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NOSTALGIA

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A Word from our Editor

by Sabrina Vourvoulias

Way back when emails were a newfangled thing, and none of us knew how thoroughly our ways of connecting with each other would change, I set up an account on one of the first public webmail services. I was warier back then, not sure whether I wanted my real name attached to the account, so I searched for something to use as a proxy. I stumbled upon the ancient Greek word *nostos* (return, homecoming) and its plural form, *nostoi*, and thought — yes, this is it.

Though I have a Greek surname, I don't speak Greek — I speak Spanish. I chose the word not in tribute to the Greek part of my heritage, but because in its singular form it reminded me of the Spanish word for us — *nosotros*. In its plural form, it also conjured up the phrase “no estoy,” which can mean “I'm not here.”

I've always loved playing with words across languages, but the choice was a bit deeper than mere play.

We moved to the United States from Guatemala when I was fifteen, after the undeclared civil war that had been raging there for decades directly impacted my family. It would be years until we felt safe enough to return to Guatemala for a short visit. And it would be a couple of

decades before I stopped thinking of Guatemala as the home I longed to return to. No estoy. Nostos.

Nostos, of course, is one of the roots of the word nostalgia — the theme of this issue.

We most often use the word to mean an authentic-but-fleeting connection to the past, like what is elicited when a song we remember pops up unexpectedly in a soundtrack (hello, “Running Up That Hill”). We also use nostalgia as shorthand for something mired in a cloying, syrupy sentimentalism. Or, sometimes, to explain (and sanitize) populist political rhetoric across the globe which wields “the way things were in the past” as a truncheon.

For the writers in this issue, nostalgia is much more complex and dynamic; it’s found in video arcades and on the skirts of erupting volcanoes. It’s in a chosen name and an unsprung feather, an interstellar gift and a phantom limb, in our suddenly misbehaving bodies.

Here is the nostalgia gut punch, ugly cry, belly laugh. Here is nostalgia writ as big as climate change and as small as your smallest toe. Here is nostalgia in two languages.

I’m extremely grateful to the editors of Apparition Lit for so enthusiastically publishing Spanish-language speculative fiction in this issue. It has long been my hope, as both a speculative fiction writer and as a journalist, that multilingual publications become the norm, not the exception in the US. Maybe, if we’re lucky, multilingual publications will become as ubiquitous and indispensable as email, and you’ll all be reading a guest editor in Apparition Lit’s bizillionth issue, waxing nostalgic about the early days of the transformation.

Until that time, read the stories and poems in this issue.

Share them, talk them up, nominate them for prizes. They are deserving. They are amazing.

And let's keep working together to understand *nostos* as *nosotros*, and to change *no estoy* into *aquí estamos* y *no nos vamos* (we're here and we're not going away).

For everyone, in every language.



Sabrina Vourvoulias is an award-winning Latina news editor, writer and digital storyteller whose work has appeared at The Guardian US, PRI's The World, NBC Philadelphia and Philadelphia Magazine. She currently serves as the senior editor of the Communities and Engagement desk at the Philadelphia Inquirer.

She is the author of *Ink*, a near-future, immigration-centered dystopia which was named to *Latinidad's* Best Books of 2012, and was reissued by Rosarium Publishing in 2018. In 2020, she wrote the Smithsonian Latino Center's middle-school nonfiction anthology, *Nuestra América: 30 Inspiring Latinas/Latinos Who Have Shaped the United States*. In addition to books, Vourvoulias writes speculative short fiction which has been published at Tor.com, Apex Magazine, Fantasy Magazine, Strange Horizons and Uncanny Magazine, among others.

She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, daughter, and a dog who believes she is the one ring to rule them

all. You can follow her at sabinavourvoulas.com and on Twitter @followthelede.

The Hungry Tree

by Auden Patrick

Freedom—a change of clothes, pomade, freshly cut hair. All I had to do was move away. Southerners didn't like the Northern tinge to my vowels but they let me keep my secret. I was first born the day I arrived in Tennessee with my voice pitched lower and my shoulders squared like a man's. Ellis Bright was a man; I was Ellis Bright. No one questioned it. That's what freedom tasted like—like joy like the taste of chewing tobacco until I met Euphoria then it always tasted like her kiss.

(The taste of her lingered on my tongue for minutes after she kissed me that first time, the next time, the thirtieth time, and having never kissed someone before I wondered if it was always like this, with the taste in your mouth for so long afterward, or if she was a special kind of magic.)

We were going to run away together, go west, to Memphis where we'd take a steamboat down to New Orleans or even further west still, where we'd claim our own land and work together to build a new life for ourselves.

Suppose God already gave me my fair share of new

life when I became Ellis Bright. Eloping with Euphoria was asking too much. That's why He in all His wisdom let her father kill me and bury me in the woods. At least, that's as much sense as I can make of it.



ii

The blood spewed through my fingers as I put a hand to my chest. He blew a hole there the size of a fist it felt like, but still it took a long time to die. It hurts to feel your life seeping out of you into the grass. I died with my eyes open and all I could see was the branches of the hungry tree as my blood fed its roots.



iii

Euphoria. She reminded me of a childhood playmate who was braver and wilder than any of the boys. She was like that too, wild and brave. She never flinched when her father raised his voice or his fists, and he did so often, though he was careful never to leave bruises where others could see. She never wanted to let anyone see her cry.

That first evening. I had to pass her father's property to get back to my cousin's patch of grass and I found her under the big oak tree we would later call the hungry tree. Call it this because of the way the branches reached in all directions searching for more, trying to block out and consume the sky itself. Its limbs reached so far from its body that they'd begin to curl back towards its trunk, too late a reminder that reaching for more than you're allowed will cause you hurt.

It was never satisfied.

“Mr. Bright,” Euphoria said, and I wanted to hear my name, my real name, the one I chose on her lips so badly that I’d have done anything she asked if she just called me Ellis.

Miss Smith.

“I never learned my letters very well. Will you read this to me?”

Here Euphoria held the letter out to me like a peace offering. The big oak tree creaked in the wind and the skirts of her dress shifted clung to her legs. I had always known but had never let myself look, not just at Euphoria but anyone. Looking was not a luxury I could allow. Yet for the first time, I looked at her, and took the letter.

After that, if her father was gone, she’d be waiting for me beneath the tree. I’d sit and read to her until it was almost too dark to find my way home and I’d stumble and trip my way back to my cousin’s home and his wife and his children who loved me. I would go there but I knew I had left a piece of me every day with her beneath the hungry tree.

When she kissed me the first time I was too stunned to close my eyes. She laughed. I blushed. Something bright burst in my chest.

“Did you know your eyes are both blue and green?” she asked and I shook my head like I’d never known.



iv

Her father closed my eyes before he buried me in the woods. Couldn’t bear my looking at him anymore. Dirt rained down on my face but I couldn’t feel it. Couldn’t feel anything but a dull ache in the spot where he’d shot

me. I clung to the ache in my chest, it was the only proof I'd ever been alive in the first place.



v

One day in one of our stolen golden hours, Euphoria took me inside her father's cabin.

"Undress me," she said. I gaped. She put her hands on her hips and glared at me. "We don't have much time, you heard me, Ellis."

I told her I couldn't and it was not only for the sake of her virtue.

Her face softened then. "What are you afraid of?"

Too much. All too much.

When she kissed me then and put her hands on my shoulders I knew I was going to give in. I loved her too much to deny her anything she asked especially with my name in her mouth. It happened fast, each of us pulling at the other's layers until the moment she lifted my shirt over my head. Maybe she'd known all along, I don't know, I can't ask her now.

I had to take short shallow breaths, watching her for a reaction as she took in the evidence of my secret. I was small but the jacket made my shoulders look broad and a narrow waist was the fashion, loose shirts hid the rest. Underneath it all there was no hiding it.

I understood, I said, if she wanted me to leave.

(I didn't want to leave but I would. I would do anything she asked, anything she asked. But I wanted her to love me anyway. I wanted her to be my wife. We'd talked about it before, but I had never told her how much I wanted it. I couldn't let myself tell her this. I

couldn't allow it for myself, for fear that this moment would happen, that she would ask me to leave.)

She reached out a hand. I expected her to hesitate but Euphoria never did. She put a hand on one of my breasts and kissed me again.

I had to break away first. Please, you can't tell anyone, please understand.

"Ellis..." She said, and I nearly sobbed to hear my name still on her lips.

I kissed her then and we lay together each of us learning the shape of what would make the other gasp. It wasn't simple and it wasn't easy but we laughed as we fumbled together, learning this new and secret feeling. The memory of her hands in my hair (her hands on my chest) would make me ache for days. Afterwards I asked if she would still want to be my wife.

"Ellis, my love," she said, and touched my cheek with her hand much the same gentle way she'd touched my chest, "of course."

So we made our plans.



vi

The worms came too soon. I wasn't prepared for the way it ached to feel them crawling around in my skin, I'd become so used to the numbness. It took a long time for them to become flies. This was when everyone still thought I was missing. They were yet to find my body. I wondered if they ever would.



vii

Euphoria with her head in my lap, Euphoria's fingers laced with mine, her hands on my shoulders under my shirt, in my hair, all the places where her body had touched mine and now never would again.

