

# VOICES



ART / POETRY / FICTION



DARE TO DREAM  
FALL 2020

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FALL 2020

Voices is a literary and arts magazine that showcases the diverse voices of West Valley College. It is published by the members of the Voices staff and English 80 & 81. Current students, alumni, faculty, and staff of West Valley College are invited to submit their works of original fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, and art for publication.

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# VOICES

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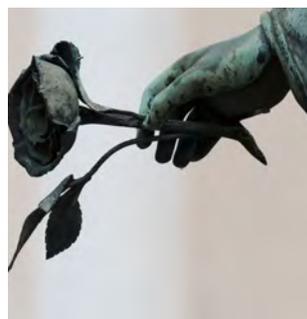
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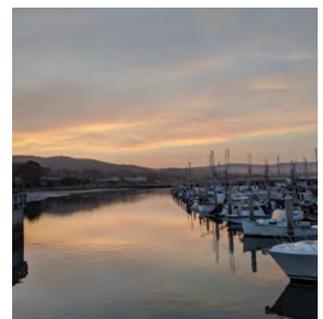
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# ORANGES

VANDANA PAWAR



# MADAME JOSEPHINE

CINDY NGUYEN



"HOW LONG WILL YOU  
STAY?..."

"I'M NOT SURE. BUT FOR  
YOU? I WILL STAY  
LONGER."

Madame Josephine was in deep slumber. Her linen under dress was wrinkled like crumpled paper. Her once perfectly coiled hair was now matted into a ragged sheep's fur. Her pillows were ransacked into the ground and her sheets were ruffled and bunched into layers of mass. Clearly last night was indebted with lively entertainment.

Courtesan Simone sashayed into the arid room. Two servants followed her. She recognized her Madame's deep comatose-like state. She raised her arms and clapped her hands in quick succession. It didn't do any good. Madame Josephine still sat lifeless in the cradle of her nest. The two servants were now dodging around the room to pick up pillows and linen thrown in aimless fashion. Simone snatched a pillow out of the hands of a servant and hurled the cushion at Madame Josephine.

Josephine's eyes pried open in a dreadful manner. She looked at Simone with great apathy and disdain.

"You did not have to charge me!" Josephine straightens and widens herself up.

The two servants walked away from the room with sheets of linen and cushions in their hands. Simone glided over to a window and broadened the curtains. Rays of light flared into the room. "I'm sorry Madame, but you would not wake up."

Simone walked over to a dresser and unleashed several frocks of clothing in her arms. She threw some stockings over to Josephine. Josephine leapt out of bed and glided the fitted pair into her calves. She strolled over towards Simone.

"What do you think of Johann van Ludwig?" Josephine inquired.

"He's a fine pianist and musician." Simone hovered a corset around Josephine's head. "Arms up!"

Josephine raised her arms. "He's unlike anyone I have met."

"Well, he is Austrian, Madame." Simone tugged and pulled the backing of the corset.

"I have met many Austrians in my life. But he is so kind, gentile and civilized."

Simone was still struggling to tighten the gaps of bodice. “Madame will you please not speak. Your corset is getting awfully tight. You’ve been eating too many sweets lately. That Johann is certainly not a good influence on you.” She finally finished and the boned bodice was tightly wrapped like beef tenderloin in twine. Josephine looked back at Simone in annoyance.

It was breakfast morning now in the Dupont Estate. There was a large dining room table that centered the room. The walls were framed in gold and were adorned with golden leaves. The floor was wooden with a pastel colored rug that sat underneath the table. On opposite ends of the table sat Madame Josephine and Monsieur Marcellus.

Marcellus ate in large bites with each bite devoured as if it were his last meal. He scurried away with his cutlet platter while Josephine ate her small bites of quail’s leg in a gradual manner. Neither of the two looked at one another.

“How was the party?” Marcellus asked.

Josephine in punctual time grabbed her glass of champagne and slowly slurped the contents till it was empty. The slurping sound remitted around the room and filled the burgeoning silence.

“I thought you were still on your business trip?” Josephine pointed.

“It ended in an abrupt state. Besides I wanted to know what my dear wife was up to. I see she is still behaving nonsensically, as usual.”

Josephine huffed with great contempt. “It was fine. I had the gratification on showing our dear guest Johann the pleasantries of the countryside of Saint-Malo. It was much better than having an ugly brute of a husband for a week.”

Marcellus shot a narrow stare in Josephine’s direction. She continued to eat heartily away while avoiding his indignant face.

During the afternoon, Josephine sprawled across a chair. She was taking in the leisure evening and music was roaming within the room. She had a fan rested between her nimble fingers that she would flap in even pace. Across from her was Johann van Ludwig. He was playing the piano with such zeal. Every now and then he would look towards Josephine in a dotting trance.

He finished the last note of his musical piece and slowly turned around to meet Josephine’s face. She was still in a listless trance. Suddenly, her eyes widened to meet his.

“That was beautiful. What were you playing?”

“Mass in B minor. It’s Bach my dear.” Johann added. He plucked a profiterole off a plate stacked on top of the piano.

Josephine gestured him to come near her with the wavering of her fan. He walked towards her and rested his head on her body and bosoms.

“How long will you stay in France?”

"I'm not sure. Until I finish composing my symphony. But for you? I will stay longer." He chided.

"Please don't go. It's dreadfully boring here." She moped. "Ohh but you have your husband right here beside you." Johann clenched his fists and mimicked silverware in his hands and pretended to munch away as if he had Marcellus' appetite. He chuckled away at the advent of his tomfoolery.

Josephine stuck her fan at Johann. "Stop it! I don't need to be reminded that he is a repulsive toad. I have to live with him every day and I still can't bare the incessant sounds and munches of his appetite."

Johann was no longer laughing. Her anger struck a chord in him. "I'm sorry about the indecent humor. I'll stay as long as I can."

It was the evening and Josephine lay in a bathtub full of suds and rose sweetened aroma clinging to her skin and the room. Her under dressing was now soaked in water and clung to her, unveiling the contours of her womanly hip and frame. Simone walked into the room and Josephine loomed out of the tub. Water trickled from her feet and she raised her arms to lift up the soak drenched linen under dress. She hung it beside the bathtub.

Simone clouded her in a shield of towels and patted her dry and neat. She brought over new undergarments and clothed Josephine's body. A new corset was attached as well as new stockings and petticoats were added. The two servants from the morning strutted into the bathroom. They each had layers of clothes laid out against their arms. More panels of fabric and more layers of underskirts were attached until Josephine was a fully costumed doll.

