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Full Issue, 2.1 The Crambo

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Letter from the Editors

Every grad student, no matter the size of their school, where they reside, or what program they are in, went willingly into the overwhelming chaos of grad school. We are all joined together in this hard world, giving up our time and our sanity, in order to pursue something we love. The work we do is difficult, but it is fulfilling. We thrive on it. Passion is our driving force—the thing that wakes us up in the morning and propels us through our grad school journey.

That common passion is what inspired us to create *The Crambo*, a literary journal created by graduate students exclusively featuring graduate student work. Who better to strike cords in your hearts than the individuals out there every day putting their all into something they love? As we combed through the stacks of work that was submitted we searched for a fire, a passion. Passion that matched our own and made us feel all the things we didn't even realize we wanted to feel.

In this issue, we have a story about a life left behind, a poem that speaks to the heart of anger, artwork that connects us to Mother Earth, and an essay that brings us to a wedding potentially hosted by the Mafia. These, along with all of the pieces we accepted, are waiting in this volume to inspire you. Benjamin Disraeli said that “Man is only great when he acts from passion.” We think this collection of works exemplifies his thought.

When you read these pieces, we hope this passion is what you feel too.

Sincerely,

Ashley and Brody, Editors-in-Chief

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Chris looked the same and somehow like a stranger. The lines by his eyes and mouth were new, and his brown hair was graying; the curls she'd ran her hands through in their youth were shorter. Instead of age detracting from his beauty, it had somehow made him more handsome. She reminisced looking at his face and wondered what happened to him in the ten years that had passed since she'd seen him.

"Julie, it's good to see you." A woman with fuzzy, dyed-red hair and too much blush hugged her. The smell of stale cigarettes filled her nose.

She smiled. The woman blocked her view of Chris. "It's nice to see you." She tried to put a name to the face, but she couldn't. She wondered why people didn't wear name tags.

"Oh, honey, it's fine, I'm sure you don't remember me. You've been away from home for so long. A big fancy writer I hear." Her drawl was thick, and each word was articulated slowly. Julie had forgotten how different home was, and the entitlement these people felt to know the intimate details of a stranger's life.

"I wouldn't say fancy," Julie said. She smiled at the woman and hoped she'd take the hint and leave her alone.

"I'm Donna," the woman replied, "I dated Lyle, Chris and Tate's daddy."

Julie couldn't stop staring at the pink lipstick smeared across the woman's yellowing teeth. She remembered a younger Donna standing under the meaty arm of Chris's dad. She wondered if that was why the make-up was caked on her face. Was she still trying to hide bruises or was the thick make-up a habit she'd never stopped? The thought of Chris's dad sent gooseflesh across her skin. The man sickened her, and she didn't want to be standing with this if he showed up.

"Ya know, we thought you and Chris were gonna get married."

"Donna, we'll catch up soon." Julie smiled and side-stepped the woman. She looked over her shoulder at Chris.

Julie thought about Chris as he had been that last fall before he turned eighteen. Even

as a kid, Chris had been the opposite of his dad. The last time she had seen Lyle, she had been riding four-wheelers with Chris since early morning, and they were hot and covered in mud. She'd ran out of water two hours before the sun went down and her mouth was dry from thirst. They had stopped at Chris's to rest. His trailer sat behind where they stood. Dark mold covered the siding, and Chris's dad stood shirtless in the kitchen window. When he smiled, the crooked, black teeth made her nauseous. She glanced at the exposed flesh of Chris's upper arm. The yellow tinge of a bruise peeked from his shirtsleeve. The bruise had been distinct fingermarks days before. She wondered how he survived a childhood with that man.

Lyle's eyes followed her, and her palms were wet with sweat. The last time Lyle caught her alone he ran his hand over her shoulder, and the sour smell of his breath filled her nose.

"You are a mighty pretty girl, too pretty for Chris."

"You want to come in and get a drink?" Chris asked.

She looked at the leering face in the window.

"It feels too good outside," she responded.

Chris nodded his head and looked at the window. His dad raised a hand and waved.

"Excuse me!" A kid yelled and bumped into Julie's leg. She was brought back to the present and had to grab the door frame.

"Sorry about him, he's a little rambunctious." A woman with orange-blond hair and leathery skin walked behind the boy holding a baby.

"It's fine. I'm fine."

"You're Julie Clarke, right?" The woman moved closer. The smell of a dirty diaper was so strong that Julie had to stifle a gag.

"I am."

"I thought so you dated Chris growing up and then moved away. I heard you're a bigshot now. Everyone always knew you were goin' places though."

Julie nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. "What did Chris do after high

school?"

"The way I remember, he was kind of lost after you left. Went to community college for a while, was gonna be a... I don't remember now, but then he got married."

"Chris has a wife?"

"He did. They got divorced. You probably knew her in school, everyone did. Lauren Bryant."

Julie did know her. They were best friends in high school. Lauren hadn't seen Chris as a person, only a name. He was the son of Lyle Jenson, a 'no good woman beater and a drunk, thank you very much,' if you listened to Lauren and her mother. Everyone in town seemed to. Julie ended their friendship long before high school graduation.

"Why did they get divorced?" she asked. Hot acid filled her throat, and she wasn't sure she could listen to the story.

"No one really knows for sure, but the talk was that he caught Lauren in bed with another man. I heard it was something else, but no one ever found out. He wouldn't say a word against her, and she moved away."

"Why'd the two of you break up? No one ever knew."

Julie studied the woman's pudgy face. Her make-up caked her cheekbones and highlighted the wrinkles in her leathery neck.

"I need to use the restroom if you'll excuse me," Julie said. "We'll catch up later!" The woman yelled. Julie wondered what her name was so she could deny the friends request if it came.

The bathroom was a nauseating pink, but the door locked. A small chair sat in the far corner; she wondered how many people escaped to this room over the years. The people in the other rooms were suffocating in their need for gossip. She sat in the chair and leaned her head against the wall. She held the locket Chris had bought her for graduation. Inside was a picture he'd taken of them. Unintentionally, it was the last picture of them together; they broke up a few months later. In the picture, they were both laughing. "I'll love you forever"

was engraved the opposite side of the locket. She'd worn it since he'd given it to her, at times forgetting it hung from her neck.

