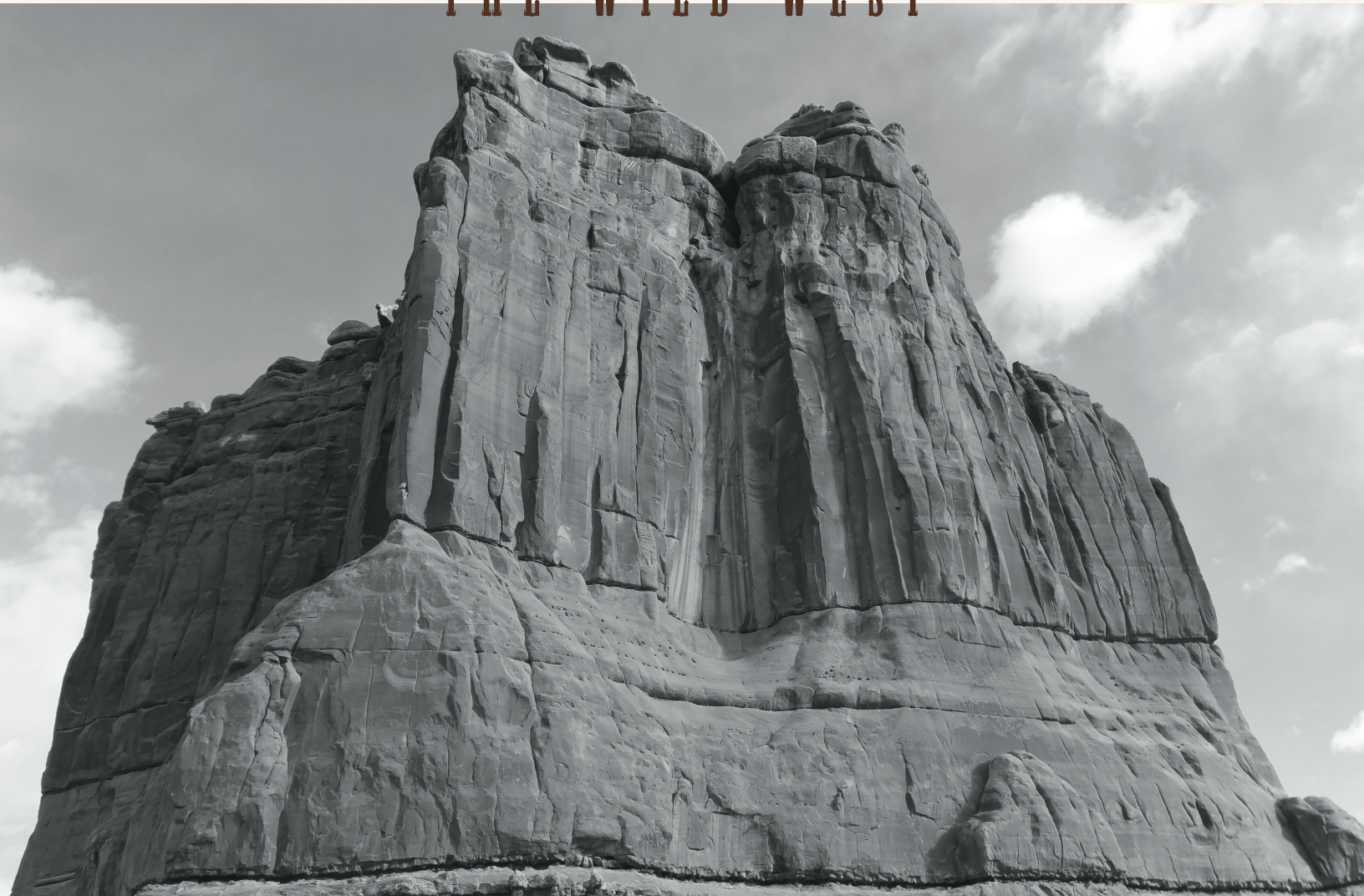


Issue 26 | Summer 2020

The broken



THE WILD WEST



ISSN 1916-3304

The broken



Summer 2020 Issue 26

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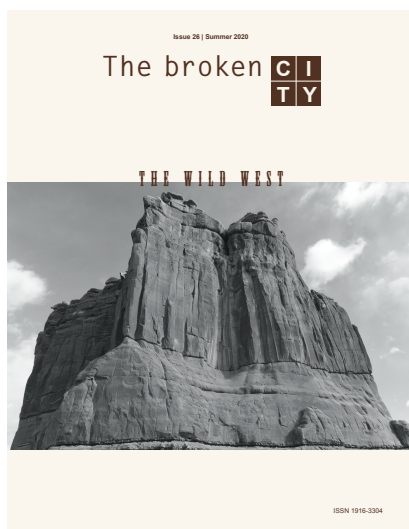
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In this issue:



Welcome to *The Broken City's* Western issue. Saddle up; we're headed for Oregonian trails, and lustng for gold. Plenty of Bison bison in these parts. Cattlemen, gunslingers and word slingers too. Time to acknowledge the corn.

