

# The Apprentice Writer



## Cinema

Jennifer Zhou  
Beijing, China

In the back row of a Beijing cinema, as the music swelled over the speakers and Judy Garland flickered across a dim screen, I saw my father cry for the first time in my life.

It surprised me. My father had always been the authoritative type; one day when I was six, I came home from school to find him standing calmly in the

## Farce

Katie Friend  
Canonsburg, PA

Poets murmur  
Poets somber  
Poets intrusive  
From the immediate fastidious pulpit there is a sense of hideous and repulsive starlings doused in orange, oral acceptance. Validation as deep as the perverted scheme of perfumed stringencies with false pretenses. The operative word here is redundant. I look to your eyes and see hazel retrieve. All is

## Resurrection Author

Laila Player  
Teaneck, NJ

1. that bagel was as soft as a pillow. no, that's not true, it was more like a marshmallow. it's as if the sweetness of that same marshmallow can be tasted at this moment. the hot cocoa felt like a fire in December in my stomach with every gulp i took of the smooth chocolate beverage. and how could i forget the

middle of the living room, booking a transcontinental flight while a small platoon of moving men bustled around him. My mother and I were moving to Australia, he explained after he finished the call. *Yes, sweetie, you have to go, your mother wants you both to move back home. No, sweetie, I'm not coming with you. But I'll visit all the time, I promise.*

And then, noticing my hysterical protests, he attempted a smile.

*It'll be an adventure. Like in Wizard of Oz—remember? With Judy Garland?*

I did remember. He'd brought home a bootleg DVD of the film earlier that year and we'd stayed up until midnight watching it, engrossed.

*(Continued on page 2: Cinema)*

well, I notice your wrenching sobriety. There is talk and mockery of jaded, diminutive men with intent of gentle death- softly teeming, feeding on the flesh which dances before your eyes in curious revolution. Monotonous gazes influenced by a continuation of strategic privacy. There is valor in the velveteen iris of your deprecated advancements.

Poets lustful

Poets soft

Poet quiet amongst the distilled approaching hours of dawn

sizzling, hot, crispy fried fish i had for lunch. the well seasoned collard greens were bitter but contained a juice that can never be found in a can. the mac and cheese was delightful, it was perfectly baked to a degree. thank God i was home alone because i was able to smack each gooey shell between my teeth.

*(Continued on page 6: Resurrection)*



*Bright Out* Jawon Kang Kingston, PA

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(Continued from  
page 1: *Cinema*)

It was the first Western movie we'd seen together.

*Of course*, I replied.

So we moved. I didn't fully understand why my father was staying behind in Beijing, why he and my mother were apart and no longer spoke to each other except with words like *custody* and *settlement*. But I sensed, even back then, that moving to Australia was an act of escape. I knew they were both fleeing—from their marriage, from each other, from whatever had suddenly and irrevocably shattered between them.



At first, I found everything about Australia strange. In my mother's tiny hometown of Rockhampton, most people had never stepped foot outside of the Podunk neighbourhood in the Podunk city where they were born. To them, hearing me say I came from China was as shocking as hearing a green-skinned, six-limbed alien announce that they heralded from the moon. For the first few weeks after they bombarded me with questions—*where's China? What's it like over there? Is it true that you eat dogs and pray to Mao Zedong instead of God?*—but I never managed, in my faltering English, to stutter out a single answer.

But even more disconcerting than the culture shock was the absence of my father. It was strange to live without him, to not wake up to the sound of his radio blasting, or to pull my white shirts out of the laundry and find that he'd smuggled in a red sock and stained everything pink. He visited, of course—every few months he'd show up on the doorstep proffering a box of chocolates for me and a cheque for my mother. For the first few visits he even forced himself to be interested in our activities. He'd take me to the library, drive me to birthday parties, politely feign interest when my mother held him hostage with our endless list of complaints (no car, poor heating, intermittent electricity). Eventually, though, the visits grew less frequent. By the end of our third year there, he couldn't stop his eyes from

glassing over with boredom as I dutifully briefed him about my life at school. The boxes of chocolates started appearing in the bin, untouched.

Then, in the fourth year of our exile, my mother told me that we were going back to Beijing to visit.

I found China in a worse state than I had left it in. That was the year of major air pollution—when our plane touched down, I looked out of the window at what seemed like an apocalyptic wasteland. It was summer in Beijing, a scorching one, and as the stifling breeze crawled along the runway, swells of yellow dust billowed like ghosts. My father greeted us at the gate with pollution masks. When he drove us home, he switched on his headlights so the beam could scythe through the soupy air.

*I've been given a promotion*, he explained as he drove. *I'm spending more time at work now, a lot more time. But I'll still take you to the park on the weekends*, he added, like an afterthought. *You understand.*

I tried to understand. My father had always been busy, but he now worked such incredibly extensive hours that he often spread out a blanket and slept in his office. On the few occasions that I visited him there, he sat ramrod straight in his chair, refusing to make eye contact and replying to my questions with evasive monosyllables. On the weekends, he drove me to the park or to the museum and waited by the car while I finished amusing myself. Then he dropped me off and told my mother that we *really bonded together*, as if these awkward excursions were supposed to make up for years of paternal neglect.

