

ARTISTS OF
PROMISE



MARICOPA
COMMUNITY COLLEGES



PASSAGES

CREATIVE WRITING 2019/2020

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Maricopa Community College District.

FORWARD

This volume is dedicated to
Dr. Maria Harper-Marinick, who has worked diligently to develop, support, and promote arts programming in the Maricopa Community Colleges District. Her understanding of the role that arts play in a fully-realized life has touched the lives of thousands of our students and allowed them to pursue their dreams.

Welcome to the 32 edition of “Passages.” It has been my honor for the last eight years to preside over its publication. The expressions of growth, the depth of personal development, and the moments of insights that I have seen in the writing have enriched my life. It has also been rewarding to see the depth of commitment of the writing faculty in the Maricopa Community Colleges, who through their talent, knowledge, diligence, and support inspire the best in our students.

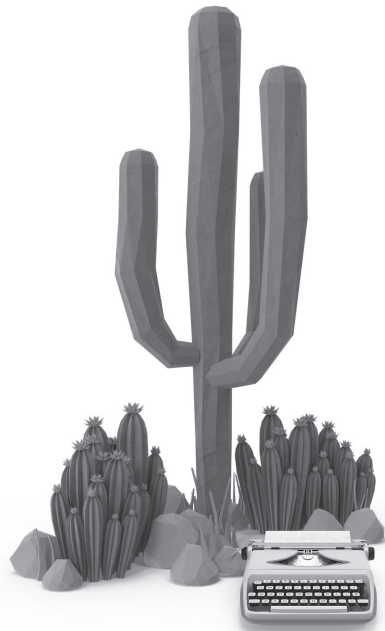
The arts allow our students to find freedom for their voices, and, in this volume, you will read entries that are insightful, sometimes challenging, and always heartfelt. Please give our student writers the respect they deserve and read all of the entries in this book. You will find a testament to the educational process that is fundamental to our college district.

For the student winners, please understand that your work had to rise above the work of many others to be represented in this book, and you are now a published author. Use that knowledge to build confidence in your abilities and to help in accomplishing your goals. When you find difficulties in your career, whatever you may encounter, remember this award has been bestowed on you for your talents and that the faculty of the Maricopa Community Colleges believe in you.

Linda M Speranza, MFA
District Arts Coordinator

Maricopa Center for Learning and Innovation
Division of Academic Affairs
Maricopa Community Colleges

POETRY



PASSAGES 2019/20

POETRY WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

*I Can't Remember the Last Time I Was Able to
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FIRST PLACE | POETRY

I CAN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I WAS ABLE TO GET A FULL NIGHT'S REST

- Marilyn Martin -

I can't remember the last time I was able to get a full night's rest
Hell, I can't remember the last time I got 6 hours. I lay awake listening
to the hum of my fan & remember my dreams of talking to animals when
I was still young & starry-eyed at the world. A cricket chirps & I can't sleep.

Maybe it's the heat, or too much caffeine, or maybe it's the smell of where
my aunt's cat pissed under the bed. My mind chatters towards a tickering finish line.
A place where I see the sunken jaws & stubbly faces of innocent prisoners awaiting
the death penalty. I look into their eyes and imagine what it would be like behind bars

for a crime never committed. I think about controversy & wonder if all dogs ever
go to heaven & if in the face of death would it matter if your family was there?
Though his name hasn't been mentioned lately, I think about my dad.
Who will have served his sentence & walk away free in eighteen years' time

& how twenty years isn't justice for a crime that was committed. In the darkness of the room
I picture my youngest sister. It's been months since I've seen her smile & the freckles
like a constellation of stars, light up her face & then mine. She's doing well as far as I know.
We chat in the morning before she heads to school & most days after. The last time I saw her

she confided in me that she had started smoking weed. We talked about first loves & sneaking
out & how she wants to pursue art after graduation. The past three years play through my
head on repeat. I picture stainless steel hugging my father's wrists & the scars I etched on mine

I question where time has gone & think of what our family could have been without him.
I imagine living under my mom's roof & able to watch the last three years before my sister
becomes an adult. Holding her in my arms & being there for her & finally able to sleep again.

SECOND PLACE | POETRY

POINT ZERO

- Nathan Buckingham -

Here are four ways the court spells mistake:

1. \$2,500 FINE, PAID TO THE STATE OF ARIZONA.
(We barely make rent?)
2. INTERLOCK IGNITION DEVICE - 90 DAYS.
(How do we pick up our friends?)
3. SUSPENSION OF LICENSE - 365 DAYS.
(I'll drive you to work.)
4. 30 DAY STAY IN TENT CITY - WORK RELEASE.
(We'll make this work.)

A sentence is deafening
Like the ring of a judge's hammer.
Sit down, buckle up, loop this rope tightly around your neck.
Does it fit nicely?
or choke.

I'll admit, I was blinded by your rope already tied.

Here are four ways to spell shit:

1. FOUR KIDS
2. ONE DYING MOTHER
3. NO DEGREE
4. ONE ABSENT HUSBAND

Fifty-thousand in child support is a hefty sum to run from.
At least we saved money every year on Father's Day.

Visitation Day, is an easier Holiday.
Too bad we couldn't save gas
Driving Allison to the psychopath in Kingman.
(I would want a drink too)
Although, I wish you would have waited
Longer than halfway-home
You wouldn't have slept in handcuffs
(I wouldn't have unlocked you in six months)

I don't know how you couldn't feel the rope
Searing your skin.
Arizona is famous for blisters, after all
And a seat drenched in Fireball,
Is on fire
Like a blazing red light
Ran by a drunk driver.

Like you.
But it was only a point-zero-nine, you said,
One hand kneading your forehead.

Zero Nine. That does not matter.
Nine Zero. Do you think that matters?
Tell Manny's mom when he didn't come home
That Saturday night
After rolling out the skatepark's gate.
Or Alec's mom
When she lowered him into his grave.

Do you need a ride?
No thanks, I can drive.
Why spend ten bucks on an Uber
When ten years is cheaper.

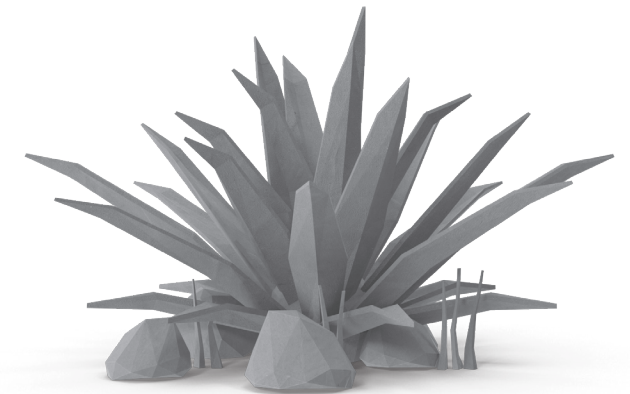
Life's no fun when everyone pays.
AA meetings were prescribed but we needed different A's:

1. Anti-anxiety
2. Anti-depressant.

Let morphine bubble up, sweep you down the river
So you don't notice the rapids, dragging you under.
I know why our mouths are open: We drink

To drown, out
The homeless shelter, the dark days
When Dad pawned the wedding ring.

Drowning is desire, but
There is no sound louder than
Keys turning in ignitions
And the keyholes of empty houses
As Manny & Alec's moms
Unlock their doors.



THIRD PLACE | POETRY

FINDING STACEY

- Kristina Morgan -

No call at midnight is good.
My hello is soft, tissue falling to concrete.
Stacey's drunk again. Her friends left her on the ground
somewhere near Dunlap and 19th. The caller hangs up,
the tone sharp—a banjo in the wrong chord.

She is in the ditch, her head resting on a rock.
I drag her into the passenger seat,
her vomit overpowers my car's peppermint.

Home, she is able to stumble to the toilet
but passes out, her jeans wadded up at her ankles,
her red underwear crumpled on top.

All night, I sit by the bed
and watch her sleep, my baby sister.
I always think to envelop her
to keep her safe, my mothering
unwanted. Startlingly
beautiful, she drove her powder blue
Corvette from man to man,
hooking up with the wealthy.

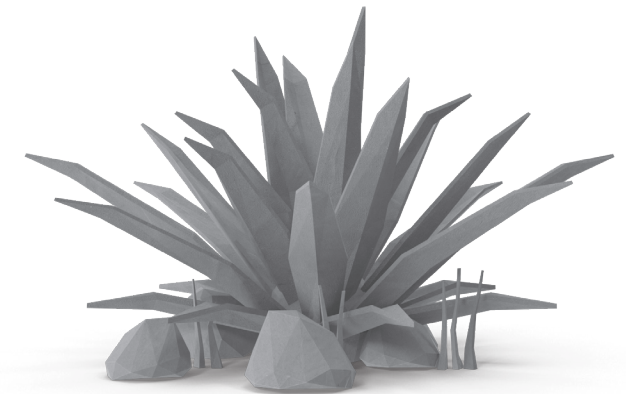
I knew she flirted, my boyfriend said no worries.
But she fucked him, the betrayal lasting for a year,
she said she would stop, her tone

as if she were reading
a grocery list.
For eight years, I carried a grudge
pasted into my heart. Then she surfaced
like a plastic doll in a dirty dress bobbing upstream.

At my psych clinic, I waited for my blood draw.
I heard her call out Kristy, my childhood nickname,
and there she was wrapped in a yellow blanket

the color of daisies. The pain in my life paled
against her fractured face, the lines of an old woman
who smokes and squints, her forehead gathered in wrinkles.
Meth had stolen her teeth. Homeless,
she slept on church steps.

I became lighter in that moment,
reached out and traced her chin
wishing I could find her,
pull her into my car,
and take her home with me
again.



HONORABLE MENTION | POETRY

THE DEATH

- Abril Chihuahua -

I arrived here a week ago
Here the dead like being dead.

They lie in the gardens where the sun shines brightest
Eating Death Bread and Poison Milk.

There is a tree in the middle
Wisdom written on its trunk in all the languages you can imagine.

If you touch it you can see those you left
Pobresito, I knew he wasn't ready

I wasn't ready.
I wasn't ready for the tears.
I wasn't ready to see you like that

Passed out on the floor en esa linda mañana de oro
In a casket that mom picked out while Cien Años plays
My cousins, tios and tias looking at you
Looking at mama
Looking at me

I wipe the tears—ahora no
Xochitl is with me, she cries for you

I miss you more than words can say
I feel my heart bursting out of my chest
The blood leaves my body and rises up to my face.

Ahora no

Mi niño, I'm sorry my time came so soon
But if you could see then you would understand
Estoy bien
No te preocupes

Here the light is yellow and red
Clouds never hover over us

Here is my papa who I haven't seen since I was 13
Here I am safe.

I have to do something
I have to come get you
I have to bring you back

I change and bring out the book
Es el libro de la vida y la muerte
I hate that your name is here now, Enrique Hernandez
I put on my backpack,
right first then left

I see your picture and—ahora no
I kiss Xochitl goodbye, she cries for me

I come ready with a map in hand,
I come ready with a shovel in my other hand
The blood leaves my body and my hands begin to shake

Ahora no

I arrived here and I love it
I like being dead

I miss you and your mami
But I can remember every detail about you now

I remember showing you Pedro Infante
I remember teaching you how to sing

I remember your mami and Xochitl
This tree is what keeps us connected mijito

I miss you
I miss your smile
I miss your laugh

I wanted to see you one more time
I wanted you to come back to us to our familia.
I just wanted to sing Cielito Lindo to you again

I blame this tree
For taking you
Tears stream down—ahora no
Xochitl will paint you, a memory you'll be

I miss you more than words can say
I come ready with a shovel in my other hand
The tears block my eyes, I miss you papi

Te amo

Ahora si

HONORABLE MENTION | POETRY

THE PARK BLOCKS: PORTLAND, OREGON

- Lynne MacVean -

The Park Blocks dripped in the dappled morning sunshine.
I followed the streams of students,
merging, drowning, emerging
in rivulets as we dribbled into classrooms.

We broke the ice and met new people,
individual facts like drops in a pond,
lost before we can recall which applied to whom.
All that remains are the ripples of recognition.

I warm my hands on my precious cup of coffee
and breathe in the aroma of awareness.
I think I will like the tall man with tattoos
and the apt name, Muccigrosso,
who is so kind to abandoned cats.

BIPOLAR

- Haylee Rolnick -

He is awake.
His hands stained with oil and gas hold mine.
His eyes—which are full of cracked, jagged blood vessels
Light up when they see my face.
Awake, he is holding hands, soft touches, a kiss.

He is asleep.
His hands work until my skin turns black and blue.
His dark eyes fill with anger and rage
When they see my fear.
Asleep, he is a bloody beating, violent, a slamming door.

He will call me beautiful with his hands
And break me down with his words.
Beautiful, incredible, amazing, he'll whisper.
Childish, difficult, bitch, he'll scream.

Surrounded by others, if silence fills the air—
I know I will feel the words that night.
Alone at our apartment, his fists will create
The Grand Canyon of drywall.

A dog, not a lover—
Chained to his jean pocket.
If I dare try to run,
The bruises will only grow darker.

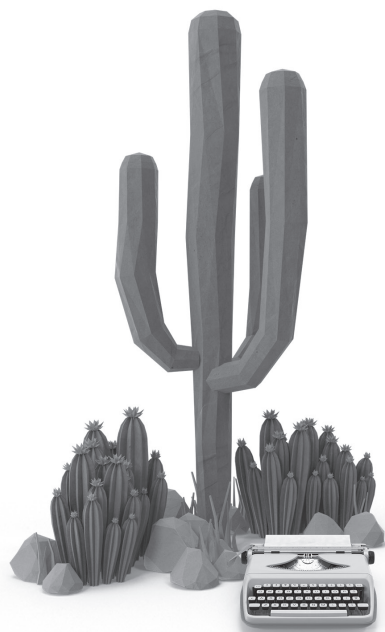
Awake or asleep,
Both live inside of him.

KENTUCKY

- Todd Welch -

Even the grass feels the pressure.
With so much carbon in the air and heaped on nitrates
It has turned a new shade of blue in
Ecstatic asphyxiation. Hazel-eyed animals
Trample their wet play yard into a green sludge with their tan, bulked-up
Gym muscles. Their hoofs will frustrate the farrier's pick with lingering
Grass blades and the occasional dried up caterpillar hidden in the crannies of feet
So strange and wonderful we had to marry them to a solid ring of
Metal to keep them from getting cold.
We busy ourselves with a muck rake to avoid the quiet tension. We try our
Best to love them, we do. The kind of love that comes with a whistle and a
Click, a hard shoe and a cinch. It makes us feel better to try to keep the
Leather soft. We kiss their noses and give them bittersweet snacks
At the end of the day. We hold
Them safe in our love, we think. But just like the grass,
Love can
Hurt. But hurts are
Easy to forgive when you're running in a round pen,
Nostrils wide, snacking on an apple after a long
Run, or carrying a quiet
Child on your back. Sometimes,
At dusk we check the barn, it helps us sleep.
We are sick with the thought they might ever
Leave us in the middle of some
Clear night for a better offer. Like they might
Raise their bowed heads and catch sight of the moon
A little too long to somehow vanish back to a place of
pure feelings.

NONFICTION



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GOOSE GIRL

- Nina Newell -

South China Sea, April, 1975

“There are no roads on the open sea.” A breeze carries the words down to us below deck.

Huddled next to each other, my brother and I exchange embarrassed glances as the other kids giggle. I inhale a deep breath, searching amongst the pungent ocean odors for a tiny hint of fresh air. Beneath the boat, the propeller whirs a soft thumpety-thumpety.

“Whose voice is that?” a boy asks, the glee in his voice grating.

My brother tenses. Gently, I nudge him with my elbow, cautioning him to not react. There’s a small chance the voice wouldn’t be recognized.

“Oh, that’s Uncle Bao.” Betraying us, a cousin names my father. “He’s a poet.”

“Or tries to be,” comes a derisive tone from the dark corner to our right.

My brother’s arm twitches. I put my hand on it. The older teens cluster in that corner. At twelve, my brother is too small to play filial defender.

Above deck, my father’s voice continues strong. “The ocean is a nowhere road for the lost.”

