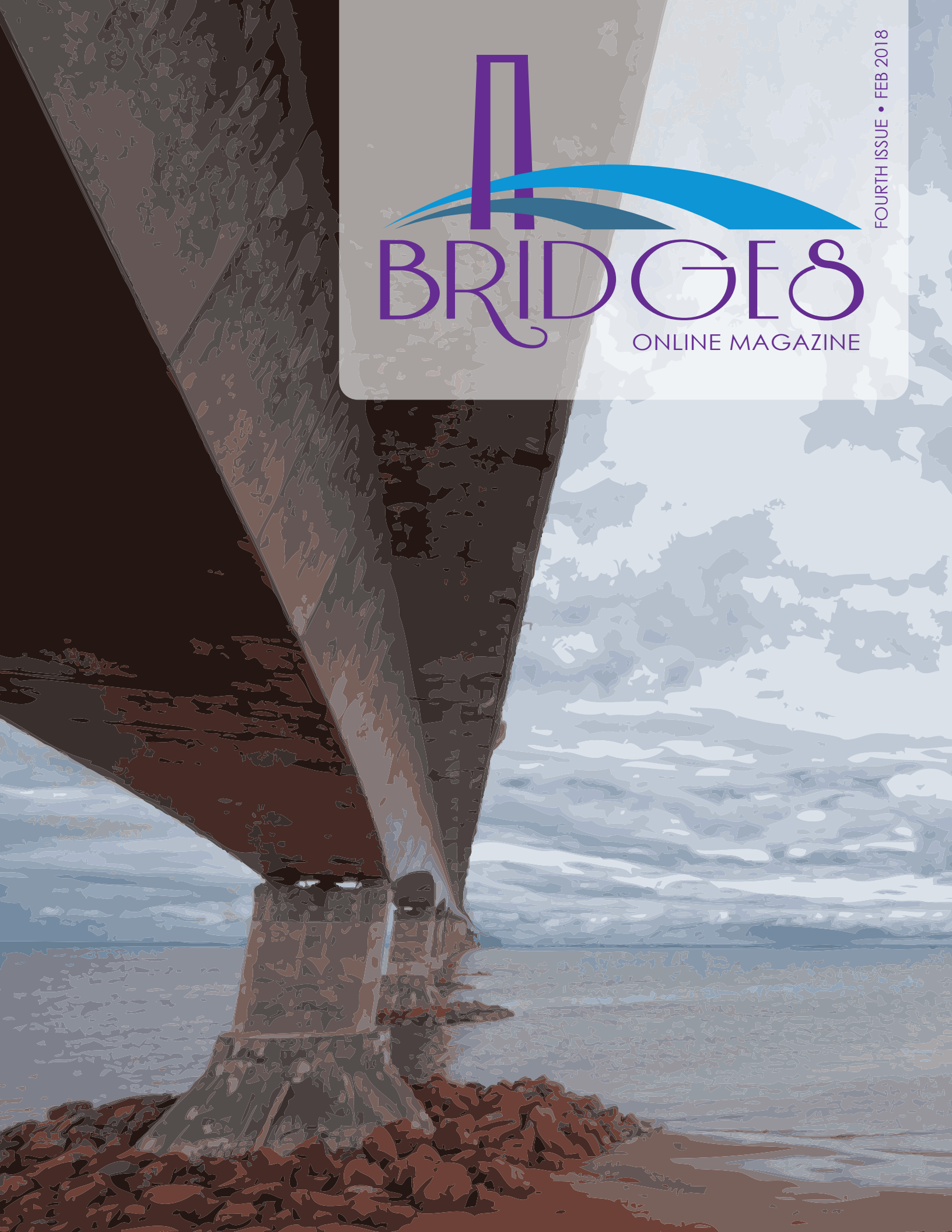




A stylized graphic of a bridge structure, possibly a cantilever bridge, is shown in a dark, textured brown color. The bridge spans across a body of water, with a rocky shoreline in the foreground. The sky is a pale blue with soft, white clouds. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image, containing the magazine's title and issue information.

BRIDGES

ONLINE MAGAZINE

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Introduction

In this, the fourth issue of the online publication *Bridges*, the members of the English Department at the College of General Studies celebrate the academic and creative achievements of the students who enrolled in our basic intensive, basic, intermediate, honors, and advanced level courses. Under the title “Transforming Visions into Words,” the reader will find many of the winning entries and honorable mentions submitted to the 49th Literary Contest judges in the categories of poetry, essay, and short story. Henceforth, you will find that these aspiring writers have much to say about the manner in which we find ourselves connected to or alienated from others in the 21st century.

In Nathaniel Pabón Cruz’s poem, the boy child rebels not just against prescribed gender roles, but against biological impositions on the body. He pays homage to “Girl,” the much anthologized short story by Jamaica Kincaid, who is told by her mother what she should and should not do in the eyes of a society critical of female behavior. At an early age, “Boy” expresses discomfort in his own skin and transgresses to become who s/he was “meant to be.” On the other hand, Gabriel Pérez Cordero touches upon technological advances that deepen the chasm between individuals and groups of people. In “Me, the Millennial,” he denounces age categories that have set an entire generation up for failure, voicing his concern about the lack of opportunities afforded to them. Similarly, María Lugo Torres grieves over the inability to speak the same language to communicate with her “Cousin/Prima,” a close relative who she “feel[s] is from space,” although both live in Puerto Rico.

In the category of essay, Nicole Náter Navarro recreates intimate portraits to reflect on the importance of words as a tool to convey meaning. These appear as a verbal/non-verbal exchange between two men in love, among true friends who share otherwise “unspoken secrets,” and in the “the furious speech” of a father imprinted on the memory of a child. Therefore, language allows humans to construct and give life to both the inner and outer worlds we inhabit, as well as the means to speak out rather than remain silent in the face of injustice. In “I Wish to Be a Man,” Paola Llompart Berríos writes about the many ways others seek to control the behavior of women, instilling self-doubt (even self-hate) and resentment when denied of alternatives in life. Finally, in “My Machine,” Yonatan Soler Rosado reflects on the inner-workings of the mind, much in the manner of a photographer who seeks to capture instances in real life.

In Cristopher Rivera Pesaresi’s “Beast Hunters,” the central character suffers from a loss of memory, leaving him in a dream-like state, on a perpetual quest for a name and a place to call his own. Moreover, in the psychological thriller, Paola Colón Nieves cleverly provides hints and clues about the identity of “M.O.S.,” the one with a mean streak directed especially at certain high school bullies. Isabel Ortiz López’s beautifully-crafted imagery in “17 Years in a Dreamscape,” provides insight into the altered mind of Victoria, leading to a surprising revelation at the end of the story about her psychological condition. Last of all, Adriana Avilés Almodóvar’s short story “Red Spider Lily,” set in a nondescript Asian town, narrates an encounter that turned sour between two people.

To conclude, we would like to give a special thanks to the professors who mentored these students and the judges who rigorously evaluated all entries during the spring semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. In addition, we thank the 2016-2017 Committee who further guided them in the process of editing their work for publication. This proved to be a difficult task in light of recent events, such as the student strike at the University of Puerto Rico and the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and María on the island and its people. Nonetheless, we hope that you enjoy the contents of the latest issue, as we look forward to future student publications of *Bridges*.

