



# ACCENTS

The Student Literary Magazine of San Jacinto College



# ACCENTS

2024

Front Cover  
***The Artist***  
Jessica Corleto

Back Cover  
***Floral Fan of Swords***  
Zioia Lizama



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Accents: The Student Literary Magazine of San Jacinto College exists to recognize the artistic talent and creative expression from students at the college. It represents the collaborative efforts of faculty across the college and reflects the diverse voices of our students.

For information about the magazine, including a digital version and information about how to submit work for future issues please visit:

<https://sanjac.edu/programs/areas-of-study/arts/english/>



**Green Garden**  
Paola Urban

**SAN JACINTO**  
**COLLEGE**  
*Your Goals. Your College.*



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# Ekphrastic Poetry Contest

*Ekphrastic poetry is a distinctive literary form that captures the essence of visual art through words. Derived from the Greek word “ekphrasis,” which means “description,” this type of poetry does more than describe art—it interacts with it. By engaging with visual art, ekphrastic poetry opens up new avenues for expression, allowing the poet to explore and expand on the themes and emotions present in the artwork, creating a rich dialogue between word and image.*



# Contest Winner

## ***Slice of Life***

Andres Lazalde

\*Inspired by ***Piece of Cake*** by Abigail Salinas (left - first published in Accents 2023)

It should be easy, right?  
Wake up, work, sleep  
Every day, every month, every year  
Piece by piece

Standing in the shower’s hot embrace  
The steam whispers to me how much more I could’ve done  
Piece by piece, every day

The computer screen’s hiss  
The office bustle buzzes like a fly in my ear  
The reflection looking at me through my screen  
Sees through my smiling face and makes me want to scream  
Piece by piece, every month

It shouldn’t be a hard life  
I have a roof above my head  
There are people that I call friends  
But something nags at the corner of my mind

My birthday ... party?  
Family and friends gathered around celebrating what?  
The flames of the candles flicker and die  
They call to join them  
Piece by piece, every year

These thoughts and doubts  
They eat away at me  
Every day we wake  
Every month we work  
Every year we age  
One more slice of my life passes



## ***Stop Killing the Phoenix***

Brett Owen

At the mouth of the cave used as a nest, I, Dask Pendum, waited for a customer to finish killing the Phoenix of the North. As the official guide for Sir Robin's Phoenix Expeditions, I had day after day led people to the phoenix's nest, all so our customers could get their own chance at defeating it. The small trail to the nest was bathed in gorgeous sunset that filled the valley below, a small pittance of warmth provided by the sun as I waited near the top of the cold mountain. There were roaring flames, a screech, and then silence. Then, the customer left, joyous and laughing. I entered the cave as he bragged to his friends.

“When I cut off its head, it acted like a chicken, running around before crumbling to ash!”

I looked down at the phoenix as it pathetically began to reform from its ashes once more. Bones popped and cracked agonizingly as scarred skin stretched over the phoenix's body. Regeneration was a process that took twenty minutes on a good day for the phoenix to regain the bright red feathers and yellow breast of its full plumage. To maximize throughput, and to avoid any impatient complaints, Robin made the time a customer waited while the phoenix regenerated only 10 minutes.

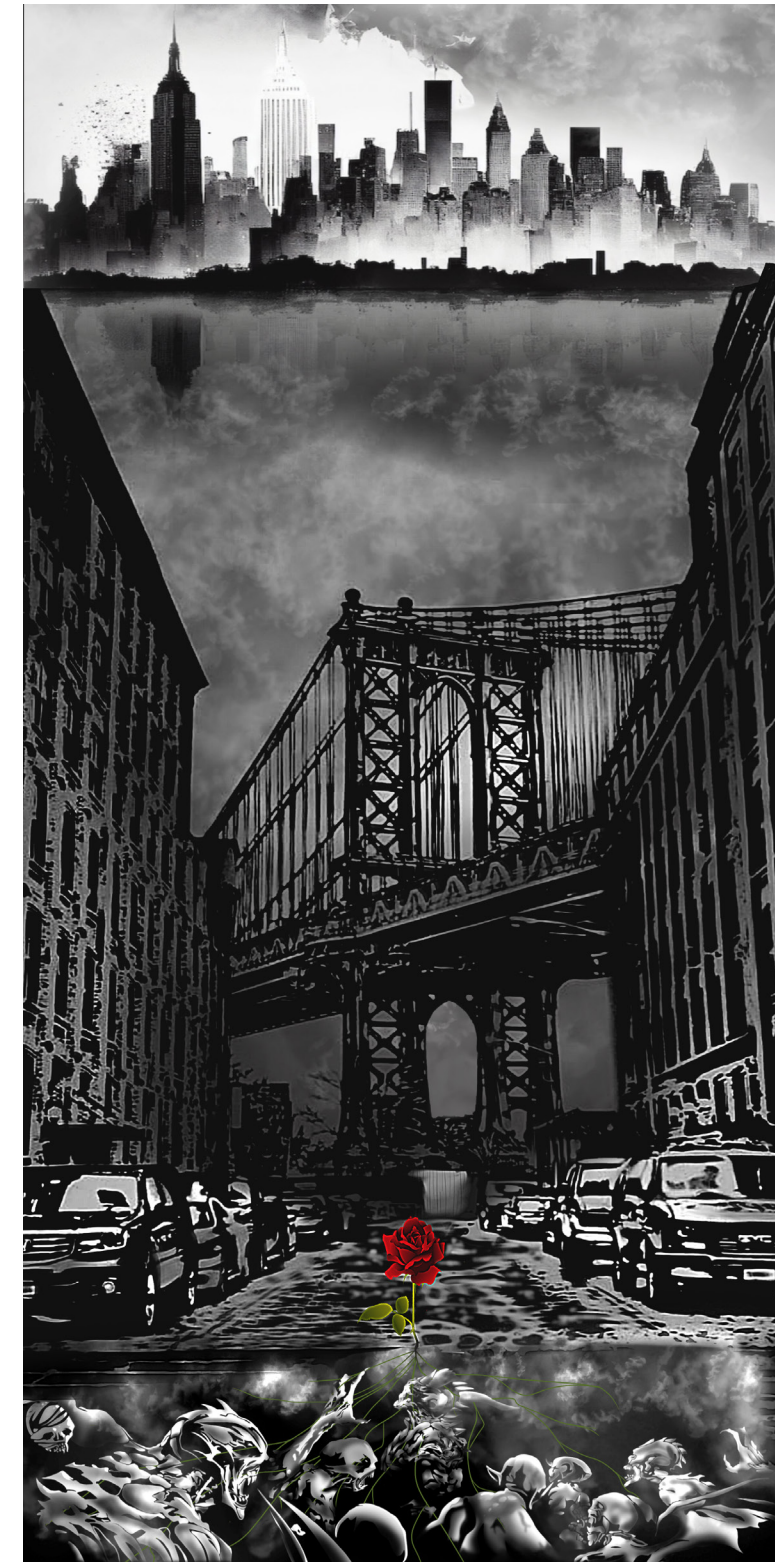
I regret bringing Robin here in the first place, and never would have done it if I didn't desperately need the coin, nor if I knew the kind of business he would run soon after. The base camp was a scar on the valley below, a festival of lavish tents that dumped its waste wherever it pleased. The people Robin attracted were equally horrible, inexperienced with this kind of trek but insistent that they would get their money's worth if they paid to come here. A section of the trip required passage over “the pit of silver,” a chasm in a deep dark cave, where too frequently an aristocratic fop loses his grip and joins the other corpses below. The chasm gained its nickname after enough bodies equipped with armor and blades filled the bottom, the glint of torchlight bouncing off whatever had not rusted yet. I felt less and less pity the more bodies had joined it.

The phoenix had regained a decent portion of its feathers and, as usual after it reformed, began to pace around the nest and inspect the grate on the floor. Cut into the stone was a hole, made by Sir Robin himself, containing three eggs. A cruel gambit to made by a crueler man to ensure his business stayed afloat. The phoenix sparked fire from its mouth, both to warm the eggs and to desperately try and melt the padlock on the grate.

I held the key to it in my pocket, nipped from Robin after a drunken night at base camp several days ago, but it would not do much good to free the phoenix if it ever came back to this place to nest again. In my pack were several powder bombs I would toss into the pit of silver on my way out. I needed to make sure the phoenix could never be hurt by the people I brought to it, and if words did not work, a cave-in would. I unlocked the grate and quietly pulled it to the side. I left the nest to find Robin outside it, looking satisfied at the setting sun.

“Well, Dask, looks like that's everyone who wanted to have a go at it today, join me in my tent for tea?”

A firm push sent his body flying down the valley.



***The Rose that Grew in the Concrete Jungle***

Dottie Brush



## **Mother**

Diego Correa Fernandez

“You’ll never know what it’s like to be a woman.”

I know. But I know her touch.

I know God is a woman for what could be more divinely feminine than the act of creation.

I know the Earth is my mother for how my brothers and I mistreat her so.

