

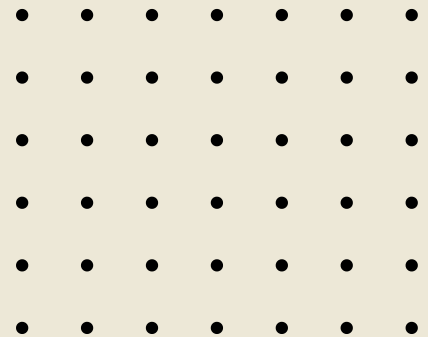
# SPRINGER LN

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FIRST  
EDITION

*An anthology of the human  
experience.*



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LITERARY NEWSLETTER

1 JANUARY 2023

AN ACCESSIBLE ANTHOLOGY OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

LIFE. LIFE. LIFE. A TAKE ON LIFE. A GLIMPSE INTO THE VOID WE ALL FEEL EXPANDING IN US. AN ANTHOLOGY OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE. A CRUCIFIX. IT IS A PROJECTION OF THE THRUM BENEATH OUR CHEST. INHALING A COLLECTIVE GASP ONLY TO EXHALE FASTENED, HAND IN HAND. SPRINGER LN IS HUMANS DOING WHAT WE ORGANICALLY DO- CREATE ART. IT IS ABOUT ROLLING UP OUR SLEEVES, WIPING THE SWEAT OFF OUR BROWS' AND STRUCTURING A HOME THAT WILL SHOULDER THE UNSTEADY HUMAN RACE. IT IS GETTING DIRTY, AND SIFTING THROUGH THE RUBBLE- SUNRISE AFTER SUNSET, COMMITTING TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THIS SANCTUARY.

Review by Clara-Lane

Poetry Selection - We Borrowed Gentleness by J. Estanislao Lopez

A MAN'S APOLOGY  
BY J. ESTANISLAO LOPEZ

I NEVER HEARD THE WORDS FROM MY  
FATHER.  
IF YOU CAN IMAGINE A SLUG  
ON A SCRAP OF DRIFTWOOD  
IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DEAD SEA,

THAT'S HIS POSITION ON THE SUBJECT.  
LET'S NOT TALK ABOUT IT.  
LET'S FERRY OUR BITTERNESS A LITTLE  
FURTHER.  
IN THE WATERS, CALM AND SALINE,

TWO MEN EMBRACE, THINK THE WORDS,  
AND SINK. THEY SHARE ONE  
OF THE THREE KINDS OF SILENCE:  
SILENCE TOWARDS THE FAMILIAR.

COLDER IS THE SILENCE  
TOWARD THAT WHICH MAKES US FEEL  
ESTRANGED. I TRY TO REMEMBER  
WHICH OF MY FATHER'S SILENCES

TUCKED ME IN AT NIGHT.  
I WOULDN'T CALL IT DISTANT.  
I COULD FEEL IT'S WARMTH  
LIKE A BREATH DOWN MY NECK

TURNING EACH SQUARE INCH  
OF SKIN TO STONE.  
SONS MAKE BEAUTIFUL MONUMENTS.  
I KNOW BECAUSE I AM THE FATHER NOW,

SHAPING A LIFE THAT I HOPE  
MIGHT FLOAT ON WATER—  
BUT ITS THE EMPTINESS IN A THING  
THAT MAKES IT BUOYANT.

LET'S NOT TALK ABOUT IT.  
LET'S KEEP WAITING FOR FORGIVENESS  
TO ARRIVE LIKE A LATE TIDE OVER WHICH  
WE HAVE,  
AFTER ALL, SUCH LITTLE INFLUENCE.

ANGER SWELLS.  
WHY NOT FORGIVENESS TOO?

Released in early October of 2022, *We Borrowed Gentleness* serves as a brilliant examination of the patriarchal power structures in families and hits it from every angle—historically, generationally, politically, familial, economically and religiously.

J. Estanislao Lopez illuminates why we need to destabilize these power structures that were built in for us by our fathers and other male influences by allowing us into some of his earliest memories. Only through this lens of his inner child are we able to holistically sense the expectations of his predetermined manhood— to absorb his father's stubbornness in an effort to cope with the lack of empathy and gentleness.

His work is an ode to the brutal cycle of toxic masculinity displayed specifically in fatherhood, that then leaks into every other part of the male life, with a beautiful silver lining of him unraveling it within himself— offering us a glimmer of hope that *yes, we can champion what we have been taught to fear*. Even if what we have been taught to fear has been spoon-fed to us since we learned to speak.

This book is a meditation on male violence. Where it stems from, what it looks like, what it feels like, how it's mimicked and reflected. How men can only benefit from this, how they abuse this, how we collectively can *stop* this. It is a sensitive and honest record of his family lineage— with heartfelt details of his father's migration from Mexico, and how it affected his family dynamic and expectations such as the assimilation and Americanization of his siblings and household.

Not only is *We Borrowed Gentleness* a breathtaking debut, but it illuminates crucial components of why our systems in place are currently failing us. Read. Listen. Reflect. And share.

LET'S NOT GET CARRIED AWAY

BY THE OFFICERS DRESSED  
IN OUR PERMISSION.  
IF WE FIND OURSELVES  
GETTING CARRIED AWAY,  
LET'S REMEMBER THE  
FOREFATHERS'  
PRESCIENCE, HAVING KILLED  
ONE ANOTHER OFF.  
WHEN A PRESIDENT  
SAYS BARBED WIRE  
CAN BE A BEAUTIFUL SIGHT,  
THE WORDS CARRY THE WEIGHT  
OF HISTORY. GENERAL SCOTT,  
HAVING OCCUPIED MEXICO,  
CONFESSED THAT HIS SOLDIERS  
COMMITTED HORRORS *SUFFICIENT*  
*TO MAKE HEAVEN WEEP*.  
SOME SOLDIERS  
BOTTLED THAT CELESTIAL BRINE,  
VISCIOUS AND SHIMMERING,  
CARRIED VIALS HOME  
TO NURSE THEIR CHILDREN.  
TODAY, WE DRINK WITH CHILDREN  
OF THOSE CHILDREN. SO DRINK,  
BUT REMEMBER, TOO, HOW YOUNG  
THIS NATION IS.  
DRINK TO THE CARRION  
PAVED OVER WITH WAR  
MEMORIALS.  
NEVER FORGET HOW CRUEL  
CHILDREN CAN BE.