Denise López Mazzeo

“Henceforth, you will find that these aspiring writers have much to say about the manner in which we find ourselves connected to or alienated from others in the 21st century.”

Foreword

Writers often ask how to find inspiration for creative writing. I know many of the writers in this issue of *Bridges* employ at least one of these ideas to write or establish contact with their creative writing muse. What follows are tips that support a new writer's progress along the creative writing path. Be aware that these areas of focus—location, self-knowledge, inspiration, feedback and routine—sometimes overlap in implementation, but for convenience's sake, I present them here as separate ideas.

Finding a place to write is of utmost importance to the burgeoning writer. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Her words continue to resonate with contemporary writers. She emphasized that both money and location are the basic requirements for supporting a writing career. During her lifetime (1882–1941) most writers were men who had family or patrons for practical support. Woolf's ambition to become a published author led her to understand that having a place to write bolsters the work itself; as such, it must be a priority in a writer's life. Realistically, for many people, space can be a problem. Louise Desalvo author of *Writing as a Way of Healing* offers flexibility as a solution to this problem. She suggests that you claim a space in any room—or even put a desk in the hall—and call it your own. Again, marking this territory, allows the new writer to consciously claim the ambition. A writing place helps to form a writing routine, which allows you to be present when the creative muse or inspiration decides to visit. Some writers can create a sense of (writing) place at a coffee shop. Others write on their computers in bed. Jamaica Kincaid, author of the short story "Girl," continues to write in bed and in pajamas. This easy-going method allows her to concentrate on her work. Maya Angelou (1928–2014) discovered the best way to write out of necessity during her many speaking engagements. She made her hotel room her writing place. Actually, she takes it even further by saying that the hotel walls must be completely bare to prevent distraction, and that only three books were allowed in the room—Roget's Thesaurus, a dictionary and the Bible (*The Daily Beast*, "How I Write"). Angelou understood herself as a writer and employed her self-knowledge to create the ideal writing conditions.

Understanding yourself as a writer also means knowing your own voice and style, which is, admittedly, an ongoing process. Even the noted Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul wrote that he struggled with this problem for many years

(*Literary Occasions*). Regardless of self-doubt and confusion, new writers should gain some understanding of their particular voice and subject. Since writers often learn about themselves and their opinions through writing, it is important to be as honest as possible. Self-discovery comes through allowing confrontation with yourself and challenging revered positions. Try debating (on the page) with conflicting ideas you hold to decide which is the most convincing. Make sure that you routinely reflect on your writing process by jotting down the writing location and other influences on your writing that day, such as a disagreeable mood or a distracting thought. Practicing this routine reflection on your creative process allows you to quickly develop as a writer.

"How do you find inspiration? A strategy to spark creative inspiration is to seek out writers that you admire and read their works."

How do you find inspiration? A strategy to spark creative inspiration is to seek out writers that you admire and read their works. Even though you may never meet this writer because she/he is too famous to be accessible (or dead), it helps your imagination (and courage) when you feel guided by an image of your identified mentor-writer. Conduct a thorough internet search to find out everything you can about this author. Look for opportunities to connect with other new writers who also share your interest. Identify blogs/bloggers (even in the comment section), writing workshops and other venues to locate like-minded people who can help you

create a supportive writing community. Another strategy is to catch inspiration on the go. Always be ready to write. Bring your journal with you wherever you go. Its presence will remind you to write. Keynote speaker and writer Luis Negrón (*Mundo Cruel*) said, "Relying on memory is a mistake because you think you will remember but you *will* forget" (Student Research and Writing Conference, 2013). Though today's writer may take notes on a smart phone or another electronic device, it is important to realize that technology works, but only if it is handy. During our recent hurricanes, Irma and Maria, many of us learned the hard way that without electricity, our devices won't work! Keep in mind that your tools (paper, pen, device) should be readily available at all times.

One of the most difficult aspects of writing is locating a trusted reader and receiving feedback. Often, we block feedback from others because we feel our creativity is at stake—not an unreasonable fear. In fact, the wrong kind of criticism can shut down inspiration. The trick is to find someone you trust and ask for the kind of feedback that is useful. Reactions about specific

writing areas are helpful. Reader questions that ask for clarity on certain meanings is helpful. Seek out readers who understand that you are developing a piece of writing that is evolving. Realize that you do not have to make changes or do anything about the comments offered by readers. Rely on your developing judgment when it comes to sensitive revision but welcome editing comments. Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*) recommends that you "... try to read your own work as a stranger would read it, or even better, as an enemy would" (*The Guardian*, 2010).

Writers make their work a priority by establishing a routine. But that routine is highly specific to each writer. Virginia Woolf scheduled a three-hour morning writing session while Maya Angelou stretched herself across the bed and maintained all day writing sessions. Louise Desalvo warns that you may not be able to find blocks of time in which to write ("Why Having Kids is No Excuse"). She suggests writing in brief periods that add up to three hours per day. Apparently, Gertrude Stein wrote from eleven at night until daylight because she received visitors throughout the day (in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*). A writer writes. As a writer, you do not allow dissatisfaction with your work, location or mental confusion (and other resistances) to stop you. As Virginia Woolf said, "So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its color, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery..." (*A Room of One's Own*). Give writing a place in your life. Follow Desalvo's advice, "Call it work, not writing. No one I know cares if you're writing. That's why you have to call it work. Because that's what it is. Your work. Your life's work."

If you would like more information on establishing your own creative writing practice, you can read Julia Cameron's *The Right to Write*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and/or Stephen King's *On Writing* (among others) to help you discover what you have to say in the most creative way possible. Finally, to those students who were published in this fourth issue of Bridges, congratulations on your inclusion. I hope that publication encourages you to continue writing. Further, through reading these works, I want other students to feel inspired to claim the title of "writer" as well. Everyone has a story to tell. Don't miss the chance to write yours.

Cynthia Pittmann

"Boy" (Inspired by Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl")

by Nathaniel Pabón Cruz



"Ophelia": Fabiola Álvarez

Girls wear dresses. Girls can't play sports. Girls can't be Spiderman. Girls can't ride a skateboard. You're a girl, act like one. Be a princess for Halloween. Talk to boys, don't be mean. Don't wear jeans. Pink looks good on you, pink looks great on you. Wear a bow, fix your hair. And never ever swear (it's not ladylike). "I like Spiderman, and video games. And why can't I play basketball with my friends?" Girls like Barbies, not superheroes. Stop acting like that, everyone will think you're a weirdo. Girls can't like girls. Girls like boys. Boys like girls. It's the natural order of the world. Go to church. Be the perfect daughter. This makeup will defo make you hotter.

How can a mother hate her only child? How can a mother hate her transgender son?

This is how you get slapped. This is how you hide. This is why I hurt inside.

"Mother oh, mother this is me. Why can't you see this is who I'm supposed to be?"

This is how you wear a binder. This is how you use a sock. This is how you pass. This is how you handle mis-gender in class. This is how you come out. Boys have manly names, like Ethan or Jake. Boys are called Nate, never, ever Kate. This is how you take a punch; this is how you take a kick. This is how you handle a homophobic prick. This is how you handle gender dysphoria. This is how you handle a mastectomy. This is how you inject "T."

