feels a melancholic asphyxiation.

T’ejem had warned him this would happen on the day he left. They reminded him of First Contact and how the rest of humanity does not understand the meaning of Urbania’s movements and words. For the ground, The Terrestrials, the rest of humanity, he supposes the shared blood is not enough. But yet perhaps his presence here is beneficial. He notices that he seems to be forging solidarity with some from down here. That does not defy the fact he is truly in another land, in a nation whose language he can not speak, and customs he is not allowed. He is not heard and he knows it. He wonders what Janeway would do in this situation. He feels the moss ask what is bothering him and he chooses not answer. Yet, they persist and eventually he concedes the truth to the only company left.

“T’ejem was - is my best friend. We spent a lot of time together when I was still in The City. They are a genius crystal weaver and designed the ansible for me. Well, not really for me. They wanted to design a translator for the world but it did not go exactly as they planned. They told me once that instead of translating, their speech was reversed. I asked them to take a look at the ansible before I began my journey and they did. They managed to get it finished and working right before I boarded the train to take me down here.

“The entire time though, they were telling me not to. They liked to ask me about the state of the world when I was leading studies of human history at the institute. I told them what things were like down here - reactions against other people, violence, extremism all on the rise - and they begged me not to come. ‘Why would you want to anyway? There’s war, and famine, and *money*,’ they would say then, incredulously. And it is true, there are all of these things but there is so much more.”

He pauses for a moment, unsure of the next words. He senses the moss remain engaged, they clearly seek such information. He wonders how long they have been in this cell. Did they come from some larger place and end up here too? He notices them growing tired of his break and demand more.

“On the day I left, I told T'ejem ‘perhaps space is not the final frontier. Maybe every frontier is the final one until you begin moving again.’ They asked me why I like that show so much and I told them that it is a representation of humanity in the best form, simple explorers seeking to find out what is really out there. I think I saw too much of my intent in that show and perhaps I romanticized it too much. I thought if this is how The Terrestrials conceptualize their place in the world, then I being he who fulfills those roles would be welcomed openly. Maybe I should have rewatched Independence Day before coming down. That is all I want to explain to you. I am tired and I need rest.”

He hears the moss come to silence and he remains sitting there, thinking of what happened in the court. He wonders if he really heard T'ejem? What about The Obelisk? Their whispered message becomes all but a faint memory in his mind - he still can not quite hear it, but he feels something coming. He feels power and solidarity for the first time in a long time. He feels this will not be the end. He plans to fight this again, even if they don't give him any more time. He is glad that the pair are talking to him, because in truth, he misses them - though he would never admit it. He misses home and the study and the books. He hears the moss tell him it is okay to cry and he feels there is now liquid coming down his face, not his own of course, but someone else's. Someone less strong.

After thirty minutes, his peace is interrupted by the guards, breaking all there is there and opening the door. He rises and signals to them they do not need to grab him, he will comply. After all, resistance is futile.

* * *

Upon returning to the surface, Samasunj learns the second word of T'ejem's renewed message: “ajhololema.”

“I have decided to allow you more time to defend yourself, do not waste it,” The Judge says, putting down her gavel and staring at him in the eyes. Though, she chooses to not tell him of the multiple lawsuits pending if she does not. “Let us start with your coming here. Why *are* you here?”

“I was curious,” he says, encouraged by the ansible & T'ejem to look at her for the second time.

“That's it? You were just *curious*?” the incredulity in her voice was astounding.

“Yes. There is nothing in my home to prevent us from fulfilling our curiosities,” he says earnestly. “I suppose I assumed there would not be anything here,” his eyes dart up to the sky and then back down to the table.

“You're on the ground now, welcome to the *real world*,” arms forming an arc up and around her. “What is your occupation?” she questions. Truthfully, she did not want to know anything about this man but her colleagues compel her to give him at least a chance.

“I am a historian, as I said earlier. I study how people work together and coalesce into societies,” he wonders how he sold himself to them.

“And how does that influence your decision to come here?”