— J. ESTANISLAO LOPEZ

## DOMINIC CANCINO

HELLO, MY NAME IS DOMINIC CANCINO AND I'M CURRENTLY A COLLEGE STUDENT ATTENDING COLLEGE FOR CREATIVE STUDIES IN DETROIT FOR INDUSTRIAL DESIGN WITH A LONG TERM GOAL OF INTEGRATING FROM INDUSTRIAL TO ENTERTAINMENT DESIGN. THE PIECES BEING PRESENTED FOR THIS SUBMISSION REVOLVE AROUND PHYSICAL MEDIUM WORKS SUCH AS MY SELF PORTRAIT WHICH IS A PIECE DEDICATED TO FINE DETAIL WITH PRISMACOLOR PENCIL AND VOODOO CHILD HIGHLIGHTING FAST CHARCOAL WORK (BOTH ON 18X24IN). AS WELL WITH VIEWFINDERS SHOWING DIGITAL PAINTING ON PHOTOSHOP OF A SKY VIEW SHOT OF DOWNTOWN LA. MY SHOP GLASSES PIECES REVOLVE AROUND A SOLID WORKS BUILT TO KEYSHOT LIGHTING MODEL OF GLASSES DESIGNED FOR MODULAR USAGE PREFERABLY IN A WORKSHOP BUT ALSO MADE FOR EVERYDAY WEAR WITH ITS STEAMPUNK SCI FI AESTHETIC. THE PIECE OF SHOP GLASSES (IDEATION SKETCHES) DRAWINGS ARE THE FIRST STEP TO THE PROCESS OF GETTING TO A DESIGN WITH A PLETHORA OF IDEAS STORMING AROUND AND SKETCHING THEM DOWN ON THE PROCREATE ALLOWS FOR AN ORGANIC CONSTRUCTION THROUGH ALSO CREATING A VISUAL NARRATION FOR THE AUDIENCE TO SEE A PROCESS.



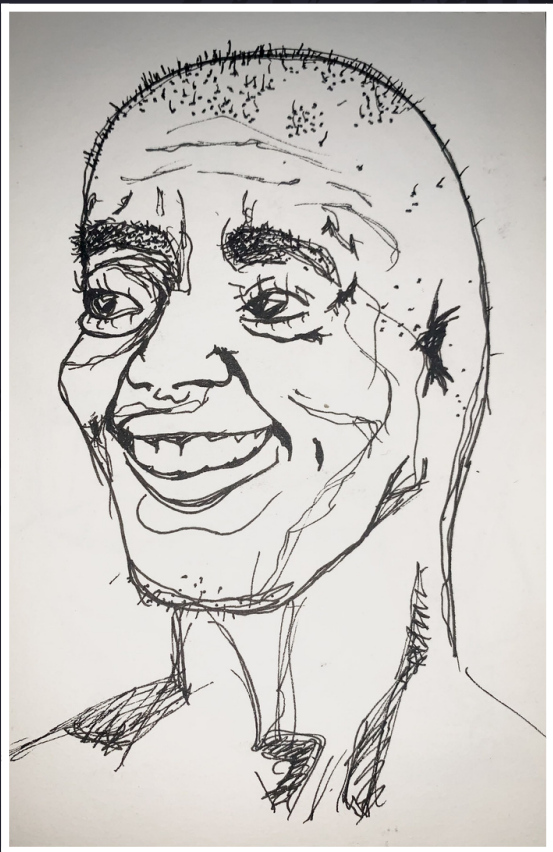
"SELF PORTRAIT"



THE SHOP GLASSES (FRONT ORTHOS) ARE GLAMOR SHOTS OF THE FINISHED MODEL SHOWING OFF THE DETAIL IN A STYLIZED MANNER TO ENGAGE THE VIEWER INTO POSSIBLY WANTING A PAIR OF THESE GLASSES. THE PALLET CHOICES WERE INSPIRED OFF OF CLASSIC ARMY COLORS WITH A NICE BURGUNDY NOTE TO GIVE IT A PUNCH OF A PALLET BUT WITH SUBTLE FENESS.

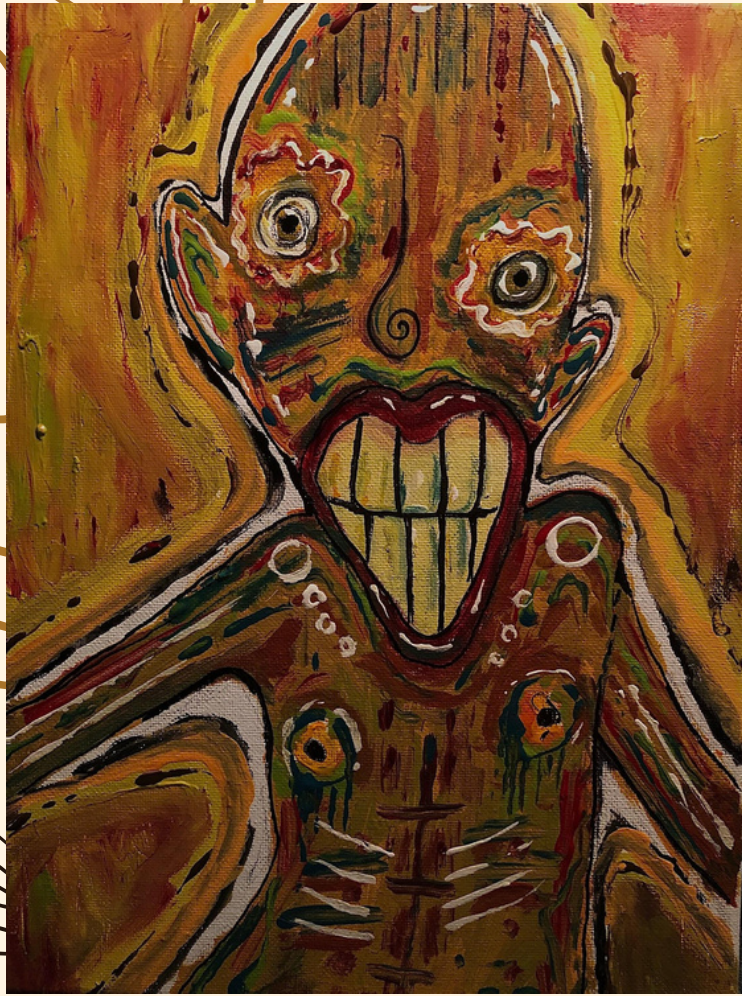
THE LAST PIECE, SHOP GLASSES (CONTEXT) FEATURES A SKULL WHICH WAS CHOSEN TO SHOW SCALE IN A STYLIZED MANNER AS WELL BEING MY FAVORITE OBJECT TO SKETCH IN HIGH SCHOOL WAS SKULLS SO IT JUST SEEMED TO FIT THE BOX PERFECTLY.

