

August 23rd, 2023

Dear Editors:

I appreciate the opportunity to submit my work. Please find a short piece, “Almost Everything Strange Washes up in Miami” enclosed. A brief bio follows:

Rafael Jennings is a Senior at a small, independent high school just outside of Syracuse, New York. Jennings, an Afro-Latino US-Colombia dual citizen, recently earned finalist status in the Subnivean New Writers Awards, a competition run by an international publication lauded by the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best,

Rafael Jennings

Enclosures: “Almost Everything Strange Washes up in Miami”

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Word Count: 2,507

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“Almost Everything Strange Washes up in Miami”

As I breathed in, the tropical air tickled a lump that had been growing inside of my throat. I coughed and then rubbed the lump in the left side of my throat as I leaned my neck back against the wall of a CVS and looked into the Miami sky. Between heavy eyelids and through an array of wind-moved palm trees, I looked into the baby blue sky that hovered above Ocean Drive. The elastic flesh inside of the left side of my throat held firm as my fingers dug into my throat to feel the lump. I could feel nothing with my fingers, the right side of my throat deceived my senses with its symmetry to the left. The Southern Florida sun had kissed my Java skin adding a roast in my color and a glistening sweat to my face and body. The elusive lump in my throat was nowhere to be found by my fingers, so I wiped the sweat off my neck, off my fingers and onto my white tank top. Through tight ribs, I breathed in the air thick of ocean salted cigarettes, and blew it back through my nose. My phone had been buzzing intermittently in my pocket for the past 10 minutes, but I was too tense to check it while I was looking around the CVS. I pulled out my phone and looked at my notifications, ten hearts on my profile, and 5 new messages. Clicking the notifications on my phone screen displayed a grid of tiny squares. Each grid looked back at me with blank profiles, people smiling, bulges, and jockstraps, every profile underscored by a title; some were real names, a few flags of countries, the common suggestive emojis, and some sexual names. The grid displayed the carnality that I heard was cooked into Miami's rooftops and sidewalks. I hadn't been on this dating app since my stay in Atlanta, but I redownloaded it when I got off the train in downtown Miami. In every city I stopped, I looked to find someone to keep me there. I was

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deep into the practice of staring as I walked down sidewalks, talking slowly when I ordered, and lingering everywhere a bit too long. It had been 7 months since I left my parents' house, guided by the ambiguous scent of love. I spent days alone traveling cities of the United States waiting for the eyes I sought out in crowds to be windows to a soul as fervid as mine. Part of this mission involved using my dating apps, to which I developed a compulsive need to constantly check. Looking at my phone, I caught myself revisiting my own 4 uploaded photos, sliding through them, biting my lips, and inspecting my presence. My brows burrowed trying to comprehend the outside perception of myself. Trying to interpret these photos numbed my brain. The photos were not old or inaccurate, but staring at these former versions of myself made me feel as if I were born this morning. Since I was a child, I had been told that I was good-looking, and I've always been excessive in hygiene and beauty. Sure, sexy was present in my photo, but any tincture of attractive or sexy felt resistant to the familiar yet distant presence of myself. I coughed and pressed edit profile, changing the profile name from my name, Santiago, to just the flag of where I was born, Puerto Rico. I tapped my messages tab and looked through what had been unread. Lined up on the left side of my phone were faces, each accompanied by short messages they had sent to greet me. I had seen hundreds of what felt like thousands of profiles and had countless meaningless conversations. Though I knew better, I still searched through the app imagining that somewhere in the sexual messages and blank profiles, was someone who could soothe the restlessness I carried with me. It was 7:00 p.m., and I felt the pressure of the west-racing sun, forcing me to establish where and who with my night was going. My indecision had wasted so much time, and it didn't really matter who I messaged back anyways. I shuffled through profiles looking for the most attractive and the least creepy.