Cover Photograph:

Jay Waters (cover, page 14) is a photographer and writer from McCalla, Alabama. Jay's emphasis is on simplicity and serendipity, so all of his photos come from his phone, with minimal processing. Jay looks for the happy coincidence of life, light and camera. Jay's photos have been published in a number of print and online journals, most recently *The Dallas Review*, *Saw Palm*, *Florida Literature and Art* and *Passengers Journal*. More of Jay's work can be found at noodlephotos.com.

Contents:

Poetry 3

Short Stories 9

The Broken City is currently accepting submissions for its winter 2020 edition: I Know What You Did Last Pandemic.

It was inevitable; the magazine is running a COVID-19 special. We're looking for anything and everything related to COVID—what you did; what you saw; what life is like now.

Send poetry, fiction, essays, illustrations and photography to thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com.

Deadline is: November 15, 2020. Submitters will be contacted after that date, with news of acceptance or rejection.

Oregon Trail

Lily Emerick

The drive to Baker City is dry, the pavement
curdling like milk left out in the sun. Before
the highway there were lines of covered wagon
inching along, their barrel-vault tops
scattered as if a disassembled cathedral,
the mountain-crowned horizon both nave
and altar, and for some, a grave. My ancestors
were in assembly, their dirt-lined palms grasping
roped oxen, pulling at the waterless blue
of the sky. No trees—even now, the great-horned owl
takes refuge under the interpretive center,
its amber eyes like embers among the air
conditioning units. I pass wagon ruts that seven
generations ago a far-removed grandparent
walked beside on his way to the Tualatin Valley.
We are all valley people now, my family,
and standing here on this far eastern ridge
makes me long for rain in a way I can't express,
only feel in my bones, and I think I might
want it enough to cross mountain ranges
just to rinse the dust from my mouth. Or that
is how I imagine him feeling, Solomon,
after months of prairie, when Missouri finally was just
a name, and flour and sugar a memory. Still,
the summer I turned twenty I drove this same
route, wandering in the Wallowa Mountains
for a week. Elk bugling outside my tent
were the closest thing to civilization. I felt that
unwanted truth, that humans are just
another animal, something the pioneers must have
been painfully aware of, like an abscessed tooth
the tongue won't let rest. How quickly we build up
sediment between generations, now my parents
work in a city office building with brass
-grated elevators, and I can't even cook dried beans
without googling it, I am so used to pouring them
plump and ready from a can. How I, both times on the return
west, let myself think only of the song on the radio,
of the sunset refracting off the windshield's dust.

Lily Emerick is an eighth-generation Oregonian residing in the Willamette Valley. She works as an organic farmer and is happiest in the soil or with a book in her hand. She holds a Bachelor of Architecture and a BA in Spanish, with a concentration in literature. This is her debut publication.

Gold Lust

Susan G. Duncan

I finished the trip of my grandfather's father
the pull of rumored gold
the shove of poverty and shame
he's eighteen and short a father
who'll claim him
so he has his mother's name
till a shipboard change
to Grayston
surname of the man to blame
for their emigration.

I finished the trip of my grandfather's father
as his gold lust drove him inland
just three hundred miles
short some three thousand to the Pacific
took him only so far
as the Erie Canal
where a Suffolk stonemason
could be put to good use
and here he rests his unwed mother
(his aunt on the crossing)
in a TB ward.

He never reached the gold fields
left no legacy
just an unlikely tale
of buried treasure
on an Ontario lakeshore
where his great nephew
searched with earnest single-mindedness—
unmet by success—
while the family roots drew deeper
in river silt
for another two generations.

I finished the trip of my grandfather's father
it took a century and a quarter
and a weeklong road trip
and though the mines have surely played out
my sun now sets
in a golden ocean
my sun sets
in a golden state.

Susan G. Duncan is now an independent consultant with performing and visual arts clientele, capping a long career in arts administration. She served as executive director for San Francisco's long-running Beach Blanket Babylon, the al fresco California Shakespeare Theater, and Grammy-winning ensemble Chanticleer. Her poetry appears in Atlanta Review, Crack the Spine, The London Reader, The MacGuffin, Soundings East, and Yalobusha Review, among others, and in anthologies by Sixteen Rivers Press and Red Claw Press.

