AN INCHOATE SYMPHONY

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For the degree of Master of Arts
in English

By

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Dedication

To all the friends of the friendless.
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ABSTRACT

AN INCHOATE SYMPHONY

By

Susana N. Marcelo

Master of Arts in English

Like many writers with plural nationalities, I have struggled to unify the fragments of my identity. I was born in El Salvador and raised in Los Angeles, yet I never felt that I truly fit as either American or Salvadoran. This feeling of displacement haunts many immigrants, and as a creative writer, I struggled to find my voice in that liminal space. It was this struggle that led me to experiment with genres and subject matters. Thus, An Inchoate Symphony is a collection of short fiction that is diverse, genre-bending, and grounded in an exploration of the in-betweens: between two cultures, sanity and insanity, normal and abnormal, beautiful and ugly, quotidian and fantastic.

What unifies these short stories is a sense of displacement. Whether the stories explore grief, guilt, loss, shame, or perversion, this collection aims to push boundaries with its breadth.
Slam

Your mom stares you down with eyebrows shaped like mountains. Her eye bags look like tar pits and her jaw is tight. You weren't watching your little brother. You should know better, she says. Your father is always working and she's always working. She needs help but you're stupid. You useless, selfish girl, a la gran puta, what were you thinking?!

She hits you until time becomes a tornado.

*

Twenty years later, you will sit in the kitchen of your mom’s new house. You’ll joke with your brother, who will then be a gentleman dressed in suits and fine ties. After all it grew back, you’ll say. But he will never let you forget it. With the poise of Johnny Cash, he’ll play “Folsom Prison Blues” on his guitar. Your eyes will always travel to where he strains his pinky on the chords. Then your mom will nag you to drink your vitamins and Echinacea, because you must take care of yourself. And when will you learn not to over-pluck your eyebrows or wear heels with shorts? You’ll tell her you are drinking your vitamins. But she’ll laugh because you have eye bags like tar pits, and when will you ever learn?

*

But now you’re mad. She said you can’t watch Tom and Jerry until you wash the dishes. It’s your favorite episode, so you make a face. Her hand sways back and forth in a threatening motion. You know what’s coming if you disobey. But you’ll go to the bathroom first. She can’t prove you don’t need to.
The bathroom door has no lock, and you have to slam it or it won’t close. The apartment is really a slanted garage knocked together by the cheapest labor found squatted on Wilshire Boulevard. You dread how the walls screech. They remind you who you are. As if you could ever forget.

*

The landlord tells your parents that his dog, a Boxer, has his own space next to the garage. It looks just like him. Nobody knows you sometimes sneak into the dog house. The smell of cedar lures you in. You press your spine against the wall and admire how perfectly straight it is. Just like Spike’s house complete with white paint and a red roof.

The dog is our neighbor, your dad jokes. You laugh. Well, you do share fleas and a door you crack open at night because it’s hot, though you can’t sleep anyway listening to your mom crying, soaking her pillow with secrets and fears. At least the dog scares some of the mice, you think. Then you bite your tongue and pray for your mom and dad. They’re too tired to pray for themselves.

*

Taking baby steps to the bathroom, you notice your little brother walking behind you. But you ignore him—this is about you. You slam the bathroom door. A familiar shrill slices into your thoughts. Your heart beats in your toes. His hand is caught. Guilt rots your heart. There's blood dripping. The tiles quiver—your mom is coming. You wrap his hand in ribbons of toilet paper. On your knees, you hurry to wipe blood from the bleached tiles you've seen your mom clean time and time again. But all you see is blood.

Your mouth turns dry. Your face turns red. You cry knowing you’ll never be the same.
The door swings open. Your mom plucks the flesh of his pinky from the wedge of the door. This is why I hate you, she screams.

*

It is this memory that will haunt you when he turns six years old. He will ask, Why is this pinky not the same? He’ll hold up his hands, side by side, aligning both pinkies for you to see. One will always be shorter and slightly crooked with a hard, stunted nail. What happened to the pinky tip? he will insist holding up his hands closer to your face. His brown eyes wide, waiting for a response. And you, with a crooked mouth, will tell him a mouse ate it.
Burrow

Enticed by their skin made of stories, I surrender to the worms in my brain. They stimulate every pore, every curve in my body. Burrowing. Gentle. My fingertips sizzle with the simmer of my blood urging me to write. Sometimes they dangle from my nose until one falls out with a "plop" on my notebook. I peel their skins off. Translucent insides encase their nerve cords. This one tells me the story of the orange tree in our backyard: It knows the weight of bearing fruit.

As I pour milk into an aluminum pot, I tell my husband insomnia has kept me awake for seven days and the worms are making holes in my brain. But he frowns. He says, Sweetie, doctors haven't found anything wrong aside from anemia; you should just take extra iron and eat more fruits with vitamin C like oranges.

I turn on the stove; he ponders about which tie to wear. I tell him the blue one. He hesitates, wears the black one, and kisses my forehead while keeping an eye on the clock. I love you, he says. His shiny, black leather shoes crush the brittle leaves that drifted into the kitchen.

I walk over to the icy window and stare at our backyard covered in festering fruit. I feel nothing but the fog that takes over my brain and the tingling sensation along my neck. I close my eyes and exhale. I think of nothing until the boiling milk has spilled over and the twins are crying. I run to them. They’ve pooped on the carpet. They ate too many prunes with milk. They wail in my arms, and I console them with a song. They’re in pain and it’s my fault. My entire fault because I forgot to change their sagging diapers when they woke up. I forgot my manuscript doesn't belong in the freezer, and my cell phone is
not useful inside the fridge. I mean, has anyone ever had to hide from a robber inside a fridge?

Well, I did once when I was seven. But it wasn't a robber, it was my mom. And I hid because her eyes pierced my skin. She told me to do this, that—and make sure not to do that again or else—and my brain will rot from reading too much, reading, reading so damn much. I’m tired, she said. She was always tired.

When she wasn’t looking, I tucked my thin limbs in there and marinated in silence. But the door flung open. She screamed. Her hand cracked against my jaw. The orange juice spilled all over the floor, which I need to buy because the kids drank too much juice and I drank too much juice. They cry, Mommy, Mommy, so I kiss their faces and I must go to the store but I can’t forget the milk or pens—and not just any pens—but the kind that let you write as the fury of ideas are too fast to type.

I take them to the bathroom. Kneeling on the floor, I place them in the tub. With a warm cloth, I clean their cheeks and wash their slippery bodies. They stop crying, and for a moment I don’t cry too. I take them out and wrap them in their hooded frog towels. Their bottles warm my thin hands and soon they drift into sleep. I’m at peace—yet I can’t sleep. I don’t want to sleep. I take the manuscript out of the oven and align three pens on the right of my desk. I pick a worm from the inside of my cheek and peel its skin. I rub the membrane between my fingertips. They send signals all over my body and I feel alive again. I am in love with the worms. They push me to write until my mind isn’t a burden anymore.
Still (Hear)

Daniel

Stars surround me, and earth is a record turning, creating a symphony of clouds.

(Darkness) I’m now in Mama’s kitchen. I cry because my bottle is on the counter.

Reaching over, I lean against my high chair, peeping to make sure Mama doesn’t see me.

She’s talking on the phone with her friend, the same lady with whom she’ll make some good ol’ southern key lime pie for Papa’s new automobile shop when it opens next year.

It’s the dog’s fault. It runs by my chair. The leg wobbles. I fall over.

Mama’s red hair spins just in time to see her little boy hit the kitchen tiles before the pot of boiling water tips, drenching me. Moles burn into stars on my pale skin.

Sunshine flows through the lace curtains. (Sadness) That’s the last time Mama sees me.

The last time I see her, she throws a white rose on my grave, and I can feel her swallowing tears. But a single drop gathers in the corner of her eye—hanging—until she blinks and a flood of tears covers the hands on her face and now I’m standing in a lake.

I remembered she baptized me here with Papa when I was a newborn. He’s holding me in his arms while Mama lights a candle. The priest murmurs his blessings.

Zoey

I saw my first pubic hairs when I cleaned as Mother always taught me: from front to back because if you don’t your crotch will rot. (Shame) What will Mother think?