Euphoria catching my arms when I would go to cross them over my chest when I undressed. Euphoria telling me I was the most handsome man she had ever met. Euphoria asking me not to hide, and pressing a kiss to each of my breasts like they were lovely and not something I loathed and had to hide.

I had so much. I had so much. I had so much.



viii

Then, nothingness.



ix

Opened my eyes and found myself beneath the branches of the hungry tree in the same spot I died. I sat up, put a hand to my chest, and found the hole was still there. I was still dead, then, though there were no gates of Heaven waiting for me. There was only the hungry tree. I stayed there in the grass for a long long time waiting for Death to come and take me. He didn't.

Up the hill I could see the cabin Euphoria's father built. I made up my mind to go up there to see if he still had the blood on his hands or to see Euphoria one last time, I don't know. I expected the tree to hold me back. It didn't.

(Euphoria's father had built the cabin, claimed the

land, planned a new life for himself and his wife. Yet the Lord gives and takes away. Euphoria's mother died in childbirth. Made him a father and a widower in one motion.)

I lifted my hand to knock, realized I didn't have to, passed right through. There was an odd tugging sensation in the pit of my stomach as I moved through the wood. I came face to face with her father, who saw me and stumbled back, dropping the bottle of whiskey in his hands. It shattered. The smell burned my nose.

He went cotton-white as he stared, dropped his gaze to the hole in my chest, took one more look at my face and ran, passing through me. The tugging sensation again, and the memory of dragging my body into the woods. Not my memory. His.

I could hear Euphoria crying through the walls, and there was nothing I could do to comfort her.



X

I used to hold her when she cried. Her father would hurt her and I would hold her and she would cry and I would try not to and it'd all be a mess, but she was alive and I was alive and it all made sense. We had such plans. We had such grand plans.

(Here Euphoria would tell me the story of her mother as her father told it. Euphoria was to blame. If she'd never been born, he'd still have his wife. Yet. Euphoria was all he had left, he couldn't let her go. She was never allowed to marry. She looked so much like her mother. He loved her and couldn't bear to look at her all at once. The Lord gives and takes away.)



xi

Her father could see me. Euphoria couldn't.

I didn't mean to terrorize him. Sometimes I would stand at the foot of his bed and wait for him to wake up. I didn't mean to. I just wanted to be seen. I wanted to know I could still be seen.

(He'd pass through me and I'd see more than what I was supposed to. Euphoria, screaming and wet, just born. Her mother's chest going still. The unending pain of his grief. I saw Euphoria, growing up, growing to look more like his wife, and I saw how desperately he wanted to keep her close for fear God would take her too. Most damning I saw him see Euphoria and me from a distance. Watched him watch her press her lips to mine. Felt him know I was going to take her away.)

Souls aren't meant to stay for long after the death. I know that now. But I couldn't go on. I was stuck and I could feel my body still out there in the woods. I could feel the breeze that rustled the leaves of the hungry tree. I could feel so much and still nothing at all.

It wasn't long before I realized I could only walk to the edge of her father's property. I could make it twenty or so paces towards my cousin's home before the tree tugged me back. I could feel its roots reaching for me and something in my chest or what used to be my chest would grow tight then tighter still. Take one step further and get yanked back by your throat. These were the rules now.

I missed the space I'd carved out for myself in this world so much I dropped to my knees under the tree and wept.



xii

“Do you ever think about going back to where you came from?” Euphoria asked, once. “Up north?”

No, I said. Thinking of the way my father called me his “girl” and how it felt like wearing one shoe on one foot and nothing on the other. Something was always off balance. Thinking of the many skirts and corsets and layers that I so loved to help Euphoria in and out of, but hated cocooning myself in. Thinking of how brave I had to be to leave, how scared I was.

(But why do I have to wear this? I’d ask my mother. She would tell me it was only proper. This is what young ladies wore. Later, without my father’s knowledge, she would write the letter to my cousin that said I was her youngest son and needed a place to stay.)

No, I said, I don’t miss it. Not once.



xiii

My mother would not know for months that I was dead or missing, letters take so long to travel from place to place. I knew this even without knowing if my cousin wrote to her when I disappeared and I was growing restless. Euphoria’s father would watch me pace through his house finding which rules I could bend or break. I couldn’t leave his property, but I could leave ripples in the water in the washbasin. I couldn’t lift a pen but I could splatter the ink. Each night when he returned from the fields he would find the evidence that I was still there even if he pretended not to see me.

(He did pretend, but he couldn’t hide the recognition the way his gaze would slide across the room but catch

on me. He knew he could see me. I knew he could see me. Yet it wasn't enough.)



xiv

Euphoria's vision wasn't very good. I could see the moment when I approached the hungry tree that she would recognize me when I was no longer a blur and a shape but a blur with a smile and a face she loved and one green eye. A smile would burst across her face, shining bright. "Ellis, my love," she would say. "Ellis, my love." Always Ellis, Ellis, Ellis.



xv

Euphoria couldn't see me but she could hear me, almost, just almost. I would try to speak to her and she would hear but it always made her panicked. Her father would see me standing in the corner of his home and he would go white and sick and leave, always returning blind drunk and stupid. I never tried to talk to her when he was around. I didn't want him to overhear.

I whispered her name and knelt beside her as she prayed.

(I didn't pray anymore.)

I probably shouldn't have interrupted her as she tried to convene with God, but I wanted her to hear me. She would open her eyes but look right through me. I would cry wishing she could see me.

Her eyes roved around the room but she whispered "Ellis?" and I cried then, yes, yes, I'm here. "My father mumbles about you in his sleep. Why are you still here?"

I said I didn't know. But I thought I did.

(Her father.)

"Yes," she said, "I think so too."

Be brave, I told her. She listened.



xvi

I used to pray with fervor. Thank you, Lord, for giving me my freedom. Thank you, Lord, for giving me escape. Thank you, Lord, for keeping my secret for just a day longer. I always knew one day I'd be found out, but every day I wasn't made that inevitable discovery worth it.



xvii

There was no moon the night I died. I watched it wax, wane, disappear again. The next morning, the men brought Euphoria's father to the hungry tree with a hood over his head. I didn't know what was happening but Euphoria did not seem surprised. I went to her in wonder and looked into her face, found grimness and determination there I had not seen before. I touched her arm and beyond a well of grief, found bravery. Saw the moment she'd told them, finally. Her father had told her what he'd done. She had told them and now this was justice.

It did not feel like justice to me. I was fading fast and everything was beginning to blend together one moment to the next. I was sick with time, too much time. It did not feel like justice to me, because I would feel the moment when they found my body. It did not feel like justice to me, because they didn't know what name to put on the marker, and finally settled on Mary.

It did not feel like justice to me, because that's when I started to shred.

Pieces of me ripped away in the wind and turned to ash.



xviii

“How do you choose it? Your name?” Euphoria had always been Euphoria, she could not hold the idea of a different name for herself in her hands. I told her it was easy. The other name had never been mine, though it was the name my father gave me, and if I had been born a boy he would've named me Abraham but that was not my name either.

(I would never be the father of nations, but I was kind. I always tried to be kind.)

“But there are so many names in the world? How did you know what was yours?”

I knew it in the same way I knew I loved her. It was like coming home.



xix

My eye was missing, my fingers were missing, my teeth were beginning to fly away too. I expected it to hurt, but it didn't. It was like taking off your clothes. But I didn't want anyone to see me like this—I no longer wanted to be seen at all—I avoided Euphoria as much as I could. She would be leaving soon, anyway, off to that second chance with some cousin of her mother's who was going to take her in and together they would go west. I no longer went inside the cabin. Euphoria would stand in the threshold in the evenings and call for me.

I would walk to the other side of the hungry tree and cover my ears, or what was left of them, but I could still hear her calling my name, my name, my name, my name over and over again. My name, my name, my name.

(I ignored it. It was surprisingly simple to do so. Nothing ever felt like home anymore.)

Before she left, she came one last time to the tree.

“Ellis?” She said, with no hesitation, though she could not see me. There was so little left to see. “I know you’re still here. I can feel it.”

I didn’t try to answer.

“I have something for you, my love.”

I watched her place a tiny wooden cross beneath the tree, painted white. With her father’s knife, she’d carved my name into the wood.

(Ellis.)



Auden Patrick (he/they) is a genderqueer writer and future ghost who thinks too much about time, identity, and—lately—*Hamlet*. His work can be found in *Beaver Magazine*, among others. Find him online at audenpatrick.com or on twitter @patrickauden.

Backward Compatibility

(Quinceañera on a Generation Ship)

by Katherine Quevedo

By the time you receive
our message,
you should be turning 15!
If we calculated correctly.
This is rocket science, after all.

You're a young woman now.
Now. Such a strange concept,
since we'll all have aged
much more than you.

We hope the dress fits.
The one your parents agreed
to pack before launch.

The one the color of nebulae
viewed through a telescope,
enhancing what human
eyes cannot see—
magentas and reds,
the increasing
wavelength of light.

We imagine your first dance,
gown swirling around you
as you hurtle between stars.

La familia misses you.
You haven't had enough
time to miss us, but
todo está bien.
It has to be *bien*.
What other choice have we?

We wish we could wish you
a happy Sweet 16
in one more of your years,
but that will be up to our
children and their children
and the backward compatibility
of our technology with yours.