North Dakota Badlands

Karla Linn Merrifield

bluebirdbison

junipersage

bentonitelignite

oxbowcoulee

If I do not succumb
to blue clay
I will become prairie wind

Whoa, Sissy Boy, Whoa

Karla Linn Merrifield

Hold yer citified horse's ass.
Watch yer pony's step,
that there's bentonite,
volcanic crap, slick as shit.
Shut yer sorry eastern trap,
that's there's the Little Mo
in quicksand season
with sticky prickly pears
an' cottonwoods gone to gold.
Keep yer eye steady,
yer gonna bang
one of the last Bison bison
on the range.

This here's Dakota badlands,
this here's rough ridin',
this here's bully country.

Go ahead, Teddy, shoot.

Karla Linn Merrifield has 14 books to her credit, including Athabaskan Fractal: Poems of the Far North (Cirque Press, 2019) and is currently writing a new poetry book, My Body the Guitar, to be published by Before Your Quiet Eyes Holograph Series (Rochester, NY) in 2021.

Buffalo Buffalo Buffalo

Robert Manaster

Rain no rain

mauve

dark edgeless clouds

smoked from West

grouped in packs

buffalo buffalo buffalo

in Great Plains of early evening sky

with grey-green

mist or dust

smudged below and above

Unshaded windows

opened packed boxes stacked

in middle of bare

family room

East Central Iowa

no rain but thunder

like unheard of

unseen

buffalo buffalo buffalo

young men shoulder-loose

in t-shirts and Wranglers

drags of smoke

drawn-out talk

city memories

of West Side factory and bars

men who vow to stay in touch

Under porch
middle-aged man
firm with drink
stampede of rain on ground shed Buick
buffalo buffalo buffalo
stares that roam ahead
past the church through soaked cornfields
into sky's edgeless evening

Robert Manaster's poetry has appeared in numerous journals including Rosebud, Birmingham Poetry Review, 300 Days of Sun, Wisconsin Review, and Into the Void. He has also published poetry book reviews in such publications as Rattle, Colorado Review, and New Orleans Review. His website is robertmanaster.net.

The Cattleman

Algo

That Yankee bullet in your leg
Plays up now and then like an unruly calf on the grazing trail
Driven west,
Like you. Every night making the same fire
In a different place.
Your reflection is only familiar, if half shaved, in a slowly rusting canteen.

Algo is 40 and from Ireland. In self-imposed self-isolation, Algo only wears black and enjoys studying the School of Austrian economics, reading comic books and meditating. Believes organized religion is a club but is not nihilistic.

JUST PRINT THE LEGEND

John Grey

Such lovely teeth in an age
of painfully crude dentistry.
Without drills, fillings, crowns,
not even a molecule of fluoride in the water,
the woman's mouth is a miracle.
No wonder the handsome deputy
is so eager to plant his lips on hers.
It's not love surely.
Just the wild hope
that a set of perfect ivory is catching.

Implausibility, anachronism,
without them, the west was just
an off-kilter shooting gallery of drunken bums,
smelly cowboys, pox-riddled whores,
thieves, rustlers and degenerate lawmen.

But movies are kind to history.
The women are beautiful,
perfumed to the gills,
done out in Paris fashions.
The men are clean-shaven
or, if bearded, not through lack of razors
but as a statement of intent.
It's a world of heroism
where white hat means good guy,
black hat, villain.
And pre-Peckinpah, the dead don't even bleed.

Yes, lies have been kind to
the history of the west.
So John Wayne says.
"Smile when you say that pardner."
With those teeth, why not.

*John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident.
Recently published in Sin Fronteras, Dalhousie
Review and Qwerty, with work upcoming in
West Trade Review, Willard & Maple and
Connecticut River Review.*

Taking Sides

Berengaria di Rossi

Whose side are you on?

The night wind had died down, silencing the rattling of the loose lower pane in the front window. Jake's shadow hunched and fretted like something out of a ghost story, blackening out the bookcase, the sideboard, Annie's sewing basket and the open doorway to the room beyond.

It's not that easy, Jake, Clyde had answered.

The wood in the hearth cracked and fell, sending up a squall of heat and embers. It would have to be raked up or it would go out before midnight, but Clyde didn't dare move. Twitchy as he was, Jake could take anything the wrong way. Even the innocent reaching for a damned fire poker.

The hell it ain't. I'm here, O'Connell's there, and you're standin' right between us. Soon you ain't gonna be able to stand still no more, Clyde. You're gonna have to take a step towards me, or a step away from me.

Jake ran a hand over his face, the scraping of his fingernails on several days' growth of beard like an attempt to strike a match.