Father already knows. But what will she say when the man at the coroner’s office in steamed glasses mentions my secret?
There she is. Her pain is turning into nests. The man unveils the head, a halo of blonde hair. “Identify a mole or scar,” he will say in ten seconds. His sweaty palms debate if he should wait more or maybe less. He doesn’t want to be here. His training wasn’t enough to prepare him for this—one of the worst cases he’s seen. A record player spins a melody over our heads. “Identify a mole or scar,” he finally says, as his glasses slip down his wide nose. The next day, he will uncover my body. He will turn away when he sees the shaved cuts on my lady parts, and then he will quit by the end of the week.

Mother looks intently. She finds out the secret. She cannot bear to say it yet. The man pauses. Stares. “She was pregnant,” he says. The last syllable lingers between his tongue and teeth, savoring the t-sound. Mother stares at him with a clenched jaw and a vein pops from her forehead. The same vein I saw time and time again when I hit a wrong chord while playing *Midnight Sonata* on the piano she bought with her extra shift money.

Words left unsaid waft in the air; I whisper in her ear, “I love you. I’m staying still.” The symphony over our heads begins to fade. (Hear) She screams and my words explode.

**Ramon**

This L.A. night is unusually clear. Taking a deep breath, I try to chill. I’m going to propose. “Luster stars sprayed among blue,” I recite a poem I wrote for my girlfriend the first time we made love. She ran her fingers through my black hair. (Tenderness) But her destiny will be to marry Don Ramon, the Cuban who manages the restaurant in
downtown and has a lot of money. In one year she’ll get pregnant; in two they’ll get married; in three I will meet him again.

I walk into her room. She’s in bed with Alberto, the leader of the Mara on 18th Street. I didn’t need to see his fucking face. I saw the tattoo on his ass I’ve always seen above his Calvin Klein calzones. Someone screams. I pull the shank from my jeans. Cotton clouds cover my head. Taste of iron in my mouth. From blood? No. Gun. Powder clouds on my skull. Gun? No. Cocaine. I see red for the last time. (Darkness)

**Peter**

My family is here waiting. Esmeralda, my wife, massages my hands just like she has done every night for the past fifty years. When God called me, I was a child. He asked if I was ready to open my eyes. But I had no answer. I simply saw darkness. Now I’ve spent my life wondering when He would come back. Esmeralda traces the roads on my face one last time.

And that’s when I see her getting out of the salon. She dabs on wine-colored lipstick, matching her dress, using the reflection of the window. She sees me staring at her. When she drops her wallet and a lace glove, I run to grab them. (Love) Two years later we will get married in my parent’s church and joke about how many children we will have—four, which we did except Leonard, the oldest, died in a car crash when he was twelve. I begin to feel his pull.

My family watches as my remains are laid in the ground. “Remember when grandpa took me to see the elephants and clowns at the circus?” I hear my grandson ask his father, the middle child, Rene. Both of them have straight brown hair like mine.
(Grace) It comforts me to know that when I was my grandson’s age, I walked in the presence of roads not yet laid, as he does now.

    Stars luster in a blueprint of time around me. I am in the sky.

    “Don’t open your eyes,” God says, “I will tell you when you are ready.”
[An Inchoate Symphony]

When I was young, I encountered God in the form of a question, but I didn’t answer. So I spent my life calling him back.

Pray the rosary. Count ten beads. Repeat. Count ten tears. [Dear reader, insert what comes next.]

I’ve been in the hospital every year since 2007. That year I cradled my premature baby in my palm. She opened and closed her fingers as if saying goodbye before she died. Suzanne, our nurse, said the baby’s lungs are too tiny and there’s nothing they can do. White linens soaked up my blood. Suzanne said I was pale like snow.

28th Street Elementary girls told me I couldn’t be a “queen” because my parents weren’t Mexican even though I watched *Carrusel*, the Mexican novela, just like they did, and I wished I was blonde, blue-eyed like our favorite character Maria Joaquina. You like the same things I like, I told them. But they said my skin wasn’t white enough. But I had a solution: I ate rose petals, the red and white speckled ones growing in front of our boarding house, convinced they’d make me beautiful.

Red is my favorite color like blood, bricks, creamy red lipstick that smells of honey, and roses that grow from unmarked graves.

We lived in South Central until I was ten. I helped my mother throw away the dead mice caught between the floorboards.

*To my brother and sister: I was nine. You were two and four, respectively. That means that as I learned to walk through fire, you learned not to walk too close.*

“La siguanaba is here!” I’d yell chasing after my brother and sister with my long, shiny black hair over my face. We’d run away laughing and crying.
I sprinkle salads with lavender and calendula. [Insert my fears, your fears, here.]

My mother, while cleaning, played her favorite love songs by Marco Antonio Solis. We thought he was Jesus.

God tells me not to open my eyes but I do.

White calms me like an all white room, like a white, cozy sweater smeared with red lipstick on days that feel like my bronchial tubes will tighten in Soprano 1 until my chest bursts.

Fireworks are pretty.

My sister played the violin when she was a little girl. Her long, black hair fell over her face as she carefully opened the case, took the violin out, and with a cloth cleaned it as if she were washing the face of the man she loves. Her teacher scolded her: “That’s not how you play.” My sister over tuned the strings. They snapped.

My sister willingly checked herself into a mental institution in Texas for a few days to get away “from everything.” She was surrounded by clear December ice. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there. I’d hold your hand, caress your face, comb your thick hair falling to your waist, and tell you everything will be okay. You never liked hair buns and braids because they were always too tight. We could pretend we’re little girls again. We could lie silent in bed staring at the moon wondering what it’s like to be queens. Then, I’d collect your tears in recycled jam jars and throw them in the lake.

Whenever I’m stressed, I listen to Yo Yo Ma’s prelude from Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1. It makes me want to crawl under a mountain of yellow leaves and hibernate.

My inner clockwork is busted. Fix me. Wind me up like a wooden doll.
I want coffee with Bailey’s before my 7 p.m. class. But I already drank a venti Americano in the morning. The lady next to me in the coffee shop says I must be stressed. She eyeballs my Louis Vuitton bag, my anniversary present, with suspicion. “What could you possibly be stressed about?” she asks. “You’re not playing the game of life right.” I snapped. “What the hell do you know about crying in the rain and feeling so small you want to crawl in between the floorboards and die?”

Coffee stains are beautiful. [Breathe, please.]

Did Yo Yo Ma ever snap a string?

My mother had nightmares of guerillas and shadows almost every night. I prayed to God, waited for her cries, and then shushed her to sleep.

Jesus paid for our lives; he needs a refund.

Every day, I wash my face in a circular motion. I brush my teeth, clean the wax in my ears, pluck unwanted hair. I perform these ablutions convinced Emily Dickinson was on to something.

I want to fold into myself. Crease my limbs. Make me a graceful origami crane.

My father lives off coffee and cigarettes. He’s a trucker and never gets sick. A six-foot cholo threatened my five-foot-five father with a gun. The bullet burst through the Pacoima house’s wall, past my head.

My mother is always sick. I’m always sick. We’re all sick.

I threw myself on the carpet and thought of the time my father taught me how to say “world” in English. My six-year-old tongue curled, and I said “worm” instead. We both laughed. And when my father came in the house, he stood while we were all on the floor. His ear covered in blood. The cholo jumped in his getaway car as soon as my father
took his gun. "No me convenía morir," he had told me a few years ago when I asked him what had happened. It wasn’t convenient to die, he had said.

Count the many ways I love you, the ways I’ve let you down, am letting you down, will let you down.

In a hospital bed in 2007, my heart pounded from a high on postpartum drugs. So my husband pressed his body against mine. And we waited—waited until my heartbeat slowed with his breathing. In the dark, I counted ten rosary beads for ten toes. Because this is how I count my way to God.

When we’re all together, we laugh the hardest.

Call God back [and insert, dear reader, your own story here].
In Case Your Baby Falls in the Toilet

Step one: When the doctor tells you the baby is not viable, try not to panic. When she tells you to eat Cheerios for the fiber, ask your husband to go to Costco and buy in bulk. She doesn’t want you to push the baby out by accident. Your cervix is too short, she says. Stay in bed.

Step two: If you have to go to the bathroom, take a clean bin with you in case the baby falls out anyway and you need to scoop the baby out of the bowl.

Step three: Bring your favorite crochet pink blanket your mother found when you were in high school. It randomly appeared in her bag of laundry when she came home from the Washateria Laundromat. When you saw the blanket, you fell in love with it and kept it throughout the years after fighting your sister for it. It’s mine! you demanded, and being the eldest it was an easy fight. You were certain that blanket had made its way for you and you alone for a future purpose you were not aware of at the time. That time is now.

