All my Relations

Volume 2

Colonization & Decolonization

All My Relations at its core is a reminder that we're all interconnected. There are so many times in this world where we forget the personhood and the inherent value of our relations and we forget to listen to each others' stories of sorrow and of joy.

In March 2020, I began attending Native Wellness Institute's Power Hours. I attended these as often as I could and each one felt like coming home. It was also healed me from racialized pain I was experiencing in the spaces I was navigating outside of those hours.

Throughout the Power Hours, I heard many elders talk about their journey back to their Indigeneity. How whiteness, colonization, and assimilation had separated them from their culture and how they had to intentionally embark on a decolonizing journey. I'd never heard anyone speak about this journey before and it immediately made me feel more legitimate as a triracial, separated Indigenous person.

It also made me investigate the *power* in our stories — the power for those like us who need to hear they aren't alone and for those who aren't like us who may suffer from a homogenized view of our cultures after hearing the single story of harm and suffering.

And so for Volume Two of *All My Relations*, I wanted to provide space to my fellow Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color to share their authentic stories. To reflect on their ancestors, to explore the complete variety of feelings that come from decolonizing their history, to explain rituals that help them cope with the effects of colonization, to muse on alternative realities where colonization never occurred, and/or to reflect on a colonization-free future. To share, to say in their own words or visuals what they wanted to say, and to, hopefully, heal.

Please be aware that most of the pieces contained here have a content warning of colonization. Additional content warnings are provided before each piece.

With love to all my relations,
Chris Talbot-Heindl

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About the Cover

“People of No Color steal our land, try to erase our cultures, ban our languages, forcibly replace our religions, but it isn’t enough. They want us, too.” A photograph by Chris Talbot-Heindl.

Chris Talbot-Heindl (they/them) is a queer, trans nonbinary, triracial creator working through the complexity of identity through art. They are the co-creator and editor of The Bitchin’ Kitsch and creator of Chrissplains Nonbinary Advocacy to Cisgender People educomic. Twitter and Instagram: @talbot_heindl, Website: www.talbot-heindl.com

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On being caught by ICE and caged

by: Charlie D'Aniello Trigueros

CW: colonialism, xenophobia, ICE, immigration trauma, implied transphobia, detention/ imprisonment, religion (christianity specifically).

An excerpt from the epistolary memoir-novella hybrid "Between Death & Flight" (as yet unpublished)

Dear nobody,

After the slew of officers and questions and holding cells came the airplane— a normal, passenger-filled aircraft with little knowledge and even less care that there was an impostor in its hollow belly, headed for a fate of indefinite caged isolation. There is nothing really of note about the flight from Miami International Airport, where I had been caught by ICE (*like a fish*, I thought) to Philadelphia. Perhaps it is interesting to you to read that I was escorted during this trip by two men whose names I never learned and faces I never memorized. All I could guess was that they worked for Immigration and Customs Enforcement — or some less-severely named part thereof, in the interest of appearance— and were therefore inherently against me. I guess it never really mattered what they looked like, who they were. They were as much cogs in a machine as I was a mouse ground between its teeth.

It is important to me— to the me that exists now— that you understand that I am perfectly aware of the gap in this story. I know, I know that I write this account like a book whose initial chapters have been ripped carelessly from its spine. I am sorry, but I do not know any other way. To get through this, to get out of this. To say whatever it is I feel the need to say. I am not ready to face what came before, and thus I let myself tell what came after.

I arrived at the place they called a “shelter” — but which was really a detention center for undocumented children— sometime around noon, a little over a month ago, now. It felt slightly like a punishment, the arrival, and I can only understand that feeling when I recall the prying eyes that fell upon me as my new captors paraded me from their car to the nurses’ office. After nine vaccines (which I had already had before) and a truckload of questions (which I had already been asked before), I was allowed a choice: to room with the girls, or the boys. I chose the latter— the first time I’ve ever been able to.

I don’t want to feel grateful for this. I don’t want to feel grateful because I am, after all, still confined, still taken. I struggle to juggle my gratitude and my rage. The weight of both dis-balances me, trips me up and faceplants me on the green Pennsylvania lawns of this walled-up village of rejects. One of these two things, alone, might just sustain me long enough to get out of this place. Either the gratitude to a slew of gringos and their token of peace, or the anger that drowns the despair I otherwise feel. But both? They clash with each other, drown and incinerate me in turn. How to rage against those who have given me exactly what I wanted, exactly the point of my leaving in the first place? And how to thank the hands that have ripped my wings from my shoulder blades, leaving mangled stumps?

In theory, I choose rage. Gratitude is dormant, passive. It is loyal and quiet and meek; but anger, like fire, doesn’t whisper.

They make me go to school. I realize that statement makes me sound lazy, somehow. Like I don’t value knowledge, don’t see the benefits that lie in a proper education— an *American education*, at that. But that isn’t what this is. Here, we learn the climates of their regions, the capitals of their states. Here, we learn the words to their pledge, *I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, to the republic for which it stands. One nation, under god—*

Under god, of all beings. god, of all tyrants. Why? They seem to understand unity only in the context of a divine king, a common subjugator. They make me learn this, repeat it every morning, quiz me on it, burn it on the inside of my eyelids. *You are under god,*

you are under god, under god. I have no need for god. I scribble the word now in all lowercase letters— a small defiance, but fuel enough for now. Their god neither knows me nor cares to. He is an all-seeing prescriber, a guard of a different sort. I squirm to even write of him as though I buy the idea of his existence. But then, I suppose he does exist, in the same way the nation exists, or the law, or gender. That is, because they've said so enough times and with enough force to make it stick.

I have learned that New York City isn't actually the capital of New York (it's Albany), that Pennsylvania is part of the northeast (and not the midwest, as I had previously thought), that my captors think themselves anti-Trump liberals, and that we ought to be respectful of the nation that has so graciously taken us in. I try to tune it all out. I already went through high school back in my home country, and I have more important things to think about than this nation's weird arbitrary divisions of land.

At 11:30 each day, the children— or "clients," as they tend to call us— line up in our classrooms and are escorted to the cafeteria for lunch. This is usually the first time I eat all day— I'm much too queasy to eat breakfast at 7:30 before "school" starts. This is also the time when I do most of my people-watching.

There are three houses for "boys" and three for "girls," all of them named after American presidents. The members of each house sit together for meals and activities. Communication between houses during meals is forbidden, because why wouldn't it be? I have been assigned to Jefferson House, which is adjacent to Jackson House. The other boys' house is Roosevelt, but they're a little ways away, on the other side of campus. The staff have turned this into a competition of sorts— *why are you louder than Jackson, do you want to end up like Roosevelt*— and the kids follow suit. There are staredowns all the time. This boy I'll call Peacock tends to glare at Mullet from Jackson at lunch. I think I've seen them both switch seats with housemates to get the best view of each other, and frankly I kind of understand. What else is there in here that can make any of us feel free?

Most of the boys also stare at the girls' tables— Washington, Lincoln, and Adams. However, there is one boy in Jackson who… stares at me instead. He stares at me with

sadness and what I interpret to be a recognition of sorts, I guess. He can probably tell what I am, and might be something similar. He doesn't smile at me, and I don't smile at him; we know better than that.

Not that it's difficult to tell that I'm not like the rest. I look like what the general population understands as a twelve year old boy at best, and a seventeen year old girl, at worst. Yet, no one has questioned my presence among the residents of Jefferson House. It is taken for granted that if I am here, it is because the powers that be have willed it so, and there is no higher authority around these parts. Here, they are *god*, and I hate them for it.

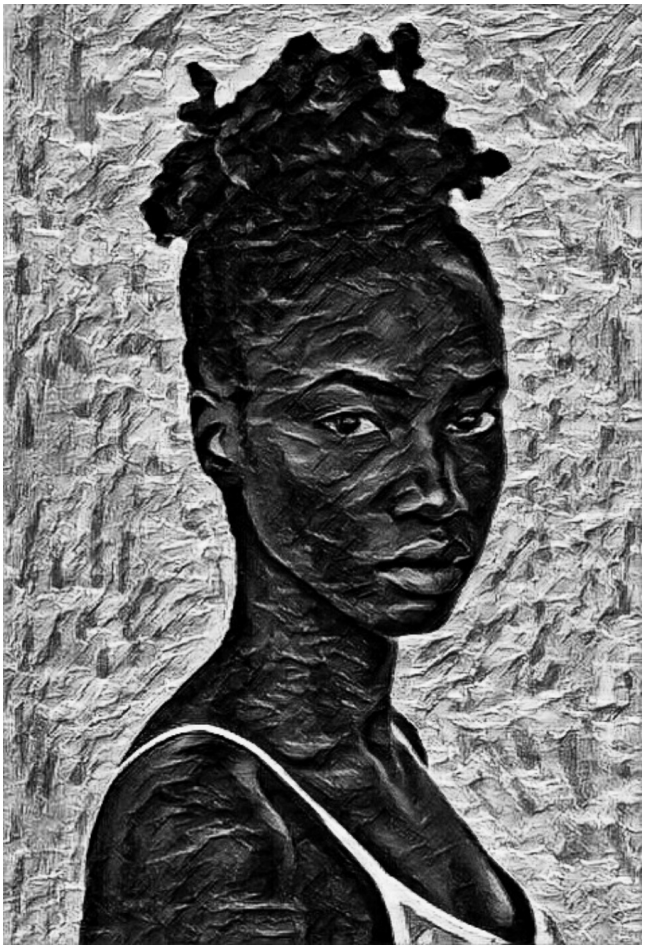
Yours,

Me.