This is how you live in the body you were meant to be.

"Me, the Millennial"

by Gabriel Pérez Cordero

Greatness.

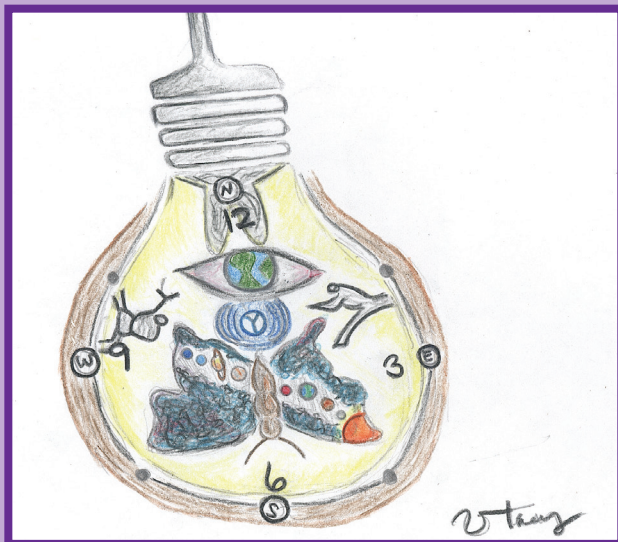
We the millennials have,
Computer in our laps,
iPhones in our pockets.
80 years since the first rocket
So connected with a grasp.

A warm piece of technology in my skin
Recites my past and future.
The selfies in bits,
Emerged in both cultures.

So little I felt
In this so called individualist generation,
Where grit is not expected,
But an unfortunate self craved laziness.

Are the expectations realistic?
I almost reach my conclusion-
Is this a false conception?

Oh-- but I nearly forgot:
I'm young and wrong,
In need of experience,
Me, the millennial.
(Read bottom to top)



"Transforming Worlds into Visions": Vivian Torres

"Cousin/Prima"

by María Lugo Torres



Artist: Paola Ortiz

I finally see my cousin who is from that little place.
It is so far away; I feel she is from space.
"¡Hola prima!" is what I first heard.
Hello family? Is that what I should infer?

We talked and laughed though
I couldn't understand her- not even a hello.
"¿Dónde es el baño?" She asked me.
I thought, "Where is the bed?"

She explained some words to me,
Like "alas" is Spanish for wings.
Although I couldn't understand,
I knew she was talking about the sand.

It's so sad that she is leaving tomorrow,
Back to her hometown, it's very far in Fajardo.
What is the Spanish word for goodbye?
"Adiós prima, adiós!" she replied.



“Words” by Nicole Náter Navarro



"Transforming Words into Visions": Víctor Vega Ward

Mario Benedetti, in one of his most celebrated poems, said “words are so free they make people panic.” Miguel de Unamuno talked about freedom when he wrote about words; he said that “men cease to be slaves” because of verbs. Pablo Neruda said that “words shine like colorful pearls, pop like silver fish, are foam, thread, metal, dew.” but for me words are the liberating weapon of the soul. Words are everything that I would like to be: free and spontaneous, dark, yet bright, outspoken, but compliant, uncertain, yet confident. I would love to be a woman as ineffable as words, and to describe the indescribable, I have three stories to tell.

On a rainy night of spring, while two friends share a bottle of champagne, words can move freely in any direction. They usually surge like the foam of that same champagne, spontaneous and light, yet there is always a word or a phrase that propels the cork and breaks the silence with its effervescence. Peter might say “I can’t hold this feeling any longer,” and Joe may unexpectedly answer “I love you as well” and kiss him bravely. If so, an irresistible passion between two gentlemen who become lovers begins. Without one saying that he loved

the other, he knew, because when words are addressed to careful listeners, not only are they what they mean, but also what they hide from foolish ears. Words, just like lovers, have the power to express the deepest most trapped feelings and to liberate them... to be like the champagne’s foam, that once it surges, pours.

On a breezy summer afternoon, words could fly through the hair of two great friends who share unspoken secrets and words as dark as the night that approaches in a hurry and as bright as the sun that takes its time to say farewell. Laura tells Keyla, “I made a grave mistake, I gave myself completely to a man that only wanted me for the pleasure of my skin,” and she replies “take this as a lesson, never share your body with someone who only thinks of sex when talking about intimacy. I know it hurts, but you are a strong and noble soul filled with new dawns. Your story doesn’t end here, the world is yours and no one can harm you if you don’t let them.” All in all, she understood that those words would not be carried by the wind, they would be safeguarded in her blood stream, taken to the beating of her suffering heart and spread through every single

corner of her body that needs ease and solace, so that every day that her heart skips a beat, those words would fill the space with life and hope.

On an early autumn morning, leaves, like words, pile up on top of each other in the front lawn of two children that play before leaving for school. Carlos, an outspoken boy, tells his sister, "Caroline, come, let's jump and roll on the leaves before papa finds us." Caroline, compliant, answers, "No, papa doesn't like when we do that." Nonetheless, Carlos pushes her towards the mountain of leaves and the young girl's words get buried in laughter and warm colors. Then, the father appears and gives a furious speech. His words, as confident as his boot prints in the mud, and uncertain as the memories of a once audacious childhood that make him doubt the very reason of his discourse. Hence, the prints were left not only in the mud, but also in the souls of the children. For Carlos, the words were imprinted on his behavior from then on, suggesting he should control his passions and rebellion. For his sister, however, the words meant nothing compared to the fun engraved in her from loosening up that day. This story is just a glimpse of the duality words can have in meaning for every single person in the world.

Most words are born with an established, structured and thought-out definition, and yet often, the most memorable words are those that have been given a meaning beyond, by speakers, listeners, writers, readers... More importantly, without feeling from the person that expresses and the person that receives, words are just characters and sounds. They have the capacity to be the weapon that liberates the soul of old secrets and newfound passions. They have the ability of creating relationships and groundbreaking ideas; of awakening a yearning for knowledge and learning.

I strive to be a woman as ineffable as words, to be able to touch hearts, penetrate minds and reach souls. I would love to be like Peter who had the courage to spontaneously confess his love for another man, and like Joe who was eager to respond "I love you" back. I would also like to be like Laura, who made a mistake and recognized she was in a dark place, just as much as I would like to be like her friend Keyla who lifted her spirit with bright loving words. I would like to be like both children, compliant when it corresponds me, and confident when my soul demands. To be able to express the words that live inside me, and not to silence a single one. This is why I am thankful for words, for I am able to free my angels and demons with speech, verse and prose.

"I Wish to be a Man"

by Paola Llompart Berrios

I see my reflection in the mirror and ask myself: Why did I have to be a woman? Now, do not get me wrong, I have nothing against women. I am a woman. It is just that I hate how my gender dictates how I should act, even if that is not who I am. It becomes frustrating to see how male privilege triumphs in my daily existence. Even my closest friends and family have ridiculed me for thinking this way. Despite all, I fight against these socially constructed genders labels are so deeply rooted that it seems impossible to break away from them. I cannot see the perks of being a woman in this patriarchal system. I would prefer to be a man in order to seek these advantages and feel free.