They broke up the week before she moved to her dorm. Chris had moved into an apartment after graduation, and they were lying naked in his bed. Her head was on his chest, and his hand ran through her hair. She drifted in and out of sleep while a soft breeze blew through the open window.

"I love you, Jules."

"I love you too."

"You could come with me, you know. I'm sure you could get a scholarship to help with school. It'll be hard not seeing you until fall break, but there will be some weekends I can come home, or you can drive to see me."

He didn't speak for a while, and she listened to the thump-thump of his heart, trying to commit the sound of it to memory. She'd almost drifted off again when he spoke.

"I'll always love you. You're the love of my life, so maybe one day we'll get another chance. You need to leave here and not worry about me. You have greater things to accomplish than being my wife."

A knock at the door brought her back to the small pink room.

"Just a minute." She splashed water on her red face and wiped away a small trail of black mascara running down her cheek

She walked back into the room with her head down and found a shaded seat away from the crowd. She could see Chris through the crowd. The light fell on his face and the years seemed to melt away. The lines became less pronounced, and his hair seemed more brown than before. She remembered the thump-thump of his heart as if in a dream. The sound filled her ears and her thoughts.

"Even after he married Lauren, it was always you."

She turned to see a man who looked like Chris, except for the eyes. His were brown instead of Chris's blue. He was smiling a little, the crooked smile from his childhood. Chris's kid

brother. "Tate."

"He called the other day and asked to see me," Julie said.

Tate sat in the chair beside her. "Did he tell you that he was a photographer?"

"No, he said, 'I know you're a writer, but I don't want us to know anything else until I see you.' You know him, always one for surprises."

She laughed and looked in Chris's direction again. "He asked for an autographed picture."

"He was taking pictures for magazines and books, and even families. I think the families made him think about you more than anything. He married Lauren, but she wasn't you. He didn't even blame her for cheating on him. He wanted her to be happy."

"I'd heard he was married to her."

"They weren't married long, not even a year. After the divorce, he started with photography. After a while, he decided he needed to find you instead."

"He called three days ago. I'm not sure how he even got my number."

"I might have helped there. He asked if I could find your number. It was hard, you hadn't called anyone from home in years. I eventually found your momma's number, and she gave me your cell phone number and told me you were single. That was all Chris needed to know."

She laughed. "When I answered he asked if I still loved Chris Jenson. The phone call was so brief, but at the same time, it lasted a lifetime. He could always make me feel like the only person on the planet."

"I reckon to him you were just about the only person on the planet," Tate said and rubbed the palms of his hands on his pant legs.

She looked at Chris again and weighed the question for several minutes.

"What happened to him, Tate?"

"He was coming to see you. He called me while he was packing. He was so excited, Jules, I hadn't seen him that happy in years. I swear he rambled on about you for twenty

minutes before he ever took a breath to tell me where he was going. He bought the plane ticket before he even called you. He was gonna see you whether you wanted him to or not.”

“He called me from the car. He said he was ten minutes from the airport. Four hours later I got your call,” Julie replied. The words were hard to form, and the heaviness in her chest threatened to stop her breathing.

He nodded like she'd told him something he already knew. “Three minutes after you got off the phone he was driving through the lights at Main and Second. A car ran the light, drunk and high on opioids. Chris died on impact.”

ODE TO MEMPHIS BLUES

LAUREN S COTTLE

Billie Holliday hung herself in my dreams.

Dr. King pleaded to an unlistening, raging America. The heart of the beast trapped
behind so
many hairy, locked doors it can no longer
feel for tenderness.

Understanding is the crux, the sound of hope.

“But I want you to know tonight / that we /

As a people /

Will get to the promised land.”

In the dream the sky imploded

and we held a string to keep ourselves

from washing up on foreign shores.

Then it became clear with brilliant red orange: We are apart.

Where is the America of empathy?

The white man didn't bring it here.

My soul has hurt for generations.

Drowning in words, memory, and rye.

When will you find me?

Will it be soon enough?

When will you carry this burden with me? When will you share this burden with me?

MANIFESTO FOR IMMIGRATION

MARY T. DUERKSEN

It's time for a revolution no I mean a revolt who says this malevolence gets the upper hand?

It's out there look in the mirror Amerika you got what you paid for what you got but you are better than this better than what you got

Where lies the dream once grasped in hands roughened from toil and stiffened by suffering?

Those hands whose reach clawed and fought to come to the freedom place ah yes the land of the unfree free

Liberty only free to some these stinking cowards and sniveling whiners "the forgotten"

Forgotten are the tired, poor huddled the ones who live in the edges and side alleys of places too terrible to describe

Whose desperation drives them to undersized craft and treacherous waters over borderlands in the night

Who gave up their souls to the howling coyotes just waiting to devour their last hope

Ground it into the sand as they choked on their own spit

Look about you and be mortified by what you see

The bewitchment of the place you seek the unfree free better garbage heaps

Your dream shatters, evidence of your calumny pours from the mouth of so many

Your lies that spin and spin and spin out beyond the stars weaving a tale of deceit

None of us escapes the burden borne by those we stand on stood on will stand on

We own it-lies power privilege

Washing up on the shore with splinters of fractured craft and salt-soaked dreams.

UNPACKING HALCYON ANDREW KULAK

We rattled down the highway near
to each other but not touching, I saw
a song on your lips I couldn't make out
the green flash of exit signs flying by

When I look down those roads, I imagine
remembering a small town, boys wading
shirtless in the creek, a broken tire
swing hanging on the last thin hours
of summer bleeding into harvest skies

You turned away then, windows down
sun tangled in your hair playing
jagged shadows across your thighs
the loamy smell of wet earth and
the years so sudden between us

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

RICHARD STUECKER

Leave the Gun; Take the Cannoli

I was rumbling about the Ricci's kitchen around 6 a.m. Sunday morning after Felix and Jackie's wedding when Ufillio appeared wraith-like in the doorway.