Charlie D'Aniello (he/they) is a trans, queer and neurodivergent author, editor, and incorrigible nerd. He often dreams of surreal apocalypses, cathartic arguments, and the power of em dashes. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of warning lines. Find him on twitter @beelzebadger

What it means to be black

by: **Joshua Effiong**



Artwork

Joshua Effiong (he/him) is writer and artist from the Örö people of Nigeria, studying Science Laboratory Technology at University of Calabar. Find him on Instagram @josh.effiong and twitter @JoshEffiong

Canon

by: Roseline Mgbodichinma

Born on the hill / raised on the mountain Shipped across borders / they walked into countries on foot / with skin whipped off their spines
When Masters inscribed desires on their lips / like cave walls
Their faces shrunk into ripples of lonesomeness / like pebbles thrown into cold stream
Men are laboured out of body water/ Women master silent ways of birthing &
Babies learn on arrival / how to wail from their navels
Now in my funky hair / I go to my hometown
With my canon in hand / I try to capture ambience but old women shun me / young bellies dart questions at me
I soak my boots in spring / I kick the rocks and walk away
I understand later / after roasting millet with my grandma
In this hut she refuses to mend with zinc
That when home becomes a place for rehabilitation / anyone who poses for a snapshot
Is accused of mocking history

Roseline Mgbodichinma (She/her) is a Nigerian writer, poet, and blogger who is passionate about documenting women's stories. Her work has been published on Isele, Native Skin, Down River Road, Amplify, JFA Human Rights Mag, and elsewhere. You can reach her on her blog at www.mgbodichi.com.

The Grace of Goddesses

by: M. Kaur

CW: Displacement of young people

The garbo felt warm in her hands. The light from the tiny flame streamed out of twenty-seven precisely arranged holes in the clay-pot and touched her skin, like a blessing from the Mother Goddess. Dakshaa bowed as she carefully placed the garbo on the ground in the middle of geometric patterns created with colored powders and fragrant flowers. The pot represented the womb of the Mother—the hope of life, and the cycle of renewal through which every soul must pass.

The crowd began chanting an invocation. Today was the fifth day of the Navratri (Nine Nights) festival—dedicated to Skandamata—a form of Goddess Durga who protects children from danger. As Dakshaa chanted along with the rest, she saw children from the refugee camp staring wide-eyed at her. She smiled.

“Thank you for bringing them safely home, Ma, where they belong!” she prayed to the Mother, closing her eyes in relief, her hands joined in gratitude.

***

Gangi couldn’t take her eyes off the women. Old and young, short and tall, their long hair coiled or braided, bindis on their foreheads, bracelets covering their arms, and wearing the most brightly colored clothes she had ever seen. As the chanting died down, Gangi grabbed Ela’s hand in excitement. It was about to begin!

In her four years of life, Gangi hadn’t seen anything like this. For the past few evenings, as the sun went down, men came out of their homes, beating on dhols. Women, hearing the drumbeat, went into the streets and began to dance. Ela, the camp social worker, had offered to take some of the girls to watch the festivities. The temple grounds were

not too far from the refugee camp. Gangi had begged her mother to be allowed to go, and she had agreed.

As the invocation to the Mother ended, women took their places around the garbo and began to move in a circle to the sound of the dhol. The music started slow. Dancers stepped forward and back, turning, twirling, waving their arms, and clapping their hands in time to the beat.

***

Ela looked down at Gangi. The older girls from the camp were laughing and talking. They had forgotten, for a moment, the conflict that had torn them from their homes. Yet the little girl next to her, clutching her hand, stood quiet and still. Ela sat down on the ground next to Gangi. Following the child's gaze, she saw what Gangi saw—skirts swinging faster, higher, and wider in time with the increasing tempo—lamplight bouncing off the mirrors sewn onto the fabric.

"They are so beautiful!"

Ela bent her ear closer to Gangi's lips so she could hear the child whisper above all the noise. "Are they the goddesses who live here? My grandma told me that Dwarka is the city where God Krishna lived with his family. He built a million golden palaces with towers that touch the clouds! Can you take me to see those, too?" Gangi turned to look at Ela, her light brown eyes wide with expectation.

Ela laughed. "That was the old Dwarka, dear. It sank into the ocean thousands of years ago. This is the new Dwarka, and these women aren't goddesses, they're ordinary people, like you and me."

Gangi considered this. Then slowly, haltingly, she began asking more questions.

"Why do they sew mirrors on their clothes? Why do they dance around the lamp? What made old Dwarka sink into the sea? What happened to all the people who lived there? Did they have to find a new home, like us?"

Each answer led to more questions until finally, Ela could barely keep up.

***

Dakshaa felt a sublime calm descend on her. Dancing the Raas-Garba is energetic, yet strangely meditative. But she wasn't as young as she once was. Perhaps it was time for a break. As she slowed and stepped out of the circle, she saw her old friend Ela talking to a little girl.

Strolling to where the two were sitting, she heard Gangi say something in Sindhi. A Gujarati speaker herself, Dakshaa couldn't understand the words, but it was clear that the child was asking questions about the dancers and sharing her own story of escape from Pakistan. Ela answered in Kutchi—a language that has enough words in common with both Sindhi and Gujarati to allow Dakshaa to follow the conversation.

Sindhi refugees were a familiar sight in Dwarka. When the British finally went home in August of 1947, they left behind a broken nation, divided into two based on religion. Dakshaa had seen the steamboats land at the port in the northern part of town. They brought Hindu Sindhis to India and took back Muslims to Pakistan. This new group of refugees had landed on the shores of Dwarka a week ago.

The child reached out, and tentatively touched the hem of Dakshaa's skirt.

"Mukhe'b nachano-aahe."

"She's asking if she can dance with you," Ela translated.

Dakshaa held out her hand to Gangi and led her into the circle. As the child stepped forward and back, gracefully in time with the music, Dakshaa saw the light from the garbo reflected in her eyes, making them shine like stars.

M. Kaur (she/her) is a learning strategist and storyteller. She is writing a collection of short stories based on her family's experience during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Find her on Twitter @manjitsekhon

Meeting the Wounded Boy from the Canal Zone

by: A. Coghlan

CW: Descriptions of child abuse

When I was 16, I took an X-acto knife to the shirts that hung in my father's closet. In the silent dark, I made tiny slits in his handsome button-downs and polos. It was payback for all the times he'd pecked at me for the most inconsequential of missteps. For all the times that I got told off for leaving a kitchen cabinet door open or leaving the toilet paper hanging too far off the roll.

My father and I are both too quick-tempered, strong-willed, and high-strung to have ever peacefully shared a household. We only started getting along after I moved out and began my own family.

One recent Sunday my dad texted me: "Did you perchance come across my father's death certificate?"

The message was mildly surprising, though not for the reason you might think. I was surprised because my dad and I largely communicate through my mother. We've learned over the years that using her as our intermediary helps keep conflict to a minimum.

What didn't surprise me, though, was that this 70-something-year-old-man would ask his 30-something-year-old daughter, about the location of his own father's death certificate—even though my grandfather died decades before I was born.

I'm obsessed with genealogy and my dad knows that. I once spent a year researching my husband's paternal line. And I'm not talking about slapping names on an online family tree—I'm talking about a 54-page family history with 349 footnotes.

But I didn't have my grandfather's death certificate. I advised my dad on who he should contact to get it, and then I moved on with my life.

A few days later, my dad sent me a follow-up message: "Want a copy of the death certificate?"

He sent over an image of the record that he'd secured through a family member, and as I zoomed in to inspect the document, I was floored by its contents. The document wasn't just a death certificate, but a full-on autopsy report.

Despite my knack for all things family history, I've always been reluctant to dive into the details of my grandfather's life. The mental collage I'd compiled of him from the scraps of my father's memories wasn't flattering. And the scraps were sparse: I knew that my grandfather bounced around South and Central America, leaving wives and children in his wake. I knew my grandfather died 10 years after my grandmother, leaving my father and his full sister orphans by their teens.

But reviewing the details of my grandfather's death certificate stirred something unexpected in me. Because it was only in reading that final record that I was able to imagine my grandfather as an actual person and not the two-dimensional construct I'd pieced together with my underdeveloped psyche.

I was finally curious about my grandfather, which is to say, I was finally curious about my father.

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I called my dad one non-descript winter morning to find out more. He'd just placed a loaf of banana bread in the oven and warned me that he would have to take it out in 38 minutes.

I summoned my preschooler over to my phone. He shouted "Hi Grandpa!" into the screen and then scurried over to a pile of Legos on the floor.

I then steeled myself to ask my dad about what I knew to be the darkest moments of his

life.

“Where were you when all of this was going down at the hospital with your father? What did your life look like then?”

Dad said sometime after his mother died of tuberculosis back in ‘54, he and his sister were separated. My aunt was sent to live with other relatives, while my dad stayed in a small apartment with my grandfather and my grandfather’s new wife.

“He was a hard worker. I hardly saw him,” said my dad about my grandfather. “It was usually a quick dinner and then he was back out the door to Panama City.”

My grandfather, George, worked as a foreman in the Terminals Division of the Canal Zone. There he spent countless hours overseeing the loading and unloading of ships traveling through the Panama Canal. When he wasn’t working, George would go out and play dominos or visit my dad’s sister.

My dad, meanwhile, became a child of neglect.

“I learned how to be self-sufficient a long time ago,” my dad told me grimly. “I was hunting, fishing, and foraging for roots to feed myself.”

I said nothing, but inside I was stunned and furious that anyone would leave an elementary-school-aged child to fend for himself. My poor daddy.

Recently I’d read a novel about a little girl who was abandoned by her family and forced to learn how to catch and grow food. I remember scoffing at the improbability of the plot point. What kind of parent would willingly leave their child to starve? My naivety was a testament to the comfort of my childhood.