I know her hands that hold mine gently when I pour myself into the ocean.

I know her calling me to wake in the morning for the gentle rays that shine through my curtains.

I know the soothing taste of milk in every meal I am provided in this life.

I know her love.

I do not know what it is like to be a woman, but I know what it’s like to live with one.

I see her in all before me, yet I know it to be true that I could never fathom her,  
for she is the world, the universe, all that is holy and otherwise.

And I am only a child.



***A Solitary Woman!***  
Zoila Lizama



## ***Let It Burn***

Makenna Ives

Deep in the Indiana forest, Lucky stalked, fur black as black and eyes like candle flames among the canopying trees discouraging the moonlight. She hadn't been this deep into this forest in three years, yet she knew its ins-and-outs like second nature. Though she wasn't just a werewolf tonight. She was a detective with exceptional skill, thanks to her werewolf blood. Top of her class and the youngest to be placed on the special agent forces, she was on a twentieth-century vampire hunt.

She had a nose like no other officer and an efficient secondary line of defense, which entrusted her with finding this vampire and deciding his fate. This had been a special operation assigned by the chief of police.

Her paws found the mat sitting outside the front door of a mansion. The aroma of tea leaves and musk enticed a low growl from her throat. She reverted to human form, then knocked three times. The door opened within seconds, but her eyes dropped. Instead of meeting a cold-skinned man, like she had expected, she met a boy, who gave her a friendly smile.

“Hello.”

Her brow twitched, confused. “Hi.”

He held her gaze with one that she couldn't judge if it was delight or confidence. “I'm assuming your werewolf senses led you here?” he quizzed.

“Something like that,” she answered.

He nodded, then widened the door. “Please, come in.”

She did, and everything about the interior made her certain that she had indeed just entered the chambers of a vampire. The walls were deep red and black; the furniture, velvet; the lighting, dim but warm. There was just one thing missing ... The fresh and/or stale scent of blood, or even a trace of it.

The door shut, and the boy's footsteps approached from behind her.

“Leave your baggage at the door,” he instructed as he walked past.

Lucky paused. “Excuse me?”

He glanced over his shoulder with the same friendly smile he had greeted her with. “Your coat and shoes. No need to carry them beyond the door.”

There was a list of things she could name that would counter that opinion, but she kept quiet, ignoring him to proceed into the living area. As subtle as he made it seem, she caught him dismissing her with a small scoff. Again, she ignored him. “What's your name?” The investigation began.

“Christopher Angeles,” he replied, retrieving an open book from the sofa, before kneeling next to the crackling fireplace. “And yours, Ms. Werewolf?”

She joined him. “You can call me Lucky.”

Christopher nodded.

She was quiet for a moment, then asked, “How old are you?”

His skin was white but smooth as water, pure with youth as it glimmered in the flames. “I'm twelve.”

For a vampire that knew she was a werewolf, that was a low answer. “How long have you been twelve?” she clarified.

He chuckled. “Too long, Lucky ...” Then, he tore a page out.

Lucky's werewolf senses hesitated upon hearing this, even though vampires were known to live for decades. She knew that. Who didn't? Still, though ... he was just ... different. So, she shifted topics. “Vampires drink blood, so what do you hunt? Humans, animals, both?”

He didn't bat an eyelash. “Neither,” he said, “I reap the dying living.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” She scoffed, unable to mask the irritable growl that corrupted her vocals, “Please, modesty will get you nowhere ...” If he thought drinking the blood of those who were already half-dead was going to make him seem like one of the “nice” vampires, he should think again. Though, when he only shrugged and ripped off a corner to toss it into the fire, she continued, “Do you live alone, Christopher? Are there more vampires here?” The house was three stories. Surely, it wasn't just him.

Christopher sighed, “Not for a while. I used to live with my twin sister, Luci, but we had a falling out.” As he explained, he continued turning pages into ashes, “She was a selfish vampire, killing for pleasure and excitement, and she wanted me to follow her. It was so cruel. I didn't want to be that way. So, I denied her. We fought. I left. That was that.”

Lucky's stoicism faltered, an odd feeling of dread replacing it. Was she actually sympathizing with a vampire? Was it guilt? Relatability? Deja vu?

“I can't help how my body is designed to live, but I can choose how to live.” He tore another page. “Choice means everything.”





*Lord Devoured*  
Abigail Salinas

She swallowed uneasily. “Why are you doing that?” She couldn’t take her eyes off of the pages he was burning. How could he carelessly destroy something that held value?

“I’ve already read it. There’s no purpose in holding onto it.”

Those words were so casual, it made her sick.

“What’s your story, Lucky? Where’s your family?”

That wasn’t his business, and this wasn’t her mission. Though, for some reason, the words poured from her lips, involuntarily. “My family was one pack, and then we weren’t. My cousins, Hope and Kira, led the pack. My older sister and I were their subordinates. I got Hope in trouble, and when it got out that I betrayed the alpha of our pack, Kira couldn’t forgive me. They banished themselves and made a new pack. Now, my family is at war, and I’m to blame.” She knew Christopher was staring, but she couldn’t bear to look at him. The exhaustion—the weight of her guilt—hit her more than the heat of the fire did.

All was quiet for a moment, until ...

“Come with me,” Christopher ordered. He cast the book into the fire and got up. “I want to show you something.”

Lucky obeyed, following him up the staircase. Every step weakened the badge over her heart that was hidden beneath her coat. It was confusing and frustrating, but it also made her anxious. However, she couldn’t stop it. She forced herself up the three flights of stairs, and by the time they reached their destination, she was reliant on the walls for support. He led her into a small room—the only room on the third floor—which looked more like an attic than anything.

“Julie.”

She froze, snapping out of her weary spell enough to find red eyes staring back at her, glowing against the moonlight that came through the open window. Julie Michigan was her real name, the one she hadn’t used in ages. Only her pack spoke of it, and all special agents were assigned code names so the public would never know their identity. “H-how do you—”

“I’ve been expecting you for a while, Julie Michigan.” Christopher stood tall, like a being of the gods. “You are burdened with guilt from the past. Your life is not your own but is that of those you’ve hurt.”

Lucky wanted to move, but she couldn’t. “Who are you?” was all she managed to get out.



“I am a manifested being who feeds off those burdened by guilt they cannot let go of ... the dying living,” he clarified. “Burden breaks the spirit, and once it’s broken, life inevitably follows. It is commonly known as suicide. That’s what my sister, Lucifer, orchestrates, mercilessly driving her victims to the point of no return. I, however, prevent sudden death. Nothing is broken without choice first, Julie.” His fangs glinted in the roaring fireplace across the room. “Time is not on your side. You must choose tonight.”

Without a second to lose, Lucky watched him retrieve two glasses of water and go to the open window. He lifted one of them.

“What is this?”

“A glass,” she answered.

He dropped it, and the sound of it shattering echoed off the walls. “Now, what is it?”

It was simple. “Broken glass.”

“Not broken. Nothing,” was his correction. He then took the other glass over to the fire and emptied it. The flames faltered but didn’t denature, which led him to toss the glass in. “Fire will not let small destruction stop its potential. Water will set it back, but it will not disappear when it receives such a controlled amount. Furthermore, the broken glass doesn’t stop fire from burning either. It’s merely an element. That same element is what draws the line between life and death. It is transparent, which will make it difficult to see, but cross it and the consequences will be irreversible.”

The pieces came together as Christopher turned to face Lucky—Julie. Julie Michigan was either going to be a victim or a survivor.

“What will you choose?” Christopher tempted. “Destroy me—your guilt—or let it eat you alive?”

Julie pulled herself to her feet. She may have been abused, but she was not broken. She knew what she wanted out of life and what it had to offer, no matter what she’d done. She’d done it for the greater good. That wasn’t something to bow down to. Not anymore.

The decision was made.

Her eyes went gold. Skin was traded for black fur, and words for snarls. She broke through the threshold of the doorway and lunged forward, the last bit of strength the vampire hadn’t taken powerful enough to meet his throat in a single stride. She sank her fangs in deep, so there was no time for the angel of death to struggle, and threw him into the flames. Then, she watched him burn. Fur bristling and eyes like mirrors, she watched her guilt, her baggage, her burden burn into ashes ... into nothing.

Across the room, the window slammed shut. In front of her, the fire blazed triumphantly. Her strength returned, and a weight lifted from her spirit. This was what it was about. This was what choice was about. The cost was high for those who waited too long to catch up with it.

Guilt, regret, should-and-shouldn’t-haves ... They didn’t need to be forgotten, but they needed to be acknowledged, accepted, and contained. She had done all three in a single night after three years.

The choice was made. The lesson was learned. The past was faced.

And she was free.