You ain't just gonna be able to stand there anymore, Clyde, that sheriff's star protectin' you. There's gonna come a time when that star ain't gonna be nothing more than a shiny piece of tin on your shirt. The Lord as my witness, you gonna have to choose a side, and that right soon.

What are you talking about?

He chewed on his lip, scolding himself a fool for not having brought out his pistols when Jake had come banging on his front door so late.

Jake stopped pacing. He looked like he'd been awake for too long and

hadn't eaten well for longer. His bandana was discolored, a button missing from his calico shirt.

I'm telling you what's comin'. A step towards me, or a step away... That's what it's gonna come down to. Just one step. And I'm telling you, it'd better be toward me. 'Cause if it's away...

He'd shaken his head. When they were boys, Clyde had always taken Jake's side no matter what he'd done. But Jake never could see beyond his own nose and the end of that afternoon. He'd never come to understand that situations were sometimes more complicated than an honest man could cope with.

"Sheriff? Think you might want to see this." Deputy McRay stood in the doorway of Clyde's office, hat tipped back and brow furrowed.

The vision of the night visit from Clyde's brother melted away, disappearing like spilt ink into the cracks between the floorboards. He set the front legs of his chair down on the floor with a thump. Noontime sunshine painted squares of brightness and heat onto the dusty pattern of the frayed office rug.

Blinking didn't make it any better.

He reached out to take a chug of coffee from the tin cup on his desk, but set it down undrunk when he felt how cold it had gone. Then he got up, settled his hat on his head and followed McRay.

Outside, the packed-earth street with its elevated wooden sidewalks was bathed in sharp mountain light from a sky so blue there was no word for it. He'd never get used to that blue, as different as it was from the

skies back East where they were from.

Clyde took in the wagons, the buildings with their high facades and the sharp dark crevices of alleys between them; the small line of people waiting to get into the bank; the passing of a horse fly by his knee; the echo of hammering that came from the new O'Connell hotel that wasn't quite finished yet.

"There." McRay pointed left. "What do you reckon they want?"

He turned to see Jake and a handful of men making their way down the street towards them. The men were all armed, some even carrying rifles in addition to the packed holsters buckled and sagging around their skinny hips.

Clyde went to take a step down from the sidewalk to wait for Jake, but the sudden shattering of glass—the whinnies of horses and cries from people as they ducked out of the street and fled into shops—stopped him cold on the first step.

McRay pulled his revolver, his face darting left and right attempting to locate the source of the gunshot. The black blinds of the bank across the road were jerked down and the door slammed shut. Clyde could hear the hasty turning of a key in the lock from where he stood.

Jake and his men kept coming. Undeterred.

Another shot. A pane of glass in the front window of the almost-finished O'Connell hotel exploded and seconds later Billy O'Connell came charging out of the brightly painted front door, Winchester aimed at the rooftops of the buildings opposite.

"Try that now, you cowards!" Billy screamed before letting off a

warning shot, but it was clear from the way the muzzle of the Winchester bobbed and swayed that Billy had no real target in sight. He hadn't seen where the shots had come from, either.

McRay took a step forward to go to O'Connell's aid, but Clyde put an arm out, stopping him. He pulled his own revolver.

"What in blazes is going on here, Billy?" Patrick O'Connell appeared in the door of the hotel, staring first at his son and then up at where the rifle was aimed.

"Somebody blasted out two of our winders, Pa," Billy said over his shoulder. "I got it covered."

"Not somebody, me!" Jake shouted.

Billy whipped the Winchester in the direction of the shout, but then half-swung it back to the rooftop, unable to decide where the most immediate danger was to be found. Patrick O'Connell stepped out of the doorway and down onto the street. He was unarmed and in his shirt-sleeves, his ruddy face set in scowl, his copper-red hair glinting angrily in the noon sun.

Clyde dropped his hand from McRay's shoulder and whispered "Make sure nobody's still up on the roof." McRay nodded and disappeared back into the sheriff's office. Clyde could hear the deputy's boots as they hammered up the two flights of stairs to the roof hatch.

Horses laid their ears back, shimmied and stomped. Pale ovals of faces briefly appeared in windows up and down the street, but were quickly pushed aside and replaced by other faces.

Clyde went down the last step to stand in the street directly between Jake and the O'Connells. I'm here, O'Connell's there, and you're standin' right between us. So this was what

Jake had been referring to, the stupid jackass.

"Parker!" O'Connell shouted. "I thought I told you never to enter my sight again if you didn't want trouble. Sheriff! Would you be so kind as to escort your brother out of this town before someone gets hurt? We law-abiding citizens have business to get on with." O'Connell shoved his hands ostentatiously into his trouser pockets, demonstrating that he had no intention of rising to Jake's bait.

