

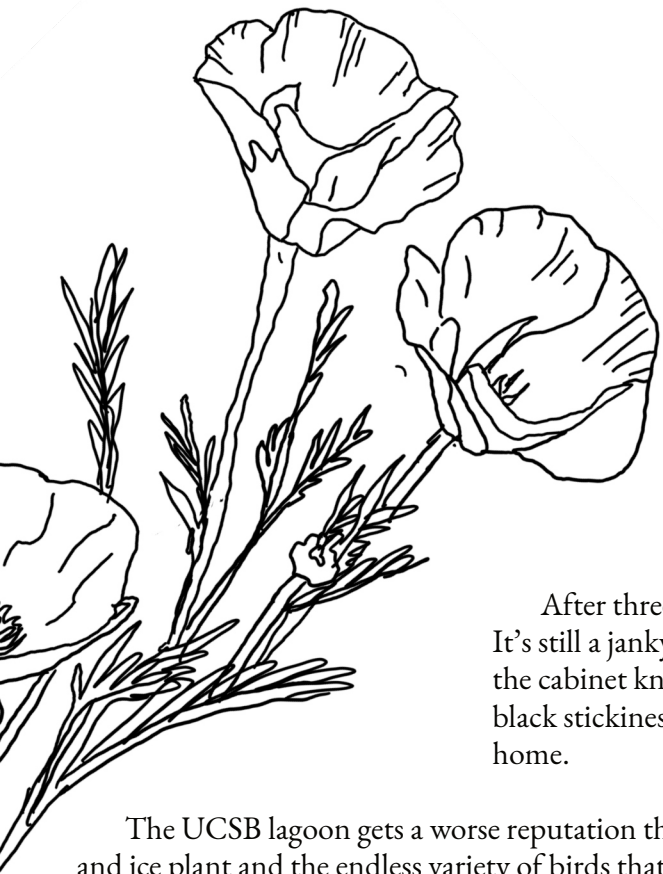
AT HOME.

BY LILA VELASQUEZ SINGH



For my friends,
whom I love so dearly.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lola King".



From the top of Storke Tower at night, the collections of lights below resemble those you'd see looking down from an airplane window, so small you forget they're the same street lamps you might look up at, if you look up at all. Thick windows block any sound from going into the tower, but even if they weren't there, the interior would be quiet and peaceful, the only noise an imagined hum of the breeze off the sea.

In the fall of 2019, I unlock the door to my new apartment in Isla Vista to find a mess. The walls above the stove are flecked with grime, fallen window shades have been abandoned to collect dirt on the balcony, and a mysterious brown ring circles the inside of the toilet. Sand covers the shower and living room floors, and looking at it, I have doubts this was worth the stressful, seven hour drive from the Bay.

After three days of dutiful scrubbing, my sister and I have restored the place to livability. It's still a janky college apartment. A shard of glass functions as a lightbulb cover. None of the cabinet knobs match. The sinks are slow to drain and the floors leave an uncleanable black stickiness on the soles of my socks. But it's *my* janky college apartment. It's my new home.

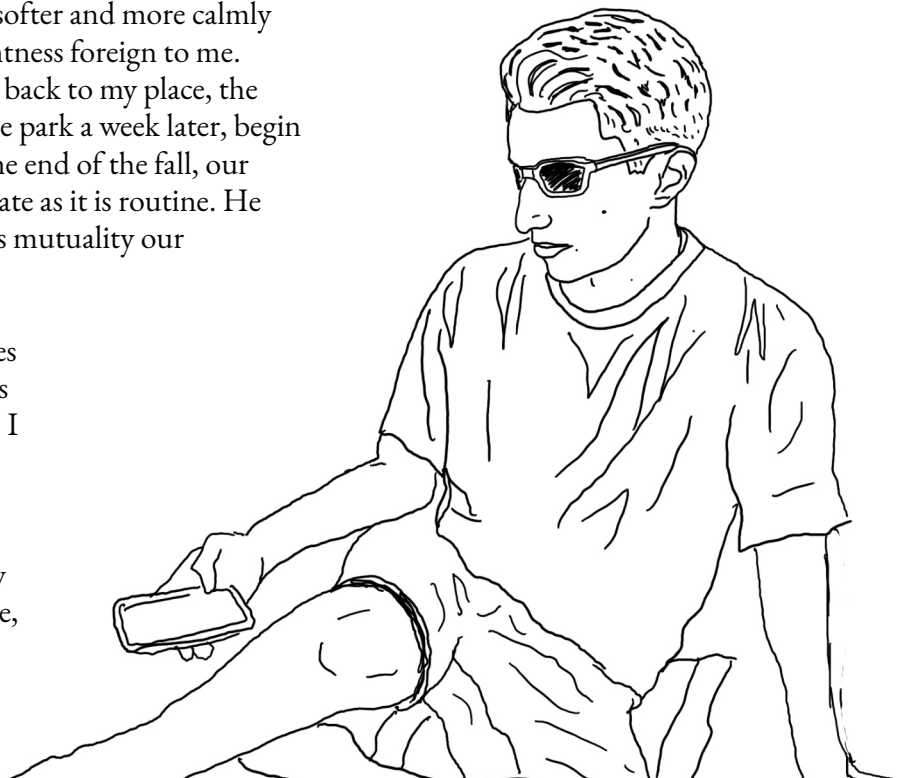
The UCSB lagoon gets a worse reputation than it deserves. Living next door my first year, I became fond of its dirt paths and ice plant and the endless variety of birds that glide on its brackish water. I went on evening runs toward the mountains and the east, where the sky would switch from its daytime blue to a pastel smudge of purples and pinks, dotted with the moon. The flora along the lagoon's edges changed with the seasons, my favorite being spring—when browns yielded to greens and little yellow and purple flowers stuck out from the ground.