**Strange**  
Abbie Woodhouse



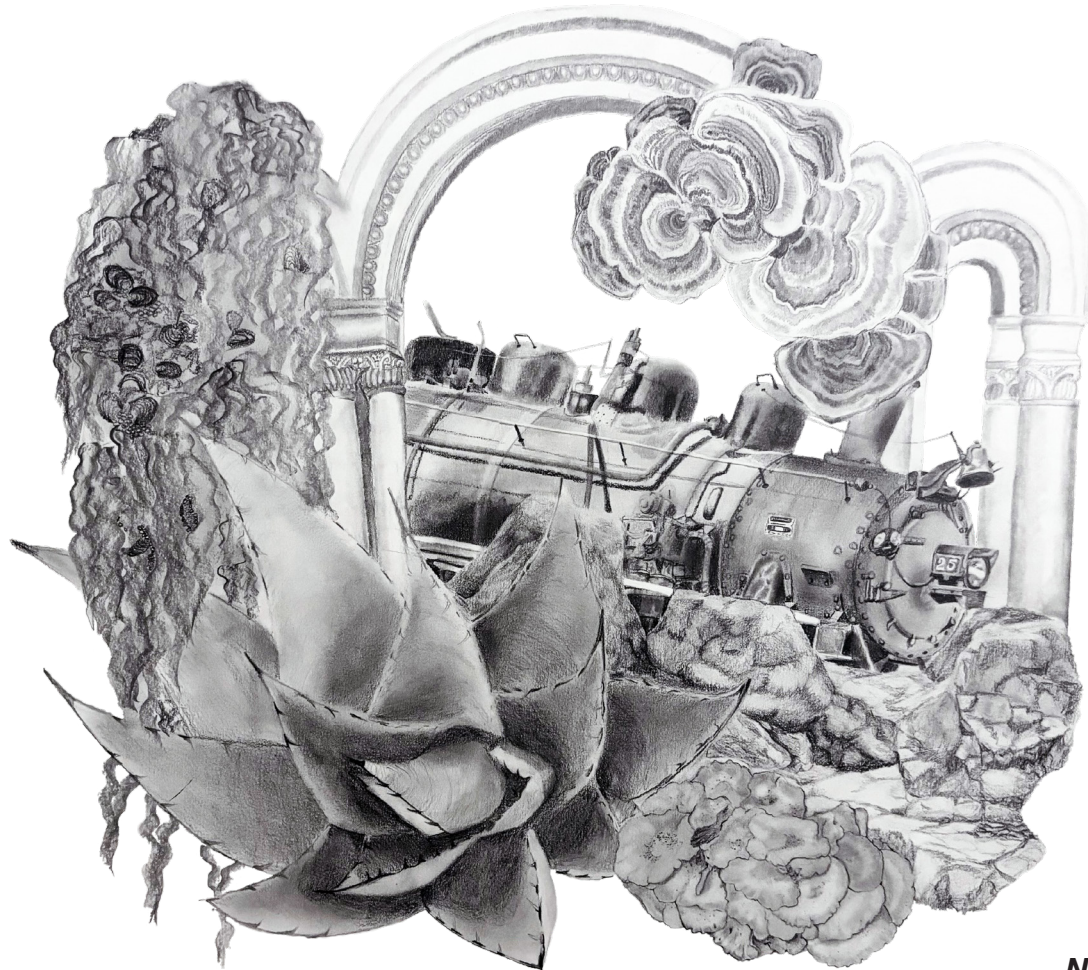
## ***The House That Built Me***

**(Elegy inspired by Ray Bradbury's *There Will Come Soft Rains*)**

Holly Ives

I want to start off by saying welcome. Welcome to this neighborhood of united peace and solitude. Welcome to this exciting new chapter of your life. And welcome to your new, forever home. There will be many memories you will make here, so please do not take them for granted. Establish them with each step you take upon those wooden floors; they capture every footfall whether it's joyful, angry, or weighted with sorrow. Paint them with every color along each wall you pass; they preserve the loudest laughs to the softest whispers. Cherish them all in the safety of your hearts; that is where every little thing is kept alive. Please make memories of your own just as my family did.

Now, I know you don't know me as I'm just an old dog that comes around every now and then, but I only want to make sure my family's home is looked after with the same love as it was filled with. It sounds silly, right? How can a dog know what love is? Well, to be honest, I never knew what love was until I was brought into that house. It was like a whole new world for me—a better world—that would not have been if it wasn't for my family.



***Nature Train***  
Journey Foster

I was brought home by Mama. On the day she found me, it was pouring rain. She got out of her car and ran across the street without an umbrella just to pick me up from underneath the bus stop bench. She didn't have to, but she did. That's how she was with everything she did. She didn't have to bring Pops his morning cup of coffee every sunrise or read all of those bedtime stories to Brother and Sister. She didn't need to give me a pat on the head every time she walked out the door, but she always did. And I'm sure she had something special to do for Baby even though Baby was never born. It sure was a blessing how that woman could never turn away a stray, and I was no different in her eyes.

I was taught how to be a "good boy" by Pops. His hands were strong when he would strike me for doing something out of line, but his heart was twice as strong when it came to loving. For 13 hunting seasons, we trekked those dirt paths looking for nothing but something to chase. That was our pact, and what a thrill it was. When we got home, I would watch him greet Mama with a kiss on the lips before he laid down his double-barrel to hold Brother and Sister in his arms. That man would do that every single day. It didn't matter how long his day had been. He would always treat his family with that kind of loyalty.

I was given true friendship by Brother. He beckoned me with a call of my name to come play with him every chance he got. We ran side by side in the yard and chased each other under the summer sun all day long. Every night, I would lay by his side as his hand would smooth over my coat until we both fell asleep. The admiration that glowed in his face when he looked at Pops. The warmth in his voice when he spoke to Mama. The protectiveness in his touch while holding Sister's hand when she was scared. That young boy's spirit never seemed to die. Even now, I still hear his sweet voice call me as I walk the vacant streets alone.

I was treasured dearly by Sister. Every scratch and scrape she took while tripping to try and keep up with Brother made tears fall from her eyes, but I was there to lick them off her cheeks. She would throw her arms around me with a big smile. She looked at everyone like that. Every time Pops gave her a hug and a kiss or Mama held her in her lap to read her countless stories, she smiled. Even when Brother pushed her on the swing in the yard, she smiled. That little girl's smile made every single worry fade. I think of her often and find my tail wagging at the thought of her pink bow in her brown hair.

I guess that's why they mean so much to me even though they are gone. My whole world began and ended with them, and I wouldn't have had it any other way. It was all made possible with that house. So, please, I beg of you... take care of my house. You won't know how precious it is until it's gone.



## Dear Cardigan

Holly Ives

Cardigan Minx got to her high school psychology class five minutes late. She was sure she would get embarrassed by a classroom full of judgmental eyes when she walked in. But no one was there. Desks were clear and chairs were empty. The only one who stood waiting was Ms. Ophelia Crow dressed in black with pearl jewelry complementing her elegance. Despite being enrolled in a private class, she was willing to accept being the only student.

They began class. The usual was introduced such as class regulations and procedures. The last thing that was discussed came with a black leather journal. Cardigan was required to write daily entries intended to help her recognize her emotional issues which was meant to help Ms. Crow understand her and create a work environment tailored to her specific needs. She promised to keep the information confidential, and drove to charm her way towards a trusting relationship. For a first impression, Ms. Crow was an attentive teacher.

The first couple of entries Cardigan wrote were deep but harmless, but, by day five, she was mostly deprived of her mental strength. It was confusing, and she did not understand it. Maybe it was just the stress of the first week of a new semester, but she was relatively good at adjusting to new class schedules. This feeling was something she had never experienced before. But she chose to brush it off, and push through writing the fifth entry.

The following week was even worse. Normally, Cardigan would catch up with her friends or participate in a study group, but she did not have the energy to do either. Joining her emotional strength, her physical strength was suffering now. She did not know what was happening to her. These sudden energy drains were completely irrational. Whatever she was suffering from, she had to find out sooner or later.

She did not have too much homework, which was a plus, but she still had her journal entries that were calling her name. While it had become easier to express her personal issues on paper, it was getting harder to bring herself to do it. Mental taxation became a big roadblock, but that notebook had grown to be her primary vent source on a dime. It was strange yet so relieving. She never shared her problems, though she was tempted by a leather-covered book to explore the satisfaction of writing everything she could not explain. So, she kept on.

The third week was strumming the strings of her breaking point. After practically stumbling up the stairs to her bedroom, Cardigan sat down to complete her eighteenth entry which came with tired eyes and a pen's black ink as usual. Then something new sent a chill down Cardigan's spine. When she closed her journal, red ink oozed from the compressed pages between the leather covers. She quickly opened the book to find smeared crimson liquid soaking her writing in blotches. It was blood. She stepped away from her desk in shock before falling back onto her bed. The vision of red splashes stained her memory but were soon replaced with black. She passed out.



**Champion Xochiquetzal!**

Jasmine Marshall





*Lines*  
Celeste Molina

Week four came, and Cardigan could barely walk to her classroom. Ms. Crow recognized the distraught glint shimmering in her student's heavy eyes, making her coax her into quickly taking a seat. When Cardigan pulled out her journal, she tried to explain the mysterious blood patches. She hoped that it was just her exhausted mind playing tricks on her. But when Ms. Crow only chuckled, she dared to ask the question.