I cringe. Why, oh why does he always have to use such florid, overblown, overwrought language? How hard is it to say simply, “Dear God: Need rescue. Send help. Amen.”

With a swoosh, the boat vibrates, and the soft thumpety-thumpety becomes a hard thump-thump, signaling we have picked up speed.

“The others, the other lost souls, they are only looking for any kind of rescue because they don’t have a safe harbor.” My father raises his voice. “They have no choice because their fear is overwhelming. But we, we know the road to our Savior...”

Well-practiced in the art of tuning out any parental prayer, I close my eyes and indulge

in my favorite pastime, dissociating.

I’m not an eleven-year-old girl who’s never going to see my school, my home, my country again. I’m not a girl who’s adrift somewhere in the South China Sea. I’m not a girl who’s hidden and stuffed in the hold of a boat along with thirteen other girls and seventeen boys while, above deck, twenty-one women and thirty-one men pray for a miracle.

I’m a goose girl. I’m a goose girl from a folktale my grandmother told. I’m a goose girl who sprinkles water on her arms hoping to sprout wings. Wings that will take me soaring with my geese over any latitude, longitude, and altitude back to my old life.

“Sis, stop flapping your arms,” my brother hisses in my ear.

Mortified, I open my eyes and drop my arms. Thankfully, the other kids are either too bored or too lethargic or both to notice.

“At this life or death juncture,” my father is still talking, “we pray for us and for all fellow boat people on the sea. We know you will never forsake us. Our faith will open the door of miracles at the mercy of the God Almighty, the Most High. We await for your most providential merciful answer...”

I yawn. I wish the Most High would send some signal if only so my father would stop his interminable praying.

The thump-thump pauses. The vibration stops. A clunk follows. Then it’s eerily quiet.

We all straighten. Something’s happening.

The big boys spring from their dark corner and lurch up the stairs, my brother on their heels.

We girls stay still. We daren’t the climb up the stairs. The boys will likely be forgiven for any impetuosity, but as girls, we’re expected to stay put and obey the all-important rule. No children can be seen above deck, lest pirates, or worse, the Viet Cong, catch sight of families escaping.

At this life or death juncture. . . the words echo in my head. I decide I’m not dying an obedient girl. My wings sprout. I fly up the stairs.

The fresh salty air stings my face. Snap-snap, the cross-bearing, white flag at the foremast competes with the flap-flap of the SOS white flag on the mainmast above me. No one has noticed my entrance. All eyes are fixed on the behemoth of a ship a short distance away.

Friend or foe? Our boat feels like a minnow next to a big killer whale. My heart pounding, I whisper to a cousin standing near, “What’s happening?”

“The American ship we’ve been following for a while now has slowed down.” His voice is reverently hushed. “We’re going to try to establish contact.”

SECOND PLACE | NONFICTION

THE COCONUT

- Eduardo Blanco -

It's about 11 o'clock in the evening when I find respite from my identity crisis. Music with lyrics I don't understand blares from the house, but I love it. Beautiful olive skinned men and women close to my age mingle and gossip, switching between Spanish and English. They involve me in these conversations. Me, the self-identifying fruit. White on the inside, brown on the outside, just like a coconut.

For a good majority of my life, that is what I believed—and to an extent still do believe—myself to be. I jockey a register at work, routinely spouting “Lo siento, no habla espanol” to chatty native Spanish speakers. Sometimes I'm not as slick; “Do you speak Spanish?” ask the older couples, leaving me like a deer in headlights only to shake my head in embarrassment. I always think to myself, “It's because I'm the only brown one working right now, can't blame em.” The grim reality of it though is that if it's not the banal orders I heard growing up with my Spanish speaking parents, I really don't know the language otherwise. “Close the door!” or “Where's your socks?” are phrases I have locked down as musical little sounds that I can't fully breakdown word for word. Those as well as other pleasant Spanish vulgarities. Beyond that modicum of flavored language, more complex exchanges trigger my eyes to widen, the sound of the more fluent speakers hit my ears like hot steam and I crumble internally from shame. Shame that's taken a lot of time to accept as natural and get comfy with. It's not a blameless circumstance I might add.

My parents figured I didn't need to learn it. They kept that for themselves. I never needed to bother to understand. I grew up in a white city. I went to school with mostly white kids. I spoke the same white language they did. The Latinos that I did know were a decade fresh across the border, enriched with tradition that got watered down for me after three generations of family living in California and Arizona. I was comfortable. Yet, you can only remain comfortable as a coconut until you realize, you are indeed feeling more like a derogatory fruit-like character than you are a flesh, blood, and spirit person. One reaches an age where

the weight of feeling different begins to become more noticeable, and more unbearable. A time comes where all your brown friends begin to talk comfortably amongst themselves. A luxury I can't share in. Getting used to it is doable. Then comes curious parties; “Where are your parents from?” “Oh! I thought you were mixed?” “Your parents never taught you?” Routinely I go through this questioning with individuals on my periphery. Getting used to that is just as doable, but incredibly vexing.

Exceptions exist, of course; I've met a myriad of Latinx kids like myself that I've befriended, and have cycled through circles of friends that are composed of Natives, Blacks, Whites, and Latinos where, despite the variation, everyone was benevolently colorblind and never scathingly curious. These tides shifted when I attended a birthday party jam packed with various Latinx twenty-somethings; spanning from first generations, the winds of Tenochtitlan still fresh

on them, to fourth generations like myself who maybe still have a whiff of a suburban carniceria on them. I felt a stirring in me that transcended the sense of ostracization and color awareness that I have adopted over time.

I sit there in the lawn chair of an Airbnb, my friend momentarily absent as he greets patrons of the party that he knows from work. I feel awkward, but only due in part to the fact that I don't know anyone here. “Do you wanna hit this?” a pretty, smaller stature girl asks kindly as she offers a joint, a heartwarming party favor. Solace, this is my ticket to interact with people rather than sit twiddling my thumbs. I get roped into playing badminton despite having admittedly horrible hand-eye coordination. English predominantly is spoken throughout the night. Even so, I laugh with the crowd when some of the more slightly inebriated girls spout off frustrated obscenities in Spanish when they mess up, or cheer in a similar manner when they score a point. Eventually, I find myself reclined in the same lawn chair without a familiar face to pacify my anxiousness, but I relax and just observe the goings on around me. Everyone walks or teeters around the yard. The beer pong athletes from within the house come to join the circle of lawn chairs, one of which I'm seated in. Then it dawns on me, “Everyone here looks just like me. Some of them act just like me!” I don't fully understand the banda anthems echoing trumpets from within the house, but then again I don't think I'm the only one that doesn't. A calm reigns over me, something unfamiliar, but warm and welcoming.

Maybe it's primal, from the dawn of time, humans have flocked to tribes that they fit into. Maybe I'm just thinking too far into it. Whatever the case, I recognize that this is the first time I've been surrounded by people just like myself where I no longer feel judged or ashamed. Do they see a coconut? Are they cognizant of my white voice? Maybe, but it's never brought up. Instead, I'm just playfully teased for being bad at badminton, which I find unfair given the title of the game.

Community was fostered that night in a way I never experienced before. I don't know if birthday parties just have that charm, I scarcely attend them. Regardless, this just felt deeply different. Young, brown, fluidly bilingual people barely clocking out of work to party were thriving around me. On the surface, it was a very benign nondescript function; the youth of the working class enjoying themselves. To me, it evoked a familial feeling that never surfaced amidst the crowd of jeering Latino strangers and acquaintances of my past, nor among the Whites and Blacks that comprised my friend groups. Eventually, my calm reaches its peak and I get comfortable.

Taking the leap to insert myself into this crowd was all it took to find this calm. Perhaps it was to inevitably come with time. Perhaps I just let myself off the hook because no one was there to press me on how brown I actually am. I was one of them, and they were just like me. Growing, finding themselves, sociable, uninhibited. All this just because I was fortunate enough

to be invited to a party by another Latino friend, one that also never judged or assumed. Nary a coconut feeling to be bothered with. At the tail end of the night, only elation beamed through my grinning olive cheeks and glossy red eyes. As I sat, the brown coating and white interior faded away leaving only gradations of not a fruit, but a man.

THIRD PLACE | NONFICTION

VIOLENCE TO JUSTICE

- Kazimier Firkus -

I was forced to sacrifice my childhood for a life of self-preservation that still affects me until this day. Some of the loved ones, particularly my siblings, in my life were addicted to drugs, and the effect it had on me required me to change the entire framework of how I functioned. While most kids around middle school and high school were worried or excited for what the new year would bring, I was concerned of who was going to wake up that morning or when the next drug trip gone bad was going to be—there were days where neither of my siblings would, from being out late, from consuming drugs, from the night before, or they would be gone for days at a time. Sometimes I couldn't go to school simply because I had nobody to take me there.

“It's just a test,” one of my siblings told me about my exams. “It's not that important.” Except, it was. Carrying heavy expectations of being a successful golden child on one arm and the weight of verbal abuse and neglect from the people I desperately wanted to be my role models for the future on the other both weakened me. Because of how I was treated by the people I love—who became puppets enslaved by a manufactured, dangerous dope—I learned early on that if I was going to survive, I had to come to terms with living out of self-preservation; I had to rely on my instincts, a fight or flight response, otherwise, I was going to have more difficult of a time than I already was having.

After being met with the haunting screams and accusations of my being “ungrateful” and “a bitch” for not lending them my money that I got for my birthday or lunch for that week, or hearing the talks of the hallucinogenic spiders crawling on the walls, I lost a lot of my trust in people. But even though I shut people out, I still wanted them back in. I craved a human connection from my peers even though I was terrified of it. Besides the cozy library by the river that housed the memories of my innocence, school was my other get away from the madness at home and I worried that the evils who accompanied my fears would overcome the sanctuaries I built for myself. I was afraid that if I got close to people, they would hurt me too. Although I was desperate, I didn't have the strength to reach out to others. I didn't allow anyone to know because being vulnerable meant letting the draw bridge down, and my soul, my empire, did not have the means to deal with the Trojan Horse of potential malevolence. Nobody knew of the verbal abuse I received while watching one of my siblings, rabid on a mix

of drugs I dare couldn't get close to, try to break open our family safe with a blowtorch and steal our valuables to sell for his next high.

The frequency of these events made me give up what I enjoyed and lost affections for what used to make me happy. As soon as I got attached to something, like a small gaming device for example, it was sold for drugs the next day. Having the keypad locks installed on my bedroom doors helped prevent theft but still I was unable to love materialized things like I used to. From that point on, I felt like the world was telling me that I wasn't allowed to be happy and expressing any vulnerability would hurt me.

Vulnerability meant taking a step that I, unfortunately, couldn't take. Anxiety and nightmares hijacked my dreams, so it was difficult to tell what was real and what was just my mind preparing me for the worst to come. I constantly tried to dial the hotline for hope, desiring some type of advice or clue to steer me towards a path of redemption, but all I was left with was static noise. Due to not having an outlet to express how I felt, I drove myself into a stress-induced, anxious insanity that helped create an internalized anger and a severe mistrust in everyone I met.

I was angry for having to give up my whole life to hold down a house that I felt no love or attachment for, but if I wasn't angry, it was difficult for me to feel anything else. It was difficult for me to be excited for the things I did accomplish or the small joys that I would cross paths with every so often; I always told myself that it wasn't enough and that I needed to do better to prove myself. Although my peers described me as quiet and nice, I've made people cry for what I've said and I've physically assaulted someone I used to call my best friend in middle school for trying to take advantage of the last ounce of kindness I was saving for the world outside of the tar pit I drowned in. I can still remember the horrified eyes glossed with tears that met with my own eyes, dilated with rage, with the intent to make her understand that trying to take advantage of a broken, lost, yet hopeful soul was wrong. Though my knuckles were covered in blood that wasn't mine, I wanted her to feel the same pain that I felt at home. The only circumstances that stopped me were the authorities and the adrenaline from releasing a fragment of my internalized anger was weaker than the exhaustion that ended up making my body sore the next day. I felt like I was living like a feral dog, using excessive assertion to keep my place in the social hierarchy of my environment. This barbaric behavior was the only structure and control I had over my life. I learned to be aggressive to the people around me and used a voice that I didn't think I had to assert myself in an unhealthy, domineering way—but it was all out of self-preservation to keep myself both safe and alive. It was a social concept that I understood and knew how to make work.

But I was aware that if I was not defending myself, I wasn't going to survive my unforgiving reality. I strongly believed that any day could've been my last, so I became highly alert of who and what was around me. I couldn't have people stand behind me and I didn't let people stand too close either because if something were to happen, I needed the time to physically and mentally react. The putrid burning smells of processed plastic and chemically infused marijuana in my air vents and hearing the car door slam louder than normal were symptoms of potential disasters that I needed to prepare for. I was not going to survive the episodes and outburst of a bad trip when my sibling came home and put holes in the walls, screaming louder than a banshee and crying intangible words that I didn't understand if I couldn't control the situation. My life was a constant, never ending battle of survival, and when I left for college, I thought I was on my way to paradise—except it was only another fight to save myself.

My first year at college dispelled some of my problematic behaviors that helped me move forward as I joined social groups that allowed me to express my feelings in a healthy, safe environment, but if I had never met that Man at the beginning of twenty-eighteen, I would have avoided moving backwards in my personal growth.

He was a Man with a silver tongue with a suit to match and a vocabulary so eloquent it made up for the intelligence he lacked. I still yearned for an opportunity to love and a person to hold, but he took advantage of the innocence I tried to revive by convincing me that he would be my true love like in the fantasies I dreamed. And for once I wanted to be comfortable accepting help, offering my trust into somebody, but that Man only helped me to his own benefit. He numbed my fight or flight response, my self-preservation techniques that I relied on, in order to gaslight me. He whispered beautiful lies to my naivety that my anxiety medications were making me crazy and that I was the one burning bridges to my peers when he was the one who lit the match. He made me believe that I wasn't mentally stable enough for college when he was the one who caused me to be unstable to start. Yet I supposedly loved this Man and the way he held me even though he'd send me to class with bruises around my neck and arms, pained in my lower half from stealing my virginity the night before and manipulating me to think it was love.

But eventually I went into a downward spiral with my feelings for this Man. He would visit me when we started a long-distance relationship over the summer, but after being exposed again to the environment I lived in my entire life, the red flags turned to trumpets that belatedly told me to run. I began to realize that the life he lived was something that I didn't want to be a part of because he made himself out to be the victim every time he was met with criticism and was unable to handle the consequences of his actions. I decided that I had enough when he twisted my arm behind my back, nearly breaking it, and raped me after tying his chain necklace around my neck to choke me until I could barely breathe.

"Maybe if you obeyed me," The Man told me as I cried after being sexually assaulted, "Then I wouldn't have to do this." And when he asked me if I was going to behave, I told him no. My fight or flight, feral dog response came back to life—and once more, I fought for my self-preservation. I fought for what was left of my damaged soul and sanity by wielding a silver tongue of my own, forging it into a steel sword, and using my weapon against him.

My metaphorical jaws snapped at him when I verbally attacked him. I was aggressively adamant in telling him that his actions were wrong, yelling that he screwed up the only meaningful relationships that I had and took away my opportunities to heal myself for his own gain. In the hour I spoke to him, he only admitted and acknowledged his wrongdoings once; I instilled the same fear into him as I did to my best friend in middle school, except this time my words were hot and ready to kill any spirit he had left.

While I don't believe he was sincerely sorry, I do believe that I was successful in showing him that there was no coming back from what he did. I made him believe that I was a threat and he was going to be following my rules if he wanted his belongings he left behind, except he never showed. Refusing to see me again, I sold his belongings instead to buy myself something nice.

My mindset of living out of self-preservation, what I once deemed as a curse, came to my aid when I needed it to escape a situation detrimental to my mental and physical health. When I moved to Milwaukee to live in my own solitude, I began to unlearn the vicious behavior that I was used to. The feral dog in me became timid rather than hostile, but I made progress in how I interacted with others. Slowly I began to express vulnerability and learned how to love life again, and from putting myself to the test by owning my own apartment, I packed up my car and moved to Arizona in August of twenty-nineteen as a chance to further my healing process and to pursue a genuine paradise rather than a fake oasis. But to this day there are times where I fear that feral dog will come to the surface again, however I now know how to express my feelings without physical or verbal violence; I've turned my aggression into passion to fight for my own justice, and ultimately, my worth as a person—and I will not settle for less than I deserve.