By the Manzanita picnic tables, a cluster of fiery poppies sprouted up. On cloudy days and at night, they'd fold into themselves, waiting for the sun to come out so they could unfurl and shine once again. During my first year of online learning at UCSB, I go through phases like the poppies.

I meet Christopher Perez by chance on Sands Beach. I've biked here after a morning Zoom to meet two other transfers. One mentions they'd invited another transfer from Texas they'd met on Facebook to join us. And like that I meet the man who will become my best friend.

Chris is pale and lanky and impeccably dressed, with short swim trunks and amber sunglasses straight out of a magazine. He speaks softer and more calmly than anyone I've met, and acts with a certainty and bluntness foreign to me. That day on the beach, we play frisbee, and when I bike back to my place, the mystery of this man lingers in my mind. We get tea in the park a week later, begin sharing music and cooking together after that, and by the end of the fall, our friendship is not so much something tentative and delicate as it is routine. He continues to surprise me, and I, him, and because of this mutuality our friendship works.

That first day on the beach, I don't know it's Chris who'll be my steadfast companion as the pandemic waxes and wanes and the onset of my bipolar depression rattles the stability and optimism I had when I came to UCSB. I don't predict the many evenings and afternoons we'll study together, the hikes we'll go on, the parties we'll attend when restrictions relax a year later, or the films we'll debate and delight in. On that first day, I just know him as the soft-spoken stranger from Texas, who, like me, seems a bit nervous to be here.



I don't know when I start going to Brianna's, but *Bachlorette* nights become a regular Wednesday excuse to get wasted and forget about the pandemic. Brianna's house, I'd later learn, was full of drama and drugs, but that's not how I knew it.

Her living room is airy and populated with plants, a fish tank with a beta named Benito in the corner. She lives with her girlfriend, Lily, and her dog, Cutie, and every week a few people come over to throw down. It's at Brianna's that I learn how to play rage cage for the first time, at Brianna's that I foolishly challenge high-tolerance friends to drinking competitions, and at Brianna's where I make my other closest friend at UCSB.

Brianna's is a way to unwind from a life lived online, a way to experience something real and personal during a time when most of my life is anything but that. It's my one oasis of what life at UCSB might've been if there hadn't been a pandemic, if I'd transferred in under normal circumstances, if I got to be young and free without worrying how my being young and free might unintentionally hurt other people.

At around three or four in the morning, after too many shots to count and much laughter and conversation, I'd amble out to my trusty bike and swagger the four blocks back to my apartment. As I biked, I'd feel the cool wind along my face and dream, for a moment, that my days during the pandemic were joyful, fuzzy, and alive like this, too.

Past Henley Gate, the bike path dips into the parking lot by Goleta Beach before veering inland toward 217 and the slough. After miles of fields and painted fences, it ends in a suburb. At sunset, the brown mountains above turn hot pink. Sometimes, one of the neighborhood cats perches on a fence, and if you're lucky, they let you pet them. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you see cottontails scamper as you go. And maybe, if you're lucky, you see something strange and surprising, like an old woman pulled in a chariot by a pony. When I went on sunset bike rides past Henley Gate in the winter of 2020, I was often lucky.

But winter, even if it is a California winter, also sends me spiraling into a dark depression. I'd been depressed before, in the months before I dropped out of my first university and again at community college, but this is something different.

