Apprentice Writer

The Lempuyang Gates of Heaven Chantel Kardous Lincoln, RI

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Apprentice Writer

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The Gates of Heaven are White (Among Other Things)

Emily Bach

Oakton, VA

"Which color do you want?" asks a man with a poorly-groomed beard. He gestures to a rainbow pile of beads resting a feet away from us, accompanied by a thin, plastic coating meant to hold them together. I say nothing and search for an answer in the strangers around me, hopeful that they can fill my blank space, my mouth.

Banners and bright purple signs drape themselves over the trees, juxtaposed by the gloomy aura that feeds them. "March for Suicide Prevention," they read, accompanied by a slew of photo props and buckets begging for donations. Walking towards the beads, a little girl whips past me, the wind chasing her and another young boy following. Their bodies float by with a lightness, not yet aware of the weight of the world.

"I walk because…" the sign behind them begins.

Teal: My loved one struggles.

The couple to my left grasps each other's hands as they walk towards the starting line, as if the strength of their grip is the only force holding them together. Both of them wear teal necklaces, though the woman's appears more worn down than the man's. Hers is interrupted by random dots of grey, seemingly from where the paint chipped away, revealing the metal beneath it.

❖

During recess in third grade, my friend and I would stand at opposite ends of the playground tree stump and lean back. Our grip was the only thing that kept us from falling, both of us holding hopefully to one another, toothy smiles painting our faces and gravity dragging us towards the dirt floor. It became our tradition: teetering on the brink of collapse.

One Friday, she got bored and chose to let go, sending me hurtling backwards into a stout ant hill and a plentiful patch of dirt. I didn't yell (I'd been taught better than that), but we didn't play the game anymore. Instead, I stood on the stump alone, sometimes with a notebook, sometimes just with the ants. I'd occasionally try to lean back on my own, but I wouldn't get very far without falling. I needed her, not in a loving way but a pragmatic one. We balanced each other until we didn't.

❖

Every couple of seconds, the woman parrots a series of cautiously-optimistic chants, and, in her silence, the man does the same. Neither of them seems to believe the other, but they say them anyway. At any given moment, they both look far too close to collapse, one marginally more alive, the other marginally less so, waiting for the other to fall but trusting that they won't.

Purple: I lost a family member.

A messy collage of teenage boys, middle-aged women, and two older-looking adults congregate in front of me. Attached to their purple shirts are safety-pinned papers that read "I walk for ___." My aunt. My grandma. My cousin. All and none of them say her name.

❖

I've taken Spanish for four years, and, each year, class begins the same way. The teacher introduces herself (usually in a string of words that I should be able to translate but can't) and takes attendance. My first year, I chose Adelina as my "Spanish" name, solely because I was called on unexpectedly, and it was the first word that came to mind. My next year, I chose Rosalia, the one after that Berta, and the one after that Emilia.

By the end of my Junior year, I'd developed a collection of identities that didn't belong to me but felt like they did. There were certain connotations with each one, or at least I wanted to believe there were. Adelina sounded like a name for a shy girl, one that wasn't quite familiar with the sound of her own voice but was trying to be. Rosalia was the popular girl that spoke often in class, Berta a traditionalist that would've preferred to be watching cable news or reading, Emilia the stereotypical sit-in-the-back-of-the-room student.

When I quit Spanish my Senior year, I lost all of them at once. In many ways, they were fake identities, composed only of what I wanted them to be, but I liked the process anyway. I carried a different name, different story—a different spoon-fed lie or partial truth, depending on how you look at it. Sometimes, I wonder if I carried parts of each of them—outgoing and quiet and traditional and ordinary—or if I was always just one thing masquerading as another.

❖

While the family waits, they share memories of the woman they remembered, though none of them seem to match each other all that well. The young ones talk about getting ice cream for dinner, her cousins about her work ethic and perfect report cards, her parents about her days working at the local post office. Many of their stories seem lost in the others' ears, as if they're trying to construct a jigsaw puzzle of her, not realizing that the pieces don't fit with one another because they belong to them, not to her.

White: I lost a friend.

A man stands inches away from the table but says nothing. He stares at the ground, tracing the crevices of the pavement with his eyes. His feet carry moccasins, waist an overused fanny pack, and hands a pile of white beads and a walking stick. The young couple beside him try to hold a conversation, but he never replies. He seems to hear nothing, but I see him flinch each time a younger man opens his lips.

❖

Near the beginning of fifth grade, I emerged as the unofficial soloist for my school choir. I'd been awarded the makeshift title only because the teacher liked me, not for anything resembling real talent. There were many other girls that practiced more and could hold a tune better, but I was sweet and quiet and didn't challenge the teacher's authority when she was wrong, traits she appreciated.

Each quarter, when the exhibition concert came around, we'd audition for solos. The process was more a formality than a legitimate contest. For the summer concert, I was chosen to sing the second verse in "You Can't Stop the Beat."

I practiced religiously but quickly realized the piece didn't fit snugly in my

range. Nonetheless, on the day of the show, I approached the solo mic, prepared to sing it anyway. The music dimmed softly, my cue that I had approximately two seconds before I was to start, and the school's spotlight looked to me. I froze. It wasn't that I didn't know the words, much less that I didn't know how to sing them, but, all at once, I felt like I didn't deserve to be there. The girls that had been passed over for the part were far more talented than I was: hardworking, in-tune, deserving of recognition. Somehow it was easier to say nothing than to take up space in air that I stole.

❖

A volunteer offers the man a bottle of water. He says thank you but seems regret his words.

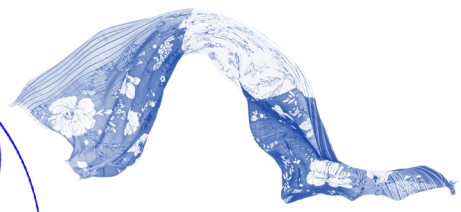
Green: I personally struggle.

When I wrote my suicide note for the first time, I composed it like an autobiography, carefully crafting the narrative arc that I wanted to be remembered by. The characters I controlled but their impacts I didn't. I went through four pens and many notebooks before I saw that it would be more effective to write it online, though that also meant it would be impossible to ever truly get rid of—permanent, or at least existing as a ghost somewhere on my computer's hard drive.

❖

"I'll take green," I answer, momentarily turning to leave, before holding back. "And purple and teal and white," I continue.

I realize that I've lost all the parts of me threaded into the before: a friend, a sister, a daughter. I can barely wrap my fist around the memories that made me who I was—the character in that story feels so unknown. The girl that I knew looks like a ghost in the pin-sized reflections of the rainbow-colored beads. The man nods slightly as he hands me my necklaces. He, too, carries green beads, but we're painted in rainbows, in the colors of loss that emerge from darkness.



Porch

Sonia Mehta

Dublin, OH

"What is she wearing? Look at that ugly scarf!"

"Why does she look like that?" my peers whispered. "What country did she come from?"

"The one without mirrors."

I said nothing to these harsh jeers. My friends did not know I, too, was an immigrant once. Why was I staying silent? Was I still trying to fit in?

SimpleJoy Sarah Mohammed Los Gatos, CA

Perhaps my friends' reaction to Halima, their cruel jokes, and my non-reaction to my friends' words forced me to confront my identity, to remember the girl on the porch. The girl that had made a promise.

One of my earliest memories of coming to America was of the snowy porch. Not of a long flight across two continents and the Atlantic Ocean, not our small house on a steamy street in India. I only remembered that porch and the Christmas lights, which made the night scene magical. The silky snow on the ground seemed almost familiar, for I had seen pictures of winter. Surprisingly, the cold air hardly bothered me. I was quite warm under the two sweaters and thick coat.

I understood little of what was happening then. All I knew was that my father had been offered something called "a medical residency." He had brought us to the other side of the world to start a new life. But something had gone wrong. We learned at the airport that the residency had "fallen through." A man called "the head" had sent a notice of the bad news, but we had already left our home. A taxi drove us through the uncertain darkness to the "head's" house to learn our fate. As I was lulled by the motion of the car, an image of a giant head, like that of Humpty Dumpty, kept appearing in my mind.

"Tell him he cannot do this to you," Mother urged in a trembling voice. "He promised you a job. We have given up everything to be here."

"I'm not a beggar," replied Father. "If they don't want me, we will go."

"Go where? We have nowhere to go."

The taxi came to a halt, and we stood in front of the door of a large porch with two massive columns on either side. Father looked sadly at the door as if it had a better answer than he had. Pinecones were strung all around. After a long wait, the doorbell was answered by a woman in her fifties, her smooth silky hair parted exactly in the middle. She looked cautiously at Father. Then Mother. Finally, at me. A brief explanation was given, but the frown on her face never changed. In a resentful voice, she spoke "wait here" and shut the door.

Mother's eyes darted about. Father just looked dejectedly at his shoes, only now there was also a hint of shame. I tugged on his arm like a pull chain on a lamp, hoping to make the fearful look on his face switch to a smile. He ignored me.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a shimmer. Prying my hand loose from Father's hold, I stepped off the porch and saw snowflakes falling from the sky. As the tiny crystals flickered by the streetlight, they sparkled like diamonds. As the snowflakes dropped further, they reflected the green and red from the porch Christmas lights. It was as if jewels were falling from the sky. I tilted my head back and opened my mouth wide, a chick eager to be fed. The snowflakes touched my tongue and

vanished as though by magic. I wished that Father's scared look would disappear like the snowflakes. Would the mystical ruby and emerald powder in the air make my wish come true?

Finally, the door opened again, and a man stood looking less irritated but still serious. His head appeared perfectly normal and proportional, not Humpy Dumpty. Father again explained the situation. Mother breathed silently, and a trail of mist came from her nose every time she exhaled. I rushed up the porch steps as the door was swung wider. A warm gush of air kissed my face. The man smiled and said, "Come in out of the cold."

The glow of the house surrounded me like a soft blanket. The scent of candied cherries and cinnamon touched my nostrils. There was another smell too. The head's wife still looked cross. I scanned the living room, which was many times bigger than ours had been. A fire crackled at one end painting the walls in amber color. On the table were a tray of cookies and two steaming cups. Now I knew the smell. Chocolate! What a wonderful country. They actually made drinks from chocolate bars. The golden color on the walls and the sweet smell in the air made me less nervous, so I considered asking the head's wife for some chocolate bar drink, but the look on her face caused me to freeze. Her eyes were as dark as a cobra's. I expected a forked tongue to dart out from her mouth any moment and wondered what we had done to make her dislike us so. A guest arriving at our house in Gujarat would have been welcomed in a very different way. Father would have offered a seat. Mother would have brought water in a cold steel cup. A tray filled with fried chickpea flour chevdo would come next. I looked behind me at the front door with three rectangular glass panels in the middle and almost gasped. A little girl stood out in the snow. I wanted to run to the door and let her in from the cold but realized that it was only my reflection. Staring again at the head's wife, I hoped Father would be allowed to stay and promised to myself to always welcome girls in from the cold and bring them spicy chevdo and a melted chocolate bar drink.

These memories flooded into my mind eleven years later on the drive home from school one day. By then, my family found its place in the new country, and we did get a beautiful house. I loved the snow and the way it twinkled from the Christmas lights on *our* porch. I was an American. Other than a Hindu temple camp for two weeks each summer, I rarely thought of my ethnicity. My English was flawless; I knew all the popular songs. My circle of friends was solid. Life was good. I was driving and thinking that my family's fate had been so arbitrary. Had the department head not been home that long-ago evening, would his wife have sent us away?

"We had nowhere to go," Mother said then. Almost every morning I heard her say the "om shanti" prayer. Shanti was the peace one experienced when one knew his or her place and the role of those around. The head's wife was not cruel. Our appearance disturbed her shanti that day. Halima had shaken mine. Hindus believe in creating one's own karma. Halima reminded me of my place in the universe. The role that strangers had played in our lives' journey was unsettling.

The next day had started uneventfully. I entered the cafeteria at lunch and immediately spotted my friends at our customary table. They were laughing and clearly enjoying each other. Then I saw Halima sitting alone. I remembered my promise to the girl in the glass panels of the head's door. I saw the girl on the porch.

"Hey, can I sit with you, Halima?"

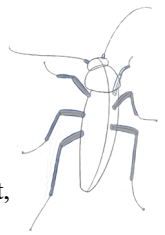
the cockroach

Elizabeth Ahn

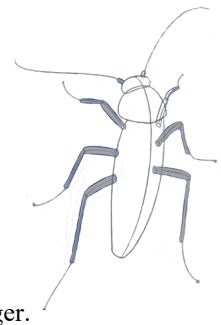
Dallas, TX

rise, rise
rise, but never
cross the line.
feast on the morsels
left behind and
freeze when blazen
light, cleansing
and crucifying, plunders
splintering courage
in two hands and squashes
varicose veins, secreting
amber honey.

run, run,
run, but never
far from their eyes.
retreat to entropic
Eden and
shroud wings in tar and wonder
why God made you
ugly and mocked
you with longevity,
the original sin.
stop, dead
silent, while screams,
piercing air like an acupuncturist,
prod paralyzed perception in
two fists and denatures you
into hallowed shells.



fight, fight,
flight, but never
hide from hands
that give yet
always take more
than you wagered
as they pinch,
oozing cumulus
clouds of death. gorge
your hungry
mouth on plumes of
peppered honey until
you can inhale no longer.
watch the sky
fall in Goliath's hands.



realize that
ground is all
that stays.
it was your domain,
never.
and worship me,
the maker of all good and evil,
now, in the hour of your death.

Jun

Elizabeth Ahn

Dallas, TX

My little brother, Jun, would never stray from the opportunity of making waves in the ocean of monotony. For as long as I had known him, he never stopped talking, never backed down from opposition, never followed the plan. A few officers were not nearly enough to stop his quest for roguery. Not even detainment could detain his entropy.

I remember when we loaded our

dresses and scarves and prides into leather luggages and ourselves into the back of the train. My mother clenched our hands tightly for the duration of the ride as if they were the only links keeping us from falling out of the steam engine, left behind as the exodus of yellow faces rode on. I diverted my eyes from the sight of Jun wriggling his pint-sized palms out of my mother's pale grip to the racing grasslands of the window. The rain pooled on the surface of the panes, blurring the view into a flat color of sacramento green under a dynamic sky of cumulus clouds.

I had never seen the world outside of Greeley, Colorado. My mother said that we moved there when I was two, but in my view, I was born with the hills, nursed with the springs, and found love submerged in the emerald bushes. This new, vast arena of flat land irked me, but it did wonders for Jun who stared starstruck at the window. By record, he belonged to the mountains, but we all knew he belonged to no one.

Of course the shock of a new environment was undoubtedly not enough to integrate Jun into the crowd of forlorn Japanese families whose eyes were a mix of shock and utter disbelief after losing the only homes they had ever known. Jun continued to prattle on about what he imagined the Granada Internment Camp would be like. He predicted bountiful gardens of lush bonsai trees. He pictured thousands of happy Japanese families – like the American ones seen in commercials – coming together and beating the world record for the largest game of Go Fish. He saw a lovely hotel where he could run around with the other boys in the escapades of an unknown terrain waiting to be explored. He was in for a shock.

❖

Life in the internment camp was nothing close to any of our imaginations. Whatever green the gardens had was coated with sand and pebbles. Our communal activities consisted of watching the men delicately march across crackling ice in the winter, pickaxes in hand; if we were lucky, they would bring back a fish. Our rooms were blocks encased with wood panels and just enough room for all of us to share a bed.

With our radios seized, Jun could no longer listen to *Adventure Parade*, my mother could no longer listen to the tunes of Frank Sinatra, I could no longer listen to *Hello America* – my primary source of information on the war. However, this didn't matter as I had since stopped listening to *Hello America* after the planes struck Hawaii; it was too painful.

The bleak imagery and restrictions of the camp were not enough to stop Jun from having his fun. Found soaring through the streets on any Sunday, Jun caught the wind of startled families and pulled so many shenanigans that he had built himself one reputation.

Akihabara Alley Katja Foreman Hamtramck, MI

Once, he loosened the cap of the pepper shaker so that when his unsuspecting victim, the seasoned and grey Mrs. Abe, added a little more flavor to her deathly bland spaghetti, her red sauce suddenly turned a shade of speckled black. After a spew of unrequited laughter, Jun exchanged his plate with the dish of Mrs. Abe who bitterly chided him and said our mother ought to be ashamed. Even before the disciplining, I could spot Jun's lips already in position to say his all-too-familiar apologies.

After devouring the overly peppered spaghetti through tearful eyes and mismatched smile, Jun was off, running to his next adventure. When he was gone, I swear to this day that I saw the creases of Mrs. Abe's lips tilt up in a smile.

❖

If there was anything that truly diminished Jun's vibrancy, it would be the hope-stifling name, "Jap." As the years progressed and seasons passed, never changing the perpetually stagnant view that was the desert, we could never escape that forsaken word. The soldiers would call us "Japs" as if we were not people but cattle they had to round up before returning to their posts – as if we were the ones who took the lives of so many Americans on Ford Island.

The word never invoked any more than a grunt from the elders of our group, but they always elicited a scowl, followed by a pungent remark from Jun. He had heard "Jap" for as long as he could remember, having grown up with the word as if it were his nickname. Because of his childish pranks, oftentimes, a yell about a "Jap" would be directed at him.

Living with this nickname for so long, he begrudgingly decided to make it his own. Every time anyone would yell "Jap" from behind, Jun would cringe but turn around. The last two letters of his name were replaced; to everyone with the exception of me and my mother, he was not Jun. He was Jap.

❖

One day, in a game of tag, Jun thought it would be funny to climb the section of the barbed wire with worn-down spikes. I believe this was an excuse for him to test the limits of his escape from the camp. The boredom and misery of being detained finally started to take their toll on Jun's blazing heart.

He finally came to the realization that his childhood had been robbed by the camp. He had never ridden a plane, never ridden a bike, never ridden out of Colorado. He was stuck in an internment camp, watching the flat world juxtapose his dynamic self. Everyday, he asked me more and more about what I heard about the war in hopes that

it would end tomorrow, and he could move on.

❖

Eager and determined, he climbed the fence. It was not long before a crowd of worried yet hopeful families gathered around the site. With horror, my mother buried her eyes in the shoulder sleeves of a nearby stranger.

"Hey, Jap!" A soldier yelled, noticeably irritated and calculating a punishment."Get down from there!"

The soldiers, sticks in hand, barked more orders at Jun who pretended to be more and more deaf as he scaled higher and higher. Doing the unthinkable, we watched him as if he was us, returning to our stores, our homes, our country.

One of the taller soldiers, fed up with Jun's defiance, jumped, latching onto his foot and pushing him down to the sandy pavement in one single swoop. Jun's lip caught the wire in his descent, his head pouncing into the stone with a thud.

"What the hell is wrong with you, *Jap*?" the soldier yelled.

Staining his right, white sleeve with the cherry red blood he wiped from crimson lips and rubbing the formation of the blue bruise on his forehead, Jun shielded his almond eyes with his left arm and squinted up at the grimacing soldier. A cacophony of silence stung the air as Jun took one wheezed, deep breath through sizzling lungs, blood-soaked nostrils, and a manila smile.

"I'm American."

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Her Soul

Amy Ding

Staten Island, NY

1
Among twenty million bustling pedestrians,
The only moving thing
Was the pitter-patter of Her heart.

2
She was of three minds,
Like a dream
In which there are three souls.

3
Her soul twisted and twirled in the darkness.
It was a small part of the pandemonium.

4
A heart and a brain
Are one.
A heart and a brain and Her soul
Are one.

5
She does not know which to prefer,
The beauty of ignorance
Or the beauty of ephemeral happiness,
Her soul calling
Or just after.

6
Gates guarded the delicate window
With pitchforks.
The shadow of Her soul
Tried to break free.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
A pitiful truth.

7
O ignorant people of life,
Why do you imagine golden souls?
Do you not see how Her soul
Yearns for freedom
From stress, pressure, oblivion?

8
She knows irreversible truths
And unfortunate, inescapable endings;
But she knows, too,
That Her soul is involved
In what she knows.

9
When Her soul shined,
It removed the light
Of one of many stars.

10
At the sight of Her soul
Gleaming in a dark luminescence,
Even the angels of light
Would cease their singing.

11
It reappeared over time
In a glistening glare.
Once, a fear pierced it,
In that it mistook
The shadow of its light
For Her soul.

12
The people are returning home.
Her soul must be smiling.

13
It was busy all Sunday.
It was thundering
And it was going to thunder.
Her soul grieved
In the dream.

Luck

Isabella Serene

Asheville, NC

Every day, Kevin scrubs off his dead skin in the shower, dries with a soft towel, and applies deodorant and an amount of cologne that is noticeable but will not alert anyone to his presence from across a basketball court. He dresses in his boxer briefs—never shorts—and his sweater and jeans that are form-fitting but not phone-doesn't-fit-in-the-pocket skinny, and he eats his O's, not cheerios, with whole milk—preferably not 2% and *never* skim. He pours his decaf coffee into the to-go mug that's already at least a quarter of the way filled with half-and-half, wipes any spilled drops off the counter with a sponge, and caps the mug without adding sugar. He locks his door—the bolt lock, never the knob—and unlocks his car with the actual key, not the clicker, puts his mug in the cup holder, fastens his seatbelt, turns on the car, flicks the windshield wipers once, twice, and shifts into reverse to escape his driveway. Then, every day, Kevin goes to the gas station a block away from his house to buy one, one dollar "Cool 7s" lottery ticket and a 35 cent, five-piece pack of Wrigley gum before work.

Today, as he slouches behind a shelf of potato chips and trail mixes—mostly peanuts and small, round pieces of chocolate covered in multicolored candy shells that are not M&Ms for branding reasons and pork rinds, which, in his opinion, are a terrible use of an otherwise delicious animal—he fears he will not make it to work. It is not the shelf nor the mediocre snacks that are keeping him. He's never had problems choosing gas station purchases. He is very happy with his dollar lottery and five sticks of gum. It is, instead, the readily enlarging pool of blood leaking from his upper thigh.

It happened quickly. Kevin pulled into the open parking space nearest the door. Inside, he went straight to the counter. An old woman with bobbed brown hair that had clearly been dyed to keep from going grey, a navy blue uniform, a

gas station name tag with a name like *Beatrice* or *Debby* or *Marge* printed on it, and the voice of someone who was twelve in a time when it was cool to smoke as a child and never kicked the habit slowly hobbles from one side of the counter to the other to get his lottery ticket from the roll in the locked, plastic case. She put his ticket and his tiny pack of gum in an appropriately-sized, tiny gas station bag and handed it to him.

He could've left right then. Usually he would have. He generally prefers not to stay inside buildings such as gas stations for any longer than necessary. However, that morning, he had not screwed the top of his to-go mug on adequately, and so, as he backed out of his driveway, the lid toppled off, and his coffee splashed into his lap. So, instead of leaving like he would have preferred, he took his little bag back through the aisles past the walk-in freezer full of too many different brands of beer and towards the restroom sign with the little black and white figures.

At the time, he had thought it greatly fortunate that this gas station has an indoor restroom and not the obnoxiously unclean and inconvenient single stall toilet around the side of the building, which really only seems conducive to drug sales and highly unsanitary sex practices. However, with his blood pasting his left pant leg to his skin and the cold tile of the gas station floor making his right butt cheek feel numb, he now realizes he would have been better off using the drug-sex-and-sometimes-toilet room.

He was so close to the bathroom. He could have been inside, wiping the coffee from the crotch of his pants with a wet napkin, but he just had to turn around when he heard the electronic bell. It was meant to alert the workers of customer's arrival—not that the gas station was really big enough that there were places in the store where the front door was not visible—but it caught his attention. He turned to see the newcomer.

The man, or Kevin assumed it was a man, maybe a very flat-chested woman, wore one of those hats known as a "beanie" that's too long to properly fit on anyone's head without being folded, over his face with eye holes sloppily cut into the front of it. Beanie Man couldn't even afford to get a ski mask to do this whole robbing thing in proper movie fashion. Maybe that's why he decided to rob a gas station in the first place.

Kevin's mistake was not turning around; that simple motion barely caught Beanie Man's attention. His mistake was his flight instinct, which, from an outside perspective, could have, instead, looked like the fight instinct, since his flight carried him towards the door, and Beanie Man happened to be between him and said door. It probably would have been much safer to go into the bathroom where there is a lock, but he didn't think of that at the time. So instead, he looked like a highly heroic defensive fighter, or perhaps a highly stupid maniac, lunging at a man with a beanie with differently sized eye holes and a gun in one hand. Really, looking back on it, the gun shot should not have been all that much of a surprise.

The fluorescent lights in the gas station and also the blood loss, make it hard for Kevin to see. Between the chip bags and trail mixes, he can make out Beanie Man who shuffles, fidgeting with the gun in his hand. Beanie Man's eyes flick from the gun's barrel to the place where energy bars and beef jerky were knocked to the floor by his victim's flailing arms. The woman behind the counter watches Beanie Man watching the blood spread across the dirty, off-white tiles.

It's starting to smell. Like salt and freshly-turned soil. Beanie Man turns to the counter, speaking quietly. He requests, rather than demands, the money from the cash register and a carton of cigarettes, and Beatrice or Debby or Marge gives him what he wants. Beanie Man tells her to call 911 for the "poor chap," and then he exits, and the electronic door chime plays him out, and it's all almost like a bad episode of TV. Except that he can feel it.

His brain is heavy, weighing his chin down to his chest. His wound hurts with heat and cold and intense pulses and dull, constant pressure. But his other leg hurts too because, in the shock, his body can't tell which leg the pain is coming from. His eyelids weigh almost as much as his skull, and he has to fight to keep them open.

He can smell the iron in his blood. He can taste the metallic bitter through his nose. It coats his tongue and his throat. He almost gags, but his body can't pay attention to that right now. He slumps sideways. His side hits the floor. The fibers in his sweater soak up the sticky liquid. It's warm against his shoulder. In his hair. On his cheek. His tiny gas station bag is a white cloud in his blurred, blinking, sideways vision. He reaches for it.

He manages to tear open the pack of gum. He unwraps all five pieces and places them in his mouth. Chewing is difficult, but the flavors flood him anyway, and it's almost a relief, except that the thick warmth of the blood clotting in his eyelashes and sticking between his lips and warming the cool tile against his face seeps through the artificial mint smell just like it soaks through his clothes.

The lottery ticket is soggy in the bag, the thick paper drooping in his hand. Drooping like his arm and his eyelids. He starts to scratch the ticket with his nails. Slowly, slowly revealing the numbers. His vision is failing him, but he keeps scratching, one, two, three fingers scraping the foil covering under his nails. He reveals one seven. And then another.

His eyes might still be open. But he can't tell because he can't see either way. He needs one more seven. His nails might still be scraping. But he can't tell because all he can feel is the warm blood and the hard floor and the cold absence of the hole in his thigh. And then there're sirens, he thinks. And then the electronic door chimes, he's pretty sure. And then a flash of light in his eyes. And voices. But not the smoker voice of the counter lady. Different voices. And then he's moving. But *he's* not moving. And his fingers tremble, and he thinks he's gripping but his hand doesn't agree, and the lottery ticket trudges to the ground to drown in his puddle. He wants to say something, but his mouth doesn't. So the door chimes again, and there's different air on him; it's cold on his damp side.

Someone takes the half-chewed gum from his mouth. And the sirens start again. And he just wants his ticket. Because every day he comes to this gas station and buys one 1 dollar lottery ticket and a 35 cent pack of Wrigley's gum, and every day he chews all five sticks of gum throughout the day,

never all at once, and every day he scratches the ticket as soon as he gets to work, and every day he loses. He wants his ticket because today is out of the ordinary. Today he's feeling lucky.

Expired Water

Lily Wolfson

New York, NY

What do a certain successful man working on Wall Street and Chicken Little have in common? They both believe, with every fiber of their respective beings, that the sky is falling. The probable difference between the two is that the deranged chicken was born with such anxious tendencies, while the neurotic bond trader developed them with time.

❖

Terrence, the bond trader, awakens on December 2, 2002, next to his beautiful wife, who is eight years his senior. He feels well-rested and honored to be the trophy son to his father and breadwinner of his family of three with a fourth member—a baby girl—on the way. Terrence visited his parents just yesterday for a Chanukah celebration, and all festivities unfolded as planned: his three-year-old daughter lit the candles with the help of his wife, while she—a masterful multi-tasker—exchanged passive aggressive remarks with his mother. His father, despite growing pale and rather thin, insisted he was in pristine health.

Unfortunately, that was December 1. Today is December 2. It is a Monday, so Terrence dresses for work where he is referred to as "Wolfie," *the* man. His colleagues revere him as both a savvy bond trader and wise confidant; Terrence is the unofficially appointed guidance counselor of the office, offering advice and support to everyone. To Terrence, there is always something profoundly rewarding about assisting coworkers on the trading floor. Offering his expertise on both life and business is a built-in dimension of his job.

His wife is still asleep when he leaves for work at the routinely prompt time of 4:30 in the morning. A few hours later, she too ventures downstairs to leave for work, too, though she should really be on maternity leave. Before exiting her apartment building, she receives a call more chilling than the crisp air of December she is about to step into. It is her aunt-in-law.

"Alan died," she utters gingerly.

Terrence's wife, in shock, genuinely replies, "Alan...Alan who?" Her father-in-law. He had died of a heart attack, caused by internal bleeding from a tumor in his rectum, in his sleep. They had been together, reciting Chanukah prayers and eating chocolate gelt just twelve hours prior.

❖

Now, instead of waking up for work with energy, Terrence rises each morning still exhausted due to the Ambien he took the previous night. Since writing a eulogy for his father, Terrence has not shed a single tear. He stumbled into the bedroom just after writing the eulogy and shattered into sobs, but, after the funeral, Terrence traded tears for Grey Goose, liquid for liquid. His baby girl was born ten days later, and, on a summer day at around noon when she was just five years old, she was thirsty. She reached for a glass on Terrence's desk that appeared to be filled with water, but the acidic taste proved otherwise. After spitting it out, her little stomach burning on the inside, she ran into the kitchen, demanding to know if Terrence was drinking poison. "It's just expired water," he insisted.

Almost a decade after, that same daughter sees Terrence practically skipping down the stairs with bliss. It is again a summer day around noon, and his daughter is enjoying ice cream with a friend at the kitchen counter. Seeing her father so giddy is a rarity, so she had to inquire.

He squeals, "Your grandmother thinks I don't know where she hides the Grey Goose!" Terrence moves like a mutinous snake, practically slithering over to the sink. He bends down, opened the cabinet where his mother-in-law kept Windex and dish soap, and whips out a bottle of Grey Goose greater in both width and length than his head and neck combined. Terrence clutches the bottle, then lifts it up like a trophy, grinning devilishly—there it is again: the likeness to a snake. He pours himself a generously tall glass, checks to ensure his wife or mother-in-law wasn't nearby, and smuggles his drink up to his room.

Terrence lives in a state of constant paranoia, anticipating the falling of the sky, the collapsing of the sun, the abrupt dropping of the other shoe. His father was snatched so rapidly from his grasp; why should he believe anything in his life to be permanent or reliable? His daughters do not physically resemble each other, and so, the girls often joke that one of them must have a different father. This has an impeccable success rate of sending Terrence into a neurotic frenzy. During these seemingly uncontrollable tantrums, Terrence continually locks his wife out of the bedroom and hides both her wallet and phone. His daughters give him the ultimatum that, if he does not regroup and calm himself down, they will run away. Fueled by vodka, Terrence is never willing to concede, often forcing his wife to sleep on the couch.

He and his wife—and even their daughters—know that he is the father to both girls. And yet, he grows genuinely enraged with anxiety each time such a joke is made. He takes these jokes as his family telling him—indirectly—that they are not grateful for him. He relishes reminding everyone that he "works like a dog," and his bank account can prove it. Yet, he is so worried he will magically go bankrupt one day that he will not splurge on more than one pair of sneakers per decade.

When his wife is on business trips, he capitalizes on the opportunity to drink more vodka while receiving less judgement, for, although his daughters view his drinking as a problem, neither of them has ever heard it referred to as an illness. And so, they remain indifferent. It is arguably their indifference that makes them suffer, punishes them; when the girls are alone with Terrence, he tends to get drunk and behave erratically. The girls think this is truly just their father's personality, so what would be the benefit of reporting it to their mother?

❖

Terrence sifts through piles of old photos, reminiscing in agony. Perhaps it would pain him less if he just cried a bit—*No, I cannot*, he reminds himself sternly. Once-tangible moments of him smiling alongside his father are now distant dreams trapped in frames. In those

photos, Terrence was "Wolfie," *the* man. He embodied everything his father saw so clearly in him. Now, he is Chicken Little. Because, to him, the sky is always falling, his world imploding. He sips his Grey Goose empty and stumbles over to the cabinet for a refill.

Author's Note

It is worth noting that my father, the person whom the character Terrence is based off of, is fifteen months sober. I will not comment on how that has impacted both his behavior and my relationship with him; that is worthy of an entirely separate essay.

Family Man

Daniel Ahr

Commack, NY

One red pick-me-up left him hooked for life
Two red pick-me-ups healed the pain
Three red pick-me-ups left him without a wife
Four red pick-me-ups were his bane
With a swift hand, the man dropped the pick-me-up in his mouth
With another, he drank to wash it down.
In fleeting moments, the man was the king under the crown,
With a silk robe draped all around.
Dressed in pain but coated in gold,
The man wanted back the days of old.
The man longed for a new alignment
Yet he sat, useless, wondering where his life went.

entry

Emily Huang

Andover, MA

i remember writing my first entry eight years ago

on the blank page of a brand-new graphing notebook
one letter for each square
one square for each letter
i wanted uniformity organization perfection

date time weather and then
words thoughts memories
preserved between thin rice-colored grids
i wrote myself into leaf prints

providing a thousand reentry points into the past as
i continued to craft a thousand more into the future

i remember sitting in my room in China trying to ignore the wet heat
i remember thinking i could be an alien from Saturn
i remember wondering why i didn't have a sibling even after
i wished and wished

i remember my handwriting getting messier

one notebook transformed into two three four five six
i transformed into nine ten eleven twelve thirteen

the leaf prints stacked up
rolled up angrysadfrustratedjoyouslovelynumb
transformed my thoughts into words and
began to wilt

i remember when my words migrated to the screen

at fourteen my entries are lost
an inexplicable uncomfortable empty void
like maybe someone had ripped a hole in my paper life and
never bothered to tape it up

maybe that someone wasn't me

i still remember
flashes of things like a spinning camera roll
i remember feeling numb at midnight
and seeing if the water from the sink could reorient me
i remember him
and disjointed dreams daytime nightmares
wondering if i really could float

but the flashes disappear in flashes
without words to pin them down

i remember sitting at the big family computer
illuminated by the dim glow of two overhead bulbs
little legs curled up
telling stories
so that my mom could write the words for me

i remember the sick days
when my clogged throat was still willing to croak out another leaf print
that my hand was too wobbly to create
so that my mom could write the words for me

i remember panicking how could i possibly
resurface
from the churning tempest trapped in my chest
binding me blinding me
i remember the leaf prints slowly sucking the poison out of me
providing an exit for the black waves crashing steaming screaming
as i wondered how i had been able to take my life for granted
and whether i would be able to find another reentry point into myself

Spell It Out

Otufa Noor

Tallahassee, FL

"Sacrilegious."

"Definition?"

"Involving or committing sacrilege."

"Um, language of origin?"

"Latin."

"Uhh, ok...anything else I need to know?"

I lunge a couch pillow at my brother's face, causing him to fall back in surprise. "I. Have. Given. You. Everything. All the information you need," I caution exasperatingly. As I prepare for another burst of stern reprimands, I suddenly transform into my grandmother, a calm demeanor settling over me like a fine layer of snow. "Listen. Breathe. Spell it out like I showed you. Think about it, imagine it, and go for it."

"S-a-c-r-i-l-e-g-i-o-u-s."

I wince at my brother's purposeful deliberation of each letter. His pubescent voice cracks in all the wrong places, causing a severe fit of laughter amongst ourselves. Thankfully, he spells the complex locution correctly, and we move on to the next list.

❖

In our family, we can correctly tell you where your larynx is located, how many hours it takes to digest a cracker, what the normal diastolic and systolic blood pressure is ideal for humans, and what the names of all 206 bones in the human body are. But ask my father to spell "conscientious," he would exasperatingly sound it out for a few seconds, and then ultimately give up and depend on Siri. My mother, on the other hand, bless her heart,

would play the victim card and claim that she hasn't learned the full dynamics of English, despite graduating in an English college and becoming a full-fledged dentist in America.

In our world full of medicine-moguls, it caught my parents by surprise when I revealed that I had applied to compete in a 'spelling bee' at around 11 years of age. My father's reaction was a stereotypical dad joke about bees and flowers, whereas my mother was astonished that her cherubic 11 year old could apply for a competition, much less compete in one. However, I was determined to explore this new area of interest, partly due to a rebellious streak as well as a genuine curiosity. I ended up miraculously winning in my school district and became eligible to compete in higher level competitions. My newfound interest for the love of spelling and words became a turning point for me in my educational and developmental life. Spelling had become an integral part of my life that would change the course of my life.

As I grew up, my love and passion for words and books also grew at a tremendous rate. My mother lovingly reminisces about the countless times she found story books in the bathroom, or the times I got lost in a supermarket when I stopped to read every single label on every single product. Costco was heaven for me. I would scour the aisles and read up on the ingredients of protein shakes, the calorie count of Nutella jars (which is not recommended if you enjoy the hazelnut spread), and the nutrition information in frozen chicken nuggets. And it didn't stop there. Shampoo bottles, aluminum cans, and even arbitrary scam ad forms all became unfortunate victims of my voracious appetite to consume every single word in the English language. According to my grandmother, a brilliant and perceptive woman who also appreciated the literary arts, I was a curious little beast, hungry for innocent words that surrounded my niche. When my grandmother became ill, I became determined to maintain this perceptive curiosity, not for myself, but for her.

❖

"Words are God's ultimate gift to us, language his messenger," my grandmother insisted. "We must maintain the originality of these words in order to fully appreciate them," she continued. "Now, spell fuschia and define it for me."

Every Sunday I would hobble over to my grandmother's house, a stone's throw away from ours, for daily spelling lessons. Bubbles of laughter and delicious Indian food accompanied the blissful lectures and stern directions my grandmother delivered to me. Her mentality lied in the course of words. Their spelling, pronunciation, definition, and origin became the most fundamental aspects of these terms, and my grandmother made sure I understood that. Systematically, our lessons would begin with her pulling out a rusty leather bound book, covered in years of pen marks and greasy fingerprints. Known as her "book of secrets," *Taita,* as I called her, utilized her own personal dictionary to feed my ever growing curiosity for new words. Termagant, harridan, jodhpur, castigate. Every day I went home with a pocket full of *baklava* and a mind full of new words. Our lessons became something I looked forward to. They would also become something I would miss for the rest of my life after her illness.

I was told that *Taita* fought hard for her life. I was reminded that there was nothing that could be done. I was reprimanded when I wondered why the doctors didn't try harder. Exactly three years after the incident, I witnessed another geriatric patient suffering as no one was able to do anything. I remember clenching my fists so hard I created half moon shaped indentations on my palms. I lost someone important that day. But what I realized is that she knew this. She was fully aware that her time on the planet was finite, as is everyone else's. My grandmother gave me the gift that I would cherish forever. Her scolding, her lessons, even her *chai* became cherished souvenirs for me that I am grateful for.

❖

My brother looks at me expectantly. I scour the spelling bee lists for a difficult word. *Fuschia.* The word *fuschia* burns into my mind, a painful reminder. Reading it out loud feels like putting salt on a fresh wound. I bite my lip so hard I draw blood. "F-fuschia." I stammer.

"Can you repeat the word?" my brother asks.

"No. You should have heard it the first time," I mutter. My heart beats so fast I feel it ripple through my sweater. My knees shake and for a moment I waver, closing my eyes to regain consciousness.

"F-u-s-c-h-i-a," my brother answers.

I look up and smile. "That's enough for today." I yawn.

"Make sure to memorize the definitions so I can test you on them tomorrow."

As we head to sleep I walk past our family picture, a plethora of aunts, uncles, grandfathers, and grandmothers. I stop, tears glistening in my eyes. I gently caress the maternal face of *Taita* and kiss my fingers.

أحبك, I whisper. *I love you.*

As I sit here today, I proudly gleam at my younger brother as he stands on stage, winning first place in his Spelling Bee competition. I have taught him a multitude of words, stood by him as he drilled the suffixes and prefixes, and sternly enforced repetition of the most difficult words in the English language. His accomplishments are entirely his own; I am merely a side character in his world of language and creativity. As he steps off stage, he asks me: "Remember the first word that you taught me to spell? Family? I almost asked them to use it in a sentence, but then I looked at you. And I didn't need to anymore."

I hug him, and look up at the sky, past the spotted ceiling, the heavy clouds, and the stars. I look at *Taita* and I know she is smiling down at me. And I know that everything will be a-l-r-i-g-h-t.

Cuffed Jeans

Audrey Kim
Demarest, NJ

She cuffs her jeans. That's a good sign. I'm looking for whether or not her shirt is tucked in when she looks up suddenly and her eyes land on mine. I freeze and so does she.

Aaaaaand this is why we don't look at pretty girls.

It feels like we're locked in, and despite the screeching of little children, calling of orders, and every other possible distraction that might draw our eyes away from one another, we're stuck. This is honestly my fault—I've probably been staring for too long. She shifts in her seat before breaking into the kind of questioning smile you can only give when you're staring into an unfamiliar pair of eyes. *I should look away now.* I reciprocate with a flimsy attempt at my own smile before immediately ducking my head back down, moving quickly onto problem set no. 10. But that smile lingers in my head.

Don't think about it, Amanda, I think to myself. *Just focus on your work.*

I shake my head and take a look over the problem set, pencil in my hand. I spin my weapon once before poising it over the first problem, ready to charge into battle. Conveniently, this is when a couple slips into the booth next to me. Normally, I wouldn't have even noticed but both men have a Venti something or another in their hands and are chatting loudly about the liberating quality of college life and a mutual hatred of Grindr.

It's curious—I always see gay men in this Starbucks, but never lesbian couples. I guess you can never really tell, but then again, between the VSCO girls making TikToks, straight edge Korean girls with textbooks or nerdy boyfriends, and white soccer moms with Subarus, what else can you expect to find?

But those cuffed jeans give me hope. Hope that I shouldn't have. Or *allow*, rather.

It takes me a moment to realize my eyes have wandered back over to her.

Her legs are crossed, and, from the way her foot is angled, I can see she has little dogs on her socks, pugs peaking out from over the topline of her shoes. *An animal lover—cute.* I shake my head a little. *You know what's cuter?* I think to myself, *finishing this problem set.* I try to focus but, between the girl and the couple conversing right next to me (I'd never heard zodiac signs debated with such contention), things are a little difficult.

Besides, out of the corner of my eye, I can see her ponytail, gathered up neatly with a perfect face frame, swaying side to side as she bops her head to the incongruously sleepy music lulling in the background. I find my lips curling into a slight smile as I shake my head and pull out a history reading. I wonder what kind of person she might be, listening to music that's covered with the sounds of chair legs screeching on the floor, conversations, and bustle. She must be attentive. She must also be sweet to hear the song and try to attune herself to it. I take a quick glance over at her, only to find her looking back at me. I can feel my face flush and I turn away immediately.

Other Worlds Akanksha Basil Chappaqua, NY

I have to stop myself from running my hands through my hair and fixing the way my hoodie sits on me. If she is staring, and, if she is gay, I can't be picking and preening. If there is a chance, I can't take it. If we end up seeing each other in Starbucks every day, exchanging glances and awkward smiles, I can't give in. If we end up sitting at the same table on a particularly packed day, making small comments to one another over the noise… if we end up exchanging numbers to stay up well after dawn, holding our phones close to our ears as the volume sits low, whispering to one another so as to not wake up our parents, it would be a sin.

They're talking about college life again, the couple, and their hot takes on whatever dining hall is the best float into my mind and overtake any ideas I had been formulating on how to attack the next definite integral.

"Oh gosh, I tried so hard being straight," one starts. "But when I got on campus on the first day and saw my R.A…." He leans forward. "He broke me *on sight*," prompting the other into laughter.