“Is this what happened to your other students?”

And Ophelia Crow replied with the wickedest smile Cardigan had ever seen. “They never survived long enough for me to know.”

In that moment, it all came together. The black dress and pale complexion. The persuasive tongue and manipulation tactics. The private nature of the class and cover-up personal journal that was serving her stressful issues on a silver platter to someone who fed off of the struggles of her students with each word written for her striking blue eyes to capture.

Everything was not what it seemed. Cardigan Minx had been reeled in by the devil in disguise; a Grim Reaper that feeds off of the psychological issues of others. She should have known better. She never trusted anyone with her inner demons. Now, she knew why.

Cardigan tried to back away from Ms. Crow, but her dwindling strength fought her resentment. She collapsed onto the wooden floors. She could not hear the clicking of heels behind her, but felt Ms. Crow's orbs burn deep into her blindside. Now crawling on her stomach, she gathered every last bit of strength she had to haul herself out of the classroom which was now caving in on her.

The last thing she heard was a snap of Ms. Crow's fingers, and Cardigan went limp.

Silence.

Ophelia Crow had claimed another victim, and it only got easier with every life. A snide chuckle rumbled in her throat as she picked up Cardigan's journal, tracing the stitching that was now leaking fresh, glistening blood. Smearing the blood against her fingertip, she triumphantly licked it off of her finger and thought ... Who would be her next?



## ***Love So Sweet***

Harlow Lamensoff

How could Love so sweet rot me from inside and out?

The pedestal holds me entranced in delusion, then falls out beneath my shadow

Love so sweet would be the demise only the  
    young,  
        drunk,  
            and beautiful have to call on.

Every piece of my Love melts in your hands

Take what you need,  
    I'm not using my body anyways.



***Cadbury Love***  
Belona Rodriguez



***House on Fire***  
Jasmine Solis



## ***The Jersey of My People***

Andrew Ullman

Growing up, I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to travel. I have seen where my mom grew up in Bogotá, Colombia, among other destinations. Traveling has exposed me to the rich culture of my Colombian heritage and the poor reputation that follows the Colombian people. Colombia's poor reputation as narcotraffickers and terrorists rarely gets cast upon me because people never realize I have Colombian heritage due to my light complexion. However, at airports, people are aware of where I come from because my family often travels with Colombian passports. As a little kid, this never affected me. Around the age of eight, I learned that at airports my family was different after returning home from Disney one summer and noticed that my Tia and Tio had to go through a different line for security.

During the end of my seventh-grade year, my cousin gave me a Colombian fútbol jersey because she was going off to college and wanted to give me a matching jersey to remember her by. I grew to love that jersey because it reminded me of my cousin who was my role model growing up, and it gave me an outlet to show pride in where my family came from. One morning, while packing for a trip to Mexico, I decided that I wanted to pack my jersey. My mom saw me folding the jersey and told me not to pack it. I asked her, "Why can't I pack it?" She told me, "If you pack it, then we would be at risk of being stopped at the airport." I looked at her, feeling defeated. I did not realize it at the time, but she felt the same way, having to hide our heritage.



***New Yorker Experience***  
Julissa Diaz

I soon realized that my problems were superficial compared to my family's. They only wanted to protect me from the realities that they experienced. I have never been stopped at the airport to be checked or called names. During the winter break of 2021, my family travelled to Mexico. My Tia from Colombia visited family in the United States for two months prior and planned to join us on this trip. After landing in Houston, I watched the immigration officer at the desk change places with another immigration officer once he saw my Tia's Colombian passport. The immigration officer let me and everyone with an American passport walk out to baggage claim. As I walked away, I watched the officers pull my Tia away into another room. My Mom and I claimed our bags and waited in the airport lobby for two hours. We eventually saw my Tia walking toward us crying; she was not able to talk to the immigration officers with her limited English, which escalated to the officers yelling at her. All my Tia could tell them was that she had three more months left on her visa, and she was here for transit and would soon leave for Colombia. I watched my mom comfort her, but my mom had a look in her eye that she wanted to cry. My mom thought we would have escaped the labels people apply toward Colombians.

When my mom was growing up, Colombia's reputation was not what it was now. She was born before Pablo Escobar had control of Colombia; it was not until she was a young adult that Colombia gained its bad reputation, which is one of the reasons that she left the country. Thus, it took her a lot of adjusting when she came to the United States and had people stereotype her as a narco. Adapting to peoples' impressions, my mom learned to be reserved about her country of origin. Although she never explicitly stated it, she taught me to hide the fact that I have Colombian heritage when it was convenient. I had the opportunity to hide my heritage at the airport because, unlike my mother, my American passport does not say I was born in Colombia.

Up to this point in time, I thought only the United States had these beliefs about Colombia. I was shocked when I found out that Latin American countries held the same beliefs as the United States. Last summer, I went with my mom to Colombia and visited my family. On our way back to the United States, we had a layover in El Salvador. When we walked toward customs, my mom handed our American passports to the customs officer. The customs officer asked, "Are you from Colombia?" My mom responded, "I was born in Colombia and moved to the United States as a baby." My mom and I knew that she was lying to the customs officer, and in an ideal world, she should not have to lie about her heritage to avoid the hassle. After we got home from the trip, I asked my mom, "Why do we have to lie about our heritage?" She responded, "The customs officer was trying to keep everyone safe. Colombians have indeed committed acts of terrorism, and Colombia has several cartels. It would be reckless to not be careful when screening people from Colombia. We both know we were not there to harm anyone, so our little lie will never hurt anyone. You need to keep that in mind when interacting with people to keep yourself safe and understand where people are coming from." I nodded and understood my mom's actions and learned when to be vocal about my heritage and when to hide it.

At this point, everyone in my family has an American passport, and we still love to travel and are planning a trip to Europe. My family is proud to be both American and Colombian. I rarely get any remarks outside the airport, and I wear the jersey every opportunity I get.



## ***The Borrowing of Genesis***

Stephen Crow

We drift into line.  
As we're planted among the stars.  
But after our time,  
The next uses what was ours.

It's the divine cycle.  
We leave as they enter.  
But in ways purely in nature's hands,  
A part of us lives on.

The same applied to us.  
Our parts came from the old.  
Though all of us may borrow,  
Treat your turn with love.



***Burden of Creation***  
Belona Rodriguez





**Disgorging Thoughts**  
Karen Becerra

## **Little Dreamer**

Kirah Archer

Each moment I look at the sky or breathe in the cool fresh air, a sense of relief floods my veins, like the loneliness that weighs me down each day slowly drifts away. Laying on a grassy open field in a fantasy world feels surreal with its enchanting sights. I surround myself with varied species of flowers blossoming with whirlwinds of color as the sky slowly sets into a light evening glow.

In my peripheral, I see a man and a woman trying to get my attention. They wave in a friendly manner. I recognize the man's tall stature with his brown hair and easy-going smile. The woman is beautiful. Her long red hair looked like fire in the sun's rays and her green eyes show much warmth.

Gregory and Fionna. My friends.

They sit next to me as we begin our latest conversation about the world, about our wishes and accomplishments. The dreams never fade. Fionna faces me, green eyes meet green, "It's good to see you Clare, you look happy." Fionna's eyes flash with an unreadable emotion that's gone as quickly as it came. Perhaps I imagined it.

I smile, "I feel happier than I've been in a long time."

Later, we walk through the fields as the sun starts to rest. A cool breeze sets in as we watch and listen to nature's heartbeat pulse. My short blonde hair ruffles in the wind as we come face to face with a cluster of oak trees. A deer appears between a few trees, watching with its beady eyes. I smile wide at the enchanting creature.

"Hello little one, what bring you here," I ask. Something nags at me like I have seen this deer before. As I try to approach, it simply turns around and walks off.

"Did you see that deer?" I ask them. "It was beautiful."

They look at one another in confusion. "We didn't see anything. Maybe you imagined it?" Gregory asked, curiosity lacing his tone.

Just as I was going to point out that I really did see the deer, I heard something. No not something, someone's voice.

"Clare," it whispers. A chill shivers down my spine as I look around searching for the voice. But instead, I find the beautiful world beneath my feet start to decay to black. Flowers turn black and wilt back into the earth. The cool breeze from earlier stops completely. The sky turns gray and slowly grows darker by the second, leaving the world feeling barren. It all happened so fast as everything started to crumble away. But Gregory and Fionna seem calm, like the world around us isn't slowly falling apart.





**Wasting Away**  
Meg LaGatella

However, I do not think so. I react quickly to grab their hands and run. I am not sure where, but it is better than standing around here. As we run, I look around at the field disintegrating into nothing. I keep running, tears threatening to escape but push through.

I see a light on the other side of the field, almost like a tunnel of hope that says, let me rescue you from this sad world. Running feels slower than usual. I look back at them and find them kneeling on the ground a few meters away, only to now realize I let go of their hands a long time ago. Staring right at me, they suddenly start to fade away into dust. I panic, running to them in a desperate attempt to save them from whatever is happening. If they cannot run, then I will drag them with me if I must. But they look tranquil and almost hopeful, like when you say goodbye to a close friend but know you will see them again soon.