"What you look for Ricky?"

"I thought I'd make some coffee," I said.

"You want coffee? I take you to a place. Maybe a pastry, huh?"

"Sure," I said, "Thank you."

I couldn't tell if Ufillio liked me or not as we hadn't really talked all weekend. He was my future wife's Chicago cousin. She brought me as her date and I slept in his wife Rafaela's tiny sewing room. He had been busy with his son Felix's wedding and the house was stuffed pretty much like a cannoli with out-of-town guests. That morning he became my own private godfather. He pulled out his vintage 1959 black Pontiac Bonneville, a long car with fins protruding at the back that he kept simonized and detailed. He told me to get in.

"I take you for a little drive. To clear our heads," he said.

Barbara and I had recently seen *The Godfather* first run at the new Cinema 10 complex.

"I guess it's like home movies," I joked.

"We don't joke about that," she said. Then she laughed.

On the drive up from Louisville, just as we pulled off I-65, my soon-to-be father-in-law, Hercules, turned his head sideways from the steering wheel and said:

"A bit of advice: do not mention the words 'Mafia,' 'Black Hand' or 'Cosa Nostra' while we are here."

Privately, Barbara had told me that her family had no mob connections in the Windy City, but Felix and his buddies got around and he had friends who knew friends who knew

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

friends. Automatically, I checked out the backseat as I slid onto the bench seat of the Bonneville. Visions of Clemenza taking out Paulie danced in my head. It was Thanksgiving weekend and I was thankful for the empty backseat. Nina Rota's trumpet played in my head.

"I show you around a bit," he said.

Ufillio, who was called "Jimmy" by his friends, had a gravelly voice not too unlike Brando as Vito Corleone but not as soft. He stood about a foot shorter than I but his forearms were roped with muscle. He owned a tavern in the city. Most of his Italian family tree had passed through the tavern, working and living there on their way from Lucca to their American dream. He pulled the Bonneville up to a stone basilica-style church and school that appeared to have been built in Italy and flown over to the west of Chicago.

"You go in there a bit later and you see many in the congregation wearing sunglasses. It ain't from the glare. They drop thousand dollar bills in the collection on a regular basis," he said. "The children of certain families are safe there, protected, you know?" He laughed a growly laugh, "by the Sisters of Saint Agnes."

He pulled away from the curb and drove up a hill. We stopped at a red light. There was a Gulf Station on one side of the road and a Sunoco on the other.

"Do not go to the Sunoco to get gas, Ricky. He is my enemy. Always go to the Gulf. I can get you a deal."

"Yes," I said, "Thank you."

We were on our way to the Northlake Hospital. It had been built in the midsixties and, like Immaculate Conception, built of stone. We pulled over into the parking lot.

"I tell you a story, Ricky. You see how tall the hospital is?"

"About 5 stories."

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

"10," he said, "you can't count."

"No, math is a problem for me."

"It is a beautiful building, yes? I think you are smart, Ricky. There are 5 main floors and one more in the middle. Not 10. It is hard to see the 6th floor"

"Yes."

"It was built to patch up certain family members if there is trouble, you get what I mean?"

"Yes sir, Ufillio, I get it."

"You call me Jimmy, huh?"

"Yes, Jimmy, thank you." Relief broke over me.

"Anyway, these families, they did a search for a medical director in Italy and they brought him over. He was so very honored and happy. He was given a very distinguished office that had a very large cherry desk, a wonderful picture window, and they provided a very beautiful woman they knew from over in Chicago who mostly did her nails and answered the phone. The phone seldom rang. They staffed the place with some very wonderful doctors. But they also staffed this hospital with other offices. Each floor ran a different racket in the city. Gambling on one floor. Prostitution on another, numbers, Union membership, and I hate to say it but drugs also. You get what I mean?"

"Yes, Ufillio, I mean Jimmy, I believe I do."

"Yes, even though you don't know math, I think you are a smart boy. Now. Let me tell you, the fine doctor chief administrator knew nothing about this. He spoke very little English and the hospital departments were run by other doctors. But the good Italian doctor looked very good in pictures, you understand?"

"Now, about five years ago, not too long, the hospital was raided. And guess what?"

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STUECKER

he paused. "The only one who took the wrap for the crime was the handsome doctor from Italy. He went to prison for 10 years, no one else." Uillio laughed until he coughed and choked. When he regained his breath he said:

"Of course the hospital was saved by a group of businessmen. It is a very fine facility. I go there myself."

At last he pulled his car in the front of the Lezza Bakery. In the windows there were gigantic wedding cakes.

"Felix, he get his cake from here, but not so big."

One of the cakes had seven tiers, flanked by two sides featuring working fountains. A wedding party of twelve attendants descended plastic stair cases from either side of the tiers, the bride and groom on the top level. Instead of fountains on the cake in the other front window were caged, real canaries. They sang a wedding song as we entered.

"*Due cappuccini, per favor,*" ordered Uillio, "and two dozen cannoli. For the sleepy heads back at the house." Around the small café, more men sipped on espressos wearing sunglasses. There was no glare.

"You take the cannoli, Ricky." He was the only one in my life who ever called me "Ricky."

"Let me tell you a love story, Ricky." The small tabletops were mirrors. Our faces looked up at us. I sipped on my cappuccino and listened.

"Mangia, Ricky." I pulled out a cannoli and bit into the crisp pastry. Ricocta cheese and bits of candied fruit spilled out the end onto the table.

"Here, Ricky, use this," he handed me a paper napkin from a dispenser in the center of the reflecting tabletop. I could see Jimmy laughing. I could see my embarrassed face.

"So, my love story goes back to just before the last war. Just before Mussolini declared

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

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war. I was here already, but I went back to visit my family in Lucca. That's near Pisa, where the campanile leans. You know, like on the pizza boxes? It was in the garden of the Rossi family that I first spotted Rafaela. Every morning I saw this vision working among the tomatoes, the grapes or zucchini plants. It took me some time to gather the courage to say hello, and even longer for me to talk with Mr. Rossi to ask for her, you know?"