Step four: If the baby has fallen out, scoop the baby from the bowl. Put him or her in the clean bin. Then wrap the baby in the blanket.

Step five: Take your cell phone to call an ambulance in case you are alone. Take your cell phone to call your husband in case he’s outside or in the kitchen.

Step six: Check if the baby is a boy or a girl.
Step seven: Give the baby a name while you wait for someone to find you. If you cannot tell if the baby is a boy or a girl, give the baby a temporary name. Do not buy a headstone without receiving the autopsy report first. You will regret it when you name your baby girl after her father because you thought she was a boy.

Step eight: Try not to feel self-pity because your family now lives in Texas.

Step nine: Try not to feel angry because your family now lives in Texas.

Step ten: Keep the baby attached to the umbilical cord, and hold your baby to your breast.

Step eleven: Keep eating Cheerios religiously as you’ve been doing.

Step twelve: When it’s over, never eat Cheerios again.
When Earth

After the world ended Anina woke up in darkness. She remembers her daughter’s brown eyes as she slipped from Anina’s fingers and into the sinkhole growing in the kitchen, swallowing the figure-eight candle, the cake, the white crochet tablecloth, the fridge, eventually the house, and millions of other bodies fell to the same fate in growing craters around the world. The world as she’s known it is gone. They must be dead.

She doesn’t know how long she was incubated in darkness, but when she opens her eyes, Anina finds herself standing on a platform facing a red veil. She looks around and is alone. She can’t see what’s behind her. She pulls aside the curtain. A cold wind blows on her face and she sees carrousels moving in every which way creating a zigzag through a backdrop of starry sky. Each one follows and disappears within a set point in a star, like the ones Anina painted in her daughter’s room when she turned six years old.

*

It is a rainy spring day when Anina cracks open the window to let the paint fumes out.

Luzelena walks in and says, “Those are pretty stars! Where are you putting my theatre?”

Anina walks to the center of the wall and points. “Here,” she says. She moves her finger above her head, close to the popcorn ceiling, and says, “And right here will be the moon shining down on you.”

“I like it!” says Luz with a smile, “We’re all made of stardust!”

“Where did you hear that?”
“In a song,” says Luz before she picks up her wand and starts singing to the tune of the rain tapping on the glass window.

*

With her daughter’s song still in her head, Anina looks ahead and runs toward the nearest carrousel. She jumps on. Where am I? she wonders when her feet land on the platform. It withers beneath her feet. Now she’s standing on a purple planet that houses a golden tree. There’s barely enough room for her to stand. The closest planet is four feet away made of a koi pond. The one below that is only dust. Other people jump from planet to planet trying to catch up with time that has left them behind. Several planets away, she sees herself holding Luz as a baby in the pink crochet blanket she made while pregnant. Anina jumps, aiming for the planet that looks like it’s made of rock, but instead she sinks within the matter until all she sees is a veil of tulle over her and Luz laughing, squirming, next to Anina’s ribs on the bed. Luz is seven years old.

“I want to be a ballerina like the dolls in the living room,” says Luz. “Is this enough for my tutu?”

“Yes, it’s more than enough,” Anina says, recalling the veil she never wore.

“Can we add flowers and a bird to it?”

“Yes, but why a bird?”

“Because I like birds. Remember the baby bird that fell from our tree? She was my favorite. Why did she have to leave?”

“She left to the Cave of Swallows. In Spanish it’s called Sótano de las Golondrinas.”

“By herself?”
“Yes.”

Luz pondered as they both stared at each other through the veil.

“Where is the Cave of Swallows?”

“It is far away in another land. I’ll show you on a map. It’s a deep hole in the ground where all the birds fly into their own little caves that line the walls of the big hole.”

“Do you think our bird is happy there?”

“I’m sure she is,” says Anina while lifting the veil to brush a curly strand away from Luz’s face. She had found the bird stiff one morning, its legs up on top of crumbled newspaper. She disposed of it before Luz could see it.

“Mommy,” whispers Luz, “I want to live in a cave like that.”

Anina’s face freezes while Luz looks at her fingernails and smiles. Anina’s heart gasps. She succumbs to the porous veil of time that envelops her and throws her again into another portal.

*

Anina stares at her table. The moving train spills coffee over her newspaper. She pulls out her sketchbook and begins to draw the rolling hills. Winter had stripped the trees of leaves and their branches look like arms, raised towards the sky. A tall man with black hair and a mustache approaches her. Anina is not overly beautiful, but he didn’t realize it or care as he was mesmerized by the way her forehead wrinkled in concentration, how her white blazer gathered at her elbows, and the way she crossed her legs pointing her beige heels to the floor. He introduces himself and asks if he may sit down next to her.
“Yes, that’s okay,” she says, barely looking up, a strand of curly hair falling over her face and touching her red lips.

He folds his newspaper, places it under his arm, and sits in front of her. He opens his newspaper and looks up at her from time to time. Before the train is scheduled to stop, he slips his phone number under her mug and says goodbye. In a week, they will meet again for coffee followed by dinner, and Luzelena will be conceived during a summer romance by the sea.

Anina, feeling the train stopping, packs up her sketchbook and sees the phone number sticking from under her mug. She smiles and pulls her bag across her chest and gets off the train. When she walks through the doors, she’s ten years older and looks out into the pier.

*  

She remembers she’s looking for Luz. This is not the real world. Her memories keep disappearing in the afterlife but she tries to hold on as long as she can. The sun is high in the sky, and children splash about in the sea with their parents. A crowd gathers near musicians playing a concert with invisible instruments and visible notes drifting like bubbles over their heads. Anina can hear the thumps of volleyballs being hit over a net on the sand. She walks over to the café next to the pier, and sits down at a table with a Chantilly lace doily under the vase of a single rose.

She watches the sunset and listens to the mumbled whispers of the people seated at the tables around her. She’s determined to wait and see if her daughter comes to her. The sun begins to set now, and the sky is blazing. Anina looks down and notices a tear on her tablecloth. There is a crack on the wood with a few crevices leading to the edge of the
table; others form circles along the grain, and one in particular parts in half where more pathways are formed creating other paths, all existing simultaneously in one space. Her tears—which she had not noticed were falling off her round cheeks and into the cracks—trace a path. A tear travels within two crevices at once, and she follows it while imagining that the paths lead beyond the edge of the table. She encloses her face in her hands, and when she opens them, she is in the Cave of Swallows watching the birds fly into the sky. Anina runs her hand on the cold, hard wall, feeling the stories layered within the cave.

“Luz! Luz!” she shouts after the birds.

“Mommy!” shrieks a little head as it pokes out of one of the holes lining the walls of the crevice, a green parakeet on her head.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“Well, you will be here in a little bit. It’s just not time yet.”

“Luz, what do you mean? I have to be near you now!”

“Let’s play a game. Cover your face and count to ten.”

Anina covers her face and when she opens her palms she’s at the same table with the cracked wood, but now when she looks up at the sky it is saturated with flying fish and coral clouds. People are floating with umbrellas in the air. Couples are waltzing mid-air, exchanging smiles and stolen kisses. Volleyball players twirl in the air above their nets. Children jump off buildings and pretend to swim on telephone poles. The sea mirrors the clouds and stars on its surface. She walks into the middle of the ocean and sits on the surface staring at the moon over her head. Behind her, she watches the fireflies
follow the people floating in the air or sit still with the people in trees along the shore outlining their silhouettes. I need to keep looking for Luz, she tells herself.

*

“Mommy, how do you know the house won’t collapse in an earthquake,” Luz asks.

“Because it has a good foundation.”

“What if it was made out of sand? And—”

“Then it wouldn’t be strong. But who—”

“I know a house made of sand; it’s near the…wait…maybe,” Luz says as she points towards the backyard. “It’s next to the spider. The spider guards it.”

When she turns, her daughter is holding her hand in the middle of the sea.

Without saying a word, they sit on the ocean. Anina rests her head on top of her daughter’s curly hair, and Luz traces the wrinkles under her mother’s brown eyes admiring all the stories she knew were dwelling there. They stare at the auroras in the sky writing their stories for the stars. Their love attracts the moon until it hovers so close to the tranquil ocean that Luz jumps into the craters of the moon, and Anina goes in after her.
Palimpsest

i.