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With managed expectations, I sent a reply. Then slipped my phone into my pocket and watched the view in front of me. My vision caught between the palms that tenderly shook, and the cars that flew by, I thought of how it would all be here tomorrow. Even if I didn't find love tonight, the same sun would light up Miami in the morning; igniting the compulsions that breathed under the moon.

I was going to a club to meet a man I had been texting for less than two hours. I sat in an Uber driving towards downtown Miami, speeding through the General Douglas MacArthur Causeway. Air soured by the ocean salt caressed my face as I peered out of the car window and into the water. A million tight tendrils of black curls danced in the wind as I stuck my head into the scene that raced across the moonlit bridge. My curls swirled into the sky as I craned down to look at the neon purple lights that reflected off the bridge and into the water. It was 9:30 pm and a yellow luminescence coated Miami. I turned my head back to look at the radiance of electric colors that blazed from South Beach and then looked forward into downtown Miami. I came to Miami because I had run out of places to call home. Miami and its infusion of the culture of The Islands and South America seemed like a city ready to fully welcome me. When I walked down Calle Ocho 5 years ago at 13 years old, I heard the Latin music that lined the vibrant street clairvoyantly whispering to me, "welcome". The more I looked for myself in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York, the more I was drawn to where my culture was rich. I hoped Miami could water the Puerto Rican inside of me that had grown wilted in the suburbs. With a sidelong gaze into the lights of a now-distant South Beach, I made a promise to leave who I was before this city in the ocean beyond. I hoped that a memory of me shrouded from my present self could allow me to feel something tonight. I felt a tinge of pain in the lump on my neck as its mass took a sharp breath in my throat. I jerked

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back into the car, rubbing my throat as involuntary tears welled in my eyes. I took the back of my vacant hand and wiped the tears. Knuckles and skin rubbed against my eye and throat for the rest of the ride to Downtown Miami.

A heat rose off my body and into the club lights as I rotated my hips on him. His sturdy chest was against my back and his strong fingers pressed into my swiveling hip bones. Hot breath blew onto my neck as he whispered into my ear with his virile voice. I could see myself loving him, Lorenzo. I pictured it as we danced. Our kids: with his nose but my eyes, cringing at the vision of kids with his face shape and my nose. Us in a high-rise apartment, us on a ranch, us anywhere in America, us in Europe, us with 7 grandkids, or just me touching his wrinkly hands as he dies in a hospital bed, a future, all with Lorenzo. I turned around to explore his eyes and rested my arms on his shoulders. A blue flame somewhere deep inside his black pupils stared into me. He had a languid look, his top eyelids a little heavy, and his full lips sat relaxed on top of his golden skin. A gold chain perched between his pecs and surfaced in between the popped buttons of his white shirt. I leaned in to kiss him. That virulent warmth that lived between us was undoubtedly that feeling of teenage love; a passion I felt so petulantly it made me feel like I was in high school again, kneeling to a cross as my father watched over me. For years I prayed, for a moment like this as I cried tears of contrite. I could hear my dad's voice in my head, "Santiago, let me pray for you." I wonder what God thought of us, my dad praying for me to obtain health, a wife and kids, an education, and me praying for distance from him. I wondered if Lorenzo could smell that on me, my youth, like a sweat that dripped from my soul. Dancing amid hot bodies and the sound of Miami bass, I felt sated, like answered prayers, like reversed karma.