When I called my dad back some days later to better understand his foraging days, he backpedaled

“I was with my buddy,” he said. “We’d hunt iguanas and doves with slingshots. It was only when provisions were low ... ”

Hearing those two versions of events made me wonder which was closer to the truth. The boy who was often left to fend for himself? Or the boy who went off on adventures with his pal?

I think my dad, too, has probably spent much of his life wrestling with those dual perceptions of the past.

One thing he is sure of, however, was the violence.

“I still have the scars,” he said.

When he was 11 years old, his stepmother beat him severely about the legs with a metal spatula, slicing open his skin in the process. His crime? Staying out later than he was supposed to.

As he described the incident to me over the phone, I heard his voice catch in his throat. But, as he recalled how even as a prepubescent boy he was able to defend himself, I heard his confidence return.

“I told my stepmother, ‘You’re never going to do that to me again.’ And then I went and I threw that spatula in the canal.”

***

By the time my grandfather sought medical care, the colon cancer was too advanced. He passed away just two weeks after checking into the hospital.

“They opened him up, and then they immediately closed him back up,” my dad said, referencing an operation outlined in graphic detail on George’s autopsy report — the specifics of which my father requested I omit from this story.

When George died, my dad’s stepmother sought to gain control of the insurance policy left to my father and his sister. A maneuver she was fortunately unable to pull off. On top of it all, my dad and his stepmother were evicted from the apartment.

That's how my dad came to live in the states. At 15, he followed his stepmother to New York. My dad's stepbrother was a citizen and sponsored the pair. But my dad's relationship with his stepmother continued to sour. Until one night, two years later, my dad broke curfew.

"I came home and the door to our apartment was bolted shut," he said. "I spent that night in a church."

The following day he left his stepmother's for good and moved in with a friend.

As I listened to him describe those early years in New York, it occurred to me how odd it was that I owed my citizenship, and further still, my existence to a person who was so cruel to my father. Yet, I had to acknowledge the modicum of care she provided him. In reality, any responsibility she had to care for my father died with her husband back in '64.

Out on his own, things improved for dad.

While finishing up high school, he began working evenings at the reclaim desk at a brokerage firm. He spent 20 hours a week in the record room of the company in Brooklyn, working alongside his friends and earning cash.

"It was fun!" he said. "Plus, they served dinner there every evening, so I was fed."

Soon, my dad met, dated, and married my mom. He earned a degree and began a career in finance. My parents started a family and moved to the suburbs. They sent my sisters and me to music and dance lessons. They bought us cleats, clarinets, and cheerleading uniforms. They took us on trips to Disney World. Every television in our house had cable.

I'd always known that when it came to my upbringing, I was fortunate. But learning the truth about my father's traumatic childhood threw my privilege into sharp relief. It made me feel guilty about our strained relationship. After all, my early life had been a cakewalk compared to my dad's.

During that initial phone conversation, I asked my dad if seeing his father's death

certificate made him feel anything.

“When I was at my father’s funeral, I didn’t cry,” my dad said. “It’s not deep. Even though he was my father, we didn’t bond. Our relationship was spotty. It really wasn’t all that great.”

I said goodbye, leaving my father to tend to his banana bread.

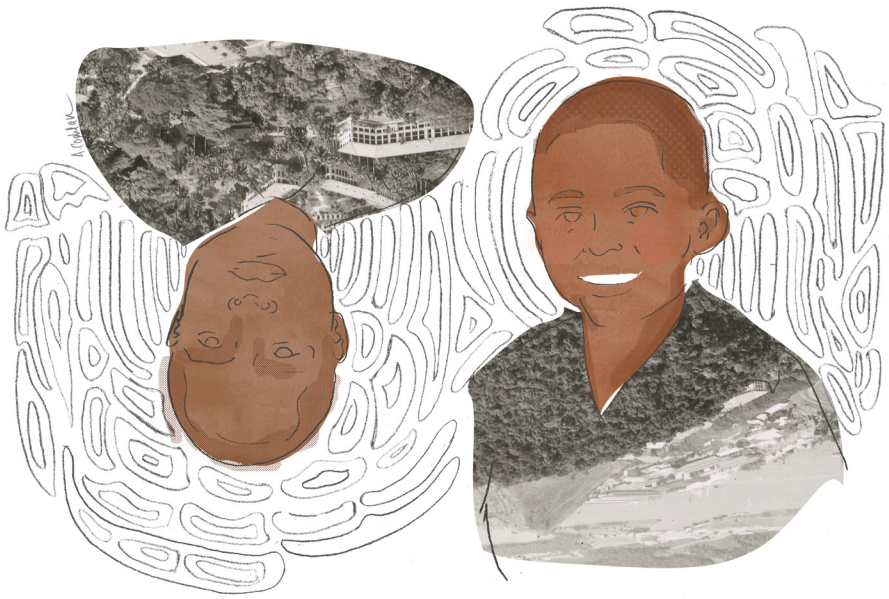
Later that day, my preschooler collapsed into a puddle of tears and thrashing limbs after I refused to buy him some knick-knack at the store. As he raged on the floor, I stared down at him blankly. I thought about my dad as a boy foraging for food to fill his stomach.

The weight of what I learned about my dad didn’t hit me immediately. But then I thought about the life that he built despite all he had suffered. And then I cried.

I cried at the possibility of never having had that phone conversation with my father.

I cried at the possibility of never knowing the extent of his resilience.

And I cried for the little boy my dad once was.



A. Coghlan is a writer and artist who thinks a lot about identity. She loves low-brow and high-brow expression in equal measure. She's currently writing about her Black (and White), slave-owning ancestors in Jamaica during the 18th century. She's represented by Folio Literary Management and goes by @3rdArrival on Twitter, IG, and Etsy.

Black Mermaids

by: Waverly Woldemichael

CW: Death, drowning

1. Somewhere on the coast of Italy

The first rays of sunlight float above the horizon illuminating a beach newly deserted by the summer month tourists. A child walks out onto a stretch of still shore—crystalline water, gleaming sand, white and pure.

“Mommy!” she screams, “Come look!”

The girl points to a row of bloated bodies lying along the waterline, half-hidden in the froth of waves foaming over them. Moving closer, she inspects the unfamiliar sight, prodding inflated limbs with her foot, staring in wonder at soggy heads and torn clothing. Each one’s mouth hangs open, frozen in a silent scream, a contrast to their eyes that are either partially closed or bearing a vacant look as if bored; their mottled skin crumbles like tree bark. She’s never seen such creatures before, beings that are similar to her but not fully human. The girl approaches one, its hair splayed out in a crown, and she notices a small, crushed figure bound by cloth around its body.

“Get away from there!”

The child finds herself suddenly floating, then sharply pulled backwards into her mother’s protective hug.

“What you’re doing is dangerous! Too dangerous for children.”

“What are they?” the girl asks.

She turns to look back, catching a last glimpse of those mysterious ocean creatures on

the sand.

"They're mermaids," her mother replies, voice shaking. "They come up onto the beach to rest. They take little girls back to the ocean with them, so stay away."

"That's not what mermaids look like. Their skin is so dark."

"They're not Italian mermaids. They're African. You know the black people here, the migrants. They're like them, black mermaids."

2. A quarter mile somewhere off the coast of Italy

A boy's head bobs just above the water. He leans backwards trying to float, pressing his arms down but finding no resistance from the apathetic ocean. Inside his chest, a hollow cave, each reverberating heartbeat echoes loudly in his eardrums drowning out the chorus of voices screaming. As he sinks, he glances around witnessing his own panic and desperation reflected in dozens of unfolding micro-tragedies. His lungs burn, crying out with each air bubble leaving his mouth. In a last will to stay afloat, the body thrashes. With every arm and leg jerk, the cold water seeps in, into his mouth, into his eyes, as if into the deepest reaches of him, and the weight of it drags him under. The boy opens his eyes, tears mingling with the salty ocean water. A dark sheath of water expands above him, impenetrable. Glancing around, still bodies hang suspended with their chest upwards and arms and legs thrown back. It looks almost like they're rising, black angels called up to heaven. He closes his eyes, suddenly calm.

Images flash in and out of focus in the boy's mind: blanketed faces on a rubber dingy, huddled and protected from the ocean wind, the scorched desert sand, an endless no man's land, the final embrace in his mother's arms as she removes a few of the of gold bangles from her brown wrists and presses them into his pockets. He opens his eyes to break the strangeness of it all. He no longer feels the urge to breathe. Rather, all his pores tingle as if open and feeling for the first time, the water is electric against his newly sensitive skin. The young man, reinvigorated with new hope, remembers the surface, and tries to swim upwards. Kicking his legs, he feels a new resistance. His feet

are bound he thinks, but they're surprisingly coordinated and full of strength. He looks at his body; in place of his legs, he now has an impressive tail from the waist down—a pattern of bright ocean hues, chartreuse, aquamarine, cyan scales spiraling into a narrow point before bursting into two flame-shaped fins. He wonders how this transformation is possible without questioning too deeply. Thumping his tail in victory, he is finally free.

Waverly Woldemichael is an Eritrean-American writer based in California, and a student of Migration. She's currently working on a long fiction project related to migrant crossings in the Mediterranean.

Martyr

by: Shiksha Dheda

CW: War, possible PTSD, mental illness

I remember the war
— intense, bloody —
I fought for what I thought was right.
Fought for what I thought would make a better country;
a better home.
For me.
For all of us.
For you.

Wanting to be courageous, reluctantly so at points,

wanting to carry you;
even if I had to bear you
upon my own weary back,

I thought we had won the war.
I thought it would be worth it
at the end.