When the moon fell into the sea, Earth did not explode. Its core did not wither, but its surface transformed. The world fell asleep, and those who survived the slumber arose on the third day. They escaped into caves at the bottom of the parted sea, making their way to the core—they traveled as far into the Earth as they could endure.

ii.

On the seventh day, the sun exploded. Lightning struck concrete as tea roses froze in crystal vases. Brown clay pots with painted flowers and frijoles de olla rested under wooden tables while in the mountains everything from insects to wolves were encased in amber. Metal cars sang with the tune of rain drops. Leather shoes, bald heads, and plastic bags collapsed to sea on top of more trash lands.

Earth’s axial tilt stood straight and its major bodies of water overflowed. Snowflakes gently caressed whales that had dried on towers when Mount Everest crumbled. Moroccan tiles cracked beneath the icy weight of the sea.

Life redefined itself. And then, under an emerald sun, the Dwellers were born.

iii.

Only electrical currents sparked war between mountains. Patina invaded ruins. On the Earth’s crest, the Dwellers didn’t know they were surrounded by still bodies of murky water and patina-covered debris. Sound was nonexistent. Their bodies were not bodies at all. They were memories embodied in ashes and dust. They wafted in the atmosphere as they reenacted their lives in an endless play while human beings inhabited the center of the Earth.
What was written in their memories was done, and they all questioned if their minds were their own. The faceless Dwellers floated around; they mimicked dramatized gestures that fit whatever their minds had retained. They were imprisoned between inner voices and absolute silence.

iv.

Meanwhile, evolution found humankind during their quest. They reached as far as the Earth’s mantle. They lived there licking the walls for iron. They lived off new species found creviced between layers of stone. The mantle’s chaotic convection patterns created plate motions that tore their caves apart. More died and people continued to dream about when they could return to Earth unaware of the Dwellers above. The bones of the dead were used to carve a tunnel back to the surface.

Along the way, humankind’s new story was passed on, documented in stone until people became blind from lack of yellow sun.

v.

The Dwellers acted out the motions of their memories. Some made gestures with their hands as if they were fighting with someone else. Others bent over as if consoling a child. The Dwellers drifted from one side of Earth to another, creating and recreating their memories with no sound. When they moved, they created several stories within one spectacle operating as a single narrative.

What was a delicate movement, like a breeze, was now a violent pull within them, among them. They traded ashes. They traded dust. The light of a new moon pulled their shared memories until a loud cracking sound rippled throughout the universe.
When blindness hit humankind, they thought it was the end. Their fate was to live between debris forever. But there was a crack in the universe. The birth of sound. They felt it resonate within their bones. Soon after, tornadoes arrived, drilling holes through new soil. By the time the zephyrs came, they traveled back to the crest of the Earth. The plates of the world shifted and shredded.

A new species of humans surfaced.

The fresh air welcomed their sallow faces, and though nearsighted, they could see under the emerald sun. They dragged themselves across the Earth, belly down until they regained the functions they needed to stand upright.

The Dwellers ripped parts of each other when they collided against the wind. Therefore, they were uncertain whose stories belonged to whom and whose memories were not tainted. People could not contain them. They floated on the surface visible only as clouds of ash and dust.

Though nearsighted, people coped and survived. The color of their hands did not matter. They even traveled again with umbrellas made of gathered material. The tunnels that had contained them underground surfaced on Earth, and they lined them with white rock. Getting from one side of Earth to another was easy. They held their umbrellas with both hands, waiting for zephyrs to pick them up or suck them down through the tunnels where they could pop in on the other side of the world.
Earth was a palimpsest of ruins. The zephyrs whirled people and Dwellers through the air. People’s feet hung above the leaning towers and over the cold ocean. The night sky sparkled as they slept mid-air, and on the other side of the world, the emerald sky welcomed those who arrived from the tunnels.

When they traveled, they collided with the Dwellers. When the Dwellers touched a person, they dreamt with their memories. People lived the reality of the world before it ended. They began to document what they dreamt about.

They wrote on metal, they wrote on caves, they wrote on ruins, but they could not document everything. Water—the tides of the ocean, the rain pouring down, their own saliva—withered pieces of it away. The remains of their written words, and the remains of the Dwellers’ memories, were a constant reminder of what was lost.

ix.

Erasure haunted them both.
If You’re Not Back By Twelve!

You’ve been trying to get rid of your mother’s voice all night long and nothing is working. Not even whiskey, you think as you pretend to listen to your handsome date. You don’t want to chew your nails but you’re so anxious. You feel awkward. You place your arms by your side, across your waist, and elsewhere. You wish your body would just remember exactly where arms fall naturally along the body. Or at least if you could mimic these Grace Kelly-type women who hold themselves with such poise. These dangling tree snakes for arms could not be mine, you think. You stick your clutch under your arm pit and frown.

“All you know is that when you take a picture, you die? You’ve never heard of this you say? But it’s true. The picture is no longer a picture of yourself… it is a picture of your corpse. You are not the same person you are in the picture. Creepy? Well, yes. But, it’s art,” Lucian says, then throws back his head in a robust laugh when he sees you’re making a face of disbelief and disgust at the same time. He leans back flirtatiously. He has a stuffy aristocratic tone, but his eyes are sincere. He is handsome. Or so the other debutantes say when they ask you what stupid idiot—I mean, young man—in the most exclusive art show gala in the Hamptons.

You want to say something witty in reply, or at least any words you can connect together. But all you can think of is, What the fuck am I doing here? As soon as you stepped though the arched gilded doors, men and women alike have not stopped staring at you. Your ego says it’s because of your beauty, but your rationality knows it’s because a girl who traveled a long way from the slums of New York does not belong here. In reality, it is both. Some people want to eat you up, and others want to chew you out. As
an artist you think this will help you make connections, but really, it’s more like you’re going to be consumed by this world. The other stuffy blue-blooded prince charmings will look at you with the same lust in their hungry eyes because it’s a black and white party, and you’re the only one wearing a red dress. Somehow, you thought it would be a good idea to wear red and stand out from the crowd. Apparently, such individualistic antics are frowned upon.

But you’re here on business.

“It doesn’t make it any less creepy you know,” you say. You’re disappointed you couldn’t think of something better that would show Lucian, and everyone else, that you’re more than a young girl with dreams of being an artist. The automaton smile and erect posture is just a façade after years of taking care of everyone but yourself. Your old-fashioned mother does not approve of your dreams of being an artist. How would you make money? she had argued. Then she had walked out the door while you took care of the household, your sick grandmother, and three siblings.

Your mind comes back to reality when you feel your arms aching from cleaning the kitchen ceiling that morning, as your mother had requested. It’s just that you must be kept busy, young lady, from your sinful, perverted mind. And what? You think you’re a woman now?

You look past the handsome man and stare at the wall, and you wish you could forget what she said because being called “woman” was not a compliment. He points at another exhibit and continues to ramble on. You try to smile at him in an attempt to be cordial because, after all, he is being nice to you; even though, you know he’s only trying to get into your pants. Does everyone think you’re a fool? But can you blame him when
all the other women in the same position as you have instantly succumbed to his charms and slept with him in hopes of displaying their artwork in an elegant first-class gallery in the Hamptons like this one? He does own the place, you think, and your rental cocktail gown starts to itch. You’re uncomfortable in this new “skin.” You sigh wishing you had your motorcycle jacket and boots instead.

You look like your father every time you wear his jacket, you can hear your mother hissing in your ear. Well it’s all you have of him.

“You know my darling Red, there’s going to be a small after-party at my house I forgot to tell you about. Only a few people are going, and after that it will be late so I will take you home personally. I don’t want anything to happen to you in these dark streets.”

The gesture makes you wonder if you’ve been wrong about him. Your mother didn’t approve of you coming here, but she's tired and your father is not around so please protect your God-given gift above all things and make sure you’re back by twelve young lady! With a roll of the eyes, you had said, “Yes mother…I will…”

“Lucian, you’re so protective of me, but when it comes to dark streets I'm afraid I'll have to protect you. And my name is not Red!” you smile at him coquettishly.

“See you later, Lucian,” interrupts a tall blonde with a coy smile. She nods at you.

You look back at the girl while Lucian leans in closely and whispers in your ear, “Whatever you say … Red.”

It sends chills up and down your spine. He raises his eyebrows and walks away. This isn’t proper for a lady, your mother would say, but you follow him. He goes into another room full of photographs in sepia. The people in the pictures are old, young, family, strangers, candid, and posed. You look around and you spot a few of the girls in
attendance. You can’t help but notice how beautiful they look in sepia: unlike color or black and white, these pictures carry an elegance unattainable in the real world. It’s magical, you tell yourself. You follow the photos until you reach one of a man in deep thought. His eyes look within you.

