

Trees

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Ismael Rojelio Robles Salinas was found hanged by the neck from the low branch of a tall black willow tree on the banks of the Los Angeles River on November 19, 1870. The black willow is a riparian, winter deciduous tree, native to Mexico and Southern California. It towers vertically, with dark, deeply fissured limbs that reach horizontally from its trunk, sometimes extending out over the river. Quite suitable for hangings.

It was late autumn when they hanged Ismael, so the tree's normally thick green foliage was absent, having changed color and dropped away in preparation for winter. Ismael's body, dangling dead with a rope wrapped around his neck, was conspicuous. But then, there had been no attempt to hide the deed. This wasn't an unusual occurrence—a hanged, nineteen-year-old Mexican boy. Word spread, and Ismael's older brothers came quietly and without complaint to cut him loose from the tree and carry him home.

Ismael's older sister, Matilde, hid her grief under a worn hooded scarf and a face that had learned not to give itself away. On Thursday, the day her brother disappeared, Matilde was at work—she was a maid at the home of John and Ada Kinney. She did the Kinney wash and played with the Kinney children while Mrs. Kinney made apple pies. First, Matilde washed and cored and peeled the apples—late harvest Spitzenburgs from seeds the Kinney family had brought with them from New York a decade before—then she took care of the children while Mrs. Kinney rolled out the dough and poured the fruit into pie crusts and put the pies into the oven to bake. On Friday, while her brother was being murdered, Matilde polished the Kinney silver and changed the Kinney linens. On Saturday, while her two living brothers climbed into the black willow tree and cut Ismael's body down, Matilde baked bread and roasted beef for the Kinney family's Sunday meal. Saturdays were Matilde's longest days—so much to do because Sunday was her one day off, and she had to make sure the Kinney family was prepared to make it through a long day without her.

When she walked in the front door of her family's home late Saturday evening, Matilde knew. And then she realized she'd known since Friday, when Ismael hadn't come home all night; and then she realized she'd known since Thursday, when her brother hadn't come home for supper; and then she realized she'd known since the week before, when he'd announced over the evening meal his intention to marry Sylvia Harrington, the white daughter of a white founding member of the Vigilance Committee. And then she realized she'd known since the day Ismael was born.

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On Sunday, Matilde and her family attended mass in the morning and buried Ismael in the afternoon. After the burial, Matilde's father and her remaining brothers went to check on the rancho's livestock, and Matilde took her mother and her grandmother home to grieve. Matilde helped her mother put Nana to bed—they sat with her in her darkened bedroom and smoothed her hair and spoke to her softly until she fell asleep. Ismael had been the youngest, her sweet and precious grandson. Only one person could fall apart at a time—Matilde and her mother had to be strong, for Nana.

Once Nana was asleep, Matilde and her mother retired to the kitchen. Matilde put an earthen pot of water on the stove to boil for café de olla. She added ground coffee beans to the boiling water, then piloncillo and a cinnamon stick. Something hot to warm their bodies—Matilde could not seem to shake the cold. When the coffee was ready, she poured it steaming into two mugs.

"I can't believe that woman didn't come to Ismael's funeral," Mama said. "Sylvia. Why didn't she come?"

"Of course she didn't come, Mama," Matilde said. "No white woman is going to come to a Californio's funeral."

"Don't talk like that, Matilde."

"I'm sorry, Mama. But it's the truth."

"But she was his fiancée. He said they were going to be married. They were going to go to Monterey, he said. He was going to start his own farm."

"Ismael was a dreamer, Mama," Matilde said. "She was never going to marry him." It would have meant giving up too much. Her family. Her reputation. Her family's wealth. Everything."

"They were in love," Mama insisted. "Ismael said they were in love. Ismael is not a liar."

"Ismael was not a liar, Mama, but he was a fool," Matilde said.

"Don't say that, Matilde. Don't speak that way about your brother."

"How could she have loved him, Mama? She didn't even know him. She never met his family. She never came to our home. She never ate a meal with us or learned our traditions." *She never washed the dirt and the tears from Ismael's face when he was a little boy, when he came inside after being rebuffed by the white ranchero's children.* They wouldn't play with him. They called him dirty and stupid, and still he kept trying. He was so stubborn, that one. Ismael had never understood the differences between people, and it had been his undoing.

