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A Literary Arts Journal
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Mission Statement

To foster the development of all students at the University of Oregon, regardless of major, by serving as a platform for outstanding creative expression. Unbound Journal is committed to the belief that publishing a community's literature is a crucial component to sustaining a vibrant culture. We publish prose, poetry and visual art that tests boundaries and comes from a place of passion, regardless of medium or approach. Our editorial process values quality as the paramount criterion. Each submission receives feedback and critique in a double-blind review from our staff of student editors.

Letter from the *Editor*

It's been a strange school year.

Packed between fall and spring term, I experienced moments of crushing defeat and pure, white-hot elation. In the fall I was worn and stained like a threadbare t-shirt. In winter I was grabbed by the shoulders and doused in cold water—crushed, folded, and kneaded against the corrugated zinc of a steel washboard until the suds oozed out. Floating in the cool basin, I was later rinsed until the water ran clear. Tattered and tired, I yielded to the hands that twisted me until the excess was wrung out. In the spring, I was found limp and weary by a kind doctor whose smile was obscured by a lavender colored surgical mask. I now stand before you illuminated by a new spring, clothes-pinned up by SSRIs and a regenerated ego. I could sway here in the breeze, pristine and pretty, forever.

I know this fluctuation of moods isn't a unique phenomenon. I know my peers have endured worse during this pandemic. Moreover, I'd like to extend my warmest congratulations to all seniors graduating from Zoom college this term. You've all worked so hard, toiling through recorded lectures, discussion posts and virtual meeting after virtual meeting under circumstances that no one could have ever expected several years ago. Whether your plans involve starting a career, beginning a graduate program, or taking time off to figure things out, I'm positive that we've all developed grit needed to endure this time of transition.

As always, I'd like to express my sincerest gratitude towards our contributing writers and artists. We've acquired a diverse range of submissions this issue season and I'm so pleased with the results produced by our team of editors and designers. Unbound Journal would be nothing without the efforts and content made by University of Oregon students. I feel so grateful and honored to have worked with my peers on this veritable repository of student excellence.

I'm excited to spend most of my days this summer lying on the cool grass, flanked by a patch of daisies as sweet beetles crawl through my arm hair. I hope anyone reading this weird little letter will have the time to do something similar. I hope we'll all have moments where we're able to experience stillness and rest and placidity—in whatever forms that may take.

Peace—for now,

Nallely Ramirez
EIC

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Clean Slate

Bitá Habashi

i remember myself at 5 years old.
there is nail polish, a hair straightener, and a first aid kit under mom's sink.
i sit at the side of the bed, she sleeps unaware of me beneath her.
toes curling against the wall, head pressing against the bedframe, and
with the sun barely risen i listen to the geese fly further from her window.
i whisper,
maman joon.
her eyes opening swollen, she hands me the book on the moss-colored rocking chair,
she walks across the carpet so delicately that it appeared nobody had stepped on it since it left Iran.
head high in the early haze of seven a.m.
she holds all her stories heavy in her spine and still steps so softly.
our home cleans itself.
how could anyone know otherwise?

i remember myself a year ago.
there is nail polish, a hair straightener, and a first aid kit under my sink.
there are geese flying somewhere in another state.
a symptom of my heavy head, i hold out my hands and herd the silence to listen to me.
somewhere in the apartment a door slams.
i feel a weight press in my stomach, i carefully hush my heart to sleep.
it remembers the last time i wasn't afraid.
what do i do with a heart that's only trying to keep things green?
it just never knew what to do about the south-facing window.
i say i would like to hear the geese and the train honk when it is too early.
i say if i learned bravery, it was from maman's left foot carrying more weight than her bookshelves.
her right foot- more weight than the kitchen, and still there was no dust to be found in the house.
i say my heart couldn't make a fly flinch, i say i am exactly my mother's daughter.

every morning i learn to forgive the world.
the dew clings to the spider's web on my car's side mirror,
she spells 'staying' as gratitude for a story becoming beautiful in the disappearance of fear.
i leave my socks sprawled out across the floor,
i never guessed i could stay in one place and make it lived in.
somewhere upstairs, there are footsteps i wake up with.
there is a candle on my desk, there is the sun peeking out.
i call my mother and she tells me i was born to write myself back into life.



Yao Liu

Bullton - The Fourth - Dimensional Monster

Sculpture

ABS plastic (internal frame), Sculpey Polymer Clay (outer casing), Milliput Putty (details), polystyrene (antennae attachments), steel (wires).