# TEO SOTO



# JACQUI FRYER

## "SWEAT"



### ARTIST BIO

I'VE NEVER GIVEN MUCH THOUGHT AS TO WHY MY WORK IS OFTEN CONSIDERED DISTURBING. IT'S HUMOROUS TO HAVE FRIENDS SHIELD THEIR EYES FROM MY PAINTINGS AS THEY WALK INTO MY LIVING ROOM. I WAS TOLD TO WRITE ABOUT MY WORK, WHERE IT COMES FROM, WHAT AILS ME TO CREATE. WHILE WRITING THIS, I AM ALSO LOOKING AT MY PAINTINGS AND TRYING TO GET A BIT INTROSPECTIVE ON THEM. UNCANNY EYES, SHARP TEETH, AND LONG FACES THAT ARE PULLED TOGETHER BY AN ARRAY OF COLORS AND TEXTURES.

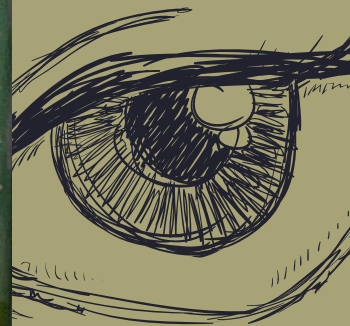
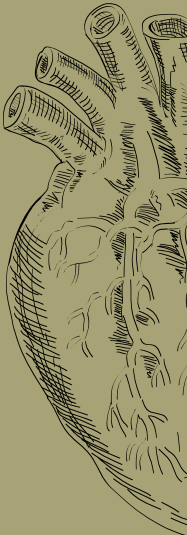
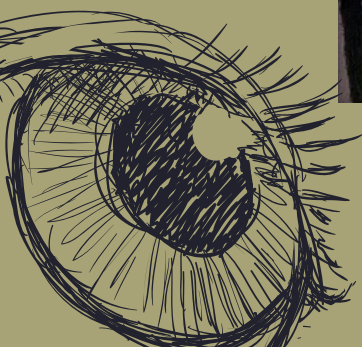
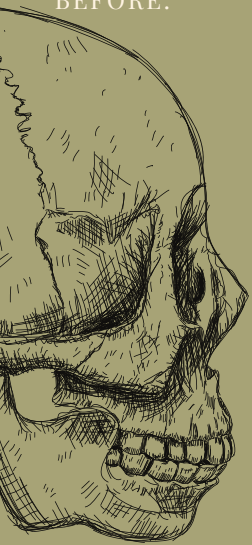
I REMEMBER I HAD A PEER TAKE A LOOK AT ONE OF MY PIECES AND HE SAID "I CAN REALLY FEEL THE PAIN IN THIS ONE." I WILL ADMIT, I WAS CONFUSED BY THIS STATEMENT. WHILE IT WAS AN UNBEARABLY BLEAK PAINTING, I WAS IN A GREAT HEADSPACE WHEN I MADE IT. SO WHERE IN MY SUBCONSCIOUS DID IT COME FROM?

I SUPPOSE I CAN DELVE INTO THE FACT THAT I GREW UP BATTLING DEPRESSION EVERY DAY. I WON'T HIDE THAT I FEEL HOPELESS, LONELY AND UNCOMFORTABLE IN MY OWN SKIN AT TIMES. I FEEL AND SEE THINGS ON A DEEPER LEVEL. HAVING THIS ILLNESS BY MY SIDE THROUGH MY FORMATIVE YEARS LED ME TO BECOME RESENTFUL OF MYSELF. WHY COULDN'T I TALK LIKE MY PEERS? WHY DID IT FEEL LIKE I STRUGGLED SO HARD IN FORMING CONNECTIONS AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS? WHAT WAS THIS PIT I FELT IN MY STOMACH EVERY HOUR OF THE DAY? I DID NOT KNOW HOW TO CONTROL IT, AND OFTEN IT FELT LIKE I HAD SUNK INTO THE DEEPEST PARTS OF OUR OCEAN, AND I COULDN'T RESURFACE.

AFTER A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE A FEW YEARS AGO, I BECAME FASCINATED WITH SPIRITUALITY AND HOW TO WORK THROUGH INNER WOUNDS. I STARTED TO JOURNAL ABOUT THE PAIN I HAVE FELT IN MY CHILDHOOD AND TEENAGE YEARS. I SLOWLY BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND MYSELF. IT WAS NOT MY FAULT THAT BAD THINGS HAPPENED TO ME, BUT IT WAS MY RESPONSIBILITY TO CONTROL THE EMOTIONS THAT CAME FROM THESE SITUATIONS. I OWED IT TO MYSELF TO LIVE AN ABUNDANT LIFE BY FIGURING OUT WHERE TO PUT ALL MY NEGATIVE FEELINGS.

I BEGAN TO FORGIVE MYSELF FOR SELF SABOTAGING BEHAVIORS, FOR HURTING THOSE AROUND ME AND FOR DISLIKING MYSELF FOR HAVING A CHEMICAL IMBALANCE IN MY BRAIN. I ACCEPTED THE TRAUMA I GATHERED THROUGH MY LIFE.