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I wrapped my hand around Lorenzo's tattooed bicep, feeling his strength in my fingers. My body lay on the edge of his bed as he leaned over me. The space between had begun to feel too wide so I tugged on his bicep bringing his face closer to mine. His knee rested on the white comforter under me, as his body came closer covering mine. He kissed me and he rested his body on mine with his chin on my shoulder. As I felt his body relax onto mine, I turned my head to the view of Miami from his apartment. Into the lush yellow streets and the buildings that gleamed purple. That consolation I had been looking for filled my eyes and pressed against my chest. I put my hand on his back to feel his breath, to reify that he was there. I just didn't want to be tantalized by Lorenzo. I was moved by the sugar-laden moment, and trying to secure this feeling I went to say, "I love yo-." My chest jumped as the words got caught in my throat, and my body flailed under his weight as a violent cough shook my body. I pushed Lorenzo off me and grabbed my throat. The smell of the Saffron in his cologne stuck in my sinus as I leaned over myself on his bed choking. My vision was a haze as Lorenzo grabbed the hand on my throat and tugged me onto my back. My eyes watered from the coughing, but I could see Lorenzo lunge towards me, and within seconds I felt his hand stuffed in my throat, my teeth and tongue resentfully wrapped around the solid force. I screamed, as his fist reached past my esophagus. The ridges on his gold ring scraped up and down the inside of my throat. I grew lightheaded as fingers moved in my throat, my eyes rolled to the back of their sockets and my breathing stopped. My throat released and gave out a croak as he pulled his fist out of my throat. The air left my body, and I lurched up fighting for more, teary eyes and my body folded over itself wheezing into my thigh. My body slowly rolled up vertebrae by vertebrae as my nails dug into

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the comfort behind me for the support of my arms. A passive vigilance projected from my eyes as they met Lorenzo's. He stood strong on two straight knees, naked with his right arm stuck out holding something in his hands. Covered in the stringy pink insides of my throat in a bloody ball Lorenzo held in his hands the balled-up tumor in my throat that was my past. I felt no lump in my throat, I felt vacancy and looseness and tasted the blood that filled my mouth and throat. The bloody ball stood toughened in his hand, unapologetic to the weakness that it had been causing me. Drenched in my blood it held my entire life, all my memories and emotions, everything that tried to explain me. The tumor swelled with everything I've ever known, filling the room with a rotten smell. Underneath the red of my blood, the tumor was black and jagged. Even though the thick structure had left my throat, I felt choked just looking at it, disgusted by its size. My past, in its entirety, stuck in my throat, stabbing at me as I traveled, throbbing since I turned 18, now sitting covered in blood filling the room with the smell of burning flesh. For months I'd thought of my life before leaving home as expired, entombed by a will to outpace it. Yet it sat silently rotting my body. Even though I was embarrassed for how disgusting I must've appeared to Lorenzo; I felt no obligation to the tumor. In his hands, he held an accumulation of 18 years, that I had no defense over. I felt exhaustion deep into my face, skin, and eyes, my entire face. I was too tired to be angry, and in too much pain to be tired. I parted my lips and lifted myself to look at Lorenzo. His bitter chocolate eyes sat heavy as his lips opened and to justify what just happened, "I smelled an infection." He reached out his hand to hand me my past. He looked so far away standing over me, as the tumor sat in his palm between us, his eyes seemed miles away. I pushed his hand and heard the ball hit the ground onto the floor and ran past him, through the door to the hallway of his apartment. As I stood under the cool

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light of the silver elevator, I saw my eyes reflected in the metal of the elevator. Tired eyes caught in a watery red glaze, realizing the sting of being left behind, even while leaving.

I watched as purple, orange, and yellow emerged from over the horizon and above the water. My feet sunk into the white sand that lined Ocean Drive. I stood and turned around to look at the famous street where I stood yesterday. I stared through palm trees at the buildings of Ocean Drive, their lights had died with the night. Miami was the best part of me, the sounds of salsa on Calle Ocho mixed with the language of my home country. The sex that breathed within the tropical air, air that reminded me of Puerto Rico. Lorenzo, and the people I could meet here. The now stultifying thought of a world so big was once the only thing that stimulated me. I remembered the lost lump in my throat, and I tilted my head back to feel where it once sat. I squinted lazy eyes at the burning Miami sky feeling the exhaustion I'd been outrunning. With my mouth open and my jaw tight, I pressed my fingers against my throat searching for the lump that once held my past, maybe even missing it. "I want to go home", I thought, but not to the house I grew up in, a place before that home, a place I've never been but I find myself always searching for.