"Yes, I am working on that right now, you know?"

"Ricky, do not be afraid of Ercole. He is very excitable, but he is only full of life."

"Okay. I will think about what you say."

"Okay. I know. Is not very easy. But, when I explained about how I was buying my own house and I was building a business in Chicago, the tavern, and how his family might one day come to America and work at the tavern he was very happy to give me the hand of the beautiful Rafaela. I came back here and went back to Lucca two or three times. On the third trip we marry, in the small church up in my little hill town. As an American citizen I had to leave right away, to leave her behind with the money for her passage. All that way, my seventeen-year-old bride had to wait for her papers to be approved. Believe it or not, she sailed, all by herself across the ocean on the very last ship to come from Italy to America. I took the train to New York and met her at the docks. She was wearing the dress she wore for our wedding. She made it herself—she is still a dressmaker, you know—and it resides in our closet to this day, forty-five years later."

"That's a beautiful story, Jimmy."

"Yes, it is. Now, when you go back, you ask Ercole for the hand of Barbara. Respect the traditions. But do not be afraid of him."

Driving back I told my future family about my early morning drive with Ufillio and about the church of the Mafia and the hospital and the bakery.

MY OWN PRIVATE GODFATHER

STUECKER

Herc smiled a big toothy grin.

“Do not believe everything you hear in Chicago,” he laughed.

“Do not disbelieve it either,” her mother, Halley, said and looked over to Herc, who stopped smiling.

Months later I was in the vestry before my own marriage to Barbara. Her mother appeared in the doorway, wraithlike.

“I want you to look in the back of the church before Barbara comes down the aisle. You will see two tall, thin men from Chicago. If we have any trouble with you, it’s one call to Jimmy Ricci. You get what I mean?”

Barbara; and I have been wonderfully married for just over 45 years.

PALMS UP, FINGERS CURLED

ABBY N. LEWIS

I sit on my grandparent's back porch,
in a chair at their glass table.

Grandpa is on my left;
my father across from him,
to the right of me at the head of the table.

Grandpa is describing the recent
abduction of a young woman.

It had been in the news a few days before.

My father had yet to hear the story—
it wasn't just an abduction, we learned;

two men had kidnapped, raped, mutilated,
then murdered the woman.

Grandfather goes into specifics,
describing how the men had tied her to the bedpost and
taken turns.

The young woman was young,
a girl really, just sixteen years old.

PALMS UP, FINGERS CURLED

LEWIS

Grandpa makes eye contact with me—
then with his son
as he relays the most gruesome details.

At other times during the telling,
he looks down and speaks to his
reflection in the dusty glass of the table.

His face, at those moments, has a look of incredulity,
as if even he is shocked to hear the story he is voicing.

My father breathes the word “Jesus”
at various intervals. He glances at me,
on occasion.

The things he must be imagining—
worst-case scenarios involving me
in her place.

When I first sat down
I had not known what they were discussing.

It was summer, early July.

Our entire family was over
for our annual cookout.

PALMS UP, FINGERS CURLED

LEWIS

I had expected the conversation to be light, airy,
like biting into a slice of watermelon.

Instead, I sit down to hear him say
one of the men had cut off the young woman's left breast.

And I don't just mean her nipple, he said.

Her entire breast.

He holds his hand out, palm up with his fingers curled,
as if that very breast was perched there in his hand.

The air around us grows oppressive.

I do not want to stay—to listen—
but I also don't want to stand

and leave so soon after having

just sat down.

So I stay. I listen.

Until my grandfather

holds out that hand,

his palm a sign of wealth—

all the years he has lived

PALMS UP, FINGERS CURLED

LEWIS

weaving a tangled tapestry

across his soft, tan skin;

the shape his palm makes, as if he were offering

his beating heart,

or if his other hand joins in,

as if he were begging for mercy—

but it is just the one hand,

golden band reflecting the sun's gaze.

I look away.

MADRE TIERRA

CHRISTINE SLOAN STODDARD



“Madre Tierra Projection” is part of a series I began imagining while working at an international school in Gowanus, a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. I’m interested in the ties between the idea of “motherland” and “Mother Earth,” which in Spanish are the same words; you simply the reverse order. Being immersed in Spanish while working at that Gowanus school made me think a lot about my mother’s native language and my relationship with Spanish as the language of the “motherland.” The historically industrial environment of Gowanus often makes me think about climate change, too. I can’t help but think of how human activity and economy in First World countries affects the lives of people in the Third World countries like my mother’s El Salvador. To speak literally about this piece, it is a photograph of a photograph projected into a wall on my rooftop. The first photograph (the ‘photo within the photo’) is of a glass painting I made. The second

photograph is of the projection. Link to full-size image:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/i7pi5ub793r868i/Madre%20Tierra%20Projection.jpg?dl=0>

PRISONER

ABBY N. LEWIS

He is there again—
on the doorstep.
His car idles at the edge
of the walkway, the side
mirror inches from the mailbox
with the words *Jim & Carol*
scrolled across its face in an elegant
form of calligraphy not unlike a wedding invitation.

He shifts the warm pizza box
from one palm to the other,
glances up. She snaps the metallic
blinds closed, retreats into the darkness.

Downstairs, she hears footsteps
trace the familiar path to the door.
Voices are heard, a burst of sudden,
strained laughter. Her hand flies to her mouth
when the car door slams. She returns
to the window as the engine revs, snakes
a few fingers through the blinds again
only to see the distant red flash of the
taillights as the delivery vehicle turns the corner.

BROADCASTS OF “I LOVE LUCY” ARE NOW ARRIVING IN ALDEBARAN

TRENT WALTERS

Oh, Lucy, we beam signals: sometimes light,
sometimes sound, sometimes body.

They escape our sphere, blast
into space, lost to us.