Stumbling back home,
I see the native flag.

Torn.
Battered.

I see my home.
Torn (apart).
Divided.

I see you.

Embarrassed
— by my wounds —
— my scars.

I cannot bear your silence
— your reluctance —
—your evading line of vision —
your disdain;
your shame.

I yearn now for the sound of bullets,
long for the uncertainty of spontaneous explosions,
thirst for the imminent possibility
of mangled death.

The opportunity to die a martyr.
A celebrated hero,
not live
as a burden.

Fighting
— daily—
— embattled—
— at war—
within me.

Against this *civil* society.

Against you.

Against myself.

Previously published in Shiksha's debut poetry collection, *Washed Away*.

Shiksha Dheda is a South African of Indian descent. She uses writing to express her OCD and depression roller-coaster ventures. Sometimes, she dabbles in photography, painting, and baking lopsided layered cakes. She rambles annoyingly at Twitter: @ShikshaWrites. You can find (or ignore her) at https://shikshadheda.wixsite.com/writing/poetry

Hyphenated

by: Divyasri Krishnan

To be Massachusetts-born is to have its cartography inscribed
on your skin. Bunker Hill. The Tavern. Old North Bridge,
where the Acton boys speared Redcoats like swordfish
through sparrows. This is our river, runner. You're in the wrong blue.
My name might not fit on any gravestones, but by God, I belong.
My skin's old-soil brown, seeded with as many stones.
To till me you've gotta be sure you're laying roots.
Stone walls vein the towns, withered bloodlines
I can almost map to my own. If I can name them all,
will you forgive my great-great-greats for not coming over
on the Mayflower? I can give you Paul Revere's Ride,
I can give you Washington, Adams both,
I can chuck a mean tea like any good Yankee.
My teachers taught me the Revolutionary War every year.
You know, Mrs. Kennedy is a real Kennedy?
When my cousins ask me to sing *jana gana mana*,
I give them ol' reliable Scott Key. No more
sitting out on chorus for not knowing the words,
no more curry-stained shirts, only clean-pressed
dresses for my white soldier boy.
Like a goodwife, I sow his bayonets in my soil.
If I'm sweet enough on the tongue,
maybe he'll give me his last name, old
enough for us both. A Pilgrim's son's
seventh son's seventh son, ticket to my country.
My heritage is what's hammered into me.

I promise, I can bleach out like any good whale bone
beached. Lamplight-white, jaundiced like a dying tree—
One if by land, two if by sea.

Divyasri Krishnan (she/her) was born and raised in Massachusetts. She is published or forthcoming in Muzzle Magazine, Rejection Letters, and Third Point Press, and was a Best of the Net Finalist. Find her on Twitter @divsrii.

AND WHO WANTS CRYSTAL SUGAR?

by: Yutong Yang

CW: Death

(1)

“She’s passed? Oh…” Dad utters a groan and fights back a sob. He hears agitated feet and the bedroom door slammed. He sighs. This is not like the time his uncle passed. At that time, his daughter was still too young to understand much about death, let alone sneak up in the small hours to listen behind the doors. But this time, he has to be strong for his baby. They are supposed to leave in 40 minutes to catch the plane to Mom’s hometown. He is going to pack everything right and make sure his girl feels comfortable. They had better hurry.

(2)

It was the worst day in Daughter’s young life so far. The sun was perfect when she rushed out of the examination room, ready to fly into Mom’s open arms. Mom and Dad had promised to take her out for dinner, maybe even ice cream and the movies after that. But what greeted her was the tired apologetic smile of Dad and the unwelcome news that Mom had flown back to her hometown to look after Granny. “She’s not in a perfect condition, you know. Your mother didn’t want to upset and distract you. You did well on your tests, didn’t you? She’ll be pleased when she hears it. Daddy will drive you home and fix some noodles for supper, ok?”

“… Yep.”

"Now that's a good girl."

So the good girl climbed into the car and rolled down the window. She did not want to see the hyper-excited faces of her classmates, but she kept staring anyway. It was just beginning to pour.

(3)

Twenty-five years have passed since Mom fled from this miserable little town. Industry had vitalized this town once, but capital rushed on to chase after bigger dreams, leaving decay and shattered lives behind. Workers were laid off, fed lies that they would be summoned back soon, and lived on the proud belief that they were doing their bit for their home. Now, sitting in street corners with bottles of beer, they laugh silently at their foolish beliefs. Mom was one of the teenagers who went south in search of a better future. They were quickly carried away by the tide of the city and blended into the flood of urban life that never afforded the luxury of a backward glance.

Only now does Mom realize that she left her heart and her sweetest memories for her mother to keep. Now, they were gone with the last breath of that guardian angel and turning colder every second. Tomorrow, she would watch them burn.

(4)

The house is in total silence except for the maddening tick tock of the clock. The only light comes from the candles in the neighboring room where the body is laid. Cousin is pondering whether he should walk inside and help his half-conscious mother up. His sturdy battle-axe mother has thinned so much these months and now has dark sockets under her eyes. She is blaming herself for not taking good enough care of Granny. She was known for her stubbornness in her youth; life has taught her hard lessons, but she was always firm as steel when it came to trying to snatch her mother from the claws of Death. She would never put it that way, but she took pleasure in bossing her siblings around in the hospital ward, asking them to do this and that. But of course, her biggest

rewards were those rare moments when Granny would wake up and talk to her. She had to be constantly by her side to be the first one to spot any recoveries or dangers. Finally defeated, she is feeling utterly powerless.

Cousin is haunted by his own demons. Last summer, the grown-ups proposed that the kids all perform something for Granny's enjoyment. He loved Granny. She had brought him up. But somehow, he just did not feel like it.

"Chief, will you sing a song for Granny? How about the one we always did when we were little?"

He cannot remember why he flew off the handle and told her to shut up and get out. Maybe it was because he was too big for "Chief" and kids' songs that expressed that kind of love for relatives— you know, the kind that is really cute for preschoolers to sing but way too emotional and direct for cool teens. Or maybe he had enough on his mind— GPA, summer internship, keeping an eye on the pretty girl who messes around just to irritate him… Outside his bedroom door, he could hear his little cousin serenading the song to Granny. Granny was laughing. It did not sound so bad after all. For a crazy minute, he even wanted to step out and join in. But he swallowed the desire and kept coding. How he wishes he could go back in time now. He would be the clown, so long as he could hear Granny laugh, at *him*. And how nice it would be to have something to remember from the last family reunion, and to say after a lot of years, "Yeah, it's still sad thinking about her, but at least I've got all these fond memories."

(5)

A few drops of saltwater land on the steering wheel. Uncle sighs and brushes them away with his big hand. Uncle is not really the uncle of the family; he is just a friendly neighbor. But he understands how friendly people can get with the Lees. They were all great people who trusted you with their secrets but never shared yours. Especially that old lady— everybody called her an angel. Her embroideries were marvelous, and she gave them away for free. Oh, and she cooked wonderful traditional dishes that you do not get to taste even in the restaurants. And she adored their little daughter. That was

the main reason why his wife insisted he took a day's leave from his busy and important work and be the chauffeur for the family; of course, he complied willingly.

Uncle does not know what will be on his mind when he gets back home and sees the embroidered flowers glowing on his couch. Maybe he will lie down and sniff them. Maybe they will smell like the old lady. The mourners set off early this morning. It was cold up in the cemetery. He is now shaking from the rain he stood in for two hours. But after weathering such things together, he feels a part of the family. And he is so grateful for the privilege to return home to an aging mother. Indeed, this experience taught him so much. He loves his wife and child even better now, and he sincerely wishes that Heaven grants him longevity and health, so that he would be the one who sees everyone off. He does not want his loved ones to break their hearts over him one day. And when he goes, he hopes it is peaceful. He does not want to cause any disturbance.

Now, he is stepping over the fire bowl with the rest of the family to drive away the evil spirits. The little girl who arrived only yesterday with her father is determined to make herself useful. She's handing everyone crystal sugar, which is said to bring good luck. Uncle thanks her and puts it on the tip of his tongue. Good luck sure tastes sweet.

Yutong Yang (she/她) hails from Shenzhen, China. Her words appear in 360° of Opera®, Ogma Magazine, and more. She serves on the World Ocean Day Youth Advisory Council, hoping to bridge languages and cultures while engaging in creative advocacy. Please find her on Twitter @yutong1147, or on Instagram @yutong_1147.

palmistry, or how to kill a hungry ghost

by: Kayleigh Sim

CW: mention of blood, needles

the fortune teller traces constellations into my
palms & tells me that *i am being eaten alive*.

that the half-moon on my hands fades by the
tide, consumes the universes in my eyes until

not even the stars are left. he tells me that *left
hands never change*, that right hands mangle

& metamorphose into my own undoings. i
profess to him that *i killed a lineage! a dynasty*,

that i wander the streets of this ghost town,
orphaned, & still pretend that *i don't belong*

here. in this temple: i lace my tongue into dead
knots & swallow my hunger like prayer. i tell

myself that one day, i too will have *somewhere
to be from*: a homeland. a soul that doesn't eat

a body, *inside out & back again*. i decide that
i want beautiful hands, lines that are poetic &

i pay him twice. press the copper faces of my
ancestors into his palms & i ask him to stitch

me an eternity: he gives me a needle & i watch
it ravage turgid skin, drink thirstily at crimson

blood. i want redemption, salvation & everything
in between: *i don't want rebirth*. i crave to taste sin

on my tongue & devour it whole. now: i profess
that *i don't want to remember how hunger tastes*.

& he tells me, *don't aim for the heart, but the
soul*: i burn my palms through cold metal, & i

aim.