We have faith
that *la sangre* runs as
wide as it does deep,
magentas and reds
flowing between stars,
a vibrance waiting to
reward the right lenses.



Katherine Quevedo was born and raised just outside of Portland, Oregon, where she lives with her husband and two sons. Her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award, and her debut mini-chapbook, *The Inca Weaver's Tales*, is forthcoming from Sword & Kettle Press in their New Cosmologies series. Find her at www.katherinequevedo.com

A, B, B, A

by Russell Nichols

{

S **TAGE 1** {

Since nobody had the cheat code to bypass your dad's funeral, you just left.

Pretty sure the man wouldn't notice. You were sixteen when he last gave an actual damn about you or your whereabouts. A lifetime ago. This was way back when you'd ride the ferry to Fisherman's Wharf to hit up the arcade at Pier 39. That was the ritual. Every Saturday. Just the two of you. Then the city shut the whole wharf down on account of rising sea levels.

"Water levels are the worst," he had said the day he heard the news. "Looks like we'll have to find something else to do."

The man found something to do, alright—or, someone. If he was sick of playing with you, he should've said so. Instead of stooping so low to use climate change as an escape hatch. And now look at him: casket-bound with his classic high top fade, health bar on E and fresh out of quarters. All he left you was a stupid note, scribbled on hospital stationery:

At the loading screen, press Up, Down, Up, Right, Right, Right, A, B, B, A

You should've tossed it. But you held onto it. Why? You don't know. But you carried the note everywhere, even now, riding the ferry back across the Bay, sneaking past "flood risk" signs. At the arcade entrance, you pause. Walk away, you tell yourself. Go back to the funeral. Your mom didn't raise you to shirk responsibilities. You're not him. No, you're not him.

But your motor skills don't comply. Next thing you know, you're inside. This ghost town of an arcade looks nothing like you remember. It's empty. Everything shipped out. Except one nondescript cabinet in the corner. The last machine standing. When you plug it in, a grungy title sequence with 8-bit music buzzes through speakers, surging down your spine and all over your body. Then a list appears of old-school, side-scrolling beat 'em ups, from *Double Dragon* to *Final Fight* to *Renegade*, and on and on. You select *Turtles in Time*. One player. Cowabunga! At the loading screen, you press: *Up, Down, Up, Right, Right, Right, A, B, B, A*

It's three a.m. in the Big Apple and Raphael jumps into action. But you're not alone.

Blinking to life on the screen stands a bulky man in fatigues with a classic high top fade. You lean forward, squinting at this pixelated non-player character before you. "What the hell?"

STAGE 1 CLEAR

}



STAGE 2 {

This can't be right. That's not him. "You're not him," you tell the figure on the screen. Your objections

notwithstanding, NPC Dad charges ahead to break his foot off in the The Foot Clan. He looks like him. Moves like him. Punches like him. But you know you're seeing things. Lack of sleep will do that to you.

You unplug the machine, then plug it back in. You select *Streets of Rage*. At the loading screen, you press: *Up, Down, Up, Right, Right, Right, A, B, B, A*

Adam jumps into action. NPC Dad does too, already comboing before you get a kick in. This time, you roll with it. Why not? You're not supposed to be here anyway. Might as well seize the moment. And the bad guys. Muscle memory in full effect. It's you and NPC Dad, tag-teaming on the streets to a bomb beat, giving these goons the work like you did back in the day. Punching. Kicking. Flipping. Gripping the joystick so hard you damn near rip it off.

And then, suddenly, you're sixteen again: drenched in splashes of flashing lights, in the stench of young musk and high hopes, in a symphony of chiptunes and sudden cheers and loose change tumbling into metal dispensers. Buzzing. Nonstop beeping. The tap-tapping of buttons. The clack-clack-clack of air hockey pucks. Pinball bells, machine gun rounds, revving engines.

Hadōken!

Get over here!

BOOMSHAKALAKA!

Those were the days. Back when this arcade was a safe haven from a strange world. The only place you felt in control. Where you could exist without explaining yourself. Away from all the noise: those voices, both within and without, screaming that you don't belong and you won't survive and you're not supposed to be here. But here you finally felt connected to something—

or, someone. And you and Dad rode the ferry home, poking at the spots on your palms where blisters used to host parties. You swore you were the only one in the world with the code to unlock the hidden character that was your father. And now he's back and better than ever—that is until some beastly-looking, flame-haired boss claws NPC Dad to death.

STAGE 2 CLEAR

}



STAGE 3 {

You unplug the machine, then plug it back in.

The screen lights up. More electronic music. You look over the list of games. *Battletoads*. *The Simpsons*. *X-Men*. At each loading screen, you press: *Up, Down, Up, Right, Right, Right, A, B, B, A*

But it keeps going wrong. Every single time, NPC Dad steps in, goes hard, then gets knocked out dead. No extra lives. No continues. You drop your sweaty head on the control panel. Your hands hurt, your stomach hurts, everything hurts. No matter what you do or what game you play or how good you are, you can't stop your dad from dying.

"Is there anything that can be done?" you ask the doctor.

This is last May. You're outside the hospital room. Your dad's new ladyfriend is here. Not the one he left your mom for. Some new character, who fancies herself a psychic with the "healing powers of God in her hands." Got the whole room suffocating in frankincense. Unfortunately for her, your father doesn't have a quarter's worth of inheritance to speak of, so she's only playing herself with this unsubtle level-up scheme.

“We’re doing everything we can,” the doctor tells you.

The neurocritical care team dosed him with a tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) to break down the blood clot in his brain. They threaded a plastic catheter into his groin, up through the aorta and into his head, then used a stent retriever to enmesh the clot and pull it out. But too much brain tissue had already been damaged. You learned more about ischemic strokes than you ever had before. At least you’re well-informed.

“You can see him when you’re ready,” the doctor tells you.

And when you do, you take a deep breath like you’re diving into a pool. Not like a stroke is contagious, but still. His ladyfriend steps out for alkaline water, which she claims is key for healing. She touches your shoulder and tells you not to leave before she returns.

“I have a gift for you,” she says, then skips down the hallway.

You don’t want nothing from this girl because a) you’ve got chin hairs older she is, and b) you’ve got zero interest in playing “Let’s be friends!” with some wannabe bonus mom. No way. You’re too grown. The ticking clock of her returning adds more pressure as you enter the room.

Your dad is asleep. A metal cap covers his classic high top fade. Silver wires slither out, connected to a machine that hums. A monitor tracks his heartbeat. His dark brown eyes open. Slowly. He sees you standing all the way over by the door.

“Guess what I just learned?” he says, but his mouth doesn’t match the words like a dubbed kung fu flick. He points at you. “You got a pathway in your body called Sonic hedgehog. How cool is that! I got one too. And the

doctors are gonna pump mine with a special drug to straighten up the tissue in my head.”

It’s weird seeing him this animated. Especially outside the arcade. Plus, with him being half-dead and all. You don’t know what to say, let alone how to feel. It’s all kind of surreal, to be honest. Like you’re seeing things. Or maybe that’s because you haven’t been in the same room as the man in eight years. Not since you caught him in bed with somebody who wasn’t Mom. You called Mom to fill her in. He called you a snitch, punched you in the chest and moved out.

“Soon as that’s done, I’ll be right as rain.” He frowns, reconsidering the common phrase. “Wait, is that right? Right as rain? What the hell does that mean? Who said rain is right?”

You study your dad from a safe distance. It’s not the words you would remember later. It’s how your dad tries to smile but can’t. And how he needs the nurse to cut his blueberries and feed him steel-cut oats. And how he slobbers off to sleep. Leaving you alone in that smelly, stroke-infested room. Leaving you to think you could do something like, you don’t know, stab him with the blueberry knife so he won’t suffer. Leaving you to watch the heart-rate monitor—that green line spiking up, dipping down, then up again in continuous waves, going right.

STAGE 3 CLEAR

}



STAGE 4 {

You unplug the machine, then plug it back in.

But by this point, it doesn’t matter. Choosing another game won’t change a thing. Every game ends the same.

You don't want to know the time. Feels like you've been at this forever. Thirty-two missed calls from Mom. You should be there. For her, if no one else. You want to go. You need to go. But you can't bring yourself to step away from this machine.

"What I hear you saying is that you feel stuck," your virtual therapist tells you.

This is last December. You're living back at your mom's house after your ex kicked you out for cheating. Not like she caught you red-handed. She found some rated M for mature videos you swore you deleted off your phone. Snooping through your partner's private devices was a form of cheating in itself, you pointed out. She didn't care for that retort. And here you are.

You wouldn't say you feel stuck, though. More like recalibrating. That uniquely human act of putting your life on pause to resolve your purpose. Hell, Jesus did it, so why couldn't you?

"Jesus had a job," your mom said.

Apparently, she wasn't too pleased to see you. You couldn't tell if her contempt came from the fact that she liked your ex. Or that she looked at you and saw hers. You didn't ask. Back home, you kept to yourself. Staying in your room in the company of old-gen consoles.

"Depression is repressed anger," your virtual therapist tells you.

"I don't feel depressed," you say. "I don't feel anything, to be honest."

"I hear you. Emotional numbness can be a symptom of depression."

The concept of therapy never made much sense to you. Like buying a strategy guide for a video game you created. And why pay some random to tell you what you

can freely find online? But your dad's ladyfriend gifted you a free week of therapy and you have nothing better to do.