“Reading books is all well and good but there are people here, real people. Different societies and different cultures,” while saying this, he remembers the long nights blissful spent at home, watching episodes of Star Trek and their explorations of humanity. “I am the USS Enterprise and you all are the galaxy.”

Someone in the audience laughs lightly and all heads to them. They politely excuse themselves.

“What did you want to get out of coming here? You yourself reference Star Trek but in that very same show societies were often drastically altered by the presence of outsiders, is that what you want?” he mouth raises into a slight grin. He pauses for a moment to collect the words. The ansible suggests the answer to him and he agrees, starting slowly and studying the pattern of the table.

“No, I am here to satisfy a desire for knowledge and movement, nothing more. There is a word in my language, I do not know if it translates to English - ‘wanderlust’. That is why I am here. If the people seek to learn from me that is their prerogative but I am not a prophet,” he can feel his old confidence and bluntness returning to him, which he cautiously constraints and uses. “You all come and go from The City as you please. We welcome all of you and we do not emplace this farcical machine to restrain the power of humanity,” he finds himself wondering if he will regret that. The ansible says no.

"It doesn't *restrain* humanity, it keeps humanity in order. It prevents dangerous things like immigration from genociding our race," sensing the resistance from one side of the jury, she decides she's heard enough about that. "Your city - Urbania, it's a floating city correct? Then what keeps it floating?"

"There is a source of magic on The Island, called The Obelisk, it provides everyone born there with magic and keeps everything in the air."

"Is that how your device works? With some abstracted space magic?"

"Yes it is. But it is more than just that, The Obelisk and The People work in tandem, if it were not for us there would be no magic. We give it something it does not have: human spirit to accomplish life," the ansible's glowing intensifies at this.

"Then why, of all places in this world, did you choose *here*? We have nothing like that here, and you all seem more than capable of defending your city," Samasunj sees her teeth collapse in on themselves.

"Here is where the train led," he wishes it had not.

The ansible reminds him of how he felt the first time he heard his sentencing and he remembers the anger, the hatred, the sadness, the unexplainable feeling of losing one's body autonomy. He remembers it all.

"We *do not* accept just any outsiders her-"

"Clearly," Samasunj says, looking up from the table, straight into her eyes. The ansible now glows brightly.

"What did you just say to *me*?"

"I said 'clearly'."

"And clearly you don't have any respect for this process!" Her finger raises and points at him and he sees the arc formed down her arm from the shoulder begins to radiate inwards, towards nothingness. He senses her pressing down on him, intensifying her own thoughts and emotions unto him. It would be beautiful, he thinks, if the nothingness and power if it were not directed at him. Though, he chooses to channel that same energy back at her. He will be heard. He hears the message from T'ejem and The Obelisk reach crescendo, metamorphosing into a scream directed at him.

"I'kan 'ajhololema -, I'kan 'ajhololema -, I'kan 'ajhololema -," he hears it in every fiber of his body and it gives him strength.

"I do not, This is not a process that I support or will ever support. I do not believe in the fundamental idea of *crime* and I do not support the campaign against it. There are people that do harm to others but it is not the role of a larger machine to force their will against those people. It is other people's roles!" in saying this, he notices his mouth changing into that of a swan, swinging. "Human solidarity is far more powerful than you or your court. We do not need a 'legal' system to know not to be assholes to each other."

There is a silence in the courtroom. Everyone is left in wondering if he had actually *said* that. Does he not understand what is at stake? one group wonders. Another, feeling smug knows that this trial is over. The Judge in turn, pauses for a minute, staring more deeply into him and him into her. Her hand comes up to her chest and rests there, only the sound of her teeth gritting could be heard in the void. The gnawing and squeaking and grinding is insufferable to all gathered, like a torture for the air. Finally, she releases her jaw and he hears her begin to cough. Never breaking eye contact, he witnesses her keep coughing and coughing and coughing until finally a peace lily emerges from her mouth, sprouting out. She finally resumes her dogma.

"You bring your dangerous ideas here and expect us to let you stay? Look around you, these are not your people, you don't have anything in common with them. You are truly a fool. If we allow people like you in, you will destroy the very fabric of our identity, of our culture. It's us or you and I will not allow your kind to disrupt the purity of these people!"