Execution of a Traitor

Jace Elson

my executioner stands before me,
sword in hand-- not raised, not yet--
the flames warping the tarmac they stand on.

heaven was not supposed to reach me,
not in a dead-end town a dead-end state a
runaway country. but

my wife requested the apples
in the plastic bags
my trembling hands clutch.

am I shaking from
fear or age?
my therapist would say that

they're the same thing.
signs of survival.
signs of strength.

(she tells me saving myself is enough.
I don't know how to say
my name meant God's wrath, once.)

"what is it like to be human?" they ask,
sword in hand-- raised, now,
shielding their face.

this I know how to say.

"when I can't sleep,
I trace constellations over the freckles
on my wife's spine.

I taste hymns in her--
her too-strong coffee,
her too-weak bones.

she needs a cane, now,
and she still believes
I don't remember you.

not everything needs
to be something
god can understand."

my death stands before me,
sword in hand-- swinging, now--
and I keep my eyes open.



Yao Liu

Vakishim - The One-Horned Terrible-Monster

Digital Art

Proprietary painted statue, proprietary photo, Adobe Photo-shop

A Burning in the Valley

Clayton Rodgers

A scrub-jay flits to a branch nearby, forgets why it came, or perhaps thinks better of it, and hurtles through the thicket again. His pine-colored eyes follow the bird as it weaves between empty trees. At the edge of the plateau, it bursts from the dead foliage and into the open air above the valley. Far below, the unfurling foothills fade to steeper rises of muted tones; deeper, the land climbs to a caldera, its round cauldron appearing nearly mauve in the distance. Between there and where he sits yawns the continuous, frozen ripple of gray sky cresting above the barren canopy. In the dell, the treetops creak, black and fingered, a thousand skeletal hands cracking as they reach from the nether. Here, in this forested glen, it is winter's end.

Alekhine squats under a sleeping copse of larches, next to him a small tongue of flame carves shadows into the grooves of his gaunt face and illuminates his matted hair. He is too young for his skin to be so furrowed, but mud and sun and mistakes have aged him more than his years. He shifts on his haunches to poke the fire while his eyes parse the lichen-encrusted larches around him. He stares at them and wonders *why*? Of all the conifers, they are one of the few that shed all their needles in the winter. Against the absence of evergreen, the light seafoam of the lichen imposes. The bearded trees feel primordial and—in their inhuman antiquity—sinister. Branches loom overhead, their rows of lichen trailing down like ghosts from innumerable bygone summers. The sighing between them moans *I was here before the gods, and I will be here after you*. Alekhine sighs, “And yet, in our aspirations of perpetuity,” he feeds the fire wilted needles, “we both have lost something.”

He turns his head from the conversation. Over the landscape, the clouds still hold light from the receding day. In a ridge where two slopes meet, Alekhine spots the speckled gleam of black water sluicing through the hillside like a strip of twilight. Brown needles swirl in the stream's eddies. *All things end up in the river*, he thinks. Not only needles, but the husks of boxelders and the brittle bones of robins and the rotted boles of fallen giants. He realizes then why the ancient Greeks used to believe the crossing to the afterlife had to be a river. His eyes study the slow and nearly imperceptible movement of the forest. Each piece of the sprawling green puzzle inexorably sliding into the river. And the river dumping it all into the vastness of the sea. At that last thought, he is reminded that the Styx was not the only river in Hades.

There was another. For those whose lives were rife with sorrow and regret, who sought the world below as refuge from the one above, who were disappointed to find their memories stayed with them, even in death—there was the Lethe. In Greek, the word translates to *oblivion*, an erasure. Its waters drowned out the memories of a blackened past and instead offered solace in nothing. It is in this way Alekhine knows the rill is not the Styx, but Lethe. And at its end, under the enormity of the sea, all is consoled in the tides.

His fingers begin to loosen the string on the top of his rucksack. Alekhine rummages through it and pulls out a pewter fork. He thinks of the Lethe and the fire in front of him. Silently he rolls up his right sleeve. Spiraling around his forearm are the words: “Between past and present there can be no compromise.” He wanted to write more, but you only have so much skin. And Alekhine has come here for precisely this. Skin. And fire. Underneath the words, the images of three small knives are scrawled into his flesh. He wishes he had one of them now. But he has always made do with what he had. He crams a bit of willow bark into his mouth to numb what is to come.

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It does not take as long as he had imagined. The sanguine coat the prongs had moments ago has bubbled off in the flame. His once tan knuckles dull to the pale white of slush as he presses the fork to the wound. In short intervals, he listens to the sizzle of the fork as it sears his riven flesh. The three knives are gone. Alekhine stares at the dark traces running down his arm. To him, it seems the knives have torn open tissue once more in their final parting throes.