The body develops a mind of its own,
the intellect of a sweet passenger
pigeon, cooing, cooing
until the rifle blasts. I see

but do not observe my dim-
witted semaphores
and wonder what they did
that for, why they didn't highlight

what they should have, which explains
why I never tried
out for a bit part
opposite Lucille Ball. Blame Lucifer.

I observe your body's light splinter
and unsound sound, and it sounds—

BROADCASTS OF “I LOVE LUCY” ARE **NOW ARRIVING IN ALDEBARAN**

WALTERS

or the dearth of sound
sounds—like you're not interested.

I won't mention it again lest
I pester you into blazing down
a blistering poem about me.
Today I sent a signal that I wanted

to retract: "Pardon my body.
That looked like the mythical planet X,
but my body is mentally
handicapped. Please ignore."

But if I deny, if I lie, if I point,
Vegas neon flashes at those hapless
electromagnetic waves, fleeing
shame-faced, at the speed of light.

THE SPARE BEDROOM **VALERIE SMITH**

What does it feel like behind that door
at the end of the hall, in that nosebleed
section of the house? No matter how small,
we fill our extra corners with fake ferns
and peace lilies, a lonely aloe vera plant.

We say we need an extra room
to keep the next guest in a plush bed
of shiny sheets and sham comforters,
with two formica tables, and a wall clock
permanently saving time.

Here is the door we pass by and peek in,
toss old furniture, lightbulbs, and pens,
the door for future guests to pass through
to the afterlife, waiting for memories
to live and die over the weekend.

Inside, that one window looks nowhere,
draped lightly like a mosquito net,
a corner view obscure, a fortress secure,
a mausoleum for one dead fly in the sill,
lifeless, except dust mites bathing in sunlight.

Sheltered out of the elements,
captive like mice in the wall, we tiptoe,

THE SPARE BEDROOM

SMITH

listen for the thinness. Light creeps in,
touching the feet of passersby as if to ask,
who will stay and when?

SOULMATE

ZACHARY DANIEL KAPLAN-MOSS

In the window of small shop in a compact city on a foggy bay, an orange dress lay dreaming of a perfect fit.

Drawn by the swirling color, humans would come inside to finger the material, to try it on, to see how it felt against their skin. But the dress was particular in its desire. So it lay skewed, bunching and twisting as they tried to cram their breasts into its slim top, the straps slipping off their narrow shoulders, the hem dragging on the floor.

They didn't know why it looked wrong on them, and neither did the girl who worked there. Who took it down from the window for her customers and put it back up again when they left, once even murmuring to it, "don't worry, it will happen for you one day."

Claire didn't love her work. She hadn't studied fashion, never wore dresses. She only had the job because her aunt was the owner. Her aunt, it seemed to Claire, was hoping that Claire would take it over someday, but she didn't want to. She didn't know what she wanted. Just that she was ready to get out of the store and out of San Francisco, where every dollar went to rent and all anyone cared about was her career. Or the lack of it. And she didn't like bike-riding or rock climbing. She didn't belong here. She was just like the orange dress that everyone thought they wanted until they tried it on. And it was a bad sign that she'd started talking to it, wasn't it?

It was another hour before Claire could close. Her aunt's things were strange and expensive. If she did three sales in a week, she was content. No one was getting rich here. Certainly not Claire. And the store stayed open too late.

Her phone buzzed on the counter and she turned it over to see a text from her friend Alaster. They had plans to go to an anarchist warehouse party later.

Where you at? he said.

The store, she said. *Where else?*

Wanna get high first?

Def. But I've got an hour to close.

No worries, he said. I'll come to you.

Alaster had been by the store plenty of times, but not recently. Now he was a mile away and walking fast, having grabbed some edibles from a dispensary. Alaster was tall and slim with long legs. It didn't take him long to cover ground when he wanted to. Soon, he was stopped outside the shop, struck by the display: a tall, black, headless mannequin wearing a fabulous orange dress. There was something garish about it, but something subtle too. The ragged hem. The thick straps. An Escher-esque black spiraling that he couldn't follow. A self-referential quality, a strange loopiness. He wanted that dress. And he knew he'd look good in it. Because the mannequin looked like him. Not that he was black or headless, but the way it stood or the length of its limbs or just something about it. The dress would fall just right. It was a flat-chested, masculine, headless mannequin, and he knew this was an androgynous dress. No. A man's dress.

Finally, he went inside and Claire was laughing at him.

"What were you doing out there?" she said. "Are you high already?"

"No," he said. "But that dress. Where did it come from?"

"The orange one? Pretty cool, right? Everybody loves it, nobody buys it."

"Why? Is it super expensive?"

"Well, yeah." She rolled her eyes. "Everything is. But it's not that."

"Is there something wrong with it?" He turned to look at it again, from the back this time, and he felt like it looked different. Maybe the pattern was going in reverse.

"I don't know," she said. "It just doesn't look right. It's a weird dress. Are you ok? What's up with you?"

"Do you think..." he said. He turned, but he didn't make eye-contact. "Would it be

weird... could I try it on?"

"Since when are you a cross-dresser?" she said.

"No, it's not that." He licked his lips. "I just want to try it on."

"Yeah," she said. "Sure. You bring the other stuff?"

"Oh yeah," he said. So they ate some drugs, and then she went over to the window to grab the dress.

"Maybe I'll try some stuff on too," she said. "You want anything else. I think blue might be more your color."

"No," he said. "Blue's great. But just the orange one."

She brought it to him, and he went into a changing room. He stood with it, holding it in his hands. A sort of comfort flowing through his fingers. And a greedy grasping in his chest. He needed this dress. He wanted to own it. And he wondered what this meant about him. Whether he was now a certain kind of person.

But it wasn't that he wanted to be a woman. Or that he wanted to be a man in a dress. What he wanted was to be himself, wearing this dress. Or like somehow, he might be able to be himself only in this dress. Like up until this moment, a part of him had been locked away or held back, and now, as soon as he was inside this orange dress, it could finally be realized. And he didn't want to think a lot more about it.