"Law abiding? You rustled fifty head of my cattle up on the Wynneg Slope last winter and refused to pay me for the loss, you lying cheat!" Jake drew his pistol, but kept it aimed at the dirt. His men fingered their rifles, wild-eyed and jittery.

"The incident was investigated by—"

"Investigated by your stooges! Everybody knows you got every politician and judge in this county in your back pocket! There ain't no justice in these parts for poor ranchers."

"Poor ranchers!" O'Connell brayed. "And just how did you become a rancher, Parker, eh?" He spread his arms out, taking in the entire town. "Not by being one of us. It was you who rustled from established ranchers and then claimed it was them what robbed you! And with a law man for a brother, you thought you'd be getting away with it easy like! He turns a blind eye to your shenanigans often enough. But not now, oh no, laddy, not now. Sheriff, carry out your office, if you please."

"I want my recompense!" Jake shrieked, his voice high and hoarse. "I demand what's mine by rights!"

"Jake," Clyde turned towards his brother and spoke calmly. "I know your side of the story and I know how hard these last months have been on you. But it was officially investigated

and Mr. O'Connell here was found innocent. I'm asking you and your men to leave right now. I'll ride out and we'll talk about this around suppertime."

That was the truth, but he knew Jake would never accept it. He never accepted anything that didn't suit his version of things.

"One step," Jake said, his eyes feverish and glistening, "Your brother, or that dirty Irish dog. It's time to choose, Clyde."

"Jake."

Jake pulled back the hammer of his pistol with his thumb, and turned his eyes from Clyde to O'Connell. Billy still had the Winchester trained on Jake, but four more men had come out of the hotel, all with pistols drawn.

The sides were even.

From behind him, Clyde heard McRay's pressed whisper. "Are they serious? Shit! We've never had a blood-bath here! What are we going to do?"

"Anybody still up on the roof?" Clyde whispered to his deputy, but he didn't hear the answer.

"Sheriff!" called O'Connell, his voice as rough as pebbles in a wagon pan. "Are you going to do what we pay you for, or not?" His hands were still stuffed deep in his pockets. He was clearly betting on Jake having the sense not to shoot an unarmed man in broad daylight with hundreds of witnesses.

Clyde took two steps out into the street. The sky had never seemed so blue, nor so bright.

"I'll get you right along with him, I swear, Clyde. Either you're my brother or you ain't. It's now or never. Nobody humiliates me and gets away with it." Jake's jaw worked like he was pulverizing grist between his molars.

"How many times do I have to ask, Sheriff?" O'Connell bellowed, the pitch revealing that his nerves were starting to fray. "Do something!"

From somewhere, Clyde heard the tick-tick-tick of a revolver being cocked.

He spat in the dirt, and for a moment, stared at the funeral-black blinds that covered the windows of the bank

like the closed eyes of a corpse. Then he took his one step, swinging his revolver up as he did.

Because he really hadn't been left much of a choice.

Berengaria di Rossi writes a number of genres, including historical fiction, comedy and mystery/thrillers. Her novels and short stories can be found on Wattpad. "Taking Sides" is her first officially-published work.

Westside

Julie Beals

Part I: Ace in the Hole

Manuel is in the Ford Mustang with his two neverendingly-lecherous older brothers. He's on the way to his high school's annual rap battle, which, unfortunately, is western-themed. And he's receiving *absolutely, fully* unsolicited advice about his on-the-rocks romantic relationship:

"Manuel, buddy. Listen. I want you to go right up to her tonight—I don't care if she's with her little girlfriends, I don't care if she's weeping because her collie just died and she found out she didn't get into UCLA. I want you to tell her it's *over*. You're not her boyfriend anymore." Sam dips his hand next to the steering wheel, as if striking a gavel. He speaks with conviction. He happens to be in his second year of law school.

"That's right, man. I mean, it's one thing to not give up the..." Remy fondles a pair of imaginary breasts, wagging his fingers up his chest and rolling his eyes in their sockets.

Sam howls as he checks the rearview mirror.

"But seriously, little dude. The fact that she just ditched you in that canyon? I was honest-to-God shocked when you told us that. I mean, it doesn't seem like she'd even be capable of it." Remy fishes a leather-bound

pocket knife out of his jeans, and begins picking a bit of orange rind off the blade. He succeeds and a flake of it pops into the air.

"She seems like such a goody two shoes," Sam says, crooking his neck to face Manuel. "You think it'd be one way or the other. Like, she's either a stone-cold bitch who abandons her boyfriend in a canyon, in the middle of the fuckin' night, no flashlight, no cell service—or an uncompromising prude, who keeps tasseled panties tucked furtively behind a mile-high waist."