Your dad is still alive. Last you heard, his body rejected the drug treatment. No surprise. Rejection is your dad's go-to move. His default special attack. But as of late, you've seen hints of expansion. When you spoke to him last week, he suggested you two take a trip out to Pier 39. And yeah, you know that was the drugs talking. Not only did he forget the old arcade was closed, but he kept going on about a craving for Crystal Pepsi and missing his old Power Glove. Life was better before you were born. That's basically what he was saying.

"And what did you say?" your therapist asks you. "When your dad invited you to Pier 39, what did you tell him?"

"Rain check."

"Were you angry?"

"Look, I'm not angry. I'm not depressed, repressed or whatever. I'm busy living my life."

"What does living mean?"

"You know, living: the opposite of dying. Heart still beating, etc."

"That's what it means to you?"

"I never met a dead man with a heartbeat. Have you?"

"No."

"And he was just talking anyway. It wasn't real. You know how I know? Because a) the arcade is shutdown, and b) he didn't follow up, so it don't matter. I'll see him when I see him—"

Right then, your mom barges into the room. Instinctively, you slam the laptop shut and start to bark

at her about invading your privacy. But quivering brown eyes betray her message. It's not the words you would remember later. It's how your mom tries to comfort you but can't. And how she looks somber, but also something else like, you don't know, relieved? Vindicated? You don't ask.

You want to be alone, you tell her, and she leaves you alone. You stare at the wall for twenty-five minutes. You play Super Mario Bros. 3 on Nintendo, the first gift you remember your dad giving you, to lose yourself in a nonlinear world of mushrooms, pipes and super leaves. You want to grow raccoon ears and a raccoon tail and run and fly as long as you can.

"Why do they call video game systems consoles?" you asked your dad once when you were little and still learning.

"You're saying it wrong," he told you. "The stress is on the first syllable. CON-soles."

"CON-soles," you said.

It had something to do with "consolidation," he told you, bringing multiple parts together into a single unit for a specific purpose. He sounded so sure of himself. You believed him at the time. You don't know what to believe anymore.

STAGE 4 CLEAR

}



STAGE 5 {

Thunder rumbles outside the arcade. Here comes the rain.

You think about your mom, navigating that funeral. You told her not to go. She wanted to "do the right thing".

Whatever the hell that means. You left because you couldn't handle it, the hypocrisy of it: being there with all those people who claimed to know your father, but really had no clue who the man was. They didn't know about that time he got locked in some video rental store called Blockbuster. Or when he stole a Game Genie from his best friend during a sleepover in fourth grade. They damn sure didn't know about his player tendencies.

You saw online that people cheat in video games for a handful of reasons:

- 1) to make the game easier
- 2) to win at all costs
- 3) to get revenge
- 4) to get pleasure from causing pain to others
- 5) because everybody else is doing it

You don't know which category your dad fit in, but the man had a cheat code for everything. Well, almost everything. Apparently, not even NPC Dad can escape the fact of life. But who's to say your reality is any higher than his? If humans were random characters in a grander game, controlled by something—or, someone—would your dad's glitches be forgiven? Would yours? The only thing more human than making mistakes is making excuses.

You unplug the machine, but this time, you don't plug it back in.

You fall on your knees at the foot of the cabinet. You pray to whoever may be there for a hint, a code, a sign, something, anything to let you know you're not alone in this buggy world.

"Hey, you!" a voice booms from behind.

Your heart double jumps. With shaky knees, you rise

to your feet. Slowly. But you don't turn around. You face forward, staring dead ahead at the cabinet.

"You're not supposed to be here," the voice booms again.

The machine is unplugged. Everything is off. But you swear you see something there, moving across the liquid screen: a faint green line. A lump the size of a joystick ball lodges in your throat, but you manage to utter these three words: "Yes, we are."

And as the rain falls outside, you keep your eyes on that line, spiking up, dipping down, then up again, a tiny blip, a hidden character, jumping, fighting on, going right, going right, going right.

STAGE 5 CLEAR

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Russell Nichols is a speculative fiction writer and endangered journalist. Raised in Richmond, California, he got rid of all his stuff in 2011 to live out of a backpack with his wife, vagabonding around the world ever since. Look for him at russellnichols.com.

Solo le quedaron ocho

por elena félix

Fue un poco antes del postre que Luisa empezó a sentir los pies dormidos. Estaban en una de esas citas dobles que organizaba su amiga Mariana y que Luisa soportaba más por solidaridad que por interés.

Pensó que podría haber sido la copa de vino tinto lo que le había caído mal y le pidió al mesero un vaso grande de agua mineral.

Mariana le dijo, “Si no se te pasa en diez minutos te llevo al hospital, ¿qué tal si es *food poisoning* y aquí mismo te me mueres?”

Luisa no estaba preocupada por morirse ahí mismo, sino porque sintió como uno por uno se le fueron despegando los dedos de los pies. Cuando se asomó por debajo de la mesa vio cómo los pequeños trocitos de uña y carne corrían por el restaurante cual tiernos y juguetones ratoncitos bebés. No sintió dolor, y se consoló al recordar que traía un perfecto *pedicure* francés.

Al mismo tiempo que Luisa le enseñaba a Mariana como sus rosados dedos correteaban por el piso del restaurante, vio como el capitán de meseros se agachaba discretamente a recoger uno de los dedos que se había

quedado atorado en la esquina de la alfombra y se lo metía en la bolsa del pantalón.

Luisa no alcanzó a ver bien cuál dedo era, pero asumió que habría sido el dedo gordo del pie izquierdo, que no era muy ágil ni siquiera cuando estaba pegado al pie.

“Ese es el dedo con el que siempre me pego en la orilla de la cama, sé que es un poco torpe, pero igual lo quiero”.

Cuando Luisa intentó pararse para pedirle al mesero que le regresara su dedo, no pudo. No solo porque sin los dedos gordos de los pies no tenía forma de mantener el equilibrio, sino porque sin dedos, los pies, se le resbalaban de los zapatos.

“Ve tu Mariana, *please*”, pero en lo que Mariana caminaba discretamente detrás del capitán de meseros, este ya había dado la orden a los demás meseros de atrapar a los pequeños escapistas que, aunque era claro se trataba de dedos y no de roedores no podía dejar que siguieran correteando por el piso del restaurante.

El problema se agravó cuando el dedo chiquito del pie derecho de Mariana se le resbaló de las manos a uno de los meseros y cayó en la sopa de uno de los comensales que al intentar tragarse lo que creyó era un delicioso *crouton* empezó a ahogarse. Por más que intentó toser, toser y toser, cuando el comensal adquirió un color púrpura intenso Mariana le aplicó la maniobra de Heimlich hasta que por fin lo escupió.

Cuando Mariana recogió del suelo al accidentado dedo meñique, estaba todo masticado, y no se movía. “Está muerto”, concluyó Mariana. Luisa lloró.

En cuanto el comensal una vez púrpura, después verde del asco y finalmente rojo del coraje se recuperó del susto, empezó a gritar, llamó a la policía y a los bomberos. Algunos de los clientes del restaurante

discutían mientras Luisa seguía sin poder levantarse de la mesa y otros comensales como los dos chicos que venían con ellas, estaban tan interesados en sus teléfonos celulares que no se dieron cuenta de nada de lo que había pasado.

Mariana ya había recuperado siete de los diez dedos de los pies de Luisa, y uno a uno se los fue pasando. Con mucho cuidado Luisa se los fue poniendo de regreso.

El dedo medio del pie derecho nunca apareció, siempre había sido un poco rebelde y quizá se había fugado buscando escapar a otro país y conseguirse un amante.

Con ocho de sus diez dedos, incluidos sus dos dedos gordos, Luisa finalmente se pudo poner de pie. Llevaba en sus brazos envuelto en una servilleta blanca a su meñique muerto al que tendría que dar cristiana sepultura al llegar a casa. Como vivía en un departamento decidió que la maceta de las orquídeas sería un buen lugar para enterrarlo.

El capitán de meseros se ofreció a acompañarla.

Mariana regresó a su mesa y una vez que el cuerpo de bomberos y el de policía se retiró del lugar llevándose al comensal purpúreo al que acusaron de borracho, siguió cenando tranquilamente y aunque no volvió a salir con esos dos amigos, disfrutaba recordando aquella noche cuando llegaba a encontrárselos en la ciudad, eso sí guardando un poco de respeto por el dedo caído y por Luisa que nunca más pudo volver a usar zapatos abiertos.

Luisa quien no creía en el amor acabó locamente enamorada del capitán de meseros, quien cada noche antes de dormir le besaba uno a uno, no solo los restantes dedos de los pies, sino también los dedos de las manos, y que se aseguraba de no darle nunca de beber vino tinto para evitar esa extraña reacción que empezaba por

dormirle los dedos de los pies y terminaba por llevarse al capitán de meseros a su casa.

Y aunque todos los días se entristecía al pensar en su dedo meñique, había decidido aprovechar sus lágrimas para regar la maceta de la orquídea que, con el sentido líquido, florecía bella, como nunca antes había florecido.



elena felix likes how her name looks in writing with no caps. Her work has appeared in Vestal Magazine and Cease Cows among other publications. She studies writing at the Extension Writers Program at the University of California Los Angeles. When she is not writing, she spends all her time working at an animal sanctuary.