WHILE ON MY SELF DISCOVERY JOURNEY, I STARTED TO BECOME INTERESTED IN THAT DARK SIDE OF ME. IT WAS ALWAYS GOING TO BE A PART OF ME SO INSTEAD OF PUSHING IT DOWN, WHAT COULD I DO WITH IT? I PICKED UP PAINTING AGAIN IN 2020. I'VE BEEN AN ARTISTIC PERSON SINCE THE MOMENT I COULD HOLD A PENCIL, BUT I WAS UNMOTIVATED TO CREATE IN HIGH SCHOOL. TO BE ABLE TO TAKE AN EMOTION AND PUT IT ON DISPLAY BY USING COLORS, IMAGERY AND TEXTURE WAS SO REWARDING. IT WAS AN OUTLET TO REFLECT THE DARKER SIDE OF MY BRAIN WITHOUT BEING ENTIRELY CONSUMED BY IT. IN MOST OF MY PAINTINGS YOU CAN SEE THAT MY SUBJECT IS FROWNING OR BARING THEIR TEETH.THEIR EYES CAPTURE FEELINGS OF PANIC, ANGER OR EMPTINESS. I NOTICED THAT ONE OF MY PIECES HAS YELLOW, RED AND ORANGE COLORS BUT THE PERSON IS IN DISTRESS. WARM COLORS SYMBOLIZE HAPPINESS AND JOY, BUT WITH POSITIVE EMOTIONS, DARKNESS RESTS BENEATH. AND THAT IS OKAY! I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A LOVER OF HORROR AND ENJOY HOW THE HUMAN MIND CAN CONJURE UP AN EERIE PIECE OF ART. A POEM THAT LEAVES US FEELING EMPTY. A FILM THAT HAS US CONTEMPLATING WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO DIE. A PAINTING THAT SHOWS WHAT LONELINESS FEELS LIKE. IT BRINGS A FORM OF COMFORT TO ME. I AM NOT THE ONLY ONE THAT FEELS SO DEEPLY AND PONDERES THE SHADOW SIDE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE. I CAN TAKE A LOOK AROUND THE DARK ABYSS I FIND MYSELF RESIDING IN AND THINK 'OKAY, WHAT CAN I DO WITH THIS?' I CAN SIT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN AND NAVIGATE THE WATERS I WAS DROWNING IN BEFORE.



"FROWN"

JACQUI FRYER



# specimen

BY MAMA COLES

SHE DISLIKES THE FEELING OF PROLONGED SOLITUDE  
AS MUCH AS SHE DOES A CONSTANT CROWD SHE IS  
THE SINGLE GLIMMER IN A FIELD OF BLACK LIKE A  
DIAMOND UPON LEATHER.

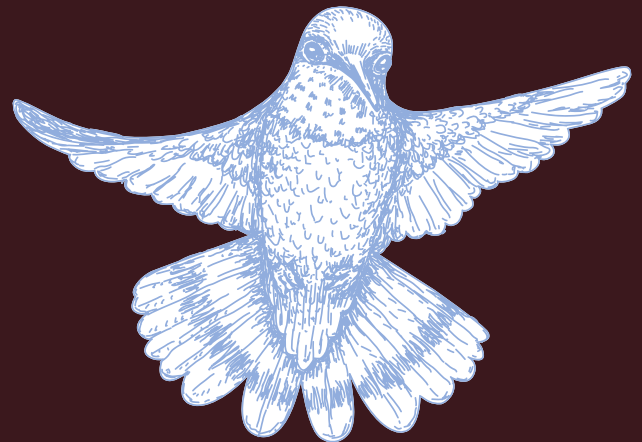
ERADICATING THE CONFINEMENT  
SHE GOES TO DANCE OUTSIDE HER DOOR  
AND STOPS TO SMELL THE ROSES  
WHILST ENCOURAGING THE THORNS.

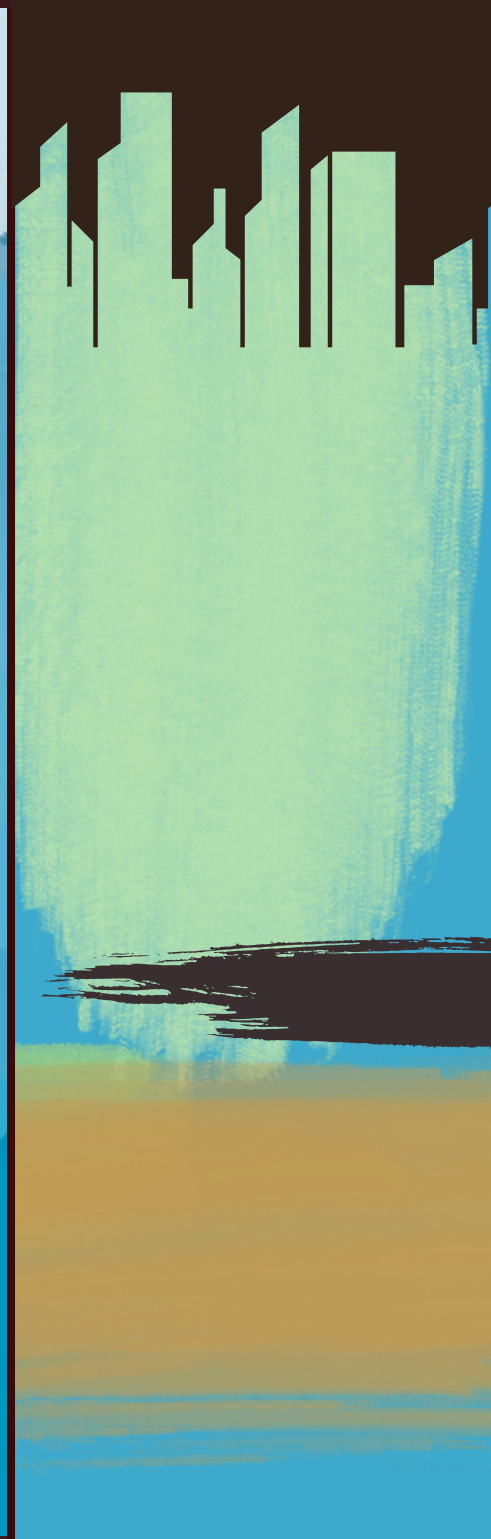
BALANCE IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE  
AND AS SHE PUTS ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER  
ACROSS THE WALL OF BRICKS ON HER FRONT PORCH  
SHE IS PROMINENT IN PROSE.

HAVING NEVER COMMITTED A SIN  
THE BRISK OF INNOCENCE FLUTTERS THROUGH HER FINGERS  
AND THE ENVELOPMENT OF THE SUN  
SHOWERS HER IN A YELLOW ECSTASY.

PERFECTION IS TOO MISUSED A WORD  
BUT SHE WAS PERFECTLY PERTAINED  
NOT A SINGLE FLAW FROM TOES TO JAW  
A FIGURE OF FEMININITY.

SELECTIVE IN HER WORDS, SHE'LL SAY  
"OH, YOU'RE ALL TOO SWEET TO ME"  
AND ALTHOUGH SUBLIME AND HUMBLE AND KIND  
SHE WAS CELEBRATED CEASELESSLY.