Johann was waiting in the carriage. The sun was setting down and broaching into the night. He was dressed like a profiterole glazed in pastel green and covered in gold foil. He had laced ruffles stemming from his chest to his wrists. His hair was kept in a shine with rolls layered on each side.

Josephine was dressed in white. With a skirt transitioned with shiny and matte white stripes. She had a large navy blue ribbon nestled upon her waist and another navy blue ribbon wrapped tightly against her neck to complete the ensemble. Her hair was poofed into a rounded foam and her ends were coiled into ringlets.

She plopped herself into the carriage and off they went to the Dubois estate.

There, the two were greeted by Alexandre Dubois and Juliette Dubois. The day was setting and the dilemmas from the day were washing away.

As they headed into the estate, there were large crowds gathered in every area. Music was playing. Food was being served. People were chattering away. It was all so lively.

Juliette pulled Josephine aside and led her to the top floor of the house. Johann was lost in the undercurrent of people.

The two women were stowed away in a room. There sat a young gentleman lying along a chair with a pipe in his hands. He was not dressed like the ostentatious crowd of that night. He adorned a simple red frock with some ruffles dangling from his chest. He leaned forward and noticed the two stately women presented to him.

“This is Pierre Theroux. He is a famous gambler in Nantes. And this is Madame Josephine.” Juliette remarked.

He stood and greeted Josephine. Johann walked in and playfully approached Pierre. The four huddled in the room would eventually reconvene downstairs with everyone drinking, eating and socializing. The occasion was so long and plentiful that it seemed to have lasted a lifetime.

Josephine learned through her drunken battered state that Pierre was astute and bright despite his dull appearance. He made much of his money through the fortunes of gambling and was quick to seize every penny. She evidently lost to him in a game of faro.

Johann was also enjoying himself. He made a point to mention his talents and skills as a musician and he took every opportunity to play a classical tune. From Vivaldi’s “Spring” to Handel’s “Arrival of the Queen of Sheba.”

“Your wonderful pianist is such a joy on this grand occasion. How long is he staying at your estate?” Juliette inquired.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. But my thoughts tell me he’ll be staying here for quite a while. And who is that Pierre Theroux of yours you’ve shown to me today? I know his status, but not how you came to know such a trickster.” Josephine responded.

“He’s a dear childhood friend of Alexandre.” Juliette softly noted.

Josephine retorted, “Huh a dear childhood friend. I wish Marcellus had a sort. He’s too confined in his work to have any friends.”

Juliette’s eyes widened. “What about Johann? Surely Johann could be a dear friend to him. He is the life of the party.”

“Johann? He could not care less for Johann. He only allowed him to stay after I pleaded with him that a dear friend of my cousin needed a place to stay in Saint-Malo.” Josephine huffed.

“What a pity. Your husband is so wallowed up in his work.”

As the night proceeded, the joyous games and laughter were lessening and eased until the only chirping from the estate stemmed from Johann’s slurred playing. By now, the overflow of drinks had gotten into his esteem. Josephine walked over to him.

“We must go home now.” Josephine demanded.

Johann waddled around and carelessly pressed the keys to the piano. “Home? Where to?”

She yelled, “You are making an unpleasantry of yourself!”

“How could you say such a thing! You are just like your bore of a husband!” Johann retorted.

“Don’t make such accusations at me! We are going back and I am taking you with me!”

Josephine beckoned for a servant to coax Johann out of the estate. He seemed displeased. He drunkenly lurched behind Josephine into the carriage. The gallops of the horses filled the stifled silence of the carriage. The Dupont estate was so far away that the drinks in Johann's system waned away.

"I think it was awfully rude of you to end on such an unpleasant night." Johann quipped.

Josephine bursted with wide exclaim, "How could I not? You were acting like an imbecile."

He jeered, "Perhaps I ought to be going for now."

The rest of the ride was instilled with silence. Josephine could not fathom of a friendship without Johann. Surely she had friends, but they were miles away and far too concerned with their own livelihoods to care for hers.

The two finally stumbled their way into the house. Johann walked up the stairs into his room without another word said to Josephine. Josephine followed behind him and tried to call for Johann. But it was too late. He had walked away from her grasp. She decided it was no use to make any peace treaties on this dreadful night. It was better to impart sincerities and apologies for tomorrow.

Josephine treaded over to the parlor to fetch herself a glass of red wine to ease the tension of the awful reddened night. As she staggered into the room, there was Marcellus sitting down with a glass of red wine already in his hand. He had his portly stomach nestled along the contours of the sofa. His blouse was unbuttoned and his frills were splotted in wine. His powdered wig was lopsided. He stared back at her with great distress and irritation.

"I see you were out on another thrilling excursion of yours." Marcellus joked.

She grabbed a glass and filled her cup to the brim with the delectable wine. "Please do not start with these accusations." she tirelessly pleaded.

"You've had too many to drink!" Marcellus retorted.

Josephine retorted "Then what's that in your hand?"

"I'm not the one entertaining myself with these frivolous functions!" He turned his face away from Josephine.

Josephine ignored Marcellus' damning words. She walked up the stairs and plunged herself into her room. She carried with her the glass of red wine.

Josephine was up, but rather not about. She starred indifferently at the glistening of the morning. Maybe reparations could be made with Johann, but they would not have mattered. She could not keep him in this caged manor forever. Her glass of red wine sat on the bedside partially drunk. Simone entered the room as per usual and adorned Josephine for the day. The two servants grabbed the sheets and linen and flattened the bed as if it were never slept on. She stood emotionless and flat.

Simone handed Josephine a letter. She knew it was from Johann. The letter addressed that Johan had left and that he enjoyed his stay and his time with Josephine. Nothing else was addressed.

She walked into the empty guest room that once housed him. She wrapped herself in the sheets and pillows. But his scent was gone and so was his stay. Her tears bled into the sheets until there was a pool of darkened blue. Simone was beckoning her to breakfast. She wiped off those glistening tears and patted her face dry with her sleeves.

Josephine sat for breakfast opposite Marcellus. There was long silence that lingered for some time.

Then, Marcellus interjected the silence with a few words. "Your companion doesn't seem to be here anymore. Seems he left the morning before you woke."

Josephine did not utter a word. Her eyes were bleak and absent minded. She carried on eating as if those words had not hit her at all. She stared across the frilly tapestries, the golden carved table, and the rich drippings of her pheasant. All of this had meant nothing to her. Nothing if she had no one to share her riches with.

# LONELY MOTHER

BANQUI DOMAGUING

Her roots have spread far away like a fast wind,  
under the magical earth of two different lands.  
Sometimes making her heart and soul wishing  
not to have grown them that strong.  
She probably will never  
see them ever again,  
holding from a few surviving strings.  
Never misremembering the  
love she has for all of them.  
Her eyes stop sprinkling maybe,  
they return once again to her just to soak  
in her unconditional love.