Then there were eight

by elena félix

Translated by Sabrina
Vourvoulias

Shortly before dessert, Luisa started to feel her feet go numb. They were on one of those double dates that her friend Mariana would organize, and that Luisa put up with more out of solidarity than out of interest.

She thought maybe the red wine didn't agree with her and asked the waiter for a large glass of mineral water.

Mariana told her, "If the feeling doesn't go away in ten minutes I'm taking you to the hospital. What if it's food poisoning, and you die on me right here and now?"

Luisa wasn't worried about dying right then, but she was concerned about the way her toes were coming unstuck, one by one. When she peeked under the table she saw the little chunks of toenail and flesh scamper off, like cute and playful baby mice. She felt no pain, and at least she had a perfect French pedicure.

As Luisa was pointing out to Mariana how the pink toes were scurrying across the restaurant floor, she noticed the head waiter discreetly duck down to pick up one of the toes that had gotten stuck on the corner of the carpet, and then tuck it in the pocket of his pants.

Luisa couldn't quite see which toe it was, but she assumed it was the big toe of her left foot, which wasn't very agile even when it was attached.

"That's the toe I always hit on the edge of the bed. I know it's a bit clumsy, but I still love it."

When Luisa tried to stand up to ask the head waiter to return her toe, she couldn't. Not only because she couldn't keep her balance without her big toes, but also because without any toes at all, her feet were slipping out of her shoes.

"You go, Mariana, please." But as Mariana warily approached the head waiter, he was already instructing the other waiters to catch the little escape artists that — though clearly toes, not rodents — must not be allowed to keep running around the restaurant.

The problem escalated when the little toe of Luisa's right foot slipped out the hands of one of the waiters, and fell into the soup of a diner who — attempting to swallow what he thought was a delicious crouton — started choking. The diner tried to cough-cough-cough it out, but when he started turning an intense purple color, Mariana had to use the Heimlich maneuver to help him finally spit it out.

When Mariana picked the injured little toe up from the floor, it was all chewed up and didn't move. "It's dead," Mariana declared. Luisa cried.

As soon as the diner — who had first turned purple, then green with revulsion, and finally red with rage — recovered from his scare, he started yelling, and called the police and the fire department. Some of the restaurant's customers were commenting on the importance of having their toes properly adjusted (even as Luisa remained unable to get up from the table), while other diners, like the two who had come on the

date with Luisa and Mariana, were so engaged with their cell phones they didn't even realize that anything had happened.

Mariana had recovered seven of Luisa's ten toes, and one by one she passed them to her. Luisa carefully put them back on her feet.

The middle toe of her right foot was never found. It had always been a bit of a rebel and had perhaps run away, looking to escape to another country and find a lover.

With eight of her ten toes, including her two big toes, Luisa was finally able to stand up. In her arms, wrapped in a white napkin, she carried her dead little toe, to which she would have to give a proper burial when she got home. Since she lived in an apartment, she decided that the flower pot with the orchid would be a good place to bury it.

The head waiter offered to go with her.

Mariana returned to their table, and once the fire department and police left — taking the purple diner, who they accused of being drunk, with them — she continued with her dinner. Although she would never again go out with the two who had been on the date with them, she would always enjoy reliving the details of that night when they had met in the city. Always paying respect, of course, to the fallen toe and to Luisa, who would never again be able to wear open-toed shoes.

Luisa, who did not believe in love, ended up head over heels with the head waiter, who every night before going to sleep kissed, one by one, not only her remaining toes but also her fingers, and who made sure to never give her red wine to drink — to avoid that peculiar reaction that started with numb toes and ended with her taking a stranger home.

And though every day she was saddened at the thought of her little toe, Luisa used the tears to her advantage, watering the flower pot with them. With that meaningful liquid, the orchid bloomed as it had never bloomed before.



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Icarus, and the Truths That Bore Him

by Jessica Cho

It wasn't his fault. Not
his, nor his father's,
but no one asked the feathers
torn by root and broken calamus,
lifted from their soft repose,
if they would take part in
the scheme of man
and monster. Woven and waxed
in their nest of branches,
bent into parody
of prior form, reminiscent
enough
to stir some lingering trace
of lives once lived. Enough
to rouse them from
crafted quiescence

to rustle with whispers,
sharing susurrus stories
as they once shared
sky, and say—
Remember.

When he takes his leave of earth
bearing the shape of
miracles on his back,
these captured pinions
steal his senses,
rob his tongue of the promise
he made his father and
fill him instead
with songs of air and grace,
a lofty seduction even
as they yearn—
yearn for their own freedom,
living again with this taste of air
as he bears them
higher and higher
and higher. Their
murmurations spill
over wood and thread,
inviting them all
to wake – and in the space
of that single moment—
Remember.

And the wood remembers, says:
 let us become trees
 again, our roots
anchored in the skin of the world.
And the string remembers, says:
 let us become flax
 again, blossoming
 beneath an endless sky.
And the feathers of his wings say:
 we can be birds again,
 we can remember
 what it is to be holy,
to be whole and flighted,
 to be free to carry
our own weight, unburdened
 by mistakes made
 by other hands.

And he whose life cannot
 be given back
 to his father, they
 instead bear gently
with all the tenderness
 of broken things,
as they descend to water and salt,
 to the start of all beginnings,
to the waiting cradle of the sea.

Wing/Flower

by Endria Isa Richardson

June huddles in her room, as though grief is a beast she can hide from. Outside, the world is ice, and dark, and dead. Inside, a tear freezes fast to her cheek before it can fall. She licks at it and thinks: *there is a spell that can fix this*. And there is; her mother taught her. She follows what steps she remembers, cobbles an incantation together.

A prickling golden light seeps from her fingers, from between her gapped teeth.

God, how she misses the sun.

Her skin begins to glow. It is as though the very atoms inside of her are moving faster and faster, red-hot with friction. When the parts of herself become too fast for herself, she—the whirling essence that is June—funnels upwards and inwards, spins wildly on the golden rim of magic. And then, like a coin slipped through a slot, she drops into the middle of—*brightness*. She knows at once something she never expected: brightness hurts. It is as though the space around her, all of the movement inside of her, has slid into place and locked. The air takes on weight. For the briefest moment she feels held. And then, quite quickly, the embrace is too much. She is

squeezed so tightly she cannot breathe, cannot scream, cannot even think. It is not symbolic, this thing that is happening to her; it is not *all in her head*. Her muscles tear and rupture; her bones crack and shatter. When she is sure that she is going to die, she—the body that is June— is released. It is over.

She looks like melting gold, like a shimmering sun glazing a blistered earth. She touches the new, raw edge of her arm, of what had been, until moments ago, whole. The skin puckers, capping the length of the humerus. The bicep that tapers into nothing. The tricep foreshortened, like it's been cauterized.

Her room is as empty as ever. The brief heat has fled. Her heart is an aching knot of muscle. Tears and hot anger flirt behind her eyes, and she stumbles through the rooms of her house. She is not sure what she was expecting—for her mother to appear, warm and brown, in the sky? Panic tears through her chest, and threatens to undo her. She reminds herself that magic cannot yield from nothing; unlike life, it has its rulebook. It has always been a fine balance: something taken, something given. *Family*, she had asked, in her desperation. *Take anything. Give me back my family.*

She tumbles to sleep, and at least it is dreamless.



When her mother burned out, June thought life might erupt into flames to fill the void. Instead, the world grew dark. Frozen. Grief was a wordless geography, frictionless as ice. Or, grief was a howling wind, screaming senselessly against her bones. Or, grief was a roaming beast, lurking everywhere at once. Alone in her house, surrounded by a wide expanse of blue ice, she slept huddled and covered in bed, the only place that ever felt warm.



Deep into the darkness that is the world outside of June (oh world without end, how long that darkness stretches!), her magic reaches toward a matching longness. It gropes arm-like for something—a handle—in all that formless nothing. Sometime between eons and moments, June's magic senses some gentle disturbance, like wing-traced patterns in snow. There is, at last, some friction in all this smooth darkness. It calls out to be touched.

Family, the magic sighs. From this, I can make family.

When the boy-who-was-a-friction wakes for the first time, he wakes with a start. "Ah," he says. Cold air soothes him. Ice caresses his new body. His skin is shiny, smooth as a plate. He stares at the dark landscape—of which he is no longer a part, at which he can now gaze—with rapt, open love. Snowflakes fall like whispered secrets far below him. Each frozen crystal, drifting like pages from a prayer book, slowly papers the ground, and glow in his silver-bright image.

He is a moon-son, cold and round and brilliant.



June wakes with a start, mouth gaping open, missing hand trying to clench at her chest. Outside, it is still dark. But something is shining in the darkness; something that did not exist before. Its cold light moves over a land revealed: over barren fields, over dead stands of trees, over mottled ribcages of rotten wood frame houses.

It was better not to see.

Past the decayed landscape, the air outside June's window blooms with the smell of clear water, fresh snow, and a hint of flowers. It has been so long since

she last smelled...anything. The sensation seizes her, then catapults her from the present into memory. The world, before death and darkness, was golden, warm, bursting with the nectar of dandelion: medallion, honey, butter-colored blooms that covered the fields so thickly you could not step without crushing twenty. She remembers a vibrancy of flowers so profound that the fields quivered with color.