HONORABLE MENTION | NONFICTION

AT THE ZOO

- Shannon Fernando -

I watch from the sidelines as Jacob, who is one year old today, smiles brilliantly at the elephants. From his father's arms, Jacob reaches a chubby hand toward the enclosure, his little fingers grasping as though he might actually take hold of the massive beasts. Steve points, drawing our son's attention to an elephant calf half-hidden behind its mother's bulky form. I can hear Jacob's elated gurgles from where I sit. I swallow the sudden lump in my throat and blink away tears.

I don't know why I am crying. Or maybe I do, but the reasons are so numerous that I struggle to make sense of them. There is joy, so much joy, that I am able witness my baby's first visit to the zoo. There is appreciation for my parents, who frequently help because it's hard for Steve to take care of both Jacob and me. There is fear, fear about the many things I may not be here to witness in the future. And under all of that there is a deep bitterness. Now my mom holds Jacob while Steve takes pictures of them with the elephants in the background. I want to be the one holding my son. I want to be in the photos with the elephants in the background. But I can't because the chemotherapy that is supposed to be killing my cancer has also killed my stamina, and I am just too exhausted to stand right now. Instead, I sit on a bench, watching my loved ones live life while I battle with my conflicting emotions, then feel guilty because I should just be grateful to still be alive.

I look away, seeking a source of distraction. Where did Dad go? I wonder idly. He had been beside me on the bench. When he stood, I assumed he was joining the others at the railing, but he's not there. Probably bored. Patience has never been his strength; if we stay in one place too long, he inevitably wanders off.

Steve, Jacob, and Mom return to my side. Steve places Jacob gently in my lap. He jabbars at me, pointing to the elephants. For a moment, I wish I could see inside his mind, see what it is he thinks he's telling me. Just as quickly, I decide that's not a good idea. How must I look to him now, with my patchy bald head and wan coloring, a shadow of my former self? Or do very young children have a way of just knowing their parents, regardless of appearance? After all, he has never once rejected me as he might a stranger. There is a small measure of comfort in that thought.

"Feeling any better?" Steve asks, swigging from a water bottle. Jacob reaches for it, so Steve helps him hold the bottle to his small pink mouth and tips it just enough to let Jacob get a sip.

"I don't feel awful," I say, blotting Jacob's damp mouth with the hem of his dinosaur t-shirt. "Just tired. We've only been here an hour, and I'm wiped out." I gesture for him to take

Jacob so I can get a drink from my own water bottle. I'm not supposed to share for fear of introducing germs to my suppressed immune system.

"We can sit here as long as you need," Mom says, joining us on the bench. She eyes the sparse early-morning crowd. "Where's Dad?" she asks. Jacob pats Steve's face, and we all laugh. "Okay, where's Papa?" Mom asks Jacob, using my dad's preferred "grandfather" moniker. Ever adoring of his papa, Jacob immediately looks around. He gives us a gummy grin stretches out an arm.

"Papapapapapapapapa," he says. We all look, and sure enough, there's Dad, pushing a wheelchair down the path toward us.

"Where on Earth did you get that?" I ask as he rolls to a stop in front of me.

"Rented it," Dad says with his typical stoicism, like this is no big deal. "Now all you have to do is sit."

Steve smiles hugely. "That's brilliant! I never would have thought of it." He promptly hands Jacob to my mom and offers me a hand. "Your chariot awaits," he announces. He helps me up and into the chair.

It doesn't take Jacob long to decide my ride is more fun than his stroller. He fusses until he is allowed to ride in my lap. I hold him in place and he, in turn, clutches his new stuffed polar bear, indulgently purchased from one of the zoo's many kiosks. Dad and Steve take it in turns to push us while Mom steers the stroller, now nothing more than a receptacle for our bags, drinks, and discarded jackets.

For the rest of the morning, I participate in everything. I drink in my son while he gapes at the zebras, lions, and monkeys. I comfort him when he is frightened by the alligators in the dank reptile house. I smile for photos with my family and a friendly giraffe. When Jacob eventually passes out from an overload of excitement, he naps in my arms, his small, sturdy body as comforting to me as a warm blanket. He sleeps for an hour and a half and wakes grumpy, opening his mouth to wail. I pop his pacifier in before he can, making his eyes widen comically.

"Look, bud," my dad distracts Jacob, pointing from his place behind my chair. "There's Dad." We are at the top of a gently sloped walkway. At the bottom, Steve has just stepped out of the restroom. He sees us and waves. Jacob makes a pitiful noise from behind his binky.

"Want to go get him?" my dad asks Jacob. "Hold on!"

He pushes hard on the wheelchair to get going. We gain speed as we move down the slope.

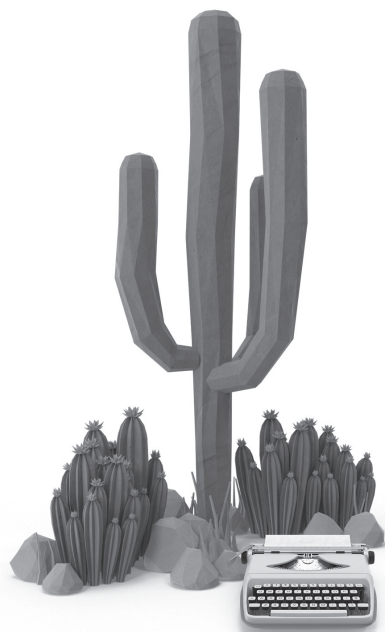
"Slow down!" I cry, gripping Jacob fiercely. Dad ignores me. Jacob squeals. His entire face lights up. My reluctance recedes as I observe my son. His arms wave in delight. His fine, dark hair blows in the breeze. His mouth is open, the pacifier falling forgotten to the ground. My husband watches from the bottom of the hill, grinning openly at the picture we make. His obvious pleasure reassures me, and I relax further. I smile at him, and I begin to laugh. In the brief time it takes us to get down the hill, I feel more alive than I have in months.

Dad lurches to a stop next to Steve, who swings Jacob off my lap and into the air in smooth continuation of momentum. I glance back to see Mom making her way toward us, stooping once to retrieve Jacob's pacifier from the walkway. Dad catches my eye and smiles at me with a gentleness I'm not accustomed to seeing in him. His large, warm hand comes down on my shoulder.

I'll always take care of you, he says wordlessly. Reaching up, I place my own hand over his and give it a gentle squeeze.

I know, I reply. Thank you.

FICTION



PASSAGES 2019/20

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LENNY

- Alex Dodt -

You know the story: a stranger comes to town, and the stranger is your widowed and soon-to-be-joining-her-in-the-grave father-in-law.

“Maybe you’re the stranger in this one, Len,” Marg liked to say to me, and then she and Pops would laugh at her twisted version of the story. She was funny like that, always telling tall tales. When we first met, she said, “I don’t date fishermen,” and stood totally still in the doorway, a hand on her hip like an imbalanced teapot I could tip over with one wrong move. I wasn’t really a fisherman, I was a dockhand, but Marg knew that. I told her, “I haven’t caught one in years,” and we both laughed. We went on dates anyway.

If I had been the lost and lonely traveler and not Pops, our house wouldn’t have been the first I looked to for refuge. It was the only two-story house on the street, possibly by accident. The second story stood less than half the height of the first and they were stuck together like a disem-boweled wedding cake, its middle layers thrown away and the top layer, still imprinted with the feet of a bride and groom statuette, slapped down cockeyed on the wide bottom.

Other strangers had passed through before Pops. Not many, but enough. Children passed through. Not mine, but Marg’s at least. The first two, from her first marriage, came to visit once after I moved in. Sometimes, in conversation with a stranger, Marg will mention their names and remind me she hasn’t made them up as part of some trick she’s playing.

Olive, from her other marriage, was only 10 when we all moved into the two-layer cake. Marg was working overnight then, so I would drive little Olive to school. The first morning, I dressed up for her in a chauffeur hat and a black tie, tipping my cap as I opened the door to the backseat. She pulled a finger out of her Rudolph nose and said, “Thank you, Lenny.”

Even after Olive moved to Anchorage, Marg kept all of the kids’ rooms just as they had left them in case they came home unannounced. That left only two rooms for Pops to choose from. Our bedroom was out of the question. The bed was perfectly-suited for Marg and I. Years of lifeless

bodies had molded it into a home, two miniature homes really, two human-like figures impressed in deep relief on opposing sides of the mattress.

I converted the den into a bedroom. A necessary sacrifice, Marg called it. The night Pops moved in, Marg and I stood against the door of the den and he sat on the mattress I had dragged in from the garage that morning. We talked about the room. There was nothing to say about it, but we found ways. We could have been standing in Olive’s dorm room again, Olive fidgeting on her bed, staring at the door Marg and I held onto, Marg more firmly than I, hoping it might not open again and we’d be stuck in there forever. Marg was good like that, closing doors and only opening them when the time called for it.

I asked Pops what he wanted to do on his first full day and he pursed his lips like he wanted to whistle a response. Marg asked about the new curtains instead. He liked them. We talked about the mattress too. Tomorrow wasn’t always proper for conversation. That was easy to forget. Even days already past weren’t always proper. Before Pops moved in, I asked how long he would be staying and Marg responded like I had asked what we should watch next, hiding her mouth behind a glass stained on both sides by her pink lips and suggesting a Judy Garland movie.

“Can I smoke in here?” Pops asked, pulling a plastic bag of thumb-shaped green stems from his pocket and placing it on the mattress. I knew we weren’t in Olive’s dorm room anymore; only adults asked that question: Am I allowed? Once they received their allowances, it was time to consider forgiveness and was it all worth it. But Pops could have never asked. Marg wouldn’t know better. Her nose had been molded by 35 years of Marlboro Reds and had never zeroed in on that smell seeping into the kitchen. I indulged sometimes when I had spent a long afternoon building boats in the garage. When I came inside, Marg never asked about the smell, only about the boat and whether it was seaworthy, holding it in her palm like it had already weathered a storm.

Before Pops was Marg’s father to me, he looked less like a dying man. Whenever I came into Arlo’s, he would be behind the bar, telling jokes that made the dog tags around his neck bounce across his chest like lottery balls. After a whole crabbing season had passed, he finally let me drive his only waitress home.

Marg wore her fingernails long then, and by the end of a shift she’d have peanut scraps packed beneath her nails. When she wanted to emphasize something, she tapped her nails on the closest surface twice like ashing five skinny cigarettes. Most nights, her knowledge of Hollywood was enough to carry us all the way to her house. By the time we got there, the dashboard of my car would be covered with semi-circles of brown dust. I made sure she got in the front door before I drove away. She always did. I kept the window down and waved.

“Paul Newman or Robert Redford?” she asked as we pulled out of the Arlo’s parking lot for the first time. “If you could only choose one.”

“What am I choosing for?”

She tapped her fingers on the dash. I chose Redford. She kept going. I listened. Voted when it was my turn. Chose Donny Osmond on our first real date and regretted it. Marg had an opinion on all of them, accumulated from years of doing hair and makeup in California. None of the names she asked about ever had their hair in her hands, and it was probably better that way. She might have never let them go.

Sometimes we chose the same star. When we did, we could talk about it all night. On our first anniversary, we ate seafood and agreed on Bob Hope. I could watch him forever, Marg said. She would prepare him backstage and then come sit next to me and watch him perform. Our own slice of heaven. I didn’t imagine Bob Hope’s idea of eternity was singing and dancing for some old couple on their couch. But they were just dreams, that’s what Marg would say. Bob Hope could sit on his couch or do whatever he pleased in his own dreams, and he could perform in ours. Everyone

could have what they wanted, and at the same time too. That was the logic of all of her dreams.

The three of us rolled ourselves into airtight balls of arms and legs and tumbled around the house. Routines changed. We began adjusting to each other. I moved to the loveseat, so Pops could sit with Marg on the couch when we watched our shows. I spent more time in the garage.

Christmas came, at last, and brought order; Marg's carefully-scripted traditions from a childhood spent with Pops and Jean on Air Force bases across America. Frank Sinatra's voice replaced the hum of the heater as our background noise. Holiday cookbooks were unboxed and laid out on the kitchen counter like a missal stand. Every act was a gesture toward a previous year and so on, backwards in time, until we could reach somewhere unknown again.

Olive came home for the holiday. Pops stuck around. I gathered everyone around the dinner table. We held hands and prayed over the food. Our unmoored daily movements were becoming fastened to the ground again. On weekends, we piled into the truck and drove around town, marveling at all the lights and the heights people had gone to just to line their roofs with them. We strung a line of red and green blinking lights across our windshield and plugged it into the dash whenever we stopped to gape at another house. Sometimes, people appeared in their window and stared back. We would sit very still so they couldn't see us and the people would point as if to say, Look at their house!

Marg hadn't agreed yet to move Pops into a nursing home when the flyers started arriving in the mail. She would throw them in the trash can in our bedroom and say we'll talk about it later. But sometimes we ran out of things to say after dinner was finished. Pops and Olive would sit on the couch and Marg would be in the kitchen bent over a yellow legal pad of Jean's recipes scribbled in blue felt pen, studying them like scrolls.

One nursing home flyer was designed like a before-and-after ad for a weight loss program. The man forking green beans into his mouth in the first photo looked like a younger Pops, and the second was a close-up of a spartan kitchenette with two slat back chairs around a corner table set for dinner. Become this stainless steel silverware set, it seemed to say.

Pops laughed when I showed it to him. He always kept a sense of humor about him. Marg didn't agree. "You weren't hired to deliver that message to him," she said, pouring another glass of Tennessee Honey and spinning two fingers in it until a pin-sized whirlpool formed amid the circle of ice cubes.

There were so many delicate messages to transmit in a marriage. Often, Marg and I could exchange them without speaking, sometimes even breathing wasn't necessary, just a kind of withholding. There were bound to be breakdowns though. Who could avoid those? Middle-age marriages required extra care. There were the usual turnabouts to navigate—decisions of whether to sleep or get up, whether to take clothes off or leave them clinging to your horrible flesh—and there were also family parties where an aunt or someone who must be a grandparent would toast to the family but mostly to the kids; the beautiful, beautiful kids brought into the world by someone whose memory still squatted at the end of the table apparently. "And we're so glad Marg found Lenny," the toast ends, and I raise my glass to life as a rescue.

Marg put the flyer in the trash and walked with her drink to the couch and sat with Olive. I wasn't hired to deliver the message. That was true. I was self-appointed, hiring myself off to anyone with a life to explain away, a messenger sometimes of even my own thoughts. That's what I wanted, today's me says of yesterday's. He meant every word, I report of myself.

Knowing when to give in was nothing new. The search for a Christmas tree was my most well-versed tradition. One of the first trees Marg laid her eyes on and asked, "Wouldn't

it be wonderful?" would be the one we'd end up taking home. But we had to be drawn back to it. That was the process. We visited a second, a third, and a fourth lot, and I played the skeptic along the way, shooting down her latest suggestion, waiting for the right moment to concede.

"Tree is a monster," Pops said and spun a tight figure in his wheelchair like he wanted to dance with one of those towering over him, maybe the tango or the jitterbug, something quaint that required a partner.

"It'll fill up the whole room," Marg said in the direction of the same row of trees we had begun the night with hours before. She ran her fingers over Pops' head, between the plush brown antlers hanging over his ears like bent antennae. No one asked for clarification. He was excited and couldn't be bothered anymore with the detail of this or that tree, his singular things becoming universal and unrecognizable.

I gave my best ambiguous shrug and kept moving. The afternoon's snow was hardening over the morning's asphalt-stew, and we moved across it slowly, like it was Opening Night again and Marg and I were limping to center ice to try a slap shot for \$50. At the end of the row was a flattop yellow tent. Outside it, a bearded man stood next to a rusted barrel like something was burning inside. He watched us without cheering.

When Marg's eyes got wide at the sight of a heavyweight near the end of the row, I called over the man by the barrel. The tree was a Douglas Fir; just getting near one felt like dunking your face in one of Jean's mint juleps. It was tall too, taller than Marg when she's had one too many Honeys and stands on the couch to try and jump on my back.