# STARCHILD

ELAINE NGUYEN



"ONCE, A STAR FELL TO  
EARTH.  
ONCE, A PRINCESS LI ED  
TRAPPED IN A TOWER.  
ONCE, THERE CAME A  
MIGHTY FLOOD."

## I.

Once, a boy named Ben lived in a tower by the sea.

We may call him a boy only because our language has no word for what he was—no clever collection of consonants and vowels quite like the stardust spun through the tight ringlets of his hair. We may call his home a tower even though it was not quite a home and not quite a tower, but an old lighthouse whose paint peeled under the daily beatings of the tide.

His name really was Ben, though. He decided to be Ben and so he was. Every morning, Ben looked out the little round window in his tower. He used his window to gaze at the world below: fishermen with sun-worn faces wrinkled with age, schoolchildren with bright eyes crinkled with laughter. Waves crashing into rocks and villagers crashing into villagers.

And every night, Ben looked out the little round glass in his telescope. He used his telescope to gaze at the world above: comets cascading down an inky canvas, planets nestled snugly in their orbits. Living echoes of dying stars.

Ben's world was neither of those things. Ben's world was this: bed and bath and bookshelf and two chairs and nobody, nobody, nobody to sit at one of them. He was alone in his tower, and he had been alone for a very long time.

On a crisp spring day, Ben turned the last page in the last book on his shelf. It was a cookbook, of which he was rather fond although he ate only moonbeams. He sat for a moment in the deafening silence, then did the only thing left for a lonely little boy to do. He began to cry.

## II.

Once, a girl named Anusha went on a quest for revenge.

That day, the waves had grown bored with lapping timidly at the shores and leaped hungrily into the streets of her village instead. The sun had fallen from her perch and the color from the sky, because Anusha's violin was destroyed. Water damage.

She wanted to *avenge* her violin, which meant she would push some of her grief onto someone who wasn't carrying their fair share. (She'd learned the word from a movie her mother was watching.) So she went backwards. The water flowed steadily and she was exhausted by the time she reached the end of things, which was an old lighthouse that might have been white once but was now beige. Anusha could clearly see that the torrent began inside; it cascaded from the little round window above.

The door at the bottom of the lighthouse came open with a kick, and a great wave rushed out and sent Anusha sprawling into the mud. Raincoat ruined, she marched into the lighthouse and began painstakingly to half-climb, half-swim up the spiral stairs.

At the top, she found a little round room with a bed and bath and bookshelf and—boy.

(That was not quite the word. It stuttered in her mind.)

Anusha thought of the deep, blushing hue of soil as the setting sun kissed it; this was the boy's skin. She thought of the pitch-black gaps between the stars, which were vast despite looking small; these were the boy's eyes. His hair burst from his head like a supernova, in thick coils of black and indigo.

Even drenched in tears, he was so lovely that it was difficult to look at him directly, but Anusha looked anyway. She had always been brave, and more importantly, she was polite.

And their conversation went like this:

### III.

ANUSHA: Hello. My name is Anusha. It means star.

BEN: Hello. My name is Ben. I don't know what it means.

ANUSHA: Why are you crying?

BEN: Because I'm alone.

ANUSHA: Why are you alone?

BEN: Because I fell from the sky and I can't get back up.

ANUSHA: Have you tried coming down instead?

### IV.

Ben kept crying as they descended the stairs and began the trek to the village. He was accustomed to it and didn't shake or sob.

Earlier, when Anusha sat briefly in the chair that had been empty for two harvests, she understood that Ben's loneliness was an ocean in a bathtub—far more than his fair share. She'd gotten her quest the wrong way around. She didn't speak of the violin, or tell him to stop crying.

"You've been very brave," she said instead.

"I didn't have a choice," Ben replied. His voice was even, but his eyes were wide and he kept staring around at the swaying trees as they waded past. "So what?" Anusha retorted. "My mother forces me to get my shots, but the doctor always calls me brave."

This seemed to satisfy Ben. He was stricken to see the ruinous flood he'd wept, but Anusha insisted that he was wise to cry. She wouldn't have found him otherwise.

**V.**

Years later, the fishermen and their kin would say,

*Once, a star fell to earth.*

*Once, a princess lived trapped in a tower.*

*Once, there came a mighty flood.*

*Once, a violinist struck her bow through the heart of a dragon.*

None of it was false, really. But none of it was true as this: Once, Anusha turned to Ben and said, *When you're ready, I'll cry for you, so you can rest.* And as he rested, Ben crafted her a violin.

# ORANGES IN RED

ANDANA PAWAR



# LIFE'S A CLIMB

SHAGUFTA ALA |



# MANY FACES

LILY ROSHAN



# CONTEMPLATION

ANDANA PAWAR



# THE ONE WHERE BLAZE FALLS INTO A PEAT BOG

CORIN QUANTZ



"TRUTH OR DARE?"

"DARE."...

"I DON'T THINK HE OUGHT  
TO DO THAT..."

At night, the bog looked less like an endless plain dotted with scraggly browned shrubs and more like a black, yawning expanse ready to swallow you whole. The pegs and ropes tying off the particularly dangerous spots were helping to ease the minds of the members of the Thornbrook Historical Society's excavation party, but every once in a while somebody would cast a wary glance over the fields around their campsite, or exhibit a bit too much caution when stepping too far away from the fire.

With great effort, she wrestled the antique pick-up to the curb bringing it to a stop in her usual spot which meant taking up two parking spaces.

"Don't you go anywhere," she threatened, pointing her cigarette stained finger at me for emphasis. Aunt Ruth's ability to relate to a 15 year old girl was on the same level as her understanding of space aliens.

Daisy, who was especially superstitious, didn't like it at all. "I like to make the holes myself," she'd say, if someone teased her about her terror of the bog. "Not be thinking about one of them sucking me into the earth whenever it wants to."

Professor Alderman had taken great care in putting together the handful of employees assigned to cover this dig. It was a relatively untouched site in rural Scotland: a few of the local townspeople had written weeks earlier with reports of mangled ancient items being turned up by their grazing sheep, or by their plows. She didn't foresee that the excavation would be anything too difficult for the troupe of inexperienced young historians under her supervision, so it had been easy to get the trip approved by the Society Board.