There are cheers of agreement from the prosecution and while inaudible, from the building behind Samasunj. Truly forgetting his place, Samasunj responds.

"But you are wrong. We are all humans; we are all just borrowed carbon," he begins, feeling a force guiding his words and his unbound throat. "I am no threat to your people. I am a simple historian. I am not here to violate the minds of your people. I came here to learn and to grow. You sit on the high chair and speak of the purity here, yet that purity is a farce," he sees the face of The Judge contort and peace lily blooms emerge from her eyes, forming new eyes with the flowers.

“I have read of your history and your entire civilization based on a dream that anyone can have a fresh start, but that ignores the pain and suffering that dream comes with. You put on this show to convince people there is a chance you believe in your principles but you don't, you do not give the opposition a chance to speak when I am directly threatened. You do not even let me speak unless it is by 'your' honor and grace. Am I not a human being?” his voice lingers in the air, supported by a force - supported by the power of The Obelisk. He feels The People in him and he understands.

Samasunj sees T'ejem - who is in his position sitting next to him - stand up next, arms on his old friends' shoulder. His body convulses and shakes until each little crack of stone falls off so now Samasunj is able to see him in his full human form. Moreover, he is able to see for the first time every single face, every single body, every line, every freckle, every division between the people gathered here - not more abstractions or suggestions of people, real people. He realizes now they are vast and powerful and have a history to them, a whole life lived. In the persecution he sees a mother of a family struggling to get through life, underserved and under-protected, her children smile back at him from their backyard where they are playing. In the defense there is a man who has lost it all, all his family, his friends, his livelihood yet there he is strong and proud, living. Behind the mask of a guard he sees a person, loved by their family and respected in their community. They make music, he realizes, The most wonderful music! He feels it in his bones and he is brought to tears! Such splendor is humanity!

“I have had enough of this disrespect, bailiff, silence him. I have heard all that I want. There will be a recess in order for me to deliberate the results of this trial,” The Judge commands seething. She breaks the link, breaking into the hidden place Samasunj found himself in. Her vulture-like nature piercing into his mind and severing the connection.

T'ejem turns to Samsunj and he can hear, unmuddied and clear as the crystals of his home, the message he brings: “Urulan 'ajhololema hujemmu'i.”

“We are coming for you.”

* * *

He sees the lily fall out of her mouth, dead and rotten.

“In the case Samasunj of Urbania vs. The Government, this court finds the accused guilty of all charges. The sentence is death. Bring out the harness,” bearing her toothless mouth in a smile, waving to the guards. Her justice will be served. After all, this was just a show put on for the snowflakes. There was never any chance for him, she reflects.

There is a cheer among the crowd, his allies clearly defeated, hang their heads low in shame. Their defense was not enough and he has been failed. Some in the defense begin to violently object, shouting over chorus of enemies. The prosecution, the pack of them, cheer and jeer at him, they would finally see the sentencing fulfilled. Guards pull him up from the chair and take him back a few steps.

The floor drops down, casting the chair and table into an abyss: black hole. Samasunj remains standing, arms held by the two guards who brought him here for the first time. They struggle to balance holding their double chocolate chip creme with extra blended creme frappuccinos and also holding him. He sees T'ejem floating standing above the hole, shouting something the message in full force, and Samasunj nearly believes it. Two large planks of wood, bound together at the center forming a cross of four equal sized pieces, emerges from the ground. There is a strap at each end of the plank, open and unbound. The guards bring him to the harness and attach his arms and legs to each strap, blood stops reaching his appendages.

He does not want to die. He knows he does not deserve this. He will never deserve this. He wonders if the people back home have even heard of what is going on. Surely someone would have heard something and done something to help me - where are they?

“Let this be a lesson to all those that oppose democracy and freedom...”

“All I ever wanted to do was explore the world I was born into,” he says in his language, staring into the abyss.

“... the opponents to our greatness are all around...”

“Damn this entire place. Damn the surface.”

“... our democracy is the best in the world...”