You turn to Lucian and joke, "So did this man die a little when his picture was taken?"

"No. He died in a horrific car accident. He was my grandfather. The gala is dedicated to him."

You feel as if the waxed floors are about to open up and swallow you whole before spitting you out like the malady you are.

You blush involuntarily. “I’m sorry. I did not know,” you say.

"That’s okay. Really. He’s been dead for five years. So do you want to come to the party with me?"

Should you? You never went to prom or even a school dance in high school. The only thing that kept you from going insane within your mother's four walls were baking and painting the lives of those outside your window. You're always watching others take pictures on the street next to the florist shop, but the people do not die. It's the opposite actually. Every flash with a loved one in a backdrop of flowers only makes them seem more alive. It's the pictures that are dead. They’re just a mere reflection of a speculative self like your reflection on the window staring back at you. Who am I? you ask yourself. You are uncertain. Every day, your mother reminds you how much you act like your father. But you do not believe that. You just can’t believe it when you’ve never met the man. All you're sure of is that your mother doesn't approve of anything.
Act like a lady, you hear her voice nagging at you. Ladies don't get dirty while doing chores, and ladies don't secretly drink whiskey, you filthy girl; you're just like your father.

“I don’t mind going to the party with you.”

“Excellent!” and he throws his head back with a slick run of the fingers through his dark thick hair, flashing a smile that shows his perfect teeth. “Another martini?” he grins.

“Of course!” you say.

"Vodka?"

"Gin."

He's impressed by your good taste. His fingers touch your hand as he hands you the drink. He lends you his arm, and for a second you think of your father. Did he hold his hand out for your mother the same way Lucian does for you? Did your mother seal her path with one touch? Your gloved hand then touches his bicep, and he places his free hand over your fingers as he leads you to his Maserati.

“The gala is over in twenty minutes anyway. You’re not going to miss much,” his voice trails in the conch of your ear. “You can leave the martini on the table.”

You smile and gulp the rest down in one swig. He smiles.

*

At his house you are amazed at how big and expensive everything looks. He has a condo, and the bedroom alone is twice the size of your living room. Your cell phone buzzes. It is your mother. It’s past twelve, and where have you been making her worry
like this? You put the phone discreetly on silent as you admire the various pieces of black and white artwork of naked women on the walls.

“I’ve never seen these before…who took these pictures?”

“Yours truly.” He looks at you with his grey eyes lined by sun-worn skin. He kisses the back of your hand. Fuck! I’m in trouble, you think as your knees quiver at his touch.

The women at his party make small talk with you because they feel obliged out of respect for Lucian. You wonder how many of these women he’s already slept with. Maybe half you guess. For some, you already know what they look like naked because their butts are hanging in front of your face in black and white.

“I’m glad you came. I was hoping we could get away from those old debutantes who enjoy gossiping about everybody at brunch the next day,” he says.

“You think they’ll say anything about me?” you ask concerned.

“Of course, you were the belle of the ball! They were shocked you showed up in a red dress. That was classic,” he says laughing. “You should have seen their faces!”

He continues to laugh while you begin to get a bit offended, and this obviously shows in your face as he stops laughing and says, “I’m sorry, that was very rude of me…that is no way for a gentleman to behave in front of a lady.” He continues to look at you like he wants to devour you dress and all. “Do you always wear your emotions on your sleeve?” He flashes a provocative grin that makes you smile.

“Lucian, we haven’t discussed business arrangements.”
“Oh! Well right now I really love your artwork. You have a way of expressing a surreal account of quotidian life. You’re too young to be displayed at the gallery. And you’re in art school, right?”

It takes you a while to realize he’s asking you a question because all the while you were looking at his mouth asking yourself if this is what other women feel when they’re near him.

“Yes I am. I finished a new project titled, ‘Prurience.’ I’m trying a new style to get away from the everyday road I know. Or as you called it, my ‘surreal account of quotidian life.’”

You’re a little disappointed that he thinks you’re too inexperienced, even if you know that it’s the truth. All you’ve ever known is what's contained within your mother's walls. Pushing all other thoughts away, you listen attentively to his advice; after all he is a famous photographer, you think, while picturing yourself undressing his muscular body. He says he’s never seen an artist as beautiful as you. You blush.

“Can I take your picture, Red?” He says, with a half-smile and a twinkle in his eye.

“Sure, why not? I only live once,” you say, puckering your crimson lips in a perfectly shaped O.

He gets his camera. This is not appropriate for a lady! Your mother answers in your head, but you ignore her and tell her angrily to stop eavesdropping in your thoughts. Enough is enough! He comes back from his bedroom carrying his camera in his thick hands. Your gaze is all over him as you admire the way he handles its different parts, and you wonder if he is as seductive with all women.
“I usually like to photograph women in the nude, but if you’re not comfortable with the idea I completely understand, and I will take your picture as you are,” he says, with his back turned. His strong broad shoulders mesmerize you, and you decide you want him to photograph you nude. He turns around and sees you there lying naked on his shaggy white carpet. You laugh at his stunned expression.

“Do you always wear your emotions on your sleeve, Lucian?” You say with glowing eyes. “There is only one condition though; I want you to take my picture in sepia not black and white.” He nods affirmatively as he grins, ear to ear, while devouring your naked body with every flash.

Once he is finished he looks up at you and says, “That’s it sweetie! You can put your clothes on here or in my bedroom if you like, and then I’ll take you home.”

But you are disappointed. This is not how you thought the story would end. I guess I’ll have to make things happen for myself, you think. You get up and push him against the wall.

Looking him straight in the eyes you say, “Fuck me.”

You lead him through the hallway, past the bathroom, into the bedroom, and on the bed where you rip his clothes off. Shirt buttons flying everywhere.

“I’ve never seen this side of you before…what big beautiful eyes you have!”

“The better to see you with my dear.”

“What soft ears you have!” he says, biting your ear.

“The better to hear you with my dear.”

“You have the perfect nose.”

“The better to smell you with my dear.”
“What succulent lips you have.”

“The better to eat you with.”

You lose track of time until you’re both lying on his bed breathless and sweaty. Beads adorn your forehead as he feels the softness of your naked breasts one more time before you get up. You notice for the first time how hairy he is and you laugh. He half-smiles and you sleepily watch as his chest moves up and down with the rhythm of his breathing. You get up to use the bathroom and when you come back you ask Lucian to help you zip up your dress. Still naked he tries to pull the zipper but he breaks it.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Red! Don’t worry I’ll pay for it.”

“You’re such a gentleman. But it’s not necessary. I’ll manage on my own.”

You gather all your things, and when you turn around Lucian is snoring; and once in a while a snort creeps out from his nose. You take your phone out of your purse and you take a picture of him. You smile.

Outside you cover yourself tightly with your second-hand coat, and wave for a taxi. Your knees are weak, for obvious reasons, they tremble with each step you take in your stilettos. Just then you hear your mother’s voice in your head. What have you done!

Will she know? You wonder. You walk a few feet up the street and you find a pumpkin lying abandoned on the floor. Fluorescent sparks dying away on its leaves. Someone didn’t make it back by twelve! You think, reminiscing about the blonde at the gala. You can feel your insides throbbing as you get into the taxi, but you do not regret it. For you, it's a night full of magic.

When you get home, you sneak into your room while your mother is sleeping, and in the morning she never realized the time you came home. She is upset, but you tell her
you were late because you couldn't find a taxi up there where people get rides in limos, so you had to take the bus. And you forgot your phone was on silent, so you couldn't answer her calls. Later, you hand your mother the pumpkin and catch her secretly taking a swig of whiskey.

"I thought ladies don't drink in secret," you tell her.

"I never said I was a lady." She stares at you, so you lower your gaze.

"The zipper is torn on the dress isn't it? Make sure you fix it the way I've taught you. The rental shop will never know the difference," she says, and hands you the whiskey. Walking towards your favorite spot in front of the window, you stare at the red roses and with a stiff flick of the wrist you take a shot straight from the bottle. In the window's reflection, you notice for the first time how much you resemble your mother. I am my mother's daughter, you think.
Life is Simple When All You Love Is Feet

Julian Tenor was a healer of sorts, a healer who could massage someone’s feet and diagnose their health. There were times he could cure them. And then there were times he could not. He did not understand why or how. And there was one more thing: Julian Tenor loved feet. But if he could change the past, if he could allow himself to be anonymous, he would go back to a time before the cave, before Anya, and—perhaps most ideally—to a time when his father was still alive.