It was an unusually crisp November, so the four research employees she'd chosen to go with the dig team were told several times to pack extras of all their clothes. Saoirse had grown up just a few miles south of the empty, wild country where the bog was located, and she took great delight in educating the rest of the party

on the likelihood of rainfall, exactly which coat would keep them warmest, and how to net the rarest birds inhabiting the lowlands.

“You know we’re going for artifacts, don’t you?” Winston remarked, while he and Daisy threw cases of gear and provisions into the back of their truck.

“It’s beautiful country,” she snapped back, blushing a little. “Who’s to say we shouldn’t take a bit of rest from breaking our backs over a few spearheads and go birdwatching every so often?”

Daisy tossed her travel-worn personal suitcase on top of the box of excavation tools and sighed. “Let’s get done what we’ve been sent for, but I’m not opposed to having a little fun if we can. Perhaps we can lend out our catches to a natural history museum.”

Blaze was told he wasn’t allowed to smoke, but of course he sewed a pack into his pants anyway. Nobody noticed until a few days into charting and excavating the site, when Saoirse decided to do everyone’s laundry on a whim and he fought her over that one particular pair of trousers.

Winston promised not to report him if he’d share half with him.

“He looks far too young to be allowed to smoke,” was Saoirse’s only comment, to Daisy, after everyone had calmed down and both young gentlemen had divided the rationed cigarettes evenly between them.

It wasn’t so much his youth, as his apparent physical weakness, that led her to remark on it, but neither of them wanted to say so. Blaze’s eyes were empty and sunk deep into his skull, and he hardly ever smiled unless sufficiently distracted. Daisy often had to poke him out of distant hazes, where he’d stare into a tree or at the ground or into the sky for ten or twenty minutes at a time without realizing it.

Of course, they also quickly learned that giving him a sip or two to drink usually broke him out of his apathy. None of them pressed him about it, but Saoirse found herself wishing she’d packed a bit more whiskey. Nobody knew much about him, really, aside from who his father is and the fact that he’d been Celia’s ward since he was very small. The only time he’d ever really speak at length, when he was sober, was if somebody asked him a question about an obscure Greek text.

That was part of the reason Daisy began a campfire game of truth or dare that night.

They’d been on the lowlands for a week now, and although they’d turned up several iron implements of various sizes through their efforts, the physical toll of the labor and the freezing weather was starting to wear on them all. Even Saoirse started speaking wistfully of fire and home at least once a day. Blaze shivered incessantly-- he was so very thin-- but never once complained even when his lips were blue with cold.

For Daisy, it was the emptiness that wore on her the most. She had grown up mostly in the cities, and although the novelty and the relaxation of open country was soothing for the first few days of their trip, the sheer expanse of the land and the loneliness of the terrain was grating--as was the feeling that they weren’t quite as alone as it seemed. She found herself glancing over her shoulder at empty shrublands and empty overcast sky at least five times a day, thinking someone was approaching from behind.

Nighttime was worse.

“Truth or dare,” Daisy commanded, without any introduction, one night as the four of them were huddled around their designated campfire.

Saoirse poked the flames with a stick. The light cast ghostly shadows on the treetops behind them.

“That’s a kids’ game.”

“I’ll play,” Blaze interrupted. He pulled his furlined blanket around his shoulders as a breeze drifted through the campsite. (The blanket was a gift from Saoirse, for his nineteenth birthday that October). “Truth.”

“... what’s the most valuable thing you’ve ever broken?” Daisy asked, grinning and biting at her thumbnail.

He hesitated a moment. “A marble tabletop. At a party when I was seven.” Blaze dipped his head and smiled into the blanket. “I threw a rock at it.”

Winston snorted into his soup.

“Since you think that’s so funny-” Blaze raised an eyebrow at him. “Truth or Dare?”

“Dare.”

Blaze thought for a moment, resting his chin in his hand. “Dare you to recite the paternoster in a single breath. If you can’t do it, you’ve got to take a drink.” He gestured at the bottle of malt whisky by the tent.

Glaring at him and taking a deep gasping breath, Winston sped his way through the prayer. He finished with a desperate wheeze at “sedliberanosamalo.” Then, he leaned off the log he was sitting on to launch into a dramatic coughing fit.

“Ought I dock him points for failing to use Ecclesiastical pronunciation?” Blaze glanced at Saoirse and grinned wickedly.

She sighed. “He’s been through enough, leave the poor man alone.”

“Remind me never to play this game with you again,” Winston huffed, still trying to get his breath back.

The next few runs around the circle weren’t quite as exciting: Daisy painted her face with some of Winston’s stockpiled jam preserves (he insisted they shouldn’t be classed as ‘non-essential’, because “essential is subjective”. Celia didn’t want to argue the philosophical point over jam, so he was permitted to bring them.), Saoirse was instructed to make a crown out of marsh shrubbery and wear it the duration of the game.

Eventually it got back around to Winston. He leered at Blaze, like a good-natured but revenge-hungry cat.

“Blaze- Truth or Dare?”

“Dare.”

He swept his gaze out at the bog off to their right. “Dare you to walk five feet out there and scream as loud as you can for ten seconds. If you raise your hands to the sky, I’ll be especially pleased. A tribute to the old gods, mm?”

“I don’t think he ought to do that--” Daisy interjected.

“Come on, don’t be a spoilsport. It’s just five feet, we’ve been out there all week and nothing has happened. Worst case is he’ll be soaked a little to his knees.”

She frowned, looking between Blaze and Winston.

“I’ll do it,” Blaze announced, standing up and putting his blanket aside. “The point of the game is to look a bit stupid, yeah?” He took a lengthy swig of whiskey as he got to his feet.

“You’re free to do what you will,” Daisy replied. She was fidgeting a little, even so, as the three of them watched Blaze carefully step out into the bog.

With each step he took, Blaze felt miles away from his colleagues by the treeline and the fire. The sound of the crackling flames faded into the back of his mind, and he let the suffocating silence of the marshland engulf him.

Blaze always felt a bit small, but the endless sky and the endless bog were terrifyingly open, so much so that the scream that ripped from his throat was not only a gesture of obedience to Winston’s dare, but a genuine cry to be heard in an infinite, cold, and uncaring universe.

That was the moment his foot slipped and his head went under.

Saoirse, watching from the edge of the forest, leapt to her feet when she saw him sink below the surface. Swearing loud enough to wake the other archaeologists in their tents, she ran for the coil of rope she kept by her sleeping bag. Daisy screamed and dashed, with Winston on her heels, out into the bog herself. Blaze’s left hand alone was grabbing wildly at the plants above the peat. She came as close as she dared, and caught it in hers.

In less than a minute, Saoirse was at her side with the rope.