Matilde got up from the kitchen table. She went to the stove and began to cook supper. Her father and her brothers would be home soon, and they would be hungry. Behind her, her mother began to cry softly. Matilde stopped her cooking and went to the kitchen table. She squatted beside her mother and took her into her arms, and her mother cried harder. She held her mother close and let her cry as long as she needed. It was her mother's turn to grieve. *I'm sorry, Mama. I'm so sorry.*

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On Monday, Matilde returned to John Kinney's house. She came just before dawn to prepare breakfast for a man who, she knew, was one of her brother's murderers. The murderer and his family—his wife Ada and their two children, Benjamin and Charlotte—were all still living and breathing. All enjoying the taste of fresh eggs and fried potatoes and smoked bacon and biscuits slathered in butter and apricot jam for breakfast. Washing it all down with big glasses of cold milk. All laughing over their morning meal while Matilde worked in the background, moving about like a ghost.

"Sylvia Harrington is engaged to the Cassidy boy," the murderer told his wife between bites of fried egg. "I heard the news from Colonel Harrington last night. They'll be married in the spring."

"Oh," Ada said. "That's wonderful news."

So soon.

Matilde felt the murderer's eyes on her. He was looking for a reaction, but she wouldn't give him one. She was practiced at keeping her emotions inside, not only out of a sense of pride, but for self-preservation. Her face remained stony and cold as the murderer delivered the news—she never looked up from her work.

Inside, though, Matilde seethed—how could this woman who had professed to love Ismael become engaged to another man so soon after his death? Poor, stupid Ismael, thinking this woman loved him, thinking he could have a future with her, a family with her, thinking he could fall in love with this woman and live.

“You aren’t eating your breakfast, Ada,” John Kinney said.

“I’m not very hungry,” Mrs. Kinney said. “May I be excused?”

Matilde tensed. John Kinney was a particular man. He didn’t like anything out of the ordinary.

“Are you sick?” he asked his wife.

“No,” Mrs. Kinney said. “I don’t think so. I have a mild headache. I thought I might go lie down.”

Matilde continued peeling the potatoes and carrots she would cook into a stew for that night’s supper, but she glanced behind her, to see what was happening, whether she should make an excuse to leave the room. Ada Kinney’s eyes were downcast—she rarely looked her husband in the eye on these occasions—and John Kinney looked like he hadn’t yet decided whether to be angry or indulgent.

Mr. Kinney spoke to Matilde now, but his eyes never left his wife’s face. “Matilde, get a cold compress for Mrs. Kinney’s forehead,” he said. “Take it to her in her room. Then watch the children while she rests.”

“Yes, Mr. Kinney,” Matilde said.

Mr. Kinney stood up from the table. “I’m going into town,” he said. “Then over to the Harrington’s farm. We have a committee meeting.”

“Okay, John. Thank you.” Ada stood up from the table, too, and went to her husband. She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. “Have a good day.” She turned to Matilde. “Thank you, Matilde, for watching the children. I won’t be long.” Then she kissed Benjamin on the top of his head and ruffled baby Charlotte’s hair and left the room.

Mr. Kinney spoke again, to no one in particular, it seemed, now that his wife was gone from the room. “A Vigilance Committee meeting.”

Oh. Matilde did not look up from the potato she was peeling, but her grip on the paring knife tightened, and her knuckles grew white—she pressed hard into the potato’s rough skin, then pulled back before she cut too far into its flesh, before he could see. Mr. Kinney and his fellow soldiers had formed a Vigilance Committee after they won the Mexican-American war. To maintain law and order, they said explicitly. And to keep the Californios in their place. This was implied.

“Enjoy your day, Mr. Kinney,” she said. Her hatred for John Kinney burned and bubbled inside her and threatened to overflow. John Kinney, a white man who’d come west to fight in the Mexican-American War, then stayed behind after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, married a landowner’s daughter, and asserted entitlement to land that once belonged to Matilde’s family and neighbors—the Californios who had lived on this land for over one hundred years. A man just like John Kinney had tricked Matilde’s family out of their land, and now they lived and worked on *his* rancho because they had no other choice.

