

# WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE



ISSUE SEVEN  
CEIBA





**Wild Willow  
Magazine**







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## Guest Editors

**Diana Rodriguez Wallach** is an award-winning author of young adult novels. Her latest, *THE SILENCED*, tackles the Troubled Teen Industry and is the winner of the 2026 International Thriller Awards for Best YA Thriller, a nominee for the 2026 Bram Stoker Awards for Best YA Horror, a honoree for the Millikin Medal for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, and a nominee for the Georgia Peach Book Award for Teen Readers and the California Department of Education Recommended Literature List. In October 2023, she released *HATCHET GIRLS*, a modern twist on the legend of Lizzie Borden, and in 2021, she published *SMALL TOWN MONSTERS*, inspired by real paranormal investigators (all Penguin Random House/Delacorte). Additionally, Diana has penned a trilogy of YA Latina contemporary novels, a trilogy of YA spy thrillers, and her essays and short stories have published in several anthologies. For the past four years, she has been on faculty as a writing instructor for the Highlights Foundation, and prior to that she taught Creative Writing for Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth. She currently lives in the Philadelphia area with her husband, two children, and two cats.

**Rosália Rodrigo** (she/her) has been in the “immersive story” space for over a decade, producing visitor experiences for museums and theme parks internationally. She now champions diversity, inclusion, equity and accessibility in this space as a DEIA consultant and educator, with the goal of creating work environments and visitor experiences that are inclusive to all—a passion she also extends to her writing. Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Rosália now lives in Central Florida with her partner and mischievous cat, Moonbeam.

**Yomalis Lourdes Rosario** (she/her) is a Black Dominican poet who was born and raised in Washington Heights, NYC. She is a graduate of the 2025 Brooklyn Poets Mentorship Program and serves as the Managing Editor for *WE THE SOIL*. You can find her poems in *Epiphany Magazine*, *ROOM Magazine*, & elsewhere.

## **Content Warnings**

Some of our pieces may include some of the following themes:

Violence

Displacement

Colonization

Cultural Erasure/Language Suppression

Allusions to ED

Death

Enslavement

Implication of Trafficking

Burial Alive

## *Letter from the Editor*

Dearest readers,

I love being Latina.

Growing up, I suffered some Latina erasure by my own hand: embarrassment over the accent in my mouth, the curls on my head, the hair on my body, among so many other aspects of my life. So, I decided in middle school to lean into the “gringo” accent in Spanish class. I would go to Graham Avenue in Brooklyn and get my hair straightened by Marina (because she was “the only one who understood my hair”), then my eyebrows waxed by the Vietnamese ladies next door to the salon. In high school, I was big into scene culture because scene kids didn’t care if you were brown, and I leaned into my weird side because it was easier to tell myself that I was getting bullied for being a weirdo than admit that there was a lot more behind getting shoved into lockers than I wanted to believe. I suppose it was my way of protecting myself.

I fought against myself to even learn Spanish, because I wanted so badly to take a different language class, but deep down I knew I was going to regret it if I didn’t learn my grandmother’s language. It took a long time for me to realize that the burning sensation in my neck when I spoke to extended family with broken Spanish and marched robotically to Salsa rhythms at family parties was not because I was embarrassed of the culture. Rather, I was ashamed that I couldn’t seem to grasp it as deeply as I felt I needed to.

It took years for me to understand the importance of culture, the weight of our families and the threads they weave, the sacrifices made for descendants to live better lives, and the lessons that are taught to us through the blood, sweat, and tears of our parents and the grands and greats before them.

During the middle stages of decline in my abuelo’s health, I started to question my lack of desire to connect with my roots. I would sit and talk with Abuelo, asking him periodically to recount stories from his life in Puerto Rico. It was around then that I felt something shift inside of me. When he passed in 2017, I had already started to unthread my complicated feelings of identity, and with Abuelo gone, I fell into a bit of a spiral. Poetry is actually what helped me delve back into my emotions

and safely parse through them. Many of my early poems explored the lives and teachings of Abuelo and my bisabuelos, as well as my identity being a Puerto Rican and Dominican kid born and raised in the U.S.

When I opened this issue up for submissions, I was very deliberate about my choice of the ceiba tree. Not only is the ceiba tree the official tree of Puerto Rico, but it is also a symbol of hope. After Hurricane Maria, there was horrific amounts of damage to the island that wiped out most of the crops, and left far too many people without electricity, some for more than a year. In Vieques, their most famous tree, called appropriately “La Ceiba,” is a ceiba tree that is centuries old. It withstood the Spanish conquest, hundreds of years of land development, U.S. Navy bombing practice, and every hurricane from then to now. Hurricane Maria had hurt La Ceiba quite a bit, stripping her of her leaves, breaking smaller branches, and cracking larger ones. But two years later, after all that damage left islanders wondering if it would ever bloom again, against all conditions, it did. A symbol of healing and hope.

And earlier this year, when Benito performed at the Superbowl? Well, everything just fell into place from there. The Latin America diaspora came together and prepared; sharing recipes and decoration ideas, buying PR flags and t-shirts en masse, sharing the video once it was out and explaining every reference in case it was missed. That outpouring of shared experiences and communal outreach of support, it felt like it was the right time to bolster the voices within the community that wanted and needed to be heard.

This collection of words and art is a love letter to Latinidad and the Latine community.

“The only thing more powerful than hate is love,” and I love you, I love you, I love you.

With unending gratitude to the readers and contributors of this issue,

Melissa Ashley Hernandez

EIC, Wild Willow Magazine

## CODESWITCH

Melissa Ashley Hernandez

Mother from where the *coquis* sing,  
Father from where the sweet *caña* grows tall,  
but born in what they call the Big Apple,  
never light enough  
or dark enough  
or American enough—  
created by three worlds,  
yet belonging to none.

Puerto Rico, you call me *negrita*.  
Your skins are a medley of diversity  
yet somehow mine is too dark for you.  
I learned the tongue to make you proud,  
instead you say I am too articulate:  
when I speak your words  
they play like a stolen song,  
it sounds fine, but is not meant for me.

Dominican Republic, you call me *gringa*.  
It is true I was not born on the island,  
but the same blood runs through our veins,  
even though when I speak,  
sometimes it comes out  
in a Frankenstein patchwork,  
codeswitching between two languages  
that comprise every part of my self.

America, my skin feels like a cage.  
From birth, peach plump lips  
learn defense mechanisms:  
when you spew non-compliments,

*You speak very well!*

my mouth codeswitches

*fuck you*

into *thank you*,  
and my brown balled up fists

hide behind my “oreo” status  
and proper posture,  
minding my reputation.

These full lips house an articulate tongue  
sharpened by years of jagged  
experiences, these battle-ready hands  
hardened by teeth-gritted silence,  
but I have survived by this warm heart,  
never calcified by hatred.