Manuel is slumped in the passenger's seat. He has no intention of responding to any of this. They'll keep going, free form, without any added kindling from him. It's all riffing. A fire-side camp song, and this is their duet.

"Okay, little bro, we're gonna drop you curbside. That work?"

They're approaching Manuel's high school; it's the next turn. The sun is just a hair above the horizon and the sky is burning with tangerine streaks.

"But I'm serious," Remy says, pinning Manuel from the backseat, wrapping his arms around his brother's ribs and exposing the corkscrew on his pocket knife. He waves the corkscrew at Manuel's chin. "You dump her or else! It's not *good* for a man to endure so much disrespect."

"Noted. Fine." Manuel unbuck-

les his seatbelt.

"And consider approaching that other chick. What was her name? The one I saw changing out of her band costume. She sits like, two seats over from you. She plays that fancy-ass horn."

Manuel sees a mischievous grin creeping up on Sam's face. "You know the one, and if she can blow hard enough to sound that horn," Sam intimates, leaning in close, "Just *imagine* what..."

"I'm out! I'm out! Goodbye!"

Manuel hops as he lets himself out on the curb, his foot caught in a sweatshirt that was balled up under his seat. Sam and Remy harmonize in laughter.

"Thanks for the ride. I'll text you when it's over."

"Oh," Sam and Remy retort, conspiratorially, "we'll know when it's over."

Manuel retracts his neck. He opens his mouth to question them, but they gallop forward in a flurry of comments and his question is swept off in the wind.

"Love you, little man! Here, don't forget your hat." Remy saucers a cowboy hat at Manuel's knees. "Yee-haw. Don't go traipsing into any canyons while we're away."

"And break up with your no-

good, rotten girlfriend. Good riddance to her and her tasseled panties!"

"Tallyho!"

And with that, the Mustang peels off, just a smell of exhaust and a pair of taillights.

Part II: Airin' the Lungs

Manuel faces his weekday jailhouse: the high school. It's a spattering of squat, stucco buildings, which have long been in need of plant life. As he approaches, he notices that someone has fashioned large cacti out of tissue paper and affixed them to the stucco walls. They're held in place with scotch tape, such that, when the wind blows, Manuel can hear tiny, concise ripping sounds—a foreshadowing of their impending jailbreak. Above them is a poster. It reads, "Freemont High's Western Rap Battle," written in sharpie. A stick-figure cowboy spins a lasso.

And right there, sitting outside the doorway to the school's cafeteria, is the veritable love of his life. Belinda Suárez. He draws a breath high into his chest and holds it. This is going to be bad.

Belinda wears a saloon dress the color of whipped strawberry malt. She has one spiraled curl resting against her cheek; the rest of her hair is pulled back. She sits with arms crossed, and Manuel can see that they're pale and bloodless in the places she's squeezing them together. The moment she sees him, she begins emitting a high-pitched ringing sound, like a battle cry.

"You *asshole!*" She grabs a fistful of the fake cactus next to her and hurls it at him. "You asshole of assholes! You cretin! You *viperous, delusive, repugnant* scallywag!" (They'd both just taken the SAT).

Manuel holds up hands in

defense as she heaves another fistful at him. The paper glances off his hip and quivers in a ball on the sidewalk.

"*God*, I should have listened to my mother when she said I needed someone *chivalrous* and *stalwart*; not book smart!"

"Baby..."

"No!" she shrieks. "No!" She grabs at the cactus again, but this time reaches too quickly and misses it. "You're not gonna finesse your way out of this one, Manuel. You left me in a freakin' canyon!"

"I didn't leave you; I lost you!" Manuel pleads. "It's not the same."

"You only lost me *because* you left me, you idiot! And you took the only flashlight!"

"I needed the flashlight! There was no way I was gonna find the car without it!"

Manuel swears he can see the fury radiating off Belinda's body. It looks like the wet, wavering blur you see in the hottest part of the desert. Like rattlesnakes and scorpions with stingers cocked, and scorching metal flasks that won't bequeath a single drop of water. Belinda's eyes could sear holes in human flesh. Her nostrils have been flared for what feels like an eternity.

"Belinda, listen. I tried so hard to find you; I did. But when that sheriff came around, I had to lay low for a while."

Belinda's eyes bulge. She starts in, again, with the high-pitched ringing sound.

"Baby!" Manuel gasps, exasperated. "Seriously! If the sheriff had found *you*, he would have just escorted you to his car, cranked up the AC, driven you home, and probably stopped at a 7-Eleven somewhere and bought you a bag of Swedish fish! If he'd found me, he would have clamped on the cuffs

without so much as asking my name!"

"I cannot believe you're making this argument."

"Belinda, he'd just think I was some hooligan! Some street youth. It's not the same when you're a dude."