Julian, frail and with rags on his feet, was unaware of the long line that had gathered outside by the shrubs. He walked out taking baby steps towards the hot sun. Faint from not eating anything at all for the past two days, he kneeled in front of a cactus plant and sliced it open. He brought the slimy green flesh to his lips and sucked until his tongue stung from the blisters that had formed, swelling his taste buds. Julian spit out the cactus and walked through the crowd without a word. At first he had expected someone to ask him about his healing powers or his sexual desires, yet when no one said a word, he feared they had come for another reason—to stone him or hold him accountable for everything from a child’s clubbed feet to murder.

“Freak,” he mumbled under his breath. He knew that was what they called him. When he sat in the cave alone, their whispers and chants twirled around him. Julian wanted to be normal. He wanted to go back home and see his mother. Yet he had no way of knowing that within two years, he would come back to the cave as anonymous as one could be under the waning moon, and just as lost.
Even though Julian was only two years old when the shop first opened its doors, his father named the establishment, *Tenor & Son Shoe Repair*. His father, Alexander, turned the upstairs section of the building into a home. When Alexander died, Julian took over the business and remained living with his mother upstairs.

Now, many years later, Julian took the shoe he had been working on all morning, a black patent leather winkle picker with a stiletto heel. He held it up under the light. The shoe needed cleaning and stretching. It was his custom to work in the shop all morning until noon. He could hear his mother cooking lunch upstairs, banging pots and pans in the same manner she had done since he was a child. Even the shuffle of her feet was the same, so he knew when she would be busy upstairs and would not come down. The only time his mother had acted strange was when his father died twenty years ago.

The lady who had brought him the shoes was blonde. While she had searched her purse, he noticed her Cuban heel sandals. He had figured out the shoe style by the sound of her shuffling as she walked into the shop. The wide Cuban heel was short and stout, just like her. Her feet were natural and appealing, even if they were quite wide. But her toes were not aligned—the index toe towered over her big toe. He didn’t like that. It had irked him. *Better than the woman with toes like protruding turtle heads.* And he laughed to himself at the thought of telling her so. *She was still cute.* Overall, she had pleased him. She had a lovely voice and a nice smile cushioned between plump cheeks. When he had wished her a good day, she had turned around and said, “You too. See you tomorrow.” He was certain she had batted her wispy eyelashes just for him. He had smiled as she turned and walked out the door.
Julian placed the shoe in his palm, and traced its shape with the tip of his finger. He brought it to his nose and sniffed the delicate aroma of sweat, suede, and the distinct smell of her feet. From experience, he was sure he could fix her toes himself. He did so occasionally when his mother or his aunt, Irma, would ask. But they had to be careful. He did not want to disclose himself as a man with a foot fetish—especially a cobbler with a foot fetish.

Every woman he told, or man, had been either disgusted, they accused him of being a pedophile, or they had wanted Julian to have sex with them. “Out of curiosity,” they always said. He was not comfortable with that idea mostly because they had ugly feet. The only thing he had desired was to introduce them to foot care products. And it never failed to offend him when they suggested he was aroused by children’s feet.

Once, he did confide in a friend whose feet had pleased him, though they were not perfect. But for a man, a clean-shaven older fellow, he had the best ones Julian had ever seen.

“A foot is like a good piece of cheese,” Julian had told him. “It’s a delicacy meant to be handled like one.”

“That’s true. The aged ones are even better,” his friend had winked.

They laughed, had more wine, and slept together that night. Julian thought the experience was alright. It wasn’t awful. But he had expected more.

He heard the faucet running. His mother was done cooking lunch.

“Julian!” yelled his mother. “Lunch!”

“Be right there!”
Out of habit, he waited every day for her to yell for him. He walked upstairs, kissed his mother’s cheek and washed his hands before sitting down.

“Your Aunt Irma is coming, so let’s wait a minute.”

“Why?”

“Does she need a reason? She’s your aunt.”

“I didn’t mean that she couldn’t come without reason. I was just wondering if there was.”

“No, no reason,” she said as she adjusted her seat.

“Rose I’m here,” interrupted Aunt Irma who was standing by the door. Julian kissed his aunt and they all sat down to eat his mother’s meat stew.

“Julian you have to meet this nice girl who works with me at the office,” said Aunt Irma.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

But Aunt Irma ignored his protests and kept talking. Julian pretended to listen. Instead, he remembered the last time Aunt Irma set him up on a blind date; the woman was a single mother. Her toes were not visible in her brown oxfords, and she had kept showing Julian pictures of her child, a little boy. Julian had thought the child was cute, but when she had showed him a picture of the child in the bathtub, he stood and said, “Yes, I see he’s very cute. But I prefer not to look at so many pictures.” The woman, offended, accused him of not caring about being a father to her child or liking children at all.

“I’m the bad guy?” he had asked. “You’re the one showing off naked pictures of your child.”
The woman had grunted and then slammed the door on her way out.

It bothered him that parents were so casual about their children’s bodies. *Children and their body parts deserve more respect. Maybe I’ll just die alone.* At that time, the idea had made him sad, but now he had come to accept it. After all, his father’s favorite saying was, “Better to be alone than in bad company. People just want to use you, and when they’re in need and you have a gift to help, it’s hard to say no in good conscience.”

My father was a saint, he often thought.

“Aunt Irma, it’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer but you know how particular I am.”

The two women looked at each other and changed the subject. As they talked, Julian could not help but think of the only person who haunted his mind: the one with the perfect feet. He envisioned his dream pair of feet—soft skin, crescent-shaped nail beds, cream-colored nails, a chubby ball of the foot, toes with a nice curve, finished by a perfectly shaped arch and descending toes. He imagined taking a pair of perfect feet and placing them on his face, stroking the baby-soft balls of the feet with his cheeks and imagining he could blow on the toes like a pan flute.

“Julian, really, you should meet this girl. You could help her with her feet.”

He perked his ears. This was something Aunt Irma had left out.

“Really? What does she have?”

“Her feet ache and get warm at night. She doesn’t think it’s serious, but she’s been to different doctors and no one can tell her what’s wrong. She just wants some relief. It’s probably nothing we have to worry about. You should be safe. What are you worried about?” said his mother with a slight chuckle.
“Ok. Fine. When can I see her?”

“I’ll bring her by later today…or maybe in a few days. After you close the store for sure,” said Aunt Irma. “Have faith Julian. Everything in its own time.”

*

When Julian was set to meet Anya, he closed the shop early. He had cleaned and stored all his tools by the afternoon. He walked over to the park across the street where he often sat by himself on the same cracked wooden bench his father had taken him time and time again. Julian was remembering his father as he always did during this time of year. He watched the sunset and tried not to make eye contact with anyone. “Life is simple when all you love is feet,” he whispered to himself.

It was the little things that had always pleased him. Not fancy cars, or typewriters, or even expensive radios. He loved feet, a good shot of espresso, the smell of bread and cheese, and the night sky. The townspeople walked past him, smiling out of courtesy to his mother. Julian gazed at the lake whose water mirrored the sky. He was wondering how far away the sun must be if all that was left was a faint remnant of light. It was as if God was a painter who smudged the sun rays with the palm of his hand before painting the sun in another canvas, for another day, perhaps another world, he thought. He wondered if souls followed the same pattern. If maybe, when people died, they turned into faint lights smudged by the hand of God.

As a child, he had wanted to unlock the secrets of the world. Therefore, he wanted to be an astronomer or a physicist. Instead, by the time he was a teenager, he decided to follow his father’s footsteps.
“Everything in the universe is connected in the roots of the body,” Alexander used to say to Julian as they both fed the ducks. Julian had had a thing for feet for as long as he could remember, and it was during one of those moments with his father that convinced him to become a cobbler.

“It’s a more gratifying path toward unlocking the secrets of the world,” he had said to his father when he announced the news. They both had laughed not knowing Alexander would pass away in a year.