I wish to be a man because I would be allowed to say what I feel or think without being criticized, ridiculed or labeled as over-dramatic. One time, my uncle told me that there are things women should not or must not do because, "We are fragile." Trying to reason with him, I explained my end of the conversation, claiming how women and men are equal. He was not at all interested in listening to me and shut me down completely. As his niece and a woman, I felt humiliated. And, almost immediately, I began to question whether, perhaps, I was overreacting. There I was, questioning my reasoning, my beliefs. I began doubting what I stood (and continue to stand for) and began self-attributing my rage and anger to my "naturally" over-dramatic and illogical femininity. I thought that maybe his shutting me down was not such a big deal. But, in reality, it was. My thoughts and arguments were out there. I tried to talk, to be heard, but there was not an attentive, willing ear to consider what I had to say. As a woman in society, my opinions are mistaken for outbursts, and my analyses are melodramatic scenes. If each of my critical reflections were a staged scene, I would probably be a professional soap opera actress by now.

Showing any kind of emotion must be based upon my femininity. I want to express emotion freely. If I wish to cry, be upset, even angry I want people to



be concerned about my feelings instead of questioning whether or not I am on my period. When a man gets angry, it is an accepted natural macho response. If I get mad, I am a drama queen. My mood changes, depending on the circumstances, just like any other man. We both have feelings. By saying that my sole reason to be upset, as a woman, depends on the timeframe of my period is saying that a man's feelings are to be considered, but my emotions and thoughts should be disregarded.

In addition, I do not like the idea of watching my weight, fixing my hair in a certain way or wearing makeup, just because my gender is always expected to be both beautiful and feminine. Once, my sister stated how she was not beautiful because of a pimple on her face. For her, that small detail meant that she was imperfect. She had a flaw that made her feel insecure. I want to feel that my body is truly mine. I get a say of what happens to it, how I take care of it, and how I feel about it. Everything I do should be my choice. Gaining or losing weight is my decision, but it should not define how pretty I am or feel. My hair is done in the way I feel most comfortable in. My curls are there and I choose to embrace them whenever I feel like it. Being beautiful does not mean being flawless; it should mean character, intelligence, and personality.

I despise the fact that my voice has to come together with a ladylike existence. Politeness for a woman means to be humble and quiet. Confidence may be mistaken for rudeness. When speaking, I want my voice to count. I remember when I talked back to this irritating male chauvinist about abortions being a woman's decision and my mother wanted me to withdraw what I said. I do not know what hurts more, knowing that you have ideas, arguments, and reasoning and having that being taken away from you or talking to closed minds that will not listen because I am simply a girl, "the teenage girl, who does not know what she is doing." I wish people would be more open to listening to my thoughts and opinions and only after listening, really listening, decide if these are worthy. However, that does not happen often. Usually, they are critical even before I start speaking because of my age and gender.

I would like to be assigned chores because I have

to collaborate with the household, not because I am practicing to make my future husband happy. A wedding ring should not be a modern-day chain or cattle tag. I am not a slave or a sexual object. I do not want to be a house slave to make my marriage work. I do not wish to leave my career to depend on a wealthy man. I do not want people to ask, "If it wasn't for your husband, what will be of you?" Marriage is a commitment between two people who need to share equal responsibility and love. This relationship is not one-sided; be aware that I am no superwoman.

I have heard plenty of times that women use the term feminism to play the victim and portray men as evil creatures, but this is a wrong. I need feminism to stand up for what I want, while validating that we are all equal. Labels are just getting in the way of our true potential and ability to progress as human beings. These gender labels should be abolished because I certainly do not want another generation of women to go through the same difficulties as I have experienced.

If I were a boy, I bet that all the things I have wished for would come true. I could go out with my friends at night. I could wear anything and go alone anywhere I wanted to go, regardless of the time because in reality, I do not. I wish to have my own voice. I long to be able to eradicate inequality and focus on the practical. I do not want to be questioned for having my own thoughts, behaviors, and choices. I want to broaden the established ideals of beauty. I want my opinion to matter and be recognized. This is the reason why I despise being a woman. Society demands from me these absurd ideas that make me feel less than, meanwhile, men are free to choose what they want in life. I want that. I am tired of wishing. I do not want to be a woman who is supposed to do things that she does not want to do. I wish to be a man. No, wait. It is important for me to make this correction. I want to be human.

“My Machine”

by Yonatan Soler Rosado

“You’re always in your own world.” I have constantly heard this from my parents, friends, and others throughout my life. I won’t deny it. I have many incessant distracting thoughts that occupy me. Until two to three years ago, something changed; if not, I would have still been contemplating that world inside my head.

Now I can focus my mind. I see the world in a unique way. I find colors where there are none to be found. I love the unnoticed aspects of life and the process of giving these visibilities. I like to imagine the world as a coloring book but one where I enjoy coloring outside the lines and inserting new color backgrounds. Sometimes, I enjoy extending those lines that are already in place in order to encompass a closer representation of what I interpret to be my reality.

It’s hard to understand how long it took for me to find a way to give my thoughts a new life so that others could see what lives inside the flamboyant cage of my mind. To clarify, it’s not sorcery or any type of magic, although to my eyes it is very similar. I call it photography.

However, the term photography seems a bit too formal for what I have in mind. If we look it up in the Merriam Webster online dictionary, it reads: “Photography is the art or process of producing images by the action of radiant energy and especially light on a sensitive surface (as film or an optical sensor).” Indeed, this is an accurate definition, but it is not my definition. To illustrate, if we look up the word “statue” from the same source it reads: “A carved or cast figure of a person or animal.” However, the reality is something different. The real meaning of the statue is what it represents, which is much deeper than just a carved piece of marble or rock. This representational meaning example, retains its truth when I apply it to photography.

On Christmas day, some years ago, I received my first emotion-capturing device, one that could create bridges between fiction and reality. It was a device that could stop time. I would take it everywhere, day-by-day deciphering the secrets that the machine held. I gained new eyes through this machine; I saw things that I had never seemed to notice before.

As I used the device, I learned from my experience. I understood that photography wasn’t just about capturing many moments, but the quality improved as I took the time to think about which moments should be captured, and the meaning behind them. I gained this insight as I walked through one of the oldest cities of my island, Old San Juan. It was here where I saw this humble old man on the ground wearing a peculiar hat, and playing his accordion while trying to get by in life with the tips he received from spectators. I saw other people carrying devices similar to

mine, but they were all using them unconsciously, while standing up and still moving. In that moment, I dropped to my knees on the cobblestones and captured the essence of this moment. Looking at what I had captured, I knew I had established a connection; I knew it was the perspective that was meant to be captured. Most importantly, I tipped the man for his musical abilities and for the lesson he had given me.



“Photographer Sketch Portrait”: macrovector/FreePik.com

“Beast Hunters” (Abridged Excerpt)

by Christopher Rivera Pesaresi



“Light at the End of Darkness”: Iván Romero

“Oh, another lost soul?” An old man says, with grey hair pushed back and a beard as white as snow.