“Why did no one stop me? Now I have to die down here? What sort of fate is this?”

“... if more of their kind start trying to show up they’ll get the same fate...”

“I should have known better!”

“...no concept of crime? Then why did the first one of them to leave commit all these crimes ...”

“It is T’ejem’s fault! He didn’t do enough!”

“... liberty, and justice for all! Do you have any last words?”

The guards push the harness forward, towards the precipice. Samasunj breaks his eye contact with T’ejem to look down, into the darkness. It is dark and infinite. There is no light from this place and there will be none ever. He knows this. This is something from which these people can never go back. An injustice that can never be repaired. Only repentance will help these people. The guards take the gag out of his mouth for the final time and he takes a deep breath. He looks at T’ejem and they both know. Another deep breath. He looks at The Judge and breathes out.

“They are coming for me.”

“They won’t come fast enough. Replace the gag.”

He takes one final deep breath. Looming over the horizon is Urbania, the island of hope and wonder. All gathered here sees it, some in awe - some not. They all see the light cast out into the world by them, guiding The City to him, pointed upon his chest. It fills him with warmth.

“I want to go home. I want to go home,” he says in his head.

“Let justice be served,” the harness begins to exact its toll.

He remembers what T’ejem had said right before he left: “live long and do well.”

“Live long and *prosper*,” he had corrected. Live long and prosper.

Multimedia Environmental Literature Project (Very Official)

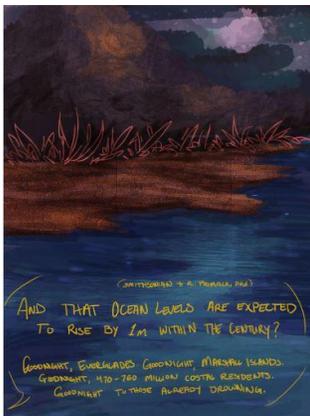
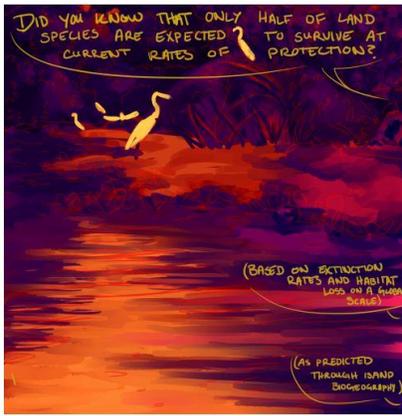
By Emily Doumitt and Ley Aldinger

~~Paper #2~~

MULTIMEDIA ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE PROJECT (VERY OFFICIAL)

Emily Doumitt and Ley Aldinger
ENG 230
10 March 2019





SKELETON GOLD
& : P.I.
birch lightly

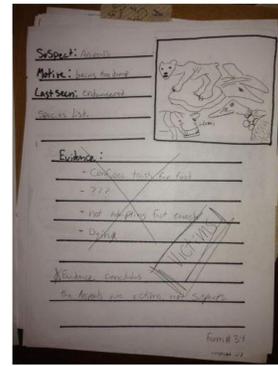
AND THE CASE OF THE DYING EARTH

Case no. 230
From the desk of Skeleton Gold, P.I.