Kayleigh Sim is a Southeast Asian writer living in San Diego, California, and is currently an Executive Editor for Polyphony Lit. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Interstellar Lit, Aster Lit, The Augment Review, Pollux Journal, and elsewhere. Find her at https://kayleighsim.carrd.co/.

A De Kam

by: Guy Melvin

An urgent message flashed across Dr. Octavia Eddy's computer screen. Fat blue cartoon raindrops with unhappy faces danced and splattered around white text outlined in blue icicles reading: "STAY in, STORM likely!" Then, through her barely cracked window, came the beautiful scent of something impossible. Somewhere someone was burning wood? Traces of woodsmoke, carried in by the heavy humid air, carried her away. She was a child once more, guiltily holding a box of matches, twigs, and a roll of wiping paper over the toilet. "For the smell," she'd told her mother after being ratted out by a cousin. With downturned glasses, Octavia's mother had examined her as if she were the embodiment of shame. "Is the brief smell of those things burning more important than our collective safety, our collective sacrifice?" The unmistakable smell, lost to her for years, was now filling her office, filling her thoughts with reckless possibilities. Still, it had rained so much the past week. No one could be burning wet wood. Someone had a cache of dry wood, someone was hoarding this banned resource. An offense big enough to result in jailing or deportation.

Years had passed since Octavia could accurately recall the childhood home in which the incident had occurred. Sanctuary Lands, like the one on which she now lived, became sought after real estate for those in the unfortunate position of having no homeland, but the privileged position of holding a degree in something the U.K. government found worthwhile. Everywhere water rose, pushing societies inland and upwards as the coastline and familiar routines of everyday living receded like waves. Violence and neglect, rather than flooding, would be the first real disperser of peoples. Nations dissolved on the whim of emotions masquerading as logic, but this happened so quickly that no one seemed to notice until reconciliation had become irreversible. As a child, stories of the past and its seasonal cycles gave her quiet hope that this chaos would not last. But that was when she still viewed things as cycles rather than finite. Sometime in her late teens, quiet hope turned to clinical resignation. As an educated adult, and

lifelong witness to the rapid deterioration of predictive weather patterns and societal stability, Octavia recognized that the difficulty already experienced would only beget greater difficulty.

She stood from her desk and climbed out her window onto the elevated walkway. For too long she'd been great at following orders. Now, she found herself prone to disobeying weather alerts. An unadvised walk, a pointless but necessary rebellion against the advice of an automated weather tracker, or maybe even less plausibly, a rebellion against the indifference of the weather itself. Steadying her footing along the slippery walkway, Octavia considered her mother. Descendent of a distant culture with its deep traditions and very real hardships. Her mother had been born into one of Sierra Leone's prominent tribes, waited on by servants, educated in the western tradition, dressed in the finest clothing, known well amongst both the greedy elite and the tightfisted fishmongers. The Sierra Leone of these stories was quite different than the one in which Octavia was brought up, and it stood in stark contrast with the casually racist depictions of Africa that pervaded western culture received via the internet.

"When I'm dead I want to know you'll be able to take care of yourself. That you'll know yourself." This might punctuate their fight over her mother's seemingly brash handling of an uncaring teacher, dismissive family court judge, or flippant cashier unwilling to check with their manager if the establishment accepted their type of government food assistance. Childhood had its share of full-throated shouts and public embarrassments. There were also days filled with dizzying laughter and exciting activities. "Nothing shouldn't be tried at least once," her mother would say. When she found Octavia's sketchbook of saxophone drawings she bought her a saxophone, somehow, and had her in lessons after school the following week. "Academics and music were once prized in this village. My uncle studied at the Sorbonne to become a doctor, but always played the piano like a virtuoso. Only you all think that this isn't possible. To be book smart and talented is a way of life, it's not about the money." When the instrument was lost on a field trip, the conversation changed to that of selfish western-influenced children. "You have no understanding of value. You assume everyone is a money tree to cut down and burn." There was a pause as her mother searched her queen's English vocabulary for the next admonishment, "Who raised you? I don't believe it could have been me. No, I'd

have done better. I'd have taught you to respect things." Her mixed-race mother also put value on her vocal tone, deftly oscillating between Krio, and the queen's English at will. Her mother preferred chastising her in English rather than Krio.

This had once seemed a cruel way of widening the distance between them by assigning polarized roles; a dedicated mother and an ungrateful westernized daughter. The very distance Octavia was hoping to blur through their shared experiences and deep love for one another. They both, however, shared the same passport. Mother had lived abroad but had gone back home to give birth to her daughter, so that their unit of two had but one national identity. Words which had once seemed mean, she now understood to be her mother's way of telling her that she too had been ignorant to privilege, until she was an unprepared victim of its sudden loss. She wouldn't let her daughter be oblivious to the fear of loss. Her mother had experienced life; or, Octavia later wondered, had her mother been made to experience life? Maintaining faith in the one constant of her adolescence, the concrete systems of education and upward mobility that the west was said to have once provided.

After college, Octavia's mother encouraged her to apply for the International Development PhD program of an elite English institution. She was accepted, sparking the start of another life. England, a grand expanse, practically mythic as a result of her vast knowledge of its history, was a map wrapped within the maps of faraway, subjugated lands. A mass of grey discontent, the island was peacefully situated in willful ignorance amongst a sea of historical atrocity. Eventually, there was true unrest back home in Sierra Leone. There had always been what English news headlines dryly referred to as "turmoil," and "strife." The deaths of multiple family friends had compelled Octavia to return and attend their funerals. While there, the United Kingdom denied non-citizens, regardless of visa status, from returning until the conflict was deemed "resolved." She sent a lengthy message to her department chair, explaining the situation. An advisor from her program called that very day and hinted at having contacts within the British government. A meeting was set, and with it her future. She explained to the government official that she was unmotivated by propaganda or political allegiance. She merely wanted to return and finish her studies, to which she'd already devoted four years of her life.

On the walkway she approached the imposing satellite tower. There she would be able to see from which direction smoke was coming. Wind was picking up and the drizzling turned to a steady shower. Undeterred, she held both handrails and carried on. Such determination had made her a "valuable asset," to the British. Such determination had secured her return ticket to England years earlier. Octavia received her PhD in time for the world to come undone. If she returned home to visit, she risked being stuck again. The last trip had already cost her two years and a great deal of bureaucratic tedium. Soon the world began to melt, foreigners were returned home or imprisoned, and a select few highly educated ones such as herself were given the option to remain in Sanctuary Lands. As one year turned into another, the more difficult it was to reconcile living away from her mother. What once seemed like the freer option began to feel like a claustrophobic destiny. Most upsetting was the idea that this choice had mutated from hers into someone else's.

From the satellite tower, she could see across most of the sanctuary. Storm clouds, thick and grey like a child's science class illustration, sat fat on the horizon. None of her colleagues had braved the weather; they'd remained indoors. From where she stood, despite increasingly poor visibility, Octavia could nearly make out the water treatment facility. It was one of the few structures not built on stilts or platforms. She looked around for sometime, until her hands grew cold and her back stiffened. There was no smoke to be found. Climbing down the ladder she heard the sound of chopping and snapping. When she made it to the walkway, she was able to see Benny, one of the caretakers of grounds, hacking fallen branches. High winds made loose branches a liability. The previous year a stray dog had been killed by one during a particularly gusty storm.

Octavia, slightly shaking from the damp chill, stood there for a few moments watching him work. She breathed warmth into her hands, just as she did when young, happily admiring the plumes of steam leaving her mouth — as if her body were a furnace or some other dangerous machine made up of many tiny and unknowable parts, something magical and beyond comprehension. She returned to her office and made herself a cup of black tea. Back at her desk, she wondered what Benny and the other caretakers did with the branches they removed. Would they, as she had once done so many years ago,

burn them for the singular pleasure of smelling something impossible?

Sitting there, she considered filing an incident report with her government-appointed case manager. Benny, a full citizen, might avoid jail altogether. He would likely lose his job, but unlike his future, hers rested on a knife's edge. She typed up the report and let it be known that she was concerned about the disposal of fallen tree branches. She left out names. Then, still sensing the woodsmoke's fragrant beauty hanging in her office, she decided she would wait to hit send. First, she would talk to Benny. She would let him know what she suspected and encourage him to let her participate. She would try that first. A rebellion, a smell, nostalgia, release. Flaming strips of toilet paper twisted twigs landing in the toilet bowl water with a sizzle. Short-lived but immensely satisfying. Her mother would be proud to find that she finally knew herself well enough.

Guy was born in North Philadelphia, and lives in Brooklyn. He has work in or forthcoming in Sun Dog Lit, Cypress Press' Red House Anthology, Fahmidan Journal, and A Long House Magazine. Contact him at guymelvin82@yahoo.com

my great auntie dina from atok trail told me that she saw right through the gaping hole in god's hand; and i sometimes wonder if that's where i'm in free fall; right through that open palm, plummeting to rejoin the water that birthed me

by: **Yanna Ridimann**

Yanna Ridimann (they/them) is a mixed Pilipinx and genderfluid artist from the Southern US. They work with textiles, tattoos, and 35mm film. Inspired by their ancestors, body, and psychological experiences, they see spirituality in needles and queerness between the analogue and digital. You can find them on Instagram @_maingay.

Listening to Clouds

by: Maria Bolaños

tell me the first name was the sound of beak against bamboo,
the sound of a tree splitting when we emerged nameless
sameness. One of us they called Crisostomo, and he became man.
One of us they called Maria Clara, and I became ghost.

I tell you I have two names. My parents wanted to double their chances,
give me two fates. They dreamt of me before I existed. Me, a vision
in piña, sitting on a high-backed peacock throne, hair curling softly, demurely
weeping as I worked my fan, wind and water, goddess of small typhoons.