I will live.

I will love and bring forth new warriors on Earth.  
My children will learn to be proud of the skin  
they could not choose to live in. They will learn  
to hone their wits so they do not have to dagger  
their tongues. No white man will coerce them to codeswitch,  
and the only fists they will make will be the proud  
ones that glide up into the air, their weapons  
of choice: intelligence and compassion.

They will make their mark on the world,  
and they will change it.

As we make our mark on the world.

And we will change it.



*The only tree*

*Cynthia Via*

I know not its name  
Behind our house  
Though I should know everything about it  
Why it has a wide slit down its upper half  
Hit by lightning or decaying from within  
I know almost nothing, except its given name  
Olga, my partner says,  
It's been through stuff  
Two of its outer limbs have fallen, not on us  
Though honestly, I wouldn't blame it  
One fell over our patio chair, softly  
Not destroying anything from our window  
It almost appeared as decoration,  
one giant ginger root sprouting  
The other limb was not a test  
It fell on our shed days after my mom  
From the same window, said that limb,  
"se ve raro, seco, deben hacer algo."  
Preoccupied with baby, my thoughts trapped  
in those origami leaves,  
dancing against azure sky  
I was not enlivened enough  
to call a tree whisperer what it means  
they can't hold their limbs the way younger trees can

My neighbor tells us this happens  
when it doesn't rain for a while,  
so I guess our tree is dying from heat  
from lack of knowledge, time itself  
A woodpecker used to make holes at the top  
We'd find wood chips falling on our heads  
He doesn't come around here anymore  
just murderous black bees fat with pollen  
giving off small premonitions  
every time they buzz in our ear  
About Olga, the oak tree, my partner says  
not seeing us out  
before the eventual embrace of old age,  
our own departure from this foreign land

*Baby Blue Triangle Musings #12804*

*Lysz Flo*

*after José Olivarez - Mexican Heaven*

*form by Nate Marshall - learning gang handshakes*

*heaven is just a museum of all the life we have*

& so ain't it worth each koupe tèt, boule kay

it crosses your mind any way. VIV. like it is worth curating hope for liberation. community your way into laughter, into held hands—resisting to break the line, raise your machete, let it gleam & remind them whose child you are. make yourself undeniable, ungovernable, a nightmare of silver gleaming gates.

protect

one another, so the babies can play in the streets

& every one makes it home. We. all in the balcón. hechando agua—limpiezas & baptisms. velando. the tools of colonia. que no lleguen al porton. que no encuentren, lo que buscan, unless its for me. si el rio suena, es por que agua trae, & mama, it may be because of me. & the exhibition I display of Librefuturismo.

make masterpieces—out of becoming la brava—like Mami—was talkin bout. lift your face. se audaz. dale cara, a la vida miya—its always been

a hard ass life. en mal tiempo, buena cara—look around—at the living room filled with crinkled eyes. let the grey show. chay la lou, let the hands held also be in dance, in calling over, in love, in another form of liberation. LIVE. in comraderie. knowing the names of your vecinos. in platos servidos. multicolor pan de mezcla made with 10 people pa vender for the parti on Sunday. The tia from two streets over, baby laughs interlacing its echoes with the music in the background. The miracles are now.

*forget heaven & its promises of gold*

## *Filling*

*Jonathan Fletcher*

I remember bright pink.  
And latexed fingers. A metallic sheen  
over pearly rows. I remember  
a dark hole in which I've often hidden.  
And the reflection of teeth  
open like a shark's. I remember  
the gentle voice behind the light blue mask:  
*There might be some discomfort.*

As fingered metal reached  
into my mouth, like a god might  
to animate his creation,  
I wanted to ask this coated creator  
whether they could also fix  
my tongue and accent.

The Spanish I garble, the family I lost  
like baby teeth.  
Cavities of memory,  
Perú extracted. A white filling,  
jawed resentment.  
Indigenous bite.

Grinding, grinding.

*Above The Pueblo*

*Mario Duarte*

The stars stutter  
My name but  
My tongue is  
A cactus, too  
Spiky to speak.

Only the solitary  
Coyote says what  
Had to be said—  
Howls why are  
You here? Why?

Because I am lost,  
Wandering, searching  
I ended up here,  
Talking to you,  
Asking for help.

Show me the way,  
Where do I belong,  
Coyote—there must  
Be more than just  
Wind-blown sand.

There in the sky,  
Watch the noon  
Time moon ache  
With all of her  
Bruised cheeks.  
Here is a tree  
That has not sipped  
Water in months—  
Here is the lizard  
Shadowing rock.

If I follow them,  
Will I know  
My place in this  
World, or is it  
Already too late?

Should I follow  
Your paw prints  
In the sand—claw  
My way forward  
Despite no claws?

What is beyond  
The palpitating sky, desert,  
Mesas, and boulders?

Who lives below

In the pueblo?

If I wander the streets

Will you greet me,

Friend, or walk

Past, no recognition

Of me inside you.



*Who Will Care for Your Bones?*

*Cris Hernández*

after *Mictecacihuatl*, by Emilia Cruz

As she swallows all the stars,  
the sky's light dims to cobalt—to obsidian.  
Skulls are stacked around her, phosphorescent moons—  
cold, empty spheres that she tends for eternity—  
ancestors lost to wars of faith, of avarice, of resistance;  
afflictions of the psyche that consume the body.

The dark belongs to her. She wears a face of bone  
so as not to frighten the dead—  
the same eyes, the same pallor,  
the same pale, opaque shroud draped  
over a frame of desert dried bones swishing  
in the breeze like the sound of passing clouds.

She will take your bony hands, lead you  
to bathe in the deep blue cenote, purify  
your bones as you descend  
through the smooth, soft water  
touching down in the sandy earth  
awaiting to be reborn.

## *Six Days*

*Patty Tacuri*

six days of violence and chaos a stone's throw away from us  
mami still sends us to school, even as protests turn into riots  
businesses are looted and burned, gunshots are fired  
mami acts like nothing is happening, even when my brother's friend  
shows up smiling with a stolen videotape  
mami shakes her head and continues cooking lomo saltado for dinner

six days of violence and chaos a stone's throw away from us  
and we are hushed when we start asking questions  
I only know that it has to do with a man named Rodney King  
and I tremble with fear at every loud sound  
while my sister puts on her headphones and blasts KISS FM in her ears to disappear  
and my brother tries his best to keep me entertained with sitcoms on the TV

six days of violence and chaos a stone's throw away from us  
at 11, I lose my innocence with the realization  
that the world is an unsafe place to live in  
at 11, I'm no longer in a rush to grow up anymore  
and hold on to the last vestiges of my childhood

## *Interview with Ilia Isorely's Paulino*

by Melissa Ashley Hernandez

Ilia Isorely's Paulino is best known for starring in the HBO Max series *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, from creator Mindy Kaling. She can also be seen as 'Captain Alvida' in Seasons 1 and 2 of the Netflix series *One Piece*. On the big screen, Ilia starred opposite Kevin Hart and Mark Wahlberg in the Netflix comedy *Me Time*, from writer/director John Hamburg; as well as the Netflix film *Family Switch* alongside Jennifer Garner. She can also be seen starring alongside Wanda Sykes in the live-action, animated hybrid *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie*. Next up, Ilia will be seen in the Apple TV limited series *Wild Things* with Jude Law and Andrew Garfield. A graduate of the David Geffen School of Drama at Yale, Ilia got her start with a role in the Paramount+ film *Queenpins*, starring Kristen Bell.