I remember the girl who almost broke me. We were sitting on the curb by the mall, waiting for her mom to pick us up, in silence. There were a million words that hung between us and a million feelings that had been cried out, muttered, and plead. But, in the minutes before her mom came, we chose silence. That is, until she took a deep breath and turned to me.

"Couldn't you just—God, I don't know, just think of me like a boy. I have big hoodies you can wear, and I'm a tomboy anyways," she said, pleading seeping into her voice.

"Ifrah, I don't know if it will sit right with me…I've already talked to pastors and people in the same situation as me and everything, but—"

"My mom is here."

The rest of the car ride, she acted as if nothing happened. We complained about the SATs as though she hadn't spent the last hour deepening the hole I was desperately trying to climb out off. As though I hadn't spent the last hour holding on to every last bit of self-control, will, and courage I had. We talked and acted as through we hadn't spent the last hour pushing and pulling in the saddest way, trying to find a middle ground between

the attraction between us and where I stood with my faith. When we finally reached my house, I climbed out of my seat, thanked her mother for the ride and went to walk around the car to my house.

"I'll walk you," Ifrah said. She climbed out of her seat and met me behind the car. She gave me a hug and whispered into my ear, "Read about it. Google it. Just…promise me you'll look into it… and text me tonight, okay?"

I nodded, but I knew that, when I got home, I wouldn't even have to look. Because the truth is, I've tried it all. I've opened up Safari on incognito too many times to count, reading every article reinterpreting passages of the Bible, arguing translations and notions. I've forced myself into those vulnerable conversations with the youth pastors in my church in search of answers. It felt as though I had exhausted the internet, and the people around me, but after all of it, nothing seemed to settle the feeling in my gut.

Despite this, that night, when I opened a chat with Ifra, my fingers froze as I questioned for the millionth time if it really were a sin to let myself into a relationship with another girl, if that passage was really meant to say "man shall not lie with boy" and not "man," and even if it wasn't, if it's failure to mention women meant anything. If it was valid to label that passage as outdated, if I could find a loophole by never engaging sexually, if God was only condemning homosexuality as it had been in those times, but not as it is today, potentially loving and actually real.

I feel the heat of eyes upon me and, when I look up, I catch a glimpse of the girl's ponytail whipping back into place, turning her head away from me. The thought of what could happen if I let my thoughts go too far stirred something in the pit of my core, and I couldn't bring myself to look back over at her.

This is just a test, Amanda.

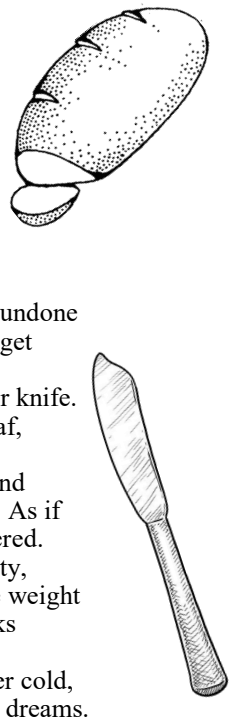
Two years of resolving the things I feel for girls has trained me for this moment. I don't give her the slightest glance until I notice her packing up to go a couple hours after our awkward exchange. She's there with her oversized jacket and backpack, taking one final glance at me. She gives a small smile—a real smile this time—and waves. My heart jumps, and I smile and give a wave back. But, while her wave might be an introduction, mine is a goodbye.

Kitchen Elegy

Rachel Brooks

Trumbull, CT

My mother bakes banana bread
in July. Up the stairway
the vibrant scent wafting—
powdery and light.
She splits ginger cloves
and slashes golden plantains.
Cinnamon bursts into dust,
cascading down her apron
like an echo.
Its risen body never fits
in a single bowl,
so she divides batter while I
shatter nutmeg. I am coming undone
as the bread leavens and I forget
about our troubles and frets
and fears glinting in the butter knife.
Now my mother prods the loaf,
its swelling belly sinking
as the needle slits its womb and
emerges, clean. She breathes. As if
her silent prayers were answered.
She hands me the pan to empty,
my fears hollowing under the weight
of the hot dough until it breaks
like communion.
My mother says it tastes better cold,
once we have settled into our dreams.
Later the crust will be thrown
in the trash and I will be wishing
the bread was still careening onto the
counter and the steam still swirling
like a dervish.



Temper

Lena Carson

Pittsburgh, PA

"*Press #1 to languish in English*
wait time estimated anywhere
between death and rebirth" –Steven Kramer

Annoying is the best way to describe it.
The peaceful music soured when listened to
over and over, waiting for some ignorant
person to pick up to phone and speak
to you. You've been waiting for
hours,
but they ignore you, and you know
it.
You can hear their carefree laughter
behind closed doors, you fool,
you. But yet, you wait for them
as they leave you behind.
Red flashes in your eyes like
fireworks. Lips pursed, faux
nails tapping impatiently
at oak desktops, tall red
heels pacing quickly on
linoleum floors, you
can't stand it any
longer, so hang up—
then, bang your
head against
the wall in
fury, heels
collapse,
nails snap,
fireworks
explode
in your
head,
listen:

you'll never hear the end of it.

Mi Quinceañera

Morgan Flodman

Pittsburgh, PA

You can place a scepter in my hand
and crown me with a diadem
to make me a princess of my maturity;
give up my dolls and heel my shoes
so I may waltz with *chambelanes* all my life,
finding strength in compañia
when the gifts of womanhood
are entrusted at my throne.

A spread of buttery vanilla
adorned with ruffles and pearls
seem splendid atop a birthday cake,
yet I say the greatest fruition
comes from making *la dulzura* yourself,
putting all that is youthful in
and savoring destiny while it's hot.

Nana Likes it Sour

Jyotsna Nair

Thiruvananthapuram, India

Nana may not know how to read, but she makes good pickles. I've seen her make them many times; she stuffs fat, green, sausage-shaped cucumbers into mason jars of saltwater almost unconsciously, as if it's a process as natural as breathing. She says pickles are the easiest thing in the world to make but making them *well* isn't as easy.

Mum says Nana makes pickles a lot because they were Grandfather's favorite food, and, after forty years of marriage, she sort of got used to making them often. But Nana snarls at Mum whenever she says that, says she never cared about Grandfather and she never will. And Mum bites her lip to stop herself from saying, *Yes, you did, actually*, and then Dad clutches her hand in warning under the table, and Julian and I try really hard not to look at each other and roll our eyes.

No one talks about Grandfather much and never in Nana's hearing. So the vague picture I have of the man has been built with all the hurried whispers and covert looks and fragments of conversation that have slipped from Mum and Dad over the years. He wasn't a very nice person. Once, Mum joked that, if he could have, he would have returned her to the baby store and asked for a refund because Grandfather never liked children.

Sometimes, I think that Nana looks a little like she's been pickled herself—shriveled, shrunken, wrinkled, skin hanging off her bones like an ill-fitting dress. And then I imagine Grandfather trapping Nana in a human-sized jar and Nana crying and crying until her tears fill it,. Instead of drowning in the saltwater, she somehow gets pickled, and Grandfather watches until she seems good and ready and then lets her out because he likes to eat pickles, and so, maybe he thinks Nana'd be better if she were pickled, too. I tell this to Julian, and he says I am crazy, and besides, how can I imagine Grandfather if I've never seen him?

Julian's seen Grandfather, but he was only two the last time they met, so he doesn't actually recall much. He claims to remember the day Grandfather left really well because, apparently, Nana started screaming and throwing stuff to the floor. She threw their wedding photo to the floor, and it broke into tiny pieces of glass, and Julian was so scared he remembered it—the memory carved into his mind forever. He says that I was technically there too because Mum was seven months pregnant with me, but, of course, I wouldn't know, being inside her and all.

Julian likes to pretend he knows a lot more than I do, but really we all know nothing. It's Nana who knows everything, but she'll never tell because she hates Grandfather. We all know it because she says it over and over again. Only lately, I think maybe she's been trying to convince *herself* of it, not us.

❖

Although she says she hated him, Mum once caught Nana looking through an old photo album. Although she says she hated him, she sometimes gazes out the living room window for hours on end, as if her eyes are magnets and Grandfather is a lump of iron, drawing nearer and nearer the longer she stares. Although she says she hated him, she makes pickles every day, maybe so that he can eat them as soon as he comes home.

Once, I make the mistake of asking Nana why she married him.

She looks at me, blinking a little, as if waiting for me to turn red and stammer, *Never mind* or, *On second thought, I have homework to finish*, and hurry out of the room. When I stay, her face crumples into a flabby scowl.

"I just did," she says. "There was no 'why' about it. He asked. I said yes, although I hated him. I still do."

I look at her. Every time she says this, maybe she thinks it'll erase a bit of her past with Grandfather. I wonder how many more lies she will cook up, season with simmering rage and swallow herself. She started with little ones at first, so that she didn't choke on them—*I hated him* seemed like a good place to start. Now she'll say she never married the man—he never existed; Mum was adopted; all of us are crazy, cuckoo, *crackers*, to speak of this man she's never met, never loved.

I'm still looking at her when I realize Nana is quivering from barely restrained rage. She clutches the arm of her chair to steady herself, knuckles flashing red from effort. Her face tenses into a knotty tangle of bitter lines, and, call me a fool, but, for some reason, it's only now that I realize Nana is not really angry. She is hurt. When Grandfather left, her heart broke.

And heartbreak morphed into hurt, and hurt fermented into fury as Nana let it stew in her bones, bleach them acid white. She bottled up her emotions and let them pickle for years.

I walk away.

❖

When I come home from university, I find Nana sitting on an armchair in the living room, gazing out the window.

I say "Hi," but she doesn't turn around. She mumbles words under her breath, and I think she's calling Grandfather home, promising him her love and her pickles. I have to remind myself that this is the same woman who had insisted she hated him.

Mum tells us not to worry about Nana. *It's a phase. She isn't young anymore, you know!* Julian rolls his eyes, but I can't help but feel uneasy. Nana is fading away, cell by cell, strand by strand of her greying hair. I swear she's growing smaller. She talks to herself at mealtimes, and we pretend not to see. The fact is, Nana is both present and absent, here but not here. Most of her is with Grandfather, wherever *he* is.

Julian, who thinks he knows more than me more than ever after taking psychology, says Nana is experiencing emotional instability after being in denial for so long. She's tired of fighting, and has given in finally. I tell him he's crazy, even though I think he's probably right.

❖

The day Nana disappears, it snows.

Julian finds the note in her bedroom after Mum sends him to wake her up for breakfast. Dad shakes his head and says he's surprised it didn't happen sooner. Mum says *I don't believe it!* and then cries. I don't say anything but look in the

kitchen. On the shelf above the stove, I find five jars of pickles for Grandfather, in case he comes back before she finds him.

Heart, Mind, Soul, and Paper Napkins

Brianna Pham

Irvine, CA

The park was immersed in a blanket of night, the perfect ambiance for writing. Crouching in the dark, Dylan began to write in his journal.

"To everyone else, English is a class requirement. Some see the language as a necessity, others a joke. People play with it, abuse it, and reinvent it every day. English is one of the many intellectually malleable ideas of the world."

However, it was more than that—he knew it in his heart.

"English is—

❖

The last sentence, arguably the most vital part of a storyline, had committed the unthinkable: gone astray from my mind.

I spiraled into a panic. My senses seemed to work against me—the cafe's ambient jazz disagreed with my eardrums, my seat grew uncomfortable, and the universally-loved aroma of coffee beans smelled sour at best.

I have no idea how to finish this, I thought bitterly. *I was so, so close.*

I slammed the wooden table with my fist, irritated at myself.

Unfortunately, I was a bit too emphatic in my punch.

The table shook, my coffee rattled, and a caffeinated Niagara Falls settled itself between my laptop's keys. The screen flashed and went black.

Horrified, I shrieked, all common sense rapidly leaving my body. I sprinted to the cashier counter, desperate for a solution.

The notoriously funny barista, an East Asian guy, handed me a fistful of recycled paper napkins. I thanked him.

"No use thanking me," he replied. "Biodegradable napkins don't absorb shit."

Chuckling in spite of myself, I returned to the crime scene and pointed the laptop's spine upwards to draw out the liquid. I looked at the depressing metal roof I had formed—the pathetic house of my woes.

I fruitlessly pressed a napkin to the keyboard, ignoring the oasis of spilled coffee on the table.

A wannabe-hipster girl sitting at the adjacent table giggled condescendingly. "Takes more than napkins to fix that one, sweetie," she jeered, sipping the most generic milk tea available.

"Takes more than some caffeine to fix your outfit," I spat. "My dad has those overalls."

The barista snorted.

With much bravado, I stormed to the trash bin by the counter and discarded my damp napkins. Before I walked off, though, the barista caught my eye.

"Her fake hipster lot is the most marketable crowd," he whispered. "I get paid, I don't complain."

"Welcome to capitalism." I smirked. I left the coffee shop, the door slamming in my wake.

❖

I was so angry, I had forgotten that I was in New York. I took in the cigarette smoke, the buildings larger than life, the Californian tourists in The North Face snowsuits shivering in the fifty-degree morning. None of the streetlights were on, but the entire block seemed to glow.

I admired the scenery for a few seconds, only to realize that my laptop screen was incapable of glowing along with the city.

What a swell time to be alive.

Mulling over my misfortunes, I began my walk of shame to the repair center across the block.

Thankfully, my misery was short-lived. I passed a produce stand and a corner bodega before dejectedly ducking into the repair store. A string of bells dangling from the ceiling jingled happily upon my entrance, clearly mocking my suffering.

An exceptionally greasy man emerged from the back doorway. "What'uh we got 'ere?"

I rolled my wrist exaggeratedly, gesturing to my still-dripping laptop.

He rubbed his palms on an apron that seemed to serve no purpose other than fashion. "That'll be nine-fifty. Minimum."

I struggled to contain a disgruntled scream. "What, you need more hair slick or something?"

The man snarled; whether he was impersonating a pitbull or trying to look intimidating was a mystery to me. "Let's make it a thousand."

I put my hands up in a mock surrender. "I'll take nine-fifty, sir." I handed him my card, hyper-aware of his eyes boring into my messy ponytail.

After uncomfortably backing out of the shop, I returned to the sidewalk. I felt naked; the monotonous thumping of my laptop bag was absent from my right thigh. My nasty case of writer's block wasn't helping, either.

Alas, death had come to all—my laptop, my plot idea, myself.

But, of course, tourists' popular belief is that death arrives faster to anyone who dares to take the subway.

That's it.

Suddenly resolute, I buttoned my sweater at the neck. I was walking the line between a schoolteacher and nun, but I didn't care. I was going to sit in the subway. After all, I wanted to be inconspicuous.

Onward, I told myself. *No better way to defeat death than to face it*.

And so, the search for inspiration commenced.

❖

In a matter of minutes, I witnessed two men burden a metal chest that could easily contain multiple corpses within it, and, later, nonchalantly noticed fecal matter by my shoe. The most shocking was this: I discovered that there are such things as portable stripper poles.

I eased onto a bench by a wall, overwhelmed. Simply trying to get to the bench had been a warzone. I groaned passionately, unbothered by my mussed hair obstructing most of my vision.

A violinist counting his earnings by the bench glanced at me with concern. He offered me a close-lipped smile—fleeting, but not unkind.

I stared at him through the panels of my hair. I saw a chiseled face, thick eyebrows, brown eyes.

Seeing me looking, he smiled again, with teeth this time.

Intrigued, I fished a dollar coin out of my pocket and flicked it into his violin case. Civility was a rare sighting in the subway.

He looked immensely grateful, which warmed my heart. To my surprise, the musician rose and stood in front of me.

Taken aback, a punctuated "Sir?" escaped my lips.

He didn't move, but instead offered his hand to shake. "Ciao, bella."

Relenting, I unstiffened. My bachelor's degree in foreign language forced a hesitant "Buon pomeriggio, signore," from my lips—I had bid him a good afternoon. "Do you speak English?"

"Solo Italiano,"—only Italian—was his reply. "Parlo con la musica."—I speak with music.

Fascinated, I spread my arms. "Così parli."—so speak.

He winked, as if he was hoping I'd ask all along. I folded my hands expectantly.

With the tenderness of a mother to her child, he placed his violin on his shoulder. He angled the bow to the strings and pulled back, producing the first piercing note.

Now this is writing material, I mused. Inspiration was high in the air, so I listened.

By the time the bow arched back for the second time, my eyes were closed. One note alone sent my mind into a reverie, absent of Dylan's life story and sarcastic humor as a coping mechanism.

I was immersed in his music, the voice of the violin.

The crescendo came with a bittersweet morning many yesterdays ago when my then-fiancé still attempted cooking. I could virtually smell the burning batter in the saucepan, a scent of my aching past. I had hated his pancakes, but I had most definitely loved him.

Chills ran down my spine.

A brief pizzicato accompanied my toughest times in university; the nights I spent substituting makeup remover for tears. The hands I held in the street then were not those of a lover, but my own mittened ones. The vibrations of the violin suggested that perhaps wringing my hands wasn't the same as having another person to keep them warm.

The demons I had shooed away with writing were out in the open, and they were here to stay. But, strangely enough, I welcomed them.

Switzerland Chantel Kardous Lincoln, RI

I couldn't possibly write a story without remembering my own. Sorry, Dylan.

The bellowing rhythm doubled on itself, dancing in the musty subway air. A tear rolled down my cheek. I could feel the musician's poignant personality screaming through every note. I could hear his ardor in my bitterness, his struggle alongside my own.

And, through it all, not a single word of English was uttered.

The man put down his bow. "Come è stato?"—how was it?

In my notebook, I wrote, "English comes from the heart."

With that noted, I wordlessly emptied a week's worth of coffee money into his case.

❖

Sheets of sunlight occasionally penetrated the windows of the trolley. It was the only reminder that I was, indeed, still on planet Earth. Between a man slamming his head against the wall repeatedly to a woman talking about her toe fungus, I was losing my grip on reality.

My decision to leave the bench and ride the subway was a stupid one. Weathering the absurdities, I peered at the over-enthusiastic advertisements plastered below the ceiling: the joys of corporate America.

American Ballet Theater. Better insurance, better you. Need a plumber? Call now at—

"The ads are so bland these days."

I jumped, startled by the voice.

A stoic woman was beside me, her neck craned to read the notices. "You'd think people would get the hint after seeing the five plumber ads in the station."

I turned, observing my ad-reading companion. The woman's black eyes sparkled as she read the ads; her natural afro was held back with a wrap. She radiated authority, her brown skin glowing in an expensive-looking tweed suit.

I chuckled. "I'm surprised you're the one bashing ads."

"Why's that?" She faced me.

"You're the one in the suit." I shrugged. "Seems pretty 'marketing firm' to me."

The woman scoffed. "Lies. I'm paid by tuition." She extended her hand, and I shook it. "Minerva Blanche, history professor."

"Lana Barnes, author," I reciprocated. "Where do you work?"

"NYU, the old beast." The subway rattled, and we both grasped the pole for dear life. "But transportation seems to be quite the beast on its own." She breathed, shaking.

We shared a laugh. "What brings you here, Professor Blanche?" I asked.

"Minerva, please." She flicked her hand dismissively. "Why am I here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She pondered for a second. "Why, the same reason as you."

A vague answer to a specific question. "To obtain transportation?" I played along.

"Think deeper."

I thought deeper. "So…you're on a mundane search for inspiration?"

Minerva shrugged. "Sure. That's what my life is, anyway."

I waited for an explanation. She didn't provide one.

The professor sighed. "Sometimes I forget to explain things."

I shook my head in mock shame. "A grave mistake for a professor to make."

"Are you telling me how to do my job?" Minerva joked.

"No, I just want to know what you mean." I paused. "It's not too often that you find someone with impeccable grammar on a grimy subway."

She took a deep breath, as if she was about to tell a fairytale for the first time. For a few seconds, the only words spoken were the whines of the trolley.

"Inspiration isn't something I have to find for myself, but something I have to find in others," she began. "My students only pay attention for so long."

"Why's that?"

Minerva crossed her arms, resigned. "They're history majors. They've heard it all already. Teaching them about a small war is the closest I can get to a full-fledged learning experience.

"So my search for inspiration is this: I'm looking to create it in my students."

I pulled out my notepad, writing "Inspiration in *OTHERS*" in bold letters.

"Actually, I take that back - all students are inspired." Minerva cocked her head. "You just have to look for it within them hard enough."

She paused, most likely for rhetorical effect.

"How?" I asked.

"I don't talk *at* them, I talk *to* them."

Bingo. "You mold the English language to your advantage?" I prompted.

"I drop the thesaurus vocabulary and replace it with common language, sure."

I pondered. "There has to be more to it."

"Inspiration comes from the simplest of places." Minerva laughed. "But yes, I try to use humor when I can. Sometimes we forget that people from history are, well, *people*."

I wrote down more notes. "Are those rhetorical choices?" I asked.

"Humor? Conciseness?" She shook her head no. "It's just the English language, but better."

I was writing so furiously, I barely heard the conductor announce the stop.

"That's mine," Minerva announced, amused. "Remember what I said."

By the time I hollered a "thank you," she was gone.

❖

Someone's palm clapped my shoulder, and I jumped two feet in the air.

The hand quickly removed itself. "Woah there, buddy."

My head snapped up from my notebook. I peered at the beholder of the voice, an Asian man in a worn leather jacket.

"What's your deal?" I asked, maybe a little too aggressively.

He put his hands up in the air, his slanted eyes widening in surprise. "I've seen you around; I just thought this was your exit."

This was my second startling concentration break within the day. "Is this East 143rd?" I asked, rubbing my temples.

"You bet." The guy walked off.

Wait.

I quickly ducked out of the automatic doors, my eyes fixated on the back of his jacket. Without thinking, I yelled after him. "Hold it!"

He paused his gait, still not facing me. In a humorous deadpan voice, he asked, "What, you need more napkins?"

I knew it.

I walked in front of him and turned around, looking him in the eye. Being six inches taller than me, the barista gazed down at me with mild amusement. I crossed my arms.

He stood there awkwardly. Expectantly.

I gambled a close-lipped smile. "What?"

The barista scrunched his brows. "Are you just going to not laugh at my napkin joke, or…?"

My zeal mostly driven by embarrassment and adrenaline, I laughed enthusiastically.

"Damn, I knew I was pretty funny," he chuckled. "Just not *that* funny."

I threw my hands up in defeat. "My life is just *that* boring."

His eyes sparkled. "I see."

A whistle filled the air, and we turned to face the track. The subway sprinted from the stop, away from us Bronx residents.

Whether we were too tired or content, I wasn't sure, but we didn't move.

"I can't afford coffee now." I piped up, still gazing at the empty track.

"Ah," he replied. "Struggles of a freelance author?"

"No, I gave my coffee money to this violinist."

"Why?" His abrupt question pierced the air, decorated with slight curiosity.

"Because he was, oh my God, *super good*, but he didn't speak English. But he really, like, *really*, moved me. He inspired me for my book; you should buy it when it's out. Oh! And there was this professor, she—"

"Long day?"

I suddenly became aware of how dumb I had sounded. "What?"

"Sounds like you had a long day."

I groaned, horrified. "Yes. I'm not normally this dumb, I—"

"Tell you what." The barista crossed his arms and grinned. "Coffee on the house for the week."

He clapped my shoulder to spite me, winked, and walked away.

I watched him leave, trying to wrap my head around the conversation that we just shared. I had been coming to that coffee shop for years to the same barista, but I had never genuinely spoken to him.

I sighed. "Wait."

He stopped, back still to me. Clicking his right heel to his left toe, he taunted, "Second thoughts about the napkins? They're organic, all-natural—"

I rolled my eyes. "What's your name? I never caught it."

"Glad you finally asked." I could hear his smirk.

Silence followed.

"Then you shouldn't keep me waiting," I goaded. "But if you want to, I think I'll make my way to pick up my laptop."

The barista finally looked over his shoulder.

"Ah, he moves!" I taunted.

He chuckled. "It's Dylan."

I almost dropped my notebook.

❖

Breathless, I sat on a bench to recollect myself. The station was empty. There was no man to bang his head against the wall, no Italian violinist to amaze me, no toe fungus banter.

Finally calm, I took out my notebook and gazed at some phrases I had jotted down.

"English comes from the heart."

"You need to be inspired to inspire."

I inhaled deeply and began penning my thoughts down as they came: "I use the subway every day, but it never grew on me. There have been moments where I was convinced that I'd have be killed if I made the wrong turn.

"Nonetheless, my encounters today were more than mental scars. The people I met were much more than passionate street performers and jaded professors. The ideas I arrived at were more than those of shallow disgust for the subway. Dylan, although similar in name, barely resembled my introverted character. Instead, his sharp humor and kind soul continue to make people like me smile every day."

So, I chided myself, *what's their significance?*

I continued writing: "In fact, the people and experiences of my today are signs of the times, tributes to our universal language and its versatility."

A wave of realization washed over me, over the massive boulder that I so affectionately called Writer's Block.

I smugly crossed out the "English is—??" on my paper.

Remembering the three people in the subway who had moved me in their own way, I wrote my last sentence:

"English is a memoir to the people who speak it, whether from the heart, mind, or soul."

It sounded like my character. It sounded like *me*.

I relished the feeling.

END

Board Walk Cole Lindemann Chicago, IL

Fifteen

Brianna Pham

Irvine, CA

Fifteen years old is an uncomfortable age. It is the golden era of raging teenage hormones, cluelessness about your peers, and superficial knowledge for the sake of advanced placement classes. Education and life itself always seem like a lie, or so says the existential crisis a person can be subjected to at this age.

However, while I attempt to function at this tender age, I have discovered one thing has not once lied to me: English, the lingua franca, the tongue of all mankind.

Fifteen was the age of my Vietnamese parents when they immigrated across the precarious South China Sea. The vastness of the ship, the insignificance of its barely living passengers, and the looming shadow of Communism only seemed more palpable when retold in my grandparents' heavy Vietnamese accent.

After weathering the perils of their escape, my parents became dedicated students, hindered only by the difficulty of the English language. My father left behind his beloved pet rooster in Vietnam, only taking with him the clothes on his back and his ever-present confidence. As an immigrant teenager struggling to assimilate, his bravado was inevitably crushed when he completely forgot how to spell "coffee" in front of his class.

In contrast, I grew up alongside my impressive collection of Berenstain Bears books and the courage to ask for fortune cookies at my local Chinese restaurant. The mango trees that surrounded my father's hometown were replaced by monkey bars that I, too, so fearlessly scaled. Keeping their language barrier struggles in mind, my parents raised me to speak solely English to better prepare me for the endeavors of public education.

However, this decision expanded to more than academic excellence. English was not only my first language, but the mental teddy bear I held at night. My nightmares could only be cured by perusing the Hogwarts halls with Harry Potter, even if my bedtime had long passed. I filled up journals as soon as I could hold a pencil. I was fascinated by how I could spell "then" with an "a" and change its meaning. A particularly less-than-proud moment of mine was when I inscribed the alphabet on my father's expensive leather paperweight in my five-year-old scrawl.

Embracing the language that was not of my homeland, but of my parents' new beginning, was

the stimulant of my identity. It is an identity that is fifteen years in the making and one that continues to evolve.

Contrary to my tendency to diverge from the paths of my parents, I was perfectly content with pursuing my father's career for the first thirteen years of my life. An accomplished allergist and immunologist, he often whisked me away to his Arcadia office. I was a frequenter of the cafeteria downstairs, enthused by the crispy chicken wings the hospital served on Thursdays. I dedicated myself to the task of memorizing each of the front office assistants' names, convinced that I would someday have a team of medical practitioners working in an office of my own. I was most moved by my father's permanently filled waiting room; it amazed me that so many patients were beside themselves to receive his "touch of God."

During this time, I regularly perused the Internet in an attempt to plan out my life. I specifically remember selecting the biological sciences major of one of my local colleges and inputting my search, "English courses."

I tried to ignore the sinking in my stomach as I stared at the fairly empty screen.

Nonetheless, I continued to pursue a career in medicine. I aspired to someday emulate the kindness and intelligence that accompanied the responsibility of wearing a white coat. All throughout middle school, I allowed blind ambition to overshadow the foundations on which I grew.

High school was my turning point. I was skeptical of my choice to take AP Human Geography and English 1 Honors.

As in most cases, though, my true self caught up to me.

Human Geography became the place where I could attempt to fix the world, the intense gaze of my teacher serving as a silent undertone of officiality. English class was where I volunteered obscure themes for the simplest of stories, typing strings of words on a laptop keyboard to form a cohesive analysis. While I wrestled with a calculator and called myself an anomaly for being "the Asian kid who sucks at math," I joyously threw into my arguments words I found in the thesaurus for the fun of it.

In the middle of an intense debate regarding globalization, I remember blankly staring at my presentation for a second. The points that were tailored to throw my opponent off, the notes I held in my shaking hand—I took it all in.

With the English language rolling off my tongue and no sign of the Vietnamese accents my parents once carried came an epiphany.

I, a mere fifteen-year-old filled with determination, contradictions, and a little too much hope, did not express any interest in studying science.

As a person with a familial background in biology and secondhand English, I ironically decided to engage a new pursuit: a career in corporate law.

Determined to make my spark burn brighter, I scoured my surroundings for opportunities. To my parents' shock and ultimate amusement, I bettered my friendship with English through writing emails to lawyers and marketing firm CEOs alike. Before my mother knew it, she was watching me put on a pantsuit for the first time and take on Comcast's legal building. Biology far from my mind, I strapped on my heels for an internship interview, telling myself that I could talk my way into the job in a whirlwind of brash confidence.

Over a generation, pet roosters have been replaced by beta fish, the sprawling Asian countryside by a Californian suburbia, a misspelling of the word "coffee" for a barely teenage girl with a love for telling stories.

The world my parents came from is a far cry from the world I was born into, but a key similarity bridges the generational gap.

Fifteen-year-olds, no matter how resourceful or adventurous, know very little about life. I, an equally naive adolescent, am no exception—I have doubts, aspirations, and beliefs based upon my minimal exposure to the world. I constantly aim to find the truth, ignoring the lies I told myself.

Whether it be while disembarking from an escape ship or entering a law firm for the first time, fifteen-year-olds need a hand to hold.

I am so glad English held mine.

The Saltwater Theory

Annie Cao

Broomfield, CO

Languid, the remnants
of paroxysmal obsession.

Here is what I remember: rusted
palms shoved through rivulets of

sand, the color pink—fingertips,
tender and weepy against foam,

knees scrubbed unripe. Saltwater,
the cruel sting of it. I drift further

into pomegranate currents, Neptune's
mouth settling plaintively over my hair.

Something rising. Fluttering, feverish
murmur. Saltwater, the cruel sting of

it. A single crack is all it takes, the
carnivore sinking to its knees before me.

Petrified—I am fertile with so much
ruination, my mind swaying against

every iteration of hysteria that mortality
has driven through this flesh. Something

rising. I have already walked too far into
the hurricane. I am girl turned acolyte

before terror. I surrender, too late: this
will be my worst undoing. I am scared.

I am begging now. *Saltwater, the cruel sting of it.* I resurface, sobbing, my face

scathing and slicked.

Hey Pacific, "Hey, Pacifica?"

Tegan Kingsley

Upper Saddle River, NJ

I plant the heels of my palms on the solid surface of the bathroom countertop and give myself a good, long look in the mirror—offer a sneer to my reflection that shows the gaps between my teeth. I pop my jaw in and out to feel that solid, grindy crack & run my tongue over the divots in my molars that my dentist never tells me are cavities. I don't believe him.

I smile again—for real this time. Big and animalistic like I'm trying to put on a show for whoever's behind the one-way interrogation room glass. Don't know why I'm here; don't have anything to admit.
Give myself a taste of my own medicine; flash the row of my crooked bottom incisors & bite my lower lip so I can watch my canines stick out like those daggers they make on 'Forged in Fire'. Scrap the first knife run through with stress cracks and try again for something that'll really do some damage.
"It will kill."
Yeah baby,
you bet it will.

Puncture my lip, crack that chapped skin till it bleeds just a little bit. Or don't. Shake my head like an Etch A Sketch until it's back to the drawing board. Blank slate.
I let up on my elbows to lean back for that perfect angle, chin tilted up and back so I can feel my neck crack. Tap the left-right knuckles of my closed fists vertical against the hard vanity edges, thinking, thinking, thinking. Thinking of nothing except the smooth glass of that bathroom mirror & wondering how it hasn't cracked yet, having to stare me down day in and day out, every day, through the night. I squint till my face blurs together with those little black splotches & the
white-yellow lights and colors
I can name PEMDAS
cancel out of
comprehensibility.

Crack my knuckles, crack my back… what's it gonna take for that bad boy to crack? Throw a fist at the tough guy I'm staring back at in the mirror with the cracked & dry skin and bones of my calloused little nail-bitten hands just to see if the glass cracks into a big, sprawling web like spider veins. See if it makes me feel any better. See if it breaks me.

Cuz I've been
hissing & spitting &
punching "*That damn punching bag,*
Pacifica!" and I've
been cracking cracking cracking
& I need something
to break.
so I "Throw that damn
punch—that *damn*
punch,
Pacifica!"
Index-middle knuckles front and center. Vertical.

Heartbeat's Harmony

Sofia Bajwa

Sugar Land, TX

Heartbeats feel like small nudges. Tender nudges. At least those of my grandmother or my *Nani* as I called her. "Love bursts," she called them. I thought they were more like love drums: their monotonous thumping rising from under the left breastbone, vibrations resounding against the elastic tissue of the aortic chamber. Her heartbeat *was* steady, reliable. Constant. It *was* almost melodic. One thump followed by a decrescendo to a staccato thump. Beat. Crescendo. Repeat.

❖

She hums "Clementine" seemingly in perfect harmony with her heartbeat, but the song only makes my stomach swirl and lurch more. I don't tell her. It's already a sad song, and I'm cranky, my homesickness growing with each (heart) beat that passes. I choose to focus on her heartbeat, counting the beats like sheep to distract me from the stream of anxious thoughts threatening to overrun my brain. This moment is almost perfect—my body curving and molding into hers like clay and my head resting against her chest, turned just right so that my right ear is directly over her beating heart. She strokes my tangled mop of black hair, combing her stubby fingers through the brittle knots. She doesn't sigh, unlike my mother who would chastise me for not brushing it properly. Or at all for that matter. But she, my dad, and my sister are 1,550 miles away from where I'm sleeping for the next thirty days.

When my mom first told me we weren't going to Canada like usual for the whole summer, only for July, because of my parents' work schedules and my sister's summer camp, I begged her to let me go on my own for June. I was only nine, but it seemed like the perfect idea to me: I'd get to stay with my grandparents while my cousins finished school, and I could see them on the weekends. But, I had only been here one day, and it wasn't as much fun as I thought it would be. Even now, I was supposed to be on the mattress next to their bed, the one with pastel pink roses on vines snaking across the length of the quilt. But, instead, I end up here, snuggled with her because I can't sleep alone. Not tonight. Not for the next month either. At least that's the way it's looking. But, for now, I let my head gently rise and fall with her chest as I listen to the lullaby coming from her heart; it echoes in my ears against the silence of a cool June night in Canada. And I'm already halfway asleep when the grandfather clock downstairs chimes twelve times.

❖

I grab the syrup off of the silver lazy Susan and pour it straight upside down over my plate, letting the thick, translucent, brown liquid accumulate into a river beside my blueberry Eggo waffles. I push back pieces of the waffles, trying to barricade it with my fork so that syrup won't ooze towards it. I look over, and my cousin is drizzling the syrup back and forth, covering the waffle with a beautiful geometric pattern. My other cousin now takes the syrup and meticulously begins filling each hole individually.

I guess there's no doubt that each of us definitely has a sweet tooth—her sweet tooth. Nani always kept the pantry stocked with little candies, mostly those hard-molasses taffies. My cousins and I would steal some out of the glass jar every so often, but we would always end up being reprimanded by my aunt who said those candies were specifically for two people: guests and Nani. But I know Nani didn't mind. I saw her chuckle when she opened the pantry to find the jar empty just two days after she had filled it. I even saw her sneaking the occasional one herself before dinner even though it didn't help with her high blood

sugar, according to my uncle. But her love of sweets found its way past the pantry and even into our nicknames. My sister was Honeybun. I was Sugarplum. My older cousin, Peachpie, and my younger cousin, Sweetpea. I always preferred my nickname the best, and I was secretly happy I wasn't something as lame as Honeybun.

I shove pieces of waffle into my mouth haphazardly as I gaze out at the white landscape. The dining room is at the back of the house, just off of the backyard. It's December twentieth, but the snow has come a little early this year. We are still in our warm flannel PJ's, and, while we eat our breakfast, my grandfather watches CNN as Nani fixes him up her specialty Chai.

As soon as we finish, we scamper off, leaving our dishes dotted with crumbs of blueberry waffles on the table. At eleven-years-old, I know better than to leave her to clean up after us, but she always does anyway. She'd help anyone. With anything. And we let her. But, we really didn't need much help; we were still protected in a cocoon of naivety and childhood bliss, shielded from things she knew that we didn't. Things like *Pulmonary Fibrosis.* Besides, we need help properly confiscating all evidence of the Eggo waffles that neither my mother nor my aunt would be happy to know we had. But it was the "occasional weekend treat for us" according to Nani.

"Girls?…Sweetpeas?" Nani calls out to us as we dart out of the kitchen, but her gentle voice is drowned out by the tolling of the grandfather clock on the dining room wall.

❖

It's always been my favorite thing about their house. It's big, but not massive, and has a round clock face. But I've always been especially captivated by the fact that a fourth hand pointed to the date. It became my ritual to check the clock every day at breakfast or dinner time. It started to become a subconscious habit even, my eyes just wandering, following the longest hand to the number across from it. Sometimes I would smile. July 6th. Two days until my cousin's birthday. Sometimes I would be too scared to look at the clock, knowing what date it would be pointing to. August 2nd. Flight from Pearson Airport to Bush Airport. It always amazes me how fast the hand seems to rotate.

"If you didn't have to go back home, then you wouldn't be able to come back."

"But then I would always be here," I whined.

"But then you wouldn't get to do all the fun things you do here in the summer. You wouldn't get to go to Fantasy Fair, or go up north to the cottage, or see the seasons change and the cherry tree blossom with the cherries we use to make our jam."

I knew she was right, but I still sulked in her arms anyway on the dining room chair as my grandfather came in with the key.

Every Sunday my grandfather would take out the key from the kitchen drawer and wind the clock up. That would keep it going for another week so that it wouldn't lag behind—*even when she started to*.

Tick…Crank. Wind. Crank. Wind. Crank. Wind. Tick, tick, tick.

Tick. Thump, thump. Tick. Thump, thump.

The whole house seemed to still be alive with her. A symphony of alternating rhythms all perfectly aligning with a muscular organ the size of a fist.

❖

She *loved* music. Especially the piano. Whenever we drove thirty minutes into the city to my cousin's house for a barbecue dinner, she would ask us to play together.

She taught us "Chopsticks." She even showed us the version with the fancy left-over-right -hand crossover. We felt like Beethoven playing that one. That was before we all started taking lessons every week, before we had to take theory exams each year, before we all got dressed up in big, poufy dresses for recitals, before we all eventually quit. She didn't know about that last part. She never would. Unless she can hear the silence from heaven.

❖

I wonder if I could imitate her heartbeat with a chord. I think it would be G major to A minor. Cheerful, bubbly, kind of a grand, open sound. Switch from *forte* to *piano* with the change of the chords to get an eerie, beautiful, hollow noise. At least, that's what her heartbeat sounded like *that* night. Or what I imagine it sounded like with the increased pressure pulsating through her right ventricle. I wonder what it really sounded like. *Static?* I also wonder why metronomes and clocks, like their grandfather clock, run the same rhythm when the rhythm that runs life leads a different tempo.

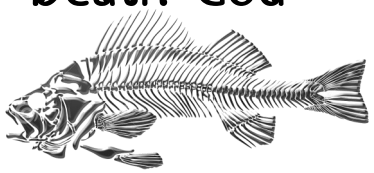
❖

My head rests on my mom's chest, and my sniffles have died down so that I am able to hear anything other than my own sobs. It's only been two days without her, and that's insignificant compared to the thirteen years I've spent with her, but somehow it simultaneously feels like forever and just yesterday since I last saw her. It's quiet as my mom strokes my hair, her fingers smoothly running through the individual strands. She's crying too, but I can't see her. I feel it as her heartbeat quickens and her chest heaves, kind of shakily. The thumps get closer together, and I can hear the liquid gushing and churning around in the different ventricles. I can feel her heartbeat; the "love bursts" nudge me, gently kicking and prodding at me.

I wonder if heartbeats are genetic. I wonder if, when she left, she left me her heartbeat. I think she did. Or maybe I just like to think she did. I like to think that it's all around me. I like to think that it's in her daughter, my mom, right now. I close my swollen eyes and listen as the grandfather clock ticks in the adjacent room. I can almost hear a thump—her thump—in between the changing of the seconds. And even though I've stopped playing the piano (I know she would be disappointed in me), I think that I'd like to grab a piece of paper and compose this Sonata of life and time in order to remember her—to remember perhaps the smallest and most delicate part of her—before it fades away, like she already has. I think that she would have liked that.

I reach over to get a pen and telephone pad off of the side table. Humming little bits of melodies and harmonies to myself, I scribble some quarter notes, letting the black ink pierce the page, and, all the while, the grandfather clock ticks on.

The smile of Death God



Yuwei Dou

Pleasanton, CA

"I feel so sick right now. I don't want to keep running. I want to stop!" Tiffany suddenly caught my arm and said in panting loud breaths. We were doing our PE class final: 500 meters timed. The goal was to finish in four minutes.

"Okay, you need to finish this on time. I know you still want to keep the top score in the grade, right? You don't want your mother judging you at New Year's dinner and deciding not to give you lucky money, right? If you don't want to see that happen, you need to keep running. I know it's hard, but you need to continue," I encouraged.

Tiffany didn't take her hand away from my arm. In fact, she started coughing. She was still trying to talk, but the cough made her run slower, and she put her right arm at her stomach. She took a long time to speak words. "Lucy, I feel bad, like I can't breathe. I really need to stop. I can't run anymore."

Her face became a violaceous color, and her feet looked as though they just could not move forward. I guided her to the bleachers. With my stern voice I said, "If you want to rest, take a fifteen -second break, fine, but I really need to go. I need this PE grade to keep first place and get into a good middle school."

Tiffany looked at the sky. It was gray and dark that day, although it was ten o'clock in the morning. There was no sun in the sky; maybe there was once, but the dust covered everything and made seeing beyond a half meter impossible. Meanwhile, Tiffany was still coughing. She found a spot to lie down on the bleachers, her hands and teeth shaking as if she were freezing. It was fifteen degrees outside, not surprising since it was winter, the time when the coal factories burn fuel around the clock to keep people warm in their homes.

She didn't have enough energy to stand, so I pulled her back onto the track, deciding that I would run a little bit slower to help her along. After I checked the time, I knew we could make it. I said, "Come on, Tiffy, we have already completed 300 meters. Let's go, let's go! You only have 200 meters left."

Using both arms to cover her heart and stomach, she didn't say anything but didn't stop coughing. A crow flying across the sky landed on the flower brushes, its wings covered in dust and black oily dirt. Seeing it, I felt bad for a second but kept running. In the previous two months, dead birds were everywhere in the city. Even my neighbor's dog passed away after the daily walk in the park. I looked back at the sky, the gray color becoming darker and darker, the wind blowing across my face, the weird trash and oil smell mixing in my nose. I coughed with a pain in my chest and stopped for a second. I turned around, and Tiffany was not at my side. She was at the end of the lane. I realized I needed to wait for her, so I ran back to the end. I went side by side with her, her face looking deathly white. She breathed hard and deep and didn't talk. "Come on, there are only 100 meters left. You can make this!" I was encouraging her and never realized what would happen next.

We reached the final turn of the track. I was at the outside and Tiffany was inside. I passed the small "lake," which was just a pond with dirty greenish water, where dead fish had floated to the top. With a hard sound like a stone hitting the earth, I heard Tiffany falling down. She lay there, and, at first, I thought she was tired. I crossed the finish line and ran back to check her. That was when I realized something bad had happened to her. Her legs kept shaking, like my neighbor's dog before it died, her breathing was deep along with a heavy cough, and blood trickled out of her mouth. I sat next to her and yelled her name: "Tiffany! Tiffany! Tiffany! What's wrong? Can you hear me?"