“Where am I?” I say, with a painful doubt.

He takes his hands and puts them at the back of his red robe, walking to a fireplace located on another wall. “You are in a dream, of course.” He gazes at the fire, waiting for me to respond.

“A dream?” I ask.

“Yes, this is all a dream,” he says. “You have awoken with no memory whatsoever. You must look for them in the nightmare across the gate in the forest if your desire is to wake up.”

“If I have woken up with no memory, how do I know how to speak? Or the words I am using right now?” I say, out of breath.

“You are given the necessary materials to survive. Words are something that define us, and without them, there is no life at all. So, it must not be taken away,” he says. “Now, during your journey, memories will come to you while you progress. Others will come as visions as well, and they will feel as if you’re re-living them once again.”

“All of that is trapped in a nightmare?” I ask.

“Yes, and there is such little time,” he whispers with a hoarse voice. He turns around and moves in front of me. “I am known as The Keeper, guardian of this realm.” His presence is soothing, and even though his voice is strong, the words

come out courteously. “Sit, if you may,” he says with a smile.

I sit and he grasps one of my shoulders from behind. “You are a strong one. I can feel it, and I know it as well.” He takes a chair and puts it in front of me. Right after accommodating it, he sits with both hands folded on to each other. “You, are a hunter. A hunter of beasts, a hunter of wisdom.” He says. “My job is not to tell you who you are completely, but to open the gate so you can find it for yourself, and for your name, as well.”

I stare perplexed at the floor, holding on to the wall of tears that surfaced from my eyes. Not knowing who I am, I only think of the unthinkable. A hunter... of beasts? I cannot recall any past events. Do I have people who care about me? Who

may be looking for me? Oh, the unknown seems to be terrifying. What if I'm somebody who will regret knowing his existence? An empty carcass, an insignificant waste of skin? Will it be worth it?

"Listen," he says, waking me up from my thoughts and holding on to both of my shoulders, "do not let your mind feed you pain, or worry. You have to pursue your reality, before it fades away. Only then, you will know what to do with it. But at this instant, you must take leave from this dream, and enter the nightmare you ought to vanquish."

"Can I ask you one more thing?" I ask.

"Tell me," as he sits and lets his back touch the chair.

"If I find a way out, will you come with me?" I say.

His face changes. His eyes give a slow glow, and his lips tuck in a smile. "I will be there with you. I promise." His eyes water, and he stands up from his seat only to look at the window that shows sparkling glimmer floating softly all around the view. "Now, run deep into the woods and do not stop. At the end there is a gate that will open at your presence, and as soon as you step in, the nightmare will commence." He turns toward me and gives a single nod. "Best of luck."

I respond with a nod as well and run out of his house, viewing how the gigantic pillars and the vivid realm recedes as I run towards the forest. Everything darkens and I'm back where I came from. The cracking of the leaves becomes louder as time passes; it is the only thing that meets my ears aside from my breathing.

My feet stop at the sight of a grey and moldy entrance, in the form of an arch. I touch the rough and metallic surface and run my fingers through the soft and dark green mold of countless years. One spherical pattern in the middle of the gate lights up with a sky blue hue. At my touch, it disperses itself into several lines throughout the whole door. I squint my eyes to decipher the figure on the door. It looks so familiar...

I feel lightheaded as I keep looking at the pattern. It looks like a bird spreading its wings, ready to arise a new flight. Its face is shaped at its side and its beak is closed. As the door starts to open, the bird is divided in half until a darkened room is revealed. Slowly, I go step by step, until I am finally inside and a creak from the wooden floor snaps in my ears. The gate closes unhurriedly and with a croak that draws my attention, mostly because I don't want to look at what's in front of me. I move my head so that it faces straight up, and a big inhalation comes instinctively.

"The nightmare has commenced," I whisper to myself.

"M.O.S."

by Paola Colón Nieves

"It was all an accident, I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't stop her. I couldn't stop myself and it just happened. That's why I am here. We had... I had endured too much. I had to make them stop. That week I just had enough. It wasn't my intention to hurt anyone."

...

On Monday morning, my little brother entered my room and started to annoy me. First he was pushing me softly until he got bored, and then he took my car keys and didn't want to give them to me. "Stop it, I have to go," I said. "Nope," he answered and started running around my room with me following him.

"Alexa, you're going to be late!" yelled my mom from downstairs. My little brother threw the keys under my bed and then ran away to his room. I laid down on the floor and grabbed them. "Why don't you teach him a lesson?" said Mos. I looked at myself in the mirror and replied "I can't do that, he's my brother." I grabbed my backpack and left for school.

Mos is my best friend, but she is the opposite of me. She answers back to people, she can't control her anger and she doesn't let anyone mess with her. On the other hand, according to Mos, I am shy and I don't step up for myself, that's why she intervenes and protects me from people sometimes.

...

When I got to my class, everyone was already there. As soon as I entered, I heard the whispers of the jocks. "My grandma has that same shirt," said one of them. "It looks like she didn't brush her hair," said another one, "Has she ever brushed her hair?" another replied. I took a deep breath and walked to my chair. "You're late, next time you will have to go to the office," said the teacher. I waited impatiently for the class to be over, after forty minutes, eight balls of paper thrown at me and ten more hurtful comments, the class ended. Great, three periods more before lunch break, and then three more after it.

When I arrived to the school cafeteria I heard everyone laughing. Then I noticed a couple of posters with pictures of me looking distracted in the classrooms. Those kinds of pictures that are taken in the



"Día de los Muertos": Paola Reyes

exact moment when you blink or do something and you look awful. "Silence, please," said the leader of the jocks after climbing on a table, "Give an applause to our own school model, Alexa!" Everyone applauded, the jock got close to me, "Do you like them? I'm thinking of becoming a photographer." "I love them," said his cheerleader girlfriend. At that exact moment, Mos arrived. "As a photographer you have no talent, and with your mediocre grades... you should start sending your resume to all the fast foods around your parents' house." The jock and the cheerleader looked at me with an angry face and then left.

I ran to the bathroom to hide. I rested my fists on the counter of the sink and started crying. "What they did, was really stupid, it wasn't funny at all, you can't give them power over you," said Mos, "stop crying, stop crying because of them." I hit the counter with my fist. "How many times have I told you to stop doing that? Don't hurt yourself. Hurt them!" said Mos. "You know I can't do that," I looked myself into the mirror, "I can't." Then I went back to my normal routine of the day. At the end of the day, the principal of the school met with

us to talk about this Friday's Senior Activity. It is a small carnival that will be held on the indoor basketball court and will be hosted by us, seniors.

...

On the afternoon of that day, I had a fight with my older brother. We were playing soccer and he lost. The thing is, he is a bad loser, so he started a fighting game. After a couple of seconds, the silliness of the game turned to annoying. He started hitting me less softly, until he actually hurt me. I told him to stop it, but he didn't, he kept hitting me as a game. And that's where Mos showed up. She wanted to punch him. She started to lift her right fist, but I held it with my left hand so she didn't hurt him. "Stop acting like you will punch me, you know you won't," he said. We turned around, "yeah, now you go cry in your room."