**DOMINIC CANCINO**  
"VIEWFINDER"





# FILM SELECTIONS: "LET IT BE" & "PLAYGROUND" BY BERTIE GILBERT

REVIEW BY SPRINGER CHORPASH

THERE IS NO MUTUALLY AGREED UPON ESSENCE OF LIFE, BUT THERE ARE ASSURED FACTORS. GUARANTEED GLIMPSES OF LOSS, OF DEATH, OF PASSING OF TIME- WHAT DO WE DO WITH THIS? HOW MUCH OF HUMANITY IS A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN TURNING A BLIND EYE TO THESE CONTRACTS OF LIVING AND APPROACHING LIFE NEGLECTFULLY BUOYANT IN SPITE? HOW DO WE LIBERATE OURSELVES TO TRANSCEND UPWARDS DESPITE THE UNRELENTING HAND OF LIFE AND HER HABITS?

BERTIE GILBERT'S FILMOGRAPHY ASKS YOU TO OPEN YOUR EYES, HOLD OUT YOUR HANDS, AND TAKE ONE FAITHFUL, GUIDED STEP INTO THE VASTNESS OF THESE TEMPESTUOUS UNCERTAINTIES. HIS SHORT FILMS, "LET IT BE" (2016) AND "PLAYGROUND" (2017) OFFER ARTISTIC SUBORDINATIONS TO THESE DENSE, CUMBERSOME QUESTIONS.

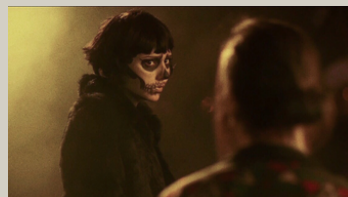


PHOTO:  
BERTIE  
GILBERT

## "LET IT BE": SHORT FILM BY BERTIE GILBERT

GILBERT'S "LET IT BE" ILLUSTRATES THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN THE PERSPECTIVES EARNED BY PEOPLE AS THEY BRAVE AND OCCUPY DIFFERENT SPHERES OF LIFE. THROUGH HIS TWO LEAD CHARACTERS, GILBERT ASSERTS THAT THERE IS NO SINGLE CONVICTION TO ADDRESS THE NATURE OF A LIFESPAN THAT IS ENTIRELY RIGHT OR WRONG. THROUGH MOTIFS IN DIALOGUE, THEMATICALLY RELEVANT LIGHTING, AND A SYMBOLICALLY SOUND METAPHOR TACKLING WHY PEOPLE PREFER OLDER VERSUS NEWER BEATLES MUSIC, WE ARE PAINTED A PICTURE OF A WOMAN WHO WELCOMES DEATH FOR KNOWLEDGE OF ITS INEVITABILITY AND A MAN WHO REJECTS IT FOR ITS CRUELTY AND UNFAIRNESS. DEATH DOES NOT OFFER A COURTESY CALL OR KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR WITH A HOUSEWARMING GIFT. IT SHOWS UP IN YOUR TOWN, IN YOUR NEIGHBORS GRIEF, IN YOUR BACKYARD, IN YOUR FRIEND'S LOSS, IN YOUR HOME, AND TAKES WHAT IT MUST, BECAUSE IT MUST. DEATH IS NO MORE MALICIOUS THAN THE PASSING OF TIME- DEATH IS WHAT IT IS, AND GILBERT ARGUES THAT ITS IMMOVABILITY IS A THING NOT TO CONEST, BUT FEARLESSLY WADE IN.

## FAVORITE STILLS FROM "LET IT BE"



# FILM SELECTIONS: "LET IT BE" & "PLAYGROUND" BY BERTIE GILBERT

REVIEW BY SPRINGER CHORPASH (CONT.)

## "PLAYGROUND" SHORT FILM BY BERTIE GILBERT

"PLAYGROUND", ALSO WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY GILBERT HIMSELF, REMINDS WHAT BRAVERY LOOKS LIKE IN THE BLANK, IMPERMEABLE STARE OF GRIEF, AND THE LENGTHS IT TAKES TO MAKE THE CHOICE TO MOVE ON ACCESSIBLE. THE SENTIMENT THAT DEATH IS THE UNEQUIVOCAL END TO A LIFE IS NOTABLY MORE HARROWING WHEN THAT DEATH IS OF A CHILD- HOW DO WE PICK OURSELVES BACK UP AFTER THE LIGHT HAS GONE OUT, AFTER THE PROMISE OF MORTAL EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN WRONGFULLY CUT SHORT? IN THE WAKE OF DEATH, HOW DO WE COPE? WHAT DO WE WEAR TO OUR LITTLE BROTHER'S FUNERAL? WHAT DO WE DO WITH HIS BIKE, HIS TOYS, HIS ABSENCE?