She didn't reply and her leg suddenly didn't move. I yelled to my PE teacher, the woman who sat on the bleachers coloring her nails. "Mrs. Li! Mrs. Li! Something is wrong with Tiffany! Could you please call the hospital? She needs help! The woman didn't raise her head. She just replied, "Every year, students act like they are sick during the PE final." I was almost crying. The wind blew harder, and the dirty smell kept going into my nose. Tiffany's breath was lighter and lighter. I yelled loudly, but those students, our classmates, were just standing there, some with review books in their hands so they could study during breaks. One said, "Sorry, my grade is more important. I have a math final next."

Our principal was heading downstairs at that time, so I ran to her and yelled, a crying sound in my voice, "Please, please, please, please call the hospital. Tiffany needs help!"

The principal called the hospital, and the ambulance arrived speedily. Tiffany was carried away to the emergency room. The crow flew across the field with a scary and harsh birdcall, and the P.E. teacher's nail polish bottle fell on the ground, the polish turning the ground red like blood.

That day, I went to the hospital to see Tiffany, who had already been in the surgery room for two hours. Her mother had come from the Environmental Protection Center, where she worked and received the call. At the time, she was having a meeting with the other researchers in the center. She came in her business suit crying like a little girl. She didn't know what to do. She sat on the hospital chair, used her hands to hold her head, and her eyes looked through the window to the outside, with no emotion, just tears. I stood there. I could hear what she was saying to herself, "Why I didn't figure it out early enough? What's wrong with my girl?"

After five hours, the doctors came out. They took off their masks and walked to Tiffany's mother. They hugged her and we all understood what had happened. The girl who loved dancing and acting, who had a friendly and kind personality, would never be with us anymore. Tiffany's mother didn't move.

Later, I got to know the reason why Tiffany passed away. Her death was caused by the air pollution in Beijing. Yes, we all wore masks, but in the face of toxic pollution, the masks did little to keep us safe or our minds calm. They actually helped reduce pollution less than 1%. Tiffany didn't have strong lungs or a strong heart, and the pollution gave her lung cancer and took her life.

I never saw Tiffany's family again. They moved to Britain, the place where Tiffany wanted to

live her whole life. In the city, winter came again and again. The snow fell every year, but the sky was never white anymore. I still wear the face mask every day in winter. I look at the dark gray sky mixing with the clouds, and it is like looking in the face of the Death God, and the Death God is smiling.

Those Years, The River, That Boy

Yuwei Dou

Pleasanton, CA

In the small village in between the mountains, big Yang trees swayed, and glistening water rushed through a riverbed. Wearing a reed hat, a woman stood on the banks, no doubt waiting for the River God to bless her with fish. Even the buildings in town depicted images of the River God in the shape of a river, and people hung the symbols on the walls of their homes. The River God controlled all the fish and shrimp and other water animals. Without the blessing of the River God, flooding would engulf the valley, the fish would disappear, and the people would perish.

This was my father's hometown—a place where air pollution did not exist and cars and people were few. In Beijing and Shanghai, the cities were full of bouncing heads, but here, only the heat bobbed over emerald green waves. Depending on how many passed away or escaped each year to live in the cities, Ying Town had a population of around 200 people.

From the back-seat of the car, I saw the only road leading into Ying Town snaking ahead of us. Here, the lines of farms carved across the green valley, and the little village of multi-colored houses clustered together in the distance. Jade-colored mountains stifled the wind and allowed small clouds of mosquitoes to hover over the green grasses. White sheep dashed here and there in the village, and in front of one house, a dog lay napping.

As my father pulled our rented Toyota into the village, I was thankful for our car's windows that kept out the mosquitoes, and our air-conditioning which kept the car cool. As we entered the town, we passed the small Yang tree forest that locals had planted when loved ones died. The souls of the dead were supposed to inhabit the trees, and the trees became people that stood motionless.

As we drove past, I couldn't help but look for Yu, the famous boy in my mind. Pretty soon, we pulled up the driveway of my grandparents' farmhouse, a white stucco building covered in bird droppings and mud splatters. The old wood-shingled roof had faded in the sun, looking more grey than brown. We got out of the car, and my grandmother rushed toward us wearing her old blue factory uniform and her debris-covered shoes. She looked older, her face darker from planting and harvesting and caring for chickens and rabbits. As she hugged me, she smelled like the fried tomato fish she always made for me.

We strode into the house, where the huge wall in front of the door called Yingbi keeps the ghosts away. On the wall, there was a beautiful picture of the mountain and rivers. Inside, the wall, there were many small ads that she used to cover the wall to keep it clean.

While my parents sat around the stone kitchen catching up with grandma, I grabbed the shrimp net and pumpkin from my grandmother's kitchen and took a walk down to the river, hoping to catch some river shrimp for dinner. I'd been in the car for three hours, so I needed to walk off the stiffness in my legs. Besides, I couldn't wait to get to the river because I knew Yu might be there.

The river started from the Danqing-colored mountain and flowed down into the valley. It was smaller this time of year, but the water was blue with some green. I could see the fish and the shrimp clearly swimming in the current.

Arriving at my favorite shrimping spot on the shore, I set up my pumpkin net. I hadn't been in this town in over four years. The trees were all still there, only taller. The mountains were still alive, the blue river still flowing to the west.

Facing the river, I kept moving along the shore so the mosquitoes could not catch up with me. That was when I saw Yu. He was sitting with a fishing pole along the shore. He wore a white shirt that looked like the white cloud in the sky, blue pants that looked as if they were made from his parents' factory uniform. I looked at him, and he looked at me, too. He looked tall. His eyes were black but shined with stories in them. He had the kind of face that looked pleasant, as if one could understand that he was different from those around him. His expression seemed to say, "I'm not the same as you." He gazed around to see who had accompanied me to the river, and I wondered if he recognized me and if he still loved me.

The sight of him brought back the memory of sitting on his bicycle handlebars as we rode to the market. That day, I felt distinctly that everything in my life was going to be good.

While I remembered, he gazed at me from my head to my feet. When he saw my crop-top, he made a face that said, "Oh, you're a bad city girl." It was the same dirty face that the villagers gave educated people, especially females who grew up and left this small town in pursuit of a better future. Yu stood up, gathered his gear, and strode along the path between the trees toward the village. Watching him leave, I stood there listening to the sound of the river over the rocks and wondering why my heart was seeping out of my skin.

With a lower voice that only the River God could hear, I said, "Please help me, River God. You're the most powerful and can solve everything. I only want to meet Yu again!" For half an hour, I sat in the same place, my eyes focused on the river. I hoped the River God would emerge from the river and carry me in a floating bubble to see Yu. The water was quiet. Nothing happened. There were no fish swimming around and no birds crossing by, not even a spark from the sun hitting the water. I sat there and waited and waited for the shrimps to come eat the pumpkins, and I also waited for Yu. One hour later, I caught many shrimps in the basket, but Yu did not come again. I sat there until the sunlight fell on the river's side.

"Lily, come back home! It's time for dinner!" Grandma yelled. Grandma's voice went all the way from her house to the river, which was almost half the village. I

paused my daydream, stood up, grabbed my basket, and headed back home, but in my heart, I wrote down *lonely* and *desolate*. I ambled up the path, but without the shrimp, which jumped out of my net, maybe because my focus was not on them anymore. Maybe because, now, I just waited for Yu to run to me from the side of the valley where the sun goes down.

The next day, I pedaled Grandma to the "supermarket" in the town. Everything was unfamiliar to me now. The last time I was there was four years ago. At the time, I'd ridden on the back of my grandma's bike, eating tanghulu and singing the ballad from childhood.

"The evening wind swayed at Penghu Bay, and the white waves rushed to the beach. There is no coconut drunk sun, just a sea blue."

But now, the market changed. The old grandma no longer sold "Zhagao." The young aunt no longer made pancakes, and the market had become dirty. The twenty shops were still there, but the roof had begun to sink. One plastic bag floated overhead in the breeze. The fishmonger who had killed the fish had thrown the pieces into the street.

"Lily, come here, buy a fish, the red goldfish!" Grandma handed me the money and one Yuan extra for an ice cream. She took her sack of corn from the bike basket, and said, "I'm going to make cornmeal."

I strode straight to the fish shop, where that weird dead fish smell made me feel nauseated. I didn't want to be there.

"Hi, may I have one goldfish? I want the red one," I said.

"Okay," he replied.

"Please be quick!" I replied, impolite for American people, but normal for Chinese. When the person turned around, he snapped up a fish from the tank, threw it onto the chopping board, picked up a sharp knife and scraped all the unicorn flakes way. They covered the ground with gold flecks like the afternoon sunshine on the field. Flies buzzed around the golden bits.

"Do you want to keep the head?"

I responded swiftly, "Yes, please."

I raised my head to see a familiar face. It was Yu. He was wearing the fish-smelling working suit of his father, which was a little too large for him, and big black rain boots. On his hands were clean white gloves that by comparison made the whole market look shabby.

"Oh, hi, you are here?" I said, feeling my face warming, my voice sweetening—changing from its usual boyish accent to a more feminine one.

"Oh, hi, you are buying fish today?"

Clearly, he didn't recognize me. The thought made my heart wither.

Docks Lauren Young Stamford, CT

"Em, yeah, for my family dinner. Grandma will cook it," I answered.

"Who's your grandma?"

"Grandma Dou. I'm her granddaughter. Lily."

"Wait, Grandma Dou? You're Lily?" He looked at me from hair to toe, as if disbelief and surprise were an illness taking over his face.

"Yes, she's my grandma. I'm Lily!"

He held the knife over the uncut fish. "You're Lily. You're Lily," he repeated several times.

"Yes."

"Lily, the girl that went to America, the other side of the ocean," he said in a low voice.

"Could you please cut the fish? Grandma is always in a hurry."

"Sure, sure, I'm sorry I forgot." He suddenly sliced the knife into the head of the fish, twisted the head off, and cut the stomach. He used his right hand to remove the viscera, including the fish heart, the fish maw, and the fish cero. Then, he threw the fish into the sink and washed it. Finally, he took out a plastic bag and put it nicely inside. He finished the whole process quickly, in less than two minutes and wrapped the fish tightly.

"You are really good at cutting fish. I have to say, you are the best one I've ever seen before," I said.

"Haha. All the things I can do involve fish. I don't live like you. Everything is just for existing," he said in a joking way, but he sounded sad, as if poverty were a culture to which he felt bound.

"No, you can do a lot of things that other city boys cannot. Fishing, cooking, and shrimp catching." Those words suddenly went out my mouth without thought behind them.

He looked at me, his eyes narrowed. I knew he was remembering.

The image appeared in front of my eyes. I was seven and he was eight. In the afternoon, he arrived at my grandma's house. He blew the small bamboo flute he made by himself to tell me he was outside. I ran out of the house, ran with him into the field. The sunshine was so warm that it sprayed heat on me as we ran past the trees, past the houses, past the river and the bridge. He ran in front, and I followed him. He ran so fast, and his two hands swung front and back erratically, his feet moving with little jumps, which made his running almost funny. We laughed, and the sound made the forest birds fly out, gathering in the sky, and singing their River God song. We stopped at the end of the village. Sitting near each other, I put my head on his leg, and we recited the old River God rhymes. Then we both lay down on the field, which was full with ripening crops like rice and millet. They smelled like the harvest. We looked at the clouds in the sky.

They were different sizes, and we guessed what each cloud looked like, and we discussed poetry and forgot about the world outside. In Chinese, "shi he yuan fang" is a saying that means that the magic of friendship makes people forget about the world around themselves.

"Lily, be quick! Where is the fish? I'm in a hurry. Your parents are waiting!" Grandma's voice was loud all of a sudden, and she pulled me out of my reminiscing. "Why you are here standing around? It's time to go back home!"

"Hi, Grandma Dou! You are also here today? I was just talking with your granddaughter," Yu said. His face looked like the sun in the sky.

"Hello, Yu. You already know this is my granddaughter? She is my pride!"

"Yes, everyone knows that, and she is interesting! I mean, I want to have more time to talk with her."

"Okay, Lily, do you want to stay and talk with this fish boy?" "Yes, sure," I said, with a little happiness in my voice.

"Okay, I'll just go back by myself. I'll leave the bike with you, and I'll just go back with Aunt Wu. She came here today, too."

"Does she have enough room for you, Grandma?"

"Yes, of course. I'm the head of the All Women's Federation. I'm the old woman who gets the most respect from the villagers. They will all drive me anywhere."

"Okay, Grandma. Be careful."

I watched Grandma get into Aunt Wu's car and then turned back to the fish shop, grabbed a chair, and sat down.

"Do you want to, uh, sit and chat?" I asked.

"Sure." He sat down in a stool next to me. He was tall, so he curled up one of his legs and used his two hands to hug it.

"Do you remember when we were young?" I asked.

"Yes. But I don't want to talk about that anymore."

I can see some unspeakable sadness on his face. "Why? That's all childhood," I said as if childhood were the only thing worth talking about.

"Don't you remember the story about my mom? I don't like to talk about my childhood because of her."

"Your mom made you want to forget? Why? How about the other things that happened in your childhood, all that time we spent together? You were my best friend."

"My mother married into the village from Hebai, and she left because we're farmers, and city people think we're poor. She left me, left my dad. All for what? To live in the dirty, crime-ridden city?"

"City people, oh no, you don't like city people … I'm a city girl. Sometimes, this just means that we have to leave the village. Why? Because city people need to work and go to school, and village people always need to be in the village to farm. But it's a new world now. Now people have cell phones and computers. Why don't cities and villages communicate?" I threw my hands up playfully. "Why! Why! Why!"

"There will be always be reasons. Some things just happen that we can't change." He stood up and looked as if he wanted to give me a hug, but his hand stopped and just patted my shoulder. "But you are not like those silly girls. I still remember the life we had, all the fun we had together. Those are the only memories that I still want to keep from my childhood." As he said this, he gazed down at me, his face looking a little warm, in high spirits, or as we say in Chinese "in good feather."

"*That time* I also want to remember. Yesterday, I saw you near the river, and I wanted to talk to you, but you just left."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that. It was just my normal reaction when I see a city girl."

"I'll leave in three days and go back to California. I still remembered the life here. And all the nice people," I smiled, and said the words directly to him.

And then he made a joke: "Do you want to stay here forever? And never go back?"

"What do you mean? Marry you?" I chuckled and didn't say anything else. We both knew what that meant. "Just kidding," I added. Country boys were known for asking girls to marry them when they were young. But we had been best friends, and when I went away, we would still be friends. We would never have the city girl and country boy conflict. I would never have to worry about him resenting me for being a city girl like his mother. But in my heart, something I hid deep in the ocean of my mind was my love for him, the true love, the real love, the love from a teen girl—it was everlasting.

"It's already time to go back to Grandma's. I need to go back. They're waiting for me. And by the way, you are so cute!" I laughed, but I felt pain inside my heart.

I hopped on the bike and rode off. As the wheels traveled over the bumpy dirt road, making the "zhi-zhi" sound, they kicked up mud and rocks, and everywhere flies buzzed in little clusters. Three times, I turned my head back, waiting for him to bike behind me, to chase after me like boys do in those movies, but he never followed. I raised my head and saw a blue kite in the sky that looked as if it were flying away. I said in my mind: Thank you, River God, for giving me another chance to meet him.

my name is Jeong hui

Julie Rhee

Taguig City, Philippines

it is Jeong hui not Jungyi it does not
flutter within your ears or break
in with purpose. it is
my name, bleak and common.

my name is of a middle-aged woman with
thin straight hair in a tidy bun. alone
she roams the street of yeouido along
the pavement lit by halogen light dust
hovering above her head. my
name is an inanimate object. a supporting cast
in a parking lot mural.

my name is pitied by young
mothers and little kids wrapped
in their slick duck-fur coats. they cast
their eyes sorrowfully at her and
her faded yellow cap as she drags
the rusted trolley filled with yogurt.

wandering
in the empty avenue at five am
crouching next
to the warm convenience store at
eleven pm
sipping the expired goods in the basket.

my name works at a call center repeated
each call and forgotten just as
quickly and lives in a small studio
in the outskirts of gangnam. it is like
so many others. forgotten and lost a mere
stepping stool.

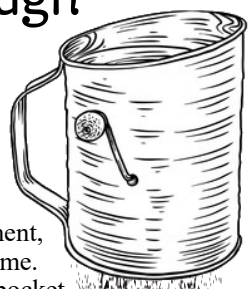
my name is not written in history or recited
in schools or had a yellow star
next to it beneath the korean flag and above
the sacramento chalkboard.

my name is Jeong hui. it means
proper beauty. 正姬.
by my grandparents' superficials.

Sourdough

Roan Hollander

Pittsburgh, PA



We stare
at the river's rare lethargy,
slight but mesmerizing movement,
something that's always the same.
My dad pulls bread out of his pocket
with a grin.

My fingers are stiffening
so I press them into the sourdough
for warmth, but wind pours
through the bubble holes.

We toss bits of bread
into the water; it's Yom Kippur,
and this is our tashlich.
One by one, brown slivers
like almonds
appear in the water, flowing
as one body through the green.

They dart to the surface,
lips plucking bread particles
from the chunks,
a gentle pierce of the water's skin.
Pieces of sourdough
begin to drift away.

Flashbulb

Alison Harvill

Pittsburgh, PA

My father was at the playground with my sister when the planes crashed into the Twin Towers. My sister was only a year old. I wouldn't be born for another two years. I grew up feeling like I should be ashamed to have no memory of 9/11. Our teachers would always be surprised when none of us were even alive when it happened. Each September, our country would mourn and we would have a moment of silence in a school where everyone was either too young to have a memory of that day or wasn't even alive at the time.

Instead of sharing our own memories, we shared what our parents had told us instead. Many people shared stories of their parents' close calls—delayed flights, missed planes, coffee lines running longer than usual—but they didn't think anything of it at the time. My friend Chloe shared that her mom boarded a plane from the same airport and almost cried while doing so.

After struggling through class discussions all day on the topic each year, I would go home to same documentary being aired. My dad would always make me watch it, trying to make me understand. Understand what, I wasn't sure. At that age, I didn't understand the severity of the attack and how many people had really died and how terrible the way they died was. I hadn't understood the ripple affect caused by that day, and how it changed America forever. In the documentary, different survivors would speak and tell their stories, and I would always ask my parents for theirs.

My mother was at work. My father was at the playground with my sister, pushing her on the swings. He told me there was a good half hour that he hadn't known what was going on. He came home and turned on the news and fell on the couch in shock.

❖

There is a difference between flashbulb memories and first-hand memories. Flashbulb memories come from learning about a public event and are characterized by the certainty of the situation the person was in. First-hand memories come from experiencing the event. My father turning on the news after coming home from the park was a flashbulb. The man from the documentary recounting the staircase before the plane hit and hearing people yelling from the rubble and jumping out the windows was first-hand.

The word "public" here does not mean that the event had to have an impact on everybody to make a flashbulb memory. Public here means that it affects more than one person other than yourself—seeing as how the memory forms once you've learned of the event, and, to learn about it, you have to hear it from someone else.

❖

The normal when I came home that day in eighth grade was that my hair was wet from swim team. The abnormal was that my dad was positively giddy. I was thirteen years old, and I felt anxious. Everyone had been waiting for this day for months—even people not in America. It was Tuesday November 8th, 2016, Election Day.

I ate my chicken-flavored ramen and stared at the TV. My dad controlled the remote, flipping between CNN and Fox. Occasionally he would leave the room and would throw the remote to me. I would continue the pattern of flipping channels, watching the bars next to each name increase with red or blue votes and listening to each reporter analyze what was *bound* to happen, listing statistics that I didn't process. My eyes glazed over while watching the report cut to yet another analyst stand in front of another graph.

I wasn't sure who I wanted to win. On the one hand, there was Hilary Clinton. I wanted a woman president so bad, but I hated people who said they were voting for her just because she was a woman—that defeated the whole point of equality. I hated how she dealt with her husband and Monica. Bill cheated on her, and everyone knew it, yet she remained married to him and protected him and his image. Throughout her whole campaign she preached for the #MeToo movement because it was trending, but, when it affected her own life, she was quick to not believe Monica. Her stance on her husband told me everything I needed to know about

her, and the email scandal didn't fill me with confidence either.

Still, on the other hand, was Donald Trump. This was the candidate most people were stressed about. This was the candidate that had no political background but was already famous for his money and business. This was the candidate that my dad had voted and advocated for. I had read posts and articles, listened to speeches and debates, and had even participated in several debates. Well more arguments as we were uncivilized (we had an excuse though, being middle schoolers) about the upcoming election. My friends would ask me who I was voting for, neglecting the fact that we couldn't vote. My answer tended to be the same: "Trump—only because I believe that Hilary is smart enough to actually do bad things while president. I doubt anything Trump will say will get passed. They're both bad options."

They were both bad options to me, at least. Some people chose a side easily, with no dispute. Fox and CNN were equivalent to conservative and liberal, republican and democrat. Tensions had been rising for more than a year. That Tuesday was the day we would finally see what side the country had chosen and the debate would end.

I watched as the red bars steadily grew more than the blue. The reporters on CNN tried ignoring it or gave hurried explanations that the polls from the red-states were coming in, but, for the next two hours, the red bars remained ahead. My dad was smiling and laughing, and, every few seconds, he would give a loud laugh at the reporters trying to explain that Trump wasn't going to win, despite his electoral votes continuing to climb. I thought of my friends and how they were not smiling.

"This is history. You should remember this night forever," he said to me, still smiling. Maybe I decided to remember it because he told me so. No one knew what was going to come next.

At around ten, I went upstairs and climbed into bed. Usually my parents are in bed before me, or at least the same time, but my father remained downstairs, sitting on the edge of the couch as the results poured in. I knew some of my classmates were staying up until it was official, but I already knew what the results would be. I turned over in bed and grabbed my laptop. I went on Buzzfeed, the first news source I saw, and ignored my father and teachers' voices in my head saying it wasn't a real news source. The first headline was about the most current tally of the votes. Trump was projected to win. I went to bed knowing he was president and woke up to my dad smiling.

❖

My social studies and science teacher for fourth and fifth grade was Mr. Vates. He was tall and balding, but kept a mustache and beard. He was young for a teacher too, probably around his early thirties, with kids of his own who were around the same age as us. He was from Philadelphia, but taught us in Pittsburgh, so he always made sure to get into debates about sports with his students. I don't recall anything he taught us, but I remember the stories he would tell well.

Shooting Star Jessy He Weston, MA

In fourth grade, he told us about where he was when Osama bin Laden had been killed. He was killed on May 1st, 2011, I would later learn. He had been the leader of al-Qaida, the terrorist group that had been responsible for the 9/11 attacks. I was alive during his death, but I don't remember hearing about it, only Mr. Vates telling us about it a year or so later.

He was at a baseball game, "A Phillies one, of course," he would add to make everyone groan. They stopped the game and, on the loudspeaker rather than the description of the play, it was announced that Osama bin Laden had been killed by American soldiers. He told us nine-year-old kids about how the stadium went wild. Strangers were hugging, everyone was cheering, the American flag was projected onto the jumbotrons.

"It was awesome," he said, and we had no reason to not believe him.

I remember wondering if I would ever gain an experience like that, if I would ever live through a moment that would be put into history books. Something future generations would be expected to know about, even though they didn't live through it.

❖

Flashbulb memories are more often associated with negative events, but can occur from positive ones as well. Mr. Vates said it was "awesome" when he found out, and he remembered every moment of it clearly—even through the euphoria. When thinking about my happiest memories, the only things that differentiate those memories from the others are the emotions attached with it. Flashbulb memories occur during important events, something you know at the time you will never forget. They are thought to occur when there is a lot going on, and your brain records the moment so you can go back and look at it later. There is no correlation found between emotion and consistency of memories. However, there is usually a strong emotional attachment to any flashbulb memory formed.

Flashbulb memories often affect a community. Why they form it varies, but some studies show the memories can be formed if there are consequences from the event within the community. Consequence does not mean punishment, but rather some type of aftermath occurs. A large percentage of a population had flashbulb memories for 9/11, as it affected many types of people in many

ways. It was an attack on an entire country, which caused many events to be spurred after it. Two main consequences: from 9/11 was America's new focus on terrorists and the wide-spread Islamophobia that occurred within the states. A member of the F.B.I. and a Muslim woman who lived in Boston could have similar memories of 9/11, but for different reasons.

❖

I was icing cupcakes. I spread the chocolate icing on the chocolate cake, brown on brown, until it was smooth. I had lots of things to do before the guests started arriving for my Halloween Party, which was later that day, but I still made sure the lines created from the serrated part of the knife were hidden before moving onto the next one.

I had just lobbed a big scoop of icing onto a new cupcake when my father yelled for me to come into the living room. I thought, even before I walked into the room, that his voice sounded strained. My first thought was that he was lifting something heavy and needed my help. I set the knife and cupcake down messily on the plate. Before leaving the kitchen, I saw the knife had fallen back out of the can of frosting, but the panic in my dad's voice prevented me from setting it right.

I walked down the hallway quickly, but I wasn't running. I had the image of my dad caving under the couch's weight, after he had decided to move it for whatever reason, and that he needed me to save his back from breaking. This was the image I was sure I would walk in on, so, when I walked into the living room and my dad was sitting on the un-moved couch, I was confused. His eyes were fixed to the TV.

I was about to ask what was wrong, why had he called me in here, when my eyes followed his. A CNN headline was on screen, detailing a mass-shooting that happened at a synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh.

I sat down on the other end of the couch, trying to be as far from my dad as I could while not removing my eyes from the TV.

A woman on screen was talking about the details she knew at the time. I couldn't hear a word she said, only watched her lips move. I asked my dad questions, but his answers didn't register, or he didn't know either.

A map showed up on one side of the screen. It showed the intersection of Forbes and Murray, two streets I walked or rode a bus on every day after school. The Jewish Community Center that I had swim practice at every Monday, Friday, and Sunday was also labeled on the map.

I was aware of all my thoughts but also of the physical world around me. I blocked my dad from my peripheral vision with red pillows that were stacked on the red couch. The coffee table had already been cleared off and cleaned by lemon Pledge, and the smell filled the air. I thought of every time I had said the words "Forbes and Murray," every person I knew for a fact was Jewish, every person I knew who lived in Squirrel Hill, and every person that could be in that synagogue for any reason. I thought of my mom working upstairs and how she still was unaware. I looked at the clock. It was after ten. Most of my friends were either still asleep or had just woken up—it was Saturday. I thought of my phone in the other room next to the knife that had fallen out of the icing that I did not pick up.

It felt like I couldn't breathe and that my brain had detached from my spine. I pushed myself off the couch and ran to the kitchen. I grabbed my phone like it was a life preserver, ignored the knife, and sat back down on the couch to find out if any of my friends were still alive.

Mahler and Molars: An Intellectual in Hackensack

Clara Shapiro

Brooklyn, NY

Nathaniel Hurwitz is a man of great intellect. He has read *Wilhalm,* in the original German, three times over. His closet is full of black turtlenecks. He is seventeen and can barely remember his formative years.

Strange that genius should spring up from suburban soil, "the breeding ground of mediocrity," as Nathaniel had phrased it in his *Memoirs,* an unfinished epic of his bubblegum-and-bleachers upbringing in Hackensack. Nathaniel is drawing up an outline for the final chapter, which he plans to call "Man." He finds this profound. To Nathaniel, "Man" is a rite of passage, some form of literary bar -mitzvah. It is a bris, a first shave, and a first time all in one.

Manhood has its rituals, but what had "Dad" taught him, all bearded and bellied like a garden gnome? Look at him over there, asleep and melding with the sofa, *LIFE* still open on his lap. Look at little Angie lying on her stomach in front of the television, watching reruns of Bugs Bunny and giggling at his nasal quips. And look at Ma! She's unloading the dishwasher, and humming Bonnie Tyler. "Hurwitz" is a perfect domestic tableau.

But why does nobody but Nathaniel see it? The mediocrity of their meatloaf and mashed potatoes existence! The banality! The mundanity! Why is it only Nathaniel, among all these happy suburbians, who understands, like Flaubert, that "*our duty is to feel what is great, cherish the beautiful, and to not accept the conventions of society with the ignominy it imposes upon us."*

At dinner—

"Mom, Dad, I've been thinking…"

"Shoot, kid."

"It's about what I'm gonna major in."

Mr. Hurwitz, sawing at his eggplant parm, looks up. "I thought we settled this, Nate. Didn't we decide biochem's the way to go?"

"What do you mean 'we'?"

"You, me, your mother…" He reaches across the table for the root beer, and, finding the bottle nearly empty, lifts the whole gallon to his mouth. The way he drinks, lips all the way around the rim like a nursing baby, makes something in Nathaniel's stomach shift—*"With age, he was developing coarse habits: at dessert, he would cut up the corks of the empty bottles; after eating, he would run his tongue over his teeth; when swallowing his soup, he would make a gurgling sound with each mouthful."*

"Chug, chug, chug," says Mr. Hurwitz in a

triumphant tone, putting down the bottle.

"Dad…"

"Hmm?"

"Dad, I don't want to major in biochemistry."

"Oh, don't worry, buddy. You can always major in just regular chem. That's okay, too!"

"No, you don't get what I'm saying," Nathaniel says. "I want to major in Classics, not biochem or whatever you have in mind for me. I don't want to be a dentist. Just try to understand that." "*For every bourgeois, in the heat of youth, if only for a day, for a minute, has believed himself capable of immense passions, of heroic enterprises…every notary carries about inside him the debris of a poet."*

"Please."

"You know, honey, there's nothing wrong with being a dentist," Mrs. Hurwitz says. She dabs at the corners of her mouth, and the gesture seems to Nathaniel as careful as her words. "Your grandfather, Grandpa Marty—he was a dentist. You used to love spending time with him in his office over the summer. Even his patients adored you!"

Speaking into his lap, Nathaniel allows himself a quiet "Goddammit." "*These middle-class imbeciles! The mediocrity of existence!"*

"I'm sure Grandpa Marty didn't *want* to become a dentist," Nathaniel says. "I mean, what little kid grows up thinking, 'Oh, I want to be a *dentist* when I grow up!'?"

"You'd be surprised, Nathaniel."

Mr. Hurwitz reaches for the gravy—"Pardon my boarding house reach." *"A man sat eating, letting drops of gravy drip from his mouth."* "And I agree with your mother, Nathaniel. Sometimes what a man needs to do isn't always what he wants to do."

"But you just said Grandpa wanted to be a dentist! Like he actually had a passion for plaque or something!"

"Nathaniel."

"But I don't buy that. Not for one second. Grandpa coulda played clarinet in the Philharmonic if he'd tried, he was so good."

With his spoon, Mr. Hurwitz taps out a rhythm against the table.

Siman tov u'mazal tov, v'siman tov u'mazal tov…

"—and a Happy New Year!" Nathaniel shakes his head. "You know, he could play stuff other than klezmer. "Fly Me to the Moon," "Summertime" … anything!"

"I don't know about *anything,* Nathaniel." Mr. Hurwitz leans back in his chair, hands cradling his belly like a pregnant woman.

"Personally, I always thought he sounded best at weddings," says Mrs. Hurwitz. "The old tunes. When he was happiest."

"When *you* were happiest."

"Please, Nathaniel, don't be like this."

But Nathaniel is remembering his grandfather's office. These are body memories, not mind memories—he remembers the feeling of the office in summertime, the way his thighs stuck to the leather chairs in the waiting room. The burping of the water cooler, the magnificent stripe of rosacea across the receptionist's face. "Like war paint," he had told her once. He remembers the music—Mozart in the morning, Mahler in the afternoon, and, in the evening, right before closing time, they would listen to the capital-G Greats of opera: Domingo and Pavarotti, Callas and Popp. They would listen to Leontyne Price's "Vissi d'arte" and Jessye Norman's "Diche Teure Halle."

And there was Grandpa Marty's favorite joke—

"How d'ya get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Practice!"

Yet it couldn't just be practice. Luck, too! Chance! "*Fate is to blame, only fate!"*

At the end of the day, when everybody else had gone home, Nathaniel and his grandfather traveled through every room, flicking off the lights. They left the radio on.

And they stood together in the darkened office foyer, while the birdish voices of divas flew in circles above their heads.

Lollipops for New Immigrants

Clara Shapiro

Brooklyn, NY

The past is sedimentary—I like to look at the fossils.

Sepia photos of a Korean family, all square-faced and unsmiling. Expired copies of "The Pyongyang Times." A pair of wong-ang seteu, wooden wedding ducks, making a nest for themselves above the fireplace. Photo albums and dusty-spined scrapbooks.

I'm not a fossil just yet. Evidence of my life is everywhere—on the mantle, my grandparents have propped up one of my old holiday cards, riddled with well-intentioned misspellings ("Happee Hollidays, Grandpa!").

None of this stuff, the wads of postcards or the thick medical books filled with microscopic Hangul text, will ever be thrown out.

"Just in case," goes the refrain. "Aygu, Clara, you should not be so wasteful!" I sit at the counter, sipping hot yuja-cha. Grandma is at the stove. The steam of the boiling soup clouds her glasses, and sweat slides down her temples. While she cooks, Grandma likes to tell me stories about her childhood.

"We had hard time. We were poor. The whole country was poor. During Japanese occupation and even after, many do not have jobs. Beggars are starving under bridges, and they freeze during the winter.

"My family escaped to China from the Japanese, and so it was there I was born, Jaenam City, Sandong Province, in 1939. In China, people are very kind. Very loyal people. But even there, we have problem. Always, we were hungry. Meat only twice a year, and every day, we made cheap barley porridge instead of rice. Having one egg was lucky." She tosses a fistful of salt into the soup. "Maybe it is because of this that my

little sister, Chung Ja, died. Dysentery, and she only was three years! My mother, every day crying for pretty Chung Ja. But Abeoji, my father, wanted only a son, and often, he hit Eomeoni for giving him eight daughters.

"When I am six, Korea is liberated, and we return to Taegu City. At that time, there was a cholera outbreak, rampant all over the country. If one person got cholera, everyone in the village got cholera. The whole country was getting diarrhea and dying.

"Then on came the Korean War. During Korean War, it's not any better. Still, we were poor. Our whole country was poor. Many people died of starvation. Always, I am so hungry, dreaming about eating bulgogi and expensive white rice. I heard stories about America. There, even beggars can have white rice. I am determined to go.

"I am young lady when I board cargo ship to go to Tacoma, Washington, to work as nurse. I leave behind my husband, Shi Gwan, your grandpa. I leave behind my family. I leave behind Korea and my old name, Moon-Ja. For twenty-five days, I suffer in the ship. All the time, I am nauseous.

"We first arrived in Tacoma, Washington. That was the first place. Mrs. Brewer, the missionary woman met us. She took us to her house in Tacoma and I felt so great and so thankful. Next morning, she gives me a basket. It was filled with ham sandwiches, a banana, an apple, some nuts. As Bong Ja and I get on train to Chicago, I promise I will keep this basket forever. It is my first American item. On train, I eat Mrs. Brewer's lunch and think, 'In America, everyone is generous. It is just like my dreams.'

"When we arrive in Chicago, the director of nursing shows us to small apartment in YMCA building. But it is in bad neighborhood with bad people—everywhere, there are prostitutes, robbers, bad men. This is when I am confused. Nobody told me about this America." The rice cooker sputters, permeating the house with a sweet humidity. Grandma fans her sweating forehead. "When I saw what America was, I lost some of my excitement. My English was not very good, and often the chief doctor and nurse would scold me because I could not understand. And I am always homesick. Always, I am so lonely and I worry that my husband will not be able to pass the medical exam and come to the United States. Everything is uncertain and I was so lonely. If he cannot come, then what will happen? When I walk along street, I see fancy chocolate store and all the fancy clothes and I remember the display of See's Candy. I was just thinking in my mind, what kind of people can afford to eat that kind of chocolate? I was always looking in. There is glass between me and America, and I cannot cross over, you know?"

Pondering Sierra Glassman Watsonville, CA

I nod, even though I cannot possibly know, growing up enjoying See's butterscotch lollipops and the privilege of mealtime pickiness.

Beside me, Grandma is spooning steaming brown broth into seven bowls, strands of seaweed slipping off the ladle. She adds a scoop of white rice to each. Grandma wipes her hand on her apron, surveying her culinary collage on the table—jars of kimchi, pale, flagellated beansprouts, Tupperware filled with galbi and fried tofu.

"Jah! Everyone, dinner is ready!" she calls out.

And the family comes trickling in from every crevice of the house. Grandpa shuffles in from the study, trailed by the adults lounging in the living room. The cousins tear into the kitchen brandishing toy Sandtrooper guns, darting through chair legs and adult legs alike as they shoot at each other with shrill "pew pew's."

"Will, Alex, not in the kitchen!" says Aunt Tammy. The cousins let their weapons fall to the side, gasping for breath.

"Do we have to eat the bulgogi if we don't want to?"

"No, of course you don't."

Grandma says nothing, and stares ahead.

Blackberries

Jacob Smith

New Bloomfield, PA

Childhood blackberry bushes bloomed across
my father's backyard.
In April, I caressed dainty buds in fragile
fingers, watched
Days unravel the petals. How May brought
fruit. I learned that the
Ripest of the berries hung deep in the thicket.
That if I
Wanted to reach them, I'd have to cross
thorns. Endure the cuts. Give
Some blood. But if I grasped the fruit, I'd
place it on my tongue, crush
It against the roof of my mouth, euphoric
juice sweet with youth,
Salivating for the taste. Fingertips stained in
innocence.

Years gathered against my chest and my heart
blossomed a boy's name.
June rooted him *friend*, hands vining their way to
something beyond.
Nights exposed the taste. Hands hungry to pluck
what was ripening.
I held him deep in the blackberry bushes. Forbidden
fruit.
We lined our tongues with bittersweet silence, let
our bodies work.
Swallowed spoken truths like blackberry seeds.
Summer sun drying
Roots, draining life from the berries it once guided
from the earth.
The leaves wilted, dead. Leaving my tongue stained
in the juice, longing
To taste the lips of the boy. Claimed by more than
his fingertips.

Time drifted away like leaves in a drought.
Blackberry thicket
Slaughtered by my father. Branches severed too close to the root.
Summer drives me to places where blackberry bushes bloom fruit
Tucked away behind a defense of thorns. I reach.
Offer blood.
Trace the skin of the fruit, stain fingertips, remember a boy.
Taste the death of innocence. Place it on my tongue.
Let it bleed.

Doors

Jacob Smith

New Bloomfield, PA

The horizon swallows the sun until dragon fruit rays ripple across the pond. A lone mockingbird sends out its call to the dusk, opening the tree line to an ensemble of followers. I shift toward Parker, come dangerously close to slicing through the silence between us, but I stop myself just in time to let the words slip from my bottom lip as an exhale instead.

I only wanted to tell him that this place was my escape. An oasis against the staleness of our threadbare town. Devil's Brook, our little splotch of hell, ancient as Satan himself. A desolate nowhere, clock frozen in a time of values and beliefs that age worse than the rot of the town's *welcome* sign.

But here, time isn't stuck. This place, where the sun bleeds pink sunsets into calm waters. Where cattails rustle in the evening breeze to harmonize with the song of the birds. Where the blades of grass always hold me in my quiet.

But I turned to him and saw the way he sat, elbows wrapped around knees, stillness on his lips, whispers of his eyes sharing secrets with the water. Quiet.

We sit this way, sprawled over grass under the cover of quiet until the sky blooms plum, then indigo. Until stars begin poking through the canvas, forcing a faint chill under my skin, rising in goosebumps down my arms. Parker is the first to speak.

"It's beautiful here." He leans back, rubbing his hands together over his heart, telling me he feels the cold, too. I offer a smile. A real one.

"It's my spot." I let my eyes rest on him, hoping he'll turn to face me.

"Why did you bring me here? If it's yours, why give it up?" He shrugs his shoulders, turning his face further away, leaving me with the back of his head. I mimic him, shifting so we're nearly back to back. I don't know why. It's not what I want. I want to face him.

"It doesn't really feel like giving anything up. I'm just…sharing it. With you." I let the words rest amongst cattail, rustling for a moment before adding, "I come here to feel, really. And I felt like maybe you needed a place to feel, too. Like maybe," I stop. God, I can't stop. I already started. I turn to face the back of his head again. "I thought you and I may need a place to feel together."

He's still. I hug my knees tightly to my chest, gnawing on my lip. Wishing I hadn't just said that. I try to offer something else up, to backpedal, but the words clump in my throat. He turns back toward the water, allowing me to see his side profile in the starlight.

"Why do you like to draw, Josh?"

I try to play it off. "Just a hobby, really. Something to do."

Parker faces me now, his eyes narrowing. He's not playing this game. He wants more.

"Okay, okay. A way to express myself. I guess." A mockingbird flutters overhead. Skims the surface of the pond for a drink.

He answers with a breathy laugh, shaking his head. "You're so mysterious. Like what's with that? You bring me here and you talk in grays, nothing too on the nose." He looks at me for a moment, but my startled expression urges him on. "I remember you drew a door for the art fair last year. Jesus, it was the saddest door I had ever seen." He turns back toward the water, eyes locked to where the last sliver of light cuts the surface. "I stood there in the hallway and I looked at this drawing from the other side of the display case glass, and I just wondered what in the hell was wrong with that kid, Brickman? What'd he have to be so upset about? Because that's just it. You can draw anything and make it sad, but nobody knows why. Everything stays subjective. The door is only sad for whatever the viewer keeps locked behind it." He pauses, eyes stabbing for an answer.

I nudge back. "You're right. It is subjective. And you saw sadness and secrets. So what does that say about you, Parker?" My fingernails carve into my palm. *The same thing it says about me?*

He takes a breath. Deep. Exhale. Irises holding mine. "Well." Time slows for a beat, then two. "Fears. I have fears." His eyes flutter like mockingbird wings, dive to the grass. "But, you drew it. So you've got something locked up, too. I want to know." He gives his eyes back to me. "What's behind your door, Josh Brickman?" He clasps a hand around my arm where I have hold of my knees. I'm drowning in his eyes. Pins and needles prick at my spine. My tongue. I think I might cry. God, I can't cry. Every stitch of my skin is screaming for me to run, but Parker is evening breeze calm. Pond ripple calm. His hand is warm against my skin. His eyes, *his eyes*.

"It's a drawing of my closet door." It's as much as I can offer. It's the most I've ever offered. Before I can even try to calm the whirlpool behind my ribs, his grip on my forearm tightens, and through the faded light between us, I see the recognition on his face. I feel the understanding there. It breaks me loose. Tears turn to sobs. Parker's hand slides up my arm, around my shoulders. He presses my face to his shoulder and I cry into him. He holds me, and the evening's chill melts from the air.

Self Portrait

Liwa Sun

Philadelphia, PA

A dead head, I am. Congesting the fridge. My hair smothers a container of cream cheese—he didn't cut it off. My skin purple, my smudged eyelids pink. My neck severed. Mother carried this in her tepidity, but now I'm frozen and forgotten like father.
My nonexistent daughter will not miss me.
In front of my lips sits uneasily an onion. We share

a purple, but it doesn't want to. It flakes.
Disappointments dribble through the night.

Let there be fire, please. Fire
to erase the frost. Fire
to annihilate me, once
and for all. The most
gruesome scene I already
smelt. The light I last saw
lit his erotic face when he
opened the door to me.
He drank profusely from
a milk carton. We locked
eyes. He barfed.

I had lived my life exactly the way
it takes to end up as a head.

The onion jittery,
sturdy,
repetitive.
Like a virgin.

Scouting

Amanda Mitchell

Pittsburgh, PA

…it is an inconvenience, it is an innocence,
And I turn against it like a record—Tony Hoagland

I was told not to wander too far from the tents,
still, I followed muddy pebbles and sticks towards
thistles and thorns that lined wood-chipped fence.
Blood-orange water overflowed in the lake,
trying to lure me back. I didn't want to return,
so I counted exhausted steppingstones, wearing into dirt.

I collected small twigs for the young hands
of my brother's troop, yet the grassy night gave none.
Wind chimes whistled within the breeze, chameleon skies
unwrapped streaming stars, a safe siren song.

Maybe it was too dark or the sun abandoned me,
but each tree trunk had become too alike;
I melted into them like a marshmallow into fire
and how was I supposed to gather sticks
when I couldn't even see my own hands?

We'll stand beside you, beside you all the way,
lyrics clung loosely to my ears, scalloped and scattered
mundane voices, all huddled close to the fire, arms linked.
Stumbling, still no sticks stocked in my hand,
but it seems that they didn't need them anyway.