Belinda has a hand over her forehead now, positioned like a visor, shielding it as if from the sun. She shakes her head. With her single curl brushing against the expanse of creamy, caramel-colored skin that rises above the cut of her dress, she looks exceptionally pretty. Manuel's eyes are drawn to a stretch of gossamer lace, bare against her cleavage.

"To think that you abandoned me in a canyon," Belinda breathes, "*on the night I finally gave you everything.*" She nods at the front of her body. She puts a hand to her bosom. "Everything, Manuel. Or have you forgotten already?"

Manuel rocks back on one of his feet without meaning to. The palms of his hands turn to her in a gesture of supplication.

"You know what I kept thinking, as I sat there, alone, in the dark? I kept thinking, you know who *wouldn't* have left me high and dry in a canyon, with no flashlight or cell service, right after we'd made love for the first time?"

Manuel groans. He covers his face.

"Zachary. Zachary wouldn't have left me high and dry."

Manuel kicks at a clump of cactus that's lingering on the sidewalk. "That's probably because Zachary would have already *been* high," he mumbles.

Belinda glowers at him, fiercely.

"Belinda, I am so sorry. I was the most worried I've ever been in my life. I looked for you for hours! I only left because I finally decided that you

must have ditched and somehow hitchhiked your way home, and it was only when I showed up on your front porch and saw your mom in her nightgown that I realized you must have still been there. And then by the time I drove back to the canyon, I think you actually had left."

Belinda straightens her posture and casts her gaze in another direction. She doesn't respond. Manuel can see her ribcage inflating against the frame of her stringed corset, which looks like it's leaving pressure indents on her skin. But even now, she is what she's always been to him: shocking in her consummate magnificence. Her self-possession. The sophistication of her intellect. Last week she used the word "solecism" to describe her embarrassment at having used the wrong pronoun with a trans classmate. The week before she'd hung back, discretely, after AP calculus, to communicate to their teacher that the optimization problem on the board had an error. Manuel asked what color her prom dress would be, so he could buy a matching corsage, and she'd sent a one-word text: *vinaceous*. And man, the way she listens. To absolutely everyone! The silence she commits to when another human being is speaking. Even when she and Manuel are fighting. Her lips together; her eyes shifting in minute glides, collecting all the data.

Manuel exhales. He gestures toward the cafeteria doors. "I have to go in. I signed up."

Belinda remains quiet.

"If I win, the SAT refund money is going to you. I said it and I meant it. It's the only reason I even came."

Belinda still says nothing. The wind picks up and relocates her curl to the center of her face, but she doesn't lift a hand to move it. The clump of fake cactus she'd thrown at him begins to

roll, tentatively, on the sidewalk. A faux tumbleweed, adrift in their world of feelings.

Part III: Acknowledge the Corn

Fake saloon doors swing back and forth as Manuel enters the cafeteria. His eyes fall on a loop of chairs, positioned around a circle that's delineated with painter's tape. In the center of the circle is Toby, the school band's second trombone player. He wears glasses and appears to be chewing on a sprig of wheat. He shimmies his hands into his pockets, over a thick belt that's garnished with a large silver clasp, and calls out:

"Howdy, Manuel!"

"Howdy."

Toby stops chewing on the sprig. "What, having a bad night?"

"Just eager to settle my business, is all." Manuel tips his cowboy hat.

He wonders how many people in the room have seen Belinda outside, fuming. And, even more, how many overheard the conversation he had with her. They'd lost themselves, out there. They hadn't whispered once.

Speakers crackle, and Will Smith's "Wild Wild West" begins to bump over the cafeteria's intercom system. Shortly after, a voice addresses the crowd: "Good evening everybody! Howdy, and welcome to Freemont High's eighteenth annual rap battle!" People are taking their seats—friends from band, faces he's seen in the hallways, a few scattered teachers—but Manuel stays where he is, in the center of the circle. No use prolonging the inevitable; he knows he was the first person to sign up.

"We're gonna get started here in a minute, but we wanted to remind y'all that we're passing around a

golden cowboy boot, and entrance fees can be dropped directly in the shaft."

Manuel observes a bandmate sticking her nose, inspectingly, into a monochrome cowboy boot, which had clearly been spray-painted in someone's garage.

"All proceeds go to the top rapper, to defray the cost of this year's standardized testing. And remember, ladies and gents, all of our participants are graduating seniors, so you can consider this performance a bona fide swan song."

Manuel tries to concentrate. It'll be him against Toby first, and then, if he wins that round, he'll have to work his way down the list and beat every other contender. He's situating himself, internally—fixing his mind on the objective, which is handing Belinda that SAT money—when a familiar voice jolts him out of his thoughts.