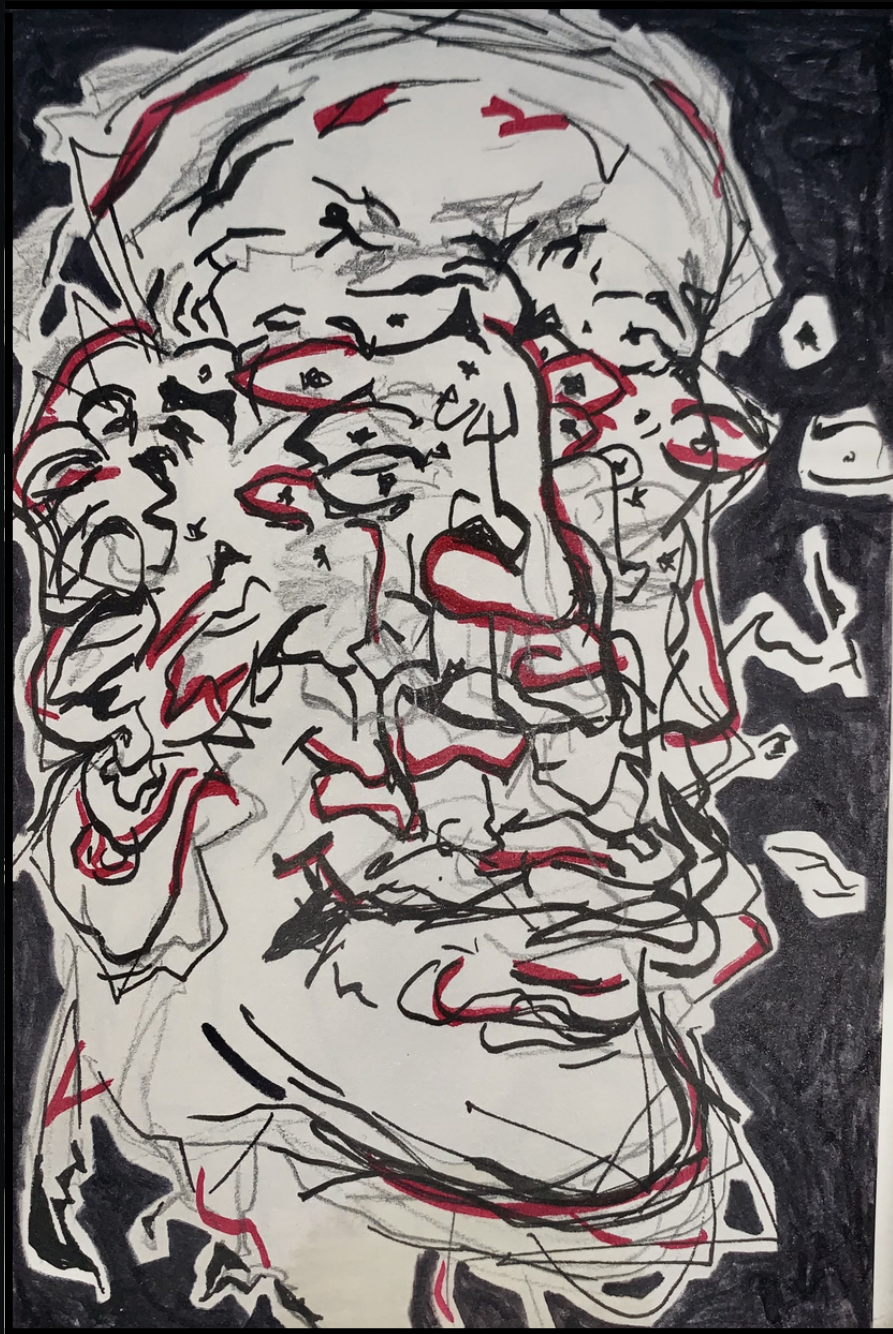


PHOTO: BERTIE GILBERT

## FAVORITE STILLS FROM "PLAYGROUND"



GILBERT RENDERS THE CHILDISH CHARM AND WHIMSICAL POSSIBILITY THAT ACCOMPANIES LIFE BEFORE BEING FORCIBLY FACED WITH THESE ODDS. DELIBERATELY DELICATE, THERE IS A SHARP HUMANNESSE ABOUT THIS SHORT FILM. WE ARE OFFERED COURAGE TIGHTLY PACKED IN A WELL-DEVELOPED-AND-IMPOSSIBLE-NOT-TO-ROOT-FOR CHARACTER IN THE FORM OF A CONSOLING, LINGERING HUG. WE SEE THE REJUVENATION AND HOPE THAT LIVES IN THE BODIES AND HEARTS OF OUR YOUTH. WE ARE REMINDED THAT ALTHOUGH WE ARE BOUND TO TRANSIENCE, WE ARE JUST AS OBLIGATED TO HANDLE IT WITH CARE AND EMBRACE LOVE POST-TRAGEDY.



**TEO SOTO**

**ARTIST BIO**

I'M TEO AND I WAS BORN IN SOCAL. I SPENT A LOT OF MY CHILDHOOD DRAWING AND I MOSTLY DRAW FACES. I'M CURRENTLY AT UC RIVERSIDE STUDYING CHEMISTRY. SHOUTOUT TO MY DOGS PENNY & SANDY.



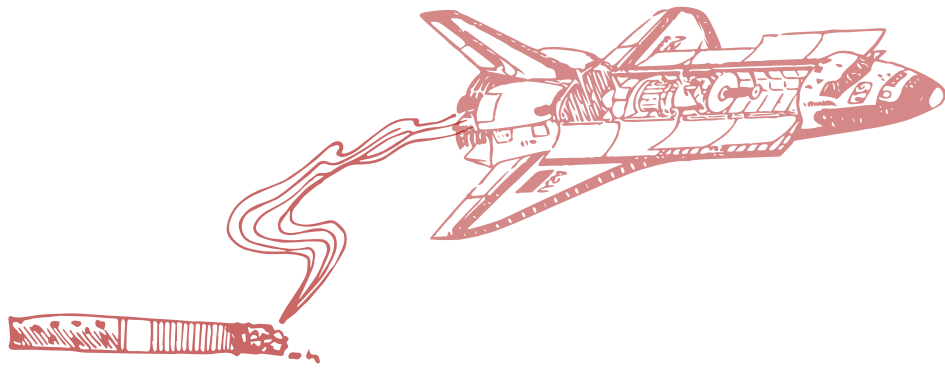


DOMINIC CANCINO



"SHOP GLASSES (FRONT ORTHOS)"





**"baby balena"  
by grace balena**

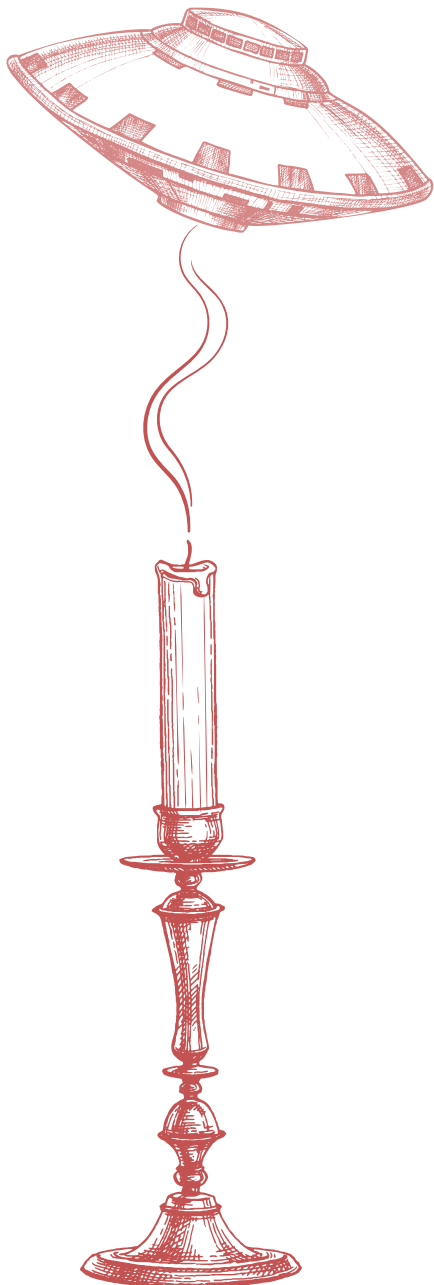
**small mouth  
she said no words  
held no room  
eyelashes angled down  
an angel  
a shadow  
a hole**

**a wraith  
claiming her valleys  
and peaks  
curving his hand around  
the needlepoint waist  
the need to control  
a fist**

**watch with me  
the remote is the illusion of control  
the assurance of goodwill  
a lie**

**with every exhale  
the fire eats more  
hips of  
flint and stone  
celestial bodies  
an orbit ending  
climax and conception  
the half-formed mass  
dead in a dumpster  
in a hole  
baby  
her whole  
baby**

**we watch with hungry eyes.**



# True Farewell

By Thalia Hernandez

Mina pulled up to the house, seeing Juniper waiting there. She was different than her profile and the video chats; same face, different color hair, and a confident smirk exchanged for half-lidded eyes and a frown. She was wearing a leather jacket, a green and black striped scarf, a green tank top and leggings and short shorts with knee-high boots. Her hair had been dyed pink.