He stripped down to his underwear. He'd never put a dress on before. Over the top like a t-shirt seemed the way to go. There wasn't a zipper or anything. Probably not something you stepped into. So he pulled it on, and it fell over him like warm water in a nice shower. Then he was looking in the mirror with a sense of recognition. Like a superhero finding the right costume. Not just clothing, but the very fabric of identity.

"Let's see," Claire called out. When he emerged, she actually gasped.

"Holy crap," she said.

"I know, right?" he said.

"It all makes sense," she said. "It's a man's dress."

"No," he said. "It's my dress."

And they smiled with a giddy joy that faded as she thought about it.

"What?" he said.

"You can't afford it," she said.

"Are you serious?" He fumbled around at the back for the tag.

"It's marked at \$850," she said. "I can get you 15%, but that's still like..."

"Whoa," he said. "For a dress?"

"Well," she said, "it's one of the less expensive. People pay thousands for shit like this."

"What if I stole it?" His eyes grew wide. "I overpowered you and ran out."

She laughed.

But maybe it'd be enough to get her fired. And maybe that was exactly what she needed. Because seeing him in this dress, how right it was for him, how he glowed and preened, she wanted to feel that way. She wanted to find just the right thing and have the crazed desperation to grab it and run.

"Go," she said. She looked at the door. "I'll meet you up later. At the warehouse thing."

They had a moment of eye-contact, searching if it was serious. If it was happening. It was.

He took off, racing through the store, blasting out of the doors with the dress flowing around his legs, fluttering free.

He'd left his jeans and t-shirt on the floor of the dressing room. She went in and looked at them. His remnants. Smells and skins cells. His wallet and phone were in the pockets of his pants. Not the best move. She sighed. He was going to need a purse. She tucked his valuables into her own pockets, feeling overloaded and left behind. Now she had to deal

with the fallout. She called her aunt. Thankful when she didn't pick up.

"Hey," Claire said, "had kind of a weird day. This guy I know, I mean, uh. He wanted to try on the orange dress, you know the one in the window? And he sorta ran off with it. I'm so sorry. I think maybe I can get it back? Anyways, closing up for the night. Just thought you should know."

This was going to come down on her. A big fat nothing for her next check. Alaster would owe her forever.

She thought about texting him and then remembered that she had his phone. She wondered if he'd go to the warehouse thing alone like that. They were in San Francisco, but still.

Her phone starting ringing. She somehow thought it'd be him, but it was her aunt. She considered if she could get away with ignoring it. Probably not.

"Claire?" her aunt had a hoarse voice, always scratchy, probably a smoker, though Claire had never seen her with a cigarette. Still, her aunt had this smell about her, like maybe she cooked over an open flame. "I've heard your message."

"Oh yeah?" said Claire.

"You must get that dress back immediately," Aunt Linda said.

"Well, yeah, maybe. I just don't know where it is," said Claire.

"The thief is a friend of yours, yes?"

"I mean, friend. I don't know. I didn't think he'd run off. He's normally very, you know, stable." Claire gestured at the empty store, wondering why she was gesturing.

"No," said Aunt Linda, "I don't know. Don't go anywhere. I'm almost there."

"Almost where?" Claire jumped off the stool. "Don't come here!" She raced around the counter, looking for what she needed to do. The edibles were gone. Alaster's stuff was in her purse. His clothing was still on the floor of the changing room. What could she do with it? Why was she so scared? Had she been silent too long? Should she say more things? She

shouldn't have gotten high.

"Wait," she said. "I'll find it. You don't need to come. He's just playing. It's fine. I'll fix everything. Hello?" Her aunt had already hung up.

Maybe if she could get out fast enough, she could disappear into the city and just avoid Aunt Linda. Never pick up the phone again. She grabbed her purse, running for the door. But she fumbled with the keys as she tried to lock up, trouble getting the right one, and then she smelled woodsmoke, deep and sweet and dusty, her heart jumping around like a drill skittering across a metal table.

"Well," her aunt said. "I'm glad you at least have the presence of mind to lock up. Considering that you've already allowed us to be robbed once tonight."

Her aunt was tall and broad with short grey hair. She was intimidating, off-putting. She stood too close.

"But it's just a dress," Claire said, looking at her aunt's big black lace-up boots. Like she was going to kick down a door. Or stomp on a niece. "Nobody liked it anyways, and it's not the most valuable, and he's not going to do anything. He loved it, and besides I couldn't have stopped him." She clenched her jaw to shut off the words.

"Wrong," her aunt held up a long white hand. "You know nothing of the value of things. No one was ever supposed to buy that dress. It should never have left the shop."

Her aunt's eyes were dark, her face pale and lined. "Now you must tell me about your friend," she said. "We'll track him down and take back my dress."

"Why didn't you tell me about it before," said Claire. "I don't understand. I don't feel good."

"No, I imagine not," said Aunt Linda. "Your pupils are dilating out of your head. You're clearly high. Do you often get high while you mind the store?"

"No," Claire said. "Dear," Aunt Linda placed a cold hand on her cheek. "You are of course fired. And if you don't want me to press charges, you will take me to your thieving

friend.”

“He’s not a thief.” She moved back, seeking escape from the cold hand, the condescension.

“Did he or did he not steal my dress?”

“It’s his dress,” Claire mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Aunt Linda was craning her neck, looking around the street like she might spot Alaster behind a trash can or something.

“Nothing,” said Claire. “Let’s go look for him.”

About a mile and a half away, Alaster was walking to the warehouse, drawn in by the sound of thumping base. There was a little group smoking outside, one of them holding the door open with her foot. The bass spilled out through the crack, lights and fog creeping around into the narrow street. Everything felt unfamiliar.

Alaster was ordinarily very careful. His last girlfriend had called him boring and uninspired while she was dumping him. It was his own fault for pushing her, demanding that she be honest about it instead of placating. Her words had stung and festered though and he wondered why he’d wanted her to be honest. He’d have been upset either way.