"That one's already been sold," the man from the barrel said, pointing to a tag that was tied on the backside of the tree. The man's hands looked familiar, his fingers gnarled at the tips like he had worked at the docks. I told him about the season I had spent crabbing. He told me how he got into trees. Fish in the fall, trees in the winter, retirement in the spring. It was impressive how he found ways just to get through the seasons.

We could choose a different tree, I told him. What mattered was that we got one. Marg didn't say anything. Her face looked stalled by the cold. The fisherman had a bewildered look. Even when people used the best words they could come up with, there was still interpretation to be done. Without words, anyone's guess was as good as mine. Marg turned and walked to the next row of trees and Olive followed. My guess then was that traditions only remained traditions until something severed them. Then they became just a curiosity, indexes of how time had been passed before.

Once the fisherman left, I grabbed the trunk of Marg's chosen tree and placed the other end on Pops' lap. My guess then was that tradition shouldn't be ceded easily. From the look on his face, Pops agreed. I began to push and Pops held on, and once we got going momentum carried us toward the exit. For a moment, there was no one around. Rolling backwards, with his hands gripping the branches like handlebars, Pops soared across the ice, his chest rumbling as he laughed. He hunched over in his wheelchair as though he could exist below the wind. I imagined he had never gone that fast before.

We almost made it to the truck. The fisherman would have had no idea. It was the sound that brought everyone running. Pops fell out of his chair when we hit a pothole and the tree fell with him. By the time I reached him, he had rolled out from under the branches and was still smiling.

The fisherman stood over the tree and shook his gnarled fingers like fish out of water. Olive helped Pops into the truck. Marg wasn't impressed with our defense of tradition. She told her version of the story. In it, tradition was ruined. Tradition never involved getting kicked out of a Christmas tree lot, she said. When we died, would Olive and her kids want to repeat this night? If it couldn't be repeated, it wasn't worth doing once. I knew that. Pops was happy

though, happier than I'd seen him before. Jean would have been glad for that, I thought. But Marg didn't share my interest in interpreting the feelings of dead people. I started to imagine that when I die, people will ask Marg, "What would Lenny want?" and she might not have any answer.

The three of them crammed into the backseat together, Olive wedged in the middle. I wiped the mud off my pants and plugged the string of lights into the dashboard. We drove like that for a while. At the first road that branched off the highway between the tree lot and home, I turned. It dead-ended at an opening in the forest that in the summertime must have been a meadow filled with knee-high purple fireweed. A short walk from the truck, I found a grizzly bear of a tree at least as big as the one from the lot.

Lying under it, I could feel slivers of bark hitting my cheeks as I moved the saw through the trunk. Olive waited just beyond the range of where the tree would fall. Pops had left his wheelchair at the truck and walked out to where the trees gave into meadow and propped himself up. Marg stood nearby. Behind her, I could see lights flashing in our windshield.

Then, the tree wiggled free. Olive raised her hands to her head. I couldn't tell if she was cheering or shielding her face from the storm. The tree yawned around the saw's teeth and landed in an embankment, spraying a burst of snow up into the air. Through the falling snow, I could see the outline of everyone, but no one was moving toward the tree. I felt like I had been placed inside of a snow globe, unwrapped on a fireplace mantel somewhere unknown. The sphere of glass must have been big enough to contain Olive too, and Pops and Marg. We were all inside of it, standing in our places, and on the outside, in someone else's hands, we were shaken.

SECOND PLACE | FICTION

MISTAKE

- Quinleia Dixon -

The thread had become loose at the end of the skirt. The frayed ends of the hem showed it was loved. The brightness of the royal purple had faded and slowly had become pale through the many washes it endured. Jay placed the skirt on a hanger and placed a maroon windbreaker on top of it. They were signature pieces. They smelled faintly of a vanilla musk and cedar smoke.

Jay hung it in plain view. She did it so she could look at it. She wanted to wrap it in plastic to preserve the smell, but she wanted to see it as well. She threw out papers from the closet, an assortment of jackets not worn from two winters ago, boxes filled with files, worn books, and broken toys. She packed them all into black trash bags and threw them out. She swept out the dust that settled into the corners of the closet and scrubbed the walls until it was white again. The small closet now belonged to the jacket and the skirt. She ran her fingers on the outside of the maroon jacket. The polyester was cold to touch. Jay smelled it a bit and closed her eyes.

"No one goes into this closet," she said to the room and the children in it. She didn't speak to no one in particular. It was an announcement or a warning.

The children didn't respond and instead shook their heads in agreement to leave the closet alone. Jay took a last glance and closed the door. She sat down. The kids walked outside the house. The baby gurgled happily on the couch. She stared a couple of moments at the closet and traced the outline of the doorframe with her eyes. She stared and stared and felt the emptiness of the closet.

"Mom, you ok," her eldest daughter Lee asked.

"Mmhmm," she replied. Lee's eyes played suspiciously on Jay's body searching for the damage that she felt her mother was in. There was no trace of blood, inflammation, or bruising. Jay forced a smile. She felt the muscles of her face tighten. She hoped she didn't look sinister. She waited for a reaction from Lee and gave up. She let her face release the folds of the smile and then nodded.

"I'm just tired," she said to Lee in a gasp of words releasing from her mouth.

Lee nodded and picked up the baby. Jay slumped and then let her body slide to the side. She brought up her legs, moved her body and curled herself to the side in a fetal position. Jay slowly slid into sleep.

She awoke, covered and lying in the dark. She didn't dream. Her eyes filled with the darkness of the room. She felt cold. She lay on the couch and stared into the dark until the light came through the room and identified the top of the ceiling.

Jay returned to work that day. Everybody felt like a stranger. She couldn't hold a thought. It appeared and flew away. She could hear it buzzing in the back of her mind. She sliced a part of her finger deeply but felt nothing until her co-worker Deb rushed over with a towel and wrapped her hand. "I'm ok," she told Deb. She held the washcloth and was released to go to the hospital.

"You'll need stitches," the nurse said cleaning the wound, "We will numb the area."

The nurse went to work. She felt the sting of the needle and then from there she felt nothing. They prescribed a hydrocodone. She went home. Her body pulsed from the pain. Jay swallowed the pill and let it take her to sleep. She felt empty and then warm when she climbed into bed. Her body began to fizz like champagne. It felt like a million tiny bubbles popping and releasing off her skin. She let the feeling calm her and carry her to sleep.

"Boom, Boom, Boom," the door roared.

Jay shot up out of bed. She surveyed the small children that lay beside her. Their eyes remained shut. Their bodies rose as they breathed in their slumber. She made her way off the bed letting her eyes adjust from dark shadows to darker shadows. A cramp began to curl her toes and work into her calves. She stood a moment and kept herself from screaming as the muscle moved back into place. She rushed to open the door.

She began turning the locks quickly and then locked it again. What was she doing? she thought to herself. She peered out the peephole. She flipped on the light switch. It flicked on and she peered out onto the porch. She couldn't see the face of the person. She squinted and she saw the hands. She felt her heartbeat and she frantically turned the locks slowly and unsure of what she saw.

"Shima (mother)," she cried in disbelief. The old woman's hair was covered in dirt. Her fingers were raw and bleeding. The dust had settled into the lines of her face. She grabbed her and then held onto her in front of the open door. Jay felt her thin frame and her warmth. She sobbed into her mother's body. Grief and relief released simultaneously.

"Aaayoo (it hurts)," her mother cried out.

She quickly let go and led the old woman to the couch. Jay's mother limped to the couch and fell back into the cushions of the couch. A trail of dust seeped from her shoes onto the floor. She grabbed the woman's hands. Strangely not afraid but she knew because it was her mom.

"I didn't die, you crazy people buried me," the old woman said as she slumped back into the couch.

"I saw you mom," Jay said to her.

"Then who is sitting in front of you," her mother replied.

She took a breath and she held the old woman's hand not wanting to let go in case it was all a dream.

"How did you get out?" she questioned her mother.

"I crawled out," her mother replied simply.

This was her mother. She believed in the simplicity of the answer. Her tongue was sharp. She and her mother laughed at the absurdity. Her mother was an old, frail woman who a couple of days ago was dying and suddenly digging out of her grave and walking out of it like nothing happened.

"How did you get here," she questioned her mother again.

"I walked," her mother said as she opened her mouth.

Jay didn't want to question anymore. Her mother was here. She was feeling her body. She was here. That's all that mattered.

"I'm hungry," her mother said.

"Let's clean you up," she told her mother.

"Ok, shiyazhi (my child)," her mother said to her. That phrase made her cry again. She thought she would never hear that again. She detested hearing that from anyone else lately. She was her mother's baby and no one else. They did it out of respect, but she felt that right should only come from her mother. She never felt like that before. Aunts and clan mothers called all the young shiyazhi (my child). Jay ran the water. Felt it warm up. The old woman undressed spilling dirt onto the carpet. She had her mother feel the water and helped lead her into the bathtub. The old woman bent forward, and she wet the washcloth and poured some soap and began washing the dirt away. She poured a little into her mother's hair and let the soap bubble up. She ran her fingers through her hair and grabbed a cup. She scooped water to rinse off the soap. She could feel her mother's ribs and thinning hair as she washed her. Her mother had become an older woman but to her she was perfect and the most beautiful human being she ever met. She was thankful this event had taught her this lesson. She wrapped her mother in a towel and helped her dry off. She grabbed a linen shirt from her closet and the skirt from the other closet. She took out the thin coat and handed it to her mother. She grabbed some clean socks and her daughter's shoes. Her mother combed out her hair and left it down to dry. The curly tendrils dripped water.

"You hungry shima (mom)," she asked her to look to fulfill all her wishes. Jay would do anything for her mother.

"Not anymore, I'm hurting," her mother said.

Jay let her mother lay down. She began to rub her back. Jay began to get tired. She fought the sleepiness. She feared it would all go away.

"Remember that time we hitchhiked to the Tuba City fair, ma?" she said as she rubbed her back, "Key, you, and I left with our blanket and a bag of clothes."

"Ooo digiis (stupid)," her mother said as she lay on the couch.

She could feel her smile even though she couldn't see her face. She could feel her mother close to sleep.

"Key walked on one side of the road and we walked on the other," Jay said to her mother. She continued to rub her mother's back and moved to her feet.

"Over here, Key kept yelling at us," her mother giggled like a young girl. She could hear her mother drifting off to sleep.

"You have to be on the side you're going too. These people are driving to Tuba, those people are driving back to K-town, remember Key was saying that trying to grab our bag," Jay said.

Her mother began to laugh harder.

"Remember that old man stopped, and we told him we were going to Tuba, he said go to the other side," Jay said laughing.

Her mother laughed. Jay let the laughter record in her mind. She wanted to hold these new memories. She could feel her body get more tired.

"You should sleep," her mother said, "We can do something tomorrow."

Jay then lay beside her mom and hugged her body. She didn't want a moment away from her mother. She smelled the vanilla in her hair and felt the wetness it had left in her pillow. She felt peaceful.

"Shima, I can still make you something to eat," Jay said as she felt the warmth spread and she curled up to her mother. She held her body close to her and felt comforted like a child waking from a bad dream. She let the security of her mother's presence comfort her to sleep.

Jay dreamt of the hospital. Her mother lay in her hospital bed. The room was cold.

She asked for a blanket, and then another blanket. Her mother couldn't get warm. Her lip shivered. Jay tried to rub her feet and get some warmth to her but it didn't help.

"Your mother's kidneys are shutting down," the doctor said.

"What does that mean," her sister Laura asked.

"Can we donate a kidney," Rene asked.

"Unfortunately, your mother has passed that stage where that might have helped her," the doctor said. "Her organs are all slowing down and in her last hospital visit she signed a DNR."

They had brought her to hospital to get her help. They injected pain medicine after medicine into her IV. Slowly her mother began to drool and sleep. "Pain management," the hospital staff told them. Her mother's body became colder. Jay slid her mom a bit to the side and held her mother trying to warm her.

Her mother never trusted people in white coats. Her mother always defied everything. She had carried a shovel and rifle as she farmed. She had fought all her life. Her mother was what others warned their daughters not to be. She drank, she made crude jokes, and she was independent. They would call her all sorts of names but she flirted with their husbands and sons and they greeted her like rain to the desert.

"These are her final moments," the doctor said.

All Jay's life she had a mother. She was an adult but with the doctor's announcement she felt like a child. "What can we do?" her sisters asked her.

"Grab my shoes and let's get out of here," her mother whispered faintly.

Jay looked at her mother's face. She wanted to laugh at her answer.

"Get my shoes," her mother repeated, "I don't want to die here."

"Should we do it?" her sister Laura asked, a bit worried.

"We should just take her," her sister Rene told her.

"Then we should," Jay whispered to her sisters.

"I'll let them know," Laura said as she walked out the room.

"Where's your shoes, ma?" Jay said searching the room.

Jay and Rene began to search for their mother's things. She searched the cabinets. She only found supplies for the room.

"Do you know where her clothes and shoes are," she asked a thick woman that walked into the room.

"No," the hospital staff said. She walked back out the room.

"The doctor doesn't think it's a good idea," Laura announced.

"She wants to leave and they aren't going to help her," Rene responded.

"They said she might just die as we are taking her home,"

Laura spoke. "They told me we should consider her comfort."

They looked to their mother. The monitor continued to beep. "I want my shoes," her mother said with her eyes closed.

They didn't know what to do. Their mother always had a presence and made sure her demands were met. Their choice for their mother was die here or die in the car. Her brothers were on their way and they wanted to see her.

"Grab my shoes," her mother repeated.

They looked and looked and couldn't find it. After the morgue took her mother's body the hospital handed the white flat tennis shoes, a purple skirt, and a maroon coat in a clear white plastic bag. They had cut through her shirt at the other hospital.

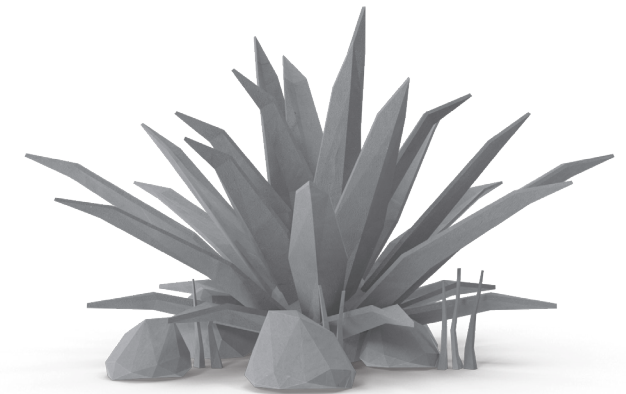
Jay traveled home in silence. She wanted to carry her mother out. Now all they had was the white shoes she asked for.

Jay cried silently and then she heard uncontrollable weeping. A weeping sound so loud it hurt to listen. She wished that they wouldn't cry any louder. It made her choke. She couldn't breathe. She wanted them to stop.

"Ma, you ok?" Lee asked her.

She woke. She looked around and she didn't find her mother.

She ran to the closet and found the skirt and jacket hanging. Lee hugged her and she wept and fell into her own child's arms. She let herself feel everything she had lost. She cried and let the wails of her cry fill the space of the house and the closet.



CROSSING THE LETHE

- Kristina Morgan -

The Bus

Motion gives me a sense of freedom. Freedom isn't something I take for granted. I grapple with psychosis. I grapple with schizophrenia. I am a plastic pan not meant for the oven. That's the way I feel when I struggle with the voices I hear being pulled from the air with my mind. That's what it feels like when I can't participate in the oven of reality. The heat of life is too much.

I ride the bus every day I can. Some of the same people ride with me. I suppose I could say it's a social event. And I can't jump out of the bus while it's moving, unlike a car: open the door. Jump. Roll. You won't get hurt. Another car may hit you but you are Super Woman, The Voices get my attention. I fight not to give in to them. When I drove, they also told me to hit pedestrians. They favor people walking dogs or old ladies.

The bus commands the road, attached to the black asphalt of Washington. The sun shines through the windows. Light punctuates each passenger. I am a comma, I think. People pause at my six foot frame and black clothes. They aren't used to seeing such a tall woman. I wear tough boots. They look like motorcycle boots, black with a silver circle on the band around the ankle. I sit still, watch wind lift scraps of trash thrown on the road and littering the sidewalk, paper the size of small dogs.