Her pink hair obscured her face from the lights of Mina's car that outlined all of her in the darkness, as well as multiple suitcases and bags. In one hand, she was holding her phone, in the other, she was clutching a silver crescent moon and star necklace and twirling it over and over. She refused to let go even as she loaded her bags into Mina's car. Mina looked over at Juniper, not saying anything, only watching her while also loading her heavier bags. When they placed the last of her bags in the trunk, Mina caught a glance at Juniper's arm as her jacket rode up against it. A faint splotch of purple was illuminated in the trunk light. Mina gasped. Juniper recoiled and clutched her arm.

"It's nothing." She said.

Mina stared as Juniper walked to the passenger side door and got in, silent. Mina walked to the driver side, looking up at the old house, seeing a figure shrouded in black looking from beyond the blinds and faint illumination from the bedroom. She glared as she got back in the car. Without any hesitation, she peeled out of the street. The scent of burnt rubber wafted into the vehicle.

The roads were old and few in this town, but they led to an interstate that pierced through downtown and lined the main street with chain businesses, as opposed to the independent local businesses on the town's outskirts. Mina took the interstate headed west, back to her home in California. She figured it would be best if they got out of Texas first and at least made it into New Mexico before crashing at a hotel.

Once they made it to the interstate, the road smoothed out somewhat and the car enjoyed less bumps and potholes and cracks.

Several miles passed in a void of sound. The radio was on and faint, enough to hear voices, but not enough to know the words. The hum of the engines didn't ease their minds either.

"It's not nothing by the way," Mina spoke up, not taking her eyes off the road.

"It is if I say it is," Juniper croaked, tearing up.

"..."

"...I'm sorry we had to meet like this."

"I'm sorry the choice was taken from you."

The hayfields breezed by, and Juniper looked outside.

"You can rest if you want," said Mina.

"I don't want to. Not right now. And I already slept before you arrived.

Morning through evening."

"Alright then."

Silence again. Juniper sobbed into her hand, tiny voice cracks making it through.

Mina looked at the road, checking for oncoming traffic, found no cars for miles, and placed her arm around Juniper's shoulders. Juniper leaned into it as best as she could with the partition separating them.

"You barely know me..." Juniper whimpered.

"...Most people you barely know wouldn't do to others what she did to you. But I know you."

"..."

"..."

"I wanted to look pretty for you. I did as best as I could."

"You are very pretty."

Juniper turned to face Mina, and they see each other fully for the first time. They stare while Mina can still keep her focus. Juniper closes her eyes and she snores. Mina smiles.

The car pulled up to the house, the street echoing only the screech of the tires as Juniper pulled up to the house and decided to go from fifteen miles an hour to zero in the fraction of a second. She lurched forward in response to the braking, her long, pink hair following through in similar inertia. It was made clear in just the few short seconds after to both Juniper and Mina in the passenger seat that no birds were chirping, no other cars driving up and down the cracked street, not even a gust of wind to accompany them. Mina wondered if this was a common occurrence in Juniper's childhood or if the years had worn down the one-story building surrounded by fields of golden wheatgrass and rattlesnakes.

Lead paint chipped from the rotted wood; it was hard to tell where the green paint ended and the rotted wood began. The slabs of siding that enveloped the house had clear termite damage if the holes and patterns of webs and channels seared into the wood had indicated. All the windows were there except one, where it had been duct-taped closed, and the chipped glass on the outside windowsill and littered in the dried dirt beneath gave indication that there hadn't been any real attempt to repair it, as well as proving that what broke it came from inside the house. Given the spider-web-esque pattern and circular hole serving as the origin for the pattern, a bullet perhaps? Cracks in the foundation zigzagged into the driveway and lifted portions of concrete into uneven cliffs and valleys. Right at the very front of the yard was a realtor company information, picture of a woman in a suit, and a SOLD label.

Mina was dressed in a black suit that she rented from a nearby Men's Warehouse. It was fitted snug to her body, but not to where she couldn't breathe. She didn't feel like a dress today, but she still thought it best to at least fit the mood of the funeral service. Thus, it was a black on black-on-black suit; even the undershirt was black. It made her sun-kissed skin stand out and her curly pink hair tied in a ponytail seem ostentatious, and she did

recall some looks from Juniper's relatives. But if ostentatious was her goal, she would have dressed like her girlfriend.

Juniper stepped out of the car, her brown combat boots marking each footstep with a *clap clap*. Her grey beanie was successful in keeping her bangs from constantly blowing in her eyes and was marked with several pins that she had acquired over the years; one was a rainbow peace sign surrounded in black, another was a realistically rendered skull drawing that had been printed onto the plastic and had chipped paint on the edges, and a large white, pink, and blue striped pin that had printed in bold black, "DOWN WITH THE PATRIARCHY." Her black faux wool peacoat was covered in speckles of lint and string that had bothered Mina to no end due to lint rollers failing to do their designed purpose. She had spent hours trying to get it as clean as possible, but she gave up quickly after Juniper went out with some friends one night only to see a fresh buildup that had rendered her progress pointless. Mina also saw through Juniper's ripped denim jeans that she had shaved today, or at least shaved what could be seen. Even still, Juniper only ever broke out the razor out of necessity.

Every now and then, Mina would catch Juniper twirling the necklace between her fingers. She doubted Juniper noticed she was doing it and whenever she did, it was only ever with a furrowed brow and clenched jaw. The tension in her face usually eased after a couple dozen spins.