“Don’t worry, we’ll see each other soon Clare,” said Fionna. They both had smiles on their faces. Their smiles as they disappeared made me gasp in fear. I do not want them to leave me. I want us to bask in the late evening sky and walk in the flower fields together again.

I take a deep breath, turn around, and run to the light. I feel like I lost a close family member. My heart aches but I keep on running, so close to my destination. I keep wondering what is going on right now. How did the world I cherished so deeply become so bleak and lifeless in an instant? This is a nightmare; it must be.

I am almost to the tunnel when something appears in front of me. The deer I saw earlier is staring right at me with those same beady eyes. “You’re back little one. Can you get me out of here, please!” I beg. However, I never get a response. Only its knowing eyes watching as the ground bottoms out, and I am falling.

I jolted up in panic, trying to calm my racing heart. I look around my bedroom, my alarm clock reading, March 16, 2020. Such a simple date that brings back the reality of quarantine. Clutching my hands, I look down and see my favorite book, *A Beautiful Lie*, still in my hands. A world filled with adventure, romance, and beauty. I see Gregory and Fionna smile wide at each other on the cover page, love shining in their eyes.

The deer from my dream sits in the background, like it was watching over them. I remember now, in the story, it watched over Gregory and Fionna. It was their picture of solace and their sign of guidance when in need. “Just as it was to me.” I whisper to myself.

“Clare, it’s time to wake up!” I hear soft steps echoing outside the door. “You better not have been up reading late again,” she adds. I sigh, getting up feels like a challenge as I process my dream. The reality where my mind should be is far out of reach. All I think about is the longing in my heart and the home I dreamt of in my own little world.

“I’m awake!” I shout.



**I Used to Be 6**  
Malena Saucedo





**A Pop of Abstract**  
Paola Urban

## ***Growing Pains***

Anna Suarez

The moon and I are one and the same

We tell stories and fall in love out of vain

Creeping up are the shadows I try to hide

But all the cynicism is just in my mind

The deepest parts stay tucked between my teeth

Gut wrenching, barely slipping underneath

Flashes of red and blurry light out the window make me wonder

Back to those nights we've spent

Out on the road

Growing pains and no self-control

Every minute I spend reminiscing

The stars whisper their secrets, so I'll feel needed

But the dreams they sold

And unkept promises discarded soon became cold

Sinking into the comfort of my bed

Soothing melancholic melodies play in my head

The overwhelming waves of nostalgia spill out into tears

Erupting intense fears of my ending adolescent years



## ***Apartment 216***

Mayra Lopez Perez

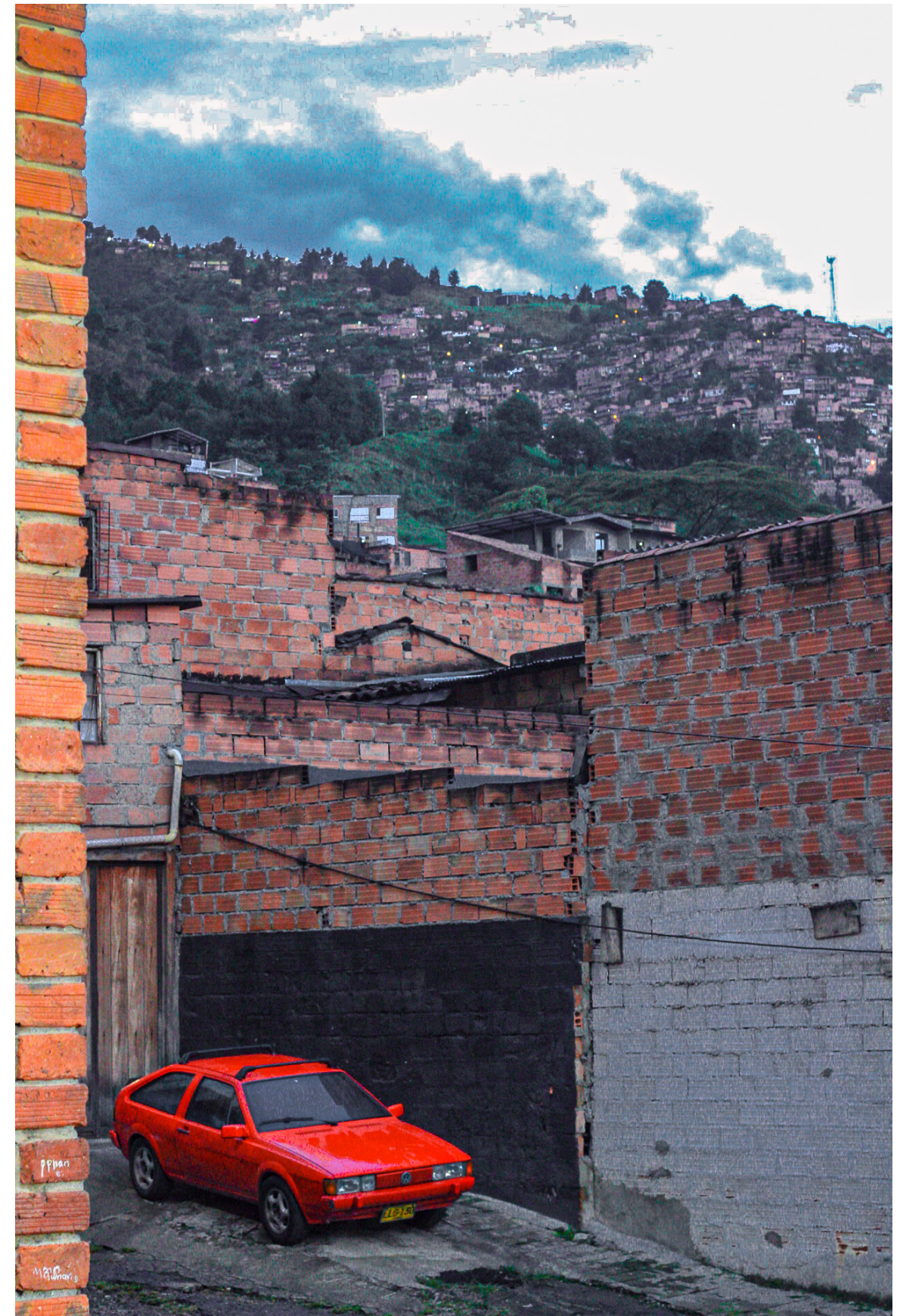
About sixteen years ago, my family and I lived in a small apartment. It was in an old part of town—a creepy apartment complex. It had classic tan brick walls and one large window in each apartment. There was moss growing on the stairs, and you would see old people smoking on their porches. The days were like clockwork; in the morning you could hear a mother scolding a child to hurry up as they ran to the bus stop. In the afternoons, you could smell the smoke of cigars, and at night, you could feel the chilly air in the back of your neck.

It might not have been the best place to grow up, but I enjoyed it. All the kids were close. The shouting and laughter of the kids would echo throughout the apartments. Trees would swing and dance as the kids would climb on them. We were not allowed to, but we did anyway, until occasionally someone would fall, and we would scam.

My family's unit was 216. It was a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of the apartment building. The apartment was in the front. As you drove past it, the big window would stare back at you. My parents had been hopping from one apartment to the next until we got there. As the eldest of two big Hispanic families, my parents helped out their siblings and extended family because they had been in the country longer. The apartment was crowded with our extended family members. This was far from uncommon. Many people lived in groups in a single unit. We were all struggling, but we had each other.

Christmas in that small suffocating apartment was the best. We used the same old tree, the same Christmas lights on which only a few worked, and the same Santa Claus holiday plates, but every year it was exciting. The living room would light up like circus lights and everything was beautifully decorated. On Christmas Eve, the women would cook a large dinner. The smell of tamales and hot coffee could be smelled miles away. The kids would play outside until we couldn't feel our frozen fingers, and our faces would turn a bright shade of pink. The men would be watching some sort of soccer game while laughing loudly as they drank beer and grilled. We would come together at midnight and that small apartment would keep the warmth of our big family in while the loud music played.

We moved away about eleven years ago. My parents rented a house and left the apartment building, as well as the crowded life. I spent the rest of my childhood in a better part of town with kids who looked and lived differently from us. I dearly missed my old friends and my old crowded life, but a kid grows up. That creepy old apartment building was renovated a few years ago. The old dead rainbow playground was replaced with a modern tall playground, the tan brick walls are now light gray, and the small trees are now gone. I pass by there every morning on my way to school. You can see people walking out to work, and kids walking to school, the apartment still so lively early in the morning. I still get a glance of apartment 216—its big window still staring out as I pass by.