The bus stops. I watch the feet of people coming down the aisle. A woman with scuffed shoes the color of custard. A man with large, white feet in flip-flops. Small cowboy boots on a child and a larger brown pair, probably the parent's.

The door swings shut.

Every time we hit a bump, the motion of the bus pushes my body up. I recall my father hoisting me from the backseat of our car when I was 5 years old. I pretended sleep, silently asking that he do this, lift my body into the air, his strong arms wrapping around me. He carried me into the house, gently placing me on the couch. I knew I was safe. For this feeling alone, I would ride the bus for hours.

Unit 6: Repeat Visit

I appear again at the Behavioral Health Center, Unit 6, after a psychotic break during which I ran from the Circle K bathroom out to the street, naked. I thought bed bugs were in my clothes. The first couple of days, I feel nothing. I stand in the hallway still as a hinge. Days four and five, I start coming to. The medicine the doctor prescribes is kicking in. I'm beginning to feel safe in my own skin. The hospital, a cocoon of warmth and clean sheets. Days six and on, I'm agitated. I want out. The doors will not accommodate me. Their lock feels permanent. Only the doctor can release me. My stay is usually ten days.

On the unit, Jeremy a patient of one week who attempted to converse with me with no luck, leaps. The square window of the nurse's station allows for his shoulders the width of my sister's. His scrawny ass follows. He thought I was tucked between boxes of Haldol, an old anti-psychotic, the other side of the nurse's station. The river Lethe flows between the patient's area and the nurse's floor. I imagine him drinking from the Lethe, inviting the underworld to plaster itself to the patient's area. The nurse's station remains an area of light. Of hope. At night, it's the only place that glows. I know this because I've woken at midnight and ambled down the hall in search of a handkerchief, my nose runny and cold.

Pharmaceutical representatives bring Haldol with them. I believe it has a side effect of my fear that telephones send electrical currents and mice into my inner ear.

Jeremy wants to propose to me before I forget him—Jack be nimble, Jack be quick—before the nimbus becomes too thick, clouding my vision. Jeremy is worth only the weight of his smile.

The Bus

The bus approaches Seventh Street. The bus driver's voice as he calls out the street sounds like someone with a penchant for chewing gravel. I pull the cord without lifting my head. I bow in penance for the sin I have yet to commit. A sin I don't even have the words for. It is three o'clock. Too late or too early for anything I want to do.

Unit 6: Jane Doe

Unit 6. I draw a picture of wine and cheese the color of cranberries, the color of nurse Helen's fingernails, the color of tongues on a friendly day. I place it under my bed. The paper can't hide, its edges sticking out. The wings of a dove from a nest too small.

Kristina, the television calls from the lounge. Kill the television or become a media whore. Lather your hair. Lovely lather loosens lice, lice loosens lovely lather. I drank my shampoo. The alcohol in it didn't get me drunk. The voices force this diatribe into being. The Voices pester me. I wish I couldn't listen. They're as clear to me as an umpire shouting "out" as a player slides into home plate.

I enter the lounge. The woman in the commercial looks clean under the spray of the shower. Water sprays her shoulders in welcome. I imagine a feather butterflying its way down her skin.

Matilda is in the corner kissing Jasmine behind the back of a psych tech scribbling notes in long hand this side of Lethe. It is becoming dark. The moon promises to be a boulder. Nikki shoots a marble across the circle, knocking the cat's eye loose. The Voices tell me to call them fags. To call them gay geeks. This I don't do. I tap The Voices asking them, please.

I return to my room. My drawing is balled up on my bed, killed by creases I can't smooth out. The young woman who sleeps in the bed one over laughs. The hands that cover

her mouth are dirty with charcoal. She has refused to speak her name. The laughter is the first I hear from her. She remains a Jane Doe.

Her person fills the room. It is overwhelming. She is locked into her depression, as limp as a rag doll. I am alone with her in the vacuum of my rage. Her long greasy hair provides the handles. I wrap it around my hands like boxers do white tape before sliding on their gloves. I yank her out of bed, the yank as powerful as an upper cut to the chin.

Was there a shriek? No shriek. The Voices tug at my ears. I hear kill the fucker, pull out her hair; let your anger hang as a silver Christmas ball on a tree.

Before I decide what to do next, a psych tech is on me, his hands around my waist only tightens the grip I have on her hair. The weight of me is pulled back into his chest. The weight of her is pulled into me. She smells like shit. I pray they have to cut me out of her.

Food

I eat the Traditional Sub outside Quizno's on Roosevelt and Seventh. Mayonnaise runs from my wrist to my elbow and then drips between my boots. White beads flatten, roll nowhere. Applause. Roar. The Voices said to leave a mark.

Unit 6: Wound

Nurse Helen is asking me something. Her mouth is lovely.

Jane Doe isn't to come within twenty-five feet of me. The rooms are not wide enough. I still remember how it felt to wrap her greasy hair around my hands.

I scrape one of my hands against the corner of a broken counter. Hydrogen peroxide fizzes. My wound cools like rose petals in winter. There is a heightened awareness of skin in movement. A slight breeze comes from a fan. I breathe lightly; a whisper harnessed. Heaven is just so far.

Tea Time

Tiwi waits tea for me in her upstairs condo. The condos are higher than the billboard promoting suitcases and long sleeves, graffiti along the bottom. They border the homeless who beg the occupants to play stereophonic jazz at dawn before the noise of traffic becomes the aggressor and interrupts the few dreams the homeless may have.

Dew beads winter grass. The scent of green arrives with me. The moistness of the smell clinging to the black stubble on my head.

Unit 6: Time

There is little to claim my attention. Time moves like a clogged hour glass allowing only a single strand of sand to power through its curves to the bottom of the glass.

Aunt Tiwi

Tiwi is an aged aunt to me. I met her at the grocery store. She couldn't reach the top shelf of jams. Cherry. Tiwi wanted cherry. I was fresh out of the hospital and still had my hospital wrist band on. She asked me about it and then invited me for tea. A year later, she is still serving me Tazo Chai—reincarnated tea. Throughout India, chai wallahs serve cups of chai to souls seeking inner beauty. Tiwi is not a chai wallah. She is an aborigine from Australia.

The tea tastes like the length of corridor to a kindergartner the first day of class. Its

taste lingers long. It is the first I have had in a while. I still long for coffee. Coffee is closer, more immediate. Its taste provocative. A punch of drum in silence.

Inner beauty catches up to me at Tiwi's, just as God does. My hands are free. Nickels fall through holes or out the frayed patches of my jeans. I catch some. The rest hit the hard surface. I hear pings.

Tiwi reads from the box of tea, "To ask questions, share observations or simply have a bit of human contact, write us at Tazo, P.O. Box 66, Portland, OR, 97207. Allow two weeks for a written response." The tea bag comes signed. Two weeks of no human contact leaves a person lost like a single red leaf that falls from the trash bag.

Unit 6: Leaving

On Unit 6, my mind matches the weight of rain. Rain slaps on the front windows of cars as they speed. Speeding in here, I do not. Everything is slowed as there is nothing to do. My mind is axed open. My mind is open to life on the side of the nurse's station. The Underworld no longer appealing like it is mid-stay when I'm convinced I cannot live in reality. Reality rolls through me down to my toes, staggering my walk, confusing my speech like an adolescent talking about Hamlet. Is it really psychosis again?

I don't consider psychosis tagged onto The Voices. They are a staple in my world. I am prey to them. Sometimes they drive me crazy like when they mimic everything I do. I pour myself cereal. They say you pour yourself cereal. I walk outside. They say you walk outside. I open my mailbox. They say you open the mailbox. And then they comment saying don't pay your bills. You will be dead before they come due.

Where is the tea? Where is Tiwi? I want to see her hand locked with Dream, poured into the sugar of my cup. I want to float around blind curves, survive like thistle in the forest.

Experts attempt to reach me with their faith in pills. Pills. Manage me. Will they manage me well? Please take the T-shirt from me and fill my hands with blue sky. I want to lounge beneath the sun on the patio outside the Unit.

Is it still 2018?

Notes to Dr. P, my psychiatrist on Unit 6—

Without poetry, I lay in bed haunted, or pace the floors dazed at the fact my body just won't die. Please don't take my pens away. With-

out them, I cannot write poetry. I promise not to write on the walls or stab anyone. Does the point really matter, anyway?

Scabs are forming thick skin covering my vulnerabilities. I recognize that fragility, like the lip of a porcelain teacup, is something I live with. But also recognize that the porcelain is strong, is protected, is well loved and has been passed on through generations without chips. Do not leave the teacup in the cupboard to stay safe.

Voices follow me—die, cry, die, cry, do all of it and die. The voices remind me of a rabid dog looking for purpose, slavering at the mouth. This is true, but the truth goes beyond dogs.

Doctor, please listen deeply. There is truth as heavy as the moon held up in the palm of the sky. I don't want to be the teacup in the cupboard.

Home

The Lethe and a breeze have followed me home. When will the water quench my mind? When will the wind still my thoughts? I no longer have dogs that could drown in the

river. Both dogs died. Sasha last year and Brutus eight months ago.

My raft holds me and a salamander. It is predawn. Fire will not hit the sky for another couple of hours.

My home smells of patchouli. I imagine getting off the raft. The river has run dry. The light wood floor shines from the light coming through three windows into my family room. I hesitate to think family room. There is no family aside from friends. My roll top desk is in this room along with my favorite chair—burnished metal with a flowered, fabric seat.

The blue couch calls my name, invites me to lie down and bask in the freedom from Unit 6. I do this. The length of my body just fits. My head rests on one of the red down pillows. Then it happens. The Voices dig into me. Mother fucker. You'll never be free. You'll always be in and out of the hospital. You can't run from us. We contaminate your mind. We are you and you are us.

"Stop," I shout. I have never done this before. I have never talked back to them.

No. Our chain runs around your throat.

I feel for the chain. It's not there. My fingers touch skin. My. Fingers. Touch. Skin.

The Voices whisper, Die Kristina. Die. Your life is worth a Bobble Head. Lethe will come back. You'll be forced to melt into the water, become a part of the Underworld.

Whispers. I can barely hear them. "Stop," I shout again and sit up. The sunlight washes over my face. I am in control. The new medication. It's helping me to hold this space steady.

Tiwi will be proud to know I will grab the sunrise and make a hat of it. I shudder in my shoes, the ecstatic moment not lost to bees in the wind. The sun does rise. The darkness fades. Someday, Unit 6 will be a decade away rather than two days. I believe this like I know breeze caught in the upper branches of pine sings softly to the child alone against the trunk.

HONORABLE MENTION | FICTION

SYMBOLOLOGY

- Malka Daskal -

My son is five and now that he has entered kindergarten, is deemed sufficiently intelligent to learn how to read. "A" says aaah and "B" says beee.

But letters don't say anything, he tells me wisely. They don't have mouths.

True, I tell him. But that is what they mean to us.

To who?

To people.

Well, that's not what they mean to me. My son puckers his lips and furrows his brow. The effect is not unlike a puppy trying to look stern. I have resolved to take his opinions seriously or at least manifest an expression of earnestness so as not to undermine his nascent sense of autonomous thinking. But sometimes it is hard. And what do they mean to you, my little scholar?

To me they mean I have too much homework and not enough time to play.

My grandmother is eighty-six and learning how to die. The lessons are difficult and there is little reward. This is how you move when your joints ache. This is how you lose track of the days. This is how a face blurs and shifts and fractures beyond recognition. This is what it feels like when all your senses betray you. My grandmother is a smart woman and a good student but she is anxious to get to the end of her lesson. I have no such sense of urgency. Her physical pain is hers alone but her love is so easily shared. To compensate for my selfish desire, I resolve to use my sudden abundance of child-free hours to keep her company during her lessons.

What do you think it will be like when you die? Do you believe in angels and demons? Heavenly clouds and pearly gates?

My grandmother smiles. I believe I'll leave this body behind and that will be enough.

When I visit my grandmother, I must walk quickly through the halls lined with wheel-chair-bound elderly who, I fear, are offended by my unseemly youth. Since my son has begun kindergarten, I have been coming more regularly, frequently enough that many of the residents know me. Most never leave this building and I have become another familiar face in the narrow confines of their world. There is very little dignity in this place and I do my best to grant respect whenever possible. I always knock on doors before entering. When speaking with a resident, I sit directly opposite so I can be at eye level and save him or her the strain of twisting his or her neck. I ask about their distant past, when they were little, when their children were little; memories they still have access to. When I leave their room, I ask if they prefer the door open or closed. These actions make me feel better about myself if I can successfully ignore their pretension of noblesse oblige.

I spent one high school summer break at my grandmother's Brooklyn apartment and, in an effort to avoid the heat and garbage smells that emanated from the cement sidewalks in cartoonish plumes, I entertained myself by gorging on the books that lined her bookshelves. I read vociferously, indiscriminately, understanding the words but not their meanings. I read *The Caine Mutiny*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Siddhartha*, *Gone with the Wind* and a paperback copy of *Sister Carrie* with brittle, yellowed pages and binding glue that was mostly dissolved so that each page would fall out into my hand no matter how carefully I turned it. One by one, the pages were read and discarded until I came to the end and there was nothing left of the book but its blatant symbolism for the passage of days.

Mealtime is a festive affair. The ones who feel up to it are brought to the dining hall which is a sunlit room with cafeteria style long tables and a BYOC (Bring Your Own Chair) policy. The residents wheel up to the table and are brought their customized meals on trays. Low salt. Modified diet. Thickened liquids. Soft textured. I go around opening the packaging their arthritic, speckled hands cannot. The impossible milk cartons and the stubborn aluminum disked orange juices. Luda is blind and searches for her foods by touch. If I am sitting next to her, she likes it when I tell her where the items are by giving them o'clock descriptions. Toast is at 3 o'clock. Coffee is at 9 o'clock. Scrambled egg is at 12 o'clock.

In kindergarten, the class has begun to learn how to tell time. The worksheet my son brings home has the face of a clock with an actual face—eyes, nose, mouth—drawn onto it to resemble a smiling, inviting, non-intimidating approach to a new conceptually challenging subject. Come on! Telling time is fun! Let's do it together! My son is not convinced by the man-clock or by me. He approaches the worksheet warily.

The shorter hand shows you what hour it is, you see? I point to the hand of the clock which in this case is a cartoonishly rendered white-gloved hand.

My son nods.

So which hand shows you the minutes?

He shrugs.

This one here—the longer hand. And there's the third hand— this much thinner one—the second hand.

So where is the other one? he asks.

The other what?

The other hand!

What other hand?

The First hand!

What do you mean?

If this hand is the Second hand, where is the First hand? he asks exasperated by my stupidity.

Do you believe in life after death?

My grandmother pats my hand gently. That's where you come in, she says.

Mr. Knobler in room 211 has a trim beard and hair like fresh snow. A recent stroke has left him unable to speak but his smiles are genuine and contagious. He has an alphabet puzzle, the kind you would find in a kindergarten classroom with primary-colored wooden letters. He sits at the edge of his bed working on this puzzle with the concentration of a chess champion or a New York Times crossword aficionado. I sit beside him, shoulder to shoulder, studying the task before us. With the door ajar and the staff passing importantly through the corridor, the room feels like a small island with views of the mainland. I would very much like to help him complete his puzzle but if I try, he holds up his open hand in a gesture that means No, no, I've got this. I will figure this out on my own. His concentration is so great he doesn't even look up. I take his silence for my own and in the halcyon of his room, the letters slowly fall into place as indistinct voices from the corridor are occasionally borne in on strong winds from across a rolling sea.

There are two ways to boil an egg, my grandmother tells me. You can bring the water to a boil first and then add the egg or you can put the egg in the water and then bring it to a boil.

Which way is better?

Depends on the circumstances, my grandmother says. There are two ways to remove the egg from the water. You can allow the egg to remain in the pot a few extra minutes or you can remove it immediately and place it in ice cold water.

Which way is better?

Depends on the circumstances. There are two ways to peel the shell of an egg. You can wait until it is cold or you can crack the shell when it is still warm.

Which way is better?

Depends on the circumstances.

So, in total, there are eight ways to make a hard-boiled egg?

Oh no, my grandmother says. There are a lot more ways than that.

In these circumstances, the egg symbolizes life.