She is represented by SDB Partners, Authentic Talent and Literary Management and Hansen Jacobson.



To say only a few words about Ilia would be a disservice to the person she is. I have had the distinct pleasure of knowing this shining light of a human being for thirteen years now, and I count myself lucky to call her my friend. Throughout our seasons of friendship, I have watched her move through the world with a strong sense of justice, quick wit, relentless curiosity, and an intensely passionate heart. She has never been afraid of tough conversations, nor of answering difficult questions with candor.

When I reached out to ask if she'd be part of this issue, she said yes without hesitation. What followed wasn't simply a conversation about being a Latina actress in Hollywood. It became a conversation about language, belonging, curiosity, and the ways identity continues to evolve throughout life. Again and again, Ilia resisted easy answers. Instead, she offered something more generous: the reminder that identity isn't something we perform for others, but something we grow into with greater honesty over time.

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## **Ilia Isorelís Paulino on “Beyond My Latinidad”**

**WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE: Since you began your career, did you ever feel like you had to become “less Latina” (or even “more Latina”) to fit into the industry?**

ILIA ISORELÍS PAULINO: I think I’ve learned that the closer I get to who I actually am, the better my work gets. And the truth is, I’m Latina. Like... hella Latina. It’s not something I can turn up or turn down—it informs how I move through the world. So, it’s never really been about becoming less Latina or more Latina. It’s been about becoming more honest. And honestly? I don’t even love the phrase “fit into the industry.” I know what people mean when they say it, but... fuck trying to fit into the industry. I believe you make the space wherever you are, and if the work is truthful enough, the industry eventually comes to you.

**WWM: Do you ever find yourself performing differently depending on the language you’re speaking?**

IIP: Absolutely. Code-switching is real. It happens across languages, across cultures, across every part of life. The version of Ilia my mom gets is probably 90% Spanish. The version my sister gets is more of a mix. They’re all me, but different relationships unlock different parts of who I am. That’s what I love about language. It’s not just vocabulary—it’s a reflection of your inner world. No one person

has complete access to every part of you, and I actually think that’s beautiful.

**WWM: Has acting ever helped you reconnect with those parts of yourself, or does performing sometimes ask you to leave them behind?**

IIP: I think of acting like painting. Every character is a canvas, and your job is to help paint a story that everyone involved agrees is truthful. There are colors I have access to because I’m Dominican. Sometimes those colors belong in the painting, sometimes they don’t. It doesn’t even have to be a Dominican character. There are lived experiences, gestures, instincts, ways of loving or surviving that come from my culture that can deepen a performance. The audience may never identify those moments as specifically Dominican. Context changes everything. But hopefully they’ll recognize them as deeply human.

**WWM: Your heritage is something people often recognize first because you’re a visible Latina in Hollywood. But when you think about your Dominican identity, what part of it do you wish people talked about more?**

IIP: I honestly wish we talked less about me and more about the ecosystem. The interesting conversations aren’t just about representation—they’re about the systems that

shape representation. Racism. Colorism. Sexism. Classism. Power. I'm one person navigating an industry that existed long before me. I'm also a product of those structures. So I don't think it's my responsibility to represent every Dominican experience every time I play a character. But if my work can open the door to bigger conversations about those systems, that's what excites me.

**WWM: As you've built your career, have you found yourself protecting your identity from other people's expectations of what a Latina actress should be?**

IIP: The older I get, the less interested I am in protecting an idea of myself and the more interested I am in protecting my curiosity. People are always going to have expectations. They'll want you to be "this kind" of Latina or "that kind" of Latina. But Latinas contain multitudes. My responsibility isn't to meet other people's expectations. It's to keep becoming more myself.

**WWM: Do you think your Latina identity influences the kinds of stories you're drawn to, even when the characters themselves aren't Latino?**

IIP: Oh, absolutely. My Latina identity shapes who I am, so of course it shapes my taste. My taste buds aren't going to react the same way to Raisin Bran as they do to a coconete. I grew up with coconetes. That's part of my emotional vocabulary. The stories that move me, the

humor I love, the families I understand, the contradictions I'm interested in—they're all influenced by where I come from, even when the characters themselves aren't Latino.

**WWM: Which character have you played that you most relate to?**

IIP: Probably Nina in *The Seagull*. On the surface she's this classic ingénue, and at the time I hadn't really gotten to play many ingénues. But underneath all of that, she's just a girl trying to figure out love. And honestly... same. We've inherited so many strange ideas about love, especially when you grow up in a deeply religious environment where nobody really knows how to talk about sex—even though everyone obviously has feelings about it. Playing Nina let me reconnect with this incredibly hopeful, romantic part of myself. Turns out... my heart is such a little ingénue.

**WWM: What's a story about... maybe the Dominican experience, or the broader Latinx experience, that you've never seen told the way you'd like to tell it?**

IIP: I have one. And nobody's allowed to steal it! I'm obsessed with *Medea*, and one day I want to set it in the Dominican Republic. That's all I'm saying.

**WWM: When you look back at the path that's brought you here – from where you were born, to DeSales, to Yale, to NYC and**

**Hollywood – what part of yourself are you most grateful you never let go of?**

IIP: My appetite.

I've always had a huge appetite. And I don't just mean for food. I don't really speak publicly about my relationship with my body very much, but I've done a lot of healing. Looking back, I think what was underneath so much of it was that I have an enormous appetite for

life—for imagination, for feeling, for making things. Once I realized I could feed that hunger with art, everything changed. I remember thinking, "I should make work that feels the way cake tastes." That's still my compass. When a project satisfies me in that way—when it feels nourishing, joyful, expansive—I know I'm making the right thing. I'm grateful that I've healed my relationship with food without losing that appetite for life. I hope I never do.