I stood dewy-eyed from lingering ashes and smoke,
darkness engulfed my back, but I turned around.
The cold cradled me and stars reached down
to scoop me up, holding too tight to let go this time.

Senzbazuru

Kiki Shaffner

Jupiter, FL

Crease, fold, flip, crease, fold, flip. Tomoko's short, humidity-curled black hair falls forward and tickles the sides of her face as she works, coffee eyes straining in the dim light of her workshop. Scattered around her lie hundreds of tiny, colorful squares of paper. Blue and gold and pumpkin and chartreuse spill out of packages and blanket every available surface, as though a rainbow whirlwind has ripped through the center of the room.

Crease. Fold. Flip.

"Ninety-nine…a thousand!" The girl's sudden triumphant shout pierces the silence which had lain so thick over the air seconds before, and, on her right, a large, cherry-crested sandhill crane squawks indignantly and flaps its wings in surprise, stirring up a cloud of paper in the process.

"I'm done! I finished, Chihiro, I finished!"

Tomoko's eyes gleam with unshed tears as she whips her head around to face her familiar, who is standing quite ruffled amidst the chaos of the room.

"Oh don't give me that look, you chicken; you weren't even sleeping—I saw your eyes open a few times."

Chihiro squawks at the word "chicken" and sticks his slender beak into the air, beady black eyes trailing his master's every move in disdain.

"Three days," Tomoko mutters, hands shaking slightly once she's slid the final paper crane onto a long string of near-identical origami. "But I'm finally done."

Exactly three days ago, Tomoko's mother Kimura Yuka—the village witch and healer—had fallen ill with an unidentifiable disease. The villagers tried everything: herbs, rituals, magic, salves, salts, but each attempt failed and magnified their panic. Finally, on a night when light rain pattered against warped windows and the air stood stale with fear, Yuka called Tomoko into her room and drew her close to the bed with a slender hand. The pair were sometimes mistaken as sisters—Yuka had a young face and the two shared the same short stature, thin features, and fiery personality. A light smattering of freckles smeared across Tomoko's nose, and cheeks stood out as one of her defining differences.

"Tomo, my daughter—" A fit of coughs interrupted Yuka's words, wracking down her slim form and lasting nearly a whole minute before they receded, and she redirected her gaze to the younger's terrified expression once more. "There is one more remedy we have yet to try."

In the corner, a singular candle flickered weakly with pale yellow light.

Yuka's eyes held an expression of uncertainty when she whispered her next word, as though saying it aloud was itself a curse: "Senzbazuru."

Now, as Tomoko gently lowers her rope-like collection into a wide woven backpack, she recalls what her mother had told her about *Senzbazuru*, a tradition of folding exactly a thousand paper cranes, ancient legend promising that the creator would then be granted a wish by the gods. So obviously, just a folktale, something only a fool might actually attempt because nobody gets a wish from the gods. Or so she thinks.

Floorboards creak when Tomoko gently slides the backpack on, clicking for Chihiro to follow her and then padding across the floor. Her muscles protest after having been in one position for so long, and she scowls at the unwillingness of her own legs to cooperate. The moment she cracks open the front door, long tendrils of thick, white fog begin to creep their way inside, seemingly alive as they cross the threshold. Her nose fills with the heavy, moist smell of the forest—intensified by the

fog—and she steps outside. White swirls around her feet and up into the air, obscuring the floor and dispersing the moonlight so the air takes on a cold glow.

"Come on, Chi." She closes the door after the bird joins her outdoors, his elegant, feathered head reaching up to her shoulders. "Mother is waiting."

❖

"So then we'll just have the village help!" Tomoko exclaimed, eyes bright with hope. "We'll have them all done in no time!"

"*No*," Yuka rasped, and immediately her daughter's expression crumpled. "*You* must do it. Alone. Even a single crane crafted by another hand will destroy the magic, and then you will have done all that work for nothing." She paused, then continued, clearly pained by her next words.

"*Senzbazuru* is an extremely rare piece of magic, as only those pure of heart are capable of creating it. Once created, however, it may be used in any way imaginable. Evil creatures will sense its presence and seek you out, daughter, so you must swear to me you will be careful and quick. Otherwise, you will not make it out alive."

A shiver ran down Tomoko's spine at how black Yuka's eyes appeared at that moment. She trusted her mother, but that added an extra layer of urgency to her words which Tomoko couldn't shake off. Her fingers trailed along the soft down just above Chihiro's shoulders and she relaxed slightly, calmed by the comforting presence of her best friend.

"We'll be okay, Chi. We'll be okay."

Chihiro gave no response.

The further they walk, the more at ease Tomoko feels. It's a little more than two miles from her home to the town center where her mother is currently being housed, and they are nearly upon the halfway mark without a single occurrence out of the ordinary.

The air is quiet.

Still, too. She hasn't felt a breeze for at least half a mile.

Her footsteps falter. It's definitely a little *too* quiet.

"Chihiro, are you—"

Suddenly, the crane's massive wings burst from his body and he lets out a scream, stepping forward to form a feathery shield in front of Tomoko. She opens her mouth to ask what's going on, and that's when she sees it.

Mist swirls up into the sky where the nightmarish wolf-like creature creeps into the open.. Drool drips from its jagged, exposed teeth, and it's covered in shaggy fur matted with dirt and blood, thicker around its neck. A crown of spikes runs from its nape to the beginning of its tail, and it's easily the size of a small horse; red-eyed gaze directed straight at Tomoko.

Butterfly in Maryland Cassandra Skweres Pittsburgh, PA

"*Demon,*" the black-haired girl growls. Probably from a higher master in the world of dark magic. It takes a step forward and Chihiro squawks again, wingtips lifting higher.

The girl has to do a double take when the thing moves because it looks as if it dissolves and then reappears again, edges becoming somewhat translucent wherever it isn't completely still. Slowly, she reaches down to remove two hand-held stone knives from where they'd been hidden in halters on her boots, simultaneously removing the backpack with the cranes inside. Her hands come up, fire burning deep in her pupils. This *thing* isn't going to stop her from reaching her mom. Nothing will.

"Chi, let's kill it."

With that, they're thrust into action. The sandhill leaps forward with another loud caw, prompting the demon wolf to break into a sprint. Its massive paws pound a trembling beat into the earth, accented by its heavy growls. Tomoko waits until the very last second—she can count its hideous teeth—before leaping aside and slashing her knife down across its neck. The weapon passes right through as if she did nothing more than swing it through the air.

She stumbles forward, a light gasp pressing pass her lips, and the demon changes course and leaps on top of her, its wicked claws pressing into her shoulders hard enough to send sharp pain shooting down her sides and its labored panting coating her in a wretched stench she can only describe as '*death.*' Tomoko feels blood, sticky and hot, seeping through her clothing. Blindly, she grasps for one of her knives where it lies on the ground, knocked aside by the force of the demon. The tips of her fingers fall just short of its gilded hilt. The demon's foul mouth opens wide, prepared to bite down, when it's violently yanked up and off of her with a yelp, claws mauling long rips through her shirt.

"Chihiro!" Tomoko pants thankfully. Her familiar has its talons buried deep in the wolf's scruff, wings flapping madly to lift it up into the air. How the bird managed to harm it and Tomoko couldn't baffles her. Maybe because it was already distracted when Chihiro attacked? A loud caw brings her back to the present, and she watches in mute horror as the demon's form turns misty again and her familiar stumbles, dropping a few feet from the air. She's running forward, retrieved knife in hand, but it's already too late. Eyes gleaming, the wolf stands up on its hind legs and leaps up, jaws crunching down hard on the crane's delicate neck.

"NO!" Tomoko screams out loud, watching as the bird immediately falls limp, watching as the life drains from his eyes, watching as her familiar and best friend *dies*, clamped in the grip of that beast.

With a scream of rage she leaps onto the back of the wolf, clutching a fistful of matted hair to plunge her knife into its neck. This time, it doesn't pass through. The demon lets out an otherworldly screaming howl, blood black as ink seeping out, coating the ground and mingling with her hands. She holds the weapon down until the monster's stumbling legs fail and it falls to the ground, sinking to nothing more than a pile of dirty, rotten fur.

When Tomoko looks up, a bright warm light is outlining Chihiro's form. It heats up and then disperses all at once, leaving behind nothing but a small, white paper crane, head tinted red just like that of its previous body.

Tomoko can feel hot tears rolling down her cheeks at the strange and beautiful display. Trembling, she reaches to pick it up and squeezes her eyes shut, clutching the little paper crane to her chest. But there's no time to mourn now, especially since the wolf's loud howl certainly alerted other non-magical creatures to their presence. Tomoko stands up. She takes five stiff steps to her bag, puts it on and turns back towards the path. The moonlight has never felt so cold.

❖

"I did it! Ma, I did it. Quick!"

Tomoko's frantic cries echo through the room's dark interior. Her feet carry her across worn, wooden floors to the door at the end of the hallway, its edges lit with a slight glow. Two women look up in shock as she bursts inside, panting from a mixture of exertion and adrenaline. Her mother's ashen face stares up at her from atop the low bed. Tomoko drops to her knees, clutching at Yuka's hand and sliding off her backpack.

"Ma, I did it. Hold on just a little longer, please, I folded the *Senzbazuru*. I can save you."

The two nurses take a few steps back, wide eyes following the endless string of cranes being pulled from Tomoko's backpack. The girl works feverishly, gently layering her creation up her mother's body till the older woman is a crisscrossed maze of color, only the skin of her face visible.

At last Tomoko steps back, hands extended in front of her as if the cranes might disappear if she's not careful enough. The entire room stills, holding its bated breath.

Nothing happens.

No flash of light, no booming voice from a god, no unexplainable breeze—absolutely nothing.

"Wh-what? But I did everything!" Tomoko murmurs, voice raising to a near-shout at the end of her outburst. One thousand paper cranes, all folded by her and her alone. Was it all in vain? Was Chihiro's death in vain?

Tears begin to well up in the corners of Tomoko's eyes, and she wipes at them desperately, thinking back to their forest fight. That was the only time the bag had been away from her, and the more she thought, the more she remembered. It had been on its side when she picked it up again. Had the top been off?

"*Yes*," she whispers to herself, shaking her head quickly. The top had flipped off when it fell over, so she'd just put it back on before leaving again. But that might mean—

Her hands are urgent as she grabs at and observes the backside of the string, taking note of the un-tied end that trails off for only about three inches before stopping abruptly.

How could she have been so *stupid*? One of the cranes must have fallen off during the fray, and she'd been too teary-eyed and overcome with grief to notice.

Almost subconsciously, Tomoko's hand slips into her hidden pants pocket. In her palm sits Chihiro. The lifeless paper crane stares up at her, so frail compared to the real one, and, this time, she doesn't try to stop her tears from falling.

Now, when she places the thousandth crane atop her mother's body, the air changes. It pulses with power, a magic so strong it's nearly tangible. Tomoko can taste it; the very last cherry blossom before winter takes over, a mighty eagle's wings spread wide in flight, the daily happenings of a trivial ant. It's addicting; but before she can lose herself to it too far, everything stops. The string of cranes is gone, with the singular exception of Chihiro, so tiny amidst the expanse of white sheets.

"...Ma?" Tomoko whispers, feeling her words shake in apprehension.

"Tomo?"

The world turns gold as Tomoko begins to sob.

"*Thank you.*"

Time Over Time

Rachel Glucksman

Glencoe, IL

Billie

The bright light seared through my orange drapes as they fluttered around my window, attempting to keep my room dark and incontrovertibly failing. *Oh lord!* I groaned and rubbed my eyes, wishing I was still sleeping. *6:00*. Of course my nerves woke me up an hour early. I wondered if I was going to be an old lady and still wake up with first-day nerves. I felt a little smile sneak onto my face as I thought of where I would be in two hours. The feeling of excitement walking down halls I would probably hate in two weeks. The heavy weight of my backpack with all the fresh pencils and folders it was currently holding. *THUD!* My door burst open and Fergie (Ferguson) barreled into my room and catapulted onto my sedentary body. He licked my face with a ferocity I liked to think was reserved only for first days.

When I got down to the kitchen, I spotted eggs and toast out of the corner of my eye. I paused at the door, dropped my stuff down, and headed toward the counter. My heart got warmer with the memory of my parents making a big deal about my first day of high school two years ago. I didn't want anything to do with that crap. Now, well now I was happy about the breakfast they left me. I quickly ate and jumped up at the sound of Lori laying down her

horn. I giggled to myself as I rushed out of my house and into the back of the carpool. Hell yeah, I felt cool as fuck getting driven to school by my friends and not my dad. I leaned my head out the window and savored the sound of tone-deaf Lori singing some lame pop song about slashing the tires of an ex-boyfriend. *Damn she is still not over that doofus.* I shrugged the memories away and continued to cringe at her 'singing.'

After lunch, I headed toward my next class. *Shit.* I swore I knew where this class was. I checked my watch. I had thirty seconds to get to this next class and I did NOT want to be the late girl. I ran to the end of the hall and almost shouted out in joy that it was my class. I pushed the door open, and that's when I saw her. She was staring out the window, and yet, I still felt embarrassed looking in her direction. I hoped my red cheeks weren't giving me away. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She had long blue hair, but her brown roots were starting to show. Her green eyes were staring out the window at the blacktop. I couldn't hear anyone's names as we went around because I was too busy investigating the clasp of my watch to look up.

I felt someone tap my shoulder and I snapped my head up. "Billie," I said firmly. I had practiced this. I stayed engaged for the next couple names so I could hear her voice. When we got to her, she smiled wide and started moving her hands. It was sign language. I think. Someone said, "Terra. Her name is Terra." She moved her hands some more. "She said it means Earth in Italian." I was shocked. She seemed able to hear, so she wasn't deaf. I texted in my group chat with my friends, asking if anyone had a class with her. Joe responded a minute later saying she was mute but mad cute. *Thanks Joe, exactly what I was asking.* But alas, I was smitten.

I spent most of that semester daydreaming and crushing on Terra. Stealing paranoid glances in class. During movies, she would watch the screen and I would watch her. I loved watching her during the holidays. She would make the whole class cards and, every Monday, she brought in homemade cookies. I could tell it wasn't to suck up, though. She genuinely wanted to do nice things. I would stare out the window in my classes and fantasize I was traveling around the world: Europe, Africa, South America, honestly anywhere with a good view and good food. My heart would sink a little when I snapped back to reality in the classroom and realize I needed the grades to get the job that would pay for my travels. *It was a nice dream though.* Before winter break began, I did a risky thing. I pulled over a mutual friend of ours, Cam, and told her that I was in love with Terra. I then left Cam standing there in the hallway stunned, knowing she would tell Terra. I did not know whether to laugh or kick myself. I just knew I was starting my vacation in a hopeful way.

Terra

I woke up late. Again. Damn it. I hated the first day of school. I loved going all the days after that, but the looks I got on the first day. They always got to me. The mute girl. The shy girl. All their damn misconceptions.

Cam texted me an hour ago. *No. Fucking. Way. She loved me?!* Billie was my favorite person to be around at school. She always smiled at me in the halls, and I secretly loved the way she looked at me in class and then pretended to look at someone else when I caught her. School resumed in three days and I had no idea what to do. *Write a note saying, 'I love you too'? No that seemed too cheesy. Bake her a cake? Buy her a necklace? Hold her hand?* I was so nervous.

Billie

I woke up eager that morning. *T-minus a few hours until I see her. She knows. She has to know.* I put on the new sweater my mom got me for Christmas and nervously played with my watch all morning. Terra wasn't in class. I slumped in my seat and waited for the day to be over. The bell rang, and I made my way out of the school. I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up. It was Terra. She looked so happy, and she pulled me into an empty classroom. She grabbed my hand and looked at me. I stared deep into her green pools and was silent. She nodded her head. *Say it. Say it. Say it. Say it. Say it.* After what seemed like forever, I asked her what she wanted, getting mildly frustrated. She looked confused and just squeezed my hand harder. She pulled out some cookies with hearts on them and extended them towards me. I felt hot tears build up in my throat and ooze up and out uncontrollably. *She could never say it. She could never love me back if she can't even say it.* She looked so desperate. "Say it if you mean it!" I said as my voice cracked. Her smile disappeared. Her green saucers turned glassy. I turned around and walked away. *Goodbye.*

Terra

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Billie

Graduation was a whirlwind of white gowns and wet faces. *My last day.* I hadn't said anything to Terra since junior year. I stopped getting upset seeing her every day. I blocked her out. I knew she was there. I felt her presence, ate her cookies, read her holiday cards, but didn't care. She had hurt me, and I couldn't forget that. I hurried downstairs in my pinching heels to meet up with my parents for a special graduation dinner. I was nearly out the door when I noticed a brown package sitting on the table. *My parents already gave me a graduation present*. I cautiously pulled the brown paper back and lifted a small box out. *Holy…..* It was a bracelet made of small seashells strung together. It was perfect. I tugged it on, threw the paper in the trash, and left for my dinner. High School was done and I was ready for what was coming next.

Terra

I love you. I love you.

Billie

The first day jitters awoke the butterflies in me at 5:00 am. I rolled out of bed and listened to the hum of my air conditioner for a minute. *C'mon, B. You got this.* I kept adjusting my blazer all morning. It was suffocating. It was my first day as an intern at this chemistry lab at the graduate school in my town. I have been in this snug apartment since junior year, and, hopefully, this internship leads to a paying job. I unlocked the door and stubbed my toe on a package. I looked for the shipping information and brought it into

my apartment. I ripped the paper off and pulled out a bottle of champagne and a smaller bottle of my favorite perfume. *Who?... It's not even close to my birthday.* I pulled out a small note with the words "Good luck". *Alright. Guess I'm celebrating tonight.*

Terra

I love you.

Billie

This is it. I looked around my living room. *I need a new couch.* My girlfriend and I stood in our house, backpacks stuffed, and looked around, soaking up the last few moments of air-conditioning. We were about to embark on a six-month trek through Europe and South Asia. *Only took five years of savings for this.* We loaded the car and brought the animals to our neighbor's house. I locked the front door when I noticed a brown package on the front steps. *Lia is too sweet.* I quickly popped it in my bag, and we headed to the airport.

As I sat by the Rhine River eating cheese I remembered the package, I riffled through my bag, shoving sunscreen and warm sandwiches out of my way. I opened the package and smiled. They were a pair of wool socks with little suns stitched all over. *Perfect.* I told Lia thanks, and she raised her eyebrows and smiled. We spent the rest of the day in the river.

Terra

...

Billie

We all sat around the coffee table teeming with gifts. I helped Lia reach over and grab the next blue frilly bag. I rubbed her belly and felt him kick. I smiled wider, which I didn't think was possible. This bag held a soft, blue elephant. *That's the third one. I hope he likes elephants.* The next gift was in a brown paper bag. I opened this one. It was a beautiful onesie covered with leaves. I smiled. *It's perfect.* I snuggled into Lia's arms and looked at all of our friends. I looked down and fiddled with my shell bracelet.

Obituary

Billie Roberts (2002-2082) passed away yesterday morning in her sleep. The family does not wish to release any more information other than some words for her: "Billie was a wife, friend, mother, and daughter." Her wife Lia wants to thank the anonymous person who found her and called for help. "Thank you."

Passing By Sophia Moses Winter Garden, FL

Obituary to a lost lingua

Kanchan Naik

Pleasanton, CA

We did not have a name to bury you with
because what name would we give you?
children are to be named, dogs, and mountains,
and your soul the weight of every syllable,
your arms outstretched in our every epithet.
We tasted your feathers against the backs of our
tongues, we breathed the burden of your silence
We will be here, with our names and our hollows,
choking the hearts of our children until
they exhale your ghost.
And where will we go when we laugh in a language
that hardens against our throats, that bends only
until our vowels curve into the arch of a teardrop?
And where will we go when every face that finds us
becomes the frown of a father, murmuring with
concern?

How will we answer him, him that asks,
and whom do you mourn,
when we did not have a name to bury you with?

The Lady Downstairs

Kanchan Naik

Pleasanton, CA

Mr. Anand claimed that, if the world grew quiet for even a single moment, we would hear the footsteps of the Great Mother. Ira, he called her. Ira Devi. But my thick New Yorker tongue, in all its nine years of inelegance, could never bring out the softened trill in 'Ira.' We would try for hours to rediscover the sideways lilt and the softened vowels of his accent. But the voice that came so naturally to him made my warbling American throat a clothed imposter. So it was Mr. Anand, while trying desperately to keep a straight face, who suggested I call her The Lady Downstairs.

We spent those evenings on the stairwell that lead to the front door of our apartment complex, where redbrick met with the sun-stained streets of Jericho. My head rested against the seventh stair with my feet swinging off the ninth. There was some clarity in staring at a city that whistled by us, that arrogantly wrapped itself within the fiction of consciousness. But Mr. Anand and I knew that the streets, with all their oil stains and car crashes and racket, were sound asleep.

Listen, he said. And we would, until the clatter of a dangling world blurred into a dull roar. He would close his eyes, and I would too. For a second, I could feel every bone in my body, every eyelash pulsing with the ghost of some forgotten instinct. The winds ceased to dance. The sky would exhale. When I opened my eyes, I would murmur, *someone was here.* Mr. Anand smiled back. *Yes, someone was here. The Lady Downstairs.* And the sun would dissolve, as though on cue, behind the diner two blocks away.

It was with Mr. Anand that I tasted my first

cup of real chai. My mother and father, who opted for the convenience of QuikTea, never bothered with spices and cane sugar. Mr. Anand, however, ground his own garam masala from fennel and bay leaves. After one taste, I knew that my tongue would never forgive the flavorless, sugary water that my parents preferred. Instant tea, like my Indian accent, was shakily unsure of what it was supposed to be. But a steaming cup of chai was so confident in its existence that the liquid sung as it gurgled down my throat. *I make chai from the earth. From what she gives us,* Mr. Anand explained. *From The Lady Downstairs?*

From The Lady Downstairs.

My parents treated the greying Indian man one apartment across with a cloaked unease. They were grateful for the hours we spent together before one of them came home from work. But the crimson toran hanging on Mr. Anand's door was a silent red flag between them. My parents were 'wallflower' Indians who lost their accents to keep their jobs. Delhi was a photograph in my father's wallet, a pair of earrings on my mother's nightstand. They forced smiles during the offhand conversation, but I could see my mother's eyes harden when Mr. Anand called her Parvati instead of some Anglicized distortion.

Autumn came. And as those summer evenings descended into the horizon, they took two towers with them. I remember the frantic phone calls, the wail of sirens crackling against our screen door. My mother sunk lifelessly into the sofa as the television blared.

Parv, my father murmured. *You need to eat something.* But she didn't. Her eyes were fixed on the bodies ablaze, on the screams coiling into television static. I remember those hours we spent, a porcelain family, almost able to touch a splintering country through the Telechrome. Mr. Anand had once told me something, and it burned in my brain. *We live in the Kalyug, the Dark Age.* Those words prickled in the television volume, an echo of those wounded faces. I would never forget those men who crawled out of melted cars, carrying bloodied bodies on their backs. They had those hunted eyes—eyes in silent agreement that yes, this is the Kalyug, the Dark Age.

Mr. Anand was shot three weeks later. My father swept me into his arms as though it was I who had borne the bullet. It happened outside the grocery he used to frequent, where he would buy cinnamon and fresh ginger and tell the cashier to keep the change. The nearby 7/11 owned by the Guptas was burned to the ground, and all I could hear was Mr. Anand, over and over, reminding me that this was a Dark Age. Those words grew colder every time until I found myself sitting on that stairwell, staring at a hollow street. Mr. Anand's relatives were moving his furniture into a white U-Haul. For a moment, I desperately hoped they would forget the red toran swaying against his front door. It could live a fragile life of its own, suspended only by a fraying string. But when I blinked, the toran was gone.

She's awake now, I whispered. The city was alive, and so was I—the two of us momentarily silenced. And for the first time, I felt the footsteps of Ira Devi against the blackened earth, louder and louder until they swallowed the sun. *The Lady Downstairs?*

The Lady Downstairs.

Confessions of a Black Girl

Sanaa Williams

West Orange, NJ

The things I carry don't differentiate me from any other teenager, or even any other human being. However, the way in which I carry them is different.

I carry heartbreak in my hair. I carry extra bobby pins and hair ties in my pocket to lessen the feeling of heartache and tame my coils that grow in every direction out of my scalp. The way they interlock causes knots and frizz. My hair grows up and out, not down my back. I feel a little pain every time I look in the mirror and realize nothing I do will ever make my hair look tidy. I carry an extra headband and a small brush to control my fly-aways. My hair will never fall perfectly into place, and because of this, my heart is a little heavier than normal.

Within my thick tendrils, I carry fear.

Fear that my hair makes me look ungroomed.

Fear that my thick mane is the reason I am not considered beautiful.

I carry abuse in my hair, and I try to hide it. I try to conceal the handful of permanently straight strands that are a result of years of straightening and damaging treatments with all of the oils, hair gels, conditioners, and texturizing cream I carry in my toiletry bag. The straight pieces hold the most weight. They hold the weight of my confused identity, and my desires to be like everyone else. They hold the pressures of conformity and the judgements of others. But, most importantly, they carry the shame.

Ugly. Nappy. Disgraceful. I carry my self-loathing in my hair.

My hair is the most elevated part of my body and is considered a portal to my soul. It carries the insecurity and anxiety that I have inside of me, but it also carries the pride and power that radiates from my spirit. I carry colorful hair clips, pins, scarves, ribbons, and scrunchies in my hair. They act as a mirror to my personality and self-expression. I carry strength in my hair. The strength of my ancestors, who used their hair to cornrow maps that contained the paths to freedom and the keys to their shackles. I carry music in my hair. The songs of hope that were sung on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The generations of hip-hop music that depict the struggles of growing up as a black man and woman in America, and the soulful R&B that delineates stories of black love emanates from every lock on my head. I hold pride in my hair. The pride I have in my heritage and my family, and the pride I take in being connected to every black woman that came before me. I carry love in my hair. The love I have for myself, and the love I have learned to have for my mane.

Unique. Diverse. Beautiful.

The things I carry come from my experience of navigating life as a black

girl and accepting all that it entails. The things I carry no longer weigh me down. Instead, they lift me up and secrete from every strand of hair on my head and will remain in my soul for the rest of my life. My hair creates a map of who I am, and I carry it with me every day on my head. My hair is everything that I am: tough, strong, and beautiful.

Straining

Mia Reiland

Brooklyn, NY

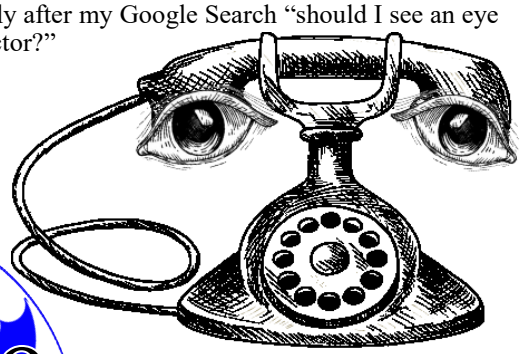
I know this grass well—
even in a silence of disarray,
disordered dark of humid after 10pm, and
I don't know how to say this, but I'll try.

To say it is to acknowledge the small partially—
erased mistakes normally undetectable in a sea of green.
A half-filled cavity, caused by cloying,
sickeningly sweet goodbye housed in a
morning breath tainted mouth.

I enjoy this, I say. I am Gleeful and Glowing,
I imprint on myself in all of its semi-permanent
tangible glory. Stuck on the same saggy loop,
on A train rides of
"We're Stopping For Track Maintenance."

(The last three hours in the brutally long stage of waiting for The Call: my tolerance for my coiled innards, tangled headphones).

Self-care is not substituting colors in for emotions,
the therapist says, but I cut a couple pieces of grass yesterday;
flew right into my eye and pierced my cornea:
there was consonance in the image of chaotic green I saw,
Only after my Google Search "should I see an eye doctor?"



A Confession

Mia Reiland

Brooklyn, NY

1.
Something is bubbling just below my hairline.

Once a week,
I crack my knuckles because of the dribble.
The noise is persistent,
variation little from thumb to pinky.

Over the years, it has been
the only constant in the equation.
Learned today how to pop the little ones
to keep the perpetual for a bit longer before
everything is moved to the left side.

I wondered what it was like to be depressed
when I was manic, and manic when I was depressed,
and then the two crossed over. The terms
were on each side and I couldn't solve.

In these ambidextrous times
I still don't know my right from my left,
looking at the permanent pimple on my left hand
for both the direction and the consistency.
I wonder how hard it will be
to learn a directional language ten miles out from the due date.

2.
These days, from 3pm to 3:45pm, I walk
my own neural pathways, seven different routes
tailored to one activity
and seven to its direct opposite.
At 3:45, I'll choose one, if its shoes fit,
but I'll only wear it untied with two socks on each foot.

I like the purple young man,
sitting by the ajar window with the declarative stare.
Each of his eyebrows have a contradictory implication.
I wonder if people describe me as empathetic,
and then I wonder if I could diagnose his eyebrows as bipolar.

3.
Some days feel like confession,
and I keep the surface level ones in my back pocket in case.
One: I wish I liked tree nuts, but
I can't help thinking of the bark of the tree itself in my mouth
when they house themselves in between my molars.
My friends like the chalkiness, but it's too flaky-sticky, I think.
Two: Sometimes in line for coffee I recite my order in my head,
even though I only ever order two different things,
and they rotate on a schedule that my mind itself operates.
Three: My pupils dilate eight times a day but only six on Sundays.

These are not good enough, apparently.

4.
"How are you," my therapist says each time I see him,
but with emphasis on a different word.
"I am fine, how are you?" I ask every time, with emphasis on you.
I say I am in love with the purple man when he doesn't reply.
He asks why, and I tell him, the eyebrows.
He responds that the love and the tree nuts and the eyebrows are a deflection.

The white noise machine whirrs.
I can hear the next knuckles cracking in the waiting room.

Sleepless

Megan McLaughlin

Winter Park, FL

The clock tolled four in the morning, but I still laid awake. I hadn't slept in weeks; no one knew what was wrong with Apollo. "It's the hard drive," the Ohio mechanic suggested; "the board blew a fuse," the Texas techie proposed; or "maybe he's just dyin'," the Georgia operator offered. Every time they checked his head, nothing was wrong. All the wires were in the right place, all the bolts on tight, not a scratch in sight. He was an old model. That much all the workers could agree upon. His type, 2300, was discontinued three years ago, so I couldn't get the parts even if I tried.

It was the last day, but I hadn't told Apollo. He didn't need to know. His operating system wasn't programmed to understand shutdown. The plan was simple: take him to his favorite park, the place where he first called me dad. The best day of my life. Then, afterward, walk with

him to the funeral parlor. The same place where his sister Artemis was put to sleep. There shouldn't be any hiccups. It would be as simple as saying goodnight.

Waking Apollo was always a process. You have to turn on his processor, oil his joints, and wipe the leaking remnants from around his face. That morning was a challenge. His processor wouldn't turn on, spinning in a mocking circle, never fully booting up. The oil wouldn't take to the joints, spilling over them but not sinking in. His face was covered in last night's dinner, a result of the imbalance of fluid in his stomach. I considered letting him remain asleep instead of formally shutting him down. Looking at his broken body, I couldn't help but feel regret. Regret for letting him get so bad before searching for treatment, regret for not trying harder to save his sister, regret for leaving my wife. I chose Apollo over her and now he was leaving just as sure as she had.

I bought Apollo and Artemis on a Saturday in September. They kept commenting on the leaves, their hue and sound. They rode in the backseat of the car, observing the environment. The twins came fully programmed. They were the kids we could never have. My wife was thrilled to have them. She decorated their room with paintings of flowers and trees sprouting from all the crevices. They were her pride and joy.

Artemis always liked music. She could play her violin, composing sounds of soothing waterfalls and raging battles. The day she was put to sleep, she had been walking across the street to a symphony. The car didn't see her. It shredded her body to pieces, leaving me and Apollo to clean her up. I could have taken her to a mechanic and prayed they could fix her, but, instead, I took her to the funeral parlor. I didn't want to hear the bad news. That she was gone. That there was nothing they could do. Later that year, my wife left me.

Apollo shuddered awake, the processor finally turning on. He blinked his eyes twice, then sat up. He looked around his room, eyes finally settling on Artemis's vacant bed.

"Where's my sister?" Apollo asked with confusion. His memory had been going for the past couple of months.

"She's been shut down for two years now, Apollo," I sighed. Telling him his sister was dead was never easy. He took it the same way every morning.

"Oh," he mumbled. Then he laid back down and sighed. He was a pitiful sight, curled up on his bed like that. There was nothing anyone could do.

"How about we go to the park today?" I asked with feigned happiness. He nodded and that's how we started his last day.

The drive to the park was quiet as usual.

I Spy Stella Oh New York, NY

Apollo looked out the window, admiring the trees. His favorite tree at the park was the old oak. Its branches were thick as car tires and as sturdy as them, too. Apollo climbed up the tree and looked out at the park. I think Apollo knew it was his last day, then. He sat on the highest branch, tracing his fingers over the mark on the tree he'd made the day Artemis died that said, "Apollo + Artemis."

Apollo didn't comment when I took him to the funeral parlor. He walked next to me, only looking at the storefront. When they shut Apollo down, the mechanic said it wouldn't hurt. They were wrong. It felt like a car had forced all the air from my lungs, and I was dying just as surely as he was.

Tonight I lie in bed, and I can't sleep.

Control Alt Delete

Aneesh Karuppur

Warren, NJ

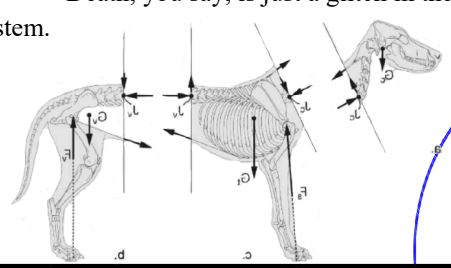
It's hard to imagine dying because you don't know how to feel
When somebody you know dies you think
What happened to them?
How did it feel?
Did they know?

And a day later someone comes in to explain
Well the ambulance was too slow, they say
Or they had a disease that hurt their lungs
Or that they lived a full life and died in old age and so nobody needs to be blamed because death is just a natural occurrence so there's no need to be sad right now

But can you blame the ambulance driver for someone's death?
Or the drug company for not coming up with a cure?
How far up the hierarchy of society can you go?
To blame someone for the death of a person they never cared about
Perhaps the dead person was a number on a spreadsheet or a dollar sign or an address on a big map
And now that person can be deleted, by right-clicking the object and selecting Delete Row

If Microsoft has a tutorial written by an expert engineer on how to color a row or delete a column or make a graph 3D
They ought to have one on how to delete a person
It isn't that much different

Perhaps then you don't have to blame a real live person
And you can blame the machine
Death, you say, is just a glitch in the system.



Outstanding Poetry

Aubade for My Sister

Anne Kwok

Milton, MA

On mornings like this she drowns her limbs
to watch how bathwater changes a body. Sunlight

has made true her hips rising bone-deep
on a woman learning to ache. I once found a glass girl

with her face stuck to a mirror. Body caught in crossfire,
breasts sunken like sighs. Her fingers: wetted nubs

of matches before they could burn, skeletal doll limp
and dripping through my hands. In the hospital

I hold soup on her tongue until her mouth foams, until
she can't call anything home. If I press my ear to

a mirror I can hear the god of small thrills
retching up bits of meat & rice, weighing

each calorie on a fingernail, red grains blinking
from the scale. Today she sucked rambutan seeds

suspended in white flesh, swallowed Eli Lilly, Zyprexa–
names of girls at school still perfect

& crystallizing in her lungs. Some days she holds down
two fingers like a pistol down her throat until it

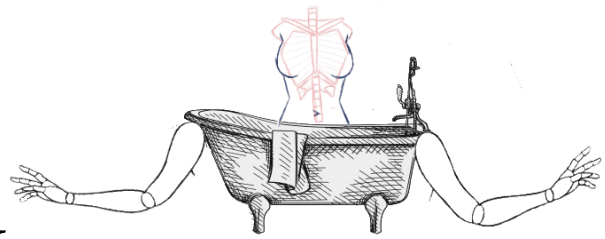
blooms red

on a napkin. She assembles herself backwards
into our mother's womb, melts any remaining flesh

so she can soak in this darkness. Remember that girl
playing at our father's knee? That girl

burying bullets in her blood? I watch her choke
gunpowder down her ramrod throat in salvation.

Hungry for nothing, doll in starvation.
The house is quiet as breath & bone.



Poetry Runner-Up

Varanasi Ablaze

Kanchan Naik

Pleasanton, CA

where death goes,
varanasi trails with her eyes closed.

her swinging hips, bells on her lips,
a bow-legged creature
garlanded in the scent of coal ashes.
ganga laps at her toes, the frothy tides
coated in the charred remains of what was.
but

where death goes,
varanasi follows in footstep.

her dusky hair, and marigold air,
she sings the silence of beaten breasts
and white fabric.
Maya plays flutes from wet branches,
soothing and soft but so terribly out of tune.
because

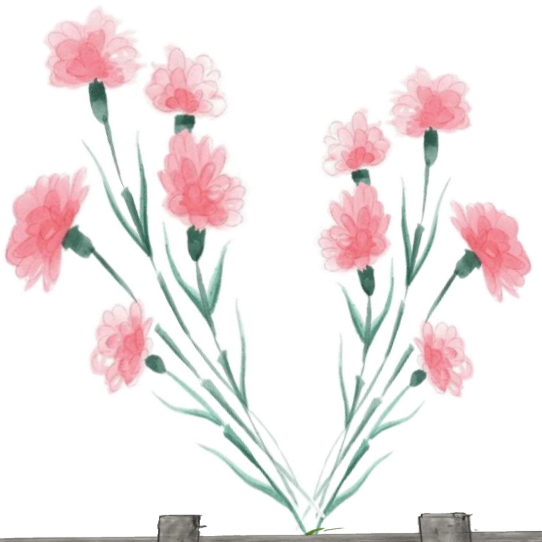
where death goes,
varanasi is dragged, breathless.

the sages grow quiet, the widows riot,
her anklets pounding against the scorched earth.
she is pulled by the roots of her hair,
old wives finding their tongues.
a wail? a snicker? the pyre awaits,
death wants it to be proper, god forbid,
it's such an auspicious match.

where death goes,
varanasi is taken, seven rounds,

her heart pounds,
her mouth forming the ghost of a scream.
seven rounds, and varanasi is flung,
don't look away now,

engulfed by the flames of her own city,
varanasi forgets all and begins to dance.



Outstanding Fiction

Cough Syrup

Jennifer Chiu

Memphis, TN

The day Carmen left for university, she woke up with bitter bile in her throat, her lips parched. She rummaged around her nightstand for her Chapstick and applied two thick coats of it. When she pursed her lips, they stuck together briefly, tasting of mint and vomit.

Coughs racked her body as she walked to the kitchen, where Grandma was stoically cutting a grapefruit in half. The house was silent except for the rhythmic thuds of the knife against the wooden cutting block.

"You silly, weak girl," her grandmother chastised her as she swept the slices of grapefruit into a large, round bowl. She reached into the cabinet for a bottle of cough syrup and placed it on the counter, the glass bottle clinking as it came in contact with the marble top. The jar of onyx-colored syrup was barely used, still three-quarters full. Carmen had always liked onyx, the way its smooth black surface streaked with milky white bands. She remembered learning about the stone in school: it formed from the slow dripping of calcite in caves, building up over centuries of patience and waiting. A symbol of warm kindness, steady protection against the dangers of the world. A timeless, boundless love.

"Carmen, do you remember when we bought this bottle?"

"Yes, Grandma," she said, suppressing a cough as she answered. "Ten years ago. In China."

"That is right," Grandma remarked, unscrewing the lid with a small pop. A saccharine smell filled the air. "But we have barely touched the bottle in that time. Do you know why? It is because we are resilient people. We are survivors. Your great-grandparents lost everything during the revolution, but they sweated and worked and toiled until they had it all back."

Grandma plunged a spoon into the cough syrup and lifted it, dark amber liquid overflowing and pooling over the sides. "Eat," she ordered. Carmen took the spoon from Grandma's calloused hands. The cough syrup was cool and sweet, smooth against her tongue as liquid memories. She felt it slide down her throat, leaving behind a sticky, velvety residue. It tasted of distant summer afternoons, fans blaring in the heat and breezes flowing through the open shutters. Carmen remembered that summer, when she had been so sick that she lay bedridden, half-delirious as Grandma spooned the dark liquid down her throat. She remembered Grandma's figure fluttering in the corner of her vision, replacing the towel on her forehead with a crisp, cool one. Grandma told her

*(Continued on page 43: **Cough**)*

Fiction Runner-Up

My Father is Stuck in the Subjunctive

Elisabeth Stewart

College Station, TX

My father is stuck in the subjunctive.

"The subjunctive mood characterizes both profound emotion and impersonal statements," says Señora Vásquez, standing in her classroom amongst the Guatemalan worry dolls, or muñecas quitapenas, that hang from her ceiling. Wrapped in horizontally woven threads of pink, green, blue, and orange, the dolls listen as Señora shows us a PowerPoint presentation.

"Impersonal expressions," Señora continues. "It's good that, it's interesting that, it's bad that. The emotion is separate, not attached to the speaker."

Like pollen floating in the air, away from the yellow, moist flower. The subjunctive reminds me of how my father speaks. Surely, his disease doesn't render him incapable of feeling emotion. He is just incapable of *expressing* the sentiment he feels and sticks to the subjunctive phrases that detach him from perception. It's good that, it's bad that, it's interesting that...

As Señora teaches, I realize that I'm stuck in the subjunctive, too.

"More commonly, the subjunctive expresses unreal situations of hope, desire, and longing," she says.

Las muñecas sway as a breeze comes in through the classroom window. The Spanish classrooms were pushed into cheap portables outside, but Señora doesn't mind. She likes the wind and the sun.

"For example, I wish, I feel, I pray to God that..." Señora keeps going with her list of the same phrases I find myself thinking every time I see my father's blank gaze.

At first it was, "I pray that his condition is not as serious as the doctor says."

Then, "I feel like this disease is taking over my father" It seeps through his brain like honey, slowly leaving a sugar residue to corrode his mind and make it into one big cavity.

And finally, "I wish that he had anything easier to help than dementia."

For our birthdays, Sra. Vázquez gives us each a small muñeca. She tells us to whisper our subjunctive dreams to the dolls at night, slip them under our pillow, and hope for knowledge in the morning. But knowledge and scraps of paper and cloth are no match for dementia, ripping through seams as it comes between my father and me.

I thought the disconnect between us was a result of our age. I'm 16. My father is 50. Maybe the technological and social divide

*(Continued on page 43: **Father**)*

Outstanding Creative Nonfiction

For an Asian

Manya Zhao

Palo Alto, CA

I am five years old the first time I can recall feeling ashamed of my heritage.

The lunchtime bell has hardly finished ringing when I, along with my twenty brand new kindergarten friends, come pouring out of the room like jellybeans spilling from a jar—bouncing, clashing, full of sugar.

My stomach rumbles eagerly as I take out my two thermoses.

"Two," my mother always said. "One for the rice, and one for the entrée. You don't ever mix the two beforehand. The rice will absorb any extra moisture." This isn't orange chicken, or broccoli and beef, or anything close to the disgrace, as my parents call it, of the Chinese food sold at Panda Express. This is authentic Chinese cuisine.

As I unscrew the cap of my "entrée thermos," I let the deliciously pungent smell of chives and bacon wash over me. It isn't chive dumplings, my favorite, but it's close enough and smells like home.

Just four weeks prior at the airport terminal, Mama had no choice but to forcibly peel my hands off of my grandmother's pant leg as I melted into hysterics, begging Po Po not to leave me for the first time since birth.

My doting grandparents had been making chive dumplings from scratch every weekend since I could eat solid food. At that moment, all my five-year-old brain had the capacity to process was, without my Po Po and Gong Gong, no one would make me my favorite food.

Struggling to hide the tears in her eyes from me, Po Po grabbed Mama's hand right as we were about to step into security check. She was making Mama promise to make me my dumplings when her voice caught, and she turned away so I wouldn't see the tears spill down her wrinkled cheeks. My mother didn't get a chance to promise.

I glance around boastfully at the other children with their cold PB&J's, their dry chicken nuggets, their greasy pizzas, and pity them for not having a homemade meal like mine. I grin as I dig into my warm, savory food.