After the murderer was gone, Matilde cleaned up the children. She took them into the parlor to play and asked the young house girl Pauline to come in from hanging the wash and watch them for a few minutes. “Be good,” she said. “Benjie, play with your sister, okay? I’m going to help your mama, and then I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” Benjamin said.

Matilde carried the cold compress into the dark master bedroom. She drew the curtains back a little, so she could see. Mrs. Kinney was lying still on her bed.

“Here you are, Mrs. Kinney.” The murderer’s wife rolled over on her back, and Matilde laid the cold compress across her forehead. “This should help.” Even in the dim light, Matilde could see that Mrs. Kinney had been crying—her face looked damp and swollen, her eyes rimmed in red. “Are you okay?” Matilde asked.

“Yes,” Mrs. Kinney said.

“Alright,” Matilde said. “I’ve got to get back to the children. Do you need anything else before I go?”

“Oh, Mattie.” Mrs. Kinney Americanized her name. Matilde wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Some days, she was angry Mrs. Kinney didn’t try to pronounce her name, and some days she was happy she didn’t butcher it with her inability to roll her tongue.

“Yes, Mrs. Kinney?”

The murderer’s wife sat up then, removed the compress from her forehead. “Oh, Mattie, I’m so sorry about your brother.”

Matilde didn’t know how to react. She and Mrs. Kinney never talked about anything personal. Just dust and dishes, silverware and supper.

“Thank you, Mrs. Kinney.”

“Please, give my condolences to your mother, Mattie.”

“Yes, of course,” Matilde said. She turned to leave the room but heard Mrs. Kinney break down into sobs behind her.

"I'm so sorry, Mattie."

"Please, Mrs. Kinney," Matilde said. "Please don't cry." She laid a hand on Mrs. Kinney's shoulder. "It's okay, Mrs. Kinney. It's okay." But of course it wasn't okay, and it wasn't lost on Matilde that she was the one with the dead brother, but Mrs. Kinney was the one crying and being comforted.

Once Mrs. Kinney had laid back down and Matilde had refreshed the cold compress and repositioned it on her mistress's forehead, Matilde went back to the parlor and sent Pauline outside to finish hanging the wash. She put Charlotte down for her morning nap, then sat down in the rocking chair. She called Benjamin to her, pulled him onto her lap, and held him close. He wrapped his arms around her neck and was still, as if he knew she needed him. That morning, Matilde drew comfort from this little boy who loved her and who didn't yet know any better.

She thought about the state of things as she rocked the boy. Of course Sylvia Harrington would marry another man—a white man—whether she liked it or not. She'd made a mistake, and her reputation hung in the balance. She would be married to someone suitable in her father's eyes—it was not in the girl's hands. Sylvia would never make it to Monterey, and she would never live on a farm with Ismael. Her future had been decided for her on Saturday, when Ismael's body was discovered. On Friday, when he was murdered. On Thursday, when he disappeared. Months ago, when she fell in love with the wrong boy. Years ago, on the day she was born a girl.

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Matilde saw Sylvia Harrington at the mercantile in late winter. She didn't notice her at first. She was in a hurry to finish her errands and get back to the Kinneys. She tethered the carriage at the post and ran up the wooden steps. She was breathing hard as she came through the door. "Mr. Green," she said at the counter. "I've come to pick up Mrs. Kinney's fabric order."

Mr. Green had his back to the counter. He turned to Matilde and looked her up and down. "Yes, I think it just came in," he said. "Let me go in the back and check. Wait here." He hesitated—he seemed reluctant to leave a brown-skinned girl alone in his store, something to which Matilde was accustomed—but then he looked toward the other end of the store and his face relaxed. "Miss Harrington," he said. "I'll be with you in a moment." Matilde recognized the grocer's tone—it was a warning directed at her, words meant to let Matilde know she wasn't alone

in the store. Matilde turned and saw Sylvia Harrington in the back by the sewing notions. Sylvia had turned to look at Matilde, too—she was staring in fact. Mr. Green walked through a curtain to the back of the store and left the two women alone.