## *The Love of Forgetting*

*Jonathan Fletcher*

*Cases of dementia in Perú are expected to rise from under 200,000 to over 740,000 by 2050.*

Forget Machu Picchu,  
the ruins of granite, the steps of green.  
Forget the calendar of stone,  
the “eyes” in the granite,  
a trapezoidal view of that yellow face of warmth.

Forget the chasquis,  
their feathered heads, alpaca to their knees,  
lightweight and woven.  
Forget the quipu, colorful and knotted,  
each chord a record, read  
by the thickness, length, and ply,  
the direction of each twist.

Forget the club and sling,  
the hollowed conches,  
each waiting to be filled by ancient Incan breaths.

Forget the cries  
in La Hospital Maternidad,  
the little brown mouths wanting to be heard  
as much as fed.

Forget even me if that could numb the loss,  
the reasons you left me,  
the time of your departure.

But remember the Nazca, the Colca, the Andes.

Remember the Pacific, the Amazon, yourself.



*el apagón meets Bwa Kale*

*Lysz Flo*

—matters are in the hands of each

Ayisyen

cada Boricua — cada caribeñe

con hacha y machete en Mano

who made Minga y Petraca leave

the voisin, the pitit, the tantann's go

no laughter, no joy, when sitting in a dark

caused by strangers & homegrown saboteurs

a country of coerced restarts & assimilation

no aguanta | one more day of compliance left

in the year 2030, there is an isle

surrounded by a few archipelagos

& it is green, El Yunque spreads & breathes in this island

breathing cleaner air

back we go to our beaches

all that stands against

the land, sus hijes, & caretakers,

barred | no more leeching,

mandao back to wherever they came from

the beneficiaries of ruin,

exiling THEM does the Criollos well

lakay se lakay

lakou yo plen

y todos regresamos a casa de afuera

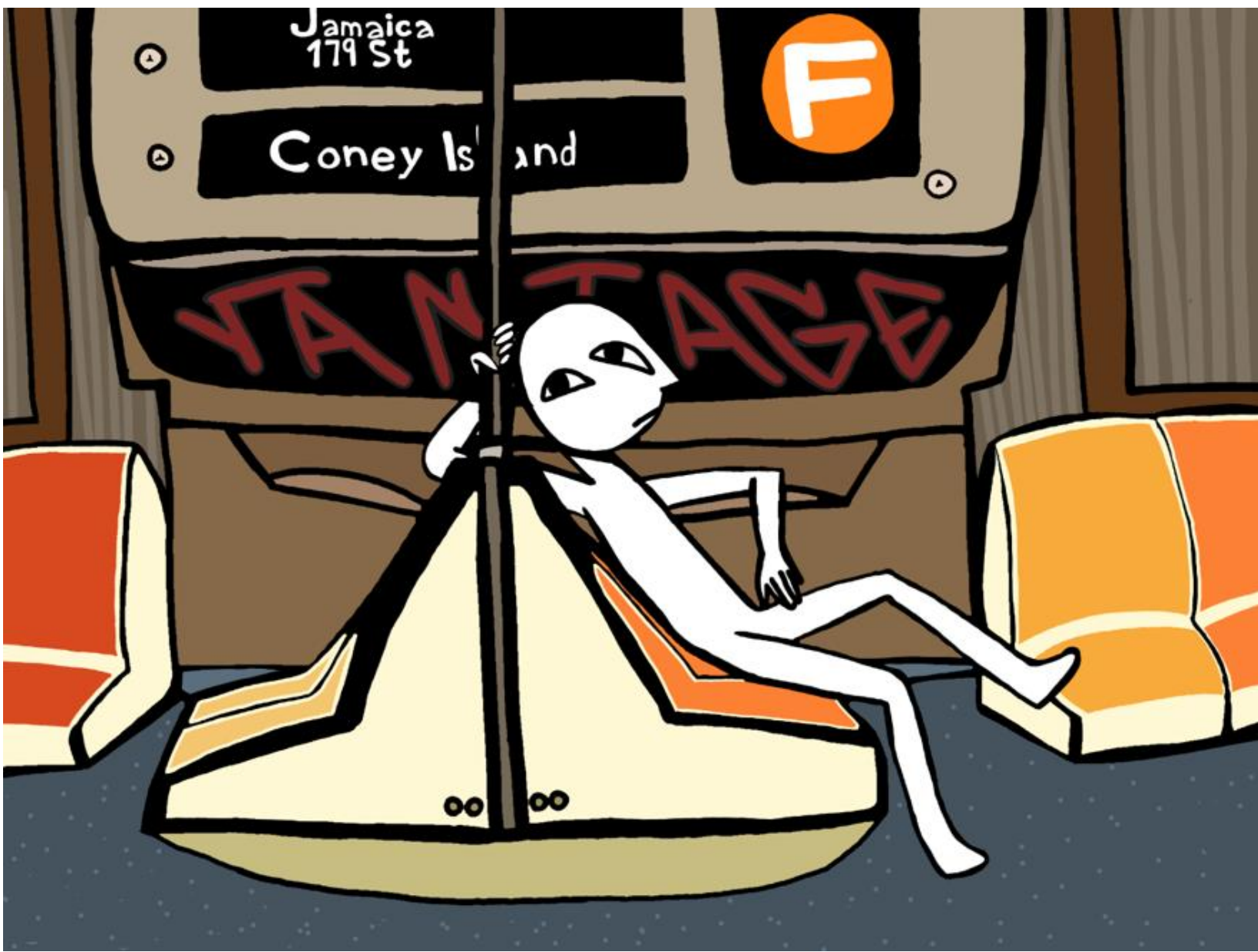
the coquis chorus

the hibiscus frondoso

the laughter fills the skies, the music rumbles the walls

novelas play through the vecina's balcón

the bal starts at 8 and ends at sunrise



## *Mestiza*

*Cris Hernández*

That would be me,  
your All-American-Girl.  
I was baptized and dedicated  
to San Martin,  
the illegitimate child  
of a Spanish “knight”  
and a Black Panamanian—  
the patron saint of those born  
of Mestizaje  
of those who live  
in mestizaje.

My mom never taught me  
how to make salsa—  
we had Herdez out of a can—  
but my friend Jeannie’s mom taught me  
how to make a mean teriyaki sauce—  
(the secret’s in the shot of American whiskey).

Mestiza—  
That would be me,  
your All-American-Girl—  
born in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico  
a dual citizen—a niña de la tierra,  
until my mom and dad decided

I'd make a good little Americanita.  
When my hair is long I get asked–  
“Are you Native American?”  
When I got my first short haircut,  
flannel shirt and Levi's jeans  
my mom and dad got asked,  
“Is that a boy or a girl?”

Now, I've been told I walk  
like my cousin Roberto–  
and Bob's a really cool guy,  
but he thinks I'm a little weird  
'cause I choose to stay in L.A.,  
where I grew up–  
All he sees is Disneyland  
and Hollywood,  
and Jack-In-The-Box,  
“May I take your order, puh-leeze?”  
He will not speak to a clown,  
so he just won't go there.