"Ew, what is that smell?" the little blond boy to my right says, nose wrinkled.

"It smells like the toilet," the redheaded girl sitting across from me pipes up.

Their eyes seem to simultaneously land on me, and I feel the heat and embarrassment of being different creep up my neck. Suddenly, a soggy old

*(Continued on page 44: **Asian**)*

Creative Nonfiction Runner-Up

How the Full Moon Grows Empty

Aanika Eragam

Alpharetta, GA

For all my early childhood, I went to sleep each day only after wishing the moon goodnight. Sometimes, it would wave from between the obsidian ribbons of night, a pale carmine crescent. Others, a rounded pearl. And yet, it was constant in a way that nothing ever was at that age, always there, in halves or wholes. I had watched it chisel itself to dust for weeks, but still, it came as a shock the first time it disappeared completely, as if swallowed by the sky. I searched for it for a long time, and went to sleep that night feeling abandoned, empty, wondering if anyone else had even noticed.

❖

Phase 1: Full Moon

Often misconstrued by astrologers as the end of the moon cycle, this phase is really just the beginning.

In birth, we are full. We are taken from the shells of our mother's wombs and curled inwards, tucked inside a blanket and placed in arms that are warm, waiting. For a moment before adoption agencies or overeager relatives or stumbling boyfriends edge their way into the punctuated wailing of a new future, the miracle of life is known only to its sole purveyor—and the love of a mother feels like the warmth of a thousand suns.

I wish, so often now, that I could exist only in that moment. In the softness of mother's chest, the gentle thrum of her beating heart. It was a time when plump chubbiness was applauded as a sign of a healthy child, rounded cheeks poked and prodded by voracious cousins, soft tummies tickled endlessly by still-kind fathers. It was a time when the miracle of existence outweighed the flaws of creation. It is a mentality that is lost on you as you age. I have yet to once again find it.

Phase 2: Waning Gibbous

Often overlooked in the grand scheme of the moon cycle, this phase is the first real loss.

Most girls will never forget the first time their appearance is critiqued. Surprisingly, it is usually by their own mothers. The woman you padded to across carpeted floors chirping "Mama!" is no longer your number one lover, and it is evident that the honeymoon period is long gone. She is a creator now, examining her masterpiece and realizing she wasn't quite as masterful as she had hoped. *The thighs aren't quite as shapely as in the blueprints*, she thinks, *the arms are a little too puffed*.

*(Continued on page 46: **Moon**)*

(Continued from page 41:
Cough)

stories throughout the night as she woke and slept in fits and starts, bringing her soup that smelled of spices and warmth and hearth. The cough syrup had tasted then the way it tasted now: syrup and honey and mint.

"You are going to college now," Grandma tutted. "I will not be there every day to care for you, to feed you, to help you up when you fall. Someday, I will be gone. What will you do then? Will you cry and wait for someone to help you like now? Someday, both of your parents will be gone, and you will be alone in this world. You must learn to take care of yourself, Carmen. It is a grandmother's job to take care of her grandchild, but you are not a child anymore."

Carmen nodded, getting up to wash the spoon under the faucet as Grandma screwed the cap back on the jar. Carmen absentmindedly watched as what remained of the cough syrup left in dark brown tendrils. She had been on trips before—left the country on her own, even—but she had never imagined a world where Grandma wasn't there to chastise her, to embrace her after a long day, her kind eyes crinkling into a thousand creases as she pulled Carmen close, her shirt smelling of spices and wood and warmth. She had never thought of the day when Grandma would be dust and ashes in the wind, only to be remembered by the things she left behind. In her mind, Grandma was strong and invincible. She had come from China when she was thirteen, a young, poor teenager with no money to her name, alone in a foreign country. She came from the rice villages, where people walked miles in freezing snow and rain and did not need cough syrups and medicines. Carmen had never looked at Grandma as she was now, frail and aging.

In the kitchen window, she could see her reflection: nose red, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy. She couldn't tell if she had been crying, or if they were simply symptoms of her cold, but when she lifted her hand to her eyes, she felt something fall onto her fingers, droplets of silent tears. She could taste them on her lips, brackish and salty. Even as they slid down her face, she felt the dryness in her throat swelling up. She pursed her lips, suppressing a cough—her lips were chapped again.

(Continued from page 41:
Father)

was finally too vast for us to understand each other. Then my father forgot words to describe the weather, could not have any more of his animated conversations, and got lost in airports after traveling the country alone for years. I realized the disconnect was at the cellular level of brain cells and nerves.

Today, I have an English paper in my backpack on the symbolism of the light and the dark in *Romeo and Juliet*. I bring it to my father, not wanting praise but a conversation. Maybe he'll see my paper and ask me what it was about, how long it took me to write four beautifully-crafted pages on Shakespeare's banter.

"I got an A+ on my English paper," I say to him. I set my backpack on the barstool in our granite-lined kitchen and walk over to the sofa where Dad's watching ESPN. Basketball players in yellow Notre Dame jerseys run onto the screen after halftime.

"That's good," my father says. There it is. The subjunctive, impersonal expressions Señora talks about, my father remaining stuck in the sludge of mental corrosion.

Before dementia, before the PET scans and MRIs told my family what we were too scared to acknowledge, my dad was a conversationalist. When he told stories—of wedding receptions, college tailgates, skipping stones at the river—you could see the memories in his eyes. His voice would become slow and gritty as he relived the memory. He could talk about all sorts of things: Shakespeare, airplane mechanics, constellations, natural disasters in Samoan villages miles and miles away. He was sharp, could multiply quicker than anyone, and knew his way around a conversation.

But then dementia came into the station. All railways slowed, communication screeching to a halt and sending sparks flying in the air. Syllables and body language have decreased in value. So maybe we don't have to talk, but rather, coexist, synchronize. Maybe, we can paint. The brushes can do the talking.

Saturday morning comes, and my dad and I set up canvases, easels, and our bin of paints. My dad likes watercolors, but I prefer acrylics. I'm too impatient for watercolors. They're too vague and watery; they scruff up the fibers on the paper. It takes too much time to layer the pigments, shadows, and highlights.

"What are you going to paint?" I ask. Questions are helpful. They prompt answers beyond yes or no.

"I don't know. What do you think I should paint?

"Did you take any pictures at Gran and G's house? Or in Scotland? Did you find any flowers you liked?"

"I don't think so."

"You could look up a picture. Maybe a wildflower, or a thistle."

"Oh yeah! That's what I'll do."

He begins to paint the purple flower that we saw in every Edinburgh gift shop last summer. In between a flower and a weed, the thistle's body resembles a prickly pin cushion with stingy, purple tips. Dad mixes magenta and darker purples together. He uses a fine tip brush to streak the paint across his page.

Dad huffs as he accidentally picks up black paint and lays dark pigment on the canvas where he wanted his grass to be bright green.

There's another thing I can't stand about watercolors. Once you make even a little mistake, there is no going back. Like brain cells and damaged nerves, there is no regaining the carefully crafted scene. You have to take what you got and figure it out somehow.

I'm using acrylics, but I don't know what to paint. I start with a flat brush, one with scruffy ends, and streak paints of orange, green, blue, and pink in textured stripes across my canvas.

"What's that?" Dad asks me.

"A muñeca background. We'll see what I do with it."

Monday morning, I'm working on a subjunctive worksheet in Spanish class.

"Write your own sentences, be as

creative as you want," Señora says. "Just use the Spanish subjunctive. ¡Y no inglés, por favor!"

I start working.

Ojalá que…I hope that…we can pay to get medical help, especially if Dad can't work.

Es bueno que…It's good that…Dad and I can still paint together, if we can't talk.

Me preocupa que…I worry that…

My father will forever be stuck in the subjunctive.

(Continued from page 42:

Asian)

sandwich doesn't seem so bad.

"What's that green stuff?" the boy asks, blunt and direct, as kids tend to be. "It looks and smells kinda yucky." The huge lump in my throat prevents me from talking, but even if I want to, I don't have the vocabulary yet to explain to him that it's actually one of the best foods in the entire world.

The girl to my left answers for me. "It's probably normal food for an Asian. Look, she has rice too, Asians always eat that." To this day, it's still beyond me how a five-year-old can recognize a different ethnicity, much less associate a food with it.

I go home that day and tell Mama I never want chives for lunch again. When she asks why, I tell her it's because it smells like the toilet.

For years, I only bring store-bought American food.

After that, I learn to hide behind a westernized mask by pretending my quickly unaccented English is my first and only language. Pretending I prefer the frozen prepackaged Costco burgers and Lunchables that everyone ate to my mother's ethnic, seasoned dishes. Pretending I had only ever known the American way of life when I missed the frequent sparkling fireworks, the feeling of my grandparents' arms around me, the sense of belonging, more than words can describe.

❖

I'm in sixth grade when my little brother comes home from kindergarten upset, near tears.

It takes much coaxing, but, eventually, in bits and pieces, the story comes out.

During their international unit in social studies, his teacher had asked which kids were bilingual, and my brother, along with a few other children in his class, had eagerly raised his hand, proud of being fluent in multiple languages. His teacher, who was monolingual, went down the line, having each child tell her their second or even third language.

"French."

"Korean."

"German."

She had smiled at each, nodded perfunctorily.

Sailing on the Nile Lawrence Chen Princeton, NJ

When she reached my brother, he had proudly chirped, "Chinese. It's one of the hardest languages in the world!" His teacher stopped then. Looked at him. Tilted her head and smiled like he was being naive.

"Honey," she said gently, according to my brother, as if breaking bad news, "it's not hard for a lot of people…" It wasn't said, but I knew it was there: *It's not hard for an Asian*.

My baby brother hadn't caught on to the insinuation. He had simply been offended for having, what he considered, a great achievement of his be carelessly dismissed by someone whose approval he craved.

My brother was born and raised here. He has never lived in China, nor will he ever in the near future, but our father doesn't allow us to speak English to him or my mother at home, so we can preserve our native tongue.

Surrounded constantly by English-speakers at school, however, my brother and I typically converse in English, and he, having much less awareness, will often turn to my parents as well and rant in English.

My father usually calmly lets him finish before saying, mandarin syllables tumbling smoothly off his tongue, in a way my brother's, and even mine, rarely does, "Say it in Chinese. We're all Chinese here. Why would you use a foreign language?"

I remember hearing his typical spiel about the importance of speaking Chinese once, just months after the chives incident and feeling so frustrated I had screamed at him, "No one cares except for you! We live in America, Chinese is stupid, everyone thinks so, and I don't need it!"

I genuinely hated it then.

English, to me, felt trendy, international, slipped out of my mouth as smooth as caramel. Chinese was awkward, bulky, mundane. It felt far more like chewing coffee beans.

The words must have stung, but he didn't say anything back, just remained silent until I grudgingly repeated myself in Chinese.

"Trust me," he said quietly afterwards, the hurt clear in his tone, "Chinese or not, the gift of language is one of the greatest in the world. Being fluent is something you should be proud of. Your culture is something you should be proud of."

And he's right; my brother's pride of knowing the language of our ancestors shouldn't have been dismissed. He shouldn't learn to cope with judgement the way I did at his age and often still do now.

❖

It's the end of seventh grade when one of my friends, while we are fixing ourselves up in the locker room after PE, looks in the mirror at me, studying, analyzing, before saying, "You know, you're actually super pretty, especially for an

Asian." To her, it isn't meant to be an insult in any way, simply an endearing observation. I force a smile and mutter "thank you," unable to respond in any other way to the blatantly racist comment disguised as a compliment.

The bar used to judge beauty is automatically lowered because I'm Asian.

She proceeds to list all the qualities of my face she liked, briefly and superficially repairing the damage she has done to my ego. She concludes her analysis of my face with, "If you got double eyelid surgery though, you would basically be perfect."

She smiles kindly at me then, as if she had given me some sort of validation. As if saying, if not for the one shortcoming I had, the one belonging exclusively to my ethnicity, I would be beautiful.

What is the worst part, what hurts the most, as I think back years later, is how I distinctly remember nodding in agreement. I *would* be much prettier with double eyelids, like typical American girls, whose faces are composed of lines that connect in ways that seem fluid but defined, soft but bold, all at once.

Weeks later, I claim a sick day. Stay home from school spending hours perusing YouTube tutorials, trying to figure out a way to artificially induce double eyelids without surgery.

❖

The summer before high school rushes by way too quickly in a flurry of freshly squeezed lemonade and painful sunburns, and the first day of school ambushes me before I can mentally prepare for it.

In my first class, I am approached by a cute guy, dirty blonde hair looking effortlessly windswept. He's tall, sinewy. He introduces himself, then asks, hazel eyes twinkling, "Can I see your schedule? I want to see if we share any other classes." I hand over my schedule and pick at my fingernails, freshly painted just for school, already bracing myself.

Exactly as I expect, he looks up half a minute later, previously flirtatious look replaced by a mixture of judgement and awe, "Damn, you're taking all the highest level courses? Do you not have any spare time for fun? Are you like, really smart, even for an Asian?"

I don't even bother to defend myself at that point, simply suppress the urge to scream, chuckle and shrug modestly instead. Finding no other common classes, he quickly finds an excuse to leave, and, for the rest of the year, we only make awkward small talk when we have to.

❖

For an Asian. Those, collectively, are my least favorite three words in the English language.

In my mind, those words bring with them the connotation of being a prude, being ugly, being insufficient. They imply that I'm not good enough, that any of my accomplishments can be easily dismissed.

They are the reason that, for years, I work hard at changing myself, changing my exterior to fit the status quo, to look and act more "normal."

They are the reason that I westernized myself to the point that, years after my meltdown at the airport, when we finally return to China to visit, my beloved relatives can hardly recognize me with my strappy tank top, hoop earrings, lululemon leggings—hardly speaking, in shame of my now accented, long-abandoned Chinese. I had only preserved the most basic of words to heedlessly satisfy my father.

When I am finally wrapped in my Po Po's arms once more, but with me, this time, towering over her small, shriveled body, the same warm floral scent she'd always worn encloses me. She says something then, and the Chinese, like coffee beans once seeming so bulky and bitter, are now rich and warm again.

I have to ask her to repeat herself, however, more than once, as my rusted understanding of the language can no longer keep up with her emotional, accented dialect. And then, then is when I realize the extent of the damage I had done to the foundation of what makes me who I am.

We step into my childhood home, where my grandparents continued to live the last ten years that I had been gone, unwilling to leave the memories and emotions, even though they could have easily moved into a smaller, much nicer place with just the two of them.

The smell of chives rushes up, embracing me, welcoming me home. I glance at the table, where, just like all those years ago, fresh-made chive dumplings await. Gong Gong, back now bent with age, stands stooped over the kitchen counter rolling perfectly round wrapper after wrapper out of fresh dough, his hands still keen as ever.

He sees me, wraps me in a hug, and pushes me toward the table. "Go, go eat, I made your favorite." He'd always been this way, communicating his love, not through words, but through delicious concoctions. I don't have the heart to tell him I have barely touched chives in the last ten years, unable to shake the memory of being called out for their putrid smell.

I tell myself to eat some just for his sake, and, as I bite into one, the memories burst through. Unfortunately, being chronically tainted with the bitterness of humiliation, it's not as good as I remember it being, but the memories that come with it are. Exploding fireworks, bustling farmer's markets, harassing the neighbors' dogs. The nostalgia is overwhelming.

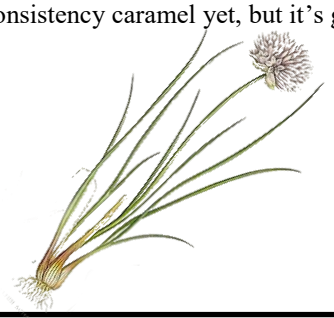
Before I know it, we're all standing around the counter reminiscing, laughing, talking, eating, rolling out wrappers—my grandparents' round, mine looking more like paint splatters.

But I am no longer punishing myself, no longer distancing myself from the culture of my ancestors for the sake of avoiding the ignorance and prejudice of others.

❖

Those three words: *for an Asian*, they still bother me, and I imagine they always will, but they no longer will me to change parts of myself. The American culture, it remains an integral part of me, but now the Chinese counterpart has become indispensable as well.

And the words that had become foreign, that felt like coffee beans in my mouth, they've started flowing more smoothly too. It's not quite the consistency caramel yet, but it's getting there.



*(Continued from page 42: **Moon**)*

The first time she frowns at the size of your clothing, you look down at your stomach and wonder what's wrong. When you look up, a porcelain smile is pasted across her teeth, and your attention shifts to the new Barney theme song. The first time her face crinkles as she says the actress on television has gained so much weight, you wonder if it is a bad thing. When you ask her about it, she says that of course a movie actress must be slim and petite—that's her whole career! You realize that you are not a movie actress and you're reassured that, for you, then, it must not apply. The first time she gains enough courage to say it to your face, you hold nothing against her. "I just want you to be healthy," she explains, constantly assuring you that you're beautiful, but a little weight loss couldn't hurt. Of course she wants me to be healthy, you think. She's my mother. This is love.

Phase 3: Third Quarter

Often remembered for its half-and-half appearance, this phase is approaching balance.

"Bigger is better." The first time I heard this phrase, it was uttered from the lips of my aunt, a plump woman with the jolliest spirit I've ever known and an ever larger heart.

Growing up, her two-story house in rural Indiana, old and fading, lined with panel instead of brick, was the one place I called home. It was there that I learned what it meant to smile so wide it made my cheeks hurt. It was there that I learned to love and live and lose myself in laughter and prepubescence and the dewy hopefulness of what-ifs and I-wants. It was there that I learned to be a child. And it was there that I learned to grow up.

Oftentimes, we would go on girls' trips for the weekend. She'd take me to the stores my mother never deemed appropriate and bring me the most outlandish clothing to try on. I remember her face in the fitting room as I strained against the fabric of a skin-hugging, magenta camisole. Her eyes were soft as she tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. When the first tear, warm and shameful, slipped down my cheek as I traced the curves of my stomach, she wiped it away. Bigger is better, she quipped, laughing, don't cry.

The year my aunt got married, she lost thirty pounds and five dress sizes. I took most of her clothes, not to wear them—the plunging necklines were too scandalous for my modest self—but more so, to remember her by.

Her husband was a handsome immigrant from India. The first time I met him he gestured vaguely at my stomach, remarking about how much I must be enjoying the food in America, laughing at the size of my thighs.

My aunt glared at him, but the strained silence stretched on. The jolt of her voice, loud and reprimanding, was nowhere to be found.

It was through that year that I learned bigger was not better. At least, not inherently. Not unless it was in a balance. Big butt. Small waist. Big boobs. Small thighs. Big heart. Small body for it to hide.

Phase 4: Waning Crescent

Often used in artists' depictions for its haunting beauty, some call this the phase of surrender.

The first time a stranger insults you, a piece of you cracks. You are used to your family's unknowingly cruel quips. You know they don't mean it. You know it comes from a good place. But these are lies you cannot convince yourself of with a stranger. They've never seen you before. Their eyes carry a startling apathy that lets you know this is about nothing more than animalistic defense, wounds hurled through tactless words. And like magic, that piece that concealed you on the edge of whole goes missing. It slips from your soul and evaporates through your eyes. You try, one day, to find it again, before realizing that you are grasping for air.

The summer before middle school was the season of weight loss supplements, exercise at 1:00 a.m., a hungering stomach—and it all began with a boy. I was on the school's Safety Patrol. He was pulling posters off the wall and throwing them at passersby. I told him to stop. He asked why he would ever listen to a fat dog like me.

It is a question I asked myself many times in the coming months. When the cold swallow of spoiled fruit probed a merciful plea from the lining of my stomach, I asked myself, why would anyone ever listen to a fat dog like me? When the sharp pain spread from my ankles to my arms as the television trainer shouted relentless encouragements, I asked myself, why would anyone ever listen to a fat dog like me? When the sharp hollow of my hips could not distract from the undulating curve of my stomach, I asked myself, why would anyone ever listen to a fat dog like me?

Fat dog. Fat dog. Fat dog. Those two syllables, lythe on the tongue, a fraction of a second to say, became my sculptors. They chiseled me until I couldn't recognize myself, until all I could feel was the cool of the carving knife and the empty of what it left behind.

Each day:

I held my breath.

I stepped on the scale.

And I waned.

Phase 5: New Moon

Often termed the phase of rebirth, one would find it shockingly doleful.

The day I was reborn as a skinny girl, the boy I had a crush on called me beautiful. In a way, twisted and strange, it felt like liberation. To me, the words he sang were threnodies of Shakespearean romance, the first real whispers of admiration not churned from the mill of parental obligation. And I hungered for them. I bathed myself in every underhanded comment: "You look so good now! No offense, but before you were, well, you know…"

The past me, the fat me, was a girl I no longer recognized. When flipping through photo albums, she was a stranger my parents would point at, a prime example of the merits of "determination." Trying on dresses and watching a flat expanse of chest and stomach rise and fall with each breath felt like a congratulations. I was in a state of euphoria, and it didn't matter that the

numbers on the scale kept dropping or the clothes I bought kept enlarging because thank God, thank God, I was skinny.

In many ways, I was more trapped without a body than with one. But I didn't know this, or I didn't want to. It felt like I was floating, weightless in the obsidian of nighttime, convinced I was the star instead of the vastness, the empty. Hunger made me feel beautiful, delicate and small and starving, because isn't art always aching, incomplete? I liked the tragedy of it all—not skinny enough to be sick or happy enough to be healthy—but everything in between. Sometimes I looked in the mirror and saw a maze instead of a body. And maybe this was the sickness.

Only, I once heard a woman say that when the fat girl gets skinny, it's never a sickness, but success.

❖

Really, I know that this is not the end of the story. That a moon which grows empty must grow full again. As a child this was something difficult to comprehend. It still is. I don't know how something can disappear and reappear like magic, whittle itself to bone and ask for flesh again. I'm trying, but there are parts of myself I don't know where to search for, in which horizon, which sky. I'm taking it slowly. I'm calling it what it is. When the moon shines full in all its haloed light, I tell myself to be round and proud and, for a moment, stop carving.

Venetian Food Delivery Sierra Glassman Watsonville, CA

Strangling Hunger

Lyra Cupala

Snohomish, WA

Angie licks the back of her teeth and pushes the salt on her tongue to the back of her throat. Her elbows are bruised and scraped from propping them on the edge of the boat, but it's nothing a faded blue blouse won't hide. The blouse is not hers.

She is given dry bread. She forces it down, cleans her throat with water. The sailors battle with their eyes–who will sit next to the pretty lady? "My name is Angela," she says. The battle ends. The silence quiets.

Angie studies the sailors as she gnaws the bread with tired jaws. She can sense the attention her chest is getting. She puffs it out a bit more.

The sky is dark. Angie lets herself enjoy the warmth of candlelight and the feeling of cloth rustling against itself as sailors sit close up next to each other, the deck filled with bodies. Angie can't stop touching her dry hair, rough and soft and different than the smoothness she's used to. She shivers when fingertips brush against her bare shoulder, and she smiles. This will be a good hunt.

Beyond the shadow of the sails is a ladder, and high above, a singular man watching the horizon. With silver eyes, she can see his: green and hard and wondering. He will fall in love.

He is a good choice.

She climbs the ladder one rung at a time, her woolen socks threatening to throw her down to her death. Her strong calloused hands save her.

"I've seen you before," says the sailor. Angie has heard this. She has known too many sailors to remember this one.

"I know you," she lies. He believes her voice.

This sailor does not stare at her body, he stares at her eyes. She hugs him, expertly running her hands over his spine and shoulder blades. He shivers against her. "Come down," she tells him. "Have a drink. Nothing bad's going to happen while you're not looking." He helps her climb down the ladder in her socks.

A sailor she knows is looking down her shirt gives the two of them tankards of cider. Angie slurps the foam off the top, then coughs and chokes on air. The sailor pats her back and pulls her closer by the waist. She tries again, taking a gulp of the drink and swallowing slowly, letting the bubbles pop on her tongue and keeping the taste in her mouth as long as she can.

The sailor gives her his tunic to sleep in. She leaves the ties untied as she climbs into his bed next to him, hoping the love will become lust, and she will not feel so bad.

She is getting hungry.

She enjoys the feeling of blankets on her skin, and his strong arm draped over her hip. She watches his chest rise and fall with each breath, and her mouth waters. She swallows. Just a bit longer.

She wakes up alone hours later, and for a moment lets herself worry if the sailor is all right. Then she stops, puts on and rebuttons the blue blouse, stands up. Her eyes wander over the sleeping sailors in the cabin, their breaths, their bones, shivering under thin blankets. Her stomach threatens to grumble, and she goes upstairs for more dry bread.

There he is again, the same place she found him before, staring into the sea. "You're awake," he says without looking at her. She stills. Usually she is good at not being seen, when she wants to.

"I was hungry," she says, and he nods as if he knows what she means. He licks his lips. Angie's spine tingles.

"Do you want more cider?"

"No, just water." She pauses to wrap her arm around his waist. "And meat."

"Fish?" He turns his head away from the horizon to look at her, the same way he did last night, and she can't help but smile back, pressing her lips together so she doesn't frighten him.

"You have pretty eyes," he tells her.

Her smile fades.

She does not want love. So she kisses him before he can think about her any more. She likes the warmth of his lips against her salty tongue. His mouth tastes like bitter sugar, a bit like the cider they drank last night, and she can taste the wind on his lips.

"You're salty," he murmurs into her mouth.

"Blame the cook," she mumbles back, though they both know she has eaten nothing but bread since she got here.

She leans back to look at his face, green eyes staring back at her with nothing but love. He looks delicious, salty hair shifting in the breeze, his worn tunic drooping down to reveal his collar bones. Angie bites the inside of her cheek until she tastes blood.

She lets out a sigh of relief as the metallic taste soaks into her tongue. And now that she has had a little, her mouth is begging for more.

"Are you okay?" the sailor asks. She flinches at his voice, looks up to see furrowed brows and concerned eyes. "You look a bit sick."

"Oh." She sucks the side of her cheek and swallows the blood until her mouth is dry. "I'm fine. Just hungry."

Angie spends the day with him, but at night, she tiptoes in the kitchen, still wearing his tunic. She looks for raw meat but finds only salted pork. That isn't what she wants, and anyway, if she eats anything the other sailors will wonder. Instead she gnaws on old bones, but that does not douse her hunger. She sulks back to bed, comforting herself by wrapping her arms around the sailor and burying her face in his shoulder. He shifts to hold her close to him. She sighs.

The sailor makes her sour tea to make her feel better. "You look sicker every day, dear. Not used to the sailor life, are you?" Somehow he doesn't recall that they found her swimming alone in the middle of the ocean.

"I guess not," she says. It's sort of true. She isn't a sailor, even if she lives in the sea. She kisses his neck, drinking in the smell of him, and he buries his nose in her hair. "I feel better when I'm with you," she tells him. He believes her.

She is assigned to mend clothing. The sailors assume that since she is a woman, she knows how to sew. She does not. But she has seen it done before, on previous ships where she is not the only female, and there is a lone scullery maid whipped into doing whatever the men wish. Angie let that girl live.

The sailor comes to sit on the trunk next to her and watch her mend a muddy tunic. Her fingers are long and slender, hypothetically perfect for sewing. "You don't know how to sew, do you?" he asks.

She grins guiltily. "Shhh," she says with a playful tone. "I'm figuring it out."

He raises an eyebrow and they both burst out laughing, his lips then capturing hers in a sweet kiss, the kind Angie hates that she loves.

"Ow!" he squeaks.

She realizes she has bitten into his lower lip, and now there is blood. She stares at it. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh," he says, giving her a smile. "It's all right. It was just an accident." But as he kisses her again and the blood on his lips brushes against her tongue, she wonders, *was it?*

She cries that night, lying next to him, tears streaming down her face and onto her lips. She can taste the salt. She loves the way he's pulled her close to him in his sleep, as if he's afraid to let her go. She loves the way he talks to her, as if he knows her for *her,* as if he's not just seduced by her empty words, but she knows he is. She loves the way he looks at her like she's his whole world, like she means something to him, like he knows he means something to her. And he does.

She jumps out of his arms, her feet barely touching the ground before she rips the blanket off him, her fangs growing sharper by the second.

Her mouth waters when she looks at his smooth neck, his soft breaths, his peaceful smile. Her eyes are so watery she can barely see him, and she lets out a single sob as her instinct escapes her mind, and she attacks him with a hunger she has not felt in a long time.

Her fingers reach bone. She knows the feeling. She enjoys it. Her eyes close as she is finally satisfied, no longer hungry. The love is forgotten, but only for a moment before she remembers and collapses onto the ground with a cry, her feelings spent.

She had saved his face. She looks at it now, holds it in her bloody hands and kisses his cold, dead lips. At least his eyes are closed. She would not be able to look at his eyes.

She climbs up to the deck. Thin white curtains strung up with ropes and wood poles flutter in the wind, left there from last night's festivities. Angie grimaces, wishing she could have been born a human, or a cat, or something regular.

She wipes her bloody fingers on the curtains, letting crimson stain the perfect white. "That's better," she says to the air in front of her.

And then she dives into the sea, foam covering her tracks, to go and find some other man to seduce. Perhaps next time she will not fall in love.

The Deafening Sound of Silence

Lucy Schwartz

Lancaster, PA

It was just like any other day in my new life: wake up, make lunches, go to school, and put on a happy face even though smiling seemed like a joke. I was longing to see my mom appear in the car rider line after school and ask me how my day was, or for her to sneak up behind me before we left for school and give me a big hug. Yet, for thirty-seven days, there had been no hugs, no kisses, and no mom.

February is always the most depressing month of the year, but this February was the most miserable one yet. My mom had been hospitalized due to respiratory failure for only a month now, but it felt like years since things had been normal. I longed for this normalcy in simple activities that I took for granted before this wave of shock encompassed and devoured my family. These thoughts rushed through my head while passing my

classmates in the hallway. I tried to remember that others had it worse than I did. At least I had a bed to sleep in and three meals a day. Even still, I felt that my life couldn't possibly get worse.

Why had this happened to my mom? Why did she, the most perfect person on earth (in my eyes) have to suffer so much in the past month? It had happened so fast; it felt like I blinked my eyes and then she just wasn't there. The flu was spreading to tons of people from my school, but it seemed so harmless. Yes, you had to deal with feeling horrible for a week or two, but eventually you would get better. Sadly this was not the case for my mom.

Today was like any other day. I was going to school, sitting in class while I endlessly watched the clock, and every few minutes I would shift my stare to the glossy floors. Lunch, which used to be my favorite part of the day, now was time I had to ponder when my mom would come home. I was numb to all other conversations going on at those insignificant lunch tables. Then I'd finally leave for basketball practice, but something was nudging at me.

I couldn't focus. I *needed* to see my mom. I needed to just feel her comforting presence. Although I loathed going to the hospital, I needed to see the look on her face every time she saw me at the door of her room. Her initial gaze of excitement gave me the feeling that spoke to me, even through her inability to talk, which said, "I will always love you, Lucy."

As the third bell rang loudly into my classmates' ears, I swiftly dodged people in the halls until finally reaching the front office of my school. When I got up to the office, I saw the receptionist who always had this cold look on her face. There was always a small bowl of mints sitting on the counter as if to fool you into thinking she was friendly. After awaiting her ruthless glare, she handed me the school phone, as she usually did.

Then, after shakily typing my dad's phone number, he told me that my mom's friend was going to visit her in the hospital and asked if I wanted to go along. So I decided that basketball could wait and that seeing my mom couldn't. I didn't even take a second to think and I answered, "YES!" It was during this time that school didn't matter, that basketball practices didn't matter, and the only thing worth anything to me was my family.

The whole ride there I couldn't focus because I had this feeling of excitement even though I had just seen my mom a few days ago. It seemed to me that, no matter how long ago I saw her, I had this continuous ache to see her face again. As we neared the hospital, I couldn't sit still, my eyes were in a daze, and my hunger to see my mom grew. At this point, I had the routine down of how to park, register, and even where the button was for my mom's floor of the hospital, the MICU. The "hospital smell" of iodoform, which I had grown to loathe, spread through the air at the hospital. I'd learned to observe the expressions on people's faces as we passed, each one telling a story of why they were there.

The elevator reached the floor where my mom was and I was so excited, yet still so miserable. No matter how I was feeling, it didn't matter because I was going to see my mom, and she needed to see her daughter happy and healthy. When we reached her hallway, I heard the most obnoxious sound, the whir of the machine that was keeping my mom alive. It was a cacophony of hospital monitors combining into the most aggravating sound imaginable. When my mom coughed, a honking noise went off that mocked me as if saying my mom wasn't strong enough to breath on her own.

The hallway seemed to go on forever with endless rooms filled with their tragic stories. I also saw some friendly faces in the hallway where my mom was, but nothing compared to when I turned the corner and saw my mom's look of elation. There she was, my mother who was always indestructible, no matter how many times she was hit she came back up. She had lost a lot of weight; her hair which was always so full, suddenly became thin and sparse, and her hands were fragile. The thing that stuck out most to me was her eyes. They told a story, a story of a mom who wanted to see her kids more than anything.

For safety reasons, I had to put a pale yellow gown over my clothes before entering my mom's room. As I entered, there was a lot of hugging and talking with my mom, but only one way talking. The thing was that I didn't seem to remember what it was like to have an actual conversation with my mom. I just enjoyed the occasional head nods and eye rolls from her if I was ranting about any of my siblings. I knew she wanted to talk back to me, but she could only slightly move her lips. It was like time and reality didn't exist in the long conversations I would have with my mom.

After an hour or two, a nurse came in and said, "Marissa, today is the day. You are going to be able to talk now." She said it in a way that seemed so standard, as if she had just told someone they found a shoe or figured out a math equation. I was in shock; I couldn't believe that I was going to hear my mom talk after a month of only watching her sit there, longing for some way to communicate. Then, just a few minutes later, the speech pathologist came in and told us how she was going to put a cap on her treac so we could hear her voice.

After explaining the procedure, she placed the cap on my mom's throat and asked her to say something. She looked up at me with her longing eyes and said to me, "I love you, Lucy." These words were so simple, yet made me tear up. This wasn't a look that she gave me or a squeeze from her hand, it was her actually speaking. It's weird to think that a voice or a sound can be so defining, not only defining but also emotional. My mom only talked in short, breathy sentences, yet her voice was so powerful to me. I finally had a part of my mom back, a part of her that I didn't realize was gone.

Wooden Spoons

Chaynee White

Pittsburgh, PA

Our yellow school bus bounced with the potholes on the road, tossing our light, little bodies into the air and down with a thump. Laughter escaped our lips, along with hums of gospel and pop songs. Our teachers shushed and shunned us with embarrassment, but we were too young and excited to care. Awaiting our

annual trip to Pine Valley always went something like that. This time we had all been to the camp the year before and couldn't pass up on the opportunity to go again. It was a wondrous thing, the words "Pine Valley" slithered through our mouths with anticipation as we inched closer and closer to the entrance. We could see our open field where we spent hours playing tag and laying in the cool grass gazing at the stars. We could see the gazebo where we burnt our marshmallows into a crisp, but still stacked on Hershey's Chocolate and Honey Maid Graham Crackers anyways. The huge bell that was rung at the crack of dawn for breakfast and rang during the sweet sunsets for dinner. Our bus stopped with a whine on the gravel. Soft faces pressed against the sun-kissed window. We watched as our recent memories flashed before us. I could smell my second home as we shoved each other, bustling to get off the bus. The pinecones stung our noses with their strong spice and woodsy scent. They hung around every tree and inspired the camp's name. The sun was hanging in the sky, giving us our daily dose of vitamin D. The birds chirped their sing-song tune, admiring the overwhelming number of little 10-year-old ants on the field.

Even after a few hours, the light in the sky remained to encourage our fun. While the other kids tripped over their shoelaces playing freeze tag, a tiny black girl sat in the huge field of grass with another girl who I referred to as Grace. Grace was the golden girl, the one who played with her silky, brown hair during class, answered questions matter-of-factly, and had the adoration of everyone she knew. I had always wanted to be her friend because I thought of her as a role model. She was always perfect and always a good student. Who wouldn't be perfect if their mom was one of the head teachers of the camp? She obsessed over the little dark freckles across her face and hazel brown eyes. Her bossy attitude had no exceptions, even for her mother. It's no surprise that she believed she ruled the world and that everyone was below her because she was just a little princess. That was until this day.

Grace and I sat down and played with the leftover relay items the older kids had used before us. A small clear box, *ASP ITEMS* written on it in bold Sharpie. We took some out: a little baton for spinning around our tiny fingers, tiny red party cups to place on our heads, and two big wooden spoons with two fake white eggs to match. The wooden spoons caught our attention the most. We plopped down and started to play with them. It's amazing what a child could find entertaining those days. Wooden spoons were little thin people. The egg was a baby. Our imagination ran wild. Each item had its own story, likes, and dislikes. We could have played forever.

Train Moon Jessica Jiang Brooklyn, NY

But as we were wrapping up our fantasy world, placing all the batons and cups back into their rightful spots, Grace held onto one wooden spoon. I looked at her; she had a certain look in her eyes that I can only describe now as pure malevolence. Like the way the Grinch looked when he had the idea to steal all the presents on Christmas. She gave me a fake, innocent smile and handed me the spoon while she whipped back her dark brown hair.

"Hit me as hard as you can with this spoon," she said.

"What?" I replied.

Why? Why in the world did she want me to hit her with the spoon? Just a minute ago we were playing with it. Maybe she wanted the spoon to be mad at her and hit her? But, nevertheless, I still followed her actions. Because that was the only thing I knew how to do. I wasn't defiant, because that was not how I worked. Why be bad and get sent to the bench, a sort of "time out" at our after-school program, when you could be good and get Jolly Ranchers?

"I said hit me with this spoon!" her rushing voice pressuring me.

I took the spoon from her. My hand shook in confusion. At the time, I wasn't thinking of the outcome. I didn't even know why she wanted me to do it. She pulled up her sleeve, revealing more of her cream skin, indicating that she wanted to be hit there. I raised my hand in the air to the waning sun and brought it down as hard and as fast as I could.

The *sound*. Oh, the *sound*. You could hear it beyond the field, beyond the wooden cottages, beyond the bridge and the creek, beyond the woods. I imagine that even deer around the area heard the sound and skipped away, fearful that it was a gunshot. It rang in our ears and stuck for minutes after. The tears and wailing followed. I couldn't comprehend what I just did. I couldn't understand how hard I just hit her because, to me, it felt like I could have hit harder. And I'm quite glad I hesitated. At least I knew I was doing something that wasn't right. But that didn't justify my actions. She cried for her mother, for a teacher. For somebody to witness her beautiful act.

"M-Mom! Chaynee h-hit me with a-a spoon!" she wailed.

I sat there, confused. She did just tell me to hit her, right? I wasn't wrong for this. I was just following orders. Like I always do. She ran over to her mother who was standing nearby. The old, dirty, brown-haired lady pushed up her glasses and examined her red arm. She sat down and curdled Grace in her arms. Which I found very amusing; the

way Grace's legs hung far beyond her mother's knees. She was way too old to be held that way. But, of course, I didn't say that. I didn't say much at all, I just waddled feebly over to the scene.

"Chaynee what are you doing? Why did you hit her?" her mother yelled.

"She told me to," I said, hoping that would make the situation better.

"No I didn't!" Grace butted in. "She just hit me!"

I couldn't understand why she was lying. Even today I don't understand her reasoning. Maybe she was just trying to get me in trouble. Maybe she didn't like me. But one thing's for sure. That little golden girl told a lie, and everyone believed her and hated me. And I couldn't believe that I wanted to be friends with somebody like her. But, in that time, I was robbed of my naïve behaviors and stopped trusting everybody. And I only let people inside of my circle who I knew I could trust because you don't know when someone will turn on you. Maybe even turn on you with a big wooden spoon.

The Twining Rope

Sierra Glassman

Watsonville, CA

Mama was frying latkes, my favorite. I sniffed the air to inhale their sweet scent wafting from the stove. Unfortunately, I did not smell latkes. I coughed as I got a whiff of the mud and sweat-covered people, people that were in fear for their lives. They were crowding us out of Stutthof. Were they taking us some place worse?

Hundreds of humans, like ants in rags, waited as trucks were prepared for transport outside the barbwire gates. I held Rebecca's arm tightly, as I did not want her to get lost like the children wandering and balling in the crowd. "That's the one that was staring at me yesterday," whispered Rebecca, pointing at a guard who was leaning against the side of the truck.

Rebecca's blonde hair and blue eyes made everyone stare. One day, a soldier even asked her why she was Jewish. "You could take off the star and you'd be fine," he said. I looked up and glared at him, and he turned away, chuckling a bit. Rebecca and I were half-sisters, and we had both been brought up by Rebecca's biological mother, Hannah Bek Bernthal. She died of pancreatic cancer the day before the war started. At least she didn't have to witness what the world would become.

The SS officers shouted and herded us onto the trucks. I felt something lumpy underfoot. A small hand reached up and I tried to grab it, but someone stepped on the hand. The hand went limp. Rebecca pulled me ahead. When we got to a truck, we were jammed in, and I could hardly breath. "Ayala!" I heard Rebecca cry my name. The doors of the truck were closing and Rebecca was not in the truck. I shoved my way to the doors, making a few other bone-thin people stumble to the floor. But I didn't care, I had to get to Rebecca. I pushed and held the doors open as Rebecca clambered in. A soldier yelled at me, and I retreated into the crowded cattle car. Everybody in the truck was wearing a yellow star and possessed the same fear: we might be going to an extermination camp. Countless horror stories had circulated, and at first everyone was skeptical. But, as the months went on and people witnessed how low the guards could go, the extermination camps had become a looming threat.

I found Rebecca pressed against the wall adjacent to the closed doors. I ducked around people to get to her. Something was hanging from inside of her coat, a section of rope. We were the lucky ones—assigned to ply rope while others had to make bricks and work in mines. It was tedious work; our hands were calloused from the endless hours of twining rough strands.

I asked, "Why did you take the rope?"

She replied quietly, "Don't know. Everything has a use, like you always say."

I did not reply. I was thinking of the latkes again, and my stomach rumbled. When was the last time I had eaten? Yesterday, at 16:00 hours sharp. A measly ration of cabbage soup, and I had given a quarter of it to Rebecca. She was only thirteen, and she needed to grow. She was very short. Rebecca said I should worry more about myself, though she always accepted the extra soup. I closed my eyes, relishing the thought of sleep.

An hour later, I was awakened by a huge jolt. The truck was on a wooden pier, and it stopped. Anchored at the back of the pier was a ship. It had three steel chimney-like structures painted white with black ends sticking out of a steel body. The hull of the ship was painted black, except words in white spelling "Cap Arcona."

Rebecca and I hurried through the throng of people rushing to the boat. Our truck was one of the last three to arrive. As I got closer, I could hear the officer near the boarding gate shout, "We can only admit six-hundred more people!"

Six-hundred? There were at least a thousand in the flood of people left.

"Run!" I shouted to Rebecca. As I started to push harder through the crowd, I saw another lost child. He was shouting, "Mama! Where are you?"

I thought of the hand disappearing at Stutthof. I thought of Mama's kind smile. I would not let this hand disappear.

I took his wrist, and he struggled. I pulled him through the crowd to the boat, Rebecca at my side. He twisted and screamed, "I want my mama!"

"You'll see your mama soon," I told him as Rebecca and I stepped onto the boat.

We followed everybody else cramming into the belly of the Cap Arcona. I barely had room to breathe. A few seconds later, a sailor shouted, "Capacity is full! We can't let anybody else in!" I exhaled in relief.

I heard gunfire outside as we were pushed deeper into the hull. I suddenly remembered Ala Kowalski's blank face staring up at the ceiling, dead. More gunfire. Sobbing, wailing, an endless cry of death, symptoms of a massacre. The steel sides of the ship could not mute the cacophony of death.

I descended the stairs with Rebecca and the little boy into suffocating darkness. People were shouting for family and friends left on the pier. I thought of Ala again, our mean baby-sitter. She moved in with us when Mama was taken to the hospital. I remembered it clearly, though it occurred six years ago.

Ala burst into our bedroom before

the break of dawn and yelled, "We have to go NOW! They are coming!" We groggily started to get up. Ala screamed, "NOW! Pack up! And hurry!" So that is why she had the suitcases on the wall. I tried to pack a huge encyclopedia, and Ala screamed, "NO! Only necessary things! Hurry!" Rebecca tried to pack the menorah she had decorated and that was a gift from Mama, but Ala screamed at her.