After that, I locked myself in my room. That's when the tears began to fall. I didn't cry in sadness, those where angry tears. I hate that I can't help it. I went up to the mirror and saw myself crying. "I hate feeling this powerlessness, and not being able to make them stop,"

and then, I punched the wall beside the mirror. One, twice, three times. I continued crying after that, and sat on my bed. "I don't know why you keep doing that," said Mos. "When a kid is mad, he hurts others or hurts himself," I looked down, "that's something that I heard once, and it is true, maybe it doesn't apply to everyone, but it does to me. I would rather punch walls than punch others, and that's the only way I can get the anger out of me." "Well now I know..." said Mos, "It is weird, but okay... Now stop crying, and don't pay attention to anyone beside yourself." And then Mos left.

...

Tuesday of that week, a cheerleader tried to humiliate me in front of my class by saying mean things about me that weren't real, but Mos ended up making fun of her saying some things about her that were actually true. So what did the cheerleader do? She said, "Alexa, you're going to pay for this. Be careful this Friday."

...

Wednesday was uneventful. The cheerleader was mad at me, probably planning something for that Friday so she and her boyfriend left me alone all day. At home, my little brother was doing homework all the afternoon, he's three years younger than me, so he isn't that little, just so you know. And my older brother, by two years, was working so I didn't see him.

...

The next day my car didn't want to start, so my older brother had to take me and my little brother to school; we are in different schools so he took me first. When we arrived, my big brother started to push me so I would get out of the car. "Dude stop, I have to pick up my things!" I yelled at him. He kept doing it. My little brother immediately said "Alexa, stop yelling, God, you always want to draw attention to yourself," with a serious tone. "Don't you see that he's the one bothering me," I replied. "But you are yelling," he said. I looked at him, picked up my backpack and got out of the car. I swear that he hates me, he always has it against me. He always ends up making me feel bad, either sad or angry, sometimes both.

...

On that Friday, seniors didn't have class; we were preparing everything for the activity at night. And then, night arrived. I was in charge of one of the games, you know the game where you throw the ball and the person sitting there falls if you hit the spot? Well, I was

the person sitting there. Coincidence? More like, the cheerleader was in charge of assigning the tasks to every senior. After falling into the water more than 10 times, my shift was over.

I went to the locker rooms to get changed, but when I got out of the shower, my clothes weren't there. "They couldn't have actually done this, could they?" I asked myself. I took the towel and got out of the locker rooms to the pool area, which is the place where the locker rooms lead you. To my surprise, my whole class was standing out there with cameras. The flashes and the laughs began as soon as they saw me. I was paralyzed for a couple of seconds until Mos got me inside of the locker rooms again. After a few minutes, I heard everyone leave the pool area, and I sneaked out and found my clothes on the floor next to the door.

After I got dressed, I encountered myself with the cheerleader by the pool. "That's for making fun of me the other day," she said. "Don't you do the same every single day?" said Mos to her, "and have you paid for that? No, you haven't. You just think you can get away with everything you do, don't you? Well that will end now." Mos grabbed her by her hair and they started fighting.

I drew a blank from then on. I just remember that they started fighting, Mos knocked her out by hitting her a couple of times, and the cheerleader fell unconscious to the pool. She almost drowned... but her boyfriend appeared and got her out of there. He gave her CPR and she woke up. "You were going to let her drown? Are you crazy?" are some of the things I remember he said. I didn't want her to die... but I froze. I didn't know what to do... She's okay now.

It was all an accident, I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't stop her. I couldn't stop myself and it just happened. That's why I am here. We had... I had endured too much. I had to make them stop. That week I just had enough. It wasn't my intention to hurt anyone.

After that, everyone found out about what happened. I ended up in court accused of attempted murder. The judge ordered me come here, to this mental institution, until I got "better." I told my psychiatrist about Mos and everything that happened, that week and before it. He prescribed me some pills, and after I started taking those pills, I never saw my other self again. I never saw Mos again... so yeah, that's my story. It's your turn now, why are you here?

“17 Years in a Dreamscape” by Isabel Ortiz López

Light streamed in through the open window, filtering through the lavender curtains. The breeze drifted into the room, causing ripples of light and shadow to dance on the turquoise walls. One beam of light pierced through a gap in the curtains, directly onto the closed eyes of a sleeping girl. At first, Victoria seemed too anchored in her dreams to be woken by sunlight, but eventually she began to stir. From her side she shifted to her stomach, her face pressed into the pillow, uttering a resigned and frustrated groan as if to tell the sun, yes, she would be waking up. She opened her eyes to a room that was just the slightest bit too bright, and tried to raise herself to a sitting position. Her mind was awake, but her body needed more convincing, so it fell back into the warm confines of her bed.

She had gone from waking to dreaming once more, and her subconscious mind painted a scene of teenagers surrounding a campfire. Tents formed a circle around the fire, and she could see them passing beers and the occasional joint. She spotted a trio of girls talking animatedly, and as she began to approach them, a scream pierced the cool air, and all of the talk and laughter around the campfire ceased. She quickstepped to reach the girls, but they didn't seem to be aware of her. She didn't know them, but... she knew their names. She didn't question their identities, and simply let herself become the spectator.

...

Nicole grabbed Lydia's arm and they looked at each other with worry in their eyes. Nicole's twin, Roberta, rolled hers. "It's just some idiots playing a prank, you'll see." Lydia loosened Nicole's hand from her arm, but continued to hold it with the grip of a person trying to contain themselves, as she leaned in to whisper to both of them. Roberta saw as she leaned in, and the light from the fire reflected in Lydia's eyes, a fear in them that could not have been more out of place in this high school camping trip to Bosque Guilarte. Lydia bit her lip hard and blinked rapidly, holding back tears that

made her eyes shine brighter. "It sounded like Sofía," she breathed, her voice breaking.

Nicole let go of Lydia's hand and staggered back, while Roberta continued to gaze into Lydia's eyes in shock. Nicole started to run in the direction the scream had come from. Roberta finally swiveled away from Lydia and called across the campfire, "Daniel! It's Sofía!" Just as a lanky boy with long blonde hair turned around to look at her, another scream tore across the night sky. Faint murmurs had begun again after the first scream, but all fell silent, and Daniel's head whipped toward its origin. He screamed, "Sofía!" in anguish, sprinting into the dense brush with Lydia and Roberta following close behind.

Daniel was so tall his strides were long enough to catch up to Nicole and then pass her. She would not be left behind, however, and sped up to keep pace with him. They bulled through the branches and stumbled over unseen roots and stones, the moon nowhere to be found. Daniel halted to reorient himself, but she ran past him. "Over here!" she called. He

followed quickly, and just as they ran across a small stream, he heard the crashing steps of someone running away just behind them. He ran back, "Nicole, over here!" he called, crossing the stream again. He reached a small cave, made of the roots of two trees, and he stopped at its mouth just as the moon shone through the branches. Paralyzed, he stared into the black maw that swallowed the light, and he wished he had just kept running, running and running, and never looking back.