He teases me when I speak Spanish  
he says I have an 'American' accent,  
and I don't speak English  
with any accent at all,  
but you know what–  
he speaks con accento Chicano–

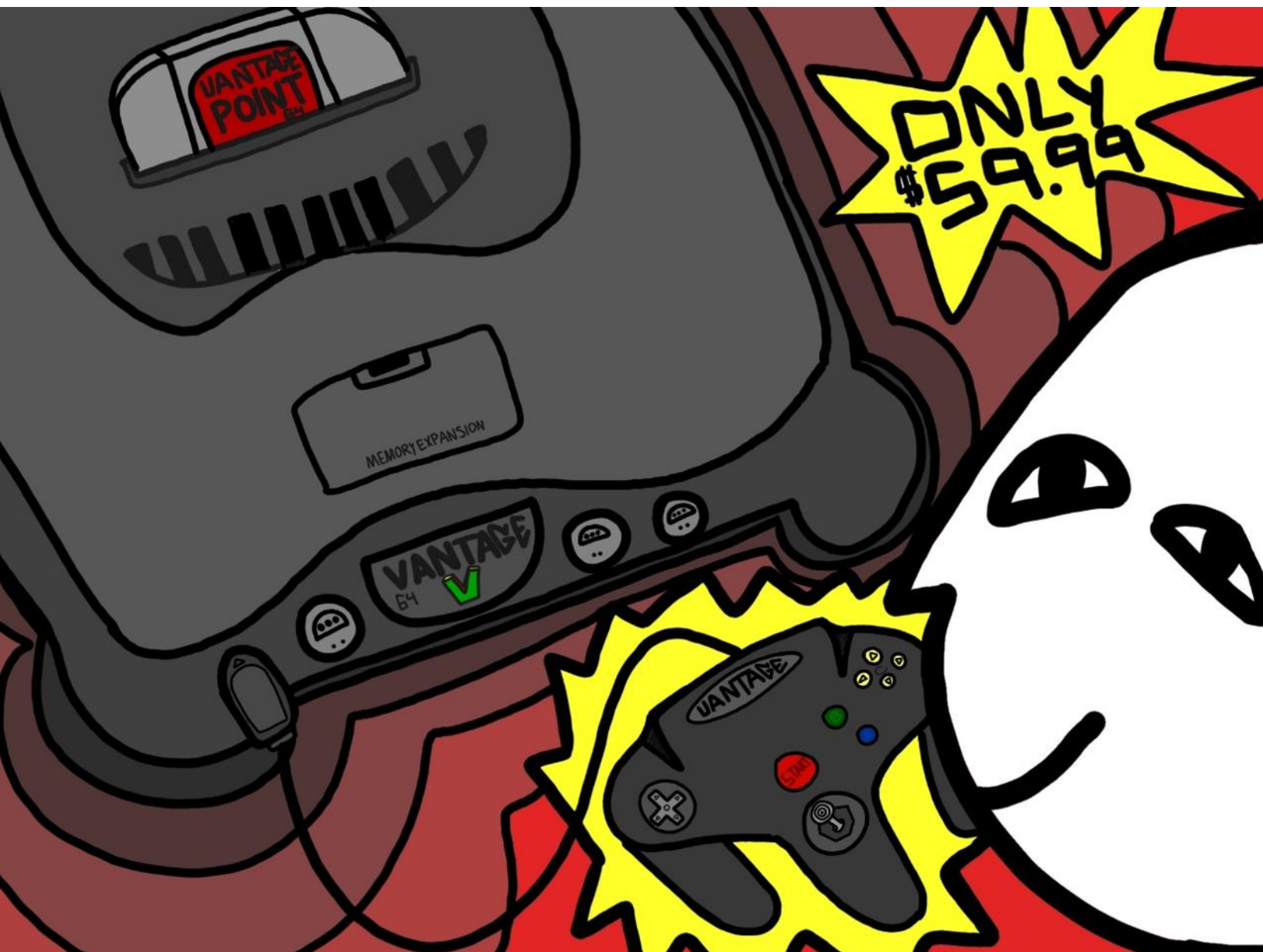
but hey–  
he ain't no Chicano.  
Punto.

He also thinks the Japanese  
are waging an economic war  
on his beloved Ford Motor Company,  
who has a maquiladora  
eighteen miles south of where he lives,  
en el 'otro lado' which happens to be  
the town where my mother and his mother  
were born.

Soy Mestiza,  
your All-American-Girl.  
My family claims that college has changed me  
made me into someone  
they don't know–  
I live in books and crazy theories–  
well they're right–  
I can't see the world around me  
like they do from Nogales, Arizona;  
I never could.  
I've never lived there.  
And I probably won't be buried there, either,  
even though there's a stone in the cemetery  
with my name already on it,

that my mother already paid for.

Yeah, that's me  
your All-American-Mestiza.  
As I quietly tend the roses  
in my own backyard,  
I can remember  
who I am.



*Pink*  
*Karen Baumgart*

Luisa's papa was a painter, the kind who breathed colour into bedrooms and kitchens, so naturally her first pink was a handful of cardboard swatches, fanned out like feathers sprouting between her tiny fingers. Of course, at three, Luisa couldn't yet read their curious names—*salmon* and *peony* and *flamingo* and *valentine*—but the gradient shades thrilled her heart, quickening its own damp crimson beating.

By the time she started school, Luisa could exhale plumes of frosted-pink into the chill morning, cheeks flushing with mottled strawberries at her classmates' taunts; by her *quinceañera*, she could tint white lilies simply by dipping long fingers into the glass vases, pink rippling from stem to petal like a sunrise; by her first semester of art college, she could brush her cheek upon a blank canvas, leaving rosy streaks pearled across the slubbed fabric.

Pink trembled within her, heavy and urgent. All around her, the world thirsted for shades of love and romance and fairy-tale-castles, as though this were a cure for illness and grief and despair...and so, Luisa moved from one person to the next, smoothing away their pain with gentle palms. In a fairy tale, there'd have been no end to the salve bleeding from her fingertips, rivulets of liquid rose marking each forehead in a silent benediction, not even when Luisa's own lips and cheeks began to fade, her hands growing pale and cold. In a fairy tale, her papa would have looked up from his sorrow at each day's end, would have seen she was still there in the shy blush of the setting sun.