Blaze wasn’t sure what was happening to him. The peat choked him and made it impossible to breathe, and he knew he didn’t have long if he couldn’t get out. But how was he supposed to get out if he didn’t know up from down? He stretched his hands out different directions, wildly grabbing at anything solid he could feel.

His left hand burst through the ground and he felt somebody pulling him up by it. His right hand closed around an ice cold cylindrical object. He wasn’t sure what was real anymore, so he didn’t let go of either.

Winston, pale and looking terrified out of his mind, grasped Blaze’s upper arm as it emerged from the bog. Saoirse instantly threw the rope around his torso and all three of them hauled him several feet away onto dry land, a camp full of archaeologists and dig employees looking on in shock.

He sat up weakly, coughing and spitting and reeking of bog water. His clothes were soaked through and what had once been white fabric was now a murky brown.

In his right hand, he held a sword.

# PSYCHEDELIC PIG

CAROL GRANAS



# TIGER

MASATOSHI ISHIGAMI



# COYOTES

MASATOSHI ISHIGAMI



# EPITAPH FOR A SMALL TOWN

CHARLES FOSTER



"I NEVER STAYED IN THE  
TRUCK. I KNEW HER  
SECRET. WHETHER OR  
NOT SHE KNEW MINE --  
I DIDN'T CARE."

The piercing scree of tortured brakes announced our arrival into town. Survival reflex sent my hand flashing to the door handle just in time. Like every other week, I knew that when Aunt Ruth turned right at Franklin, she would be going faster than any rational person would consider reasonable. She didn't disappoint.

With great effort, she wrestled the antique pick-up to the curb bringing it to a stop in her usual spot which meant taking up two parking spaces.

"Don't you go anywhere," she threatened, pointing her cigarette stained finger at me for emphasis. Aunt Ruth's ability to relate to a 15 year old girl was on the same level as her understanding of space aliens.

"I'll be right back." She leapt from the cab slamming the door in her haste. I was livid as she walked away. When my parents died the court sent me to live with Aunt Ruth. It became clear that she didn't want me here any more than I wanted to be here. The only solace I had was knowing that in 127 weeks I would turn 18. On that day I would flee to the Carnegie Academy and take refuge in that safe haven.

And so the Saturday morning dance began. The same as last week and which was certain to repeat itself again next week. I knew by now that she wouldn't be right back. She would enter Pearson's market under the pretense of getting groceries. She would walk straight through where she would exit the back door and immediately enter Lou's through its rear door.

Lou's was a popular bar in town - popular because it was the only remaining bar in town. The fact that it was busy at 10AM laid testament to the economy here in Dry Fork. To some, Dry Fork was on its way to becoming a ghost town. For some it was already there.

I knew from past experience that Aunt Ruth would be gone for about an hour and a half. On her way back through Pearson's she would grab a six-pack and a bag of chips and our errands would be complete. That would give me ample time to wander around town – which I always did. I never stayed in the truck. I knew her secret. Whether or not she knew mine – I didn't care. I wandered across the street knowing that it was meaningless to check for traffic. Except for Aunt Ruth, most everyone with a vehicle that ran had long since moved away. I headed to Style Mart on the chance that there might be something new in the window. There wasn't. The door was still locked even though it was 30 minutes past the opening time hand-written on a faded sign inside the door. I continued aimlessly down Franklin noting all the vacant store fronts. As I looked around, the town looked so...tired...so defeated. A far cry from the bustling town it had been in the 50's when the mine was still operating. It was getting increasingly more difficult to kill the hour and a half while she would be "getting groceries."

I headed down Franklin as I had done so many other Saturdays. This time, I took a right at Porter – a street pretty much unfamiliar to me; yet, a street as tired, as defeated and as deserted as Franklin. Perhaps there would be something different to look at. As my gaze extended down the street, past the few remaining store fronts, I saw something unexpected. A sight so foreign that it took a while to fully register. A stranger. A woman.

What surprised me first was her beauty. More than that, she had a quality about her. Her grace and her poise were in stark contrast to her provocative dress. I stared – spellbound. Strange. She seemed nervous – very nervous. As she leaned against the wall, she constantly shuffled her weight from one foot to the other; hands always in motion as if unsure where they should rest. Her head darted left to right, back and forth, as if she were waiting for someone. Perhaps, someone is coming to save her. Someone who was disturbingly late.

She looked slightly familiar. Where had I seen her? My pace slowed as I continued down the street. She had not yet noticed me. Where had I seen her? Perhaps the Carnegie Academy? No, in spite of the rumors I can't imagine the girls at Carnegie would ever dress like that. Where?

Three men suddenly appeared from around the corner. Everything seemed perfectly normal. Is this who she was waiting for? Soon their posture turned menacing. My pace slowed again. It was clear she was being confronted. I shot into the shelter of a nearby store front to avoid being seen. My heart was racing. At that moment any thoughts of running to her aid vanished.

Through the glass of the display window I watched the scene unfold. There were no other people on the street. The men drew closer. One appeared to do all the talking. The others stood ominously on either side. Apparently, the one talking was in charge. The other two supplied intimidation. The woman's body language showed she was now petrified. At a signal from the first man, the goons grabbed her arms. She struggled furiously but futilely. I watched as talking escalated to shouting. The leader stopped shouting and slapped her across the face. She cried out in pain and he slapped her again ... and again – harder each time. Slapping turned to punching and as he gave her one final punch in the stomach the young woman slumped over, head bowed down, her body trembling. Only the men's firm grip on her arms kept her upright. The leader took something from his jacket. I couldn't recognize it at first but soon made out that it was a syringe. Without hesitation the man drove the needle deep into her thigh. She thrashed at the attack and screamed to an empty town for help. The men's grip did not budge. Gradually her body went limp.

Had they killed her? I gasped at the thought, my hand involuntarily rising to cover my mouth. Perhaps she was just unconscious. I watched in horror as the vile men raised the piteous rag doll over their heads and heaved her body callously into a nearby dumpster. I recoiled at the sight, backing deeper into the shelter of the store front. Mid-stride I unexpectedly hit something. I spun to see that it was a man ...another stranger. He stared straight into my eyes and put his finger to his lips signaling me to not make a sound. I stood stunned as he slowly pulled something from his pocket. A badge? A badge! I looked harder, reading each word.

What was a federal agent doing in a town like Dry Fork?