Julian’s eyes wandered from the ducks to the children gathered at the edge of the lake with stale bread. He heard laughter; he heard crying. And then he heard the inevitable—parental reprimands. He frowned in their direction, furrowing his eyebrows. He did not understand parents who suppressed their kids’ creativity. Adults are so unhappy because they do not know how to appreciate and understand the world they live in. Unlike children who constantly overcome conflict and pursue new, wondrous things. After all, if you want to learn about the world, you ask a child. Julian clenched his square jaw, bowed his head, and rubbed his thick, sweaty hands as he fixed his gaze on the grass just as two women walked in his direction. Their voices were getting louder with each step they took. They turned to him and made eye contact. He looked at their feet. They were both wearing open-toed heels. He smiled a half-smile at the mental picture of them shopping together in the department store. One was a redhead and the other was blonde. Weeknight I Love Lucy watchers, he speculated and chuckled as he remembered Lucille Ball’s antics on the show. The “Friends of the Friendless” was his favorite episode.
His eyes traced the S curves of their arches. *Just like inverted swan necks.* Their toes, dipped in red nail polish, lured him. His eyes followed their curves as they walked past him. Julian jumped from the bench and called after them.

“Excuse me! Miss! Ladies!”

They turned around.

“I noticed that your strap is damaged. I can fix that for you.” He handed them his business card.

“Oh, thank you,” said the woman with the damaged shoe. “You have sharp eyes. I’ve been meaning to get that fixed.”

He looked at her face and thought she had to be in her late twenties: her crow’s feet were still faint.

“You should. It’s irresponsible; you could trip and scrape your feet,” he said with more force than he had intended.

“Yes, of course,” said the wide-eyed woman as her friend raised her eyebrow.

With his hands in his pockets, he went back to the bench and they walked away.

The scene in front of him was the same except that the sun had almost set and only a faint glow appeared from behind the mountains in the distance. The crowd was waning. Those who remained picked up their things and prepared to leave. He inhaled the cooler air. *Summer is fast approaching.* His eyes followed a swan, and he wished he could take it, tip it over, and create a shoe cushioning soft soles with their feathers. When the sun was almost gone, he got up and headed back to his home.

His mother was watering the plants when he walked upstairs.
“I’m leaving in a few with Aunt Irma,” she said. “I’m going to Father Pascal’s wake.”

“With Aunt Irma?”

“Yes,” she said and sat on her rocking chair. Her bifocals had gotten smudged when she washed the dishes in the farmhouse sink. She cleaned the lenses as she rocked her chair. “Julian, maybe it’s time you got out more, went dancing…I miss dancing.”

He leaned against the wall. “Mama, I don’t dance.”

“What are you talking about? You dance. You can move your feet well.”

“I know. I didn’t say I couldn’t. I have no desire to dance.”

She smirked, placed the glasses on her face, and then threw up her hands. She mumbled something as she looked for her purse.

“I won’t live forever,” she said when she came back into the room. “I just don’t want you to be alone. You’re always alone.”

“I’m not.”

“Your father wanted the best for you. I’ve done what I can. It’s your choices that make you happy and…I don’t know. I thought things would be different by now.”

He shrugged and did not say a word. He was not necessarily nervous about meeting people, especially this Anya. But after thinking about his father, all he wanted was to be happy. And if happy was not an option, if there was no room for love in his future, then all he wanted was to be left alone in his shop. He wanted, more than anything else, to feel content with what he had and his life’s work.

“I worry about you,” she said. “I—”
He held up his hand, “I know. You’ve always worried. Is this because of Father Pascal? I only ask because I know you were close. I’m sorry he passed.”

This time she shrugged and half-smiled. Julian felt like he had just glimpsed at himself in the mirror. He may have had his father’s ability to heal, but his smile came from his mother.

When Aunt Irma arrived, she introduced Anya to Julian. Aunt Irma had mistakenly assumed Anya was single. But Julian didn’t care. He just wanted to see her feet. He was not looking for a relationship.

“Here she finally is!” said Aunt Irma.

“Yes, finally,” said Julian jokingly. The woman pressed her lips as she shook his hand. Anya didn’t seem to want a date either. They all made small talk until Julian and Anya were left alone. Julian thought Anya didn’t seem pleased to have been left alone with him. She did not say much to Julian except to explain her symptoms. She pressed her bag next to her hip so hard that her fingers turned red.

“Ok, just relax,” he said, “So you don’t know what’s wrong with you, right?”

She nodded. Her hand gestures swung in the air with a black glove. “All I know is I get throbbing in my feet, and they get really warm, hot even. Especially when I’m sleeping. It wakes me up, you know,” she said.

She seemed sincere to Julian even though he felt like something was wrong. He eyed her up and down. He held his hand to his lips.

“I can take care of you with a massage. I’ve been told I have a healing touch,” he said and smiled.

“Really?” she said. “I’ve been to many doctors, so we’ll see.”
He did not like her tone, but he brushed it off. I wonder what Aunt Irma had told her. He led her downstairs to a cushioned chair inside his shop, and she took off her shoes. They were near perfect. His eyes traced the curve of her nail bed. He began to trace her toes.

She pulled back and said, “What are you doing?”

“It’s part of the ritual. Didn’t Aunt Irma tell you how it goes? Relax.”

She fell back into the cushion with hesitation. Her nail beds looked like the moon crescents he had always envisioned. He placed the palm of his hand under her foot. Her skin was soft. Her nails were a healthy pinkish glow at the bed, and a strong, clean white at the edge of the nails. Julian took his pinky and traced it along her cuticles.

“Neat and moisturized,” he mumbled under his breath. He felt himself hardening even though he did not mean to, so he rearranged his loose pants to hide his bulge. There was something about her that he liked even if he felt uneasy at the same time.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Concentrate on my touch,” he told her, “Think of my touch as light that penetrates your skin, your pores, your muscles, everything deep inside you. Every part of your foot corresponds to a part of your body. It’s the essence—”

She snickered. He furrowed his eyebrows, and tightened his jaw. “It is the essence of it all. It can even heal our souls,” he said.

“I will trust you. But only because your aunt has told me many good things about you, and I love her like family, even your mother is so sweet.”

Julian relaxed. “Yes I know.”
“My husband couldn’t be here today. He’s out of town, but I came because I really need immediate relief from my foot aches.”

Julian took her comment as a warning not to try anything funny with her.

“That’s a shame. Please don’t speak,” he said between his teeth. “Concentrate with me. Our breaths should be in rhythm.”

Anya rested her back on the chair and closed her eyes. Julian dimmed the lights and started off slow with one finger over her skin. Then he increased the intensity until her feet were immersed in both his hands. After several maneuvers of her ankle, even calf and back of the knee, he saw Anya’s muscles twitching.

“Wow, you are good,” she said. “The masseuse I go to is the best and even she can’t— .”

Julian cracked her toes, and put pressure on her metatarsal bone. She exhaled a long, deep breath. She had goosebumps on her arms. Anya, opened her eyes and Julian placed her feet in her shoes.

“Keep your feet arched. It stretches you. When you get home you can relax them again in warm water, then moisturize,” he said getting up. “Every few days soak them in a foot bath. Some Epsom salt. Some lavender. Anything you’d like.”

She almost did not notice the bulge in his pants. But he turned sideways when he reached over to grab a pen. She screamed, and hit him over the head with her bag. Julian felt the lump of something hard against his skull. What did she have in there? He grabbed his head with both hands. By the time he looked up, she was gone.

When Mama Rose came home, he stayed in his room out of shame. He did not want to talk about anything. He just wanted silence.
Julian had been working on a pair of cowboy boots all morning. The detailed work on the leather required Julian to wear his special magnifying glasses. He was trying to salvage the embroidery and repair the sole. Someone walked through the door. The customer’s feet were heavy and moved fast. But Julian did not look up right away. As soon as he did, Anya’s husband punched him without warning. Small shards of glass cut the side of his left eye. Julian’s glasses were broken and they fell off his face. Anya’s husband threatened him and then left before Julian could get up from the floor. He bled over his hand. Not even a week later, as he walked home from the grocery store, he noticed the stares. No one said anything to him, but he knew Anya and her husband must have told everyone in town about his foot fetish. The boys who used to say hello to him and show him their latest baseball cards no longer “were allowed” to see him, a little boy had told him before scurrying away lest his mother find out he disobeyed her.

Aunt Irma and Mama Rose had not left the apartment since the scandal emerged. They went to church on Sunday and bought groceries, but they did not want to bother leaving if they did not need to.

“Julian, maybe we should move to the city,” his mother told him. Aunt Irma sat in her chair knitting. She did not say a word.

“No, mama. This was papa’s shop. I won’t do it.”