*Rusty nails in the heel of our ascension*

*Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi*

1. As if being American was [ ever ] attainable.
2. As if we could wish ourselves out of poverty [ with sweat and love ].
3. As though our [ light-ish? ] skin shielded others from hearing the ever-so-slightness on our tongues.
4. As if las lenguas de mis padres were not the most glorious [ of echoes ].
5. As though we misspelled our own names, teachers side-eyeing us while erasing their [ correct/ed ] assumptions.
6. As if the virus was our own [ master ].
7. As if we weren't [ carriers of ] an ancient disease, [ a rag of ] hollowed-out victims,
8. Homogeneous [ strains ].

*Sitting in between Choublak & Amapola is the Planet Woz Quartz and the table is set*  
*Lysz Flo*

Echoes of *pass the...* fills the gaps  
cackles & bangles clang in tandem with forks  
hands motion, steam rises, the blessing spoken  
Altars served first, for past & present  
space rides parked, moon beams mega magenta  
*Bless all the types Diri, Rice, Arroz*  
sing | rejoice in this starry spread scenery



*The Jaguar Café*  
*Zai M. Maristela*

Jaguar paws fall heavy on the jungle's floor, disturbing moonlit puddles. When did I choose to follow the creature? I've forgotten, but it doesn't matter. Not when the giant cat is leading me to a childhood dream, the jaguar café beneath the ceiba tree. All are welcomed there. The living, dead, and creatures who are neither.

"There, los antepasados serve up memories and drinks hot enough to warm the dead," my bisabuela once said, but the memory halts my weary steps.

Strange. She did say those words, but not in that tongue. My bisabuela spoke a different, forgotten language, and its corpse rusts in my mouth. As bad as forgetting tastes, remembering is worse.

What did I forget, though?

It doesn't matter, as long as I remember bisabuela's story.

Humid heat strikes my hand, the jaguar's impatient snort. Its eyes, two curious suns, set on me.

"Apologies," I say. "Lead the way."

Silent paws circle me once. Its fangs spark in the moonlight, and the yawning jaguar plops onto the jungle floor.

Of course. Cats can't be told what to do, and I'm on this jaguar's time. Waiting is easy though when the jungle sings this tune. Coquí frogs whistle lullabies. Rustling fronds swish a swaying beat. And the song's lyrics roll from a voice deep as cenotes.

A woman sings in the tongue of my bisabuela, words striking hard as a war drum and snapping my patience. Someone remembers the language I forgot.

No, I never forgot. I wasn't allowed to learn—but why?

I chase the voice, jaguar at my heels. My bisabuela sang this very song, and anyone who knows it is as good as family. I shove aside fronds wide as a man is tall, and stumble onto a road flattened by traveler's feet. At its end stands a ceiba tree tall as mountains.

The canopy brushes against the full moon. Roots tall as temples weave far and wide, holding back the wilds. Tucked between their sweeping walls, the Jaguar Café of bisabuela's stories.

If I could breathe, or my heart could beat, the sight would stop both.

Jaguars prowl between the low tables, and staff bustles behind a counter built from the roots. People sit upon woven mats holding hollowed gourds. Clacking sprinkles between the voices, dominoes shuffled by hands as gnarled as the ceiba's bark. Children attempt to catch flicking cat tails with chubby fingers or nap cuddled with cubs of gold and midnight.

In the center, a fire burns. People gather around its flames. Tangling languages unfurl and yank my cherished memories to the surface.

Children, sitting around the fire. Me, fighting to keep my eyes open for one more story.

The song I followed breaks on a note soft as waves upon the sand. The singer stands from a mat woven with starlight and laid between the café's entrance and the jungle.

"Mabrika. Welcome."

Her voice is deep as the caverns from which our ancestors emerged. Hair spun from midnight, and skin brown as mine, she could be family. She knows the language, and that makes her safe to approach.

Where did I learn that lesson from?

"Our café soothes weary souls, both living and dead," she says. "Your cup is waiting."

A strangled sound rumbles in my throat, and I swallow it. Do I even know how to talk to other people anymore, or only wild animals? She glides away, and the jaguar at my side has no hesitations. Its tail slaps my leg, and it follows. Only a fool would fail to heed a jaguar's beckoning, and the fire burns bright as the hearth stoked by my mamá.

I've missed her.

"Xaniki!" Voices call the singer's name.

She's engulfed by smiles, hugs, and ghosts—the antepasados my bisabuela promised.

The spirits appear whole, until they move too suddenly. A flicker, brilliant as moonlight on ocean waves, sparks beneath their form. And they're everywhere! Behind the counter. Fighting off cubs' attacks upon unattended drinks. Floating over tables and taking orders from the living and dead.

I'm not like those shimmering ghosts, though. I'm too broken, and far too cold.

I weave between tables and mats, mouth watering from the caramelized aroma of roasting beans. Children chasing mischievous cubs trip me, their giggles floating up to the whispering leaves. Wherever shadows persist, fireflies dance in glass orbs for lighting. Elder felines favor those tables, curled around kneeling guests.

Against the ceiba's trunk, the staff's work area is crowded by ghosts pulling strange levers on stranger contraptions sleek as moonlight. It hisses, steam bursting out in thick, lingering clouds. Mortars line the counter, and abuela's wrinkled hands brush through my thoughts.

She taught me how to grind herbs until their scent grew potent enough to taste on my tongue. This memory still tastes sweet. Why have I been hiding in the jungle, running from what I'd forgotten, when remembering could taste like this?

I slip onto an empty stool. Humid warmth rolls over the counter, curling against the ice in my soul. I sink into its embrace and watch the ghosts grinding beans or pouring drinks. One swoops out of the chaos and places a steaming gourd before me.

"I didn't order yet," I say.

The words melt off my tongue easy as honey despite my earlier fears. The ghost winks and drifts away.

Xaniki did say they'd have a drink waiting.

Between my palms, the gourd is smooth as pearls plucked from the ocean. Ripples dance through the foam art, breaking it into swooping arcs wide as the ceiba's roots. It smells earthy, like my papá's hands after toiling in the soil.

I've missed him the longest.

The first sip is hot as the summer sun on my skin after a swim in cold springs. The second, soothing as mamá's kiss upon my brow after nightmares. Between each sip, the aftertaste sits heavy, like those afternoons napping in hammocks while the elders spun song and thread.

How could I have forgotten so much? Guilt runs in frigid currents, but the memories are too warm to be frozen away once more. Bisabuela holding me by the fire as my parents' laughter sings me to sleep. Chasing friends through the jungle, and cousins teaching me to climb the trees.

I swallow the last drop, and a new drink is set before me by a living man. A warrior. He leans a broad arm onto the counter, steaming clouds shoved aside. Red, angry scars mottle the flesh where his other arm has been cut away. Whatever happened had been violent, and lightning tears jagged paths through my thoughts.

I've seen this before, but I refuse to remember why.

"Ready to close out your tab?" The warrior asks, gesturing to the new drink.

"Oh, I apologize..." Embarrassment tightens my throat.