# MORNING

TRINITY CHESTER

My eyes blink open to see  
fingers of sharp golden  
sunlight trace across my wall.  
I breathe the smell of my mother's coffee,  
hear a fragile aria of birdsong,  
as warm thoughts begin to percolate.  
This is the hour of possibility,  
when the things that will be tease us  
like the words that hide—just out of  
reach—on the tip of your tongue.  
As my dreams ebb away  
they are replaced by hope  
for a new day—hope that waits  
to store up tears and laughter  
in her box of treasures,  
the imperfect sanctified by a  
wounded God. The dawn rushes  
to meet me and I feel my heart  
shot through with rays of colored  
light. How can breaking  
be so beautiful?

# LEMONS

ANDANA PAWAR



# JELLYFISH

MASATOSHI ISHIGAMI



## WILTING AGAINST AN ORANGE SKY

AMEYA PATKAR



## BURNING BOUGAINVILLEA

AMEYA PATKAR

# DEATH COMES FOR US ALL, BUT I THINK I'LL COME FOR YOU A LITTLE QUICKER

GENE IEE DUFLOCK



"A PERFECTLY  
INNOCENT SIGHT,  
UNLESS YOU KNEW  
HAPPENED TO KNOW  
BETTER. AND KENDRA  
KNEW BETTER."

Kendra had never cared for stereotypes.

As she made her way past trick-or-treaters she saw more than a couple dressed in black robes with skeletal masks and comically large scythes. Frankly, it was insulting. One reaper centuries ago indulges a taste for fame and theatrics and it's how they're all seen until the end of time? Ridiculous.

A woman dressed as a scarecrow and a teenager dressed as a pumpkin nearly bumped into her but Kendra nimbly ducked out of the way. It would've been confusing if they appeared to crash into thin air. Being invisible did not mean being insubstantial as her father loved to say.

Unseen, she continued her way through the crowd, careful not to step on any toes until she got to the address. Kendra looked up at the house. 115 Maple Street. A bowl of candy was sitting on its front steps but the lights inside were off. A perfectly innocent sight, unless you happened to know better. And Kendra knew better.

As she walked up the steps a black cat in the bushes caught her eye. Its pupils narrowed into slits and it hissed at her. Damn it, but she'd

always had a soft spot for cats. Her father didn't understand it. The cat hissed again, its back arching, before cautiously making its way over. It nosed at her hand and then relaxed, twining around her ankles with a purr.

"That's it," she murmured. Kendra stroked its back a couple of times before rising to her feet. She reached out a hand to the door and pushed it open.

The inside was remarkably unremarkable. A kitchen with childish drawings taped to the refrigerator, a living room scattered through with Legos, soccer cleats near a back door. Your typical nuclear family household. If only the rest of the family knew the truth.

Kendra moved soundlessly through the house and into the study. The rug on the floor was rolled aside revealing a trap door which she opened just wide enough to slip herself through. She needn't have worried about making noise though. One of the occupants was unconscious and the other was wearing large headphones.

Steve Whittaker cheerfully hummed along to the music as he spread plastic tarps on the ground. The blonde girl lying drugged against the wall was Annie Lincoln, a high school junior who had gone missing last week. He never held them for more than a week.

Kendra leaned against the wall and pulled out her list to double check. Similar to Santa's Naughty or Nice list in concept, a Reaper's list said who was going to die next. It didn't list everyone in the world of course, not with over seven billion people on the planet. Kendra's list was limited to her zip code.

She glanced at the top and sure enough, Steve and Annie's names were still side by side.

This was Fate's least favorite type of encounter, one where luck would factor into the mix. Tonight wither Steve would kill Annie or she would kill him, and he was unable to predict who. It would be Kendra's job to *observe only* (she screwed up her face as her father's patronizing voice rang through her head) and reap whoever was dead at the end. Scenarios like this vaguely reminded her of the *Harry Potter* prophecy. 'Neither can live while the other survives.' One of them would be dead very soon.

Eyeing Steve distastefully, Kendra knew who she hoped she'd get to kill. But then again, she rarely got what she wished for.

She tensed up as Annie stirred. The sedative was wearing off.

Steve, still humming, didn't notice.

Annie stirred again. Kendra would've held her breath if she had one, willing Steve to stay busy, for Annie to lie still until she regained her senses.

Annie blinked a few times and made to lift a hand to her head, only to see that her wrists had been zip-tied together. Kendra watched as recognition flooded through her and she slumped back to the ground as Steve looked over at her. Seeing her apparently still out cold, he returned to braiding the rope he would use to strangle her.

Kendra itched to wrap her fingers around his throat, to snuff his life out, but forced herself to be still. That wasn't the job. She wasn't meant to kill humans before their time.

Annie opened her eyes once more and got to her feet as she looked around, hopefully for a weapon.

She wouldn't be able to easily climb the ladder with her hands like that. There was a pair of scissors, the rope Steve was braiding, a screwdriver. She could maybe smother him with the plastic on the ground though Kendra had a hard time picturing how that would play out.

Swaying slightly, Annie darted across the room and placed her hands over Steve's head and around his neck.

Kendra raised her eyebrows as Annie jumped up to ride Steve piggyback style, trying to strangle him with her bare hands. *Well I suppose I have to give her points for originality, though I would've gone with the scissors.*

Steve thrashed around, trying to get Annie off but her tied wrists worked to her advantage, keeping her hold in place. Overcoming his surprise Steve backed up and rammed Annie into the wall. Her legs loosened and he threw her hands off of him. Annie fell to the floor with a thud. Mozart was playing from the fallen headphones, something Kendra didn't feel fit the mood at all.

Steve swung at Annie but she ducked and ran to the other side of the room, trying to climb up the ladder. But she couldn't get a grip and Steve wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her back.

Annie started screaming, bucking and thrashing about like a wild animal. Her head connected with his face and Kendra heard something snap. Steve yelled as blood from a newly broken nose coated his lips. He dropped Annie as he brought his hands up to cup his face.

Steve was a grown man in his thirties, at least twice Annie's weight and almost half a foot taller. But Annie was fueled by desperation and adrenaline and fighting for her life, and sometimes that could make all the difference. Or at least give her enough of a chance that it would come down to luck.

Kendra pulled out her list again. Still both names.

Steve was now trying to talk Annie down, taunting her, telling her it had been a week and still no one had found her, that no one was even looking for her. When this didn't seem to work he ran at her and Annie dove under his arm but not fast enough. He wrapped his grip around her chest but she leaned over and bit him on the arm hard enough to draw blood.

Steve roared and dropped her, backing away. Rage flickered in his eyes as he promised to kill her, to end her, to make it painful. Blood dripped down Annie's chin as she shifted back and forth before charging straight at him.

Her shoulder rammed straight into his chest and normally it wouldn't have worked but Steve was wounded and caught off guard and Kendra swallowed a cheer as she knocked him backwards onto the work bench. Annie brought her bound hands up and drove them into his face, an=gain and again as Steve flailed his arms behind him. No, not flailing. Searching.