Taghirap closes like a crocodile's jaw clacking a tiny snap
of neck. I tell you the way to deal with separation is to pretend
there is nothing tragic about the fact that I can't speak
my grandparents' language, have no words for the day dims

distant in the playback of my mind. Every memory starts
with you had to be there when I have no way to say this the way that I feel it.
I hold the feeling, the small clump of knowledge, an inch of earth
on a turtle's back, the gnawing awareness of perhaps

this is the piece hardest to let go. That nothing is how I remember.
Sarap is a manufactured beehive hum, gold plated palabok red-ringed
in violence. If every new story is a groundbreaking freedom,
it's time I walk the broken ground.

Crack the can of spam open: this is how you make war rhyme
with comfort and we eat the rations you didn't want and we drive
the cars you left to rust. Five hundred years ago you manifested,
a storm gathering at the end of the world. Trauma rolls fresh thunder

and the rain is salt on my tongue. No man is an island
because the island is a woman. I have been an island ever since
I first saw the ocean. Ever since a great bird flew me across the sea
dropped me into the snow and told me, this is what it means to be

alone. And I looked out across the winter white city
and the cold cut my black hair and tried to make me forget
the large mountain and the flowing river, the land of my name.
But I will keep searching for it. I tell myself I will find it.

This is the only way I know to reach you, when the sky is an uncrossable bridge
over an impossible ocean. Hinahanap is the breath escaping, a drip of red slipping
slowly from my nose. What an idea: in place of language, there is a rupture
of capillaries. The word still finds its way out.

I tell myself stories in order to live.
I emerge myself from jungle leaves.
I am a yellow head with horns.
I open my one thousand eyes.

Maria Bolaños (she/her/they) is a Filipina-American poet, book reviewer, and Co-Editor in Chief for Marías at Sampaguitas literary magazine. She is a 2021 Best of Net nominee, and her writing has been featured in Touchstone, Cut Fruit Collective, Antigone, CP Quarterly, and the International Examiner, among others. Instagram: @mariabeewrites

A Continued Evolution Rather than a Fossilized Past: Decolonizing Storytelling

by: **Julián Esteban Torres López**

CW: Colonialism, racism, xenophobia

Colonization has not ended. We are not in a post-colonial age in a similar way that we are not in a post-racial age. Colonization has simply become normalized, perpetuated by dominant culture narratives, and accepted by the majority as part of life.

Being a bilingual, Colombia-born storyteller with Afro-Euro-Indigenous (colonizer and colonized) roots, colonialism has been bred into my bones. It has also grown weeds onto my tongue and has been forced upon me as an identity of my nativity, even though I can trace my lineage on this land back thousands of years, long before quixotic Europeans (some of whom were also my ancestors) set foot on these shores. I call myself Colombia-born instead of Colombian because Colombia was named after Christopher Columbus. (Even this attempt to center my full self is still limiting.) The territory now known as Colombia is the only country in the world named after probably the most infamous colonizer. Colombian means follower of Columbus, and I am *not* a supporter of Columbus. Period.

When Spanish American revolutionaries took up arms 200 years ago and fought a decade's worth of war to liberate themselves from imperial Spain, and after they secured their independence from the grip of Spanish royals, the revolutionaries decided to call the hard-won territory Colombia after the colonizer. It was not that these victorious rebels were against colonialism, per se. No. Instead, these revolutionaries were against *Spanish* colonialism, *Iberian* colonialism. The elite Spanish *Americans*

wanted to control the land, people, minds, future, flora, fauna, and biota on the hips of this newly conquered continent. They wanted to remain in power without having to bow down to, or give a little back to, the crown. No, it was not that they were intrinsically against colonialism.

Further, the fact that we *still* call ourselves Colombians two centuries later and that we have not—with any earnestness or eagerness—dissected such a situation is troublesome and exasperating. I would love to start a movement to rename ourselves to reclaim ourselves so we can then reinhabit ourselves in a way that is more aligned to the reality of who we are, collectively, in a more inclusive way, instead of consistently having to elevate the colonial part of our history as the most valuable identity worth centering, thereby dehumanizing the Brown and Black aspects of ourselves, as a result. Our current group name is the ultimate monument to settler colonialism—a narrative statue that needs to be toppled for us to truly advance in the journey of liberation.

That said, settler colonialism should be understood as a structure, not an event. Simply renaming ourselves will not liberate us. Wars of liberation from colonial powers, or "peaceful" transitions into autonomous states and away from colonial forces, should not be how we measure the existence of colonialism. When we decolonize, we decolonize the whole self, not just an aspect of our oppressed identities. As bell hooks advanced, decolonization is a centering process that takes us from slavery to freedom, from void to wholeness. It's a process of transformation that intentionally shifts away from institutions, systems, policies, and cultures of domination. It is a critical process of self-examination and communal introspection. We have to be constantly creating new language, telling new stories, acting off different scripts, and building new systems to allow us to be who we really are and want to become. Current colonial and binary languages, the whitewashing of history, the gatekeepers of culture, and the designers of our policies keep us bound to settler colonialism as they continue to essentialize us into something that is either limiting, distorted, or false for the sake of the power and comfort of the status quo. Sometimes that status quo is hundreds of years old, regardless if it considers itself a present-day colony.

I come from the Audre Lorde school of resistance in that I am dedicating both my life

and my creative talent to confronting and addressing injustices because, as Lorde wrote: "Your silence does not protect you." Lorde emphasized that "the transformation of silence into language and action is a self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger." People are afraid of others' reactions for speaking, but mostly for demanding visibility, which is essential to live. Lorde added, "We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. […] People are taught to respect their fear of speaking more than silence, but ultimately, the silence will choke us anyway, so we might as well speak the truth."

Even when we are afraid, we can learn to speak. I am done allowing others to choke me. I am done choking myself. I am done biting my tongue for the comfort of others, which directly burdens me with the consequences of oppression—mine and yours. I want to become more than just a survivor. I want to overcome my own complicity in my and your suffering, and I want you to overcome yours, as well. I want to reinvent and create beyond what we have accepted as the best of all possible worlds. I will start with my voice, and yours. As Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis wrote, "The narratives you give power through silence become our future." Let us be silent no more.

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For this conversation, I want to set a foundation that builds upon my autobiography, a diaspora story of migration from South America to both Canada and the United States. I want to start by interpreting one of my poems, entitled "The Wind,"[1] to enforce my tone. The poem is about decolonizing and indigenizing ourselves. The poem centers two characters: the wind and the fireflies.

- The wind represents an Indigenous child torn away from his parents and community via the residential and boarding school initiatives, whose primary

1. "The Wind," Rigorous, Volume 5, Issue 2, https://www.rigorous-mag.com/v5i2/julian-esteban-torres-lopez.html.

objective was to “civilize” or assimilate Indigenous children and youth into Euro-Canadian and Euro-United Statesian cultures. In short, these so-called “schools” were designed to “kill the Indian and save the man.”

- The fireflies in the poem are the descendants of enslaved Africans throughout the Americas, whose ancestors were kidnapped, taken hostage by white human traffickers, packed into ships like sardines and taken across the Atlantic Ocean, and forced to work in death camps by torturers and murderers after these said enslavers had already nearly wiped out most of their previous forced labor: the Indigenous communities from which the wind is a descendant.

In the piece, both the wind and the fireflies journey to find their cultural, social, and historical roots under environments that have whitewashed their past, erased them from history, invalidated their experiences, gaslighted them, vilified them, and attempted (at times succeeded) at genocide against them.

The wind searches for its mother as a form of Rematriation, validation, and healing. In this process, the wind stumbles upon the fireflies, who are also on their own personal and communal journeys. Yet, as they come to realize, even those with lit paths can feel lost at times. Even those of us who can trace our lineages to a specific region of the world can still feel invisible, adrift, misplaced, and cast away—exploited, marginalized, undervalued, overlooked, silenced, and forgotten by intentionally designed systems of oppression and dominant cultures that continue to be part of our society’s legacy. The poem, “The Wind,” follows the survivors of settler colonialism as they search for remnants of their cultures, of their heritages, of their peoples, of their identities, of their homes on Turtle Island and Africa.

Some people go through their day-to-day lives as if some of us have not experienced dystopia. They read their dystopian novels as warnings of what can happen in the future if we continue on, or take, a certain path. But, for example, Indigenous folks worldwide continue to experience that dystopia since settler colonialism. Their fears are and have been a reality for many of us; they just happen to benefit from our dystopia.

Imagine experiencing genocide, theft of your ancestral lands, your sacred rituals made

illegal, forced to assimilate and detach yourself from your culture and your people. Imagine having your language and traditions outlawed and made punishable. Imagine being suppressed and being treated like a beast of burden or second class (if treated like humans at all) for generations and generations and generations and generations. Then, you're made out to be the terrorist of the story—deserving of the brutalization and dehumanization—through the enacted and enforced policies and the whitewashing of history and the whitewashing of all forms of art, culture, and storytelling. *This* is dystopia.

When a person, a book, a film, a society, a culture, etc., labels the survivors of settler-colonial oppression as savages, while simultaneously identifying the oppressors as civilized, this should be a blatant indication of the whitewashing of history and our collective stories.

The criminalization and dehumanization of our existence, the whitewashing of history, and the erasure of a people and culture from it is a form of genocide.

This is a problem that requires your attention and mine, as whether we like it or not, whether we are conscious of it or not, our actions, habits, dispositions, rituals, practices, and beliefs are more likely than not perpetuating such a legacy, making us complicit, regardless of our intent.