"Kachí," he says, voice steady as stone.

"I apologize Kachí. I'm dead? I don't have money."

"I'm not collecting payment," he says. "Closing your tab means remembering what you've been hiding from out there."

His lips pucker, pointing to the darkness swallowing the world beyond the café.

"Drink this and remember, or don't and leave your tab open," he says. "Until you close it though, you'll only find forgetfulness out there, but maybe that's what your soul needs."

So, that's where I've been? Resting in those forgetful spaces between life and death, waking and dreaming. Alone, but it allowed those scattered pieces of my soul to return. So why do I still feel so broken?

"We'll be here when you're ready to remember everything, or," Kachí lifts his hands, "if you need a drink from a friendly hand."

Despite the muscles, his grin is boyish. His words are too weighted to smile beneath, though. Remember everything? Trying to remember stings worse than a rusted needle through the tongue and tastes no better. But sitting here alone, while ghost and families huddle close, an ache claws at my soul. It hurts more in a way.

"I remember my family," I say. "Isn't that enough?"

"Not if you want to continue on." Kachí shrugs. "You'll need all your memories before you can walk through the underworld or visit the living."

That's why I'm not like the busy ghosts at Kachí's back. Life broke me, and the pieces are out of order. The picture incomplete. Forgotten. Without all my memories, I can't put my soul back together, but do I even want to?

Will I break again?

"What's in the underworld?" I ask.

The ghosts behind him part for the singer, Xaniki. Kachí's broad muscles go rigid. She leans onto the counter next to him, her arm where Kachí's missing limb would rest. At her touch, every hard line of him softens.

They're a pair, and within Xaniki's stomach, starlight glows. She's pregnant, and the light brightens the world. Brightens my smile.

"The underworld has everyone you've loved," she says. "Your friends and family."

A beat shudders through me, soft as a heartbeat, and shakes loose a tickling hope. My family? Mamá, papá, and friends whose names I've forgotten.

"And there will be life," Kachí says. "An afterlife."

"A ghost can live again?"

Xaniki and Kachí nod. The pair of them, and those gathered around the fire, remind me of an existence I'd longed for in life. One filled with family and community. The entire village raised me, and I wanted to do the same. To help shape life for the better for all who would come after me.

I won't find that out there where I'd been before the jaguar found me.

"I'll close my tab," I say, and swallow the drink too fast to taste more than the blistering heat of summer suns.

Of raging infernos.

Flames lick my heels, fires set by the hands of invaders. These are the memories I've run from for so long. And in them, more running. Men with raised weapons run to the fires as children and elders scatter into the jungle's shadows.

My small hands cling to mamá's neck—bibi I'd called mamá before the invaders forbid the language. She clutches me in a serpent's vice.

"Baba!" My scream pierces the night.

We leave papá—baba I'd called him first—behind to fight and slow the invaders. To die.  
Mamá's tears roll down my back, but she doesn't turn back.

No matter how far or long we run, smoke follows thick enough to blot out falling stars, but never the fallen bodies. Elders beaten to death when they fail to speak the new tongue. Cousins sold like livestock and taken away in large boats upon the sea. Our temples, villages, and way of life shatter.

Without the healers, childbirth complications steal my mamá and the baby. A strange illness takes my friends and bisabuela. My abuela follows.

I'm the last of my family, and I do not escape the illness's touch either.

I lie on a sick-house's floor with the dead. My mouth parched, but the fever is gone. It's left me too weak to stand, even as strange voices rise outside. They speak the invader's language and argue over who should go in to check for survivors. No one wants to risk getting sick.

Good. I'd rather lay with the dead than stand in their presence.

No one comes to check, and I never have to suffer their attention again. They pull the stones down and bury me alive, but I'm too tired to mourn or rage.

I'm not tired anymore.

A hurricane of emotions rage. Tears rain, and the gourd snaps between my clutched fingers. Sorrow lashes in whipping strikes brutal enough to tear apart islands, but I stay at the counter.

No more running.

They broke my soul but never destroyed it. They buried my body but never my spirit. It stirs, flickering silver bright as moonlight on dancing waves. Restless, not to run away, but onwards. Towards life. An afterlife.

"Ready for a new journey?"

A different warrior leans against the counter. Restless energy thrums in her lean form, sleek as the jaguars prowling around the ceiba's tables. She shoves off the counter and beckons me to follow.

"I'm Huracá," she says, "and I'll show you the way."

"To where?" I ask.

"That's your choice," Huracá says.

She leads me between the tangle of swooping roots, down into the cavernous earth. Weaving into bridges, the roots carry us across underground lakes lit by bioluminescence. Bats squeak, eyes sparking like stars in the strange glow of crystals. A beat accompanies our steps. It's a comforting rhythm, sweet as a mother's heartbeat heard from within the womb.

At the bridge's end, we stop at a crossroad. Huracá whistles and a human form materializes on the left road, but they're not human. The face is silver as the full moon. Horns peek out from dark curls upon their head. Jaguar fangs wink in their smile, but it's without menace. This smile is all charmed mischief, like a trickster-spirit from myths.

"This vejigante," Huracá winks, "can show you how to make that good type of mischief and help our descendants correct generations of injustices."

"We are going to have fun," the vejigante says, voice smooth as rivers, and I'm tempted to be swept away.

"As always you move too fast," Huracá tuts. "There's still another choice."

On the opposite road, a woman steps forward in cotton skirt my mamá or tías would have worn. Red paint adorns her face, skin golden as sunsets.

"You could also spend time with Yucaché," says Huracá, gesturing to the woman's kind smile. "She'll cleanse your spirit before you descend further into the underworld where you will reunite with those who named you."

A song rises in my soul sung by my parents' voices braided into a tether tugging me home.

"I know you're sweet on Yucaché," says the vejigante, smile sparking at Huracá's blushing, "but your bias is showing."

The vejigante's eyes, two jewels bright as a jaguar's snap to me.

"The choice isn't final," they say. "You can always return to these crossroads and choose another road."

"Yes, yes, yes," Huracá bats the words away, or fans the heat in her cheeks. "The ceiba tree will always stand. You may come back for a drink or to choose a new path, but what will you choose now?"

Smirking at the mischief they've caused, the vejigante rocks on their heel as they wait. Huracá and Yucaché try to catch the other's gaze, both red in the cheeks.

Justice or family? I can choose without doubt or fear now I have my memories, both the good and bad. When things change, a new choice can be made. No situation or suffering is eternal.

"Thank you all," I say, and above, bats mimic my voice.

Wings flap away, messengers no doubt carrying my words to Xaniki and Kachí as well.

I take my first step onto the road of my choosing, and this time, I'm running towards what I want.