There was a knock at the door and Ala's voice broke, and she sobbed, "It's too late."

"Why is someone knocking?" Rebecca asked. I gave her a look that made her quiet, but I regretted it. Ala composed herself and told us to go under our beds. I was about to ask why, but Ala was already down the stairs and opening the door.

I could not hear the conversation between Ala and man at the door. Ala started sobbing and the man pushed past her and came up the stairs. "Where are they?" he bellowed, and Ala shrieked, almost to herself, "I won't tell! I won't tell! Hannah, oh Hannah, why?" The man, we could now see better, had a red suit and on his shoulder was a black, spiral-like icon. He took out a pistol and shot Ala.

The bedroom door was slightly ajar, and I saw everything. Eight year-old Rebecca saw everything too, and she gasped. I tried to cover her mouth, but the man heard and came into the bedroom. He dragged us out and forced us into a cattle truck.

What would be next? God, when will this war be over?

We were shoved into a dark room with thousands of people already in it. They locked the hatch behind us. The little boy cried harder, as the room was very hot and smelly.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Sam Goldmann." he proudly declared and stopped crying. I could see why the guards interrogated children now. They were much more likely to tell the truth.

"Well, I'm Ayala and this is my sister Rebecca."

Someone pushed between us and Sam. I felt the boat nudging off the barge.

Waves tossed the boat back and forth. I would have been starving, but I was overcome with nausea and dry heaves. I belched and almost threw up. At the same time, Sam got sick on his shoes, causing others around us to press away.

"At least we're getting better sea stomachs," said Rebecca, unfazed.

If Rebecca had not been by my side for

Light Bulb Lori Khadse Princeton, NJ

those six awful years, I knew I probably wouldn't have made it. I remembered when we were almost separated back at Stutthof. Children ages ten and above were in a different line than younger children. The younger children's line was leading to an ominous-looking building with smoke billowing out of its wide chimney. We lied and said we were both above ten.

Most of the people around me were women and children. Sam clung to my leg and asked, "Why are there so many people?"

Rebecca replied first. "Because we're on an adventure." What was the definition of adventure? I remembered the Merriam-Webster definition: "An undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks." Well, that was certainly true.

"What is your favorite animal?" I asked Sam.

He was quick with a reply. "I like planes."

I almost laughed. "Are you sure planes are animals?" I asked him.

"Yes," he proclaimed.

As the ship sailed into the open bay, I began to feel less seasick. But hunger gnawed at me like a dog desperate to get the last pieces of marrow from a dry bone.

There was a huge, ear-shattering BOOM!

My adrenaline kicked up. There was a huge hole in the top of the chamber. Already, hundreds of people were trying to squeeze through it. I started to run toward the hole too.

Suddenly, I realized Rebecca and Sam were still in the corner. In the darkness, I rushed back to them. The floor felt like an oddly stuffed pillow with many lumps. From the dim light, I could see the lumps were bodies.

Rebecca carried Sam while trying to dodge people pressing in on all sides. Rebecca panted, "I can't carry him anymore. Here!" She handed Sam to me. He was wailing. I told him I would give him a piggy-back ride.

I shouted for Rebecca to go up first. Suddenly, huge flames appeared on the opposite side of the room. People became even more desperate as the stragglers were burnt to crisps. As I got under the hole, I heard gunshots above. Were they shooting from above too? Rebecca clambered out of the hole, and I handed Sam to her. I leaped up after her.

On the sinking deck, SS officers were shooting. From the sky, planes were shooting. There were no lifeboats. Only the frigid Baltic Sea. I heard Rebecca scream in pain. I pushed among people to get to her. Her arm was bleeding, and time was running out.

"Hurry! Jump!" I shouted.

I clutched Rebecca's good arm as Sam clung to her back. We jumped.

It was cold, so very cold. Sam cried as we swam away from the ship. I was so glad we had life

vests. Except "we" did not all have life vests. I had one, Sam, had one, but Rebecca did not have one.

I looked around. There were thousands of people in the water. Most of them were dead.

"Rebecca! You need a life jacket! I'll take one from her…" I said, pointing to a dead woman floating in the water.

What had the war made me into? An unblinking thief? I tried not to look at the woman's face as Rebecca and Sam treaded water and hugged each other for warmth. I looked at the woman's bloodstained yellow star instead as I unbuckled her life vest. What would her family think when no word came? Did she have a family or was she like me? As I slipped the vest off her shoulders, I looked back at the burning ship. It was slowly sinking, like a sandcastle that had been overrun by a wave, slowly disintegrating back into the sea. I swam back to Rebecca, and she strapped the life vest on, shivering violently. The shore was just visible in the distance.

We were not getting as far as I hoped. Sam was not a good swimmer. If we did not hurry, we would all die of hypothermia, like the countless others. Suddenly, I thought of the rope Rebecca had taken.

"Rebecca! Do you still have the rope?" I asked, teeth chattering. She pulled it from her pocket. I handed the end of the rope to Sam. "Hold on to this and kick!" I told him.

We passed a dead girl clinging to her dead mother.

"Just a few more minutes," Rebecca told Sam.

Five minutes later we were just offshore. More gunfire. Still figures lay crumpled on the beach. I saw one of the soldiers pointing at us.

"Dive!" I shouted.

The freezing water enveloped my face as four bullets hit the surface of the water. One sunk and landed in my palm. We swam underwater for about ten seconds. Sam looked at me. He needed to breathe. We rose to the surface, and Sam gasped. Luckily, the soldiers had lost sight of us.

"Just a minute and we'll get to land," I said.

We swam farther down the beach, trying to keep our heads low. When the soldiers were far away, barely in sight, we rolled amongst the freezing waves onto the beach. We were shivering like mad. When I turned around to look back at the ocean, I wish I hadn't. Thousands of dead bodies were floating in the water, looking like breadcrumbs I fed to ducks at a zoo a lifetime ago. They were floating, bobbing with each wave, their faces unseeable from the distance.

Each of us clutched the rope tightly. For a second, we all stared out at the water; droplets glinted in the sunlight as they came in rivulets off our soaked clothing. Then, we bolted for the bushes flanking the beach.

Author's Note

The SS Cap Arcona's sinking is not known to most people. According to estimates, there were about 5,000 concentration camp prisoners on board, most of whom were women and children. But, there were only 350 Jewish survivors.

When the SS Cap Arcona refused to accept any more prisoners, over 800 people were shot. Among these, 500 were killed on their barges by the SS guards.

On the afternoon of May 3, 1945, the British Royal Air Force sunk the ship in the shallow bay of Neustadt. The ship had not been marked as a hospital ship and the prisoners were hidden below deck, so the British had no idea they hit a ship with concentration camp survivors. The SS Cap Arcona was not far off-shore when it was capsized, so some were able to swim to the beach in the 7ºC Baltic Sea. However, these survivors decreased in number as they were shot on arrival at the beach by SS soldiers.

On May 7, four days after the sinking of Cap Arcona, Germany signed terms of unconditional surrender, ending World War II. Over the next decades, many skeletons washed ashore. The last remains were found in 1971.

december musings

Carolina Owen

Manhasset, NY

i.
the leaves beneath my feet are a beautiful myriad of hues;
most are a dark umber,
the tone of a slightly-burnt pie crust,
of overly-calloused beeswax-hands,
of smooth honey-colored skin,
of oakwood and ebony
however, others are far more vibrant;
jewel-tones of oranges, yellows and crimson crunch beneath me
like the spilt blood of a royal king
(and occasionally, the vermillion leaf of a japanese maple)
or the slightly rotten peel of a tangerine
strewn about the path by a visiting traveler
the various colors are beautiful,
but i feel a solemn pain in my heart as i view them
i somehow feel as though with every step,
with the crackling of the leaves below me,
Their skeletons are ground to a fine dust
before they're lost to the wind
in the midst of my autumn pandering
i wonder if the howling wind outside my bedroom at night
is really just the souls of leaves
begging me to return them to the barren earth
from which they came

ii.
outdoors, my world is blanketed in a fine white dust
(perhaps the shedding of an angel's wings?)
and time is standstill in this wonderland scene
the crystal-topped evergreens are pristinely packed,
one next to another, in formation,
like soldiers on the wintery fields of Newbury or Normandy
(whichever you prefer)
it's the most perfect view Mother Nature has ever conjured
and i have no words,
no sweet phrases
no epiphanies or songs to describe
the immeasurable bewilderment
and infantile wonder
that i am consumed by in this moment
so i snap a photo with my Polaroid camera
and devour the frozen beauty with my eyes,
whose color mirrors the icy blue of my parents' car
through my lens the candied flowers look

so delicate,
as if one single touch could shatter them all

love poems for moon children

Carolina Owen

Manhasset, NY

i. jazz
the music blasts through my headphones on repeat,
a flashy jazz melody coloring my thoughts
the song is ingrained in my memory,
pieced together with images of us
side-by-side, stand-to-stand
right in that moment we are happy
toothily grinning as we win gold

ii. honey
color-filtered daylight streams through the sky,
illuminating the world in a beautiful glow
the honey-colored hue on your face
makes you look just perfect enough,
your skin incandescent gold a few shades darker
than my own porcelain
as i reach for your fingertips
our gorgeous tones,
bone china and honeycomb intertwine

iii. pillow
the empty space rests beside me,
a reminder of the hollowness within myself
I crave something that never is, never was
a feigned happiness, a false togetherness
the second pillow slips out from underneath my head
as I place it next to my own
and tenderly envelop the plushness with longing arms;
it's a place-marker for something, someone
who will never be mine

iv. touch
i want to hold hands with you,
to feel cool marble-skin against my own,
to touch your fingers tenderly
leaving invisible reminders of us
scattered on your smooth flesh

v. missing
as we sit together in the grass
fingers intertwined ever so slightly
I realize
the half I did not know I was missing has found me;
in this fleeting moment
I feel complete

vi. stars
do the stars know your secrets?
(I imagine they'd be good at keeping them.)
they are guardians of lost promises,
keepers of first love and last words
they understand without knowing
so go on,
whisper your heart out to the stars;
they will keep it from breaking

Spring in Red Geoffrey Kim Jeju, South Korea

Terrorist

Sarah Mohammed

Pittsburgh, PA

I.

It's September 11th, 2011. I am in second grade and, as usual, the TV in Mama's bedroom plays the news before school—today it is blasting out those horrific headlines once again in remembrance of that shocking attack that amplified the threat of terrorism here in our country and challenged the idea that we are "the land of the free and home of the brave." The footage before the bombing shows New York in its best season on a breathtaking late-summer day; the gleaming buildings glitter with life. My eyes widen in disbelief as the planes crash straight into the towers, chills running down the valleys of my spine as they collapse.

At school, my friends have heard all about that day, and, faces bright with a gawking curiosity, they start probing me with questions about terrorism:

Why do they do that?
Does their family support them?
Who teaches them that?

I am seven, so I reply curtly and softly:
I don't know.
I don't know.
I don't know.

They eagerly lap up my short responses like warm chocolate melting against their tongues, and each word only seems to encourage them. Just kids themselves, they press on and on, asking me how in the world I could not know.

I finally ask them why they choose to spit these questions at me, and they look at each other knowingly, finally pointing to my smiling aunt walking towards me to pick me up, her hair neatly wrapped in a hijab. They glance back at me, expressions wary, and ask me a final question before leaving:

Are you a terrorist?

My eyes drop and I feel scared, for the first time, of who I am. Why does it have to be me who my friends think is terrorist? Why does my religion and culture suggest I am a bad person?

II.

On the streets with my family, I see a few streets down that folks are lining the crowded traffic lanes with anti-Muslim signs. Some people walk by freely, ignoring the hateful messages but when we walk past them. They scream savagely at us, guttural voices cracked with a jagged sort of hatred. One man waves a tattered cardboard sign in my face:

Go back to your country.

I am a child of this country. I have nowhere else to go.

III.

I laugh at my aunt's jokes as we help carry

Mama's home-cooked meals to the park to celebrate Eid, a time of celebration, silence, prayer, family, and happiness. The powerful aroma of the spices, unleashed by Mama's deft hand and her skillet, wafts through the entire park, and my eyes shine with joy as I tell Mama:

This is my favorite day in the whole entire year!

We have just put out the blankets and carefully spread out the banquet when a mob of yelling people approach—they chant and wave their signs telling us to go back, as if America were not our home as much as theirs, as if I were not formed in the body of this country, my only home. They spit at us until we back away, our faces crestfallen. We scramble to head back, quickly gathering up the home-cooked banquet and confining its aromas in sealed containers. As we approach the safety of my Uncle Waffiq's car, our alarm grows as we make out the words "go away terrorist" spray-painted on his windshield. Our dismay is complete when we arrive to find his car broken into and defiled by someone's defecation. He spends three days repairing it, missing work at the local jewelry store. I will never forget the look on his face, usually so reserved and graceful, tightened with anger and melancholy.

We stay home for a week, afraid to go out except for work, celebrating Eid in solitude, exiled from our community. We can't even feel comfortable buying groceries, not with people spewing hate at us in the supermarket aisles and telling us to leave Americans alone. I was born here and raised with American values—you know, the self-evident truth that "all . . . are created equal," that "prohibiting the free exercise" of religion is so fundamentally un-American that the first article of the Bill of Rights forbids any such thing. In spite of these principles, I am an American child who is not treated as American because of the color of my skin and the religion I practice.

Eid is no longer my favorite day in the whole entire year.

IV.

On the first day of school, my teacher calls the roll but stumbles across my obviously Islamic last name. My classmates' previously bored faces turn as one towards me, alerted by my name, and I watch them whisper to their friends and point in my direction. Trying to recover the class's focus, my teacher says that he will always remember my name since I am the only one in my class who looks like she could have that name. He laughs, as if my name, race, and culture is a joke, and the other kids chime in with their own derision-stippled giggles.

But I don't laugh.

The next year, I try to register my name without the last three letters at the end.

V.

My friends ask me where I am going to spend summer vacation and, filled with excited anticipation, I tell them I am visiting my grandparents' homeland. They glance at each other and laugh, not a full-throated laugh but a choking, sarcastic sneer. Then they ask me:

Are you learning to be a terrorist?

They laugh again, so I roll my eyes and, once again, my lips crack that exasperated smile. "Allah," I say, the Arabic equivalent of "oh my god." As the name for God rolls off my tongue, it comforts me in a way they never can. But my friends suddenly back away from me, their faces no longer playful. I hear:

Stop using that terrorist talk on us!

Then they are gone, all hurrying away from me in a tightly packed row, their arms protectively around each other as if finding safety in numbers.

My eyes turn glassy as I consider the unfairness of it all. How can this simple Arabic word be so frightening and alienating? It is a different name for the same God.

Why must a girl in a scarf traveling east be accused of training to be a terrorist? Since when has terrorist training become a joke?

VI.

Mama smiles at me as we fill out the forms to move to a new school. She has always taught me not to run away from my problems but to stand up for myself and be who I am unabashedly, but it is not working anymore. Instead, I feel excluded and stereotyped at the institution that is supposed to enrich my learning and empower my life.

Mama assures me that this is for the best, and she slowly rubs her soothing fingers in circles across my back. I may never 'blend in' with the other students, but I can use what I have learned from the years of stereotyping to embrace the fresh start and welcome the change.

I start my new school in fourth grade, still embracing my culture, my religion, and my heritage. I hold my head up high as September 11th passes, as I enjoy my dinner at the park in celebration for Eid, as the teacher stumbles over my name, and as I tell my friends about my summer plans, tossing in an Arabic word here and there.

Although my fellow Americans' assumptions about me may not change, their adversity has strengthened my self-confidence and taught me that their mistakes have no bearing on who I really am.

Fallen Angel

Charlie Marasciullo

New Canaan, CT

I see the sun shining.
The beams are bouncing off the crystal water in the pool.
Untouched. It's a hot summer day in the south.
And there are children playing in the
lush, kelly-green grass.

I see two starry-eyed
toddlers. One with platinum blonde hair,
as pure as an angel's.
The other with rich brown hair,
sweet like chocolate. They are just a year apart.
And they're playing in their grandmother's
backyard.

They are cousins with the bond of
sisters.

We used to know each other. Now I
don't recognize her.
Her hair is darker now—more like honey.
But not as sweet. Of course, she still has highlights
to hide the aging, to play that angelic person she
once was.
Like when we'd play dress-up; it's all
pretend.

That girl isn't my cousin.

I don't see *her* much anymore.
All I see is the character she portrays.
She was always into theater, but I never knew that her
own life was a drama, and she was the star. To her, I'm just a supporting character.
I don't matter anymore.

When it's not a movie, it's a game, a game of strategy.
A game in which
I am a pawn. And she is the queen.
The almighty piece which a pawn can never compete with;
the piece that doesn't abide by the rules.

Sometimes I pretend she's still there
when I see her. I pretend I'm not the supporting character
or the pawn. But I now know that pretending is just a classy way of saying "lying."

The angel I once knew has fallen.

Asleep

Iris Roth-Bamberg

Pittsburgh, PA

Derrin curls his hands around his cup of coffee. The hospital is too bright and shiny for midnight on a Tuesday, and he can hear the tap of shoes in the hallways outside, the squeak of cart wheels. The florescent lights hum faintly, and everything combined has him unable to sit still. Derrin was never good at sitting still in the first place, but the anxiety has only made his fidgeting worse. His leg jiggles enough that he has to hold his coffee aloft, and his free hand taps fingernails across the rail of Liam's hospital bed. A fly buzzes a circuit around the room and Derrin squeezes his coffee cup tighter.

Two people pause to talk right outside his door. He can't make out what they're saying, just their muffled voices, and somehow that's worse. The hospital room is cold, the air conditioner humming with the lights, and there are *too many sounds*.

Derrin squeezes his eyes shut and tries to remember earlier that day, when it was warm and windy and the sky was blue. It doesn't work. The air conditioner coughs and sputters. The fly circles his head, and he is startled enough to jump. His grip on the coffee cup has reached strangulation. A bit sloshes over the lip and runs down his fingers. It has gone cold. He takes a sip anyway, closing his eyes and trying to remember what the hot coffee was like that morning, in the park. It feels cold and slimy when he swallows it.

There is movement on the gurney in front of him, and Derrin looks up hopefully, only to deflate after a few seconds. Liam is still and silent as he was a minute ago, the last time Derrin checked. The sheet moves with every shallow exhale. Every time Derrin looks away he wonders if maybe this is all a dream. It feels like one, all surreal and floaty. Liam would never let this happen in real life. Whatever this is, Derrin is ready for it to be over.

"Wake up, idiot," he whispers, too quiet to really mean anything at all.

❖

Derrin has split the day into two parts.

The first part of his day began with him waking up late, curtains already drawn, Liam setting a cup of coffee on his bedside table. Liam always woke up first, even when he went to bed after Derrin. He groaned as he sat up in bed, so Liam knew that as much as he appreciated the gesture, he still hated mornings. Liam just smiled.

Derrin's sister called it disgustingly domestic. Derrin called it love.

Neither of them liked breakfast, so instead they sat at the small kitchen island, sipping coffee and talking. It was Tuesday, but neither of them had work, and so they'd decided to spend the day as relaxed as they could. That meant Liam used the more expensive dark roast to make coffee, and that they'll go to the nice restaurant on Fifth for lunch, and they'll have breakfast for dinner.

Liam looked at Derrin over the rim of his coffee mug. "We haven't been to the park in ages."

"No, I guess we haven't."

"Would you wanna go a little later? It just rained. It would be—"

Derrin smiled a little. "It would be like our first date."

"Yeah. Which was the rainy one?"

"You mean did it rain when you first thought it was a date or when I thought it was a date? It rained on your first date. My…second. I think. Or third."

"I can't believe we dated a full week before I realized." Liam shook his head. "That's *awful*."

"It's not my fault you're the most oblivious person on the planet."

"You take that back!"

"Never. Here, I'm gonna go shower. We can go after that? And then for lunch we can walk down to Fifth."

❖

Nothing has changed in the hours Derrin has been sitting in the hospital. Liam's heart monitor beeps steadily, but he hasn't so much as stirred. Derrin worries he never will. Every so often a nurse comes in, checks Liam's chart and messes with his wires a little. She doesn't say anything. She gave up trying to speak to Derrin the second hour.

He talks to Liam sometimes. Not very loudly, because it feels wrong to interrupt the quiet, but he read somewhere that coma patients are still aware of the outside world. Derrin wouldn't want someone watching over him to just sit in silence, so he doesn't.

Maybe the strangest part of this whole thing, hospital and all, is that Liam is so still. Liam was never still. It went against his genetic code. That's part of what Derrin loves about him. Two people incapable of sitting still work a lot better than one person getting constantly ticked off at their partner's fidgeting. Liam rarely sat down, but, when he did, his leg was always bouncing, or his fingers were tapping. He didn't even calm in his sleep, just twisted and kicked. Sometimes he talked, too.

Derrin feels the sudden urge to slap him. Mostly because Liam would never let someone hit him with no explanation, and a little because Derrin is furious that Liam would leave him alone with something like this.

It's 3 a.m. now, and his eyes keep drooping shut. The hospital coffee is too watered down to be of any use, but Derrin isn't going to leave Liam

alone for long enough to walk to a coffee shop. He wishes there was a clock on the wall, one of those old analogue ones you see in the movies, so he can have some sort of physical representation of the time passing. He thinks it would add to the general ambiance and vague menace of hospitals. Liam would laugh at him if he knew Derrin was thinking about the ambiance of a hospital room. Liam would laugh at him for using the word ambiance, too.

"When you wake up," Derrin says, "I'm going to make you drink hospital coffee for a month. That's all you're getting. Hospital coffee and water. And every time you complain I'm going to throw more hospital coffee at you. Then you'll know how I feel."

"God," he adds after a second, "it tastes like dirt. Dirt that was in the same room as a coffee machine once. And then it got thrown in a dirty river and had to be strained out. I hope you appreciate everything I'm suffering for you."

Liam doesn't respond. Derrin scoffs. "Rude. I'm just trying to help, you know. Keep you company while you do who knows what up there." Derrin gestures at Liam's head. "The least you could do is say you're welcome."

Again, no response.

"Whatever," Derrin grumbles. "Have it your way."

❖

The air was chilly, and scented with rain and the various spring flowers. They walked close to each other, shoulders brushing. There wasn't much to talk about, so they didn't. It was the middle of March, which meant they were dealing with a sort of lion-lamb hybrid that changed its mood multiple times a day. The week before it snowed. That morning it thunder-stormed. Now it was sixty degrees and sunny. Crocuses were wilting all across the wet green grass. Daffodils were beginning to droop. The path through the park was a constellation of muddy footprints.

They paused for a second to let a few teenagers who should have been in school dash across the path. Derrin scuffed his shoe in the grass and sprayed Liam's leg with water. There was a moment of silence as Liam realized what just happened, and then Derrin was sprinting away. They gave up on the path after dodging one too many people, and instead ran through the grass with no one but a few dog walkers. The grass was slippery, and their feet nearly slid from under them more than once.

Derrin was faster than Liam, too busy laughing to immediately notice that he wasn't right behind him anymore. But then he looked back and saw Liam sitting on the ground, staring at his arm. It took Derrin a minute to understand what was wrong with the image, opening his mouth to tell Liam to *hurry up, a little grass never hurt anyone*, but Liam began to pat himself down, movements tinged with hysteria, and Derrin understood in a sickening flash.

He sprinted back, already patting down his own pockets. Nothing. "Where is it? Do you have it, I don't have it, oh my god, where's your EpiPen, why the hell don't we have it? It's *spring*—" He began fumbling in Liam's hoodie pocket for his phone when he couldn't unzip his, fingers too clumsy with panic to be of any real use.

Rejecting Monotony Aneesh Karuppur Warren, NJ

It took Derrin forever to successfully call 911 and communicate the situation. Long enough that Liam was wheezing by the time he finished. Derrin bent over him, trying desperately to calm down. Liam's wrist had already ballooned, the bee sting a taught red bump. "God," he said, a little calmer now but only just. "I don't—*god,*" he said again. Liam didn't say anything at all.

The ambulance arrived minutes later, but they took long enough for Liam to have completely passed out, each breath sticking in his throat. A small crowd of people had gathered, but all Derrin could do was kneel by Liam. It took him a moment to understand why the paramedics were there, what they were trying to do. He didn't bother trying to go with Liam. He'd just get in the way.

Derrin drove to the hospital in record time, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, leg jittering badly enough that he had trouble keeping the gas pedal steady. The hospital was big and brick and tall, just as all hospitals were. Derrin couldn't bring himself to enter yet, partially because he could barely breath, partially because entering would mean it was actually real, and he wasn't prepared for that yet.

Liam was highly allergic to bee stings. Derrin had known that, but the knowledge hadn't prepared him for the reality of it. The swelling, the wheezing, the sweating and eyes rolled back into Liam's head felt like a horror story. Derrin brought quaking fingers up to rake through his hair as he let out a stuttering breath. He didn't know what to do. That wasn't how this is supposed to work. Derrin was always supposed to know what to do, that was his *thing*. He was calm, prepared, collected in crisis. But the minute he realized Liam was hurt he was hysterical. He was supposed to be able to help, and he hadn't even had Liam's EpiPen. *God*, he hadn't had Liam's EpiPen, and now he was in the hospital, going through anaphilwhatever, while Derrin had a breakdown in his car.

He squeezed his eyes shut as they began to water, took another painfully deep breath, and got out of the car. Now wasn't the time.

The hospital was bustling inside, full of doctors, patients, nurses, visitors. Derrin stood in the queue at the front desk, got a visitor's sticker, and left in search of

Liam's room. It was busy in there, too, with nurses and machines and a doctor pushing an IV into Liam's arm. Liam himself was still passed out on the bed, completely still.

The doctor gave him some explanation full of medical terms Derrin didn't know (something about severe reactions and breathing patterns), then walked out after a few more minutes. The nurse stayed a while longer, scribbling on Liam's chart, fidgeting with the wires, then offered what was probably meant to be a sympathetic smile and walked out. Just before she was out the door she paused.

"He'll be okay. We got to him in time."

Derrin said nothing. His throat ached with suppressed tears.

A few seconds later the nurse nodded and left.

Derrin reached to take Liam's hand but stopped half way. "Why in god's name would you not bring your EpiPen on a walk on a spring day you *stupid idiot*?" He was quiet for a while, zoned out staring at the heart monitor. A bit later he added, "Don't you dare die on me. I love you." It felt like an assurance, but Derrin wasn't sure for whom. "I love you."

❖

Derrin has given up staying awake. It's 4 a.m., still dark out, and the stupid hospital coffee hasn't worked. Besides, Liam always woke up before Derrin did. When he opens his eyes again, Liam will be there to laugh at Derrin's worry and tell him it's okay.

"I'm going to throw you a bee themed 'congratulations on not being dead' party," Derrin says sleepily. "The cake is gonna be striped and all the guests have to knock you out so we can eat the cake. Oh, and we can have pin the stinger on Liam instead of pin the tail on the donkey. Huh. I should be a party planner. Imagine."

"Anyway, it'll be hilarious, and when you wake up, you'll be mad you didn't get cake, but it's fine because I'm a thoughtful boyfriend so I bought you a cupcake covered in a spectacular icing bee, and you'll be so overcome with joy that—" He yawns—"that you'll promise never to go anywhere without an EpiPen ever again, and then we'll dance or something, because bees dance. Did you know that? They, they dance so the other bees know where the pollen is. I think. Probably. Maybe it's just for fun, I forget."

Derrin blinks. He blinks again.

"'M tired. When I wake up, I'm expecting some really nice coffee as apology. I'll also accept breakfast in bed. I'm not picky. Anyway, goodnight. I love you."

Just before Derrin lets his eyes finally close he thinks he sees Liam twitch. *Stupid sheet*, he thinks, and promptly falls asleep.

The constant beeping of the heart monitor is a mosquito in his ears, and Derrin drags himself awake. There is Liam, sitting up in the hospital bed, a styrofoam coffee cup clutched in his hands.

He grins at Derrin. "Surprise." Liam looks exhausted. There are bruises under his eyes, and his hair is a nest of knots. His fingers rap against the sleeve of the cup.

Derrin stares.

"It took you forever to wake up. I was bored out of my mind just sitting in this stupid room."

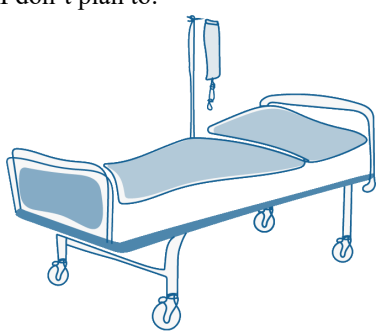
"You're awake." Derrin's voice is hoarse, and it scrapes at his throat.

"Yeah, I would have thought that was obvious."

Derrin is hugging him before he can finish, burying his face in Liam's hair. He smells just like everything else in the hospital, and it prickles at the back of Derrin's neck.

"I've missed you," he whispers into Liam's hair like a secret. "Never do that again."

Liam's arms wind tight around Derrin's waist. "I don't plan to."



Mom's English

Erika Myong

Tustin, CA

In the grocery store, we get to the front and it's always the same. I bite my lip, watching Mom dig through coins and dollars before she pulls out the right amount. I hold my tongue when the cashier takes the money. "Do you want your receipt?" she grunts.

Mom shakes her head as she smiles and takes the grocery bags. "Then-kyoo," she says, clearly and loudly.

The breath I'm holding comes out slow and quiet. She tries, but it still sounds bad. It will always sound bad.

❖

Mom picks me up from school because my stomach hurts too much. I must've eaten something bad.

"What's wrong, Yuri?" she asks me when she walks into the nurse's office.

I don't look at her and mumble that I'm fine.

"You need to sign your daughter out at the front," the nurse sighs from behind. Mom turns around and pauses, trying to comprehend her words.

I drag Mom out of the office because she doesn't understand and will never understand what that nurse said, and I'm too tired to translate. I make Mom sign me out, and we get to the car in an instant.

"Yuri," Mom says from the driver's seat. *"I understood what that nurse said."*

I nod my head and don't look at her because I'm trying to calm down. I risked another embarrassing moment.

"Okay," I reply, and the rest of the drive is silent.

❖

"I think they charged me extra," Mom says when we step out of the store.

I shake my head and grab her wrist with my tiny hands.

"No, it's fine. Let's go," I tell her, but she's already turning back and walking into the

clothing store.

I follow her back to the check-out counter, where the scary saleswomen are scanning items and muttering quietly. Mom opens her mouth and begins to speak in the broken English I hate so much.

She starts talking to the saleslady who looks confused as ever and, of course, looks down at me with a silent cry for help.

"Ma'am, I think you're mistaken," the saleslady says, and I agree and want to go, but Mom stays put.

"Check bag," she says quickly. "Receipt."

"Sorry?" the lady says. The other women are looking at us.

Mom looks down at me and I hold my tongue.

"Yuri, tell them."

I turn away and don't speak.

Mom storms out of the store, and we are silent when we finally arrive at the car. She knows I'm upset, at her, always at her.

"Yuri, I could understand the lady at the store."

I shake my head. "You don't understand them," I tell her with tears springing into my eyes. "You always sound stupid when you talk and I wish you could be better at English, so I wouldn't need to translate."

She flinches. Grips the steering wheel. I watch her knuckles turn white.

"Do you know how hard it is?"

Mom shoves the receipt into the bag. *"I'm doing my best for you."* She looks at me through the rearview mirror. Her eyes are narrowed and glossy.

I turn to the side and shove my knees up, letting the seatbelt stretch over my whole body. I cry silently.

❖

"Your mommy talks weird," Lucas tells me at the playground. It's lunchtime, and I want to be left alone, but he's here and wants to talk to me.

"She sounds like this," he begins. He pulls his lips up to reveal his big teeth and starts making noises that make my skin crawl.

I kick sand into his face, and he cries out in alarm.

From afar, my teacher sees everything.

He puts me in time-out after lunch ends and calls Mom.

"Your daughter was very disrespectful today," he says on the phone.

I think about how confused Mom must be. Lucas is laughing at me for being in trouble, but all I can focus on is my teacher continuously repeating and slowing his words. My eyes sting, as if I got sand in them, and I think about how stupid Mom is. How stupid she is.

"What happened?" Mom asks me when we get home. She sets the car keys down and tries to take me in her arms. I push her away.

Wind Shaper Aiden Jung Incheon, South Korea

"Why can't you just talk normally?" I finally scream at her. "Why can't you be normal? Why do you have to be so stupid?"

She hits me across the face, and we both gasp.

I stare at her with wide eyes, and she stares back with wide eyes. Her hand is trembling, and my bottom lip is trembling.

"Yuri," she bends down and embraces me tightly. *"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."*

My face burns but not from the hit. My face burns because I'm crying against her leg, and I'm the one telling her I'm sorry. My face is heating up with the anger I've forced myself to hold back.

But the anger is not at her. It's me I'm mad at.

"I'll get better at English," Mom says as her palm finds my face, where my cheek is a fiery red. She rubs it soothingly with her cold fingers. *"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."* She tries again. "I'm sorry."

❖

Fleeing seasons turn into months, and fleeing months turn into years.

A decade passes. I walk with Mom to the mall. I lock our arms together as we walk, and I carry the shopping bags for her.

We step into a fragrance store, and Mom observes the products displayed on sale. I look at them too and notice Mom picking up one perfume.

A saleslady comes up and greets us politely. "Do you ladies need any help today?"

Mom tells her, "Yes. I would like to see some more bottles of the same smell." I listen to Mom's English, which is like music to my ears.

The saleslady smiles. "Of course! I'll grab some for you right away!"

Mom turns to look at me. *"She understood me."*

I squeeze her hand. "Of course she did. Anyone can."

Voice Lessons

Lucy Clara Sopher

New York, NY

Hybrid accents collide with the scent of saffron as we sit around the kitchen table unpacking the week's events. We rely on our own eccentric vocabulary colored with Hindi, Arabic, and French, a sprinkle of Hungarian, and some Australian slang. I read between the lines, staying alert to the women and how their cultural histories appear in their words and intonations. My grandmother from the Iraqi side always exerts authority via silence, choosing her phrases with economy and surgical precision. Her rare anecdotes carry the weight of years of reflection and traces of

a society in which women deferred to men. She wields the submission expected of her to drive home her points. The Aussie-Hungarian women provide a dramatic contrast, with wit and bluntness that borders on oversharing and a debate style that leaves the men stammering.

My childhood trained me to be a listener, attuned to the nuanced voices all around me, to stories of people seeking ways to assert themselves, even when they were outnumbered or overpowered. My challenge was to develop and use my own true voice while honoring my complex heritage. In this endeavor, my paternal grandfather, an Indo-Iraqi physician, was my guide, sparking my love of storytelling. Every time we were on the same continent, we spread atlases on the floor or marveled at the chemical reactions we ignited using baking soda and chili sauce. I soaked up family history and hung on his every word as he shared his border-traversing biography. Migrating from Baghdad to Bombay where he manufactured fez hats to make ends meet, he got his pilot license and played on the 1952 Indian Olympic water polo team. In Bombay, he was known as "tall, fair Sahib." When he arrived in England to study medicine, though, he was viewed through a different lens as the "short, dark fellow."

Rather than allowing these changing perceptions to affect his sense of self, he developed a resiliency that kept him in touch with his own humanity. He brought ethical clarity to tasks as mundane as learning the backstroke or "reading" a mango for ripeness and slicing it correctly. I discovered that it is possible to apply a deeply thoughtful framework to something seemingly unworthy of intellectual analysis. His character instilled in me the importance of remaining true to my ideals. Performing tasks to his high standards also gave me the confidence to voice my opinions honestly without bending to the fashions or the views of others. It was, for example, a huge violation of duty to cut fruit incorrectly, as I learned through repeated admonishments that I "mustn't do that!" And while these moments may have seemed insignificant at the time, I eventually came to see them as little glimpses of insight into what made our family tick.

When a mango crate would arrive from oceans away, I was reminded that nothing about my extended family has remained static but has been driven by constant migration and movement. My maternal grandparents escaped Hungary during World War II, eventually settling in Australia and starting their lives from scratch. Our collective oral history, from mango tutorials to a brush with death on the banks of the Danube, links us to our homelands, binds us together, and creates our unique chemistry.

The awareness of what my family overcame has pushed me to gain mastery one task at a time. But it was the women who taught me to speak up. I learned the value of outspokenness from my maternal grandmother, whose voice reminds me to make sure I am heard. In her house and career, women never took a back seat. Instead, they were always solving problems with optimism and a good dose of Aussie forthrightness. To me, forceful female voices have Australian accents. Yet my childhood influences showed me that female strength transcends culture and can be as easily conveyed in Arabic, Hungarian, or Hindi, in the full range of volumes. Power also takes the form of my own voice, as I get up the nerve to perform a dramatic staged reading, earn my first paycheck, or contribute to a scientific debate.

When I walk into the NYU psychology lab where I intern, I feel this energy follow me into the room, and I apply it to the research I do. My team's study explores how teenage girls communicate, focusing on moments of hesitation and silence with an eye towards understanding how gender differences manifest in speech. Paradoxically, analyzing evidence about the relative insecurity of girls through their speech patterns has strengthened my own voice and contributions. Though I was young and inexperienced when I started this work, I've added range to my voice in the lab, even challenging fundamental aspects of our research agenda.

As I pore over transcripts of interviews with middle school girls, mapping their hesitation and verbal uncertainty by coding cues like "I don't know," "I guess," or "umm," I feel a deep sense of connection and desire to amplify these girls' voices. Each time I flag an example of a girl vocally doubting her own opinion or expressing hesitation, I think about how women are taught to use their voices. This often doesn't happen through dramatic moments but in everyday interactions, at kitchen tables or on walks to school. I learned to advocate for myself in precisely these moments while navigating sometimes contradictory cultures and maintaining a set of core shared values.

Pivoting and reinvention has become our family mantra, one that forms an integral part of my identity. This is reflected in the power of my voice, but also in the give and take that I bring to conversation and debate. Striking a balance of flexibility and conviction has allowed me to thrive in and love every country I call home. I like to think I embody the latest evolution in my family history. My own distinct voice is defined by the resilience that brought us to this point.

Fog of Snow

Elizabeth Neel

Pittsburgh, PA

I slog my small legs
through the heaping bank of snow,
frozen from ankle to thigh.
I feel as though I'm climbing K-2.
Crystals of snow flying into my boots,
melting against the warmth of my body.
I feel like an ice pack,
retaining the frozen water.
Icicles form on the ends
of my split blonde hair strands.
My eyes dispose of all moisture,
leaving them arid and inflamed,
like dead snake skin.
I examine the tree line,
frozen over branches and pine needles,
along the death defying road,
it's the neighborhood park.
Completely empty, not a lone soul.
The place where I longed to be,
on my rare whimsical snow days.
And today it was just for me.
Bleak in a cold, frozen winter,
like an old, abandoned Walmart.
I whizz down the snow-piled slide,
and as I clash with the syrupy snow below,
my dad is hanging around for me,

glad to stand in the cold with me,
for as long as I wish.
No matter how frigid it becomes.

Helpless to Help

Sara Holden

Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ

It's spreading,
infecting the fallen.
Or was it always there?
Their hearts stabbed,
misery invading their
consciousness.
And here I am,
above it all,
on my platform drifting
through their stapled figures,
their secrets surfacing to my
bare ignorance.

They grimace at my
empathetic tears,
or do they stare?
Their cries are chipping my
weakened platform,
their desperate,
reaching arms a beak
prodding me,
peck
by peck.

Where is the rope
to throw,
and finally share
this resilient surface,
travelling from
opportunity to
opportunity?
Do I make one,
seek one?
Or is this rope merely
a non-existent
taunt plaguing all
of us?

Despite my searches,
there are no answers,
there is no rope,
no plan b.
Am I supposed to give up,
glue beneath my
gleaming sneakers,
powerless in my confinement,

or fall down,
admitted to the
collected agony,
united into what
I deserve,
waiting for the next
isolated platform
to appear?

The Mural

Jessy He

Weston, MA

You can always hear a rustling sound, usually at night after the first bell, in front of the mural under the bell tower. It's hard to estimate the true age of the mural; the bumpy marks on its surface indicate that it has stood there for more than centuries. If you walk closer, you may see the trace of multiple flashlights and silhouettes of figures moving, jumping up and down, as if some kind of ceremony is taking place in the dark. You can sometimes sniff an intense scent, which you can tell comes from oil paint or some type of permanent spray. After hours, the mural quiets down and falls back to tranquility, and only when the first ray of sunrise hits on the ground, can you walk under the shade and look closely at the newly painted mural, knowing that the mysterious artists have departed. Shades of dark redness always dye the main portion of the stone, the color is so saturated that you almost mistake it as the blood that directly spills out from living veins. *A violent magnificence.*

The mural has changed every day since Monty entered the school. The mysterious artist is always changing, covering the previous one's work and adding a brand new layer of paint to express the new master's dominance. The only thing that never varies is the constant redness of the mural, sometimes a slightly brighter red over a dark one. You can detect the mural's original color only when you look really closely at, the imperceptible tiny gaps that the redness fails to invade. *It must be a tradition, the school's symbolic color or something.* He first learned about such a "tradition" from kids' chattering, which never ceases in between classes. Their spontaneous gathering on the first day gave Monty a slight chill.

Monty had never seen such a thing back in his old school, which was the most ordinary public elementary school that one can imagine with its morning prayers, ugly uniforms, and insufferably unsavory food. Yet these were not the worst. The old ladies, "the teachers," as they claimed themselves to be, were the truly unbearable ones. After being mocked by the ladies when he shared in class his wonder that the moon emits its own light instead of reflecting the sun's, he was determined to keep his mouth shut and save all his thoughts for himself. No more risks. No one dared to show signs of disagreement back there, not even his best friend at the time who always passionately talked about his dream to be a debater in the future. They knew that they would be turned down by the teachers' rigid teaching philosophy.

"The mural is all yours after the first bell, you can paint anything." Charles, Monty's desk mate excitedly fills him in after seeing Monty's confused and hollow glare at the gathered kids on the first day after the first period of class. "Someone once wrote a love letter—that was a brave one..." Monty isn't ready, at all, to overhear what the kids had to discuss after his very first class, yet their loud talk that "someone just painted the face of Super Mario on the mural" successfully captures his attention. *What are they talking about? How can someone paint on a school's property? Are they not afraid of being suspended?*

"What if multiple people want to paint?" Monty asks. He decides to hide his shock after hearing Charles's word. He doesn't want to be perceived as the conservative one who doesn't dare to do anything outside-of-the-box, especially as a new-comer in such an obviously much more accepting place.

"Well. I guess they fight." Charles winks at Monty and stands up from his chair, ready to hop into the bigger conversation.

"Wait… Have you done it?" Monty giggles at Charles before he took his next step toward the crowd with his thick and upward eyebrows. Monty has this naturally fierce look that oftentimes gives people the wrong first impression, that he's mad when he's in a

good mood. Yet Charles doesn't seem to be frightened, unlike the girls in his old school who even intentionally avoided having eye contact with him after their first chat. *Maybe he's different.*

"Hmm… When the time is right, I will… I guess." A flash of disturbance slips through Charles's face. He tries to hide it by grinning even harder than before, yet sometimes when you try to cover something up, you end up exposing yourself. Monty's curiosity towards the mural is like a filled cup of water, and Charles's suspicion is the last drop before it overflows.

"What do you..." Monty raises his brows even higher.

"Talk later!" Charles turns around at the exact moment when Monty brings up the new question and jogs to the crowd, leaving Monty's unraised question behind. *Maybe he is not so different, after all.*

❖

The streets remained dead silent when Monty sneaked out from the window with an iron bucket in his hands, after hearing the midnight bell. He worried all day that the babbling old lady across the street, who always pulls an all-nighter knitting on the porch, might catch him on the spot. Yet the lights in the neighborhood houses were mostly turned off; even the streetlights were not illuminated, as he finally recalled his mother's complaint at the dinner table about power cut tonight in the block due to equipment renovation.

The town without light or sleepless creatures seemed like a massive tomb. A slight scent of blood traveled in the air, magnified by the mid-summer steamy heat. *Hmm, weird enough. Wonder where that came from.* It took Monty a minute to adapt to the street's dimness coming out from his room with only a warm-lighted night lamp on. It was his first time strolling down the street at this hour after moving in. He used to grumble at the noise of cicadas when he attempted to sleep, yet they seemed to be his only company at the moment, convincing him that he was still walking in a lively town.