Three knives cast into the void, three names following. He could remember each of them, their comings and goings, their anniversaries, what they ate before. How awful for them? To have blood and bone reduced to a small commemorative etching of their end in something as temporary as flesh. It burns. The smoke vanishing into the low hanging vault of gray above. Another sea. Another Lethe. He hopes in oblivion, they will have their own eternity. Alekhine supposes, then, this is what it has always been about: the ephemeral and the ethereal.

His hands go back to his bag, somewhere under the pemmican and canteen lies a name far heavier than the ones now gone; a name so large to him, he whispers it to himself when he sleeps, but never awake; a name he would forget only after he has forgotten his own. At the cinch of the pack, his hands pause. On a bough just above his head, the western scrub-jay returns. It tilts its head to the side, proffering the profile of a single black and endless eye. A stalwart bird, loyal to its hills, it never migrates. In the middle of winter, the bright cerulean of its feathers is sustained with nothing more than chill and insects. *You do not have to leave either*; it bows its head before gliding away.

A few seconds slowly trickle away; Alekhine decides to undo the cinch. He rummages inside with one hand, there are clinks-and-clanks of metal, followed by his fingers brushing over coarse, dried meat, then, something soft. His hand shuts, and he pulls out a long, forest-green, velvet dress. Wetness gathers in the corners of his eyes. The urge to bury it in the pack bubbles up. *It looks nothing like her*. The wind flutters the ends of the dress, giving it momentary curves, unrecognizable from the ones that used to fill it—*they are cruel mockeries*, he thinks. His bleary eyes desperately crave to look elsewhere.

Staring at the dress as it sways is both too much, and not nearly enough.

Alekhine averts his gaze to a root poking from the cold, solid earth, and coils his hand around it. “I wish you could have seen her” he says, unrolling a sleeve to wipe his rheumy eyes. “I feel so inadequate in my memories of her.” He clutches the fabric tightly in his hands and buries his face between the folds. “You can remember the colors of a sunrise, the confusion of pinks and purples—but you can’t remember the warmth of the coming morning. This is the absence I have lived with. Like something of her will return, but then she is smoke in my hands, thought and air. And I flounder about trying to grip the edges of her shadow—” Alekhine knows he is at an impasse with the protruding root. There is no meaning in our words when we have no shared past, and in trying to recapture her, he is swallowed in the ineffable. *How can you know what she was when you never saw her?* Alekhine’s words turn to sawdust in his mouth; he feels contempt rising in him towards this entire valley and its inability to understand his longing.

Somewhere inside, he breaks. His voice and mounting anguish shatter against the hard wall of her memories. “I could tell you that she smelled like draughts of ambrosia and that her eyes were the moon to wolves. But these words have no hook to hang meaning from for you.” His knuckles loosen around the root. “She taught me how to smile. A furtive grin shared across a dinner table with company could carry me for months. Our interwoven fingers suspended between our chairs at town meetings, her thumb tracing circles over mine. Everything she did told me, ‘this—this is for you, and you alone.’” His lips scrunch into a rictus of sorrow. The dress turns splotchy with darkness as tears patter it. Alekhine looks to the fire and knows it wants to lift what he has carried for so long. He inhales the larch and cedar and winter air.

It is all wrong, he thinks. *Time cannot heal all. It cannot restore what I have lost; memory has held what is left for the fire.* And here it is. Unraveling the dress, Alekhine lays it over the flame. He is surprised by the banality of what comes next.

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For some inexplicable reason he had imagined the flames would turn green as they licked the verdant curves off the velvet. Where is the color and recognition of her effervescence? The fire levels all. The dress turns the same black and gray smoke as all else. It does not care what it was in life—in the flames, it burns, and burns. *Lethe*.

The fire dances upwards inches from him, the dress forgotten, the tongues reaching to distant, unseen stars. This is how physics used to be divined. People observed that fire always burned towards the heavens and concluded there must be a threshold between the stars and sky which served as home to all the faded infernos. *They are returning*. It was the same with rain, the droplets fell from the firmament to the earth in search of their natural place, the seas. Small bits trying to become whole in the infinitudes of sky and ocean.

And there is one more small bit left for him to lose. It seems so insignificant and impossible to him that the name has almost slipped his memory. A name given to him, but one he had never claimed. He reaches into the bag one last time and pulls out a mud splattered polaroid of himself at a chess tournament when he was twelve. In the photo he stands with a medal around his neck and a scoresheet in his hand. His hair was longer than it is now, cut into a bob, with a sheen unlike his current mangled mess. At the top of the sheet, he can make out his faint signature. *Alexandra*. He hardly recognizes the name as once belonging to him. However, it is not what most interests him about the photo. If he squints hard enough, he can see the first move he made in the final game on the scoresheet. His opponent played pawn to e4 and he responded with knight to f6—*Alekhine's Defense*. No pawns in the center, just a lonely knight wandering over the board. Alekhine stares at the scoresheet, reading the notations and remembering the way the piece arched to the other side. *It too did not like where it started*, he supposes.