"Oh Manuel?"

Manuel whips around to see his brothers, reclining on two of the cafeteria chairs and grinning at him, cheekily. They're decked out in hats and bolo ties. Sam has a child's broomstick horse tucked under his arm; Remy has a golden tooth snapped onto one of his bicuspid. They're sharing a bag of kettle corn, and a thick lasso is weaved around their shoulders, as if a photographer had arranged it that way.

"Oh god."

"What's up, buddy!"

"Sam!" Manuel intonates.

"This is only for Freemont High people; you're not supposed to be here!"

"You know, we wondered about that. But the lady with the golden boot was more than happy to accept our entrance fees. I told her our baby brother's about to go off to college and we didn't want to miss his final moment of pubescent glory. Strangely, that was all it took!"

Manuel scowls at them.

But, even with their presence, the first round is a breeze. Toby is the most good-natured guy in Manuel's class; he only signed up because he knew Manuel did. He doubles over in laughter twice. At one point, Manuel rhymes *different cities* with *flicking titties*, and Toby looks as though he's having an asthmatic attack that he's enjoying. An ashen-faced teacher jogs over, thrusting a foul sign at them, arms in a 'T'. Manuel smiles at the floor and wins the round.

As the emcee retrieves the next contender, Manuel turns back to his brothers. Sam is now balancing a textbook on his knee, underlining sentences in pen.

"Sam, you're not even paying attention! You're studying constitutional law!"

"I'm paying attention *and* studying constitutional law," Sam answers, tapping at his temple.

Meanwhile, Remy is sawing at their lasso with his pocket knife. He notices Manuel's attention and pauses his efforts. "So, I take it you're officially single?" he asks, amusedly. "We saw your girl outside, man. She looks *pissed*."

Manuel answers that he doesn't know, because he doesn't. He's scanned the cafeteria a dozen times—he's sure she never came in. He keeps wondering if she's off somewhere, crying. He keeps snuffing the urge to bolt

and check all the women's restrooms.

"Hey, no hard feelings, little bro," Sam says, looking up from his textbook. "Sounds like everything is working out for everybody. She mentioned she got that full ride to UCLA."

"Wait, you talked to her?"

"Yeah, buddy," Remy laughs, "You might wanna reconsider giving her your championship money, if you win. It sounds like you're gonna need it more."

Manuel ignores this. He moves to turn back to the circle, but, before he can, he realizes that Sam is fixing him with a *look*. Eyebrows raised; something like mild sternness curled into the corner of his lips. He shakes his head at Manuel, slowly. Once back, and



Jay Waters

then forth. Then he returns his eyes to his textbook, smirking.

He knows. How does he know? Would Belinda have told him?

But Manuel doesn't have time to consider this. At that very moment, as if someone fired a pistol in the air, events begin to speed up. What was once a leisurely clip—the wagon cover overhead, the burnt-red vistas and desert shrubs passing—changes, and the former state is unrecoverable. All at once, Manuel is in a chase.

A hand grabs his elbow and whirls him around to face his next contender. But when his vision settles on the individual standing before him, he's struck by a cacophonous, full-fisted blow to the psyche: It's Zachary. It's faced pierced, cannabis wafting Zachary.

"Hold up, is that his girl's ex?" comes Remy's voice, delighted.

It's not what Manuel expected. He'd always told himself that Zachary was a dud—that his mind had the build of a stack of pillows—but apparently, he was wrong. Like he was wrong to tarry when the sheriff emerged at the canyon's mouth, hands on holster. Like he was wrong to climb off

while Belinda's arms were still contorted behind her back, re-hooking her bra. The guy is a lingually-nimble, linguistically-gifted son of a female dog. He rhymes *lumpy ass saggin'* with *mumps-infected wagon*. He rhymes *John Wayne's saddle* with *eviscerate them cattle*.

One line fires through Manuel's shoulder, deep into the musculature, pivoting him backwards. Another cracks into his right femur, bringing him to his knees, his hand flattening against the cafeteria's tiled floor. His ears are ringing.

As chatter becomes distant, as his town becomes a cataclysm of fire against a nighttime sky and the possibility of winning becomes cobwebs, Manuel registers one last sight: It's that of Belinda, standing in front of the swinging saloon doors. She finally came in. Her curl has been restored to its rightful place on the frame of her cheek, and it's clear: she has not been crying. She surveys the scene with her signature expression, which is that of someone who doesn't question, for one second, the soundness of their mind. Her eyes shift from Manuel to Zachary, and then back to Manuel—at which point she splits into a smile, humor erupting. And Manuel is sure of it: neither of them is single yet.

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The Broken City - Issue 26
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