It has been so long since she remembered flowers!

She runs onto her porch and meets—nothing. Or what appears to be nothing. The moon-boy is standing quite still. She does not notice him at first, when she steps off her porch into the dark blue world, searching for color. The boy has pressed himself behind a tree's thick trunk, the pale globe of his body almost hidden behind its black lines.

It is when the tree's branches begin to glitter that June turns to look more closely. At first, she thinks she is imagining it. But the thick branches flicker, and then glow steadily. They burst and bloom, bright white moon-flowers on branches that have been bare for months. June's mouth fills with water, sweet and cool. Her belly cramps with a hunger she hasn't felt in...weeks. A sweet, faint fragrance tips again onto the breeze. Her arm twitches at her side. She feels her ghost hand open, her fingers stretching wide to cup the air. Bloom, and open, bloom, and open.

And the outline of a boy, white against white flowers, pops from his surroundings.

"Moon," June gasps, with a sharp shake of her head.

"Moon!" The moon-son replies, beaming.



Since her mother died, instead of warmth, June has

pulses of feeling, bright and sharp. She hates the frozen fields, hates the emptied sky, hates the deep, bone cold of life now. And now she hates the moon-boy, silver and bright, who waits to be let in.

"You aren't what I wanted," she tells him, coldly. "I wanted warmth. I wanted *yellow* flowers. I wanted my *mother*. I wanted *sun*."

She appraises him. He is silvery and small and wrong. He smiles faintly.

"I hate you," June says to the frozen world, to the unreason that came like lightning and took away everything, and to the boy who is far too much a part of this new landscape. Far too little like her, like her mother. "I will never accept you."

Back alone in her room, shivering and miserable, June tumbles apart like a handful of stones.



She lets him come inside. He shines silver, and asks for ice.

"It's everywhere," she says. "You don't need me to get it for you."

The moon-and-ice boy laughs. "You're right," he says, undaunted. June sucks her teeth, but otherwise ignores him. In the middle of the night, when she is supposed to be asleep, she watches him slip out of bed, climbing up branches until he is way up high in the cold, black sky. His light makes diamonds in the ice fields.

"Beautiful," June whispers, half-sleeping. And the moon-son, overhead, smiles.

"Stop watching me," she says, the next night, when she catches him peeking at her while she pretends to be asleep. He grins, unabashed, and continues gazing.

She raises herself up on one elbow, and asks him just what he thinks he is looking at. She expects him not to answer.

But he does. He tells her that once he was just the smallest disturbance of texture in a limitless dark potential, a ripple in a stream that could have gone on being nothing. Until her magic found him. Now, he is a moon-bright boy with arms and legs and laughter. He feels strong as a mountain covered in snow. He is brilliant as a glistening sheath of ice with blue-black water gliding beneath his belly. He is possible as a cascading snow shower, a million of him at once, floating silently toward the earth. It takes her a moment to realize that, for just one second, as he talked, she too was enchanted by what the cold, dark world could be.

Through his eyes, the world is not dead, and cold, and dark. It is sparkles and crystals and...alive.

On the table between their beds, the boy has piled a little heap of moon flowers from the tree outside. He watches them glisten and sparkle. As he gazes, they unfold themselves from their crumpled pile, their petals flap like snow cranes, and lift to fly gracefully through the room. June smiles at the novelty, the delight of it. She supposes that he could be beautiful, in his cold, silver way.

But then her mind stutters. It is like catching a toe on the rough edge of memory and she goes tumbling to her knees. She remembers her mother blowing warm breath into a silky cup of petals, remembers the flower hovering delicately above her palm, animated briefly before wilting from the heat. "You can eat these," her mother said, then. "The taste will transport you to summer." June's mouth tugs down, her hand curls into a fist against her side.

"I like being the moon," the moon son assures her, worried that she thinks he has been complaining. "With my light covering the land, I can be part of everything."

"Not everything," June says softly.



June dreams that she is eating flowers.

She feels something soft brush against her lips. *Wing*, she thinks. She smells clean water, fresh ice. *Flower*. She smells burning sun and sweet perfume. The flower's stem is a cord stretched from her chest to the far edge of a blank land. She opens her mouth, takes the petal between her teeth. She chews. It tastes faintly perfumed, slightly bitter. It wilts against her tongue. She swallows. A cool, gentle liquid rises in her stomach, spreads to her chest. Tingles spread up and down her limbs, to her toes, to her cheeks. She stops shivering. The magic in her veins slows, and then stops. There is no pain, this time. There is sweet, unexpected relief.

Her body is not a prisoner, she is no longer tethered.



She wakes, expectation brimming in her like water. She scrambles outside, stumbling down the steps in her haste, and pinches a blossom from the tree. She holds it to her mouth, thinks of her mother, and pushes it between her lips. She chews, and swallows. Liquid fills her stomach, and quickly rises to her throat. She braces herself against the tree, and vomits.

Grief twists her. After her mother died, June had wrapped her arms around her still-warm body, and tried to follow where she'd gone. As the chill set in, then the terrible cold, her mind flew on soft downy wings over an endless, blank, in-between land. Nowhere to

perch, nowhere to land. Hovering, exhausted, she beat the air until it formed the shape of a question to resound, over and over, through that empty, dark, unwelcoming space. *How do I go on without you?*



June sits at the table, and tries to think of a spell that can fix this. She is no closer to making the world be what it used to be, no closer to remembering what it felt like to be whole. Perhaps she has not given enough.

What she loses next is a leg—the bottom half twisted and useless, though not torn away completely. It hurts the same, and she is still not prepared for it.

The star-girls appear quickly, holes punched into the night sky. When June sees them, she trembles with recognition. They are as bright and hot as her mother, and as giant. But when June reaches for them, hungry, greedy, they recede from her. June stumbles, tries to steady herself with a left arm that no longer exists.

“Please,” June says, and tries to find the words to continue. “Why are you so far from me?” June holds her hand up before her. “I can’t feel you.”

The stars twinkle cheerily. Faint voices answer, a harmony reverberating through the heavens:

“We are right here, mother!”

“We are right here, mother!”

“We are right here, mother!”

Rage, unexpected as it is complete, shudders through June. “Please,” she shouts into the sky. “Don’t you know how much I need to feel you?” Magic crackles through her hand. A jolt, heavy with anger, thuds through her. And then grief blunts June’s senses like a cloud of dirt,

like a mountain of ash. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I don’t want you if I can’t feel you.”

The stars go on shining, oblivious, twinkling.



Is it worse, she wonders. To have nothing, and no one? Or to have something so different? Brightness hurts, she reminds herself. But it is what she taught me.



The moon-son comes quietly through June’s door, his arms full of white flowers. The star-children peek through her window.

“I’m sorry,” June begins, wanting to apologize for the strange things she has done, for the strange thing she has become.

“Look,” interrupt the stars, pointing to the flowers. “You have been so sad, and we thought that you might like these.”

“Smell them,” says the boy. He shows her a soft petal.

“You can’t eat them,” June says, frowning. “They don’t do anything.”

“No,” agrees the moon-son. “But they make you smile when you look at them.” The moon-son finds a jar, fills it with water, and arranges the flowers carefully.

“It can be hard,” the stars say, “to be alone in the dark.” A simple fact, stated simply. But in their voice, their quiet harmony, June hears all the words of grief.

They climb down from the night, and seat themselves at the table around her. The silver light from the moon and the white light of the stars brighten her room. It is not the world she knew; it is, still, so painfully different. But the flowers shine softly, sweetly. There is a beauty

in their whiteness. A sliver of ice breaks from a petal, and June watches it melt into water.

“I can look at these,” June says, “and remember a little bit of summer. I can tell you about it, if you’ll let me.”

The moon and the stars look at her expectantly, waiting for her to teach them. And June feels—not relief, not exactly—but a moment. A moment of something that softens her lips, her heart, the claws of her memory.

Perhaps, June thinks, there is no spell that can fix this. But tonight, there are the moon and the stars who sit with her. There are flowers that look like bright wings lifted.



Endria Isa Richardson is a black, malaysian, and gay american writer from Worcester, Massachusetts. Her stories are in *Lightspeed*, *Clarkesworld*, *FIYAH*, *Nightmare*, and other fantastic/al magazines. In her past life, Endria was a prison abolitionist lawyer. You can find more of her work at www.endriarichardson.com.

Entre cráteres, nosotros

por Ana Hurtado

Es el sulfuro que primero penetra nuestras ventanas. En los ojos de Bastián veo el reflejo de un baile resplandor rojo y dorado, y un calor que llega hasta nuestros cachetes. Bajo el volumen del playlist que nos ha traído hasta acá, tan lejos de casa, y observo como la lava fluye en su canal y se come todo en su camino: piedras y lodo, plumas de unos pájaros que pudieron escapar, huellas de patas y garras, una calzada ya recorrida por esta misma lava hace cientos de años. Cuando el volcán Cotopaxi vomita todo lo que tiene dentro y sus venas de páramo se llenan de magma, noto como llora, como chilla con nubes de cenizas y lágrimas de relámpagos, y pienso tal vez llora por nosotros.