“Hello, Matilde,” Sylvia said. To Matilde’s horror, Sylvia began walking toward her. “Matilde,” she said again. The name sounded strange in Matilde’s ear, an American accent, not lyrical, but ugly. The dead stop between the ell and the dee. Matilde did not answer her.

“Matilde,” Sylvia said again, drawing close to Matilde, standing beside her, placing her hand on Matilde’s arm. She had tears in her eyes, but this only made Matilde angry. She was tired of comforting others about the loss of her baby brother. “Matilde, I’m so sorry about Ismael.” The American accent again and the familiar way the woman’s tongue embraced Ismael’s name fed Matilde’s anger, made it burn hotter. She jerked her arm away and turned her back on Sylvia. She waited at the counter until she sensed in her bones that the woman had given up and left the store.

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One afternoon in early May, Matilde and her mother were in the garden, tending the tomatoes. The men were away in the fields, and Nana was dozing on the porch. Matilde heard a noise behind her, and when she turned to look, she saw a plume of dust in the distance and Mrs. Kinney’s carriage coming up the road toward the house.

“Go inside, Mama,” Matilde said. “Please. Take Nana and go inside.” Mama didn’t hesitate. She dropped her trowel in the dirt beside her and hurried to the porch.

Mrs. Kinney waited in the carriage and watched while Matilde’s mother and grandmother went inside. But the instant they were in the house, she alit from the carriage and ran to Matilde. “Mattie,” she said. “Mattie, I need your help. We need your help.”

“Why would you bring that woman here?”

“Please, Mattie,” Mrs. Kinney said. “Please. She needs our help.”

Sylvia Harrington sat still as a stone in the carriage. Her face was white and drenched in sweat. Her breathing was heavy.

“Is she sick?” Matilde asked.

Sylvia began to whimper and arched her back then. Her whimper became a low moan and then a cry of agony that seemed to go on forever.

Mrs. Kinney ran to her side and took her hand. "It's okay, Sylvia. Breathe. Squeeze my hand. I'm here. It's going to be okay." Mrs. Kinney turned and looked at Matilde again.

Matilde ran to the carriage then. "Help me get her down, Mrs. Kinney. We have to get her inside. Quickly." Sylvia was sobbing now. "You have to calm down, Sylvia. For the baby." The two women helped Sylvia from the carriage and carried her into the house between them. Another contraction began before they reached the door. They waited it out. "Don't push, Sylvia. We are almost there. Don't push yet."

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Sylvia was in hard labor, giving birth in Matilde's bedroom. In Matilde's bed. Giving birth only six months after Ismael's murder. How had she managed to keep her pregnancy hidden from her family? From Mr. Cassidy? From the entire town? There was no time to think about that now. Sylvia looked terror stricken. Her contractions were coming closely, one after the other, and her body was drenched in sweat. Mrs. Kinney was beside her, dabbing a cold cloth over her face and neck and shoulders and trying to calm her. Matilde and her mother made preparations. Mrs. Kinney looked terrified, too, not only for Sylvia, Matilde knew, but for what her absence from home might mean when she returned.

"John will be home by now. He was only going to look at a horse. He will be home by now."

"You can go, Mrs. Kinney," Matilde said.

"He's going to kill me one day." She spoke matter-of-factly, softly, as if she were talking to herself.

"Go home, Mrs. Kinney. I can do this."

"No," Mrs. Kinney said. "No, I'm staying. I want to stay. I want to help."

Matilde felt it, too, the fear. Not only because of what was happening but because of all the things it meant. This young woman was giving birth to a child out of wedlock. Ismael's child. Matilde kept moving, but her mind kept racing ahead, to what was going to happen after the child was born. Where would they go, what would they do? They were all in danger.

"Please, Matilde. Please. Take care of my baby." Sylvia was delirious, and her pleading eyes tore at Matilde's heart. The hard shell of Matilde's anger toward Sylvia broke away from the exterior of her body, fell off in big chunks that melted into pools when they hit the floor and then evaporated into the air. Once the anger was gone, she felt the fear going, too. She knew what she had to do. What all of them had to do. "It's going to be okay," she said to Sylvia. And by that, she meant so many things would be okay.