## Meet the Editor-in-Chief

**Melissa Ashley Hernandez** is a Latinx writer, editor, and performer from the South Jersey/Philadelphia area. She has her BA in Acting and Directing, and two MFAs in Creative Writing and Publishing from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She is also the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Wild Willow Magazine, formerly The Minison Project!

Her prose can be found in two short stories published in 2021, “The Rum Keg Girl” in the Cemetery Gates Media collection, *Paranormal Contact: A Quiet Horror Confessional*, and “Lady Killer” in Volume 4 of Kandisha Press’ Women of Horror Anthology, *Don’t Break the Oath*.

Her poetry can be found in *the minison zine*, The Daily Drunk Magazine, Fahmidan Journal, and Bandit Fiction, among others.

## Wild Willow Magazine

Formerly The Minison Project, Wild Willow Magazine is a literary magazine founded by Melissa Ashley Hernandez that intertwines nature and the human experience, showcasing the wonderful, weird, and wild aspects of the human condition.



## Contributor Bios

**Cris Hernández** is a Mestiza, queer, working class, lesbian, feminist who currently lives and writes in Long Beach, California. Her poems have appeared in; *The Blue Mouse*, *Las Girlfriends*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Jota*, *Lodestar*, the *Peralta Press*, *Saga*, and the anthologies *What Rough Beast*, by *Culture Matters*, and *Forever Songs: An Anthology of Music Poetry*. She has hosted poetry venues at *Huntley Bookstore*, part of the *Claremont Colleges*, *Cal State University, Long Beach* for *Women's History Month*, and *Sacred Grounds*, a coffee house in *San Pedro, CA*, as well as featured at *Beyond Baroque* and on *NPR* amongst other community venues. She has taught in the *History and Women's Studies* departments and served as a staff person until her retirement from *Cal State University, Long Beach* at the end of 2020.

**Cynthia Via** is a Peruvian writer, educator and editor living in Maryland. She explores feminine angst, the duality of motherhood, and the confluence between nature and emotions with writings published or forthcoming in *Yellow Arrow*, *Angel City Review*, *The Acentos Review*, *Write or Die*, *Grace & Gravity*, among others. She is a graduate of the *VONA Voices* and *Tin House Workshops*. Currently, a submission reader and editor for *Trio House Press*. During off hours, she spies on birds and performs stand-up.

**Ilia Isorely's Paulino** is best known for starring in the HBO Max series *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, from creator *Mindy Kaling*. She can also be seen as 'Captain Alvida' in Seasons 1 and 2 of the Netflix series *One Piece*. On the big screen, Ilia starred opposite *Kevin Hart* and *Mark Wahlberg* in the Netflix comedy *Me Time*, from writer/director *John Hamburg*; as well as the Netflix film *Family Switch* alongside *Jennifer Garner*. She can also be seen starring alongside *Wanda Sykes* in the live-action, animated hybrid *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie*. Next up, Ilia will be seen in the Apple TV limited series *Wild Things* with *Jude Law* and *Andrew Garfield*. A graduate of the *David Geffen School of Drama at Yale*, Ilia got her start with a role in the *Paramount+* film *Queenpins*, starring *Kristen Bell*. She is represented by *SDB Partners*, *Authentic Talent and Literary Management* and *Hansen Jacobson*.

**Jonathan Fletcher** holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from *Columbia University School of the Arts*. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals, including *Funicular*, *Epiphany*, and *The Plentitudes*. A *Pushcart Prize*, *Best of the Net*, and *Best Microfiction* nominee, he won *Northwestern University Press's Drinking Gourd Chapbook Poetry Prize* contest in 2023, for which his debut chapbook, *This is My Body*, was published in 2025. Currently, he serves as a *Zoeglossia* Fellow and lives in *San Antonio, Texas*.

**Karen Baumgart** lives in *Australia* and adores beautiful quotes, pink things, cats and chai lattes. She loves it when people geek out on a random thing that makes their heart sing. Karen used to be an *English teacher* and is quite certain that writing is the best therapy.

**Keila Bueno** is a mother, wife, and a New York licensed funeral director. Her love for photography began in the millennial digital camera era and has turned into a passion for preserving memories for her family. As a Dominican woman, learning more about her Taino ancestry has transformed the way she sees the Caribbean. Looking up to the magnificent ceiba tree in Puerto Rico (photographed), she was reminded that the islands are connected by more than just water; sharing history, resilience, culture, and blood.

**Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi** (she/ella) is a biracial Latina (Puerto Rican, plus Italian) writer, professor (decolonial theologian), and ordained minister (the non-scary kind) from Colorado. She is the 2026 Writing in Color Fellow with the Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver and winner of Fragmentation Magazine's micro fiction contest. Kristina's work has been published in *wildscape*, *Azarão Lit Journal*, and *Zimmer Magazine*, among others.

**Lysz Flo** (she/her) is a Haitian Puerto Rican, polyglot, Polydisciplinary artist, Ignyte Awards CNF Finalist, podcast host, Speculative Tin House Fall Fellow 2025, Voodoonauts Summer 2020 Fellow and Obsidian Black Listening 2022 Fellow and Ignyte Awards Winner of CNF. She released her poetry novel *Soliloquy of an Ice Queen*, March 2020. She is a teaching artist since 2020 with Grubstreet among others. Her poems can be found in *FIYAH*, *Hellebore*, *Lowle*, and *Strange Horizons*.

**Mario Duarte** is an Iowa Writers' Workshop alumnus. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Hole In The Head*, *Huizache*, and *Peruse Lit*, and more is forthcoming in *Midwest Quarterly*. He is the author of poetry, *To the Death of the Author*, and short stories, *My Father Called Us Monkeys*.

**Patty Tacuri** resides in Athens, GA. She's an immigrant from Peru and raised in the United States. She has a blog called *Life on the BPD*, where she talks about various topics ranging from relationships to mental health to politics. She writes poetry to process the intense emotions that come with having mental illness. It is reflective of the experiences she's had as a working-class Latinx first-generation millennial woman with mental health issues. In her free time, she spends time with her friends and kids, writes poetry, blogs, and goes to open mic to perform her poetry.

**Steven Hernandez** is a multimodal creative who enjoys capturing moments in time. He has a degree in Psychological Science, but expresses himself through art such as painting, music, and photography.

**Vantage** is an explorer, photographer, artist, and writer.

**Zai M. Maristela** (she/her) grew up in the rural U.S. South, where being called "too loud" and "too brown" convinced her she wasn't out of place, but stolen from somewhere far more magical. After family secrets came to light, Zai began reconnecting with her Boricua heritage and making her voice louder through storytelling. When she isn't writing, Zai can be found carrying a picket sign in one hand, a toddler in the other, or dreaming up ghosts and girls who get what they want with a bit of magic.