Bastián sale del auto aunque le pedí que no lo haga. *Estamos estacionados a una distancia segura*, me había prometido, pero siento el fuego en mis párpados. Este paseo fue su idea. Un último tour por nuestros Andes antes de irnos fuera del país para la universidad. Hace doce años hicimos el mismo viaje con nuestros padres. *Así que es tradición*, insistió. En aquel entonces, Cotopaxi no estallaba ni derramaba sus entrañas sobre nosotros. La foto que me mostró mamá del viaje retrata a Bastián, JuanFer, y yo sentados en una piedra con chompas de los

noventas y lentes más grandes que nuestras caras y un volcán atrás nuestro dormido.

Dale, que no te va a pasar nada, me dice ahora Bastián, su cuerpo ya pisando tierra caliente. Coloca su pelo rojo en una cola baja y se tapa la nariz con la manga de su camiseta.

Atrás mío está JuanFer quien también se quita su cinturón de seguridad y pone su mano fría sobre mi hombro. Vamos, Valen, me susurra, que esto solo se ve una vez en la vida.

Nuestro paseo de fin de curso empieza con un volcán que nos solloza y lagrimea fuego. Viajamos desde Quito horas después de que el anuncio salió en las noticias: el volcán Cotopaxi está preparándose para una explosión. Mamá mencionó algo de como esto haría que el mundo solo siga subiendo en temperaturas y que los glaciares sigan derritiéndose, y yo le pregunte algo como que *pero qué culpa tienen los volcanes?*

Ese instante, JuanFer mandó un mensaje al chat del grupo proponiendo salir antes para admirar la explosión y tal vez morir en el intento. Mientras yo escribía *Tengo miedo--*, Bastián respondió *De una*.

Parada en frente del Cotopaxi, entrelazo mis dedos en el bolsillo grande de mi chompa, y el cielo de cenizas cae sobre nosotros, bañándonos de gris. En la distancia, vemos como un zorro andino, color candela naranja, examina nuestro paisaje de liquen y hongos y flores y luego, como si también lo lamentara todo, se acuesta lejos de la lumbre del Cotopaxi y duerme. Bastián agrupa unas piedras en su mano y las lanza hacía el animal que reposa. JuanFer se ríe.

Ya, déjenlo en paz, les pido.

Nos acercamos al auto de Bastián de nuevo, y esta

vez no subimos el volumen de la radio. Entre respiros, escuchamos como las llantas se resbalan en el lodo y barro de un ser que cada cientos de años llora. En el retrovisor noto como mis pestañas se deshacen en gris y se disuelven en mis mejillas porque también soy ceniza de volcán.



En el camino a la laguna Quilotoa, nuestra segunda parada del viaje por carretera, notamos como la nube de hongo del Cotopaxi se dilata y nos sigue. Tal vez esta cortina de gris nos cubrirá hoy noche mientras acampamos en otro volcán. Ahora nos acercamos a una caldera, a una boca de un volcán extinto, una bestia que en algún punto de nuestra historia chilló y gritó y estalló. Cuando al fin se calló, un lago de agua azul fosforescente llenó y ahogó su boca, y hace doce años yo estaba aquí con JuanFer y Bastián y nuestros papás, todos remando en kayaks esperando a ver si nos tragaba Quilotoa en un mordisco.

¿Se acuerdan que tomamos agua de la laguna hace mil años? pregunta JuanFer, sus rodillas arrimándose en la parte de atrás de mi asiento y apuñalándome.

No jodas, ve, le digo, y le aleteo a sus piernas con mi mano.

Sí, responde Bastián, sí me acuerdo.

Yo también me acuerdo, añado, y me sorprende que no nos morimos.

Siempre tan paranoica, Bastián me dice.

Bastián estaciona el auto en un terreno vacío. Donde antes prosperaban pasto y plantas del páramo, ahora sucumben nubes de tierra marrón, y el polvo se levanta como un tornado acogiéndonos. Abrimos las puertas del auto, y miro como los bigotes rojos de Bastián recogen

tierra. Ya no reconozco a el Bastián de la foto que me enseñó mamá, el Bastián que escondía rocas volcánicas en mi chompa y no me daba cuenta y luego yo pesaba mil libras, el Bastián barba roja que una vez besó mi quijada cuando me tropecé con las raíces de un árbol de pino aquí en este desierto andino, mi *bestie* Bastián. Caminamos hasta el borde donde un gran anuncio dice *Bienvenidos a la laguna del cráter Quilotoa de 9kms!*

¿Y la laguna? Pregunta JuanFer. No sé si el sol está demasiado brillante o si me estoy volviendo ciega. Pero observo un charquito de agua y apunto al centro de la boca del Quilotoa con mi dedo índice.

¿Qué le pasó al agua? Pregunta Bastián.

Desapareció, le respondo.

Se evaporó, teoriza JuanFer.

Vemos como dos o tres burros todavía caminan hacia fondo de la caldera, sin turistas en su lomo. JuanFer me pasa su termo repleto con aguardiente y tomo un sorbo. Cuando el líquido quema mi garganta, comenzamos la bajada: esta boca desierta se come nuestros pasos, y el viento elimina el rastro de nosotros. Cuando llegamos a lo que antes era un océano volcánico, suspiro. En frente nuestro hay un charco en donde varias moscas se sumergen. Caminamos sobre una tierra agrietada, llena de fisuras, de cicatrices.

No queda nada, digo en voz alta.

Otras partes del mundo inundadas, y nuestra caldera sin agua, dice Bastián. Le paso el termo de licor a Bastián y comenzamos a armar el campamento. Hablamos de que si vale o no tomarnos una foto aquí para el Insta, para el hashtag de *Doce años después* pero pensar en este desierto como fondo nos calla.

Hoy noche, mientras Bastián juega con la fogata que

no debería estar aquí, debería estar hundida bajo la laguna, y a la vez que JuanFer se acuesta boca arriba y con sus ojos color miel observa nuestro cielo ecuatorial, me siento en la carpa y me quito mis medias y noto como mi piel morena también se deshace en un polvo gris y las fisuras y rajadas tan profundas en mi ser se abren, y me deshago yo también.



Llegamos a Los Illinizas hace poco. Estamos chuchaqui y acostados en un páramo seco. Nuestras cabezas topan, los tres formamos un triángulo. Acá, nuestros padres nos tomaron una foto así: chiquitos, con jeans bastante azules, nuestros ojos cerrados, y sonriendo con dientes chuecos y algunos faltantes, acostados sobre un césped que respiraba. Ahora, doce años después, igual seguimos con jeans, con dientes mejorados por brackets, y recostados en un pasto amarillento y marchito.

Los gemelos volcanes Illinizas nos vigilan desde arriba. Los gemelos no han tenido nieve por más de cinco años, desde que Guayaquil comenzó a llamarse Guayakill no solo por su narcotráfico, pero también porque regresaron los piratas: ya hundida, la perla del pacífico ahora es su propia Venecia.

Así fue que vimos el cóndor esa vez, ¿se acuerdan? les pregunto. Sonríó al ver cómo una nube tapa al sol que nos achica los ojos.

Ni cagando vemos otros, Bastián responde. Pero lo bueno es que si me voy a broncear antes de mi viaje, dice, y se quita su camiseta, revelando un abdomen blanco, pelitos dorados, pezones rosados.

Te vas a quemar, le advierto. Ponte bloqueador, le ofrezco un tubito que guardo en mi mochila.

Nah, me dice. ¿Y vos, JuanFer? Le pregunta.

JuanFer se sienta, pedazos de césped muerto pegado a su espalda, y cuando se quita la camiseta, revela una constelación de lunares en su lomo.

¿Me pones? Me pregunta JuanFer. Me paro y deslizo hacia él. Caliento mis manos con mi aliento olor aguardiente y coloco el bloqueador blanco en su espalda color tierra.

Ahí está pues, nos dice Bastián. Con sus manos crea una cámara con flash y dice *Clic!* La foto de doce años después, sonrío. Camina hacia el auto y comienza a sacar nuestro toldo.

¿Crees que es cierto? JuanFer me pregunta. Uno sus lunares con mi dedo índice y con mis palmas esparzo el bloqueador. Es tan cálido.

¿Qué cosa? Le devuelvo la pregunta.

¿Que ya nunca más vamos a volver a ver a un cóndor? Cuando dice *cóndor*, se da la vuelta, y me encuentro con manos blancas y brillosas en el aire y la cara de JuanFer tan cerca a la mía.

Creo que el cóndor que vimos cuando éramos guambras fue el último que vamos a ver en nuestras vidas, le admito, y miro el rosado de sus labios.

Qué lástima, me dice. Oye, Valen.

¿Si?

¿No estás triste de dejarlo todo, de dejar a nuestro país? Me pregunta. Escucho mis latidos en mis oídos, y quiero responderle que *Sí, ahorita si me da tanta lástima.*

Pero en vez, le respondo, Todo ha cambiado, tal vez es hora de que nosotros también. JuanFer se da la vuelta de nuevo, y noto cómo de sus lunares tan cafés nacen plumas color obsidiana.