As safe as it seemed, Monty still chose to carefully walk under the disguise of trees. His black hoodie, which discorded with the stuffy summer, served as his shelter along with the shade. He learned to be prudent, to avoid every risk possible, from his old school. *That might be the only knowledge that the place has generously endowed.* Looking at his gradually distanced house, Monty for once admired his willingness to take the risk, just to uncover his buried curiosity.

The mural was closer to his house than Monty pictured, yet the route felt as if it never ends. Maybe it was because of his nervousness, or maybe simply because of the suffocating heat. Sweat slowly came out from every one of his pores, like water squeezing out from a sponge, dripping down along the black hood. The smell of blood, strangely enough, became easier to identify as he approached his destination. He wondered if the smell was his illusion, which diffused out from the bucket of red paint that he bought after school. Monty didn't expect to be invited by mysterious artists, not at all. But what if the expense could come in handy and add new hue to the mural?

Unreachable Destination Marina Qu Falls Church, VA

Fifty steps. Monty couldn't seem to control his increasing heartbeat. He wanted to speed up to try to see the mural as soon as possible, yet couldn't help but take every step lightly as if he were pacing on the clouds, attempting not to startle the mystic artist. *Forty steps.* He heard a rustling sound coming from the mural, which was surprisingly silvery that he almost mistook it as the collision of blades, or perhaps it originated from the artist's painting tools. *Thirty steps.* The dancing trace of flashlights and silhouettes projecting on the mural, just like the way Monty imagined, heaved into his sight. The smell of blood had already filled up his breathing. He worried about the red paint spilling, yet he couldn't sniff out the intense smell of oil paints. *Twenty steps.* He crouched down in the mossy bush which looked colorless in the dark night, trying to get a preview of what was happening before announcing his arrival. *Almost there.*

"BONG—"

The bell rang without a prelude. The first bell. The sound was so ponderous and loud that it banged directly on Monty's heart. He looked up and finally recalled that the mural itself was the ancient bell tower. The heavy ringing of the bell lingered in the air, bouncing back and forth on every surface it meets. At the moment he looked back down, the flashlights pointed right at the figure standing in front of the mural who also dressed in black and wore a mask. Yet his temptation to discover the figure's true identity completely fled away as he finally uncovered what the figure was holding in both of their hands and what he was about to do.

The second bell rings. You try to move but you find your body static, as you finally realize how long you've been staying in the same position. You see the mysterious artist wipes their hands clean, standing in front of the newly painted mural to appreciate the completed art. You can't see through their mask but you know they are smiling, proud. The flashlights are turned off, yet somehow you can still clearly see the redness on the mural, so saturated that it bangs on your heart with more force than the ring of the first bell.

You wait until the artist departs their masterpiece, standing up in a tremble. *Ten steps. Five steps. One step.* You finally find yourself facing the mural, yet your heart is filled with fear

instead of excitement. You quiver, turn on your flashlight, and slowly look back at the bush. You see the shade of redness, same as the one on the mural, spreading to the bush and dyeing the colorless fern dark-red. You see bodies stacked, hidden within, yet you can't help but consider them the most dreadful yet beautiful sculpture you've ever seen. You turn back, slowly yet determinedly lay your fingertips on the wet mural. The blood permeates your skin, as if it is your own, as if it is your creation. *A violent sacrifice.*

A violent magnificence.

Morbidly, Goyly

Joy Akeju

Burlington, NJ

I'm rehearsing his dialect, mouthing his words like some intimate oath
it's shamefully strange for me, committing [ghost] stories to memory…

But who else sweats agape in his subtle candlelight?
Who else holds out tingling palms when he drips wax onto the table?
How does all that count for nothing? How do *I*, for all my peril?

he lights up about the [ghost] at how it shook him to religion
but let it be known, as only we do:
our [ghost] is not a cinematic poltergeist

is not a semihuman silhouette who lurks the astral plane
is not a poet sliding verse across on an ancient Ouijaboard
is not anything the thriller-thirsty reckon it should be
I scrape my elbows 'cross the table and emphatically agree
him first, and subsequently me:
in *that*, we don't believe.

"Imagine the terror..." yet, he says this with a reminiscing laugh.
I shiver at the crunch of eggshells static of his throat—
content to hover in the corner of his seven years ago

the boy was taken by the ankles from the molten yolk of dreams
vexed, he blinked into the chill, reached out to smooth his mother's hair
but *then!* a cyclone wrenched his fingers back and swept him off the sheets
[it] left him writhing from the impact, tailbone ripped from spinal cord
he felt paralysis invade him as he dragged his frame upright
[it] fastened firmly like a seatbelt made of rusted iron chain

he turned his small head toward heaven and prepared to suffocate—

I want to chase his bass narration to the center of the earth
I want to bow in knightly zeal and graze his knuckles with my lips
I want to grasp the wind's esophagus and strangle it to death-!

he improvised some final words—somehow they pleased the Savior's ear—
his tender rib cage sagged with joy as metal particles dispersed—
Dawn cast silk ribbons on the wall—beige canvas, opalescent strokes—
a viscous liquid trickled down his temples- vision framed with gold—

since then, he's learned to wield the language of the supernatural scythe
the [ghosts] return; each time he spits the scriptures burned into his mind
in prayer's heat, two spinning blades of righteous ore materialize
at once beheading all assailants as the curtain draws itself.

Morbidly, coyly, I'm thinking:
I think I know why [ghosts] keep drifting towards you.
You're just so transparent, I want to phase through you.
But, unlike a [ghost], I would serve to preserve you and flow through your veins like anointing within you…

I raise my firsts in playful gallantry and force a careless smirk
"If I see any [ghost] come near you, I'll just bop it on the nose!"
and I would slay a graveyard full to hear him breathe my name in awe
but he just shakes his head, lamenting: "Only God's protection lasts."

I let my hands fall to my sides because he's absolutely right.

Plaster

Violet Crabtree

West Linn, OR

Stomach full of plaster, stiff and heavy, puffy and rotten. It's funny, considering you haven't eaten much since this morning.

"Well, Edith, are you going or not?" Mom is a frustrating woman. She suffers the same as you do. You know it for fact. For a long time, your frustration towards her rolled off, under the impression she didn't understand, that she knew no better. But then you found the horded pill bottles and the prescriptions and the records.

She understands all too well. Yet she constantly works against you, hypocritical in her judgement of your character.

You fantasize about screaming at her. Telling her off. Punching the wall and ruining the green paint she spent a week fussing over when repainting the kitchen.

"I don't think it's a good idea." You fiddle with the hem of your dress. When you bought it just a few days ago, you absolutely adored the way it fit on you. Flashy and sequenced, framing your hips just right. But now it's small, too small, one more breath and you'll tear it, revealing cracked skin, and plaster will ooze out the seams.

It's 8:18, and you'll need to leave by 8:30 if you want to make it to prom to meet up with Mike and his friends like you agreed. The seconds tick by in a steady stream. It should add some sense of urgency to the decision. You should be weighing pros and cons, should be reasoning, thinking of Mike's feelings and your mother's wasted time. But, instead, you're caught up in the slow dwindle of time, cool stability contrasting darkly with the nervous flush that's befallen your body.

Trying to grasp that stability is like holding your palms under a hose. It runs through fingers and overflows past thumbs, and, after a long enough time, your hands grow cold and numb to its passing. Until your entire body freezes over.

Mom watches you critically from behind her glasses, recognizes the way seasons pass on your skin. *I hate her*, your

head offers darkly. It's a sour thought. You banish it back to whence it came.

"I mean, I don't even like the friends I'm going with, you know?" You frame it as a question in the hopes that it'll cover the lie.

The thing is you really did like the friend group you were going with. You didn't know them well, but you hoped to. They were friends of a friend, your best and only friend, Mike. Mike was friends with so many people. He charms everyone he talks to, funny and teasing and knowing just what to say. They adore him for it. *You* adore him for it. You are happy for him, really. Even if it means you sometimes spend lunch beneath the stairs. Alone.

It's disorientating, standing next to someone and feeling the happiest you've ever felt, and the most alienated you've ever been.

Makes you want to curl up under the comforter and cry to the beat of some folk-punk songs.

That sounds like a good plan, actually.

"I know sweetheart, but it's your junior prom! You have to go. Didn't you have fun last year?"

You didn't have fun last year. You sat on the sidelines, watching Mike and his friends laugh and dance, trying to swallow the bitter taste in your mouth.

Bitter, lonely, scared, you have no right to any of it. Like you stole all of them from someone who actually needed them, someone stuck in a bad enough situation that warranted the reaction. Not a girl on prom night, upset her best friend doesn't like her. How terribly clichéd.

This is entirely your fault. All of it. It's your inability to talk to people beyond awkward pleasantries that has led you here. It's the distance you have put between you and your peers that has left you nothing more than a blur on the horizon, a hello in the hallway, a seat away from the group.

You've done this to yourself.

Body begins to crumble, cracks widening, your soul vacating to inhabit the walls you've built. You feel yourself in the plaster.

Tremors rock your legs, unearthing your feet. You stumble into the couch.

"Edith?" Mom calls. Her voice reverberates against your walls, echoing in your skull. Your skull is too small. "Edith! Are you alright? Is that dress too tight?"

The cracks in your body begin to fill, water flooding your throat. You choke on a sob as the water overflows, and suddenly you're crying.

But you won't be for long.

It's 8:24.

"Edith?" Mom tries to sound sympathetic, but her voice rings with irritation. "Oh, dear, what's wrong? Did you and Mike get in a fight?"

No, you and Mike did not fight. You don't even remember the last time you and Mike had a proper conversation. Aren't best friends supposed to talk to one another? Nobody wants to talk to a wall.

A fight would have been better than this. At least, in a fight, you would have had a chance.

Not for the first time, you wish Mike was your boyfriend. Boyfriends are broken up with. There's a definite end, an obligation for one party to put a restriction on another when something isn't working.

Best friends are torn apart slowly. It's not a break. More like a slow and agonizing tearing, a poison between two people that wears them down, deteriorates them, until they are too sick to try any longer.

The rough fabric of your dress irritates your face as you try to wipe your tears. You're deteriorating. There is nothing you can do.

"Can I please…" You take in a big, ugly breath. The water in your throat gurgles… "Just stay home…?"

"But we just bought that dress…" Mom grumbles. You will receive no comfort from her. You won't need it anyways.

The desire to get away from your mother at that moment is greater than the plaster weighing you down, so you muster the last of your energy to run away, tail between your legs. In the confinement of your room, without the interference of time, your senses expand. You feel the distance between you and Mom. You feel the distance between you and Mike. You feel the walls between those distances, the wood and plaster and paint.

You try to take in a shaky breath, but the air doesn't enter your lungs. Your lungs are gone. But it's fine. It doesn't matter. You don't need them.

Walls don't breathe.

Face Time

Arden Yum

New York, NY

Heavy breathing. Poorly drawn red hearts. Clingy text messages that flooded the front page of my cell phone. He liked to FaceTime me while he was half-awake, spewing out muffled sounds in place of words. The way that I used to admire his soft, drowsy smile through my fingerprint-stained computer screen had vanished. All I could think about during our calls was how long I had to wait until I could hang up and text him, "I'm sorry, I thought you fell asleep. Let's talk tomorrow morning."

❖

We started dating in early September, but I didn't see him until I came into the city for Thanksgiving break. We'd planned to meet for dinner. I wasn't used to the blistering cold, and my jacket felt heavy on my shoulders. I walked down Madison Avenue with my lungs numbed from the frost. The hazy lights of lonely storefronts illuminated my path. Dead leaves swirled in tiny whirlpools of yellow, orange, and brown. I rubbed by palms together in a desperate attempt to warm my frozen body. Each foot reluctantly stepped in front of the other, as if I were being pulled with an invisible string by a master puppeteer. I looked up, and watched his blurry figure come into view, his pace quickening when he recognized me. He stood taller in person. Before I could see his face clearly, his unfamiliar arms wrapped themselves around my body. The drowsy skies provided a stark contrast to his misshapen blue puffer jacket. The icy air had crystalized on its outer layer in a thin shell. I had told him to get rid of the ugly coat a few months ago, but he said that his mother wouldn't let him.

We walked toward the subway stop with our faces turned inward to protect ourselves from

the bitter winds. I studied the nuances of his features that his laptop camera had failed to pick up. There were tiny caramel freckles on the bridge of his slightly crooked nose. His lips were chapped from the cold, and tiny flecks of dry skin were peeling off at the edges. His eyes had a shallow quality to them, like pools of clear water where the sand and pebbles look like they are encased by glass. He reached his hand into my pocket and interlocked his frigid fingers with mine. "I can't believe this is *real*," he whispered into my ear. I nodded slowly in agreement, and carefully replied, "I know, I can't believe it either."

He would come to hate that about me, how I would return his words to him only slightly repackaged, or with an extra word tacked on. But that Thursday, he was so enamored by the physicality of it all (he no longer had to hear me speak through a screen), that he let my echo-like repetition pass. I was the opposite. I was so frightened by the loss of the earth as my protective barrier. Halfway across the world, I felt close enough to him to satiate my loneliness, but I was far away from true vulnerability. I could no longer disconnect through a mouse click on my trackpad. It was real now.

The ride downtown was quick. The only time he let go of my hand was when he needed to swipe his MetroCard at the turnstyle, and I discreetly wiped sweat off on my jeans. Our interwoven fingers rested on my thigh, swaying up and down with the unpredictable rhythm of the train.

He put his name down at the Korean restaurant I wanted to go to, and we waited a few blocks away at a sandwich shop about to close. As blank-faced employees swept the floors, he pressed his face against mine. I could feel his tangible desperation tingling between our cheeks, and, every time I suspected he was about to kiss me, I pretended to receive a text message, or I brought up a topic of conversation that I prayed would distract him. Eventually, a woman with a white apron and heavy undereye circles told us that she had to lock up. I thanked God.

Our table was ready, and I ordered the food. He didn't know how to use chopsticks, and dropped one on the ground, which bothered me. At the end of the meal, he pulled out a wad of twenty dollar bills from his wallet and paid the check in cash. "I haven't been spending money for months," he bragged, "I wanted to make sure I had enough for this weekend."

"Thanks."

"Maybe we can hang out at your house for a bit. I don't have to be home."

It wasn't a suggestion. We took the train back uptown.

I told him that I had to clean my room before we could do anything else. For thirty minutes, he sat on my gold and white polka-dotted bed sheets while I emptied my closet and filled trash bags with clothes that didn't fit me anymore. I felt his stare on my back while I picked up sweaters I had left in a pile on the floor. Whenever he got bored of scrolling through his phone, he would walk over to me and wrap his hands around my waist. My body shrunk away from him out of instinct. No boy had ever been in my room before.

He eventually pulled me onto the bed. We examined the items on my bookshelf, flipping through old yearbooks and laughing at my baby pictures. I kept scanning around for more trivial objects that could spark conversation. I was terrified of confronting the silence that would arise if we paused our casual banter. I was acutely aware of the thoughts running through our minds simultaneously: we were alone in my room, my parents were sleeping in another time zone, and he had been building up the anticipation of my visit for weeks. My bed was a quasi-heaven for the teenage boy, but I felt sick to my stomach.

We talked about my day, my friends, my plans for tomorrow. When he sensed that I had become more comfortable, he looked into my eyes like he could see straight through them, and randomly confessed, "I really like you." My heart hurt a bit, like it had been punched, but I stifled my feelings of dread with a tightlipped smile.

"I really like you too."

And then he kissed me, confidently and violently, just as the prepubescent girls at my old summer camp used to practice French kissing on their own arms. I had spent years wondering about this warm, wet, unfamiliar feeling. I had built it up in my head to be some sort of defining moment: once I touched a boy's lips, I would acquire a higher level of maturity unknown to my younger, more naive self. I would be a woman, prepared for college parties and casual dating in my early twenties. I would no longer force myself to silently watch games of never-have-I-ever from the edges in fear of being compelled to admit that I had never kissed a boy.

But the immediate moment did not bring joy or comfort or happiness. It did not fill the cold void in my chest that had only grown larger since the moment I first stepped into the frost. In one second, the sixteen year buildup around the elusive "first kiss" shattered onto my bedroom floor. I watched a younger version of me float away from my body, picking up the pieces of golden polaroid frames and picture books and candle wax and scribbled-on notepads. She attempted to put them back together with impossible despair. In a hopeless whisper, I apologized to my little self for bringing a stranger into her bed. She looked at me and stared with impenetrable eyes.

❖

I had flown to New York to be kissed. Neither of us acknowledged it, but we both knew it was true. I distinctly remember a conversation we had in the early fall about my visit. I told him that I didn't know if I could miss two days of school just to go to the city for less than forty-eight hours. He told me, "I'm sorry, but if you don't come, this isn't going to work out."

I begged my parents for weeks. I blamed anxiety, depression, medical problems.

"New York will fix everything," I told them.

I explained that I could reunite with my old school friends, sleep in a familiar bed, and see my dentist and orthopedist for overdue checkups. I cried on my living room floor. In exhausted resignation, they told me that I could spend a weekend of November at our apartment. We booked the tickets so that I would arrive on the afternoon of Thanksgiving.

When I told him that my flight

was set, he didn't believe me. "I won't know if you're coming until you're actually here," he explained. I thought he was being reasonably suspicious: It was nearly impossible to imagine a world in which we lived together. I had forgotten how the lines on his hands overlapped with each other. I could no longer remember which side of his nose had a tiny bump. We existed outside of the physical. I was okay with that.

On school nights, I would lay down with my laptop opened up beside me on my bed. With my lights turned off, my blinds drawn, and my door closed, the screen reflected a blue-green wash of color onto my face. Connected by our devices, on the other side of the world, he sat in an empty classroom, or the student lounge, or the cafeteria listening to me speak through the AirPods that he had stolen from his ex-girlfriend (before he lightheartedly confessed his thievery, I was under the impression that they were a gift from a friend).

We talked about his today and my tomorrow, and when there were no more words to fill the silence, he would choose the next topic of discussion.

He loved to go on about his past intimate endeavors with girls. He would often provide private, vulgar details about his experiences. I pretended not to be shocked when I heard about what happened in the backseats of taxicabs or Upper West Side diners in the earliest hours of the morning. I never once thought to myself that his tendency to overshare was odd. *This is what relationships must be like. No secrets.*

I didn't know if he could tell that I had yet to be kissed. He was two years older than me, but I tried to match him in maturity. When we talked about parties or other people's relationships, I pretended to have a nonchalant attitude about the physical acts of closeness that mystified me. I exaggerated the epic realizations of my middle school crushes. I fabricated the guilt, regret, and heavy tears caused by the one day relationship I had with a blond, scrawny boy in my grade. I was constantly begging for his approval, even though I never explicitly asked for it. Each time, I said words that had never before left my tongue and recounted emotions that were foreign to me.

One night, he asked me through text, "Have you ever hooked up with anyone?" He followed his question with a comment meant to reassure me, "Don't worry, your answer doesn't change the way that I feel about you. I'm just wondering."

I felt as though he had seen right through my ill-executed facade of sophistication and sexual elusiveness. I thought about lying but decided against it. If, come November, I was a bad kisser, at least I could blame it on lack of experience. I texted back that I hadn't.

"Okay. I won't pressure you into doing anything you don't want to do. We don't have to hook up while you're here," he immediately responded.

This was the first time he ever said that to me. I would hear it again, although I didn't know it then, but each time I believed the words less and less. He constantly reminded me that I didn't have to worry about him pressuring me "into doing anything I don't want to do" in the same FaceTime conversations that he ridiculed his best friend because of the three year gap between his most recent kiss and the present, and deemed it absurd that another couple at school had only made it to first base. He was pressuring me, in the most terrifying way possible, by blatantly planting seeds of insecurity in my body that twisted around my organs. I didn't want him to describe me or us in the way that he spoke about his friends. He poisoned me before we had even seen each other in person: I truly believed that I owed him intimacy.

Our streams of careless thoughts manifested themselves in never-ending FaceTime calls. He violently embedded himself into the deepest crevices of my psyche. Even when I wasn't looking at his face, I saw his name, in burning letters dancing across my mind.

Natural Outlet Haley Parrett Palo Alto, CA

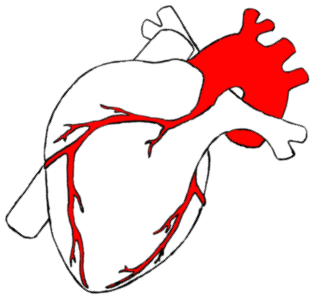
sharkskin heart

Olivia Lee

Arcadia, CA

glide deep beneath the gilded blue—in
somber, slipping sweet inside
for loveliness, in secret sand
and beats, in pulsing glow and hiss—
hammerhead, slide passively
drip, your darkly hanging maw
hunger, darling, toothlit bane
quiver love in flashing jaws
from seaward, vast eternity
throbs, electric flutter-time
a hundred fish, drawn gasping in
betrays electric lateral lines
now move, in false serenity
then pant: in ever-rasping gills
but even when the deed is done
the hungry searching never stills

and in this gaping chest of mine
in cartilage: no bony parts
nothing, dearest, satisfies
your roving bloodless sharkskin heart.



Where the Gathedral Sleeps

Meg Kennedy

Havre de Grace, MD

slip down suburbia
toward the city where
dogs lay beneath dumpsters
and rain slicks cars better
than oil ever could.
until you hear her voice
let the doors call your name,
ascend the stairs and
grab hold of the gates
where the cathedral sleeps.
drift down aisles until you reach
the dripping gold gates where
heaven hangs across the back walls.
tears painted on the faces of women,
blood drizzled like honey
at the mouths of men.
cry out to them.
can you feel the earth splitting?
fall to your knees at the altar
pull chunks from your chest,
drop the heavy at their feet,
let the light engulf your eyes.
ceilings stretch yellows and blues
and whisper prophecy in your ears.
kiss them at the jaw and shuffle out the back.
turn the corner, remember to toss a coin
at the little boys who dream to fly
but watch birds drop like stones.

No One on the Sea

Akanksha Basil

Chappaqua, NY

It was long past noon now, and the old woman sighed and changed the position of the magnifier. The fresnel lens glowed in the late afternoon sun, refracting the life the sea had brought her. Her old body bowed like an archer's string from the weight of the leaded glass, which swept around its mercury-bath axis in preparation of the inclement nighttime. The lemon-colored sunlight gazed into her eyes from beyond the calligraphy stroke of the horizon. Wisps of her hair, the color of shadows on frost which had long ceased to form on the leaves of coastal trees, trailed in the stifling air. Her face was drawn and the tone of milk chocolate was painted there, a picture of the past richness of the old world's colors. The charcoal lines of worry and loss were etched into the fresco of her countenance. Her hands were scarred and leathery, the flexion creases older than her birth, pushed into each other from years of smoothing around the antique door handles, shifting the lens, scrawling in the notebook.

Her small feet, ensconced in thick boots, thudded on the weathered oak of the stairs, which wound down from the top deck into layers of floors and finally into a study, filled with her father's antique maps of Iceland. The island had long been covered by sea and silt and lost voices. She sat at the mahogany desk and scrawled in the keeper's log: "Hotter today. Air is stifling. No one on the sea," then sat back on the old chair and watched the dying incandescence of the kerosene lamp, lit with an asbestos wick, flower in the darkness of the circular room. The electricity had died months ago, along with the communication systems and the line of supplies. It was there that there was something profound and untouchable, as light as moth wings and as dark as a dead man's eyes. Sitting alone with the rain sliding off the outside of this small world, the acid of it burning down the grass and the leaves of the trees, eating away at the side of the nearby cliff. She had fortified the outside of the lighthouse residence with nickel long ago, giving the ancient lighthouse the appearance of a cold factory. It was a light rain, no storm, and evening was falling. She had never been truly alone before. There was always noise, always sound. There was always acceptance, normalization. She pushed the chair back and stood, clasping her hands about the rusted lamp's handle. Pulling the protection around her, she held the lamp and pulled open the door. Locking it behind her, she plodded among the acid-puddles to her home, the gable house just a mere couple of meters from the door of the lighthouse.

In her life she had seldom left the lighthouse. Her father, and his mother before him, had kept the lighthouse all the long years of their lives, turning the lens, gazing at the horizon. She swore she could hear their ghosts on the rafters, see their eyes in the millions of points of light held within the beacon. She could no longer remember their faces, but she remembered their hands, their eyes. In their passing, much had happened. The earth was an empty husk of what it once had been; its very boughs, like the haunches of an old tree, creaked and wailed as if being destroyed from the inside, like an artist's bracket fungus tearing its blood away. The earth's temperatures soared so that there was no longer a winter; in the place where snowflakes and silence had been, there were now hurricanes, forest fires, tornadoes. Nothing could grow on its soil; famines wracked the land, and the cities were ruined, home to rebels and marauders. The wilderness, where she was living, was suffering. The sea had reverted to its prehistoric, primeval soul; it was dangerous and infuriated, like a dying, trapped animal.

She swept open the gable house door, stumbling into the spacious foyer, and pulled the boots off her thin ankles. Leaving them near the door, she discarded the acid rain cover and set the lamp down on a side table. The lamp was the only source of light in the house, and the shadow of her thin frame waned and waxed upon the painted walls. The woman creaked across the floorboards to the small library-room adjacent to the foyer and set herself down on a wicker chair. She lit the fireplace and watched the sparks, like crumbling sapphires, escape out of the chimney. Illuminated by the flame, hundreds of antique books lined the walls, in muted tones of earth. She picked one up, and upon its opening, breathed in the delicate scent of old ink and vanillin. She read by firelight for a time, alone for miles. From the books, she had learned to purify water, removing the poison and parasites from the brook that ran a half mile off and bled into the sea as a waterfall. The water, once clear, was penetrated with arsenic and other pollutants from the city miles and miles away. This had been her only source of water for years, and it had killed her father as the poison slept in his system. From the books, she had learned to understand a world she had never known.

She stood and padded to the shelves again, running her hands over the treasures she had collected over the years,

placed among the books: a piece of turquoise sea glass, a pair of opera glasses, a bird's skull, a willow branch, a raven's feather, a blackbird-colored pebble, and sprigs of dried lavender. Her jaw clenched as she remembered how the beach below the cliff had looked after the world had come apart. The plastic of the people from the mainland, the city waste: toothbrushes, plastic bottles, cigarettes, plastic bags, and cans from thousands of miles away. People's waste thrown into the home from which they came, the vastness of the sea filled with greed and carelessness. She found numerous dead turtles and seals, hermit crabs using toothpaste caps as shells, and even a dead baby whale once. The bodies of people from the city often washed up on the beach—those who had drowned themselves, others who had died from mosquito-transmitted disease and poisonous substances punctuating the pores of their body, and yet still others who had been killed by the marauders.

She coughed, feeling pain welling like acid in her chest. Climbing the stairs, she felt the strain in her legs. *I'll soon be gone*.

She felt her way into the east gable room, the wick of the lamp having expired. Her body smarted as she eased into bed. Soon, the hot glare of the sun would pour through her window, and another suffocating day would collapse upon her body, her lighthouse, the scarred land. She shut her eyelids and fell into a dark, relentless sleep.

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Morning broke and she rose in the room, busying herself for the day, already feeling the heat penetrating through the walls of the house. There were important tasks to do today: checking the crops, surveying the beach, foraging in the forest a mile away.

In the back of her mind she must have felt this was futile, but human beings normalize pain and strife to keep living, even when everything is blowing to ash. But no one would ever know. There was no one to pass the wisdom and stories to. The only paper in the house, apart from the keeper's log, had been swept away in the hurricane that had torn through due to imbalances in the atmosphere. But she would not sacrifice the keeper's log.

The woman made herself a breakfast of bland potatoes, which she had grown in the field, and hardtack from the supply ship that had run aground weeks ago after the storm. The mangled vessel was filled with the dead, their faces hard as starched cloth. She left the gable house and made her way to the cliff. Upon looking down, she remembered the distant afternoon when her grandfather took her to watch the sea, raging against the light all those feet below the limestone where her small feet had been planted at the top of the cliff, her eyes wide and young.

"See the bird?" her grandfather had said of a wandering osprey. "She's nesting in the forest." The girl watched as the umber-colored bird swooped and dove, many feet below the cliff.

Now there were no birds, not even the feathers of the old and dead ones. Their slim bodies had been penetrated by plastic and mercury, their feathers swept about with tar. Now, the rising sea pushed and shoved the base of the formerly cream-colored limestone cliff, slowly but surely eroding it as the acidified oceans dissolved the stone. The lighthouse was quite far back from the edge, but she knew that eventually it would cave into the ocean, the lens shattered among the rock and sand, sea glass for the new world. She watched as the sea that had once graced the beach when she was young pushed into the air, many feet above where it had been laid to rest by gleaming gods years before. The storm before had pushed this sea so that it railed against the lighthouse's metal exterior, and she knew that next time the sea could pull the structure away.

A mile off was a stairway, carved by her great-grandfather, to a limestone beach that had once left cockles on the shore and hosted rock crabs. Now, it was saturated with multicolored plastics which bit through the ash-colored sand. Tramping along the decaying beach, she came upon the bloated body of a man, a faceless effigy of salt and carbon dioxide. Where the eyes used to be there were now rotted sockets. He had likely died of asphyxiation from the fires in the city and washed out to sea. It was a common appearance on the beach, and the woman, unfazed but bleary-eyed, pulled back and passed alongside the sunken figure quickly and quietly. No train passed for the dead here.

She cast a thin fishing line far out from the beach, old muscles tensing with anticipation. She had little doubt that there would be nothing, as usual, and there was nothing. The dull pain of hunger cut into her viscera. The hook, unladen in the coiled water, glimmered in the sunlight. Sighing, she pitched the handle of her fishing rod into the sand and sunk down into the deadened ground. A distant roll of thunder punctuated the silence, competing with the lap of waves. Bunched and gathering masses of darkling clouds held the sunlight in their palms in the distance, complementing its voice with a strange air of finality. The contrast was the most beautiful part of the world that she had seen since her childhood. *This world, though a sleeping corpse*, she thought to herself, *is still stunning.* Almost as much as the sea used to be, as compelling as the shades of sunset or the strange starless night. The sky was the color and the form of her childhood, like tarnished and pale silver coins and the delicate wishes of dead children. She stopped, meditated on the sky for a transient moment, came to a realization of the self, and left the beach.

By the time she had surveyed the crops, they were ruined, curling and withering from the heat. In the forest a mile off, she had collected morels, crusted with dry soil, and the last of the wild strawberries. Among the trees was a smoky smell, and she knew that a fire had started on the far side of the woods. The heat was choking the trees, choking her. A rush of fear was built upon when she remembered the rolls of thunder. Two different forces. Stories fall apart, crumble to lost fragments of gold. She wondered which would get to her first. The fire or the flood. In that moment she resigned herself, and feeling faint, retired to the gable-house.

As she sat alone at the kitchen table with the lamp, she listened to the wind rage outside and the rain hail against the window. She smelt the faint grey smoky smell of the fire a ways off, too large to be quenched. Gathering herself up, she stepped

outside with the red kerosene lamp and clutched herself against the wind. The trickles of her hair blew fiercely in the rage, and she was back in the small lighthouse study. Climbing the stairs, she reached the top of the lighthouse where, in the beacon-room, the lens was concentrating the rain's reflection into thousands of points of carved, scintillating diamond. She turned to look out on the streaming sea, alight with the anger of one thousand troubled gods. There was an eerie calm, an eerie warmth. The heat from the day had made the mercury bath begin to vaporize, and she knew it was over. The woman turned the lens and her body bent again. There was nowhere to go now. Her home would be destroyed, along with her food, water, and remaining supplies. Perhaps it was better for all of this to end. *Leave the world to dust and clocks.* She left the beacon room and her footsteps held a sanguine pounding as the boots thudded down the stairs.

In the older world, when there were just flames to guide the dusky footsteps of those residing in darkness and depth and silence, hauntings of stars splattered like the blood of those crucified upon the thick honeycomb of nighttime. Anyone coming out alone into that night would, for the first time, have found themselves face to face with something so much larger than themselves that it would have stopped each of their rough hearts for a crystalline second. Just that second would have been enough to begin a revolution of beauty and love, an orbit around singular infernos so far away that they had already died before anything had been born yet. Now there were flames again, night again, storms again. There was nothing and everything, and she was so full of the feeling of it all that she hardly stopped for a second to feel afraid.

As the lighthouse walls creaked and cracked open with their final breaths, she sighed, opened the log, scrawled "No one on the sea." on the beige pages, and knew it would be her last entry.

Dead Tree

Akanksha Basil

Chappaqua, NY

Today, your branches
Clasp the light like the unburied fingers of the dead.
I sit by your feet and watch the cream-white
crumbles of your dead flesh
exfoliate precariously from your blanched bones.
Why does your silver corpse drift in the light?
your dark body drinks, like fine wine,
all the pouring sun and sinking darkness.

Sometimes I think I lack depth and
that I'm too full of silence but I know that life is
not a story. Most stories look at beauty and
romanticize the pain
but the truth is that they

Twenty-five Cents Stella Oh New York, NY

will miss all the quieter moments.
You are not a story. You are a history.
Dead tree, your body bears the map of
the earth when you were born. I wonder
if a soldier huddled beneath you once,
if a child tripped over your roots
when they were not red and mutilated.
Why is it that you make me miss
the days I have never lived for? I place my hand on
your clammy skin and wonder
if we're not the same, you and I.

I watch the birds, like puppets of a
marionette, flit in the shrieking sky.
They will raise their young
in your arms until they, too,
can sense the unfurling
effervescence of death
beneath your rotting skin. They will
become afraid that your
bare branches, laden with their children,
will abandon them. Invalid, they call you.
upon your body, pinned to the lacerated skin,
Mushrooms spread like fans, milky charms.

Their bodies are Mandelbrot geodes,
and you have been forgotten. It is like you
have been embraced by silver night,
too full of itself to be penetrated by sunlight.
The light curls around you, but just like for me,
it is too frivolous to reach you.

An Unexpected Turn

Caroline De la Rosa

Houston, TX

My brother and I squealed with glee as we dashed out of our grandfather's house and through the wild grasses that towered mystically over our heads. The curious tang of salt danced in our lungs with every breath, heightening our excitement for the adventure that lay ahead. We burst through the brush to the wide, empty beach, with still a thousand feet of sand before the dark ocean of Bandon, Oregon. As always, a shallow river trailed through the sand parallel to the shoreline, so we bounded across the unstable yet sufficient bridge that we had built earlier in the week. Already in our swimsuits, my five-year-old brother and my seven-year-old self raced toward the water, bearing the wind that pounded against our faces and the flying sand that stung our eyes. We finally reached the shore, feeling the icy waves nip our ankles, shins, knees, and thighs until our grandpa yelled at us for going too deep. We splashed around in the water and dug for crabs for a while, then turned our attention to the pack of at least two hundred squawking seagulls back near the river.

"Mommy, Daddy, Gpa, we're gonna go try to catch a seagull!" I exclaimed, proud to share our new game.

"Okay, Butter Bean, tell you

what, I'll give you each twenty dollars if you catch one!" my dad replied, amused at our seemingly impossible goal.

My brother and I turned to each other wide-eyed and gasped as gapped grins took over our faces. Twenty dollars feels like winning the lottery to five and seven-year-olds! I don't think we actually thought we would succeed (how could two little kids possibly catch an animal with *wings?*), but the childlike hope inside of us prevailed. With a newfound determination, my brother and I came up with a plan to catch one of the bickering birds. Then we set off for the river.

After making a wide voyage to the river (we made sure to leave lots of distance between us and the seagulls so that we wouldn't scare them away so soon), we cautiously lowered ourselves until we were lying stomach-down in the frigid water nowhere near the birds. Then, we began to army-crawl through the river. Our parents and grandpa, entertained by our selected strategy and laughing at our unrealistic goal, watched from a distance. Their doubting us only furthered our determination. The water numbed our skin as we slowly crawled and crawled, but we didn't stop. We made sure to lower ourselves even further into the river as we neared the flock. The amount of patience we had at such a young age impresses me now.

"*Sshhh!"* I hissed at my brother, as if he would dare make a sound. We had finally shimmied ourselves within about twenty feet of the birds when my brother whispered, "One, two, *three!*" and we sprang out of the water, sand flying everywhere as we sprinted towards them with everything we had. As you can imagine, the hundreds of seagulls squawked in terror and flew away in unison—except for one.

The poor bird tried to fly but could only get a few feet off the ground before it plummeted back down to the sand. It must have been wounded somehow. My brother and I surrounded it.

"What do we do?!" I screamed over the wind.

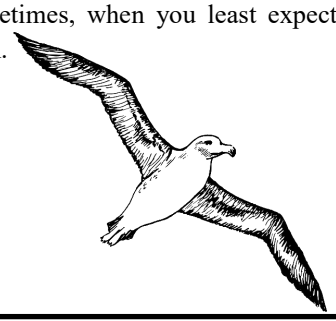
"I don't know!" my brother answered. We hadn't really thought through actually snagging a seagull. "I'm just gonna grab him!" my brother yelled. I watched in awe as my brother ran up to the seagull and grabbed it around its wings. Our smiles beamed as he held it up high like a first-place trophy. My parents and grandpa ran up, unable to believe their eyes.

"We got one! We got one!" my brother and I chanted. I felt like we were in a movie, accomplishing such a crazy goal, especially when even our own *parents* didn't believe in us. I wanted that feeling of glory to last forever.

After we'd calmed down and collected ourselves, we all assessed the bird's injuries. Dried blood stained its right wing, and it had a bloody scrape over its left eye that reminded me of Scar from the Lion King. My grandpa retrieved a towel from inside the house that we wrapped around its fragile body, and soon enough, we were all in the car on the way to the veterinarian.

When we arrived at the vet, she told us that the bird was actually not a seagull, but a tern, a bird in the seagull family. Luckily, my dad assured my brother and I that that wouldn't affect our twenty dollar prize, which felt like further congratulations of our vast success. The vet thanked us for taking the tern in, said she'd fix him up and release him, and she sent us on our way.

Nine years later, I still hardly believe that my brother and I actually caught a seagull. Did two little kids seriously achieve such a crazy goal? The twenty dollar prize that felt like such a big deal at the time is nothing compared to the lesson I learned: even when things seem unrealistic, sometimes you just need to follow your childish dreams. Ignore the people who don't believe in you, or, better yet, use their doubt as motivation and try to prove them wrong! That dreamlike feeling of success that I felt when we caught the bird is something I'll continue to chase for the rest of my life. Sometimes, when you least expect it, things take a turn.



Attention

Alex Berman

New York, NY

If my shadow could see me sitting here,
She'd probably reprimand me for wasting time.
Well, why doesn't she try writing a poem herself and see how that feels?
Why doesn't she try tearing out her insides and arranging them into
A bow
Or
A knot,
Depending on whether or not she wants to break the rules.
Is my shadow a bad girl?
Is she edgy?
Does she make prisoners of syntax and diction?
Make them twist?
Make them squirm?
Make them love her in their new distorted forms?
Or does she always keep a strict meter
And stick to an A/B scheme of rhyme?
Does she refuse to be a quote "cheater"
And count her syllables all of the time?
Does she know how to format her writing so
That when she
Inevitably
Is torn apart,
It's her writing that's being criticized.
Not,
Like,
You know,
Her whole entire vulnerable self served on a bed of greens under lemon slices?
Does she know how to fabricate sadness because poetry is a ridiculous form of literature which is only considered good if it makes the reader feel better because
At least they don't have it as bad as the writer?
Does she know how to feel?
Does she know how it feels to feel so much?
Does she know how it feels to want to know how to say what she feels so much
That
She writes a poem
About things that are completely unrelated
Because
She doesn't feel in words but
She can't write in feelings
And
This is the closest she can get
But
It's never quite right?
Does she know how
To lock her words in a notebook

And
Pretend she doesn't want anybody to see it
When
In reality, it's the only thing she wants
Because
She's just a teenaged girl who craves attention
And
Aren't we all, really, just
Teenaged girls who crave attention?
Aren't we?

By the request of the author, "The Diary" has been redacted.

Per the note on the previous page, "The Diary" has been redacted by the request of the author.

Falling Friendships

Peyton Zaletsky

New Canaan, CT

"*Best Friend (noun): A close friend who means the world to you and holds a very special place in your heart. They are always there for you and you for them.*"

I stare out the now fogged up window in my living room, watching the trees as they sway ever so slightly to the beat of the wind. Snowflakes steadily fall from the clouds, landing gently upon any not yet snow-covered tree branch or grass blade. The world seems to have stopped for a moment, letting go of all of the stresses and tensions that fill it up. I seem to gravitate toward the door, softly placing my hand on the large, brown handle and turning. I am greeted with silence and peacefulness, no sound to disturb the beauty of nature. The snow seems to be coming down faster, more ferociously, like a rainstorm, only better. I steadily place my boot into the whiteness below me, and it sinks in, absorbed by the freshly fallen snow. Before I know it, I am running out into my yard.

Citizen Chishamiso Kwenda New York, NY

Snowflakes brush every inch of my face, yet they disappear as soon as they touch my skin. The feeling of the snow seems to jolt a memory in my head. I see her. Emma. My best friend, I think. I mean, I haven't seen her in months, but we must still be besties, right? The coldness surrounding me brings me back to Whistler. There we were, together, like we always used to be. I take in the mountains, the skiers, the laughter…

"We HAVE to do the T-Bar!" I exclaim, splattering snow all over Emma as I come to a sharp stop. The freezing air sweeps my face, turning my nose into a bright, red cherry. I gaze up at the mountainous backdrop of Whistler, trying to make myself believe that we really were here and that this picture perfect winter wonderland was not just a figment of my imagination. With the shimmering snow laying gently atop the peaks and crevices of the mountains, it seems as though we were put straight into a painting.

"Yes! I love T-Bars! But if you make me fall off, I will never forgive you!" Emma jokes, a slight giggle escaping her lips. This giggle, the one that usually makes me smile, seems to have a nervous bite to it, almost as if she really believes I am going to make her fall. But, knowing Emma, I quickly shove the thought away. I mean, we have been on a T-Bar at least three times now, so we are practically experts.

"Don't worry Emma. We will be ok. Hopefully," I tell her in a teasing manner, shooting her an evil grin. But, just for a moment, I seem to catch a slight twinge in her joyful smile, a slight falter barely noticeable to the human eye. I decide not to worry about it and begin pumping my legs through the freshly fallen powder below us, heading straight for the T-bar…

This moment is frozen in my mind, a memory that will never fade away. I remember staring at that T-Bar, seeing how it was so steep and foggy. I remember my heart beginning to pound more and more as we inched nearer to the front of the line. Yet, I don't remember how those nerves had developed. Had I sensed Emma's nerves? Had I just been shocked once again by how steep it was? Had the thought of falling really become an actual fear of mine? A singular snowflake lands onto my red-tipped nose, and I am thrown back to Whistler, to this moment, back to Emma…

"I didn't remember it being so scary," I state as we are pulled along by a thick rope. The T-Bar sits behind our backs, dragging us up through the powdery snow. My goggles begin to fog up, yet I am clenching so tightly to the rope, I am too nervous to let go and wipe them.

"Yeah, it's as steep as the black run and the rope is super slippery! Why did we want to do this!?" Emma asks me, fear painted around every word she says. The wind seems to blow faster and harder as we are tugged higher and higher. I feel as

though we are being dragged to our doom, the T-Bar giving us no mercy. I try to distract myself by watching our skis as they move swiftly along in the snow, carving a path. But, this path is soon covered by the falling snow around us. *Falling.* Why does this fear seem to keep popping back into my head? We are not going to fall! Barely anyone ever falls off T-Bars! We would be ok…

I plop down in the powder below me, thinking about that moment. *Falling.* Why had I been so scared at the thought of falling? Everything falls. Snow falls from the clouds, babies fall down when learning to walk, people fall in love. Yet, why does this T-Bar make *me* so scared about falling? I decide to continue replaying the story in my head. I lie down in the coldness below me, letting snowflakes continue to fall onto my cheeks. My mind begins to wander off again…

I lay there, frozen in shock on the soft snow. My legs are twisted around me. My skis are gone. What just happened? Why am I laying on the snow? Did we really fall off the T-Bar? Am I hurt? Where's Emma?