Before he knew what was happening, Nicole was standing behind him, and he tried to grab her and shove her away, "Nicole, no, wait." She shook him off and flashed the light from her phone into the cave. She stood there, still, quiet, her mouth hanging open and horror in her eyes. As the other two plowed through the forest after them, calling their names, a sound started to build inside of her chest. She collapsed to her knees on the wet, decomposing leaves of the forest floor, and the sound rose to a keening wail



Artist: Paola Ortiz

of pain. The sound made Daniel so distraught he shifted confusedly from covering his ears to dropping his hands and shaking his head, an agony contorting his features, until he finally fell to his knees next to her. He held her tightly, so tightly that he seemed to be holding together the pieces of her that were breaking apart. And they wept, they wept as savagely as children, not caring that the sounds they made bared their souls to the world.

...

Victoria watched them from atop the cave. Silent tears ran down her cheeks, just as she collapsed to the ground, and woke up from the dream with a gasp. She sat up and held her chest hard, as if pressing a wound to stop the flow of blood. It made her remember the boy, holding the girl on the forest floor. Who was he? Who was she? What did they see? Some tears trailing down her cheeks fell into her mouth, and she tasted salt as she gasped through the pain. *Why am I crying? I don't even know what they saw.* She could guess though, and her mind supplied a horrific image. No! She shook her head wildly; that was not what they saw, that was not what happened to... Sofia. She stopped shaking, her mind racing. *Why do I feel like I know her?*

...

Her day was a normal one, the kind of day that doesn't get recorded in your memory so that, even when you're 80 years old, you remember the good old times. No, she went to school, spent lunch break with her friends, and went back home. She tried to act as normal as possible, especially around her parents, who could notice the slightest change in her demeanor. All throughout the day, however, she kept replaying the short glimpses of dream she could still remember. The first scream, the campfire mirrored in Lydia's eyes—But how did she even know the girl was called Lydia? It was all far too strange.

She didn't want to go to sleep that night. She paced her room, watched TV until her head ached, browsed the Internet until there was no other social media site she could check. She was so focused on staying awake that it took her a while to notice the sunlight filtering into her room once more.

It was much harder to stay awake the second day. She felt like someone had replaced parts of her brain with cotton. Her skin was too warm, so she felt cold constantly, and her eyes itched to the point that she wished she could rub rash cream on them. She didn't act differently from the day before, but her best friend, Sonia (whose eyes seemed to catch every detail of life), passed a tender hand over her shoulder while still talking to a friend across the lunch table from them. Victoria appreciated the gesture of concern, but decided not to talk to Sonia about her dream even as she drove them home after school.

They talked about everything and nothing at all, from school to books to movies they could go see next weekend. The conversation was a pleasant

escape, but it ended all too quickly once she dropped off Sonia at her house. She drove the rest of the way home with music blasting through her speakers to drown out her thoughts. She still managed to wonder why Nicole and Daniel had reacted so strongly in comparison to the others. What was Sofia to them?

She got home, yelled hello to her parents and scurried to her room before they could ask anything of her. She dropped her bag on the floor, kicked off her shoes and threw her keys on top of them, gracelessly falling on her bed. To no one's surprise, a couple of seconds passed after her head hit the pillow and she was already asleep.

...

I can't see. A soft hush was all around her. The darkness seemed as solid as a wall, and if she moved an inch in any direction, she might collide against it. She tried to move her hand to feel around her. It felt strange to have no visual confirmation that she had moved. How was she to trust her mind?

She started to notice she was lying on spongy dampness, and her nose told her she had her cheek pressed against earth. She could also smell blood, but before she could figure out where it came from, she was startled from her thoughts by heavy footsteps stepping much too close to her head.

"Fu-!" a voice exclaimed and interrupted itself.

What in the world...? She couldn't even begin to understand what was going. She heard feet shift around uncertainly in what sounded like leaves, and then the sonorous beeps of someone typing into a smartphone. She assumed she could hear the ringing of a telephone, and heard a voice answering, "Fernando, what the hell's going on?" Fernando inhaled sharply, "Doctor! Y-you see, we tried our best to keep her awake while we erased her last dream, we were so close, too—"

"That is not what I asked, Fernando!" the doctor responded in anger.

Fernando inhaled sharply, but gathered himself quickly, "Doctor, her subconscious mind is fighting us. We're defenseless; we've never dealt with something like this before."

Victoria felt a hand touch her cheek. She tried to recoil, but she didn't think she had; she still felt the weight of his hand. She could understand that they were talking about her, but her confusion filled up every thought in her head. She started to feel afraid when she heard Fernando begin to sob.

"She was so perfect, Aimee. So docile for... Gosh, has it really been 17 years? We built a world for her in her mind where she could be happy while we conducted experiments. Why would she fight us? We were so good to her—"

"Fernando, come back to your senses! She's waking, and you are exposing everything!" Dr. Aimee shouted.



Before the doctor could continue, there came the sound of another pair of footsteps running through the leaves towards Fernando and Victoria. The frantic voice of another scientist, this one female, began, "Fernando, tell me what's going on, all of the sensors lost her, is she—", stopping when she was three feet away from Victoria.

A scream pierced the cool air. Victoria's heart pounded and bashed against her ribcage, and she could clearly see before her shining flames, reflected in the eyes of a terrified girl. She could see her lips move, see two other girls react to her words, the boy's head moving to respond to the calling of his name, as the female scientist let loose another scream.

In the face of disaster, Dr. Aimee was suddenly calm, "Fernando, Ms. Martínez, as you can see, Subject 05's subconscious is far too damaged for further use. Abort the mission now, while we salvage as much data as possible."

"B...but... Yes, doctor," Fernando ended the call. He grabbed Ms. Martínez's arm forcefully, "Come on, Martínez," and they ran away from where Victoria lay.

They were not fast enough, however, and Daniel heard them as he raced through the forest. He came to the mouth of the cave where she lay. He seemed calm, but his hands shook as he crouched down and reached out to cradle her bloody head. Nicole came upon the scene seconds after, and once the light from her phone hit the girl's battered body, she swiveled away. She gulped in mouthfuls of air, and she gazed at the full moon through the forest's canopy as she steeled herself. They had to finish the mission; they had to wake her up. They would never have another chance if they failed now.

She turned back to Daniel and Victoria's prone body. Daniel was trying to talk to her, but he wasn't sure if she could hear, she wasn't responding. He grabbed the arm farthest from him and pulled her more securely onto his lap, almost throwing up as he felt the deep gouges in her arm.

"What did they do to her?" Nicole's voice was barely a whisper.

Daniel shook his head and felt tears stinging his eyes. "They never realized that what they were doing was slowly killing her. They pushed the human mind as far as it could go." He breathed in, trying to unblock his throat, "We were constructed to save her, Nicole. She constructed us to save her. But, I'm not sure if there's anything left to save..."

Nicole dropped to her knees next to him, holding him tightly, as tightly as he had held her in the last dream, his sobs shaking her as well. "We have to try. You know we'll be there when she wakes. We'll help her heal. She's strong, or haven't you noticed? She's been fighting all these years, even as her conscious mind was tricked into thinking she was a normal girl named Victoria."