I become intensely suicidal, and for a week, I take daily walks to Storke Plaza to hang out with the turtles and koi while pleading with my insurance company to pay for a higher level of care. My therapist says whatever I'm going through is more than she knows how to deal with and dumps me. My insurance company says I'll have to pay \$6000 if I want more help. I spend over a month trying and failing to handle things on my own, on a waiting list to see a therapist and a psychiatrist alongside everyone else struggling during the pandemic.

My world becomes something wan, bleak, and hopeless; I stop believing that it ever was anything different or could be something different. Some days, I dissociate—in my bathroom mirror my face takes on alien shapes, and when I speak my voice is distant and foreign to my ears. Scared of my own emotions, I turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms, hang with a bad crowd of people, and end up getting hurt by others and myself.

I won't know I have bipolar until the fall of 2021.

In the spring, however, things slowly begin to get better. Over break, I bleach my hair, reconnect with an old friend, and do shrooms, and my hope that life at UCSB might be something enjoyable is somewhat renewed. I take my classes and my life day by day. It happens slowly, but the weather starts to improve and so does my mood, and by the end of the quarter, my depression lifts.

I'd been the first to arrive at my Trigo apartment; I'm the last to leave. My housemates are both fourth years. They graduate in front of the clubhouse, livestreamed so that family and friends can cheer them on from their homes. When it becomes close to time to move out, we go on a walk together to take photos of them in their graduation stoles. We get a couple passing by to take a photo of the three of us at Campus Point, the only photo of the three of us in existence.



When they do move out, it occurs to me that I will likely never see them again, which is strange because for the past three quarters of a year, these are the very people I spent most of my time around. Each of the three of us doing our own thing but sharing the same space. It's odd, I think, how you can spend so much of your life around other people then part ways as if you'd shared nothing.

On the day I move out, I run boxes up and down the same stairs I'd jogged down for lagoon walks, evening runs, photosynthesizing on campus lawns, and visits to Brianna's and Chris'. When my car is packed, I run up to lock the door one last time. When I do, I feel the satisfaction of having somehow survived my first year of virtual learning, at a new college, living on my own.

When I leave my apartment, I leave it clean.

A series of benches runs along the bluffs at the far end of IV. In my second year at UCSB, I got to know these benches well. They're the benches where I came to admire the sea in the summer, where I broke down in my housemate's arms in the fall, where I came to sit when things go back online for a bit in the winter, and where I come for a dose of stability today, in the spring.

During the day, the bluffs remain fairly empty, save surfers biking past, beachgoers, or the occasional runner. At sunset, people emerge in clusters to stand on the edges of the cliffs, laugh with friends, look at the water, and share a moment. It's the most wholesome Isla Vista pilgrimage, and save days where it's overcast or unbearably windy, a few people dependably make the trip.

I first see these daily gatherings after the worst of the pandemic, when memories of life before the vaccines are still fresh, and they seem all the more precious because of this. On these evenings, the sun flashes a bright orange or red, sends light skidding on the water, then dips its toe in the ocean before sliding under completely.

Summer in Isla Vista turns out to be something spectacular. I move into my new place, the bottom unit of a house on Sabado, I take a literary publishing class, and I start seeing the world in a way I've never seen before—endlessly beautiful and expansive. It's partially because summer is the first time I get to see what IV's like without the omnipresence of the pandemic and partially because I'm hypomanic, but for a couple months I live my college dream.

I spring out of bed in the mornings, eager for whatever fabulous moments today will bring. I spend very little time indoors. I go hiking three times a week, go to as many parties and gatherings, play die during the day, thrive on little-to-no sleep, and befriend my street. My hair gets a fresh round of bleach, and I dress as if each day is going to be wonderful—which, for that blissful summer, they are.



One night at my next door neighbor's birthday, I find a Sharpie and get everyone at the party to doodle on my arm until I've got a complete sleeve. Another evening, I cook pasta with zucchini and caramelized onions and eat it outside as I savor the sunset. Newly 21, I go out to Wildcat with my new housemate and then Sharkeez and then get so shitfaced that I get kicked out of both bars, throw up on my housemate's feet, sleep all day on the couch, and never go to Sharkeez again.

Late on one of these nights, Brianna and I are drunk, energized by another transfer friend's party. The sky's a velvet black and the only noise is the two of us yelling as we zoom through the streets, me on her back, my German housemate running after to make sure no one gets too injured. Somewhere close to Brianna's new place, the two of us wrestle. Predictably, I lose. But moments after she's pinned my arms, Bri rolls off me, and I notice the stars.

"Look up!" I yell. "It's all so beautiful!"