The first time I ever went to a nursing home, I was seven or eight years old and my teacher brought our class to do a small performance at Glenn Oaks Retirement Villa down the street. After a brief performance of which I have no memory, the teachers encouraged us to approach the residents and say hello. Basically, we were being offered up as child sacrifices. Dutifully, I approached a table occupied by three ancient women, trying to conceal my terror, and to convey, nonverbally, how non-horrifying I found them. Come here sweetheart, they

cooed. I inched my way closer. The woman sitting closest to me reached her arm in one surprisingly quick motion and fastened her fingers around my wrist, drawing me in. Such a pretty complexion you have. Such rosy cheeks. I felt myself blushing, unwittingly making my cheeks even rosier. She let go of my wrist and said to no one in particular, Well, that won't last. The other women at the table nodded their heads sagely. This might not have been exactly how it happened, but it is how I remember it and it marked the first time I could sense the clock ticking down.

Won't you be sad to leave behind the people you love? I ask my grandmother.
I would be sadder if there were no people I loved to leave behind.

Recently I have been toying with the idea of redoing my home to resemble something more institutional. Textured oatmeal colored walls with guard rails at waist height. Low-pile Berber carpets that are easy to clean when they become soiled. Heavy, plaid drapery hung in swags across the bay window, filtering out the harsh sunlight. Would it be so bad, I ask my husband. Wouldn't it perhaps ease our inevitable transition?

I have come late to pick up my son from school, having been held up at the nursing home. He is crying and I assume it is because I am late but he tells me it's because another boy, some little shithead I have heard about too many times before, would not let my son have a turn on the slide. All the other boys were playing on the slide but this boy said you had to be yay high to have a turn. My son is small for his age. The smallest in the class. He tells me he hates this boy and cries into my shoulder tears of the profoundest grief and I hold his soft body in my arms and remember that five years ago, more recently than I purchased the jeans I'm wearing, he was inside of me.

Charlie Howell lives down the hall from my grandmother but is frequently parked in the hallway just outside his door because when he stays in his room, he becomes lonely and when he is lonely, he cries long pitiful wails that torque your insides and make the walls quake with sadness. Charlie has full apple cheeks and, I've come to learn, is rather simple-minded. Whether this is how Charlie always was, or whether this is a new development as his brain ages, it is impossible for me to say. The residents have all been born old into my world. If I sit across from Charlie during meal time or in the activity center, his hand inevitably finds its way onto my knee. Or further. This is not as bad as it sounds because, while Charlie is confined to his wheelchair, I can simply stand up. I feel guilty about having such an unfair advantage.

My husband is concerned I spend too much time at the nursing home. It is easy for me to be morally indignant at this accusation—what could possibly constitute too much time with my ninety-six-year-old grandmother—but secretly I think he may be right. At the nursing home, I become a superhuman. Faster than a powered wheelchair, more powerful than a can of Ensure, able to leap two stairs at a time! When I crouch down to lock the breaks of a wheelchair, I am aware of my excellent sense of balance. When I braid my grandmother's hair, my fingers are dexterous and swift. I worry all the hours I spend at the nursing home is causing

me to have an inflated sense of self. Sometimes, when I am leaving the grocery store with two heavy bags in my arms, I am dismayed to see that no one around is impressed with my feats of strength.

At night a bleary fog rolls in and some of the residents, I am told, experience a complete change as the synapses of their brains go dark and their logic loses focus. I imagine them, my sweetly addled friends, transforming into an angry, sharp-toothed mob, returned to their most primal state. I refuse to see them like this so, coward that I am, I always leave by five o'clock before the bewitching begins. But the night nurses swap stories with the morning nurses at shift change and so I am made aware that my grandmother too undergoes this Mr. Hyde transformation, that she can no longer remember where she is or what day it is or that her legs are no longer strong and steady enough to transport her where she would like to go. In these hours of confusion, I'm told she gets combative and accuses the well-meaning nurses of holding her hostage. I'm told she is irrational, hysterical, verbally abusive, vitriolic. My grandmother. I choose not to believe it. In the morning she remembers none of it, and so, neither do I.

What do you think is the meaning of life? I ask wheeling her back to her room after having had our fill of sunbathing on the back patio. She is whistling A Fella with an Umbrella.

I'm sure it means something different to every person. What does life mean to you?
Too much housework and not enough time to play.

Ever since my son was a toddler, he has been dragging around a stuffed brown dog everywhere he goes. Every supermarket outing. Every doctor's visit. The library. The mall. At night he won't sleep without it. Frustrated with having to search the house for it most evenings, I buy him another one as a backup. Same color. Same size. Same brand. Same exact dog. Now, he refuses to sleep without them both. It's completely normal, my husband assures me. It's a form of security, consistency, familiarity. But what about me? Don't I provide those things? Am I not my son's source of security, consistency, familiarity? What does this mangy, glassy-eyed stuffed dog have that I don't?

My husband would like to take a trip for our anniversary, but the thought of not seeing my regulars, my wrinkle-worn friends, even for just a weekend, is like a cannonball to my gut.

But, what do you think will happen once you're gone?
My grandmother shuffles a deck of extra-large playing cards and sets up a game of solitaire. I think the people I love will miss me.

My son and I are playing with his extensive collection of battery-operated trains. We are chugging up a steep hill when he pauses and asks why his friend's family are vegetarians.

I think Joseph's family doesn't like the idea that animals are killed to create food.
My son looks horrified. Which animals?

Well, cows for meat and pig for pork and chicken for chicken and fish for fish. Even eggs come from an animal, although they are unfertilized so not technically animals in their own right.

My son considers this. But those foods are the best ones.

Yes, they're all very tasty. I watch his little wheels turn. Chug, chug, chug.

Mom, he asks, everything that is alive will eventually die right?

Yes, that's right.

Then all these animals, the food animals, would die anyway, right?

I guess that's true.

Then it's not so bad that we eat them. Mollified by his own airtight logic, he returns to his trains.

In these circumstances, the egg symbolizes death.

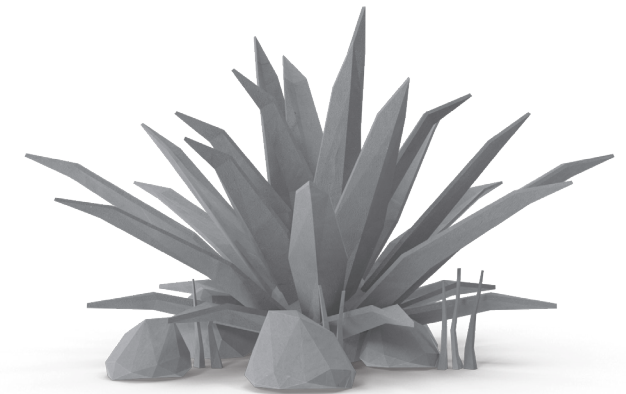
In an effort to curtail the hours I spend at the nursing home, my husband buys me a gift card for a facial. The aesthetician dims the lights and starts her work, kneading my face with practiced efficiency. Her voice is dimmed as well, and she speaks to me in the breathy, caressing tones one would use with the terminally ill. Do you know which two places will first show the signs of aging? She pauses her work, the better to make sure she has my full attention. Your neck and hands. Neck and hands. You mustn't forget to massage and lotion your hands and décolletage. Everyday. I won't take her advice but I know I will now forever be surveilling the soft skin of my neck for signs of elasticity loss and the topography of my hands for deepening valleys between ligaments, ulnar drift, or evidence of desiccation in my veins, looking for portents of my decline.

Will I see you again? I rearrange the flowers by my grandmother's bed.

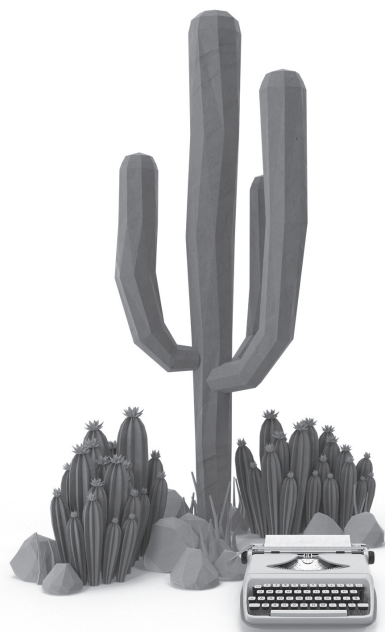
Don't worry. Not for a long time.

I bring my son to visit his great-grandmother on Sundays where we spend the day coloring and cutting construction paper. I am the only one allowed to use the scissors. Watching my son with his great-grandmother is like watching a sunrise and a sunset at the same time. It's beautiful and mesmerizing and incomprehensible. Together, they are their own measurement of time, and the distance between them is so far apart, even with my arms out wide, hands stretched to the three and nine o'clock position, I cannot quite reach either of them, their shining souls just beyond my grasp, marking my beginning and end.

But I am forty-two and in the days that my grandmother has left as herself, and the days that my son has left as my child, and the days that I have left as my own, I must learn how to not be blinded by distant horizons, to focus my gaze on the moments in front of me, to live squarely, fully, in the middle.



ONE-ACT PLAY/ SCREENPLAYS



PASSAGES 2019/20

ONE-ACT PLAY/ SCREENPLAY WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

Sugar | JACOB NGUYEN60

HONORABLE MENTION

Adelaide and Noah Sledge | TIMOTHY GRAY70

FIRST PLACE | ONE-ACT PLAY/SCREENPLAYS

SUGAR

- Jacob Nguyen -

FADE IN:

EXT. PARKING LOT – DAY

SCREAMS, PROFANITY, and CAR ALARMS fill a university parking lot where two cars are backed into each other. On one side, TAYLOR, a twenty-year old gender-fluid fashion major, stomps their chic boots from outside their vehicle.

At the opposite car is PRESTON, clean-cut and confident. His personable attitude is twisted into rage as he yells across the parking lot. The two echo screams at each other.

INT. STUDY ROOM – DAY

Taylor approaches a study table and rests their bag in one of the chairs. They look up and recognize Preston setting his things at the same table. They commence a stare-off. Preston imperiously plops down at the table and smirks. Unamused, Taylor leaves.

INT. ELEVATOR – DAY

Taylor awaits with their sewing supplies for the elevator doors to open. Much to their dismay, Preston appears behind the sliding doors. Determined and armed with coffee, Taylor enters the elevator. The doors encase them in the claustrophobic space.

MONTAGE

—The elevator doors slide open in the middle of a violent verbal battle between Taylor and Preston. Right before the elevator's close, Taylor accidentally douses Preston with their weaponized blonde roast coffee.

—The doors open again. This time, Taylor helps Preston clean his shirt, all while the two laugh about it.

END MONTAGE

INT. LOBBY – DAY

Taylor fervently blots Preston's stained shirt, like a mother cleaning her messy child.

TAYLOR

Put club soda on the stain. Club soda works on everything.

PRESTON

You sure that's going to work?

TAYLOR

Well if it doesn't, I'll make you a new shirt.

Preston chuckles.

PRESTON

Do you make all of your clothes?

TAYLOR

Some of them. The rest are results of my crippling addiction to shopping.

PRESTON

Well, you look very good.

TAYLOR

(mirthlessly)
Thanks.

PRESTON

We should grab coffee sometime. To drink, not to wear.

Taylor receives a text. They look over the message.

PRESTON (CONT'D)

Are you free Friday?

TAYLOR

Sorry, I can't do Fridays.

PRESTON

What about Sunday?

Taylor continues to text on their phone.

PRESTON (CONT'D)

Is that your boyfriend?

INT. MR. PRYCE'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

In a showroom apartment, romantically lit, MR. PRYCE, a middle-aged man decorated in an expensive suit, enters his home to find Taylor waiting for him. Mr. Pryce fixes his intense gaze on Taylor, and leads his way to them.

INT. MR. PRYCE'S APARTMENT – MORNING

The morning sun pours through the bedroom doorframe from which Taylor emerges languorously, wearing only Mr. Pryce's dress shirt. Mr. Pryce has thoughtfully set a sweet breakfast for two on the counter.

Finishing their last bite of french toast, Taylor rises from their place across Mr. Pryce and gets dressed.

MR. PRYCE

Don't go, stay here with me.

TAYLOR

I'll be late to Julian's. Thank you for introducing me to him. He's very talented.

MR. PRYCE

He's not as talented as you.

TAYLOR

And that's why you like me, among other things.

MR. PRYCE

(playfully)

And you're only here so I can pay your bills.

TAYLOR

That's not true

They kiss him on the cheek.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)

You also know how to cook.

Taylor grabs their bag off the counter and leaves.

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO – DAY

Taylor lays out outfits on the cluttered floor, plastered with various fashion editorials and studio equipment. JULIAN, very cool and very focused, pieces the equipment together while Taylor sifts through their selection of photographs.

JULIAN

(focused on their camera)

Are you going to see the boy?

TAYLOR

He's nice. Sweet. Too unreliable though.

JULIAN

Sounds perfect. What's stopping you?

TAYLOR

He feels different from the others, which makes him risky. And risky sounds like trouble.

JULIAN

High risk equals high reward.

Taylor shoots Julian a playful smile. Julian points the camera at them and snaps a shot.

EXT. PARK – DAY

Taylor and Preston stroll along a lovely park promenade with coffees in hand.

TAYLOR

This reminds me of the park my parents took me to. We'd spread out the picnic blanket, play cards, ride bikes...

PRESTON

Sounds like a happy childhood.

TAYLOR

It was. My parents are very sweet. It's kinda sickening how "white-picket fence" their life is. They're not perfect, but they're happy... what was growing up like for you?

PRESTON

It was alright. My parents were very involved in my upbringing and education. I think they cared more about that than they did for me.

TAYLOR

I'm sorry.

PRESTON

I don't care. The truth is they wanted the ideal family more than anything else. Anyways, my parents are better apart from each other, and I'm only slightly fucked up so it's all good.

The pair rest on a nearby bench. They sit intimately together. Their eyes turn from watching the scenery to each other, sharing a connection.

INT. CAFÉ – DAY

Taylor waits at a table, as Preston carries over their drinks and pastry. They cozy up next to each other.

INT. SEWING ROOM – DAY

Taylor pieces a dress shirt together using pins and Preston as a mannequin.

INT. MR. PRYCE'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Mr. Pryce tosses in his sleep. He tries to reach Taylor from behind him. He turns around to see the glow of their phone. Taylor smiles as they type.

INT. STUDY ROOM – DAY

Preston works hard on his studies, while Taylor entertains themselves by drawing, taking selfies, and other various ways to avoid death by boredom. Eventually they cave in and fall asleep.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Taylor and Preston attempt to cook, which quickly turns into a competition. Both resolve the fight by a kiss.

INT. BEDROOM – DAY

Taylor rests on top of Preston, after spending the night with him. He plays with their hair. They trace his chest with their fingers.

PRESTON

What do you want out of life?

TAYLOR

I want to be successful, happy.
Loved. Not lusted for or idolized,
but truly loved.

Taylor's phone chimes.

PRESTON

Are you going to get that?

Taylor holds on to Preston. The intimate moment is betrayed by the sobering reality chipping away at Taylor's face with each persistent chime.

INT. MR. PRYCE'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Taylor rests on the sofa, as Mr. Pryce mixes himself a cocktail.

MR. PRYCE

I spoke with Nadine. Elle is doing a piece on up and coming designers, and she wants you in it.

He sits right next to them, caressing their shoulder. He kisses a less receptive Taylor.

TAYLOR

That's fantastic.

Taylor's phone rings. They try to be present with Mr. Pryce, which proves to be a struggle with each rhythmic ring.

MR. PRYCE

Are you going to answer him?

TAYLOR

What?

MR. PRYCE

Come on, Taylor. I see less and less of you, and when you are here, you're not present. I know bullshit when I see it.

Mr. Pryce's blasé visage slips from his lips into his glass. Taylor's face sallows.

MR. PRYCE (CONT'D)

I've given everything to you, and you want to risk it all. Could he honestly give you the same?

Mr. Pryce walks back to the bar to make another drink, leaving Taylor by themselves.

EXT. ART GALLERY – NIGHT

The evening atmosphere dances with elegant GUESTS and beautiful art. Taylor, exquisitely dressed from head to toe, saunters alongside the equally sophisticated fashion editor NADINE.

TAYLOR

Thank you for this opportunity. It means everything to me.