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The three women worked together in service of a shared goal: to save the child and its mother. Once the baby was born, Sylvia and the baby slept, but there was not much time. The sun was going down. Matilde's brothers and father would be home soon. This was a secret that could not be shared with men.

"You should go, Mrs. Kinney," Matilde said. "You must get home. Mr. Kinney is going to be worried about you." They were out on the porch, speaking in hushed voices. "I will think of something to tell my family. I will take Sylvia home when she is able."

"No," Ada said. "That shouldn't fall on you, Mattie. It would be dangerous for you to take her. I will take her home. I will tell them she was struck ill. That I took her to get medical help. I will take her home. Tonight. Please. Let me do this. Let me do something."

"But Mr. Kinney"

"It will be okay. I will tell him I had to help Sylvia, that she was sick." Mrs. Kinney looked thoughtful, like she was considering how she would explain, wondering how she would assuage her husband's anger, thinking about how bad it might be.

The two women were quiet then.

Mrs. Kinney eventually spoke. "It is Sylvia's decision, of course. But I don't know how she can I don't think she can take care of the child." She began to cry.

"I know," Matilde said. "I will do what has to be done."

Matilde decided to speak her mind then. There was nothing left to be afraid of. Not anymore. "Mrs. Kinney, I don't want to speak out of turn. Or hurt your feelings. I know you mean well, and I appreciate your kindness. But that day, when you were crying in your bedroom over what happened to Ismael, it wasn't right."

"What do you mean, Mattie?" Mrs. Kinney stopped crying, but she looked confused. She didn't understand.

“My brother died, Mrs. Kinney. My brother is dead. And you were crying. And I had to comfort you.” Matilde wasn’t sure how Mrs. Kinney was going to respond, and Mrs. Kinney wasn’t the person who’d murdered her brother, but she hadn’t done anything to stop it either, and in this moment, Matilde didn’t care how she responded or how she felt. “It wasn’t right,” she said again.

Mrs. Kinney didn’t say anything for a while. They stood together on the porch watching the sun set, neither of them speaking.

“You’re right, Mattie,” Mrs. Kinney finally said. “It wasn’t right. I’m sorry.”

Matilde started to say it was okay, but it wasn’t okay, so instead she said, “Thank you.” Then Mrs. Kinney put one arm around Matilde’s shoulder. Matilde felt something inside her give way. She folded herself into the crook of Mrs. Kinney’s arm, and for the first time since her brother’s death, Matilde cried.

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A letter from her mother arrived at the post office in Monterey six weeks later, general delivery. Matilde put it into the pocket of her skirt unopened. When they got back to their small, rented room, Matilde fed the baby and put her down for a nap. Then, while the baby slept, Matilde removed the letter from her pocket and opened it. She lit a low lamp to read by. The sensation of seeing her mother’s familiar script on the paper caught her by surprise—she held the letter to her chest and felt her eyes begin to water. After a moment, she wiped her eyes, smoothed the paper in her lap, and read.

Dearest Matilde,

I hope this letter finds its way to you, and I hope it finds you and my granddaughter well.

So much has happened since you left. I don't know where to begin. It is all sad news, news I wish I didn't have to share.

I suppose I will start at the beginning.

Mrs. Kinney is gone. She disappeared the night you left. No one has seen her since she took Sylvia home that night, and of course, no one knows she was here. The townspeople are saying she ran off to meet a man. The salesman who came through town a few months ago selling suits. They are saying that because that is what Mr. Kinney is saying, and no one can find any sign of her. But I don't believe she ran away. And I don't think you will believe that either. My heart is broken thinking what must have happened to her. I am afraid I know, but I do not want to believe it.

Sylvia Harrington is gone, too. She hung herself from a tree on the morning she was to be married to Mr. Cassidy. The same tree where Ismael died. No one knows why she did it. Only I know, and you. And Mrs. Kinney, wherever she is. Sylvia must have loved Ismael and their daughter very much after all. Too much to go through life married to someone else. Too much to be a mother to Mr. Cassidy's children when she couldn't be a mother to Ismael's child. Their little girl. Fear is a powerful thing, and she was too afraid to do what you have done, to leave this place and start a new life with her child. Which makes me so sad for her, Matilde, and so sad for her little girl, but so very proud of you, my own little girl.