He grabbed the noose he'd been braiding with one hand and pulled Annie into him with the other before rolling them both over onto the floor. He brought the noose around her neck and began to pull.

Annie thrashed beneath him, bringing up her hands to pry at the rope as she strained for breath.

Fingers shaking Kendra once more unfolded her list. Both names.

Steve had his full body weight bearing down on her, his hands pulling the rope as Annie fought to escape, fought to *live*.

She glanced down again. Both names.

Steve yelled, still pulling at the rope.

Both names.

Annie's face was starting to turn blue, spittle forming at her mouth.

Both names.

Annie's hands started to go slack.

Both names.

Her eyes began to droop.

Steve's name began to fade from the list --

Kendra lunged forward and forced her hand into Steve's chest, wrapping her fingers around his heart.

He gasped, eyes widening, and collapsed.

Kendra immediately withdrew, hardly able to believe what she'd done and pulled her list back out with shaking fingers. Steve Whittaker was at the top in bright black letters, and Annie's name was nowhere to be seen.

Kendra's knees nearly gave out as Annie pushed his body off of her. She tore the nose from her neck as she stared at him. It would admittedly be a shock if the man trying to kill you suddenly dropped dead from no apparent cause but thankfully Annie was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth because she ran back to the ladder and climbed up haphazardly, wrapping her elbows around the rungs. Annie reached the top and rammed trap door open with her shoulder before staggering away, screaming for help at the top of her lungs.

Kendra sank to her knees.

"You shouldn't have done that."

She couldn't bear to look at her father. "Oops."

She could feel his gaze burning a hole in the side of her head as he glared at her. "I'm serious Kendra. If you hadn't gotten to him before his name disappeared from the list--"

"Kill the murderous douchebag sooner next time. Got it."

"Kendra."

She glared up at him defiantly. "Well there's not much we can do about it now is there? Besides, I *did* get to him before he disappeared off the list."

Her father removed his glasses to rub at his eyes. "Sometimes I worry this path isn't for you."

"If only," Kendra replied, her voice dripping acid. "There were plentiful opportunities for half-Grim Reapers

half humans. If only I could pick a different career without throwing the cosmos into disorder."

"You could work with Charon. Be one of his workers, ferrying souls into the next life."

She looked over at Steve's bloodied corpse. Mozart was still playing from his headphones in the corner. "Charon likes his employees to refer to him as Your Most Magnanimous Unholy One, and the last time I saw him he threatened to burn me alive in the fires of hell for looking at him funny."

"You were looking at him funny," he pointed out.

"He was naked and covered in beeswax. How was I supposed to look at him?"

Her father sighed. "I know the job is difficult. But we cannot interfere in the affairs of humans. You know the consequences."

Ah yes. Consequences. Kendra was intimately familiar with those. She was a consequence herself after all. "I know."

He placed his glasses back on and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Well, as close to comforting as he ever got anyway. "Don't forget there's a car accident on Sixth and Magnolia in twenty-two minutes. I'll see you later." Between one blink of an eye and the next, he vanished.

Twenty-two minutes later, Kendra reaped a seventeen-year-old boy who blew past a stop sign. Unable to sate her own curiosity, she headed back to 115 Maple Street afterwards. The trick-or-treaters had cleared out and been replaced with police cars and an ambulance. Annie was sitting in the back with a thick blanket wrapped around her shoulders, her freed hands clutching at the edges. Most of the blood had been cleaned off of her but there was a heavy line of bruising around her neck. Kendra felt her throat close up at the sight.

There was a squeal of tires to her left as a gray suburban came rocketing around the corner. It slammed to a stop and a woman in a soft green shirt and grey sweatpants bearing a *striking* resemblance to Annie leapt out from the driver's side. A harried-looking man with salt and pepper hair came out of the passenger seat and a young boy in dinosaur pajamas emerged from the back.

"Annie!" The woman's cry was more of a disbelieving sob.

Annie's lips parted in a gasp, her green eyes widening. "Mom!"

The three raced towards Annie as she slid out of the ambulance and nearly fell to her knees. The paramedic caught her and helped her stand as Annie's family crashed into her. Her parents were sobbing and Kendra felt tears brush up against her own eyes at the sight. Annie's parents couldn't seem to keep hugging her, they kept drawing away to stare at her, to brush her hair out of her face, to touch her cheek, to reassure themselves that their daughter was alive and real.

Annie leaned down and picked up her brother. He threw his arms around her neck and she clutched him tightly, as though she never planned to let him go ever again.

"You did a good thing you know."

Kendra turned to see her mother behind her, the only human who could always see her. Some moms had a sixth sense for when their children had broken the rules, Kendra's mom had a sixth sense for when she needed

emotional support. "Dad doesn't seem to think so."

Her mom snorted. "Your father couldn't tell a good deed if it gave him an ear infection." Kendra didn't reply, still watching the reunion before her. "It's after midnight so you're off the hook for a couple of days. Let's go home. We can eat ice cream and watch movies with happy endings."

Her mom placed cautious arms around her and Kendra leaned into the embrace, inhaling the familiar scent of lemon soap. "Home sounds perfect."