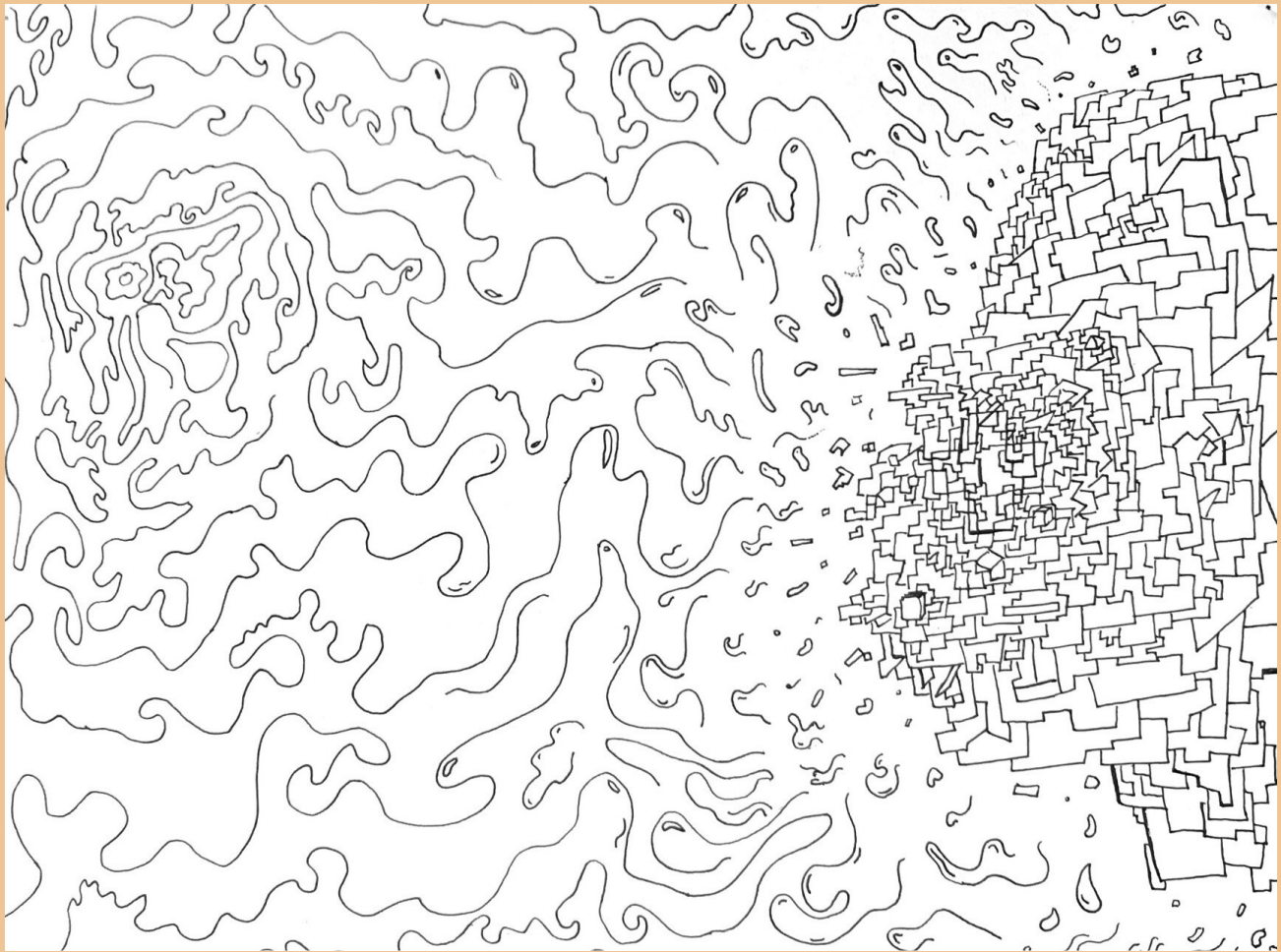
Unlike the others, Alekhine feels nothing when the blaze reduces the photo to inky cinders. The name had never been more than a misnomer. When the photo was taken, he had already started to burn the name. By the time he finished high school, not even its ashes could be seen trailing him. Still, it seemed fitting for it to drift to the sky, like the rest.