I want to assure you no one knows where you have gone or why. No one cares much what we do or where we go. I told our family and our friends at church that you went north to San Francisco to take a post with a wealthy family, and that seems to satisfy them. Some in the town are saying you went with Mrs. Kinney, to be her maid servant in her new life. No one who knows you believes this, but the people who know you are not the people who have the power to set your story down in history. I will tell our family the truth someday. But for now, with Sylvia having taken her own life, I do not want to risk stirring up more anger or trouble or gossip that might trace her back to our family.

Mr. Kinney came around to ask about you. I believe he knows Mrs. Kinney was here that day. I think she must have told him, and I fear it was her undoing. I told him the same thing, that you took a post in San Francisco, but the difference is, Mr. Kinney did not believe me—I could see the disbelief and the anger in his eyes, and I could almost see the blood on his hands, Matilde. Ismael's blood, yes, but Mrs. Kinney's blood, too, and perhaps yours and the baby's if he ever found you. If he ever knew the truth. He is an evil man. I can see it, and I was afraid in his presence.

I hope to visit you and baby Luisa in Monterey soon. I will take the train and come to you once things have settled down here.

I love you, my brave daughter, and I miss you.

May God bless and keep you.

Love, Mama

Mama was right in all she said. Mrs. Kinney did not run away with anyone, and Sylvia could not face a life without Ismael and their daughter. They had both been afraid. Matilde was afraid sometimes, too. But she had to keep going in spite of it. For the child's sake.

Matilde lit three candles: one for Mrs. Kinney, one for Sylvia, and one for Ismael. She took her rosary beads into her hands and prayed the rosary for the dead and then the prayer for the faithful departed. *Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.*

Outside, the sun was low against Monterey Bay. The softening light turned the water into a shimmer and the trees into shadows. The Monterey pines are native to California's Central Coast and to Mexico, too, like Matilde and her family before her. But the Monterey cypress is native only to the Central Coast of California, like Ismael's little girl, who would grow up here as Ismael had wished. These trees are strong and sturdy and evergreen—their leaves never die. They bear cones and the cones produce seeds and the seeds fly on the wind and reproduce wherever they might land. The Monterey cypress can live for three hundred years. Ismael and Sylvia were gone, but three hundred years from now, their descendants would still be in this place, seeding and reseeding and planting themselves firmly into the fertile earth.

Tonight, Matilde would feed the baby a supper of goat's milk, feel the baby's tiny fingers wrapped tightly around her own, rock her to sleep. She would sing lullabies to the niece she was raising as her own in this place where Ismael had wanted to raise a family. The same lullabies her mother once sang to Ismael. The same lullabies Luisa Angelina Robles would sing to her own children one day. *A la nanita nana, nanita ea, nanita ea, mi niña tiene sueño, bendita sea, bendita sea.*

Tomorrow, when the sun rose over the mountains behind them, Matilde would take in laundry and sewing and do whatever else she needed to do to survive. But for now, while the baby slept, Matilde made thread for tomorrow's work. She took two strands of wool and plied them together. She worked against the wool's nature, twisting in the opposite direction of the strands' own inclination. It was this tension, this act of bending in a way that was not intended, that would give the newly formed thread strength and keep it from unraveling.

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About the Author

Leanne Phillips is a writer, editor, and paralegal. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts from the University of California at Riverside, Palm Desert, and her BA in English with an emphasis in creative writing and a minor in history from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. “Trees” is a story from her novel in progress, *California Is an Earthquake*. A version of the story was the Grand Prize Winner in ScreenCraft’s 2023 Cinematic Short Story Competition, and the novel manuscript was the Book Winner in Launch Pad’s 6th Annual Prose Writing Competition. Her work has been published in *The Rumpus*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Coachella Review*, *Kelp Journal*, and *Persimmon Tree*.



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