Walking through the house, hand in hand, the two examined each crack in the popcorn ceiling, the pile of plastic and decades-old ceramic plates gathered in the sink and attracting flies to the hardened scraps of meat and sauce still stuck to them, and, the obvious focal point, the grand array of rod-iron and wooden crosses that covered the wall behind the brown cotton living room couch in an almost grid-like pattern. The brown shelves beneath them held various movies ranging from *The Passion* to *The Ten Commandments* to entire collections of preachers giving sermons. Candles of the Virgin Mary covered the windowsills with such proximity to the curtains that even while unlit, Mina felt a twinge of anxiety pang her heart. The coffee table held a thick copy of King Richard's interpretation of the Bible that had been turned toward the Leviticus chapter and several passages had been highlighted or circled. Mina raised an eyebrow at the sight.

Juniper's frown grew deeper. She read over the various titles of the books and movies and her head angled lower and lower. Mina saw her spin the star on her necklace faster and multiple times over.

Mina walked over to her. "We can step out if you need to," she said. "I don't want you to have to relive any—"

"I'm fine."

Juniper moved past her and walked into the hallway next to the dust-encrusted television. Mina stared, feeling her heart pounding.

Mina followed Juniper through the hall to a bedroom. The air was warm and humid; Mina could feel her pores begin to fill with fluid. It wasn't as dusty in the room. It made up for it with empty glass bottles of pomegranate wine piled up on one side of the bed. The sheets on that side were stained with red spots and scrunched together. The sour smell of fruit overtook the



faint stench of musk that had embedded itself into the carpets, sheets, and walls. There was a noticeable divot in the bed and lack of uniformity in the wrinkles of the comforter and sheets that came together to form a wall between the exposed and not-exposed part of the bed.

To the right of the king-sized mattress was the pole of an IV stand with an empty bag still hooked on next to a nightstand of similar architecture to that of the nightstand on the left. The paint was faded and covered in dust, but only a lamp and a frame were on its surface. Mina couldn't see from where she was standing, but she could make out a toddler boy with dirty blonde hair and a wide grin that revealed erupting baby teeth. The boy was seated in a woman's lap, her hair also dirty blonde and with fewer crow's feet in her eyes and forehead wrinkles compared to how she looked in her casket earlier. Her blue eyes matched the hue of the blue watercolor backdrop. Next to the both of them was a male figure, smirking in a well-trimmed and groomed beard and red hair shaved in a fade. It was a warm smile that carried wrinkles of thousands of smiles in it.

Juniper stood at the foot of the bed in front of the impression.

"You know," Juniper spoke. "It was just us for a good while. She was all I knew for most of my life. With all those bills and drinks, she knew she had a problem almost immediately, and she was so scared. The first man she ran to was the Minister. I was happy for a few years because she finally put the bottle down, and she wasn't so angry anymore. She had me enrolled in Sunday school. Then Catechism. Then an all-boys high school."

Juniper stopped twirling her necklace. Her hand drifted toward her beanie and she pulled it off her static-induced hair. She looked at the blue and pink and white pin, caressing its edge.

"I didn't know what it meant when I first heard the word. But all the other boys at school called it so many things, so I hated it alongside them. The summer before I graduated, I looked it up out of curiosity one night. Soon, I needed to know more. I didn't sleep at all that night. And I soon hated going to school because each day was another day of hiding. I prayed so hard to be free of the pain, to not be who I was. But no one answered me. Then, before my senior classes started..."

The package came to the door and Juniper picked up the box before any neighbor could see him. Mom was at one of her church-group meetings, which started at 12:30 in the afternoon and ended at 2:30, to which she usually got home at 3:00. Juniper glanced at the clock and saw the time listing at 2:45. Panicked, Juniper sliced open the box and rushed to her bedroom. Inside, folded into a neat pile, was a knee-length purple sundress, styled with a bow on the side at the waist in a retro 1950's reminiscent style. Beneath it was a crescent moon necklace with a spinning star piece built into it. Juniper picked it up by the straps, feeling it drape from her hands.

Her chest grew tight, and only then did she notice how warm her palms had gotten. As well as her face and ears. Her arms trembled. She was about to

do this. It was her first piece of... *women's clothes*. It...

She threw the dress back into the box. She couldn't do this, what was she doing? This... this wasn't allowed. She would be better off not doing this.

She grabbed the dress again. She slid off her shirt.

There's no way she should. Why had she even gone through with ordering the dress and amulet on her dime? It was money better spent on other things, right?

She was in her underwear now. She slid the garment above her head. Her arms fit through the straps.

She wouldn't even look good in something like this anyway... There's no way she could...

She turned to the full-length mirror in the corner.

The dress hugged her body, flowing with each slight movement. It ended just above her knees, and her legs had yet to be shaved, but the shape of the dress and the shape it made on her torso, she could imagine her legs without hair. The thought made her heart beat against its cage.

She put on the necklace. It glimmered in the light against her chest above the dress's neckline. She clutched her arms in her hands and hopped, feeling her bare arms.

She looked back in the mirror and smiled.

"James?"

In the corner, she saw movement in the glass, in the doorway. A familiar figure stood in the doorway. Juniper ground her teeth. She turned and saw the face of her mother staring back at her, wide-eyed. Juniper returned the gesture. Her nose twitched. Her eyebrows furrowed. She reached to her foot, removing it from a sandal and picking it up, clutching it tight.

"No one answered my prayers..." Juniper said. "Until I met you."

Mina looked up at the teary-eyed girl. "Junie... "

The two held each other in embrace, feeling the faint tapping of their collective heartbeats against their chests.

"Something that's been on my mind... if she hadn't kicked me out three years ago, would she have gone back to alcohol? And if my leaving was a life-or-death issue, does that mean she loved me? Was she just... misguided?"

Mina shook her head. "I don't think it's a good idea to dwell on what-ifs. All you can really do is look at what they've done."

"I don't know, I guess it still blows my mind. How could someone I have known all my life still have so little to give compared to someone I hardly knew?"

"I guess...time with someone isn't always about length."

"I suppose."

"..."

"..."

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

**The two walked out of the house, hand in hand once more. They got in the car and drove off, with Juniper content with seeing the house one last time before it was torn down. It was a quiet but content drive back to California.**

#### **AUTHOR BIO**

**Thalia Hernandez is an aspiring writer and comic artist based in California. She is a 21-year-old trans woman born in Clovis, CA, raised in Fresno, and currently attending San Francisco State University studying creative writing. She has a vested interest in magic, mythology, and fantasy, and loves comics, movies, shows, and stories that delve into such themes. She also loves art in its many forms and spends a lot of time writing and designing characters based on various ancient myths and figures through the medium of digital art.**