***Dimensions***  
Camila Parra

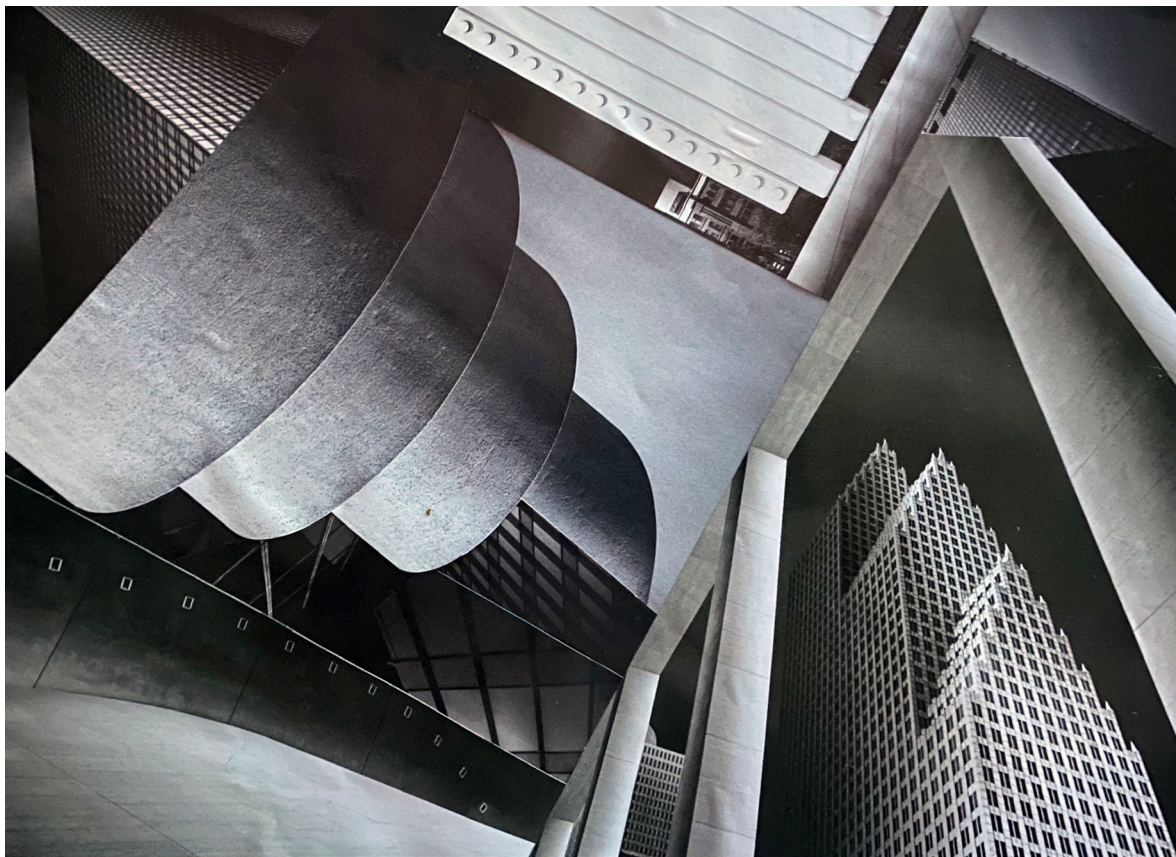


## ***Thirty-Six Stories***

Jessup Loska

The elevator to the hotel room is deafeningly silent compared to the gambling floor of the casino. Achingly tired and emotionally vulnerable from long flights and longer nights, the quiet is jarring. The gambling floor I could easily call a cacophony, but that feels as though it wouldn't be entirely accurate. It is a measured and intentional soundscape, like everything else in the casino. The musical tinging of the slots, the sleazy music piped in softly overhead, the gentle background chatter, and the ever-so-faintly heard hoe-down at the in-house country bar are all meticulously planned. Everything has been engineered to make me feel welcome, wealthy, and more importantly, lucky. I am both special and a nobody, famous and anonymous, a winner and a sucker.

The hotel room, too, has its own dichotomy. It is both the gaudiest and cheapest room we have ever been in. The room is bathed in hues of deep scarlet and cheap gold, just a shade too close to bronze to really sell the illusion. The room is stale, but blessedly chilly compared to the sweltering dry heat of the July sun in Nevada. The scent of the room is gentler than I had expected. A smoking room, but scrubbed clean of any ash and grime as best as possible, with only the barest notes of a cigarette clinging on for dear life. We accepted the smoking room almost purely for the novelty of it, both of us believing they were nothing but a relic from a bygone era. Why not indulge in Las Vegas, of all places?



***Architectural Value Collage***  
Jessica Corleto

Rhys lights a cigarette almost immediately, just because he can. I can almost feel the way he swallows down the first drag because of how palpable the stress-relief is. I don't partake, but I don't mind him doing so. Some cigarettes burn down the back of your throat acrid and cheap when they waft your way, but Rhys' never do. They are minty, almost floral on the tongue, like flavored tea. I ask him if he's seen the view yet, and he joins me at the window. There is a tentative hand hot on my hip, nervous as all new love is. The tobacco suffuses my sinuses and my head spins from the potency, or perhaps it's the thirty-six floor drop to the searing pavement we gaze down at.

Everything in the city blinks and beeps and begs desperately for your undivided attention, not unlike a shelter dog with separation anxiety. It cries and fidgets so that you might pity it and let it into your chest, but unlike a shelter dog, Las Vegas has no heartfelt intentions or love to give. Up here, three hundred and seventy dizzying feet above it all, it doesn't feel like it would be that bad of an idea to let it whisper sweet nothings to us about luck and fortune. The midday sun twinkles off of uncountable mirror windows and car windshields as the city bustles. It is markedly pristine despite its large population, far more so than Rhys or I expected. It seems inviting, like a grave might seem inviting to a cadaver.

It is the mountains that break my stupor, looming gently in the backdrop of opulent skyscrapers and LED screens. They are hazy and purple, and their gentle slopes also invite me into their embrace. I follow the lines carved through them, a hiker trudging down a pleasure trail like thousands have before me. I end my trek at the hot, arid wastes that surround the city, encroaching from all sides, and suddenly feel claustrophobic. Or perhaps, I think, it is the city encroaching on the ancient landscape. Who belongs here more, the steel and glass and canvas currency, or the dust and cacti and solifugae? The desert tells no lies about its intentions, brutally honest about the danger and dehydration that await, although not unkindly. Las Vegas, on the other hand, is an anglerfish who feeds on coin and drained savings accounts. The desert whispers to me that I can enjoy my love and my hotel and my indulgences, but I must never truly let my guard down here. I thank it for the reminder.



## ***Dog Writes a Diary Entry to His Family About Family Dynamics***

Payton Waters

I don't want to be the pet anymore.

All day, every day, all I hear is sit, Chester! Roll over, Chester! Beg, Chester! And when I inevitably do, because I am not a heathen, you know what I get in return? Not a new toy, not a new bed, not a 16 oz. ribeye steak (rare)—no, all I get is a pat on the head and a tasteless “treat”. Pathetic.

And listen, I'm a good boy. The best one in the neighborhood, undoubtedly. So, I feel I'm justified in asking for the least bit of gratitude for all I do in this family! Without me, who would yell at the mailman? Or clean up the floor when the baby drops those very tasty crumbs from her highchair? Who would keep that pooch next door from peeing on mom's beautiful rose bushes? And who would end up digging holes all over the front yard so that mom can plant even more rose bushes?!

No, I'm done. From here on out, I expect some real respect from my family! These are my conditions:

Dinners must be punctual, if not early! And preferably six times a day, I am a growing pup after all. I would like to be rewarded for my efforts with that aforementioned steak, preferably served with cheese, and whatever it is that baby keeps dropping. I demand walks hourly, no leash, and free reign to bark as loud as I please at the neighbor's house as we pass. And I want that mailman gone!

Starting now, I am my own dog. Chester decides when it's time to roll over, and nobody else. I'll be independent! I'll be resilient! I'll be—sniff sniff ... wait ... sniff sniff sniff ... By God, the baby is in the highchair!! Wait for me!!!



***Copacetic (Licking Wounds)***  
Sam Allen





***The Devil's Insider***  
Aicha Benali

## ***Violent, Sweet Love***

Vivian Wu

### Sweet

It's wonderful, addicting, yet.  
I've been missing this my whole life.  
They're sweet, kind, and caring.  
Doing all the little things  
I've must've forgotten to do.  
Paying for my meals  
Every time we go out.  
Spouting lovely nothingness  
in a dark bedroom  
I'm the luckiest person to be loved by them.

### Bittersweet

Did I do something wrong?  
We're arguing more and more.  
Feeling like there's no end.  
It's my fault after all.  
I couldn't be faithful, modest, or intelligent.  
For him in the end  
I'm afraid he'll leave since he's the only one.  
That loves me truly.

### Bitter

Black, blue, and purple  
I'm now a painting created by them.  
Their paintbrush is their hands.  
And my body is their canvas.  
Everything hurts yet,  
I'm sure they'll change.  
Back to the wonderful lover  
I first met.