Luego, en el atardecer, tomamos más aguardiente, lo último que nos queda, y cada cuanto nuestras miradas se dirigen hacia arriba, hacia un cielo y un universo que es testigo de todo lo que hemos dañado. Nuestros ojos buscan por el gran cóndor andino y solo nos encontramos a nosotros, aquí, en los Illinizas, solos, lejos de Quito y lejos de lo que alguna vez fuimos. Las flamas de la fogata parpadean, y sus sombras juegan con la luz de nuestras caras. Con cada baile, observo como la cara de Bastián cambia: su nariz y boca crecen un hocico, sus bigotes ahora largos, sus dientes grandes y afilados. Muerdo los malvaviscos derretidos y todo me sabe a sulfuro.



El glacial del volcán Cayambe colgaba de su pecho, y, con los años, comenzó a deslizarse. Poco a poco, el enorme pedazo de hielo llegó al mismo pueblo nombrado en honor a su volcán, y luego se derritió, ahogando a la plaza central, el mercado, y una escuelita. Lo vimos desde Quito por las noticias. Tuvimos años para salvar al pueblo Cayambe y no lo hicimos.

En el único parque de Cayambe que no está inundado, un señor en su triciclo vende *Agua de glacial*. Compro tres botellas, pongo mis dólares en sus manos arrugadas por el sol, y camino hacia JuanFer y Bastián. JuanFer se rasca la espalda con sus uñas, sus manos cada vez más garras y talones y menos como las manos que sostuvieron las mías en aquella noche en un paseo a Cayambe de guambras cuando tenía tanto frío. Bastián y su trompa roja de zorro abren la botella de plástico con sus dientes afilados. Me siento entre los dos, entre mis amigos de toda la vida. Coloco mi cabeza en el hombro y ala de JuanFer y miro a su plumaje nacer. Abro mi botella con lo que me queda de mis manos: al topar la botella

cristalina contra mi labio de cenizas, desaparezco con el viento.



Ana Hurtado is a speculative fiction writer and a Clarion West 2022 alum. Her work has been published by The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Strange Horizons, Uncanny Magazine, among others. LeVar Burton read one of her stories for his podcast LeVar Burton Reads. She is a professor of creative writing at Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador. You can find her via her website www.anahurtadowrites.com or on Twitter at [@ponciovicario](https://twitter.com/ponciovicario).

Nuturing Nostalgia

with Erika Hollice

Nostalgia isn't always a single-person event. It can be a dialogue as memories spark and catch, something as small as an old essay saved by your parents or as interactive as trading lines from *The Princess Bride* with friends.

The design for Nostalgia cover was formed during Issue 19: Omen when one of the first ideas was to create a two-character cover. The end result didn't quite fit the mood so we tabled the concept. This is Apparition Lit's first cover with two characters on it and it makes a unique way for Erika Hollice to end her residency with us.

Each month Erika releases brush templates for Clip Studio through her Patreon. During the Spring, one of the brushes was a set of glowy neon shapes. The shapes reminded me of 90s surfer wear and the colours were straight out of the arcade. Inspired by those brushes, I asked Erika for a date night at a sci-fi arcade and for her to specifically use the brushes she released.

Two of the sketches showed the characters beside an old arcade game. The poses were different, the first with one of the aliens using the joystick while the second watched and popped some gum. The second was the

two leaning together over the game, their hands almost touching.

The third image was more like a super high-tech driving game, with one of the aliens floating in place while, their hands glowing with control, as the other watched.

We decided on using the first image. What really sold us was that pop of bubblegum. There's a memory and instinct attached to seeing a bubble that I wonder if everyone has. When I see a bright pink bubble, I know the taste immediately. I can feel the hard gum and terrible 1940s joke packet slipped inside the wrapper. My tongue knows the shape to make and my fingers twitch to pop that bubble.

There were no arcades when I grew up. The closest approximation was the small section in the movie theatres over 40 minutes away and only built when I was a penniless student. Arcades are a more recent fixation, stemming from 80s movie marathons sparked by the pandemic and, yes, *Stranger Things*.

The more you see and create, the more references you have to hold onto. It makes it easy to stroll down memory lane as our memories glow, shift, and become mythical. Did I almost drown in a pond or did I just struggle for breath for a few moments? Did a popped ember from a fire ruin my favourite sweater or was that a charred marshmallow? What makes sense in the story, what compels the listener, and what is the truth don't all have to compromise a nostalgic moment. It's not Power Rangers becoming a Metazord. Nostalgia is a feeling that can be twisted and shaped. It's up to us to keep it in check and make sure our walk down memory lane isn't so rose-tinged that we can't see the thorns within the flowers.



Written by Rebecca Bennett

Erika Hollice is our Artist-In-Residence for 2022. You can find more Erika's art at <https://www.eriart.net/>

Find the sketches from Erika on our website.

The Ghosts of Goodbyes

by Marie Baca Villa

For a brief moment, my past self and I are on the precipice of a single plane of existence. She can't see me, but I can see her.

Twenty-two years old, sitting in the process group with our clinical supervisor. Today's discussion is about endings and goodbyes. She leans in when the professor starts the meeting with a question.

"How do you do goodbyes?"

"I've never had to say goodbye. To anyone, really. I don't even know what you mean..."

She is lying, of course. We have said many goodbyes; let go of many friends and loved ones. Teachers, classmates, mentors, coaches. All in the past. What she really means is she has not acknowledged those endings; has not allowed herself to feel the pain of letting go. She is young, the whole world is in front of her. All she has is time. She is surrounded by people and doesn't have to mourn them when they leave.

The professor soaks in the answer, looks at her knowingly, skeptically.

"Let's unpack that."

My young self nods eagerly.



We are a year into the pandemic and I'm texting a friend, venting about my bad day. I was thinking about my dad again. This friend is good with grief; doesn't mind the way I make every conversation, every memory about him.

We live only a few miles away from each other, but haven't seen each other in months. It isn't safe. Nothing we used to do together – art shows, meetups, happy hour – is safe anymore. I finally admit the truth. Not out loud, of course. That would be too hard. But in text.

I hate this. I miss my old life. I want my old life back.

With as much empathy as she can muster in text, she responds: *There is no going back. Only moving forward.*

This is not bad news. It's actually comforting. A fact that continually propels me with purpose as my life oozes, changes, shapeshifts into a form I never anticipated.

Only forward, I repeat.



There I am again; now 30 years old. This self, too, I visit in memories. This is one of those stark, flashbulb moments I carve out of the dark time and time again. It's sunny, and the last time I see my father alive.

The years following graduate school were painful but full of growth. The endings have been plentiful since the time I once believed they had no role in my life or practice. So many goodbyes, in fact, that I can no longer utter the phrase. The colloquial "Talk to you soon" has completely replaced the word from my

vernacular, and inherent discomfort with saying the g-word encapsulates all of my conversations, personal and professional.

That day is no different. As we part ways, my dad talks about how well he is doing in rehab. I encourage him, and wave, and can hear the words before they even leave my mouth...

“Talk to you soon.”

Now, as I watch from afar, I ask my mind to show me if I hugged him. I think it's in the moment between walking to my car and calling out over my shoulder. But the memory is blank. There is no answer to my desperate plea.

Please tell me I hugged him one last time.

A lone howl into a darkness that never howls back.



There is glory in letting go. There is much to be gained in saying goodbye. Perhaps, this is what the past is really calling for; what I am really missing when I refuse to say the words.

The ghosts of my old life hang around bitterly. I'm tired of trying to keep them at bay. They cling to every step forward, heralding me to return to the person I once was.. For what? The past is not as rosy as my brain would have me believe. It is not the princess, fair skinned and eternally young. It is the ruthless witch, poisonous and greedy. It keeps me trapped in the castle while my future runs free in the vast kingdom waiting to be explored.

I wake up one day and no longer recognize my life.

Too long I have been held hostage by my past selves. I prepare for psychic surgery, my hands and will moving deftly across time. The child who blamed herself for

her parent's marital discord. Blessed and released. The desperately lonely teenager who was bullied and bullied others. Blessed and released. The young woman crying in the bathroom at Christmas, completely alone in a room full of "family." Blessed and released. The daughter who could not convince her father to stay sober. The sister who could not keep her family together. The granddaughter who could never do enough. Blessed and released.

Gingerly, I say goodbye to each. There is no going back; only moving forward.



I am back in that clinical supervision group. My young self has arrogantly proclaimed there is nothing wrong with goodbyes, no real challenge. You just let go and move on. There's more exciting things to look forward to in life.

What keeps me anchored in this memory? Why does this spot rub so deeply in my consciousness? I realize the derision I hold for her - my younger, idyllic self- is what keeps her caught in the net of my memories; what keeps her trapped in my own time capsule of dread...

Gracefully, I grant her the compassion I locked away in resentment. She would learn, over time, just how many goodbyes life had in store for us. She would see, over time, that the future always bears challenges, the fruits of which are often sweeter and more plentiful than the feelings of the past. She would learn over time, and isn't that what the passage of time is for?

I see her clearly, in that plane, and I see the time pass between us. She is back there, I am here now. Moving forward, I allow myself to say goodbye to her, too.



Marie Baca Villa is a queer Chicana writer and artist in California. She loves science fiction, horror, flaming hot Cheetos, and cats. You can find Marie on Twitter at [@okay_its_marie](https://twitter.com/okay_its_marie).

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Year 3: Experimentation (January 2020); Transfiguration (April 2020); Redemption (July 2020); Satisfaction (October 2020)



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