Why should Alekhine be any different? With his pack empty of all sentimentality, he feels burdenless, then, a gentle warmth spreads over him like a sunrise. His eyes reflect the trees as he passes by, and when Alekhine crosses over minor-mirror lakes, they reflect each other, endlessly. There is a new awareness in his lightness. A feeling like he has just strolled into a forest and only now recognizes Vivaldi playing in the background. It all makes so much sense. Each footfall seeming so natural to him that he forgets the last one in the brilliance of the current one. *La ruta nos aportó otro paso natural*, Alekhine tells himself. *The path provided us the natural next step*. A Spanish palindrome, the same forward as backward, an ouroboros of letters.

Each stride brings a mounting, inexplicable sense of familiarity. *A returning*. A cosmic pull, almost a skid, an unyielding sliding sensation.

Alekhine sees himself as a piece in the green puzzle of trees. Everything appears to be moving towards a point between two slopes. *Lead me to the river; he hums*. Below, Alekhine hears the splatter of water slapping rocks. He runs. The wind curling through his hair. At the end of the valley, the sun is bisected by a tree on a ridge, plum-colored rays spill from the split. Water droplets collect on the tips of branches, each one trapping the light and turning the forest into a glimmer of color. Alekhine's eyes swell as he walks through a sea of sunsets. All is offered to him in this moment, but he desires the opposite. *The ocean is miles away*, he thinks, *but the sky is right here*. He is velvet smoke, he is water purling down to the earth, he is fire piercing the firmament.

The precipice comes quick; the fall is eternal.



Warren Berg
Entropy of Creation
Ink

“Despite the poor reputation among students, mathematics is actually an extremely creative discipline that takes intuition and imagination to solve logical problems. In a basic sense, Mathematicians create models that explain phenomena using logic. Viewing the world through this lens, gives a unique perspective of the logical relationships between people and objects that exist in the world. This abstract perspective inspired the piece that I am submitting today. The ink drawing, titled "Entropy of Creation," was inspired by my conceptualization of humans' relationship with our creations and how they diminish over time. Whatever we create, will inevitably dissipate with time. This is the law of entropy that defines our universe. Everything proceeds from order to disorder. This idea is explored in the drawing, where we view a person who is composed of layered fragments that slowly dissolve into the chaos of everything.”



Kelli Yamada
Untitled
Photography

A Visit

Sofia Garner

I shivered as I walked up to the door, glancing at my mom for reassurance. But her normally expressive eyes look blank to me--cold. The lawn outside of Golden Oaks Nursing home was a fake fluorescent green, the flowers freshly planted. It seemed wrong for my grandmother to live in a place this manicured when her own garden had been a beautiful disarray. She'd never planned anything, just planted where she wanted. She would come in afterhours outside, and I'd laugh at her dirty garden gloves and frizzy grey hair. But almost as soon as the sound had escaped my mouth, she'd be dragging me by the arm to help her outside--talking about "obligacion primero." But that was before the dementia diagnosis, before she'd changed and before the nursing home.

We were finally at the door and, and inside the lobby--all fluorescent lights and air that smelled like Antiseptic. I saw a woman, partially hidden by a huge desk.

"Do you have an appointment?" she said, not looking up from her computer. I glanced at my mom, hoping she would say something. When she didn't, I spoke up.

"Yes we're here to see my grandmother, Maria Veracruz?"

"One quick second." The sound of typing filled the empty space. Soon, name tags in hand, she was leading us down an empty hallway that seemed to stretch for miles. One room after another, I saw blank walls and cafeteria food trays. Even after everything, I was ashamed that we'd put her here. There was something sad about living out your final years surrounded by strangers.

I wondered if my grandmother had anyone to speak Spanish with. My stomach turned as I realized our family hadn't even thought about that when we were deciding on a nursing home. We'd failed her, on even the most basic level--allowing her the opportunity to speak her language. Suddenly I felt sick, maybe it was the smell of rubbing alcohol that seemed to get stronger by the second, or the bright yellow lights that stung my eyes.

Either way I felt like I was going to throw up when we finally stopped and the beige door was opened and I heard as if from very far away "Look Maria, you have visitors!"

The lights in the room flickered one by one to reveal a mess of long grey hair, gaunt cheeks and two blue eyes that stared at me blankly. The woman from the front desk paused at the door way and then after a beat:

"Well...I guess I'll leave you to it." The door fell shut.

"Hi Abuela," I said, tentatively. "How're you doing?" She turned away toward the window, as if bored already. But I heard her whisper "En español, Marina, es español." She hadn't said that to me since I was a child. I used to hate it, because I wanted to speak in English--I could express myself better. Her Spanish reminded me of flowing water. There was never a disruption in the current, each sound a part of a whole.