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The eradication of culture and imagination is an essential part of settler colonialism. I agree with Laguna Pueblo feminist Paula Gunn Allen when she stated that "the wars of imperial conquest have [also] been fought within the minds, bodies, and hearts of the people of the earth for dominion over them." She said that "we must remember our origins, our cultures, our histories, our mothers and grandmothers, for without that memory, which implies continuance rather than nostalgia, we are doomed to engulfment by a paradigm that is fundamentally inimical to the vitality, autonomy, and self-empowerment essential for satisfying, high-quality life."

Colonial paradigms, time and again, continue to try to have us believe that Indigenous

peoples were not civilized or cultured until we came across European whiteness and Euro-centric ways of life, thinking, and doing; that we were not spiritual until we came upon Christianity; that we were not educated until we came upon English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Russian, Latin, and Greek languages, philosophies, literature, music, and other forms of art. That the only way we can move up in this world and become successful and live quality lives is if we align ourselves to numerous forms of supremacy: white supremacy, male supremacy, Christianity supremacy, cis supremacy, hetero supremacy, able-bodied supremacy, and if we worship models of organization and development that treat and relate to our environment and other peoples as resources for exploitation rather than as extensions of ourselves and our families; that we cannot become successful and live quality lives unless we uncritically bow down to arbitrarily defined forms of art regarded as masterpieces that reflect the very same supremacies I just mentioned. European art is high art, they say, while Indigenous art is folk art, for example.

This is how settler colonialism continues to shape our reality and our storytelling. In other words, to civilize the so-called "savage" was to eradicate tribal attachments and to kill the Indigenous, save the body, and infuse it with Euro-centric values so the bodies would become docile vessels, relegated to inferior positions, to be more easily coerced into benefitting the greed and satisfying the whims of Europeans and those of European descent without much resistance. These vessels would become more docile if settler-colonists molded them into their images.

This civilizing machine of settler colonialism has ruptured our place in the world for over 500 years; yet, we're still here… resisting.

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The first stories we experience are not novels or films. The first stores we experience are rooted in relationships. They are rooted in what we tell ourselves about ourselves, others, and our surroundings, which are also informed by what others tell us about ourselves, others, and our surroundings. These stories shape how we engage with our words and our worlds. These stories help determine whether we alienate and estrange

ourselves, or whether we connect with ourselves. These stories help determine, to a large extent, how we will behave and how we interpret external and internal stimuli. All of this starts before we read our first book, write our first poems, or sing along to our first song.

This means that it is extremely important for us to interrogate the gatekeepers of such stories… for us to unpack and dissect the frameworks of our society—those lenses that pass as common sense. We must shine a light on the roots of our cultural consciousness—its backdrop, social structures, agents, institutions, unspoken assumptions, and taken-for-granted ideologies.

For example, let's interrogate representation in mainstream storytelling. Invisibility is part of our current situation as Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. And, if we are visible at all, the situation tends to lean toward misrepresentation—limited, distorted, or false caricatures of who we are, were, and could be. Misrepresentations that may positively impact the psyches and imaginations of those benefiting from such oppressive systems, and misrepresentations that also negatively impact the psyches and imaginations of those targeted and subjugated within such dominant settler-colonial cultures. All of which create soil that makes it so fear and hatred can more easily grow against those who have been Otherized and devalued, which also include other realms of oppressed diversity dimensions like ethnicity, nativity, sex, gender, orientation, disability, religion, education, and class.

Let's also dissect how the publishing industry's focus on profit perpetuates colonial paradigms. Something we experience in many storytelling industries—be it film, the stage, the page, or radio—is a focus on perpetuating the status quo. We can see this in ways editors, agents, and publishers, for example, pander to the bigotries of the dominant culture, and try to disassociate themselves from their complicity with such systems of oppression by justifying their actions on the ethically hollow response that they are just "giving the people what they want." Well, what the people want is not us. So, if it's more profitable to pander to bigots that uphold oppressive colonial frameworks—such as racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, etc.—then they will flex their muscles to hold up such architecture.

One thing we experience a lot from agents, editors, and publishers in the literary world is an insistence to change our stories, our characters, our names, and the topics we wish to discuss, in order to appease said bigotries because these literary agents, editors, and publishers do not want to make this target audience that drives the profits of their industry (as they perceive it, anyway) uncomfortable. So, what they ask of us is to, again, assimilate… to decenter and erase and dismember ourselves from our stories in order to make our stories more marketable to the very people who oppress us. Again, to kill the Native, but save the person so the body becomes a vessel for serving the interests of those benefiting from the status quo put in place and upheld by settler colonialism.

Further, there are genres they try to force us into, which limits our creativity if it cannot be marketed to such bigotries. Yet, those given the opportunity to experiment and explore and go beyond the boundaries of the status quo tend to be those who already benefit from it. These are just more forms of gatekeeping and forced or coerced assimilation.

Let's take, for example, what is often taught as good writing: that stories should have a plot; a beginning, middle, and end, even if it's not in that order. Earlier in the year, I spoke with India-based journalist Akanksha Singh about her essay "What if writing lost plot?"[2] to continue to get her perspective. She said, "The idea of a 'strong' narrative arc (and plot) is something that is extremely culturally relative. So much so that it's been erased in the very white and Western world of 'good' writing. Consider, for instance, how white writers—LeGuin and Woolf—can get away with plotless, arc-less stories and novels, where writers of color simply don't. We're familiar with these 'avant garde' forms, but largely when they come through the white/Western lens. It is, in my opinion, a very limited form," she said. She even almost went as far as to say it (the limitation of stories having plots and narrative arcs) may be one of the reasons prose has not grown beyond the novel and short story.

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2. "What if writing lost plot?" Akanksha Singh, https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/writing-lost-plot/

And as I continue my journey to connect with my Indigenous heritage, I am constantly reminded of the different forms of storytelling throughout all of our Indigenous communities that do not align themselves solely to the plot/narrative arc forms of storytelling.

For example, according to Emily Aguilar, an arts educator and community leader working to ignite Indigenous sovereignty and gender and racial justice: “Euro-centric storytelling guidelines limit storyteller creativity. They also limit our understandings as recipients of stories. Some stories are shaped like an arc, but this isn’t the only way. Not all stories have a beginning, middle, and end. Not all stories have a main character. Some stories are shaped like water. Some stories flow. Some stories have multiple currents. Some stories are shaped like a tree. They have roots beneath the surface, visible and invisible elements, and we may see only part of the story. But we know it is vast and strong. It gives us so much to think about, long after the story is over. Some stories are shaped like wind. They ebb and flow. They have strong gusts and gentle breezes. You may not see a story, but all over your body you feel a story there. You see it moving others, too. Some stories are shaped like fire. They move quickly, they inspire strong feelings, they gather people around them. They may have teachings that show up quickly, or take time to see. Fire stories are sometimes short, making them the easiest to remember and pass on. Some stories are constellations. They connect us to other places and times. They leave us with more questions than answers. They reveal endless possibilities.”

Emily Aguilar continued to say that “there is no wrong way to shape a story. A story is a gift from Creator. Trying to change a story to fit Euro-centric models is disrespectful.”

“Show gratitude,” she wrote, “by accepting the story as it comes to you, and allow learners to do the same.”

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As a gatekeeper myself, both Singh and Aguilar, among many others, have gotten me to think about my inherent biases in writing and storytelling and curating, and where those biases came from. I needed to deconstruct and dissect my literary instincts even more. Gatekeepers are curators who end up creating stories as a result of their selection

process, pretty similar to the power that historians and educators have.

For my process, after decades of doing this, I would catch myself trusting my instincts more and critically thinking about my selection process less. But I do go back to dissect the instinct to learn why I'm disposed in a specific manner, why I like certain arrangements, certain artistry, etc. But I need to dissect these instinctual, almost knee-jerk reactions, primarily because I, like everyone else, have ingrained biases and prejudices.

We are all born into dominant cultures, and, as a result, and to different degrees, are all products of this enculturation and socialization. So, when in social justice we discuss deconstructing, dismantling, rebuilding, unlearning, decolonizing, etc., our instincts also have to be dissected. Our instincts are exactly where we can identify our biases and prejudices. Our bodies, hearts, and minds tend to go to the trained and comfortable spaces of our being to help us survive and exist with minimal stress. Instincts, for me, are an extremely valuable source for decision making (like an athlete who trains themselves to produce one specific technical move thousands of times until they no longer have to think about it but can trust the mind and body to do it instinctively). Conversely, these knee-jerk reactions can also be the very specific identifiers of other ways we have also been trained to create other kinds of instincts, bigoted instincts, many times without us even knowing we were trained to react in a certain way.

This realization for me was both a benefit and a burden, and brought me lots of hesitation and many concerns as the leader of an organization like The Nasiona[3] that is intentionally trying to challenge systems of oppression and dominant cultures. I say this because my team and I have all been trained in this settler colonial dominant culture to define "good" writing, for example, in a very specific way, which is ultimately a very Euro-centric colonial way of assigning value to what a "good story" is supposed to do, how it supposed to be arranged, whose comfort it is supposed to center, etc. Arranging anthologies and selecting essays for publication in our magazine, for example, are some of the areas where I have to constantly check myself and have others check me so we

3. The Nasiona, https://www.thenasiona.com/

are aligned to The Nasiona's mission more effectively.

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So, what could decolonization look like for you, for me? I like how Indigenous media maker and environmental educator Nikki Sanchez[4] answers this question.

She recommended that we can all take the first initial steps together by asking ourselves some questions and addressing a few things, like:

- Where did your people come from?
- How did you get here?
- Whose land are you on? What has been done to them for you to occupy their land?
- Address the oppressive systems and histories that enable you to occupy the territory you do now.
- Find out how you benefit from that history and activate one strategy wherein you can use your privilege from which to dismantle that.
- Share the knowledge that the work of decolonization is for everyone.