"Red Spider Lily"

by Adriana Avilés Almodóvar

It was like waves of sea foam flooding the grounds of the forest. White poppy flowers sit around seeming like delicate dancers that sway with the wind. Ace walked down the path that was clear of flowers yet invaded by the giant trees that have been there for centuries, like standing soldiers. Golden ornaments clung onto the branches, making light clicking noises as they touch one another. He was confused, disoriented, not knowing how he ended up in such place without knowledge of it, but even so his body kept moving as if it knew where it was going.

The more steps he took the darker the road became, only receiving a subtle light from up ahead at the end of the path. A rice paper door stood there, surrounded by foliage and even seeming impossible to open with the branches of the trees holding onto the sides. He needs to go through there. It was where the light shone the most and where he felt like he needed to go.

Very warily he took the edge of the door, slowly sliding it to the side and stepping into the blinding light. It took him a while before he could open his eyes comfortably, realizing that he wasn't in the majestic forest anymore, but in a very busy Asian town. Round lanterns hung out at the corner of every shop while some shopkeepers tried to lure clients with bizarre discounts and offers, seeming as if a small local festival was being held at the moment and everyone decided to come. Dancers expertly fluttering their fans in exquisite attires, performers perform their routine to entertain the townspeople and loud music was playing in every corner. He walked around, looking at what could spark his interest, but nothing seemed to quite do so until he saw her.

She was quite unique compared to everyone that surrounded her. Silky smooth hair cascaded down to her hips, wearing a traditional dress that had an elegant phoenix sewn on with golden thread on the red fabric. Her almond shaped eyes catching his gaze for a moment before they bashfully hid behind her fan. Ace couldn't help but chuckle at her cute reaction, thinking that maybe he should get her something,



Photograph: Asian Development Bank

maybe a small detail to have an excuse to talk to her. He took a quick glance around, spotting a shop that sold hair ornaments that looked beautiful and probably would look even better on her smooth hair. Without any second to hesitate he bought one and walked towards her, feeling shy as he got closer. He shook those feelings and took a deep breath before gently tapping her shoulder. It made her jolt, turning around while hiding behind her fan, but a small smile curled up on her lips when she saw who it was.

They didn't talk much. Just the usual greeting and small talk to break the ice, but it was enough for each other, especially since they had just met. Their looks did most of the talking they needed anyway for them to understand the other. He had waited for a while before taking out from his pocket the gift he bought for her, thus earning a small gasp that was followed by a thanking smile as she stepped closer to take the gift. It was a hair pin with a design of a white poppy flower, simple yet beautiful as she set it on her hair, seeming like a flower floating on an ink river without getting

tainted, staying on its pure state. She thanked him once again for the gift that for her wasn't that necessary, but it was a sweet touch from him. Exchanging glances and bashful smiles until a few firecrackers burst nearby, startling the pair at the moment which led to a small fit of laughter from both sides. He didn't know why, but her smile reminded him of an elegant fox, walking gracefully through the trees.

It was then when she began to walk away, inviting him to a playfully to follow her as she starts to trot her way between the busy crowds. Ace looked around, thinking that she was joking around which she clearly wasn't. When he started to see how she went farther and farther, disappearing into the crowd, making him quickly react and start to trot his way through the sea of people who were already bumping with each other. There were times where he could catch a small glimpse of her hair ornament that shimmered or hear her light chuckles among them. It seemed like the chase would last an eternity if it kept up like this. Turn after turn, street after street, until they ended up in at a dead end.



A large door straight ahead waited to be opened. She didn't hesitate to fling the door open, swiftly slipping into the darkness beyond it. Ace stared at the opened door, at the pitch black shadow that didn't let him see what was inside. Part of him said to not set a foot inside and leave her there, but another part of him was screaming with curiosity, wanting to know what was unknown to him inside. He battled to come up with a decision in his mind, but his heart beat and the unconscious steps he took made him surrender to his curiosity. He took a deep breath before he stepped into the dark shadow that swallowed him and what was left of the light. Ironically, he had his eyes shut since there was no need to have them open anyway, walking blindly with no notion of exactly where he was going. He listened to noises that resembled that of snapping small branches and squelching leaves that mixed with mud altogether, but it was the soft laughter that reached his ears that gave him some sort of signal to open his eyes already.

Slowly and carefully he started to look through the slit of his eyes, brightness overcoming his blurry vision, as confusion washed over him while staring at the new scenery. A whole field of poppy surrounded him, shining bright with the sun that shone over them. There weren't any walls or loud music that rumbled against his ears and the door he had come from had disappeared long ago. The only thing that had remained the same was her, standing in the middle of the field just a few steps from him. Her beauty was still outstanding as she put to shame the little petite white dancers of the wind. Flashing her foxlike smile, she stepped closer to him. Ace's heart fluttered, a bashful smile slipped from his lips while stepping closer to her as well. Feeling as if his heart throbbed louder against his chest, wondering if she was able to hear how her presence drove his heart wild. Seconds felt like hours, up until the moment her hand rested on his chest. Locking gazes with each other, sweat crawling down the back of his neck as she leaned forward. Was she going to embrace him? Kiss him? His mind began to get clouded with thought, zoning out as he leaned forward unconsciously, but a sharp pain that began to sprout from his chest made him snap out of it. It felt like sharp shards of glass cutting their way into his chest. He then looked down at her face with such graceful features and an expression he hadn't seen before. Her hand was halfway through in his chest, while a devious

grin tugged on the corners of her lips.

He gripped her wrist miserably, trying to pull it out, but her strength said otherwise as she dug deeper. A knot began to form in his throat, running out of whatever air was left in his lungs. Red petals began to spurt out of his mouth, falling down swiftly on the ground and staining the petite white dancers that witnessed it all. The pain was too much for him, too agonizing, too torturous and he wanted it to end already. She snickered while gripping something in his body and dragging it out in one pull. Red spider lilies sprouted out of his chest, reaching up to her hand, holding something important and vital. It was like a mixture of horribly gruesome, yet elegant and delicate at the same time. More of his red petals spilled out of his mouth, staining the white poppies that gradually looked less white and became redder. His legs quivered and knees dropped to the ground. The spider lilies sprouted out even more as if it slowly consumed him. Ace looked up at her with shortened breaths while she stared with a playful grin. Her hand holding tightly to the vital object she had dragged out...his heart!

Nails slowly digging deep into the flesh, making his chest hurt and more flowers sprout from it. He couldn't take it anymore. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he begged for her to finish already, screaming for it to end, but she didn't indulge. She kept gripping his heart until it burst in her hand into small droplets of petals. A sudden ripple of spider lilies began to sprout all over his body, consuming his screams, his tears and his whole body while he looked at her. Her grin burned into his memory, it being the last thing he saw until the last red flower sprouted and clouded his vision.

Ace snaps up from his bed while looking around desperately. Taking in deep gulps of air as sweat dripped down the sides of his face. It was just a dream, a nightmare for many. He clenches his chest, trying to calm his fast-pacing heart as he changes his sweaty clothes to dry ones. It was like an emotional roller coaster that just went too fast for his liking, but now the ride was over and he could relax yet again. Slowly he slipped into his bed and easily went to sleep. The fan occasionally squeaked, the branches scratched the window and the door creaked open. In the darkness of it, a small chuckle was heard and a devious grin was seen.

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