NADINE

You have extraordinary talent. That deserves to be shared with the world.

As they cross onto the balcony, Preston greets Taylor with a glass of champagne. A look of surprise overwhelms Nadine.

NADINE

Preston! I'd never expect to see you here. I ran into your mother the other day.

PRESTON

I'm sure she had a lot to say about me.

NADINE

No, she didn't. Do you two know each other?

TAYLOR

We attend the same university.

Nadine studies the pair standing before her.

NADINE (CONT'D)

Are you two...?

Before Taylor can utter a word, Preston interjects.

PRESTON

We're just friends.

This comment stuns Taylor. Preston and Nadine's continued conversation deflects off of Taylor's frozen position. Their ice cold gaze burning through Preston is broken by a new guest waylaying the conversation.

MR. PRYCE

Hello everyone. Great to see you,
Taylor: Hello darling.

Mr. Pryce kisses Nadine on the cheek, in the same manner he kisses Taylor.

NADINE

Hi Babe! I wasn't expecting you tonight. Have you met Preston?

He turns to Preston, then to Taylor, who looks uncomfortable. Mr. Pryce's gracious attitude unwavens.

MR. PRYCE

I have not. It's a pleasure.

He extends his hand, giving Preston a firm, long handshake. This mixing of worlds overwhelms Taylor.

TAYLOR

Thank you so much Nadine. I'm afraid I have to leave, got an early shoot tomorrow.

NADINE

Thank you for coming!

MR. PRYCE

We're sorry to see you go. Let me walk you out.

Taylor reticently walks with Mr. Pryce, parting Preston with nothing but an insipid glare. Nadine mingles with other guests, and Preston focuses on the departing couple. He watches Mr. Pryce's hand slip from Taylor's waist down to their hip.

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO – DAY

Julian mindfully directs Taylor, who is posed rigidly against a backdrop.

INT. CAFÉ – DAY

The café is fluttering with cheerful CUSTOMERS, ordering coffee and enjoying the company of friends. Taylor and Preston occupy one solemn section of the café. The awkward silence makes them seem miles apart. The only thing holding them together is the anticipation of who will speak first. They both interrupt each other.

PRESTON & TAYLOR

We should talk.

TAYLOR

There's something I really need to tell—

PRESTON

Please, may I speak first?

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO – DAY

With each shutter from the camera, Taylor grows frustrated.

PRESTON (V.O.)

I love you. It's like you engraved yourself into my life. You're such a wonderful, beautiful person and my life's made better for it.

Each photograph exposes Taylor's betrayal. Julian reels back his focused stance, still holding the camera in position.

PRESTON (V.O. CONT'D)

But whatever developed between us recently... I think we should take a step back.

INT. CAFÉ – DAY

PRESTON (CONT'D)

As friends. We had something so great, I don't want to ruin it.

Taylor takes a saturnine beat as they process his confession.

PRESTON (CONT'D)

What were you going to say?

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO – DAY

One agonizing sentence whimpers from Taylor's lips.

TAYLOR

I thought I loved him. . .

The camera shutters.

INT. ELLE PHOTO SHOOT – DAY

A hub of ASSISTANTS, wardrobe and makeup STYLISTS furiously buzz around the studio. Amidst the chaos is Taylor, gloriously assembled in beautiful fabrics and elaborate makeup. They pose like a Roman statue for the incredibly intense PHOTOGRAPHER, who takes a frenzy of photos.

INT. DRESSING ROOM – DAY

The entire room is black except for one vanity. Taylor sits before the mirror. The vanity bulbs illuminate Taylor's exquisitely professional makeup. Taylor stares back at the unrecognizable reflection before them. They grab a makeup wipe and begin removing their glittery mask. QUICK FLASH – TAYLOR'S MEMORIES: Taylor kisses Mr. Pryce on the cheek.

Taylor removes their earrings.

QUICK FLASH – TAYLOR'S MEMORIES: Taylor and Preston fight in the parking lot
Taylor removes their eye makeup

QUICK FLASH – TAYLOR'S MEMORIES: Taylor and Preston laughing.

Taylor removes their lipstick.

QUICK FLASH – TAYLOR'S MEMORIES: Taylor and Preston share their first kiss.

In one violent motion, Taylor swipes the clutter of makeup, perfumes, and jewelry off the vanity in anguish. The only thing left is the desolation bleeding through their face. Taylor is alone.

FADE TO BLACK.

HONORABLE MENTION | ONE-ACT PLAY/SCREENPLAYS

THE STORY OF ADELAIDE AND NOAH SLEDGE

- Tim Gray -

FADE IN:

EXT. WHITE TANKS (RAMADA) – DAY

It's mid-afternoon at the White Tanks. A family has gathered at one of the ramadas. MELANIE HAYES, the mother, DANIEL HAYES, the father, and ADELAIDE, the daughter, are preparing for a cookout. Everything's all set up—there's steaks ready to grill, charcoal in the grilling thingamajig, and on the table there's a professionally decorated cake featuring the words “Free at Last!” and “Welcome Home, Noah” along with an image of the guest of honor, Melanie's brother Noah, muscle-bound and breaking out of a jail cell, hulk-style.

The real NOAH SLEDGE, meanwhile, has just arrived in his car. He sits there being all nervous and apprehensive, then takes a deep breath, opens the door and steps out.

Adelaide, who has been gloomily sitting and surveying the parking lot, is the first to notice him arriving. Her face immediately brightens up.

ADELAIDE

Uncle Noah's here!

She runs up to greet him and gives him a big hug. Melanie follows behind her.

NOAH

Hey, Addy. Hi, Mel.

MELANIE

It's great to have you back, Noah.

Adelaide is still hugging Noah, but Melanie butts in to give him a hug, pushing Adelaide aside. Adelaide shoots a jealous look at her. Noah seems a little uncomfortable.

Melanie lets loose of him and calls to her husband.

MELANIE

Daniel, Noah's here!

Daniel is still over at the family car, oblivious, in the throes of frustration searching for some important object.

DANIEL

Melanie, where are the matches?

He checks the glove compartment. No matches. He slams it shut and kicks the car door.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Well, that just beats everything. We drive all the way out here and we won't even be able to light the damn grill!

MELANIE

Daniel? Did you hear me?

DANIEL

What?

MELANIE

I said Noah's here!

DANIEL

Oh!

He turns around.

DANIEL

(suddenly friendly)

Hi, Noah!

NOAH

Hi. The matches are already out on the table.

He points to the table. Sure enough, a box of matches is sitting there.

DANIEL

Oh.

ADELAIDE

Mom, can me and Noah go on a hike while the food's being made?

MELANIE

Oh, honey, do you really want to do that? Noah just got here and—

NOAH

It's fine, Mel. I like hiking.

MELANIE

Oh, okay. Just don't go too far or get lost or anything.

NOAH

Come on, Mel. It's me!

They grab water and a backpack from Noah's car and head out.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Don't burn them steaks, Dan!

DANIEL

Ha ha! I won't!

Daniel mutters something unintelligible under his breath. As soon as they're gone, he turns and leans in close to Melanie, speaking in a hushed tone.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Look, Mel, I know he's your brother and all, but...

MELANIE

Don't even say it.

DANIEL

I was just gonna say...

MELANIE

Well, don't!

DANIEL

I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to offend you.

MELANIE

You're not offending me, Daniel, you're annoying me. And you don't have to be sorry, you can just stop.

DANIEL

Don't be mad at me, Mel.

MELANIE

Will you just go find something to do? Light the grill or something!

Daniel walks away muttering.

EXT. WHITE TANKS (TRAIL) – DAY

Adelaide and Noah are walking along the trail at a leisurely pace.

ADELAIDE

I've been waiting all year for you to get out.

NOAH

It hasn't been quite a whole year.

ADELAIDE

It felt like it was.

NOAH

How have things been?

ADELAIDE

Bad.

NOAH

Worse than they were before?

ADELAIDE

Way worse. My mom's going crazy, Dad's a jerk, they're obsessed with punishing me for every stupid little thing. I can't go outside, I can't do anything.

NOAH

Sounds like the government.

ADELAIDE

They took the door off my room.

NOAH

What?

ADELAIDE

The door to my room. They just took it right off the hinges and hid it somewhere.

NOAH

Why?

ADELAIDE

Because they thought I was hiding something from them.

NOAH

Like what?

ADELAIDE

I don't know! They're crazy!

NOAH

Have you tried talking to somebody about it?

ADELAIDE

I'm talking to you.

NOAH

I mean, like an authority figure, or something.

ADELAIDE

Ha! Are you kidding? That'd be pointless.

NOAH

Why?

ADELAIDE

Nobody'd believe me. They all think I've got the nicest parents in the world. Besides, it doesn't matter, anyway, because now you're here.

The seriousness in Adelaide's voice stops Noah right in his tracks.

NOAH

What do you mean by that?

EXT. WHITE TANKS (RAMADA) – DAY

Melanie is watching them from up on the ramada. She can see they're talking about seemingly grave matters, but can't hear what they're saying.

EXT. WHITE TANKS (RAMADA) – DAY (LATER)

The family is seated, eating. Adelaide keeps making conspiratorial eyes at Noah. Daniel and Melanie are giving Noah the third degree about his future.

MELANIE

Have you thought at all about what you're gonna do now? Where you're gonna live?

Daniel swallows a big gulp of food and interrupts before Noah can respond.

DANIEL

You know, Noah, I'm good friends with the guy who manages the Walmart down the block. I'm sure if I talked to him I could get him to give you a job there. Would you be at all interested in that?

Noah doesn't respond, but the two of them just keep staring at him.

NOAH

(finally)

I'll live where I can, and I'll work when I please. Thank you.

Noah picks up his steak with his bare hands and takes a big bite out of it.

NOAH (CONT'D)

(with his mouth full)

These steaks are cooked to perfection, Dan. I didn't think you had it in you.

Daniel looks irritated. Adelaide laughs silently to herself.

EXT. WHITE TANKS (RAMADA) – DAY (LATER)

Everyone's standing around eating cake and stuff. Daniel has gone and started chatting with an ELDERLY GENTLEMAN from another family that has gathered at one of the other ramadas. The old man is holding a bored, fussy toddler—presumably his grandchild—whom both men somehow manage to completely ignore.

DANIEL

And I told him, I said, that's when you've got to establish that you're the parent, and what you say, goes! But, you know, he doesn't listen to me.

The old man nods in agreement.

ELDERLY GENTLEMAN

That's exactly right. I hear people saying things like, "Kids these days are so ungrateful" and I think, it's the parents' fault! Children got to learn to sit still and be quiet. It doesn't just come naturally to them.

Elsewhere, youngsters from the other family are horsing around while Adelaide sits somberly by herself nibbling on cake. Melanie and Noah are having a quiet personal moment.

NOAH

How are things, Mel?

MELANIE

Oh, they're good. We're getting along alright.

NOAH

How's Adelaide?

MELANIE

She's... okay.

Noah doesn't believe her.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

It's hard. She can be so disrespectful sometimes. I don't understand it. I mean, when we were kids, we would never be that disrespectful to our parents. Sure, they weren't perfect, but every parent loves their children. I mean, when I first became a mother, it changed my whole perspective.

NOAH

Adelaide said... it kind of sounds like you've been being kinda hard on her lately.

MELANIE

I saw you talking to her. What was she telling you about?

NOAH

Just stuff. She said you... took the door off of her room...?

MELANIE

That didn't happen.

NOAH

It seems like an oddly specific thing to lie about.

MELANIE

Daniel probably had to take it off for a little bit just to fix it or something.

Noah looks skeptical.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

It's our house, Noah! Don't we have a right to decide what we do with our own house?

NOAH

I'm not trying to tell you what to do. I'm just trying to understand.

MELANIE

What do you want me to say, Noah? Yes, we abuse her! We beat her with a whip every night! We've sold her into sex slavery. She spends most of her days chained up in her bedroom. Is that what she told you? Is that the image she planted in your head?

NOAH

No, I—

MELANIE

I mean, really! She can say whatever mean and nasty thing she wants about us, but the minute she gets in trouble

over anything, it's like, oh no! My parents are so abusive! And you believe her!

NOAH

I didn't say I thought you were abusive.

MELANIE

Well, you sure were thinking it!

NOAH

Well, alright then, just forget about it. Let's just drop the subject.

They do—for a moment.

MELANIE

You know, Noah, if you ever decide to settle down, you could get married and have your own children and then you could decide how you want to raise them. Then you'd find out it's not so easy.

They watch the other children playing around near Adelaide. One of them bumps into her, disrupting her reverie, only to take off again without saying anything. Adelaide goes back to staring off into space.

Then, as if suddenly awakened from a trance, Adelaide gets up, throws the rest of her cake and plate into the trash, and goes bounding up to where Noah and Melanie are standing.

ADELAIDE

What's happening?

MELANIE

Nothing. Mommy was just having a little talk with Noah, sweetheart.

NOAH

I was thinking it's probably a good time for me to head back, anyway. I'm getting kind of tired.

MELANIE

Head back where? You still haven't got a place to stay.

NOAH

I've got a couple of sleeping bags in the car.

MELANIE

Oh, no. I can't let you do that. Come and stay with us!

NOAH

No, you've done enough already. Besides, I've already made up my mind.

MELANIE

Oh, Noah...

NOAH

Dan? I'm heading out!

DANIEL

(from afar)

Alright! Drive safely, brother!

Melanie steps forward and hugs Noah tightly as if she felt she might never see him again.

MELANIE

I was really hoping that this would wake you up. That you would want to change so that something like this doesn't happen again.

She releases him slightly and looks him straight in the eye.

MELANIE (CONT'D)

You're not gonna go back to your old ways again, are you?

NOAH

Melanie...

Melanie's on the verge of tears. Noah, though he has pity for her, has no words to comfort her. Daniel comes walking up. He notices Melanie is emotional.

DANIEL

Is everything alright?

MELANIE

Yeah. We were just saying our goodbyes.

She lets Noah go. Adelaide realizes that everyone's expecting her to want to give him a hug, too, so she does. It's a tight hug, but also quick. She steps away from the stage.

Free at last, Noah walks backwards to the driver-side door of his car, waving.

NOAH

Bye, Addy. Mel. Bye, Dan.

DANIEL

Well, take care of yourself. Enjoy your freedom! Don't lose it this time!

Noah gets in and shuts the door. He turns the engine on to warm it up. After an emotional pause...

DANIEL

It'll sure be nice to not have that car sitting in our driveway.

Melanie gives him a shove and walks away crying. Perplexed, Daniel rushes after Melanie to "console" her.

DANIEL

What's the matter? What did I say?

Rolling her eyes, Adelaide walks away from the sordid scene, eager to get out of earshot as soon as possible. The sound of them arguing fades away as Adelaide withdraws from view. Mercifully, the scene ends with a quiet shot of the desert. The tranquility is disrupted by the sound of a car door and Noah pulling out of the parking lot.

I/E. NOAH'S CAR (WHITE TANKS ROADWAY) – DAY

Noah's driving along the winding road that leads out of the park. He looks straight ahead with a stoic expression. Faint giggling sounds become gradually audible and a smile creeps its way onto his face, when:

HIGH ANGLE SHOT – NOAH'S P.O.V.

Beneath the dashboard in front of the passenger seat, Adelaide is crouching down, her giggling having given way by now to full-fledged laughter. She climbs up into the seat.

ADELAIDE

See how easy that was?

NOAH

We're not out of the woods yet.

ADELAIDE

We're in the desert.

NOAH

It's an expression.

ADELAIDE

I know.

NOAH

How long before they notice you're missing and send the hounds out after us?

ADELAIDE

Um... forever, maybe. Yeah, forever sounds nice.

NOAH

It's not up to you.

ADELAIDE

I don't care. Even if they do catch us, it'll still have been worth the effort.

NOAH

That's easy for you to say.

ADELAIDE

No it's not.

Suddenly, Noah's cell phone (an old flip phone), which is sitting in a cupholder between the seats, starts vibrating. Noah is startled.

NOAH

Pick that up, will you?

It stops vibrating. Adelaide picks it up.

ADELAIDE

Why do you have such an old phone?

NOAH

Who was that?

She opens it and checks.

ADELAIDE

Oh, it's just an AMBER alert.

She's about to put it away when Noah pulls over and screeches the car to a halt.