Sanchez also highlights the value of decolonizing. We should do this work because:

- decolonization helps you live without paralyzing guilt/shame of your identity and the social identity you have inherited.
- decolonization helps you give up social and economic power and privilege that directly disempowers, appropriates, and invisibilizes others.
- decolonization helps you dismantle patriarchy.
- decolonization helps you do the work to find out who you are, where you came from, and how you got here, and commit to building communities that work together to find out where we are going (together) and what our individual roles and

4. "What you can do about your country's ugly history," Nikki Sanchez, https://www.ted.com/talks/nikki_sanchez_what_you_can_do_about_your_country_s_ugly_history

responsibilities are in this process.

- decolonization helps you celebrate who we are and connect with the unique knowledge we each bring to work together to solve our global challenges.

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As I stated earlier, I come from the Audre Lorde tradition in that my work with The Nasiona embodies the recognition that our silence will not protect us. Our silence will not protect us from a world designed to subjugate so many of us. If we remain quiet, and if you remain quiet, these ingrained instincts and biases and prejudices will steer our stories and how we curate them and how we assign them value.

One question I ask myself repeatedly as a storyteller and as a gatekeeper is: How can we reimagine and redesign and free ourselves from the shackles and limitations of colonial storytelling? The Nasiona was my response to that question.

The Nasiona is a movement that centers, elevates, and amplifies the personal stories of those Othered by systems of oppression and dominant cultures. Our work centers decolonization, liberation, empowerment, healing, and transformation. Through our magazine, podcast, publishing house, music series, mentorship program, fellowships, live events, along with other initiatives and partnerships (like this one), we strive to humanize the Other. We look to erase borders, tackle taboos, resist conventions, explore the known and unknown, and to rename ourselves to claim ourselves. We believe that the subjective can offer its own reality and reveal truths some so-called facts cannot discover. From liminal lives to the marginalized, and everything in between, we promote personal stories and conduct interviews that explore the spectrum of human experience through an intersectional lens.

Our initiatives and series, for example, have so far centered the following communities and topics: Being Latina/e/o/x; Being LGBTQIAA+; Diaspora and Immigration; Being Mixed Race; Womanhood and Trauma; BIPOC Musical Artists; Disability, Mental Health, and Chronic Conditions; Deconstructing Dominant Cultures; and Stories on Human Connection and Disconnection. We are consistently always working on something.

All of this is to say that "We confront in order to connect." According to Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *this* is also "the legacy of James Baldwin. The troubles we're in are deeper than we thought because the troubles are in us, which requires us to be vulnerable. The autobiographical is the point of entry into the global context."

By centering the autobiographical in everything we do at The Nasiona—and who we pass the mic to and advocate for—are some of the main ways we are actively working toward decolonizing and indigenizing storytelling: by centering, elevating, and amplifying the voices, histories, and experiences of those who have been exploited, marginalized, undervalued, overlooked, silenced, and forgotten by settler-colonial systems of oppression and dominant cultures.

We are intentionally changing the landscape by including the excluded, making visible those who've been erased and misrepresented, allowing them to speak their own truths, and we take those truths and amplify them by using different platforms and through different initiatives and partnerships so we can inundate the culture with these stories.

In doing so, we are normalizing a new normal in storytelling industries and spaces; and we are creating a space for healing, transformation, community, connection, and empowerment. I want to use my influence and power in the storytelling and social justice worlds to remove barriers and create new situations where survivors of settler colonialism can take off their masks and stop worrying about assimilating and code-switching to be accepted or to be treated with the respect they deserve. And in this liberating space, I want them to feel and be safe enough, encouraged enough, welcomed enough, and supported enough for them to be liberated to be their authentic selves without hurdles, fear, or shame. They, and we, will be better off for it, and so will our stories, thereby leaving a different storytelling legacy of which we can all be proud.

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The longer I work with said communities, the more it becomes apparent that settler colonialism and imperialism have transformed many parts of the world, leaving a legacy of violence, trauma, and destruction. The "civilizing" machine of settler colonialism has ruptured the place of many of us in this world, which includes our relationships with

ourselves, others, our environment, and our life activity, work, and creative pursuits.

We have to be very cognizant of the fact that colonialism and imperialism do not simply use force to dominate. As Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* understood, imperialism can continue to influence colonies and former colonial territories via how they employ culture to control distant lands and people, because storytelling and literature have "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging," which might contradict or perpetuate the colonization of a people.

In the words of Yankon Dakota writer, editor, translator, musician, educator, and political activist Zitkála-Šá: "A wee child toddling in a wonder world, I prefer to their dogma my excursions into natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers. If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a Pagan."

Zitkála-Šá had a vision for Indigenous peoples that I have adopted as a vision for all of the peoples The Nasiona serves: a continued evolution rather than a fossilized past. An evolving translation and community preservation.

So, with The Nasiona, we elevate ourselves and say, "Enough!" And in the process of disentangling ourselves from relationships of abuse, we reinvent ourselves to reclaim ourselves. We set boundaries that center our needs as a form of self-love. With these raw, real, and personal stories, we constitute a statue of personhood, our personhood—humanizing ourselves—blending our scars with our strengths and our vision for ourselves, rejecting the lies that had previously depicted us as lesser than.

With The Nasiona we rise and become a revolutionary scaffold that centers us. Our own healing and self-validation: a form of resistance. We take up space and take control of our stories and tell them in our own ways. We remind others that it is okay to love themselves and to lose themselves in their own embrace. And in that cradle, we deconstruct our form, rebuilding it into something that makes more sense to us.

In our defiance, we force ourselves to not only behold our stories but storytelling as a whole, creating the conditions for us to also dissect our literary instincts and other

borders of abuse that have colonized our bodies, minds, and hearts.

Through my work and the work of The Nasiona, we hope to inspire our readers, listeners, and followers to also experiment with their own lives and communities in order to create beyond the limits of the forces that have for far too long told us to sit down, shut up, and follow the rules.

Our silences will not protect us. So, I speak, and I help others speak, and I will take the consequences as they come.

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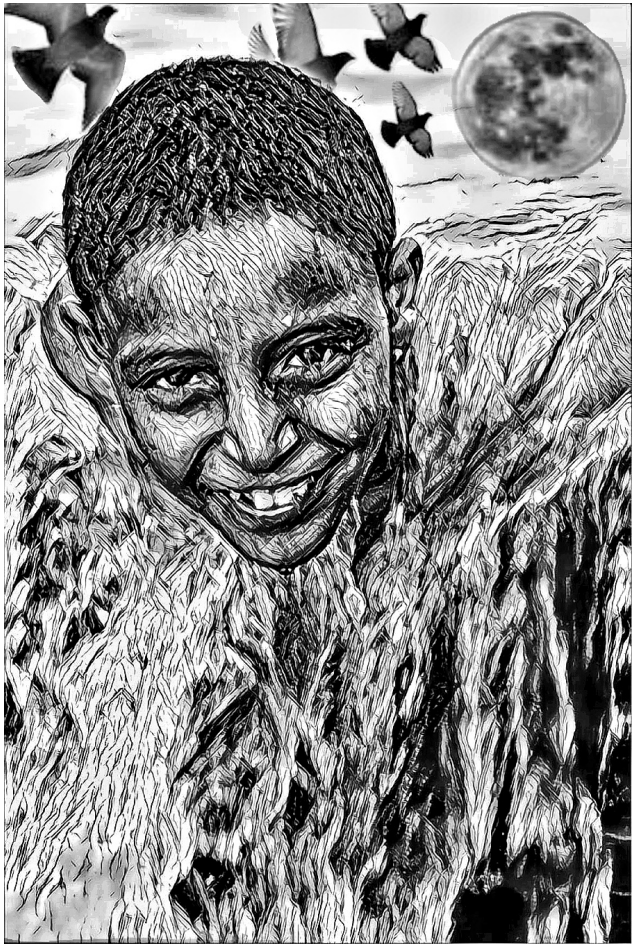
Murna (Happiness)

by: Zaynab Bobi



Zaynab Bobi, Frontier I, is a Nigerian writer, digital artist and a photographer. She is a finalist of the voice of peace anthology and a student of MLS. Her works are published/forthcoming in Kalahari Review, Blue Marble Review, Barren Magazine, Typehouse Literary Magazine, Night Coffee Lit, Olit Magazine, etc.

Infinitives for Filipinos

by: **Neen Ramos**

CW: Imagery of grief, mourning, and third-world resilience

To live in day-to-day uncertainties
To mourn another dead loved one
To pick yourself up all on your own
To survive is mabuhay

To walk around with face masks on
To promote rampant inequality
To get by all on your own
To persist is magpumilit

To dream of a life worth living
To forget dreams to keep living
To grieve all on your own
To endure is magtiis

To flaunt your privilege
To say we're un-Christian
To make excuses all on our own
To rebuke is sawayin

To negotiate islands for vaccines
To ally with just another bully
To combat tyranny all on your own
To refuse is tumanggi

To voice dissent in poetry
To fight oppression with expression
To cling to freedom all on your own
To object is tumutol

To denounce a fascist regime
To speak truth to people in power
To protest all on your own
To resist is lumaban

To try
to stay alive
alone &
on your own
is
mag-isa.

Neen Ramos is a Pinay who loves to devour pop culture and random stuff on the Internet. A lover of good books and coffee, her Spotify playlist keeps her sane as she juggles her work and TV show marathons. You can find her alter ego (@whatneenwrites) on Twitter and Instagram.