

# in between an unknowing place

by Michael J. Pagan



“ . . . the corner was hot. Thought of  
the one halogen me, my momma, my sister  
all shared in our living room,  
with the broken dial—lighting up  
our whole world. The sun sucking off  
the sidewalks. They called it humidity.  
We called it the corner—breathing.

Fruit man panhandling with  
a sign: *fresco, limpio*, but in all  
caps. Resting on a street rail. A  
penny waiting for a train to beat  
him down. Pinching my nuts. I  
had to piss. Hungry as any definition.

Everyone said I had the face  
of a pork shoulder; residue on  
the pan (cast iron, not the non-  
stick joints). Always caught up.  
A cicatrix for the beaten, and  
the pavement.

Dracula sitting on the lid of  
the cooler next to me, selling  
cans of Jupiña and the small bottles  
of Malta Goya, spitting: *I'm thirsty,  
nigga. It's fuckin' hot like Africa.*

Street light reminding me of my eyes—  
colorblind—unable to ever tell  
what it was trying to say. Lucky  
there were only three. Top-middle-  
bottom. Never forgot what  
the top meant: all stops.

There was an old woman chopping  
a coconut with a machete while  
watching a crowd. Animated  
phantoms overlooking a dead  
mother. She spoke of how she didn't  
understand the difference between  
a laughing joke and a smiling  
joke. Spoke about the difference  
between un-land and no-land.

That heat-cloud-off-the-pavement  
smell. Ten years ago. What the  
fuck did she know? I had a bruise  
at the bottom of my right foot.

Dracula two cars down; palm  
on a girl's shoulder. He ignored  
the woman, much older, on the driver's  
side. *Drac, the light's about to change;*  
face sunk-in. Dracula looked out  
at me through the windshield. Face  
next to her cheek, choking  
the air. I remembered all that was  
left of her was an earring stud  
hiding underneath my comforter.  
A screwback.

A little girl hugging an empty tin  
bucket, waiting for the rain. A  
ghetto rock. Awake and  
asleep. Wishing she were  
like an Anise seed instead . . .”