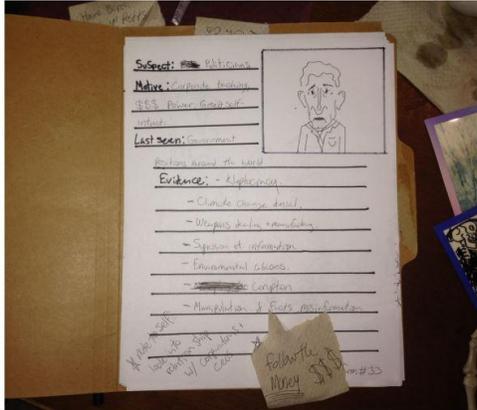
Status: Open

Suspect #2:
The Animals



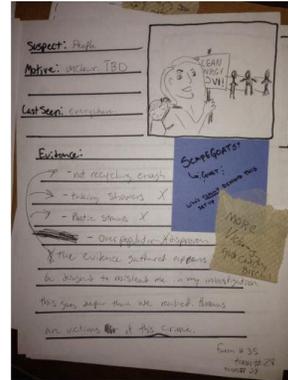
Status: Dismissed

Suspect #1:
The Politicians



Status: Pending

Suspect #3:
The People

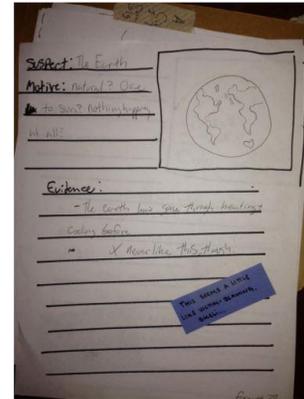


Status: Dismissed

Evidence no. 332



Suspect #4:
The Earth
itself



Status: Dismissed

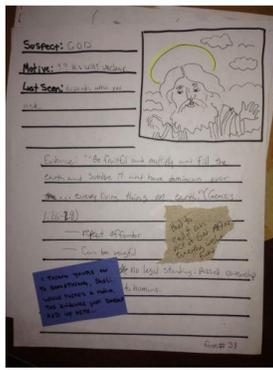
Evidence no. 328



Investigation Selfie Break

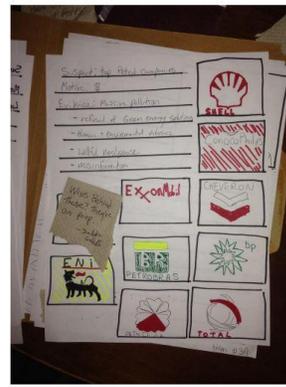


Suspect #5:
God



Status:
Dismissed

Suspect #6:
Corporations

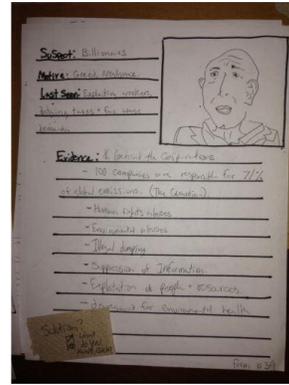


Status:
Guilty.
More data
needed

Evidence no. 226



Suspect #7:
The Rich



Status:
Guilty

Evidence no. 278



Evidence no. 376-459



Commemorative Investigation Photo :)



Evidence no. 465-477



Evidence no. 462



Case no. 230

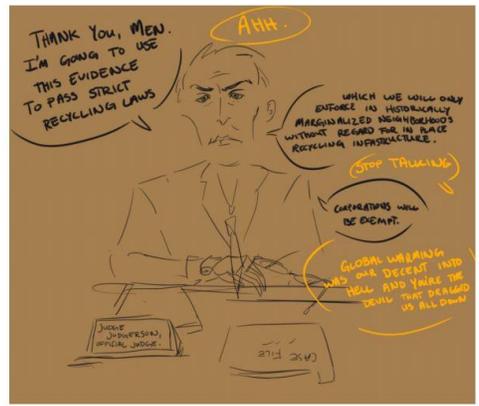


Status: Closed



...





~The End~

The Mountain

By Emily Martin

I once heard that mother is God in the eyes of a child.
Mother,
As a child, I looked up to you like you were a mountain
That someday I would reach your summit and be beautiful just like you
That someday, I could be a mountain for my children, too.
Strong, immovable
Something that could be built, and built, and built upon
Until some generation long down the line of our lineage
Could stand upon our backs and touch the sky.
But you let the river run right through you.
It filled every cavern and crevasse
Until you were flooded over and swallowed,
Only spit back out half of what you once were.
You are a deteriorating slope that is jaded and jagged
And there is no way up,
And there is no way down from here.
I no longer wish to be a mountain.
I wish to be the wind,
That softly curves around you and keeps going.
I wish to dance atop the river and never succumb to it
I wish to be cut through and never have an edge.
I will not die on your shoulders.



Submissions for Issue 2 of *Cinder Cone*
are open until January 8, 2021

Submission or Questions:

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