On IV Halloween (early October), I'm Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*, and my friends and I head to the house of a writing and lit friend on DP. Once there, we admire the views of the ocean, tear up the dance floor, and chat with strangers and friends. Because I'm incredibly drunk, I do the many dishes piled in the sink. Brianna checks in on me, and I tell her, straight-faced, "Dishes are evil. I must save the people from the dishes."

After I break a mug, I run upstairs to the loft where my writer friend lives, scrawl her a love letter and then am convinced by my other friends to come down where I admire the crowd from the balcony. In the bathroom, I see myself, as Max, in the mirror, and I rawr. It's a month

since college has been an in-person thing. Aside from masking in classes and stores and news of people quarantining, the pandemic's something I hardly think about. Especially not when I'm here: giddy and goofy in the house of a friend, seconds away from meeting up with others, a Wild Thing.

But fall doesn't stay marvelous the way summer did. It's filled with many remarkable moments—a half marathon, impromptu LA trips, sneaking to the top of Storke Tower and coloring with crayons on the concrete below it—but even the remarkable moments seem undercut with an urgency and instability that snowballs into a worse depression than what I'd experienced during my winter of online learning, this time paired with the frenetic energy of mania.

I have a hard time going to classes, a hard time hanging out with people, and a hard time just living. I can't seem to write anything, I don't go for evening runs, and I show up to the only class I haven't completely abandoned with my mind half in another dimension. Because of how much I feel I'm failing my classes, how much I feel I'm failing my friends, and how much I feel I'm failing my life, I seriously consider dropping out of UCSB and ending my collegiate career there.

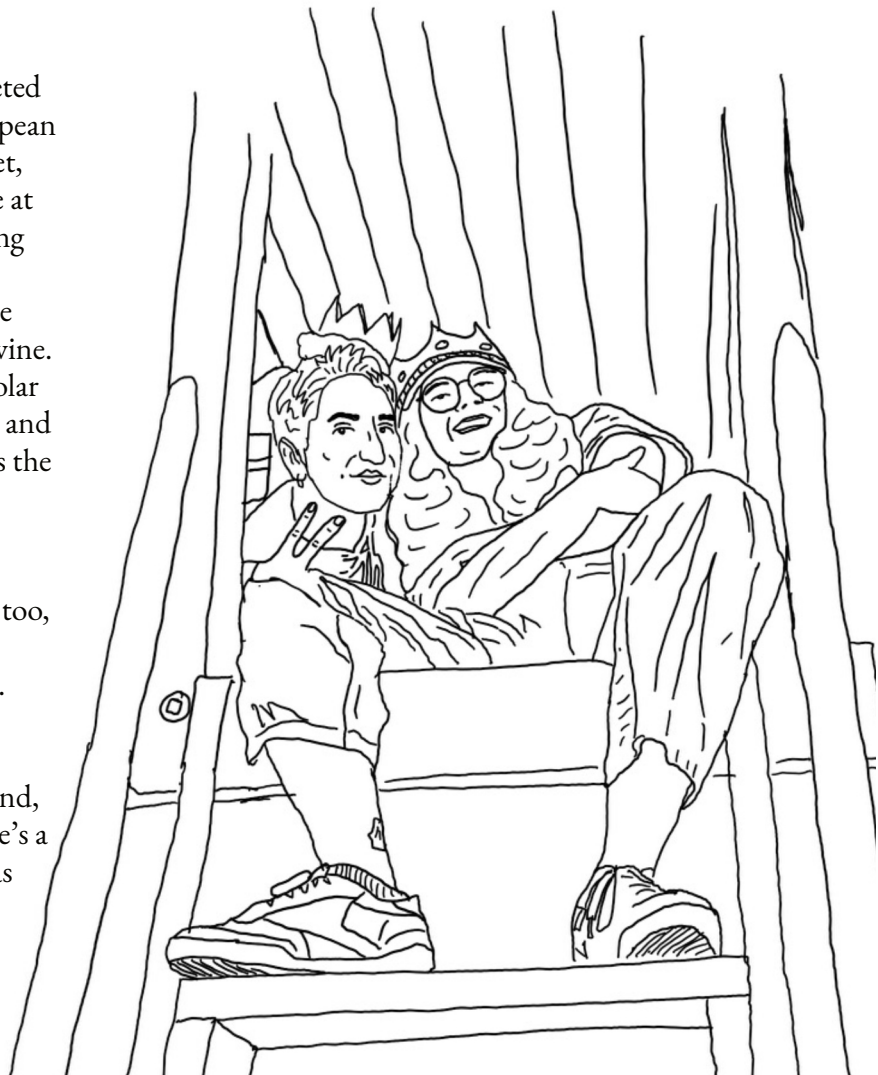
I have many moments where I blast Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart" in my car and scream "EVERY NOW AND THEN I FALL APART." I have many more where I escape my problems by going to Devs, where I watch the waves rise, crash, ooze toward the cliffs, recede, and then rise again.