“But angry customers have demanded we close this shop. Anya’s husband has threatened to file charges if we don’t leave by next week.”

Julian sighed and walked to the lake to think. He wondered what was worse, leaving behind what his father built or letting go of it. He had not had a customer for the
past three days. He doubted anyone else would come now that he was known as Julian, the freak. The parents at the park had led their children away from him. Some had spit on the grass nearby. He sighed and threw his head back.

*

Julian packed everything his father ever owned. If he could move the shop brick by brick he would. He heard a knock. When he opened the door he saw Anya there with a woman and a sick child.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“This is Jane and her son,” she said. “He has a problem with his lungs. The doctors give him two more years to live.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“They don’t know exactly.”

“So what do you want me to do about it?”

“Heal him,” she said. “I went back to the doctor and they told me my thyroid problem was cured. It’s a miracle.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. You said you didn’t know what was wrong with you.”

“I did. I just didn’t think you could do anything about it. I just wanted relief.”

“So you scream, and between you and your husband you leave me with a headache and black eye. Why should I bother helping you? Look around,” he gestured.

“You made me lose everything.”

“Please, Sir,” said Jane. “This may be my son’s last chance.”
He felt his mother’s presence behind him. He was sure Aunt Irma was next to her. They didn’t need to tell him anything. He knew they would have asked what his father would have done. Julian looked at the eight-year-old child. The child stared back at him with no emotion. *He is really sick.* Julian observed the child who was wheezing in front of him.

“Alright. Come here kid.”

The child sat on the couch with him. His mother took off his shoes. For a moment, she hesitated before shaking her head and pulling off the boy’s shoes and socks.

“What’s your name?” asked Julian.

“Peter.”

“Ok Peter, where does it hurt?”

The child pointed at his chest.

“Peter, what’s your favorite game?”

“I don’t have one. Mommy says I can’t play outside.”

“I had the same problem growing up. I was a sickly child. I got picked on a lot by the bigger kids.”

“Me too.”

Julian smiled at him and told him to close his eyes and think of being strong again. He began to massage the child’s feet. He felt them go limp within his palms. *The boy’s ankles are flimsy.* Julian closed his eyes and remembered all the times he was pushed by the bigger, popular boys. How they had laughed at him because his nose bled during allergy season. As a child, he stayed indoors a lot and he could tell this kid did not go out much either. *He probably stays up all night reading under the covers with a lamp.*
Julian felt a warmth in his chest, and he wished for a moment that one day he could have kids too, or at least a partner who understood his awkward social skills and fascination with the stars—and feet, of course. The little boy’s legs started to quiver and Julian cracked his ankle and put pressure on the boy’s heels.

“Ok kid. You’re done!”

The child opened his eyes and shook Julian’s hand. The gesture of maturity amazed Julian. The mother did not say a word, but she nodded towards Julian. Anya said thank you and apologized to him for what she had done.

“It’s not your fault,” he said.

As if nothing had happened, he turned back to his task and continued packing. He drifted all day between a desire to leave everything behind and the lure of nostalgia.

When he eventually disappeared into the caves, it was this moment he revisited time and time again.

*

The news of his healing abilities had spread faster than the news of him being a “freak.” All the townspeople who harassed his mother and aunt and threw things at him now sat outside his door pleading him to help them and their loved ones. “But you’re our last chance,” they always said. He gave in each time because he knew his father would have wanted him to help the needy. But they didn’t have very nice feet, especially the ones whose diseases had started rotting their toes. Others had internal problems but their feet had bunions or fractured bones. Some even had foul smelling feet. He could taste death through the smell protruding from their skin. The worst was a woman whose fungus smelled so bad, Julian had to submerge her feet in water. It was torturous.
He was beginning to hate feet. It wasn’t a simple pleasure anymore. It had become too practical. He wasn’t aroused by practicality. He wanted something mysterious and gratifying. And before he could even begin, he had to find a way to bond with the people he was healing. Being awkward, that was not an easy task.

He once tried to joke with a teenager whose parents were fighting right in front of her.

“Look at how your toes look like they’re pointing in two different directions,” he told her.

She laughed when she realized her toes each pointed to one of her parents.

“Hey, hey,” he said, nudging her shoulder. “Choose a side!”

But she didn’t understand his joke. It felt flat until he found another way to bond with her. Apparently, she too thought kitten heels were classier than Cuban heel sandals.

“You have good taste!” he assured her before she left.

But not all his experiences were as great. He rolled his head at the thought of all the awful feet he had to touch. I swear, if I see one more foot. It seemed that every day his line for healing got longer. He even had to employ the help of Aunt Irma and Mama Rose. At least I don’t have to leave my father’s shop. But Julian could feel something was off. There was no way this following could last.

Anya stood before him. But she was not alone. This time Anya had brought an elderly man in a wheelchair. Julian remembered him well. It was the same old man who used to mock Julian for being a slow runner. “Pansy! You run like a girl,” the man had yelled at him when Julian was only nine years old. Julian’s father tried to dissuade Mr.
Payne, but no matter what Alexander said or did to protect his son, Mr. Payne found ways to torture Julian.

“It’s you,” said Julian, signaling toward Mr. Payne. “Why should I help you? You made my life miserable.”

“You’re so ungrateful. I taught you many things when you were growing up!”

“No you didn’t. If it wasn’t for my father, I would have never gotten better.”

“So what Anya says is true! My wife knew there was something odd about you and your father! I never believed her. May God bless her soul,” he said.

“All of you please leave!” Julian shouted and slammed the door.

“I told you he’s a pansy!” Mr. Payne said to Anya. “He just can’t face a real man.”

“Please Julian! Open the door,” people pleaded from outside. He opened the door once again when he heard the children crying. He could stand anything, but not the sound of children crying, especially when he had the power to do something about it.

As soon as he opened the door, Anya pleaded, “Please ignore my father. Can you heal him too?”

“He’s your father?”

Anya told Julian she was scared about coming here the first time because her father had warned her about Julian when she was growing up. “I’m sorry. I just don’t think he ever liked your father. He was jealous of him because mother admired him a lot,” she said.

“Who cares? He made my life hell. Well why should I help? I don’t like him at all and it doesn’t work if I can’t bond. If I don’t like him, it just cannot work.”
“I don’t like you either!” Mr. Payne snorted. Anya looked like she was about to cry.

“Okay. Come inside.”

“Have you lost your mind Anya? No, just let me die,” said the old man between coughs.

“Father, please,” she said. “Don’t you want to see your grandchildren get older?”

“That’s up to God. This pansy is a hack and a pervert just like his father,” he said clutching his left arm.

“Father, you’re getting upset—”

“Look, I can heal you Mr. Payne. You know that. But you have to let me help you.”

Mr. Payne, quiet for a minute, nodded. He was breathing in gasps of air.

Julian took the old man’s foot in his. It was soft like baby skin. The nail bed was white and shaped like the crescent moon. The nail itself was crème-colored and the shape descended in perfect harmony. He massaged the man’s feet. He focused on the veins protruding by the ankle and the sagging skin typical of elderly people.

Julian could feel the man’s breathing as it matched his own. Mr. Payne’s breathing slowed down. His chin was sagging and his hair was white and thin. His scalp was brown after years of working under the sun. When Julian finished, he took a long look at Mr. Payne. He was no longer angry at the man who had tortured him. This man before him was unlike the robust man from his childhood. Julian felt pity for him. He knew Mr. Payne would eventually die. All he could do was make his pain more manageable. It had not worked this time. He could not heal him.
Julian knew Anya would probably bury her father in the same cemetery Julian’s father was buried. So he escorted Anya and her father out of the shop, and then asked the remaining people to please leave.

He locked the door of the shop and went to Mama Rose and Aunt Irma upstairs. He held them in his arms but said nothing. He walked out expecting to sit at the bench at night while everything was quiet. Instead, Julian walked past the park and headed towards the mountains.

*

Julian was unsure of what he had expected when he came out of the cave. All he wanted was to sit quietly and not be bothered. He did not go in expecting to come out a saint—even though some people tried to call him one. He was never a holy man and could never aspire to be one. “Idiots,” he said. He walked past the crowd that had gathered and headed home. He looked down at his own feet, covered in rags and dried blood. His feet were always simple, sheltered. They had transformed him with every step. Julian looked up. Mama Rose and Aunt Irma were there. His eyes watered as he walked towards them. His feet felt heavy. Each step made its mark on the dirt.