I started learning to speak Spanish late, much too late. And my throat wouldn't cooperate with me. While my grandmother's voice was a stream of sound, my words sounded separate, disjointed and awkward. My Spanish wasn't melodic, it had the rhythm of English in it. A rhythm I knew I couldn't shake.

My grandmother always blamed my mother for not teaching Spanish to me when I was a baby.

"A waste!" she said. "It's a waste." She then took it upon herself to teach me, despite my unwillingness to cooperate. From elementary school, onward it was always "En español, Marina, en español." And eventually I gave up on complaining, because she pretended like she didn't hear me when I spoke English. But her Spanish had lost the otherworldly magic it had when I was a child. My envy had grown into resentment.

My grandmother continued to stare in silence out the window. I tried to meet my mom's eyes, and raise my eyebrows, hoping she would know what to say. But her brown eyes had followed my grandmother's, to some fixed point outside the window

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I glanced at my mother's profile, her dark skin and sharp nose. Her eyelashes straight and coal-colored. With my grandmother sitting in bed right in front of us, it was more apparent than ever how different they looked. I remember seeing photographs of my grandmother when she was young. Even in black and white, her eyes seemed to shine. She seemed so happy in those old photos--nothing like the somber woman I saw today. Her hair bouncy and coiled, her eyes, pale blue. She always wore blue, because of those eyes. I remember stumbling through her closet as a child and finding racks and racks of blue. She had turquoise dresses with white trim, coats the color of the night and more sky blue shirts than I could count. She would sit down and tell me how she met my grandfather when she was out dancing. She would glow when she said the first thing he noticed about her were her eyes. She no longer looked like the woman in those black and white photos. That dancing girl was someone else I would never know. But I knew my grandmother, or at least I thought I did. I tried to reconcile the spirited person I remembered with who she was today. All my life she had always been happy to see me. She'd walk out to greet us when my mom pulled up her car to her house. And she would hug each of us, laughing, as we stumbled onto the driveway.

Finally my mom broke the silence, ignoring my grandmother's request that we speak Spanish. "So are they treating you okay here, mom? We tried to pick the best home we could." The word "home" sounded so out of place in this context--this place felt more like a hospital than anything. My grandmother muttered something to herself in Spanish. I noticed how she looked skinnier than when I last saw her.

Sometimes I thought my mother chose not to teach me Spanish as a way to rebel against my grandmother--who emphasized it any chance she got. Maybe her insistence made her want to reject it even more--throw it away all together. Maybe she gave up, knowing her words would never fall into place like my grandmother's did. Maybe she looked in the mirror and wished her eyes were the color of her mother's dresses.

My mom turned to focus on me. "Do you know when your brother's meeting us here?" "No I don't, he never texted me back." That was just like Matt, he was careless. Always had been. He was probably off with his friends somewhere, doing something dangerous. As children we would race across the dew soaked grass of our backyard. I would count down but he would leave before I'd said go. Already sprinting forward, kicking up burgundy leaves, his blond hair a glint in the distance.

"That's not fair!" I would gasp, leaning against the fence for support.

He would just grin, "I can't help that you're too slow," wearing that same grin he always had on when he won. And he won often.

"Oh god," my mom said, "I hope he's not coming on that thing."

"Oh no, he's definitely not," I said, knowing full well that was a lie. That "thing" was a motorcycle Matt had bought, even with my mom begging him not to. He'd finally saved up enough money and then it was his--shiny and new in our driveway.

"If you get on that death machine you are not coming back in this house" my mom had said.

But Matt saw through her bluff, "I can make my own decisions" he replied, putting his helmet on. He climbed onto the seat and smiled, his eyes wide, stroking the newness of it, unable to believe it was his. My mom slammed the door and went back inside but I watched him take off into the brightness of the streetlamps. I heard him laugh out loud as he drove down the street, unable to contain his joy. I knew it was dangerous, but watching him ride--I also knew I had never seen anything so natural in my life.

My phone buzzed. "He finally texted back," I said, "he says he's going to be late."

"Figures" my mom said, "well as long as he gets there safe, that's all I care about." I never worried about Matt crashing because I knew something tragic would never happen to him. He had an ease about him, an assuredness that always convinced me he was going to be okay.

But I think the Matt my mom remembers, is the old Matt. Because before he was Matt, he was Mateo. She remembers Mateo, the third grader who came home crying because the other kids had made fun of him and told him he looked like a girl, with his shoulder length blond curls. He begged to get a haircut that very same day and he did. His eyes puffy and red, the tracks where his tears had fallen still shining on his cheeks.

She remembers how the faceless barber had held up the razor and asked “You want it gone? All of it?” She remembers raising her eyebrows at Mateo and him nodding, closing his eyes, tears still caught in his lashes. How the curls fell to the floor one by one. How something that had been a part of him for so long could be eliminated so quickly and suddenly. My phone screen brightened, waking me up from my daydreams.