## ***For When This House Is Quiet***

Adrian Patterson

'Tis crow's nest hails high my gaze reigns supreme,

yet these seas whisks, whisk cradle me to sleep.

Smoke and liquor make yonder but a dream,

Oh, so far gone I can hear the winds weep.

Drunken hazy drifting, times' elixir.

My beak opens as musky smells clear,

It's just a picture upon the fixture.

My heart made its way to eyes exterior.

Threading through tangled webs, my marionette,

I must flee this birdhouse to time's end.

Loathing I am not if music's the fret.

Taking this picture amidst, I needn't rescind.

I shall soar forever in the frame's sum,

For when this house is quiet, don't be times hum.



***A Warm Welcome***  
Isaac Balmaceda



## ***The Corvid in the Woods***

Adison Cooper

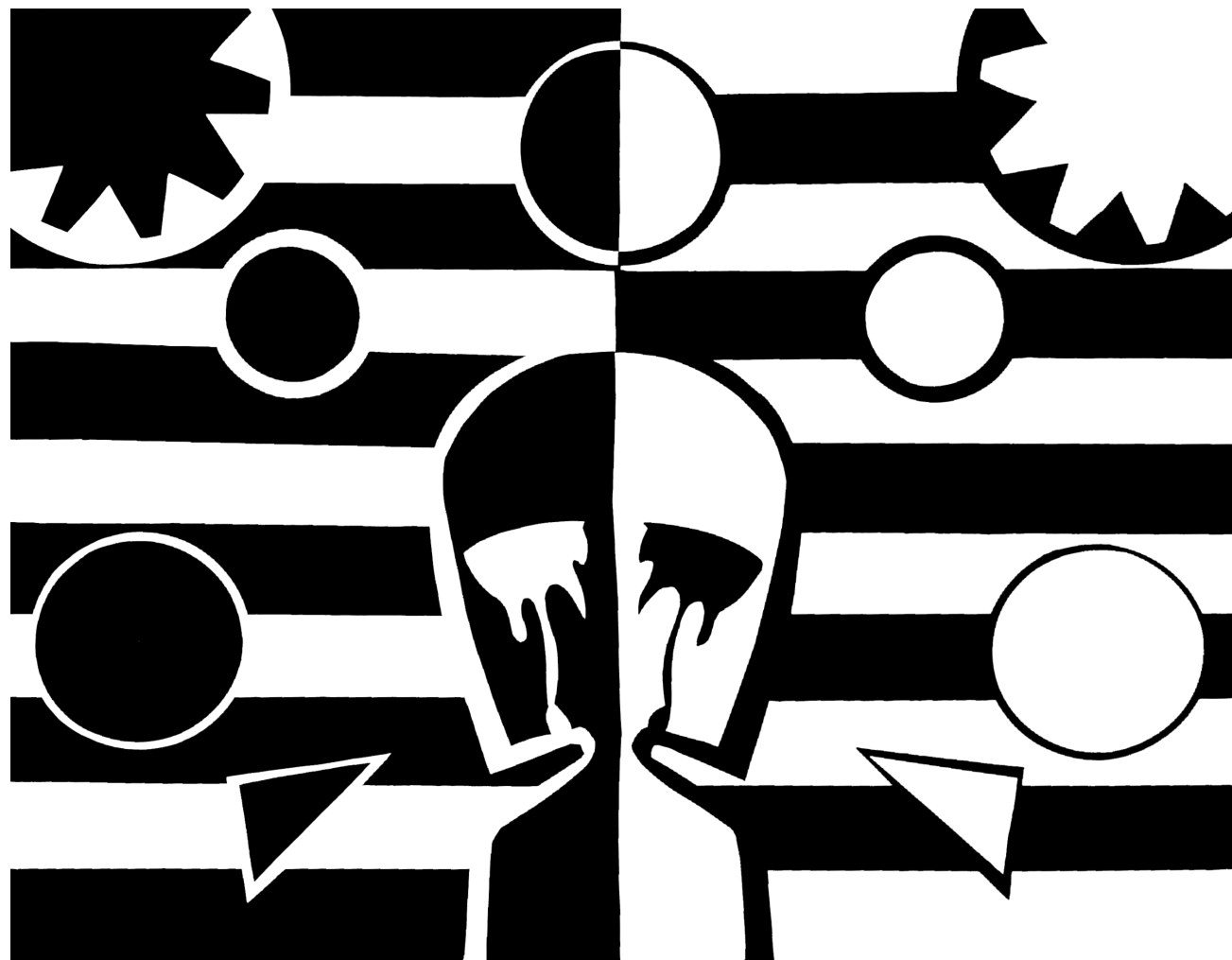
“You should talk to the two-eyed raven.”

“Don’t most ravens have two eyes?”

“Aye!” The old woman seemed pleased with her joke, but I was not amused. This was serious business, and she was telling me to talk to a bird. “Oh-right boyo. You’re no fun y-know that?” She began hobbling down the dirt path, motioning for me to follow. We walked for several silent moments, passing cottage after cottage, until we finally reached the opening to the woods. I began to walk forward but was stopped by the crone’s cane.

“You are making this incredibly difficult,” I said. The woman glared up at me.

“I cannot take you to the raven. It will find you.” And with that she limped away.



***Alien Fever Dream***  
Ry Brusselback

As soon as I crossed from the dirt of the village to the leaf paved ground of the woods, a sharp breeze blew through the trees, shaking the branches, and creating swirling towers of leaves. Everything turned into a blur of red and orange. I crouched down covering my head, waiting for all the fluttering to stop.

It went silent.

I remained in the fetal position for a while but eventually lifted my head to look around. I was no longer on the road. Instead, I was in a clearing, surrounded by trees whose trunks were too close together. A few steps ahead of me was a stump with flowers growing around it. I walked over, intending to sit, but when I attempted to, a loud “caw!” stopped me. I jumped back, startled by the noise.

A raven, his feathers as dark and bright as the night sky, stared up at me with two milky white eyes. Just above the bird’s beak was a deep gash, a hole, where a third eye might once have been.

“Ah. It’s you.” The raven stared as I lowered myself down beside the stump. He remained perched, shifting his feathers and feet, opening, and closing his beak like a nervous child preparing to speak. “Well, get on with it. I haven’t got all day.” It was a lie of course; I had all the time in the world. That’s why I had come to see the bird.

The raven glared at me as best he could and let out another ear-splitting “caw!”

“I thought you were supposed to help me.” He simply stared with his dreadful white eyes.

A life-sized marionette. The terrible eyes shone a little brighter.

“What?”

A life-sized marionette. A hollow imitation. The bird flapped its wings over and over but did not take flight. He repeated the phrase again: A life-sized marionette. A hollow imitation. A wooden boy. Now the raven was getting bigger. The size of the stump, the size of me, until he filled the clearing.

“I don’t understand!” I shouted over the sound of wings and wind. The raven stopped moving. He lowered his head till I was level with the socket of his missing third eye.

But it wasn’t missing. The third eye was there now, and it was black. I stared at my reflection; my reflection stared back.

It was almost me.

Almost.



## ***My Pond***

Ashley Berry

Its beauty is so prevalent that Claude Monet himself wishes he could capture it on a canvas. The sun bounces off the water making it look like stars are dancing on its surface. The trees cascade across the banks of the pond providing a blanket of shade when the sun hides behind the large pines. The land looks as if God himself crafted it with his own hands leaving out not a single detail but placing everything with intention. My pond has belonged to my grandfather since before I was born, its land is where I spent many happy childhood memories, and it will be the place where I am laid to rest, so I can spend all of eternity in paradise.

The beauty of the atmosphere changes with every new season, but they don't outshine each other; instead, they each have their own elements the others lack, making them all perfect in their own ways. The sun blazes in the hot and sweaty summer, but the days are longer making it just right for hours spent by the water. Despite the scorching heat the critters of the land frolic and graze as I sit in the shade playing peek-a-boo with the sun. I sit and stare at the scenery before me, appreciating the natural beauty. I enjoy every second of being engulfed in nature surrounded by the large sweetgum trees protecting me from the harsh rays beaming from the sky. The long days provide enough sunshine to spend fishing until the sky grows darker as each minute passes. As night falls, I admire the stars in the sky as I reminisce how they were dancing on the water just earlier in the day. I sit and I listen to the sweet melody of the crickets as I gaze upon the lightning bugs illuminating the forest.

The fall foliage makes my pond a breathtaking sight. The leaves are in an assortment of warm colors and the wind lifts them gently in the air until they quietly descend back to the earth. As I walk the grounds, I hear the leaves crunching beneath my feet signaling the coming of colder weather. In the fall, the temperature is just cool enough for me to wrap myself up in a blanket while lying in a hammock with a book in my hand. I like to turn my head and see the reflection of the colored leaves in the water because it resembles a painting. The quiet sway of the trees cradles me to sleep as I listen to the songs the birds are singing ever so faintly. The days start early in this season with the sound of nearby roosters greeting me each morning. However, the night comes faster making the pretty autumn sight hide in the darkness each night only to be slightly lit up by the glow of the moon.