So he marched right up to the smokers, said hello like he knew them. The girl holding the door informed him that she was the welcoming committee. He expected her to ask him for the invitation or at least some money and he realized with a sickening lurch that he’d lost his wallet and his phone and his dress didn’t have pockets. But she smiled and held the door for him, and when he went in, the music was loud enough that all the thoughts were blasted from his head.

His body felt long, smooth, alien. Possibly, he’d become a mannequin. An incredibly fluid mannequin. He was the spirit of music, the essence of dance. He was smoke and water.

At first it was wide and empty, but soon it filled with hands, arms, vibrating torsos, solipsistic and orgiastic. The incongruity of a rave. Like an amoeba that spreads and consumes, an amorphous blob of human movement and emotion. And still he was also singular, selfreferential, eyes closed and self-orbiting.

Awareness crept back in as he noticed two women looking at him. He appeared to be dancing with them. Or sort of in a circle with them. They weren't touching, but they were smiling and he was somehow no longer a part of the greater party, but a smaller group of just him and these girls. They were ballet dancers; they were birds; they were briefly robots; and also, no matter what they played at, graceful and sexy women. They were working with each other too. A wordless, body connection. And then, he didn't know how, they started touching him. Hands on his dress and on his arms. Reaching up to brush across his face, his head, his hair, their fingers leaving ghostly trails. His head spinning. His feet hurting.

Suddenly, the dress constricted on him, squeezing rigid. He stumbled, gasping. The girls grabbed him, held him up, shouting questions. Was he ok? Did he need to go outside? His ribs hurt. His eyes weren't focusing. Outside. Why was the dress so tight? He couldn't breathe.

He blinked into the night. Quiet and ordinary. The dress still clung, but only fabric. These women were looking at him.

"Are you like, overdosing?" one of them said.

"No," he finally said. "Just a little out of breath."

"You don't look real good," the other said.

He pulled at the dress. Something apologetic about the way it responded, slinking back to its former shape, a little tighter than before, a little stiffer. As if the material had changed, the strands thickening and hardening.

"Shoot," said the first girl. "I thought you were gonna lose it."

"We totally saved you," said the other.

"Thank you," Alaster said. But he didn't feel saved.

"Your eyes looked like they were gonna pop out of our head. Like those dolls you squeeze you know? And their stuff, their face pops out? That's what you looked like."

"You don't look that way anymore though. I'm Penny. She's Jenny."

"I'm the thing in the doll," Alaster said. "You guys are good dancers."

"Thanks!"

"We love your dress."

But he just thought about how it had tightened up. How maybe there was something wrong with it. How maybe he had been a little out of control, and even now, he was on the edge. His own fear and exhaustion warring around with things he wasn't sure were his. A sort of mania in his limbs, his torso, a compulsion to go back and dance, ditch the girls, run away into the night. Or how, when he considered maybe taking the dress off, he felt tight again. His chest turning in on itself, his heart wrapped in layers of orange cloth.

"Do you smell something?" he said.

"Yeah," said Penny, looking around.

"Smells like burning," said Jenny.

"I don't see any smoke," said Penny.

Neither did Alaster, but he did see two figures coming towards them. One tall and dark, the other slim and familiar. The dress drew back against him, a tail trying to tuck between his legs.

"Alaster," said Claire. "We found you."

"You've stolen my dress," said the tall woman.

"This is my aunt," said Claire. "She owns the store."

"But actually," said Alaster, "I think your dress is stealing me."

"Look," the aunt said. "I'm supposed to be playing Bridge. I just want my dress back in my shop. And honestly, you do too. You don't think you do, but you do."

"I can't," he said. The dress was tightening again, slow and powerful as a python. His ribs hurt. He had to breathe shallow. He was trying to pluck it with his fingers but it was like pinching his own skin. "I can't," he repeated, his eyes going wide, panic shivering through him.

"I was worried about this," Aunt Linda said. She reached into her purse and came out with a pair of long silver scissors.

"Whoa," said Claire.

"What's going on?" said Penny.

"Is that a knife?" said Jenny.

"It's scissors," said Aunt Linda. "Why don't you girls go back to your party?"

"I think I'm going to call the police," said Jenny.

"Do it," said Penny.

Alaster muttered to himself, still plucking at the dress. His legs were shaking now, wobbling like a drunk. "I don't know," he said.

"Ok," said Claire. "It's fine. Everything is fine. Put the scissors away. Time and place, ok?" Aunt Linda looked at her for a moment, the scissors long and dangerous in her hand, and then she put them back in her bag. "My aunt," Claire addressed Jenny and Penny. "She made the dress. It's a funny thing. And my friend, well, he stole it. He's not feeling so great. Thank you for your concern. We'll be ok though, really. He's just had a little too much tonight. We'll take care of it from here."

"Yeah?" said Penny.

"Maybe we should go back inside," said Jenny.

They touched Alaster, looked at him. "Are you going to be ok?" they said. His eyes rolled around in his head. "I don't know," he said.

They didn't know either. They'd just liked the way he moved, and liked his dress, but now it was clear that he needed some kind of help that they were not equipped to provide.

It was a relief, actually, to let it be someone else's problem. So they went back into the party.

Alaster gazed after them. "I don't know," he said again.

Claire took his arm, steered him across the street to where her aunt had parked the car.

"What's going on," she whispered to him.

"It's squeezing me," he said.

"The dress?" she said.

"It hurts," he said.

In the car, they sat without moving, Claire and Alaster in the back and Aunt Linda in front. She looked at them through the mirror. Her eyes dark; her voice calm.

"This is the problem with your generation," she said. "You just want all the time. And you think you deserve everything you want. So it's never a problem to take. You don't believe in consequences. Everyone has to be special. No idea that you might not deserve it or even what you'd do with it if you got it."

"Really?" said Claire. "This is a commentary on our entire generation? I mean, isn't what's really going on that you made a fucked-up dress?"

"We're still Beta-testing," said Aunt Linda. "And actually, I meant to say. You handled that situation out there very well. I was impressed. I might be willing to reconsider how I fired you."

"Please," said Claire. "Don't. I'm not working for you anymore. I'm getting the fuck out of this city. I'm going to go take whatever I want regardless of the consequences. Can we just go back and fix whatever you've done to my friend?"