NOAH

What does it say? Read it to me!

ADELAIDE

Okay! Geez! Chill out!

She opens it back up again.

ADELAIDE

Tucson, AZ—AMBER alert—blah
blah blah—2006 blue Toyota
something-or-other...WARNING:
this message may cause grown men
to pee their pants in fright when they
hear it. Read with care.

She slams it shut.

ADELAIDE (CONT'D)

It obviously has nothing to do with
us! What's the matter with you
anyway?

Noah snatches the phone out of her hands and puts it back in its spot. He's breathing heavily.

NOAH

When they catch us—I say when,
not if—I go to an actual prison, not
just the county jail, and it won't be
any measly six-month sentence. Does
that mean anything to you?

ADELAIDE

Oh, boo hoo! Like you've got
anything better to do!

NOAH

Excuse me?

ADELAIDE

All you do is drive around from one
place to another mowing lawns for
gas money and eating out of trash
cans! No job, no girlfriend and you
can't stay out of jail even when I'm
not around, so how do you expect
me to care?

NOAH

Adelaide...

ADELAIDE

That's the kind of life you have
that's so great that you can't risk
losing it?

NOAH

Adelaide!

ADELAIDE

Can't stand anyone else cutting in
on your wild adventures. That's the
real reason. Getting scared by a
stupid phone message. What an idiot.
You're dumb as rocks!

NOAH

Get out of the car.

ADELAIDE

You're dumb as rocks!

NOAH

Get out of the car!

ADELAIDE

No!

NOAH

Get out!

Noah reaches over and pushes the door open. Not using his full strength, he tries to push Adelaide out of it. She struggles fiercely against him, and he finally pushes hard enough to make her scream and jump out. They keep arguing through the open door.

NOAH

You can walk back the rest of
the way.

ADELAIDE

Are you crazy? I'm not going back
there!

NOAH

Then you can just wait here until
they come get you.

ADELAIDE

I'm running away whether you help
me or not, loser!

NOAH

That's not a good idea.

ADELAIDE

I'll do it!

NOAH

You won't!

ADELAIDE

I think I would know!

NOAH

Close that door!

Adelaide does not budge.

NOAH

Fine then.

He drives off. The door closes on its own. Adelaide chases after him a short distance; as he gets away from her she slows to a stop.

ADELAIDE

Coward!

She picks up a big rock and throws it at the car with all her might.

ADELAIDE

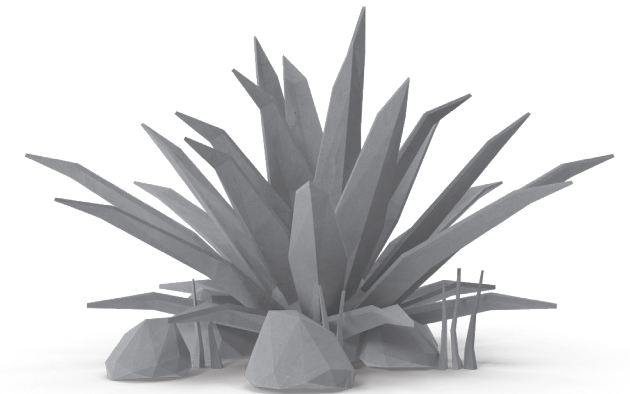
(at the top of her lungs)

COWARD!!!

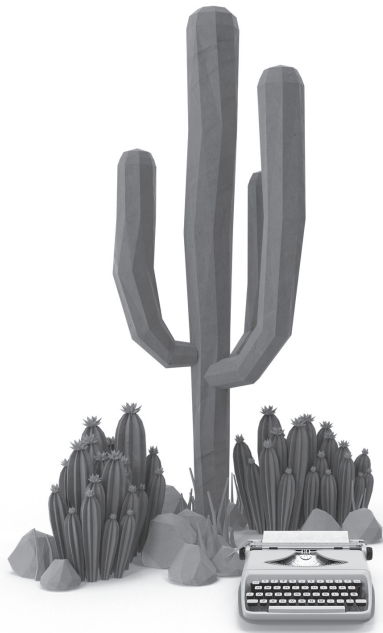
Noah keeps driving. She stands in that same spot, not moving an inch, as she watches his car bobble up and down along the straight, hilly road. Minutes pass. He keeps going. Still, she does not budge.

At the end of the road, the car slows, makes a u-turn, and comes heading back. Again, Adelaide watches it intently from the same position without moving. Finally, it arrives back where Adelaide is standing. Without saying a word, Noah stops and opens the passenger door. They watch each other for a moment. Adelaide steps in, shuts the door and they drive off.

THE END.



STUDENT BIOS



PASSAGES 2019/20

EDUARDO BLANCO, 2nd Place—Essay, Scottsdale Community College.

Eddy Blanco is a 20 year old budding filmmaker and writer. He currently attends Scottsdale Community College and has been a frequent collaborator for an online hip-hop publication known as UVC for over a year.

NATHAN BUCKINGHAM, 2nd Place—Poetry, Mesa Community College

When Nathan Buckingham isn't dying from the Arizona heat or a severe lack of inspiration, he can usually be found binge-watching *The End of the F**king World*, playing *The Last of Us*, or accidentally winning writing competitions. He won first place for fiction in the MCC creative writing contest, and his work has been published in *Sixfold* and *Passages*. You can find him on Instagram @theshapeofletters.

ABRIL CHIHUAHUA, Honorable Mention—Poetry, Phoenix College

Born on July 27, 1998, Abril Chihuahua has written many stories over the years. She published her first poem at the age of 15. The poem called "Notice Things" appears in the fifth edition of *Barrio Writers'* book released in 2014. Being encouraged to follow the path of being a Chicana novelist, poet, and playwright, Abril has never lost her passion for the art. "The Death" is a devised poem from a piece called "The Death" written and created by Quetzal Chihuahua, which was to premiere in the showcase "Thank you 10!" in February 2020.

MALKA DASKAL, Honorable Mention—Fiction, Glendale Community College

Malka Daskal is a creative writing student at Glendale Community College. She received her master's degree from Columbia University way back in 2006 in a field completely unrelated to writing and is now making a belated attempt to refine her writing skills in an effort to do that which she loves/fears. She lives in Phoenix with her husband and two young sons.

QUINLEIA DIXON, 2nd Place—Fiction, Phoenix College

Hi my name is Quinleia Dixon. I am currently enrolled in Phoenix College. I'm completing my pre-requisites and hope to enter the Nursing program.

ALEX DODT, 1st Place—Fiction, Mesa Community College

Alex Dodt studies creative writing at MCC and plans on pursuing an MFA in the near future. He writes poetry and short fiction, focusing on whichever one is inducing fewer crises of confidence at the moment.

SHANNON FERNANDO, Honorable Mention—Essay, Glendale Community College

Shannon Fernando writes both fiction and creative nonfiction and dabbles in poetry. Her work has previously been featured in PVCC's *Paradise Review Literary Journal* and *Dry Heat* online Journal. In 2017, she was invited to participate in the Maricopa Community Colleges' Emerging Writers event. Shannon is a continuing education student from Phoenix, Arizona.

KAZIMIER FIRKUS, 3rd Place—Essay, Scottsdale Community College

A long term resident from Wisconsin, Kazimier moved to Arizona in search of opportunities both for personal healing and growth. The after-effects from traumatic events during their youth and young adulthood lead them to fight for their own personal justice and a more mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthier chance at life.

TIM GRAY, Honorable Mention—One-Act Play/Script, Glendale Community College

Tim Gray is a writer and filmmaker and lifelong Arizona resident who has been obsessed with storytelling since he was a child. He likes to write stories, poems and songs that are as provocative as they are entertaining. He is currently trying to balance working full-time with taking film and acting classes at Glendale Community College. What he'd really like to do is find success as a writer-director of feature films, but regardless of how his luck turns out he intends to keep writing and writing until the day he dies.

LYNNE MacVEAN, Honorable Mention—Poetry, Paradise Valley Community College

Lynne MacVean is a Phoenix native who earned a BA in English and French literature from Willamette University in 1995, then attended Portland State University to study Italian. Retiring after 20 years of working in IT, she has completed the academic certificate in Creative Writing at PVCC and is applying to MFA programs in pursuit of a writing career. Her once and future husband and son also attend classes at PVCC. We're a family of Pumas!

MARILYN MARTIN, 1st Place—Poetry, Mesa Community College

Marilyn Martin is a 24 year old student at Mesa Community College. In her free time she likes to draw, write, make collage art, thrift shop, and go to shows. She started writing at the beginning of this year as a therapeutic device for herself and fell in love with it as she watched herself grow with and through the poems she completed.

KRISTINA MORGAN, 3rd Place—Fiction, 3rd Place—Poetry, Scottsdale Community College

Writing is freeing. Worries don't follow me into the zone. It's simply language passing from my pen sometimes a sentence an hour. I am largely an intuitive writer. Only recently am I learning craft under the tutelage of Sandra Desjardins and Kim Sabin. I am the author of *Mind Without a Home: a Memoir of Schizophrenia*. Schizophrenia, it's like hot sauce on buttered toast. I live in Scottsdale with my two black cats, Grams and Annie, named after my grandmother and mother.

NINA NEWELL, 1st Place—Essay, Phoenix College

Ten years ago, completely convinced she'd never understand English grammar, ex-refugee Nina reluctantly picked up a grammar textbook to help her then young children learn what are the parts of speech. These children, now in college, have requested their mother write about her refugee experience. Nina is currently enrolled in a memoir writing class at Phoenix College.

JACOB NGUYEN, 1st Place—One-Act Play/Screenplay, Glendale Community College

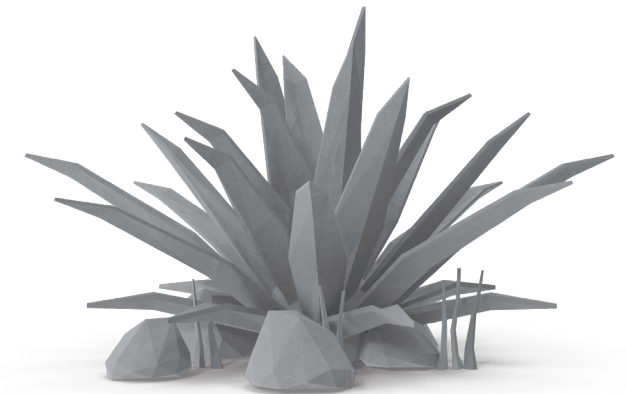
Jacob Nguyen is entering his final semester in the Digital Cinema Arts program at Glendale Community College. He is graduating with his associates in film, having previously won the Best Screenplay award at GCC's Film Festival. Not only interested in screenwriting, Jacob is also attending courses in fashion design, aspiring to become a costume designer for film and television.

HAYLEE ROLNICK, Honorable Mention—Poetry, Chandler Gilbert Community College

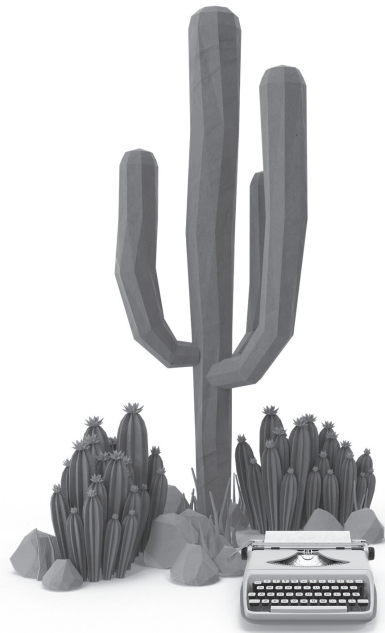
Haylee Rolnick is a 19 year old photographer who aspires to impact the world with all forms of her art.

TODD WELCH, Honorable Mention—Poetry, Phoenix College

I am a Phoenician with a day job and a night passion (for writing poetry). I have read a lot over the years and written a bunch. I hope to some day study Creative Writing at a graduate program and become a full-time writer. These things may not need to happen in that order, but I like them both. My favorite line of a poem right now is: "To pray you open your whole self." (Harjo)



JUDGE BIOS



PASSAGES 2019/20

ESSAY, FICTION: Tiffany Midge

Tiffany Midge (Standing Rock Sioux) is the author of *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's*. She's received a 2019 Pushcart Prize, the Kenyon Review Earthworks Indigenous Poetry Prize, the Simons Public Humanities Fellowship and a Western Heritage Award. She's a former humor columnist for *Indian Country Today*, and makes her home in the Inland Northwest. She aspires to be the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Seattle's Space Needle.

ONE-ACT PLAY/SCREENPLAY: Eric Micha Holmes

Eric Micha Holmes is a playwright and audio-dramatist whose work has been heard on the BBC ("Care Inc.") and seen at The National Black Theatre ("Mondo Tragic,") The New Black Fest and MCC Theatre ("Pornplay; Or, Blessèd Are The Meek,") New York Theatre Workshop ("Nimpsey Pink,") and The Lark Play Development Center ("Jackets In May") among others. Residencies and fellowships include The Djerassi Artist Residency, Dramatist Guild Fellowship, Space At Ryder Farm, 'I Am Soul' Playwright's Residency at The National Black Theatre, LaGuardia Performing Arts Playwriting Lab, City Theatre Company, and many more. His mono-play, "Walking Next To Michael Brown: Confessions Of A Tragic Mulatto," was commissioned by The New Black Fest and has toured with Barrymore Award Nominated "Hands Up: 7 Playwrights / 7 Testaments" to theaters across the country including: The Brooklyn Museum Of Art, The Red Door Theatre, Crowded Fire Theatre, The Museum Of The Moving Image, The Hansberry Project, and Flashpoint Theatre.

POETRY: Andrea Scarpino

Andrea Scarpino is the author of the poetry collections *Once Upon Wing Lake*, *What the Willow Said as it Fell*, and *Once, Then*. She received a PhD in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University, and an MFA from The Ohio State University. She has published in numerous journals, is co-editor of *Nine Mile Magazine*, and served as Poet Laureate of Michigan's Upper Peninsula 2015-2017. Her co-edited anthology is *Undocumented: Great Lakes Poets Laureate on Social Justice*.

We would like to recognize and thank the following individuals for their dedication and support in making this competition a success.

College Creative Writing Faculty Coordinators

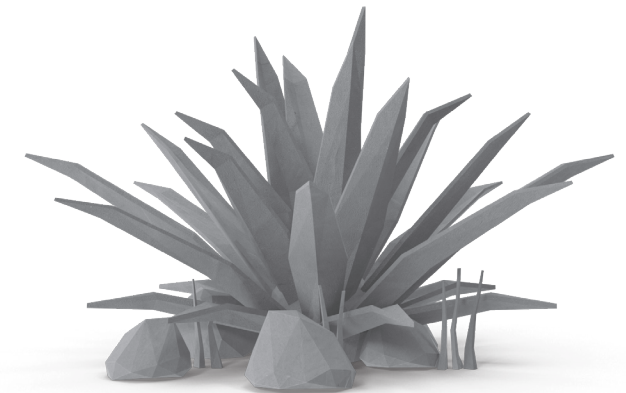
Patrick Finn, Chandler-Gilbert Community College
Rod Freeman, Estrella Mountain Community College
Jeff Baker, Glendale Community College
Ferdinand Hunter, GateWay Community College
Josh Rathkamp, Mesa Community College
Ryan Stone, Paradise Valley Community College
Joanna Robbins, Phoenix College
Jennifer Adcock-Shantz, Rio Salado College
Sandra Desjardins, Scottsdale Community College
Jim Smith, South Mountain Community College

Literary Judges

Tiffany Midge, Fiction & Non-Fiction
Eric Micha Holmes, Playwriting/Screenplay
Andrea Scarpino, Poetry

Special Thanks

Dr. Steven Gonzales, Interim Chancellor, Maricopa Community Colleges
Dr. Karla Fisher, Provost, Maricopa Community Colleges
Bettina Celis, Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Maricopa Community Colleges
Dr. Steven Crawford, District Director, Maricopa Center for Learning and Innovation
Linda Speranza, Fine Arts Coordinator
Brianna Bartlett, Program Coordinator, Maricopa Center for Learning and Innovation
Adam Stich, Fine Art Coordinator for 2020-21
Erica Black, Fine Arts Assistant





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