The cold air bites my nose as I tread slowly along the banks. I can see my warm breath every time I exhale. The leaves have since fallen and the color has drained from my pond. The landscape is now filled with various shades of grey and blue making it a somber but beautiful winter wonderland. The birds are no longer singing, and the land has grown quiet besides the subtle sound of the wind rustling through the bare tree branches. It is too cold in the winter to stay out very long, but I do so anyway to soak up the views the summer and fall cannot provide me. Along with the colors of the other seasons, I also enjoy the still grey portrait my pond becomes as the temperatures drop and the clouds roll in. The winter provides a perspective I can't help but find captivating; it is the most unique of all the atmospheres, and it adds an appropriate sense of surrealness.

As life begins to come back to my pond with the coming of spring, so do the vibrant colors that paint the surroundings. The soft rainstorms have brought back the vegetation, and the fish are beginning to bite once more. The temperature is back at that perfect level making outdoor naps a viable part of my days. I enjoy the delightful weather by spending my time by the water while picking the wildflowers that have begun to grow. The birds are beginning to sing again, and the dragonflies are chasing each other across the water. I sit and stare for hours thinking about what a gift from God this portion of the world is and how lucky I am that it's my portion of the world. There is no place in this world that makes me feel as happy and safe as my pond. Its land is my sanctuary and as long as I live and even after I pass it will forever be my paradise.



***Slumber***  
Jadyn Denby



## ***Transmutation***

Maddie Armstrong

Languid Longing  
Liquid Lacquer

Goadng into decisive disaster  
Springtime flowers bloom anew

I think she'll come to greet me soon  
So shall the morphing and moving picture of you

Glimpse through a luminescent moon



***Equivacado Ascension***  
Karen Becerra





*El Paso Does It Best*  
Jamie Estrada

## ***Nerf or Nothing***

Nox Biggers

I remember our old Nerf wars.

The battles we had every day.

Our old tactics that we used to metaphorically nuke the other team.

Our old guns and our ever-changing strategies.

The loud screams of joy and betrayal.

The short but fiery rage at sabotage,

And the happy hugs when it was over.

I see those memories tinged with an almost yellow hue,

our muted shouts replay in the back of my mind.

We can never go back to that.

Times have changed, nothing is the same.

So now, instead of Nerf wars and fun times,

We don't talk.

We don't text.

We don't see each other.

We continue on as if they never happened.

We continue on as if all of it meant nothing.

You continue on as if I meant nothing to any of you.



## Motherhood

Brady Casas

INT. Bedroom - Morning

*Alarm clock—4:10, 50 minutes before she has to get up. We TURN to a young woman staring at the alarm. Empty eyes. We cut to HIP LEVEL SHOT at the foot of the bed watching as she rolls off. We cut to a GROUND LEVEL SHOT as she steps off the bed and walks to her dresser, walking past piles of old clothes, photos of an older couple, and piles of junk that she hasn't touched. Not because she's lazy, but because she doesn't want anything to change.*

INT. Bathroom - seconds later

*We take the perspective of the mirror at a COWBOY SHOT. She walks into frame and begins her morning routine. Washes face. Brushes teeth. Files her nails, brushes teeth again. She doesn't shower to save the hot water for her brother. She then stares at the running faucet water. We push slowly towards her face as the background gets blurry and we hear ticking. Eyes empty, gazing.*

*We then cut to a side view of the faucet as it's turned off (we no longer see a blurry background or hear ticking). We are left with the faucet dripping and hear her walk out.*

INT. Bedroom

*We cut to a FULL SHOT of her sitting at her bed (full view of the room) staring at her clock. It is now 4:49. 11 minutes, sinking into the glowing green numbers. We PULL closer to her face, 11 minutes, eyes empty with a touch of sorrow. 11 minutes of no existence. Before her body fills the screen, we cut back (full view of the room) as the alarm goes off. HOLD ANGLE. Beep. Beep. Beep. Be ... she reaches and turns it off. 5'o clock.*

*Inhale*

INT. Hallway/Living Room/Dining Room - seconds later

*We cut to a MEDIUM FULL SHOT of a hallway. Kassie walks out of the door to the left and turns away from the camera. As Kassie walks through the hallway into the kitchen, the camera follows behind Kassie (same angle and distance). We see her turn on the lights. We then cut to a MEDIUM FULL SHOT of the whole apartment from the dining room. Now we have cuts of her in different locations making breakfast. 5:30. She is halfway through making the meal. HIGH ANGLE SHOT of food in a pan. She then walks back into the hallway. Cut to a MEDIUM CLOSE UP behind Kassie's head. She quietly opens the door (hold shot). Walks in and starts getting clothes out of a dresser. Cut to her back in the kitchen (back to MEDIUM FULL SHOT). 6 o'clock. Alarm goes off (O.S.). The food is done. Kassie now sets up the table.*



**Apprehension**  
Caitlyn Moore





**Take Out**  
Delilah Flores

KASSIE

*(yelling)* Max, get up and start getting ready for school!  
*Kassie starts to put the plates on the table and the food on them.*

MAX (O.S.)

Thud OUCH... I'm up!

*We hear a door quickly open. Running. Another door opens then closes. Running water. Max is taking a shower. 6:15. Kassie has prepared the table and sits there waiting for Max. Cut to COWBOY SHOT of her sitting. She starts to gaze. A brief moment of silence. Faint ticking. She begins to lose her breath. Blurring. (Pushing closer to her).*

*Sudden cut back to a MEDIUM FULL SHOT (this time from the kitchen to the dining room. We see the front door to the left. We hold this shot for the remainder of the scene). Kassie snaps back. Max walks into the room and sits down. Kassie smiles.*

KASSIE

How did you sleep, Max? Have any good dreams?  
*Max hardly touches his food; it was his favorite dish at one point.*

MAX

Yeah, I slept pretty good. I had that dream again! *(swallows a bite of food)*. Where we went to California and saw the mountains and I got to explore.  
*Kassie gives him a big smile; Max avoids eye contact.*

KASSIE

Good! Well, one day that dream is going to come true, I promise. Finish up your food. The bus will be here soon.  
*They both continue to eat. Max just stabs at his food while Kassie finishes her plate but sits with Max. She looks at his clothes.*

KASSIE

Did you see the clothes I set out for you?  
*Max takes a deep breath.*

MAX

I did *(Max says in a dramatic tone)* you know ya don't have to do that for me, I'm not a kid anymore, I'm twelve now and can take care of myself.  
*Kassie chuckles.*

KASSIE

Well, you're right about one thing, you are twelve, and it is my responsibility to take care of you.  
*Kassie takes their plates and starts to clean them.*

MAX *(raises voice)*

I don't need your help Kas, I can take care of myself!



KASSIE

Max, I am not saying ...

*Kassie gets interrupted by Max.*

MAX (yelling)

No, you don't seem to, cause everyday you still get my clothes and lay them out on my bed like dad would and every day you make my favorite meal from mom, and you're ruining it!

KASSIE (soft tone)

Max, I ...

MAX

NO. Kassie just stop, those are the last things I have of them, the last thing that reminds me of them and you are ruining it!

*Silence. Max is now standing there in tears. Kassie looks back with sympathy. Silence.*

MAX

I don't need you to be a daily reminder of them.

*Max walks into the hallway. (O.S) We hear Max gets his stuff together for school. Kassie stares at the ground with sorrow. Clawing to keep herself together. She looks to the left. 6:30. The stove clock shows. Max rushes back into the room. Races for the door. Before he can grab the door.*

KASSIE

Hey... I'm sorry I didn't know *(she walks up to Max)*. I didn't mean to hurt you, Max. I just want to be there for you and help get you ... get us through this. *(Kassie starts to tear up)* You know I lost them too. *(Kassie's voice starting to crack)*

*Max quickly turns darts to Kassie and hugs her. Crying.*

MAX (sobbing)

I'm sorry sis, I just miss them so much. *(He hugs her tighter.)*

*Kassie hugs him back. She looks at Max and wipes his tears away.*

KASSIE

I know it's been hard, Max, but I am here to take care of you, not because you can't but because I love you, and I will always be here for you.

MAX

I'll be here for you too, sis. *(Max gives her a big smile.)*

*They stand there for a little longer. Relieved. Knowing that the fight just got a little easier. Kassie wipes her tears away. 6:30.*

KASSIE (soft tone)

Ok Max it's time, don't want you to miss your bus now.

*Max steps back and wipes his tears away and looks at Kassie. He smiles.*

MAX

Thank you, sis, for being the best.

*Kassie looks at Max. Rubs his cheek.*

KASSIE

Thank you, Max. I ... I don't know what I'd do without you. *(They hug one more time.)* Ok, let's get you going.

*Max opens the door and walks to the bus. Waving. She closes the door and stands there. Alone. She drifts off.*

*Empty. However, this time, with a faint smile.*

*Exhale*



**Threshold**  
Rudy Ibarra





*Sweet Tooth*  
Belona Rodriguez





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