Aunt Linda started the car. "I didn't do anything to him," she said. "It's just aggressively bonding."

They went back to the shop, dragging a limp Alaster through the doors, his head lolling

around. He made noises that weren't speech. When they let him go, he crumpled up on the floor and lay there, pale and shaking.

"It's so unpredictable," said Aunt Linda. "That's why it was for window-shoppers only."

"Well you should have told me," said Claire. "What if I'd tried it on?"

"Trying it on is fine. That's the point. It would never have gone for you."

"Why not? How can you be so sure? Why are you always so sure about everything. Look where it's gotten us."

"The question, Claire," said her aunt, "and really a good one for you to think about another time, is why aren't you more sure about anything. But let's address the matter at hand. We're going to have to cut it off. It'll take months to make another one." She shook her head, reaching into her bag to bring back out the long silver scissors.

Alaster looked up, awareness sharpening along the edge of the twin blades. It was the end he saw up there, rapidly approaching, and he tried to crawl away. He wanted to go back to when he'd first put on the dress. That feeling when he'd looked in the mirror. The perfect display, the ideal form. How it'd been when he was dancing. But the dress was a solid thing now. Petrified. Ossified. Nothing would ever be ok again.

Aunt Linda knelt down, rolled him onto his stomach. He felt like a fish. About to be gutted. At least fish didn't know what was coming. The cold touch of the scissors on his spine, the bony fingers of death. And then he heard the long smooth tearing, the cutting, the agony. It tore something out of him, some part of himself that he would never get back and then it lay on the floor around him in pieces. He was in his underwear in a store. Claire and her aunt were looking down at him. Cold and exposed.

He coughed. Rolled out of the carcass of the dress and climbed up. Conscious of his bare red skin, suddenly ashamed of how healthy he was. Like he'd been hamming it up, play-acting, and now it was over and they'd seen through him all along.

"Are my, um," he cleared his throat, "are my clothes still here?"

An hour later, he was still in the store. Aunt Linda had taken the remains of the orange dress, draped the limp halves over her arm, and walked out. She'd told Claire to lock up when she left. That they should talk in the morning. Now Claire sat on the floor next to Alaster. Shoulders touching, facing the same direction, backed up against the wall.

"So," he finally said. "Made a real fool out of myself tonight."

She reached over and took his hand. Held onto it.

"I guess we're stuck this way after all," he said.

"It's the problem with soulmates," she spoke softly, her voice a cool balm over his burning shame. "We put too much of ourselves into the myth. And when it isn't what we expect, we can't recover. Ruined by happily ever after. Because life keeps going, and soon, we know that we haven't escaped ourselves or become better versions or found the one true love that will fit next to us forever. Nothing takes away the pain of uncertainty, the terror of making choices and never becoming the thing we wish we would. But you know what? You almost had it. Maybe even did for a minute or two. I don't know whether that makes you better off or not. It was inspiring though, and a little frightening, but no, it wasn't foolish."

She squeezed his hand.

"Let's never settle. Let's not give up. Let's go out into the world, be weird and unexpected and unashamed. You looked fucking good in that dress. You were happy. And I was happy for you. We'll get it back. Some semblance. One way or another. Or we'll never stop looking."

They were quiet a long time together and he was glad she was there next to him. Glad she was his friend.

"But you're contradicting yourself," he finally said.

"Fuck it," she said. "Things don't always have to make sense."

LOST

DIANA PROKOPIEV

The broken compass's needle swings in different directions.
She holds the compass in her trembling, frigid hand—
a useless tool in a fatal situation.

And trying to go North in the forest, she fumbles with it,
desperate to get home.

Her bare feet find comfort in the crunchy leaves below

even though she is heading in the wrong direction
in the black forest full of naked trees—
running, panting, then tripping on a rotten log.

The compass slips from her hand after
she falls.

It's pitch black.

Home is five miles away.

*

Home is five miles away.

It's pitch black,

she falls,

the compass slips from her hand after

running, panting, then tripping on a rotten log
in the black forest full of naked trees.

LOST

PROKOPIEV

Even though she is heading in the wrong direction,

her bare feet find comfort in the crunchy leaves below.

Desperate to get home

and trying to go North in the forest, she fumbles with it,

a useless tool in a fatal situation.

She holds the compass in her trembling, frigid hand—

the broken compass's needle swings in different directions.

25%
a Latin dollar
of a language I don't
a quarter Puerto Rican.
Noun: Puerto Rican(s) (US Citizens), adjective: Puerto Rican
They: white 75.8% black/African American 12.4% other 8.5%. 99% Latino
Me? 25% Puerto Rican Percent Latino? cinco
first name "little girl." last name
I'm Perez and Santos cousins
But I'm still asked
"what synagogue do you go to?"
colonizer, privileged, sipping green tea
with water from the tap
nestled in the eye
hurricane: evil spirit of the wind
outside Irma and Maria rage, floods
155 mph
the island anticipates
since 89 years
I turn on my lamp
10 atomic bombs
everything shuts off
per second
my rage at 12%
at least 12 killed
they said 64

over 1000 silenced
90% from floods
What about the other 10?
Curly and course
The exhaustion of my blood
Ancestral blue eyes. Waters that 75% of me probably sailed
to claim their destined burden.
the boxes Hispanic/Latino and
next box white.
To lay with
the consonants and tangle with the rolled Rs
pretending but not married to it
slowly bleach dropped
from my grandmother my mother
diluting to Google translate
to foreigner in my own protectorate history
of what should be
but income is 2/3 of the "mainland's"
Unemployment 13.7%
I cheat and cling, ¿ por que?
Scared
"white"
so badly the bad guy
so badly bland
so badly majority
my smudged quarter

\$.25 worth of Spanish Puerto Rico mallorca bread
Matriarchs reina mora flor de maga
ceiba a life that my grandfather lived
and his father far back before it
evaporates into ancient indigenous
invaded belonging
forged from my blood
comprised of
promise
compromise.