City Lights from the Upside Down

Santa Always Blows His Cover

Alex Z. Salinas

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It was Christmas 1995 when Mom burnt the bacon and Dad was just getting home. I tore open the packaging to the Mortal Kombat-brand plastic ship and Ray pulled a puppy out of a box.

"Ruby!" he announced, holding up the furry dog he'd dreamt of since summer.

"Where's Liu Kang and Raiden?" I asked out loud, the question meant for Mom. For a child on Christmas day, what are toy vehicles without action figures to steer them?

"Your mom shopped around everywhere for that thing, so knock it off," Dad answered in his oil-stained uniform. "Now let's eat."

After breakfast—about forty-five pancakes Mom had stirred up for us since she fed us like linebackers—we were corralled to the garage where there were two new bicycles, mine Scorpion-yellow, Ray's Reptile-green.

Fifteen seconds later Ray crashed into the oak tree in our front yard. He came away with scraped knees, a split lip, the indignity of knowing that the next-door neighbor girls had watched him cry.

I was older than him by three years, so I stayed outside riding in circles, round and round, wheee! I showed off the training I'd received from my best

"Scoville Tree," 2004, 26"x12", acrylic on canvas, [Brianna Keeper](#)

friend, Jordan, who was white, so of course that fool had had a bike since the age of negative one.

The thing about Christmas, for the longest time, was how Mom always burnt the bacon and how now, no one's around to do it, so I burn my own. I know my wife hates it, barely tolerates it, but she understands the fragile thread that's there. The smell.

Ray and I send each other \$50 gift cards every year. We believe it an even exchange, efficiency at its finest, although last December I texted him what's the point if in the end there's a zero balance.

"Good point," he responded. Followed by a thumbs-up emoji. A shrugging-man emoji.

I know he gets torn up about the holidays the same way as I do, Ray, but this year I'll send him \$100. Surprise him.

He'll spend the extra dough on booze, maybe new shoes, videogames. Most likely he'll save some of it. His wife manages their budget.

And then in a few months, probably in March, when the sun starts frying us, I'll wonder to myself during a quiet stroll, Hey, man, why the hell didn't you just buy him a plane ticket? Invite 'em over. It's the least you could've done, you cheap, lazy bastard. Mom and Dad would be so proud of you right now. So proud.

Maybe next year. Yeah, definitely next year.

[Alex Z. Salinas](#) lives in San Antonio. He is San Antonio Review's poetry editor. His debut full-length book of poems, *WARBLES*, was released by Hekate Publishing in November.

[Brianna Keeper](#) is a painter and kayaker in Hunt, Texas.