I pry myself up, looking around at my surroundings. My skis are sprawled out along the snow, reminding me of when I used to say "Yard Sale" to people who had fallen down. I turn my head and watch the T-Bar continue to drag fellow skiers up. I look the other way and see Emma lying on the snow like a pancake. I quickly crawl over to her, wanting to make sure she is ok.

"Emma! What just happened?!" I ask her, panicked that she may be angry at me. She rises up off of the snow and looks me right in the eye. Suddenly, the sound of a small giggle seems to fill the air. It starts out as almost a whisper but grows louder and louder, filling up the awkward quietness that was between us only moments before. The sound of laughter is soon booming out of my mouth as well. Before I know it, we are lying down on the snow, laughing and laughing.

"How did we actually fall off of the T-Bar?" Emma tries to say through pockets of giggles.

"I have no idea!" I yell back, unable to control my constant laughter. I stumble back over to Emma with a smile pasted onto my face, my stomach aching from the minutes of laughter we just went through. I grab the glove that's encasing her hand and pull her to her feet.

"Come on, let's ski back down and try it again," I tell her, wiping the snow from my skis.

"Ok, but, if we fall AGAIN, then I will really never forgive you!" Emma exclaims, grinning from ear to ear. The snow seems to begin falling faster as we ski back down the mountain, but I barely even notice. After all, I am skiing next to my best friend…

I open my eyes and expect to see Emma, always there for me like she used to be. But, of course, she's not. How could she be? We were at Whistler together months ago. Besides, she's at Andover right now, probably playing in the snow with all of her new best friends. I slowly wipe the snow from my face as I get up off of the ground. My shoulders slump as I meander towards the door of the house that Emma and I had played games in a billion times before. I knew that she had gotten into boarding school and that that trip to Whistler would be our last. I also knew that we would never go on vacations together again, or go skiing together again, or do anything that we always used to do ever again. At least, I thought I knew this. I thought that I had accepted this, but I guess I really wasn't ready to lose my best friend.

I think I finally figured out why I had been so scared of falling off that T-Bar. This type of falling wasn't about the physical pain, or the falling in love, but about the falling out of a friendship, losing a friend. I hadn't been ready. I needed Emma, and I still wasn't ready to lose her.

But now, I think cracks have begun to form in the friendship we have worked for fourteen years to build. We don't talk as often. We never see each other anymore. I mean, how would we? She's at another school, in another state, gone from New Canaan.

My heart starts aching in this cold wintery storm as I realize how much I really do miss her. I mean, she is my best friend, or at least used to be. But, clearly, everything has its downfall. It's like the snow. It stays within the clouds for as long as it can, until eventually, it is time for it to fall down. Then, it melts away from us, disappearing from the human eye, even though it still exists in the world, just in a new form.

I place my hand onto the door handle and turn, soon greeted with the instant warmth and coziness of my house, relieving me from the frigid cold of the outside. I glance one last time at the snow as it continues to fall to the ground, my mind finally coming to a conclusion. It is time for me to accept that this long-lasting friendship between Emma and me, may, just like the snow, fall through. One day, it may even end up disappearing for good, but I guess I can only hope that it doesn't. I gaze into my house and reluctantly step into the warmth, allowing the snow covering my jacket to finally melt away.

Refugee Ghazal

Ilan Magnani

Pittsburgh, PA

for Alan Kurdi

It begins like this: the shallow water's mournful sway.
In death, the boy ripples headlines, remains a refugee.

You begin like this: undrawn map of skin smuggled from
a railway leading towards a death camp. Nana escaped, a refugee.

She'd begin like this: *I hid, and then I ran*. See, their tongues
harvested rain from grass at daybreak; their god became a refugee.

Tugged in towards the shoreline: the boy's three years—
what child marks a whole sea as his grave? A refugee.

His name: breathless flick of tongue mirroring yours,

but Ilan, what does it matter? No one names a refugee.

Luxury

Manya Zhao

Palo Alto, CA

Stanley sat at his old oak worktable in the nook, fingers furiously working the sewing machine as brown eyes anxiously darted to the nearby wall clock every few seconds. Around him lay scattered scraps, illuminated only by the little twenty watt light bulb from the sole lamp on his table.

It was barely half past three, yet the looming nimbus clouds barricaded even the slightest beam of sunlight from penetrating. The prospect of the incoming typhoon was frightening, but for Stanley, the gloom was actually preferred.

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Especially in the past three years, he often found himself increasingly unable to ignore the mold stains that had begun spotting the walls and floors. They grew almost exponentially as the years went by, bringing up the cheap paint and even plaster on the walls.

No matter how furiously Stanley scrubbed at them, they would steadfastly reappear the day after. He attacked them almost obsessively every day, yet they stood firm, much like the smell of must that always seemed to linger in the air.

He assumed the smell was a byproduct of the mold, but it somehow reeked of something much more sinister.

No amount of darkness could cover that up.

Desolate as the setting may have been, however, the array of cheerful children's artwork proudly displayed from the walls dramatically improved the ambience. They brought with them a child-like innocence and wonder that couldn't be artificially produced.

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"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," Stanley murmured to himself, forehead wrinkling with focus and an almost desperate sort of determination as he finally sewed in the hidden zipper. He closed his eyes and muttered a little prayer to himself before gently pulling the long blush rayon dress from his table. For the first time in almost eight hours, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was perfect.

Stanley laid the dress back down, leaned back on his chair, and was putting his worn shoes up on the table, when he heard the bell on the door jingle. Rare as it has been lately, his heart skipped at the prospect of another customer.

He stuck his head out of the nook and hollered, "Wesley's Wears, welcome!"

"Hey Hon, just me," his wife, Sarah, said, walking into his nook. Her hair was falling out of her loose, low bun and her face was completely devoid of makeup, but his heart skipped more than a beat upon seeing her. Fifteen years, and it still did every time.

She met his questioning look with a thin smile and a peck. She could understand without a word from him, just as she always had, which was part of what made them the perfect couple. Stanley was a man of few words, but one whose words made people really listen.

"I didn't want to go through the back 'cus I'm assuming Wes is sleeping, and I didn't want to wake him." The corners of her mouth turned up more at the mention of her baby. "And Maxi's still at the Claes' right? When should we pick him up from the playdate?"

Stanley opened his mouth to answer her question but was cut off as Sarah plowed through. He sighed but reminded himself that her passion was one of the most attractive things about her.

"How is Wes, by the way, doctors say he's doing well? I mean, must be good news, right? They haven't sent us home this quick in ages," Sarah continued, walking toward the heavy hanging bedspread that acted as a quasi-curtain. It separated the already cramped area into their tiny tailor shop in the front and living space in the back.

Stanley crossed the room in three brisk strides and pulled her back by the arm. "Hold on, hold on, hold on," he said, finally getting in a word and pulling her toward him.

"Wait, I want to see Wes first, everything's fine, right?"

"Doctors sent us home, didn't they? Just hold on for a second, I want to show you something."

Sarah finally furrowed her eyebrows and looked at him quizzically but didn't argue.

Stanley handed her the dress with a smile. He didn't tell her to cover her eyes, didn't tell her that he had a surprise, didn't say anything more, in fact; they were past such luxuries like that. It was more than enough that he had made her this dress, and he knew.

"Stan… It's beautiful," Sarah breathed, before falling quiet. When she spoke again, it was with some difficulty. "But we can't afford something like this, you know that. I—I think we should sell it."

"A customer came in with a bunch of this rayon today. Wasn't even the customer actually, it was the customer's *butler*. I thought it was only fitting to splurge a little with the extra material."

He paused, voice dropping to huskily mask the emotion.

"You deserve it, okay? Fifteen years we've been married, and you never even got the chance to wear a wedding dress. I promised you that when the business took off we'd have a real celebration—" he abruptly cut himself off, the unspoken "but" lingering uncomfortably in the air.

"Anyway, I know this is pink, not white, and it's not exactly a wedding gown, but it was the best I could do."

He looked at her imploringly then.

Her appreciation for his hours of hard work would mean more to him than the money, she knew, and the dress was lovely, without a doubt, but it was difficult putting down the prospect of the hundreds of dollars they could earn from it.

Nonetheless, after a moment's thought, she gave him a rare, real smile, teeth and all, and a little nod. His face lit up, highlighting deep-set wrinkles around his eyes that can only be the product of extreme stress or trauma. The lines created the illusion of an age far greater than Stanley's real one.

Sarah threw off her clothes with a poorly-suppressed, childlike excitement and carefully slid the dress over her head, afraid of wrinkling the fabric or, god forbid, tearing a stitch. Stanley

watched anxiously, twirling the pencil he usually had behind his ear around his fingers. Sarah's hair fell out of its bun as she pulled the dress over her head, sending a cascade of graying mousy-brown hair down her back.

Stanley instinctively moved behind her to help with the zipper, like he'd always done. It had been so long since she'd even put on a dress, however, that she jumped at his touch, blushing from the now unfamiliar tenderness. That, too, had become a luxury.

He pulled up the zipper and walked to her front, examining the fit.

The dress hugged her figure perfectly, creating the illusion that her body was composed of nothing other than lines connecting as fluidly as water. He was shocked by how she took his breath away, even after all these years.

"What do you know," he said gruffly. "Fits perfect. Looks perfect." Suddenly embarrassed by his sentiment, he cleared his throat and added, smiling wryly, "All because of my immense talent, of course."

Sarah returned it with an ambivalent smile of her own and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her forehead to his.

"Thank you," she whispered.

For the first time in maybe months, if not years, the couple shared a tender moment.

❖

Like the few fleeting ones before, however, this one was interrupted by a feeble, "Mom? Mama?" coming from the other side of the curtain. Sarah immediately snapped out of the moment and returned to full mother mode, striding toward the house side with a discouraged Stanley at her heels. But their kids come first, they always have.

Since he'd gotten sick, Wesley had reverted to calling Sarah "Mama," something the nine-year-old would not have been caught dead doing in front of his friends before.

Like the shop side, the other side of the curtain was derelict, but clearly not by choice. It was as if even the house itself had put up a fight, grabbed onto every last bit of willpower but ultimately lost to the mold and insistent stench of impending doom creeping up from every corner. The only little bits of brightness still battling resolutely were the practically overwhelming strings of red clover plants hanging from the ceiling and, of course, more of the children's artwork.

❖

Shortly after Wes's diagnosis, Sarah had read in an herbal medicine book that dried red clovers could alleviate the symptoms of lymphoma. When she read it, she had shown Stanley, a satirical smile plastered to her face.

"Look," she had said, pointing at the

Family Traditions Lori Khadse Princeton, NJ

blooming tubular flowers on the page, "we might not be able to afford enough chemo, but you know what? It's fine! We can treat it with dried red clovers! Yes we can." She'd laughed then, a harsh, sardonic sound that made the hairs on Stanley's body stand.

Although her slightly psychotic stage of grief soon passed, the obsession did not. Firmly grasping onto this remedy like it was a panacea, Sarah began religiously collecting red clovers, everywhere she could find.

Her fingers permanently became wine-red stained as a result of hours upon hours spent grinding the dried red clovers into fine powder to mix with hot water. It was a nasty concoction, but with honey and grapefruit rinds and a touch of motherly love mixed in, it somehow wasn't so bad.

Besides, Wes's consistent congestion prevented him from tasting much at this point.

❖

Thinking he had fallen back asleep, Sarah silently mixed this drink for Wes, blowing at the mug every once in a while to cool it down. Unoccupied, Stanley wound the little hand-crank radio, listening for updates on the quickly approaching typhoon. He went back to work, furiously scrubbing at the mold with a toothbrush.

Wes's eyes fluttered open briefly, almost completely obscured by his long eyelashes, and the hint of a smile played at his lips. It quickly disappeared though, as if maintaining any bit of joy required more energy than he could muster.

"You look like a princess, Mama," he whispered, voice hoarse and thick from fever, but so soft Sarah nearly missed it. And then: "Please help me. I hurt so much." His eyes flickered shut again.

Tears welled in her eyes as she sat on the edge of his bed and pushed his cold sweat-drenched bangs out of his face. "Hey baby," she said quietly, struggling to keep her voice steady, but mustering a smile. "You're awake. Daddy said doctors sent you home, huh? That's a good sign, sweetheart, a great sign. You're gonna do better now. I promise." Before she'd even finished the sentence, however, Wes's breathing had become heavy and regular. He had drifted back asleep.

Sarah sighed and reached for Stanley asking for help up.

"Guess it's going to take some time," she said, gripping the crook of Stanley's arm and pulling herself up.

"Shit." Stanley flinched hard and jerked his arm away, nearly causing Sarah to topple over. Sarah's eyes flashed as her gaze shifted annoyedly from Stan's anguished face to Wes's peaceful one. They didn't swear in

front of their children.

"Shoot, sorry, honey," Stanley whispered, his expression composed once again.

"What was that about?" Sarah hissed, walking toward him, hand outstretched.

"Nothing. I think you just hit a pressure point or something. I'm serious, it's fine."

Sarah stalked toward Stanley and grabbed his arm, pulling up his sleeve. She gasped as her face drained of color.

"Stanley. What is this?" Her lip quivered, "What the hell is this?"

❖

A thick gauze cocooned Stanley's elbow, but the blood could be seen starting to seep through.

"He had to get another transfusion?"

Stanley's face drooped with exhaustion, and he ran a hand through his thinning hair. They remained quiet for a moment, almost parallel to the moment they had shared just minutes before. But instead of being amazingly tender, this one was amazingly painful.

"Stan."

"Sweetheart," Stanley said, swallowing hard, "Wes isn't going to be getting better."

"No. No, no, no, no, no," she mumbled, "This can't be happening. This cannot be happening."

"Sarah, the doctors are saying… It's time we stopped trying."

"Those sons of bitches. They told you we should give up on our little boy. They had the audacity to tell you that?" Her voice rose an entire octave.

"Sarah…"

"Oh my god." Her eyes widened, stretching the wrinkles around her eyes and making her look like a hurt child.

All Stanley wanted to do was hold her, to protect her. "You agree with them, don't you?" He reached for her then, only to be violently pushed away. The sickened way she looked at him threatened to tear his heart in two.

"How—I don't—I don't understand. How can you just give up on our baby like that? He's our *baby*." Her voice had dropped back to its normal pitch, but it was hardly understandable, interspersed with her poorly-suppressed hyperventilating and whimpers.

"We don't have any more money," Stanley said quietly. "You know that. We've been struggling to make ends meet since Wes's diagnosis, and we still have another child we have to think of, honey. There's nothing more we or the doctors can do at this point. I think it's time we think about this pragmatically."

Sarah held her bewildered look, a mixture of horror, disgust, disbelief, utter pain.

She stood frozen for another second before whipping around and yanking their old, beat-up suitcase from under Wes's bed. She began silently pulling clothes off of hangers and stuffing them haphazardly into the suitcase, hardly caring that half of them were spilling onto the ground.

"What—What are you doing, Sarah?"

"What the hell do you think I'm doing? I'm leaving. I'm taking my son, and we're leaving. I hope you and your precious money have a nice life together."

"Sarah, hold on. Stop for a second, okay? It's not that I don't want to save our son—" Stanley finally lost his composure as his voice broke. "Goddamnit, I want more than anything to save him. I would trade my own life for his. But the simple fact is we don't have any more money. We still have Maxi. We can't just keep sending our six-year-old to other kids' houses so he can get a freaking warm meal. I can donate my blood today, and next month, and maybe for months after that, but what are we going to do five years from now? Ten years?"

He cleared his throat and slowly exhaled, once again gathering his composure.

"This isn't a long-term solution, honey. You know that, and I know that. And I wish it hadn't come to this. God, I pray and wish for that every day, but we both know that it has. We can't keep doing this."

"That is utter BS," Sarah said, voice frigid, not looking at him. After a moment's hesitation, she stalked toward their tiny dining table, throwing open its slim drawers. She pulled out wads and wads of coins and ones and fives, throwing them all around.

Stanley crouched and rushed to pick them up, fearful of losing even a penny. Their rainy day stash. They had always said that someday, when Wes recovered, they would pile all the money they had here and any other money they had lying around and take the kids to Disneyland. That promise always brought a smile to Wes's face, without fail.

"Tell me this isn't money, Stanley. Tell me this fucking stash isn't money. Tell me we can't spend it towards our dying son. Tell me it's a luxury. And then tell me it's our rainy day stash and meant to be saved, not used. Well here's a news flash, buddy, the day is here, alright? It's a fucking rainy day, and it can't get rainier than this because, any worse, and I'm going to drown."

She took a shaky breath, her voice once again becoming composed but so frigid it made the hairs on Stanley's exposed arm stand.

"This money is going toward another round of treatment, you hear me? I don't give a damn if I live on the street or if I starve to death or if you starve to death. We're putting every penny we've got toward—" She suddenly came to a stop, looking incredulous and furious at Stanley's upheld hand.

"What—"

"Shh. Just stop for a second. Hold on—" He turned his ear toward the radio, which was still blaring unknowingly in the background.

"—take shelter now. Do not set up sandbags. Do not board your windows. Just take shelter. The typhoon is coming far earlier than we predicted. I repeat, the typhoon is coming."

Stanley and Sarah's eyes widened and met as they gave each other a little nod, fully understanding one another without a word of communication. Each person climbed up onto the pitiful table as they lifted their arms to support the central beam stretching along the length of the tiny space. Since the prospect of an incoming typhoon had been announced, they had discussed this plan many times. Whether this provided any actual reinforcement was unknown to either of them, but what they did know was, as long as this beam didn't fall, their house would hold up.

❖

The typhoon hit within half an hour of their scrambling onto the table.

"Don't be scared, Wesley!" Sarah screamed into the wind as their poorly constructed windows allowed currents of rain to billow their way into the room. Wesley fell into a coughing fit and cried.

Red clover flower petals rained down around them, creating almost a blizzard of blood-red flakes. It was an unfitting and beautiful sort of chaos.

"You got this, Sar," Stanley called through the water. His entire body was soaked, whether with sweat or rain, he wasn't sure. "As long as we hold this beam up, the house won't fall. C'mon, say it with me; it distracts you from the ache. Say it with me."

As the weight of the entire house became increasingly heavy on their shoulders, Stanley chanted, "As long as we hold this beam up, the house won't fall. As long as we hold this beam up, the house won't fall."

And eventually, Sarah joined in.

"As long as we hold this beam up, the house won't fall. As long as we hold this beam up, the house won't fall. As long as we hold this beam up, the house won't fall."

❖

Hours later—how many exactly neither was sure—it was Stanley who first noticed the rain had stopped. Both of them had been so thoroughly drenched to the point where it had probably been over twenty minutes since the rain stopped before he noticed.

The couple practically fell off the table, muscles reduced to the strength of gelatin. But as they lay on the floor, shoulder-to-shoulder in the crimson water-clover mixture, Stanley began chuckling to himself, and then full-out laughing. Pretty soon, Sarah joined in.

And then they were rolling on the floor, holding their stomachs, tears flowing from their eyes, laughing hysterically to themselves. It was a type of laugh that was the result of pure relief and euphoria, at the realization that they had survived the storm, that the worst of it was over, that, perhaps, if they could survive this, Wes could survive his illness. Neither of them had truly believed their dilapidated house would have withstood the storm.

But it did, and they hadn't laughed like this for ages.

Even after they stopped laughing, completely drained of energy, they stayed lying on the ground for a while, hand in hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, neither speaking; Sarah, still in her dress, though it was now sopping wet and clinging to her body, and Stanley, whose gauze had bled to a uniform pink all around. But they felt happy. And lucky. And most of all, they felt hopeful.

Finally, with some difficulty, Sarah pulled herself up to a sitting position. She glanced toward Wes's bed again, for the thousandth time since they had gotten down from the table, to find him still sleeping. She chuckled, still fully absorbed in the positive ambiance.

"That little boy really just slept through the whole storm, huh?"

Stanley's eyes stayed closed, but his lips curved into a little smile.

With a groan and a wince, Sarah stood up on wobbly legs and walked to the table. "Should I wake him up? I think it's time he ate or drank something." Her eyes scanned the table as she said this, realizing they had no edible food or a working stove at the moment. And then her eyes rested on the little thermos. She opened it up and found the red clover drink she had been making earlier, still warm enough where wisps of steam rose up from it. She didn't even remember transferring the drink from the mug.

Sarah whooped with joy, scaring Stanley, who had fallen asleep, awake. "Well I'll be damned! Today really is a day of good fortune, honey! Look what I found in the Thermos! And it's still warm too!" Suddenly recharged, she crossed the room in a few brisk steps and sat down on the edge of Wes's bed. She gently shook him.

"Wes. Wessy, sweetie, the storm's over! It's time to wake up now, okay? You're not going to recover if you don't eat or drink anything. Look what Mommy made for you. It's so, so yummy, and it survived the storm. Wes. Wessy."

The subtlest nuance in Sarah's tone made Stanley rise to his feet and cross the room to his wife's side, where she was still trying to gently shake Wes awake.

He immediately realized what had happened.

Wes's beautiful green eyes were rolled all the way to the back of his head, only the slightest bits of white peeking out from under his eyelids. His mouth lay, a gaping black hole in the middle of his face. And all around him, the aura of death seemed to diffuse. It was a scent Stanley recognized immediately, because it was the scent that had been looming for months.

Stanley took one look at Sarah and knew she knew. There were no tears streaming down her face, as if she was internally refusing to acknowledge the fact that the inevitable had happened, but her entire body was quaking.

"C'mon Wessy, wake up now. You have to eat something. How are you going to grow big and tall otherwise? Oh, is it too hot? Here, Mommy will cool it for you." Sarah continued on, blowing at the thermos.

"Sarah," Stanley said quietly, voice catching in the middle. He placed a hand on her shoulder to pull her away. She shrugged it off.

"What? Stan, what are you doing? The boy's got to eat. He's got to eat. How's he going to grow big and strong? How?" Sarah placed the thermos on Wes's lips, spilling the drink all over him as her body was finally wracked with awful, heart-wrenching sobs.

And then Stanley pulled her up. Physically lifted her up by the arms with his strong hands and held her. Forced her head onto his chest as the two cried together.

❖

"Mommy! Daddy! I'm back!" The couple heard from a distance, as the cheerful pitter patter of a child's shoes bounded up the driveway. Sarah gasped and forced her tears to stop almost immediately with a gargantuan strength she didn't know she had left. The Claes had attempted to do them a favor by sending Maxi home, knowing that the phone lines were down

and they would be worried. But it couldn't have happened at a worse possible time.

Her eyes widened as she messily mopped up her tears and mucus with the hem of her dress before wiping away Stanley's tears with her fingers as well.

"Go, go meet him at the door," she whispered. "He can't know, not yet."

So Stanley, with a similar immense amount of strength, swallowed his emotions and headed out. And as he walked outside, he glanced back at the desolate scene.

His wife had gone back to Wes's bedside, and Stanley had to choke back a sob as he watched her tenderly close Wes's eyes all the way and pull the comforter over his head. She bit her lip so hard he imagined that it drew blood, but she didn't shed a single extra tear.

Red clover petals lay scattered everywhere, giving the illusion that this had been the scene of a murder. Which, in a way, it was. New mold already seemed to be sprouting up from corners of the room, and one window hung off its hinge. As Stanley looked, one of his children's drawings fell off the wall and floated gently down, disintegrating in a puddle on the floor.

The house was in absolute shambles, but still, Stanley walked out the front door, with his arms outstretched, ready to welcome their other son home.

It was a luxury that they still had a son to love and cherish.

Finding Ordinary

Manya Zhao

Palo Alto, CA

I walk out of my room and push past Mama sitting cross-legged on the ground by the coffee table, applying makeup with the help of her tiny, crooked vanity mirror. The table is made of reclaimed wood with knots and old nail holes interspersed across its ugly surface, making it impossible to set the mirror down flat.

Bright lipstick shades of purples and pinks and reds and oranges lie spread like a tropical sunset around her as she continues pulling tubes out of her seemingly bottomless makeup pouch. They're all drugstore brands, besides the few she saves for special occasions.

She looks great, as good as a mother of three with fifteen-hour work-days can, I suppose, but the bags beneath her eyes look nearly as heavy as the one holding her makeup. Compared to just the week prior, the worry wrinkles already seem to be etched deeper into her forehead. Still, her eyes shine bright at getting a night off.

It makes me feel slightly guilty for moping around. But I do, every week.

❖

Mama finally chooses a shade of lipstick and proceeds to wrap her faded, old pashmina around her shoulders, even though it's about a million degrees outside. She always wears it on date night; I'm not sure why. Mama doesn't have many "going-out" outfits, but the ugly old pashmina is definitely anything but a necessity.

She stands for a moment before the full-length mirror as she waits for Daddy, and her nose scrunches slightly with disdain at the reflection that peers back at her. Besides that pashmina, I'm not sure what she dislikes.

Then again, not much seems to make her happy these days.

Daddy walks out of their room in his dress shirt, the one that now hangs slightly too loose off his body. His tie also hangs unknotted around his neck as his arms are preoccupied with one little kid hanging off each side, giggling, squealing like monkeys.

He sees Mama and nearly drops the littles as his eyes light up. He reacts this way every single week. He points to her and spreads then collapses his fingers like a fan in front of his face, grinning ear to ear the entire time. *You're beautiful.*

Mama gives him a small smile, crosses the room and helps him with his tie. Afterwards, with her arms still around his neck, she leans in briefly for a quick peck. The littles look at one another in mock shock, as they always do, cover their eyes and gag.

❖

They are heading out when Daddy turns to me and signs, *Thanks for babysitting again, sweetie, we really need this.* The most I can offer him is a tight-lipped smile and a small nod. It's not like they gave me much of a choice; they never do.

As they leave, I turn to the littles.

"So. What do you guys want to do tonight?"

They pass looks and giggle, nudging and prodding one another to tell me whatever scheme they've come up with. I'm getting impatient by the time Alec finally speaks up.

"Jess, let's follow Mama and Daddy and see where they go every Friday!"

I open my mouth, about to reject their proposal, but then pause. I *have* wondered where they go every week for a while now, and I've asked more than a few times, but they're always so tired by the time they come back that my questions are dismissed with the wave of a hand.

The neighborhood isn't completely safe after dark, so we're not supposed to go out, but they did tell me to keep the littles entertained. If this is the form of entertainment they prefer, who am I to say no?

❖

So we run—Alec, Katie, and me—down the wobbly stairs of our complex, flip flops slapping the concrete almost to the rhythm of cricket chirps, just loud enough to send my heart into frissons of anxious excitement.

Worried they may have already driven away, our legs move at speeds incomprehensible for normal people. Then, Alec stops so abruptly that

Katie slams into me, and I nearly slam into him. He turns to us and points, eyes wide with a poorly-suppressed thrill.

Mama and Daddy sit with their backs towards us, not two hundred feet away, on the corner of the street, overlooking the sketchy skatepark they regularly warn us never to go to. Daddy hands Mama half of a footlong subway sandwich and a can of Coke, and she smiles at him. I can visualize her crow's feet even from where I'm standing.

Neither of them say or sign anything. Just sit, eat, sip their cokes, and watch the skaters go up and down, up and down, up and down the ramps. Mama in her billowing almost-prom dress, Daddy in his tie and dress shirt.

Mama's pashmina slips off of her shoulder when she links her arm through Daddy's, and she doesn't bother to fix it, just leans her head against his shoulder. I wonder for the hundredth time why she always wears it.

We stand for a while in silence, just watch them sit there, when Katie turns to me and whispers as if they can hear us from that far away, "What are they doing, Jessie?"

"Date night."

"Date night looks kinda boring."

"It's not boring, it's ordinary."

"Is ordinary good?"

"Not really."

"Why do they go there?"

"I'm not sure," I answer, but, in my mind, I wonder if it's because Daddy can't walk much further than the corner of the street anymore, and neither of them wants to waste gas money.

Katie opens her mouth to ask more questions when Alec nudges my foot.

"Look, look, Jess, they're walking away."

❖

We all know Daddy's previously confident and quick-paced gait has significantly slowed in the last few months, but, on the wide open street, with just him and Mama, the difference is even more noticeable. There aren't any cars in this part of town at this time, so they walk hand-in-hand down the middle of the road, even though there are sidewalks on both sides.

The littles and I stick to the sidewalks, relying on the safety of the shadows. We stick and creep, so close to the walls of buildings we can smell the seemingly ever-present, sickly-sweet chemical scent of undried graffiti paint.

It takes us half an hour to walk maybe three-quarters of a mile, if that, when Mama and Daddy make an abrupt turn at a corner. We're lagging a block behind, so it is only then that I realize we're at the hospital. Katie comes to the realization around the same time as me, and I watch as her eyes widen to the size of saucers. Alec claps a hand over her mouth before she can express her surprise and blow our cover.

Visibility Vithika Goyal Lafayette, CO

Mama and Daddy turn into the hospital bay as we watch from the opposite side of the street.

It scares me how natural they seem to be, walking into a place meant only for the ill. My legs suddenly feel much more tired than they had been a minute ago, and I sink to the ground. The littles sit with me, and Katie rests her head on my lap.

And now we're the ones watching, watching and waiting.

❖

It's nearly an hour later when Mama and Daddy reemerge from the hospital.

Daddy now has one sleeve rolled up to reveal a thick bandage wrapped around the crook of his arm. He looks sick, almost jaundiced. It's ironic to me that someone can walk into a hospital relatively fine and walk out the opposite.

It takes them even longer to walk out of the hospital bay than it did walking in, and they have to stop at the corner for a moment for Daddy to catch his breath. He must be shivering, even though it's warm and humid outside, because Mama takes her pashmina and wraps it around his shoulders, and I finally understand why she brings that ugly old thing every time.

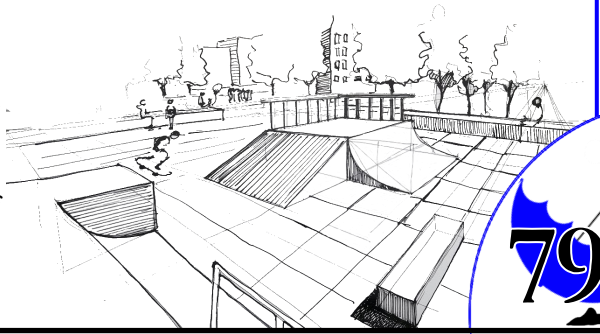
And then I decide we can't watch anymore, so I grab the littles' hands, and we run.

They don't complain, just run with me, because we're all running from the same things. We're running from the Daddy that looks yellow with gallstones, even though there are none; we're running from the prospect of getting caught for being out, even though the chances are near-zero; most of all, we're running from the goddamned mass that has invaded our entire lives—the one that has consumed Daddy's laugh, his voice, Mama's time, her happiness, my Friday nights, the littles' childhoods, and everything in between.

So we run the entire three-quarters of a mile, full-speed, and we don't stop, not once. And we're all panting, ready to collapse from exhaustion, by the time we burst through our battered old door.

I look around our boring, dingy little apartment, one that has been a source of my embarrassment. I look down at my little siblings, whose hands are still clutched in mine. I look at our reclaimed wood coffee table, full of its knot and holes.

I find that I'm grateful for what little ordinary we have, and I pray we can find ordinary everywhere.



Her Hemispheric Battle

Nithya Ramcharan
Kenner, LA

She bounced inside her new school with fresh hopes, fresh dreams. She smiled brightly at the jaded faces around her; no one smiled back. She introduced herself to her classmates near her locker. "Cool," everyone responded listlessly. "You're gonna love it here." The same generic responses pounded her like bullets. She was about to give up when she heard the question she had eagerly counted on: "Where are you from?"

"Oh!" She smiled modestly. "I'm from Chandigarh, India. My old school had so many people. Ugh, it was so annoying! It's so nice to go to a big school for once—I can finally breathe! Did you know," she whispered confidentially, "we didn't even have space for a field! Some of the people in my class would play cricket in the classroom, and Geeta Ma'am, she was our physics teacher, she would—"

"Whoa, whoa! I was just going to ask which school you came from!"

She laughed before realizing the girl was not interested in hearing about her life in Chandigarh. "Oh, I came from—well, there's no point. You probably wouldn't be able to pronounce it anyway," she conceded, a little disappointed.

The girl wasn't interested in trying. She nodded, pursing her lips to muster a slightly interested expression. "Aw, well, nice to meet you…Ana?"

"Er…it's Anu. As in Anuradha." But no one was there to hear her.

For the first time, she began to miss her old life, her old city. The pain was slow and unforgiving. Her family had immediately snatched at the glamorous job offers in the glamorous new country. She thought the move would be so much better for her, that she would have so many more opportunities to make friends in her new city. But now, as the reality that no one cared about interesting outsiders sunk in, nothing hurt more than thinking of home. She missed indulging in *chaat* sold on the streets, the melt-in-the-mouth *chole bhature*, the soft, sweet *kulfi*. She missed eating at seedy restaurants with her family and spending the night in the restroom as a result. She missed *bhangra* dancing with her friends, their traditional skirts flowing around them.

Nonetheless, she shook herself out of the reverie. What was she missing? The filthy, polluted streets or the constant fights between drivers on the jam-packed roads? The incessant disputes between her family members or the zealous competition between her classmates in school? Life had been a living headache.

"I have room to breathe here, and I'm happy," she declared, ignoring the catch in her chest.

Departing Soon Mia Reiland Brooklyn, NY

❖

"I'm happy, I love it here," she reassured the school's guidance counselor, who frowned.

"Are you sure?" he repeated. "You do know, Anu…" At least he could pronounce her name right. "…we're here for you whenever you need us, right?"

She nodded emphatically. "Oh, yeah, totally." She'd practiced her words carefully.

"Good." His sigh came out as a comical little puff. "Anu, we were so afraid it would be hard for you to acclimate, but you've fit in so well, it's like you've been here all your life…"

He was just saying that to get this meeting over with; nevertheless, Anu felt warm from the praise. She was proud of herself for the convincing act she had put on that almost fully masked who she was. Wait, what act? She shook herself. She was so happy here she forgot what Chandigarh had been like, or so she thought. Whenever a flash of something from her past came up, like throwing colored powder at her neighbors, or giggling with her classmates as they admired the new head boy, she viciously tried to quell it. But she never won.

"Hey, Anu," a boy in her new class called. "How was the meeting?"

She shrugged, rolling her eyes. "A waste of my time. Mr. Roy tried to prod me about my life in India. So annoying."

The boy laughed. "Ha, he must've been like, 'how was your life in India?' and you said, 'it was a hellhole, Mr. Roy!'"

She joined in indulgently. "Sounds about right."

Back home, her mother asked how was school and received a monosyllabic answer. "Anu?" she prompted. "*Mujhe batao*!" (Tell me!)

"School was really fun." She didn't understand why her mother began to laugh.

"*Kya*?" (What?) "Are you trying to get the local accent? You sound so funny!"

Why couldn't her mother shut up? They weren't in India anymore, so why speak Hindi? She could "get the local accent" if she wanted to. No one understood her anyway!

"Anu, tomorrow is Janmashtami! I'm going to ask for special permission from your school so you can have the day off." (Janmashtami is Lord Krishna's birthday, celebrated around August annually.)

She suppressed a groan. There was no need to celebrate where no one knew or cared who Krishna was. Just like her mom to exacerbate her reputation as a superstitious pagan. "Ma, we literally moved to this whole new country, and you expect us to continue being hardcore Indians?"

That silenced her mother for a few moments, who replied sternly, "Anu, no matter where we go, we preserve our roots. We need our

family and our customs to help us, especially in foreign places, no?"

"I want a smartphone," Anu announced, ignoring her mother.

Her mother immediately flared. "*Kya*? A smartphone! Who are we, the royal family of England?" She returned to her occupation, making random marks of sickly yellow and muddy red on a painting of Krishna.

"Everyone here has a smartphone. It's useful." She ignored the painting, which had been her favorite when she was younger.

"Why spend on smartphones when you can buy gold?" her mother demanded, swinging her head to display her enormous earrings.

"Ma, who cares about gold? I don't want to use my flip phone. It sucks." With that, Anu stormed out of the room, angry, even a little ashamed. She could hear her mother yelling and tried not to care. She was right, after all. This was a different world, a better world. She should not be ungrateful to it by showing loyalty to the one she left.

❖

A few weeks later, her friend from Ludhiana called. "Why, Anu! It's been so long!" she chirped. She chattered excitedly in Hindi, but her friend abroad was not having it.

"Oh, hi," Anu drawled in reply. "Yeah, yeah. Oh, I love it here. The weather is so good, it's so clean, the people are friendly." *And distant*, she thought. "It's really nice here."

"I miss you, Anu."

"Yeah, I know. You guys should really come here." *They really should not*. "You can meet all my new friends here, eat all this really good food…"

They did not talk for long. The call ended, one end confused and unsatisfied, the other bored, but, at the same time, a little lonely.

At school, a few people approached her. "So, Anu, I heard you're from India! What was it like?"

She rolled her eyes. A fake question from fake people. "It was alright," she muttered. "A little boring." That was the answer she had begun to give to every question: How's life? How was the concert? What's three times twenty-three? Perhaps she stopped making an effort too soon, but that was the problem: why should it be her who reached out first?

"Boring! You know what's boring? This place! We don't have elephants and jungles and…"

The list continued for an eternity and Anu listened wearily, not bothering to point out that India was a civilized land and the elephants there were endangered. These were the people she should have met first—the interested locals—whose attentions she could have reveled in. But no, most of the people either knew the truth about the outside world and weren't the frog-in-the-well type or were far too ignorant to care.

That didn't matter now. "I have to go," she muttered.

But she was promptly stopped. "Anu, we're doing a project where we need to interview people who have lived abroad. Would you care to contribute?"

Pity was what prompted her to blurt "sure." Their grade probably depended on her.

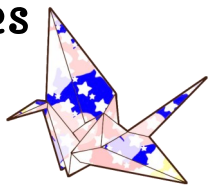
One boy drew out his sleek, suave smartphone and opened its camera. "Alright, Anu, just talk about your life in India."

She didn't know if it was spite or sorrow that seized her, but she began to ramble in a mocking, cynical tone. "I remember contracting the malaria virus five times in total because of all the mosquitoes there. One time our school had to shut down for a week because there was a riot nearby involving religion, politics, and a langur…" But what she said did not correspond with what was going on inside her head. Flashes of her past appeared in her mind's eye: amusedly watching her dad slap his knee to the beat of classical music, striking a match to light innumerable vibrant *diyas*. It was overwhelming, unstoppable like a Juggernaut, and soon the words that came out of her mouth changed. "Did I tell you about what happened when we played cricket in our classroom and our physics teacher flipped out?" The reactions on her audience's faces also changed. They laughed and drooped when necessary and even added stories of their own occasionally—and the interview morphed into a discussion.

"Thanks, Anu!" was the grateful response. "This is going to turn out really nice! And it was great getting to know more about you!"

She beamed. All this time, it was nostalgia she'd been hiding from. There would be memories to make here too. But she did need a past to compare them with.

cranes



Jasper X

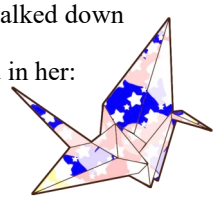
Chicago, IL

i once made a crane,
folded out of a poem of mine. i started
verse-side up, so that the poetry would be
hidden on the inside. that crane was like a
person in a way.

once folded, i thought of
romantic things. i mean romantic in the
purest sense of the word: romantic,
adjective. defined as conducive to or
characterized by the expression of love.
i mean, a crane composed of poetry;
what isn't to love?

haikus flowed out of my fingertips, lines
5-7-5. i clicked out the syllables with my
black ballpoint pen and wrote them as neatly
as i could on the wings, neck, tail. i wrote
about the autumn leaves and i wrote about
self-love and i wrote for her and i wrote,
i *wrote*.

poetry on the inside, outside, i tucked my
crane in the back of my black notebook and
planned on giving it to her. when i saw her
the next passing period as she walked down
the hall, almost glowing, i
whispered to myself as i reveled in her:
a girl composed of
poetry, she seems to be
a star among us.



there isn't an intimacy greater than
cranes and friendship, i learned that day,
and remembered today. i watched her
struggle to fold the paper, and remembered
my first time. i reached over and showed her,
saying, "*here…just like this*," and she
complied with a light in her eyes every time
she managed a crease.

i could've folded a couple cranes in the time
it took her to fold that first one, but I
slowed

down. we folded it together, step-by-step.
i felt my heart in my hands as i pressed down
the head of the crane. origami is visceral,
human. know your paper and it knows you
and every crease came out perfect because
my paper knew the love that i exuded.

she smiled when she got it and i
couldn't bear to let her give it away. it wasn't
perfect, but it was a crane, and that red bird
was all hers—she made it after all.
she reminded me of my haiku crane and
when i got home, i dug it out of my notebook
and wished that i gave it to the star girl long ago.

These Ninjas I Know

Zoha Arif

Union, NJ

The Muslims that I know are like ninjas. Often (but especially on Friday), you see them arm-locking, hand-standing, and cartwheeling with a succession of front snap punches and roundhouse kicks on the pilgrimage to the mosque. There is one mosque here; it has a simple body, the only architecture being the edges of the roof that hook up into triangles to surround, like a huddle of penguins, one dome centered over the prayer hall, resembling tortilla chips and a bowl of gold dipping sauce. The minaret, standing only to follow the aesthetics of Ottoman architecture, concludes into a spatula of a crescent moon. It is the lighthouse for land dwellers for it can be seen from a considerable distance. In the jolting car ride through the aurora of pot-hole riddled streets to the mosque, the Muslims use this minaret as a beacon to plan their route.

The mosque's parking lot has only nine spaces because one is always reserved for the imam. Those Muslims who live fifteen minutes from the mosque fill the nine parking spaces and roll into the mosque two hours before the Friday sermon begins. For the rest of us who were not early enough to sack one of the elite nine parking spaces, we station our vehicles along the surrounding streets and change into our prayer wear, our sheaths and disguises, in the car. Women wrap their hair in scarves and men put on their caps and sandals. The locals observe us ninjas from their porches to make sure no one has rolled the slightest edge of a tire in front of their driveway. From our cars, we walk quickly, though the young ones jog and the embarrassed run. We roll and tumble and karate chop through the low-lying leaves and branches of trees to quickly get to the mosque because we can't bear to risk the chance of our co-workers and classmates pointing at us and calling our names in this state. So we fill the mosque like plumping up a farm animal.

My America Akanksha Basil Chappaqua, NY

In the women's prayer hall, babies are like boats in the curled arms of their mother and, for now, the prayer room is the land of the toddlers who roam and run around the pillars, falling and tumbling, young ninjas in training, their mothers whispering bismillah. When the imam begins, a hush straggles the mosque with two legs. We listen and pretend even though we know that, in the prayer hall, there are families who wrap Christmas ribbons on their stairs and verandas to feel more American. In the corner, a girl tells about another girl because she wants to feel more American. The middle schooler whose mother hasn't let her shave yet wears her scarf halfway across her head and, somewhere in the next room, a cap presses in the pocket of a boy. One of the mothers promises her toddler McDonald's fries after the prayer because she is ignorant about the fact that it is boiled in the same oil as pork. We feel shameful to judge one another after all these things we've done so we just listen. Outside, there are protests against the Friday prayers at the mosque because they say it results in traffic. Though we want to explain that we love Jesus too, that we only want to worship and praise the same Lord of the Worlds, we are mute, so some ninjas karate chop and spinjitzu three miles to the mosque instead of driving. For Peace.

Religion is like soup. Instead of nunchucks, stars, and chains, we pour boiling soup over our own heads because we want to know what it's like to drown without the sin of suicide. All that we have to our soul is our faith and it somehow swells even though our noses can't breathe in soup. So we twist along with our faith and remind ourselves why we keep coming back. For a moment, as we pray, straight lines slightly slanted toward the kabba, the earth holding still, the love of God, everything is okay. We hold invisible hands of the other like one breathing organism. After the prayer, we are told about the murders in the Bronx. Six Muslim men stood up execution style. Two of the men could not stand, so they were shot first. In the morning, with skin floating like islands in red and bone blown over like taffy, a lump of bodies was found. We stand up to pray for their forgiveness in the hereafter. Then we roll and tumble to our vans and leave quickly so the locals stop their protests. At the traffic light, I see the ripping hijabs and the caps plucked off and the phones popping from pockets and the lip gloss in their hands because they want to feel American. And I do the same because I want to feel American, because I am almost American. The ancients do not do this. They tell us to give no heed, and we tell them that they don't know what it's like to be the ninja that drowns in the melting pot because he or she can't walk on water.

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