“He’s outside.” I told my mom, looking down at the text he’d sent.

“Can you go meet him? I’ll stay here” she said, her eyes never leaving my grandmother. I knew my mom was more anxious than she was letting on. She’d hardly moved since we got here, her neck and shoulders unnaturally stiff.

“No problem.” I left the room hurriedly. Breathing hard, as I rushed down the empty hallways and onto the courtyard, the cold air was a welcome relief.

And there he was, all long limbs and sandy hair, wearing that sheepish grin I knew all too well. He looked taller now than he’d been before and I realized it had been months since I’d last seen him. He only lived a few hours away at Oregon State but it felt like he was on another planet.

I’d visited him at the dorms a few weeks in and I remember how surprised I’d been when I heard all his friends calling him Matt.

How casually he’d responded when I asked why.

“Oh I go by Matt now” he’d said with a shrug, like it was nothing. Like shedding a name was as easy as putting on new clothes.

When I raised my eyebrows at him he’d gotten defensive. “It’s just easier to say, Marina. That’s all.”

But something told me that wasn’t the whole truth. Something about how he’d introduced me to his friends as Marina, not his sister. Maybe someone named Mateo could have a sister that looked like me, but not Matt, with his clear eyes and cleancut smile.

I hugged Matt, grateful to be outside, I’d take the harshness of the cold air anyday over the pain I felt at my grandmother’s blank stare. Over his shoulder I noticed the gardener’s wrapping lights around the hedges--and I remembered that Christmas was coming. I’d forgotten.

One year, on Christmas Eve my mom spent hours getting ready, which she never does. I could smell the burnt odor of a straightening iron coming out of the bathroom, the gardenia perfume she sprayed. She’d had that little pink bottle that looked like it was dipped in shiny gold glitter for years and only used one drop at a time--careful never to waste it. She was wearing a red sweater that my grandmother had got her, and shiny black boots that matched her hair. Her face was filled with genuine joy, which was rare for her. And most astonishingly I could tell she was proud of the way she looked that night. She walked into Christmas dinner and sat down, all gleaming hair and vibrant red and looked at my grandmother expectantly. Maybe she was waiting for her to complement her hair, which my grandmother always liked better straight.

But instead my grandmother’s eyes focused on Matt, “You look so handsome!” she exclaimed. And my mom’s face hardened, the glimpse of genuineness I had seen earlier was gone. Matt simply shook his head at the ground--he’d never known how to take compliments from her.

Sometimes I wondered if he had always known. And just pretended he didn’t. Maybe he had convinced himself he was deserving of the praise he received.

Matt’s voice startled me, interrupting my thoughts.

“So..are you going to show me inside?,” he said.

“Yes, yes of course.” I tried to focus. To forget. To be present, for the family, for Abuela. But as I heard the distinct muffled voices of my mom and grandmother in the room ahead of us, I was reminded of a phone conversation I’d overheard a few weeks ago.

My mom had been explaining her idea for a new lesson plan for her middle school students.

And seemingly out of nowhere my grandmother said “I never wanted you to be a teacher you know. I always thought you could do better. Be a doctor or a lawyer or a professor. I had high hopes for you. Too bad, morenita, too bad.”

And I watched my mom’s eyes cloud for a second, the mask was chipped at a bit. Pieces were crumbling and falling off--they shattered as they hit the floor, until only dust remained.

“Okay,” is all my mom said, her voice hoarse.

But my grandmother continued, “You were always the smart one, not the pretty one like your sister. Why could you not make this family proud, why could you not do the one thing I asked of you? Was that so difficult?”

“No it wasn’t.” my mom replied. I didn’t need to walk into the other room to know she was crying--I could tell by the sound of her voice. I knew she would be mortified if she knew I had heard. So I slowly walked back up the stairs, the sound of my feet muffled by the carpet.

As we stood outside Abuela’s nursing room door, I found myself unwilling to open it. Matt, seeing my hesitation, shook his head and grabbed the door handle.

As Matt and I walked inside, I heard Abuela’s reaction as soon as she saw him. “Beautiful!,” she said. “Beautiful!” She practically yelled it, screamed it as if nothing had ever been more clear. Suddenly her personality shifted, color returned to her face and she looked human again. Nothing like the blank shell, I had interacted with earlier. Mateo looked at the ground and muttered thanks, the way he always did. “Blue eyes,” she kept repeating, “I have four grandchildren with blue eyes.” She said it with so much pride. But I couldn’t share in it.