It's the end of fall quarter and I've successfully completed a single course. One of my European friends and my European lover are packing up their stuff at the house down the street, getting ready to fly back to the Netherlands. When I arrive at their place, there's music playing and rainbow lights flowing around the living room.

I help them pack and cook vegan lasagna and as the night goes on, there's much joking and food sharing and wine. I can't drink anymore—the medications I take for my bipolar negatively interact with alcohol—but I make an exception and toast to our European friends and their quarter abroad. As the night goes on, we venture back to my place, where we don cowboy hats, play Twister, and dance. It's a few days into winter break and I can think of no place I'd rather be than right here, spinning with my friends, laughing with them, too, chatting the evening away.

The pandemic, at this point, feels like an afterthought.

But, winter quarters are notorious for being terrible, and, in true winter quarter fashion, this one starts online. There's a new coronavirus variant and the whole pandemic thing has suddenly become less forgettable.



I am secretly grateful things are online. I'm mentally unwell, I've spent more time at UCSB online than in-person, and it's easier to make it from my bed to the couch for a Zoom than to get dressed, leave my room, and be present in a physical classroom. Watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* with Chris on my couch one day, I think about how comfortable it is to be home. It feels like the earlier days of the pandemic again, only less stressful, less foreign.

But then, things are back to in-person.

Unlike fall, I don't want to return. Severely depressed, I once again find myself struggling in my classes, on the verge of an anxiety attack when I'm on campus, always moments away from a breakdown.



On the day I decide I need to leave my job as a tour guide and my internship, I head to the bluffs for a post-Zoom walk with my housemate.

"Maybe I should just drop out," I tell her, looking out at the metallic sheen the pink clouds have spilled onto the water. I think of my struggles to write and thrive. "It seems like I've got a pattern of collapsing." As I speak, I wonder if all my time at UCSB has been this: collapsing, failing, struggling to thrive. I wonder if I should blame myself, I wonder if there's more I could be doing to make it not the case, I wonder if I can blame anything on the pandemic.

"Maybe," my housemate says. "Or maybe not."

One day in the winter, I swam in the ocean.

The sun glinted like glitter on the gentle waves. The sea was cool on my skin, the sun hot, and salt collected in my hair. I looked up and saw DP houses; I looked out and I saw the Channel Islands. I felt like I was seeing all of it the way I would if this were a movie—in hyperfocus, with supersaturated colors, a solar flare bringing the image together.

When I got tired of swimming, I floated on my back. I used to struggle with floating because if you panic and start flailing your limbs, you sink; it only works if you trust the water to carry you.

That day at the ocean, I let go and risked sinking. The waves billowed up beneath me, but sure enough, the ocean held me.

Toward the end of winter quarter, my depression lifts. The things that had become dull and meaningless—running by the slough, cooking with my housemate, admiring the wildflowers and poppies blooming for spring—become enlivening and meaningful once again.

During finals week, I'm sitting at a Starbucks in Santa Barbara with Brianna. We talk tea while sipping on coffee, and she studies anatomy while I edit the stories I've written for my major's capstone project: a story about a tightly wound female college student becoming unhinged; one about depressive dissociation; another about a bagel's existentialist ruminations; and the last, a story about an optimistic SoundCloud rapper's struggles with bipolar and Mario Party.

While I tinker, I'm surprised at what I was able to create even while feeling miserable, and more surprised that I'm having fun editing, that for the first time since I transferred to UCSB, writing feels enjoyable. I finish writing low-quality SoundCloud-rap lyrics, and as I do, I feel lucky to be here, studying a subject I love, living in a beautiful corner of California, passing the afternoon maskless outside of a strip-mall Starbucks, sharing time with one of my close friends.

It feels like home.

It's quiet in the mornings in IV. I'm standing at the foot of peeling wooden stairs, the ones that start where Camino del Sur collides with Del Playa. The water foams as it eats its way to the cliffs, where today, mercifully, there are no Bird scooters being gifted to the ocean. Sunlight shimmers on the water, receding in ripples until it meets the pencil sketch of the Channel Islands on the horizon, and a duck goes fishing in spite of the waves. From the north, a V of pelicans approaches, dropping down to glide over the ocean before rising up to the clouds.

It's sunny and it's beautiful and it stills something inside of me every day I come out here.