# SUNRISE AND THE BOATS

EMILY CHAO



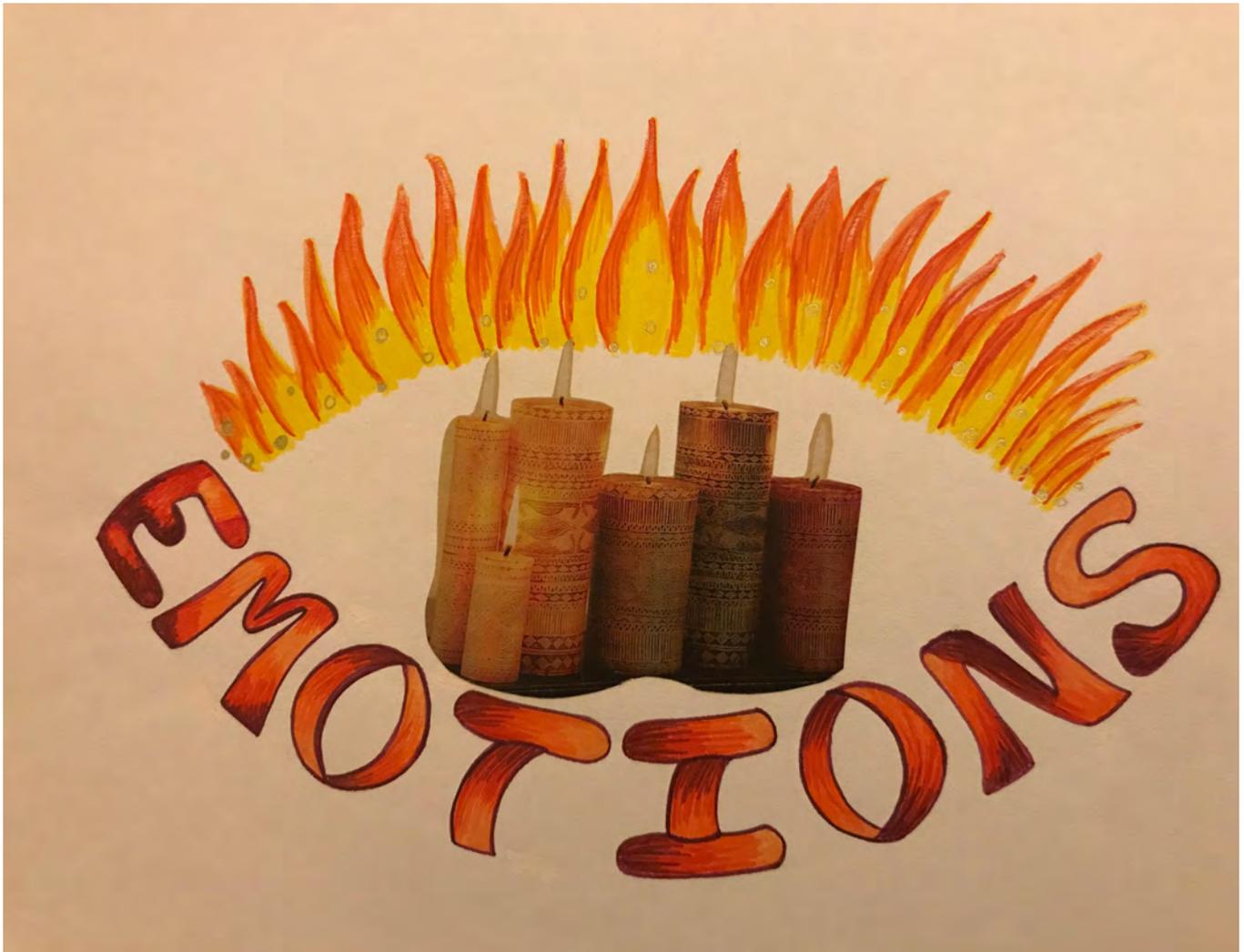
# POINT REYES

ANDANA PAWAR



# EMOTIONS ON FIRE

SHAGUFTA ALA |



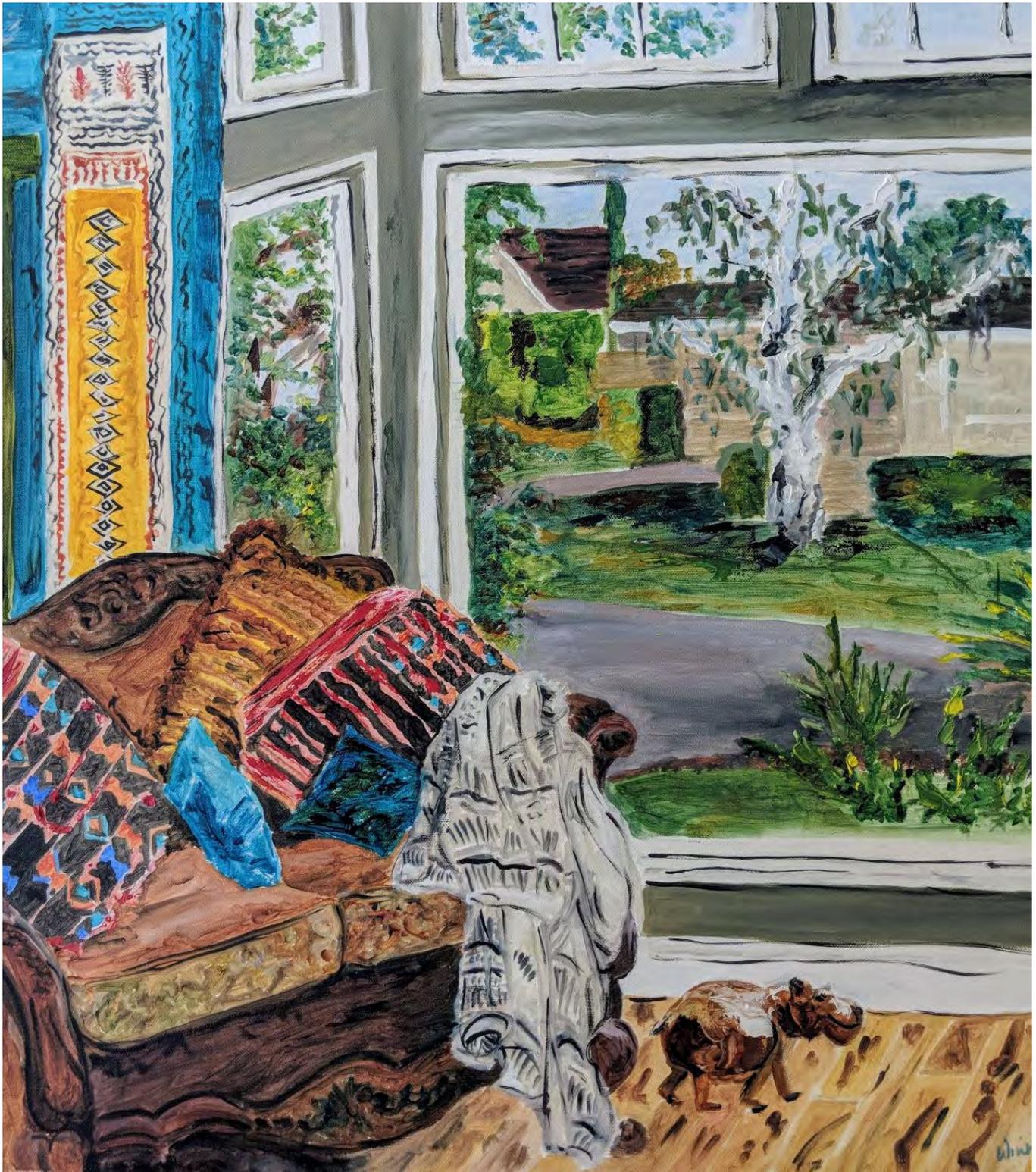
# ORANGES #4

ANDANA PAWAR



# ROOM AT MANTECA

ANDANA PAWAR



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