I felt invisible again, as I often did standing next to Matt. And he seemed as oblivious as always. Suddenly I felt more angry, than anything. I didn’t want to cry--I wanted to punch something.

“And what about us?” I said, I could hear my voice, rising, but I didn’t care. “We’ve been here, Matt didn’t even have the decency to get here on time.” Her smile fell as I spoke--she could tell the energy in the room had shifted.

“Hey” I heard Matt murmur from beside me, but I continued on.

“Please look at me, Abuela,” I pleaded. She shook her head, and turned away but I went to the other side of the bed.

“What’s my name Abuela,” I said, “please look at me and tell me my name.” She’d said it earlier, unprompted, but now I only saw confusion when her eyes met mine.

“Morenita” she said finally, and I wanted to cry, but instead I watched as the foggiess of her stare permeated the room, not an inch untouched. Morenita, morena, her nickname for my mom. It means brown like the earth, like the roots of the old pine tree that lived in Abuela’s backyard. It had been my mother’s to bear--now it was mine to claim.



Mikaela Colwell
Jelly
Digital Art
Instagram: @micky.milkyway

Hymn

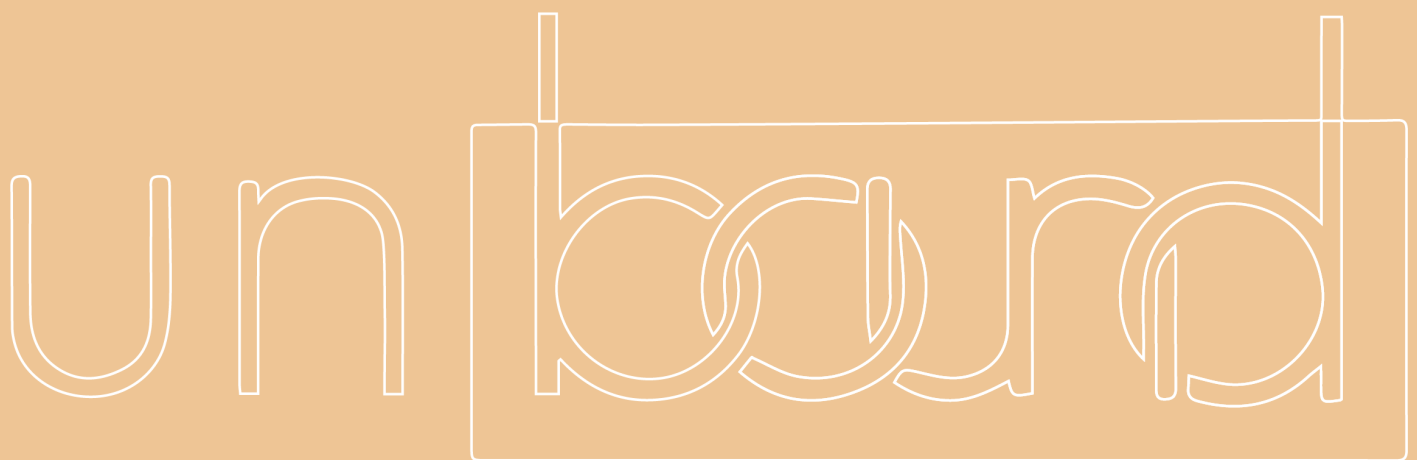
Bitá Habashi

i worry that God looks at me in confusion.
i know She often cannot decide whether or not I need Her hand to cradle me again.
She knows i am a gentle-but-not-fragile thing.
She knows i am too slowly walking the line between two paths.
i press my neck on the cusp of the bathtub and angle my chin towards the tiles.
i think
i want to feel more art than woman-

wear loose clothes, become less body and more shape i can control.
yet still i stand beneath the clouds, letting Her tears press the fabric into my bones, molding
me like warm clay, craving approval.
when my skin is transparent, i think i am how She wants me to be.
two creations all in one, a body sick and a mind longing for more.
i put myself in the kiln and cracked within the hollows of my ribcage but still i remained a
whole piece.

i slip into my father's shirt stained with paint and childhood walks by wild-berry bushes.
Her cold deep breaths brush my growing pains and i want to stretch my own canvas and my
own body
and cover them with brightness even when the brushes are coated in residues of murky
water-
but i am lopsided in the bath.
left foot curved on the faucet as a dancer's broken wing, and right knee leaning on the
shower wall,
hair covered in bursting bubbles.
with mouth cloudy i watch the smoke sing from my elbow-resting on the precipice of the
tub and two fingers holding the fire-
i pray God knows i am a delicate-but-not-easily-breakable thing.

the water, lukewarm, filled with falling ash, parts at my prayer-
god i swear i'm not breakable.
how could i be.



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