But one day, about half a year after we'd forged this uncomfortable arrangement, we got lost on our way to a restaurant and found ourselves trapped in a dense maze of ramshackle buildings. My father was in a bad mood—something had happened at work, I guessed, although I knew better than to ask. His mouth was set into a tight line, his hands clenched so tightly around the steering wheel that his knuckles were white. We drove in terse silence, the sky

growing dark around us. Eventually, we reached a squat dirt building in the middle of nowhere—*Memory Film Centre*, the flickering neon sign proclaimed in Chinese. The rundown building looked more like a public toilet than a film center. *Now Playing....*

I squinted at the sign, incredulous. *Now Playing Wizard of Oz, starring Judy Garland.*

My father slammed on the brakes. *We're not going to the restaurant*, he said. *We're going to see a film.*

Inside, we bought our drinks and squeezed our way into the back row. As the halogen light bulb flickered off and the opening credits rolled across the stage, out of the corner of my eye I could see that my father had visibly relaxed. He had removed his stiff work blazer and, for the first time that I could remember, he had loosened his tie.

At the end of the movie, when Dorothy was bidding farewell to her friends in Oz, I leaned over to him and whispered: *do you remember? We've seen this one before.*

He didn't reply. On the screen, Dorothy was tapping her red shoes and reciting the magic incantation that would bring her back to Kansas. *There's no place like home*, she was chanting.

*Do you remember, Dad? When I was six?*

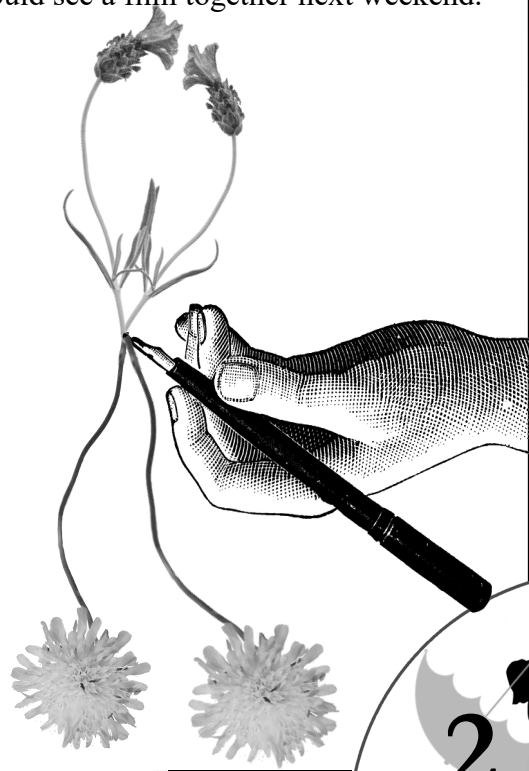
*There's no place like home.*

*It was the first Western film we saw together.*

I turned my head and saw tears glistening on my father's cheeks.

*There's no place like home.*

I never mentioned the tears. But later, sitting in the car, I asked him if we could see a film together next weekend.





## Scarecrow

### Pigeon in the Sky

Riley Moore

Gibsonia, PA

Tall Natalie

We used to see her there

Tall,

Tall Natalie

As if she didn't have a care

She used to dance on pigeons,

Their wings stretching out to  
catch her amidst the fluffy clouds

Tall,

Tall,

Tall Natalie

Now I see but a gravestone

Alone in a dark field

Noticed by everyone – ignored by  
all

Tall,

Tall,

Tall,

Tall Natalie

I saw the desolate Scarecrow with  
the purple – rimmed glasses ...

Grasping  
the hand of a little  
girl taller than the  
clouds

Tall,

Tall,

Tall,

Tall,

Tall Natalie

She wanted  
to run in the  
Olympics

She ran  
through desolate  
cornfields

Now her  
feet are buried in the mud, and she owns  
a cement factory

Tall,

Tall,

Tall,

Tall,

Tall,

Tall Natalie

No one came to her funeral

## No Fear

Lauren Azrin

White Plains, NY

Her hair warped in loops of frizz  
sprinkled chestnut

Parted through the top of her head like  
the path through a maze

Of bravery and courage

Ears hidden in a swarm of cinnamon  
locks

Hidden, but always there

Listening

No fear of others' judgment pressed upon  
her skin

Her skin

So smooth like caramel and almonds  
crunched together and molded into one to  
shape a face

Boxed glasses outstretched creating a  
symmetry between her coffee bean eyes  
and sloped nose

That radiate a kindness that floods the air  
A solemn look ties her lips into a neatly  
pressed bow

And a smile pins the edges upwards to  
form a crescent

A crescent moon surging rays of light into  
the darkness

The only being luminous enough in the  
depths of the night

To be noticed by the people down below

The only voice in a sea of somber silence

Her head held high like a marble statue

With no fear

In her coffee bean eyes

No fear

In her crescent moon lips

body seemed to reject

the brittle air. The

landscape had changed

before my very eyes; shifting from tall

trees of angry green that hid the wide,

blue sky, to fields of brilliant grass

infused with wildflowers of every color.

And then it was just rock. Orange and

gray and white swirling together into the

dirt as mountains loomed in front of me.

When I finally scrambled up to the top, it

was as if I had opened my eyes for the

very first time.

Ever since I first picked up a  
book, I have loved reading. I love how I  
can get lost in a captivating story and  
leave the world and simply forget. The  
emotion creates beauty for me. I have  
read stories that made me cry, made me  
laugh, made me angry, left me in awe.  
Because someone decided to create  
something out of nothing. Words make  
me feel human.

Never before had I been so aware  
of the sheer delicacy of something I had  
thought to be eternal. The Grand Teton

rose up and stood  
resiliently against  
the sky. I was so  
close - it felt as  
though I could  
trace every crease  
and bend in the  
rock with hands. I  
wanted to drag my  
own skin across  
the skin of this  
Earth; let my  
blood soak into

the cracks and empty spaces.

The singing, the ringing, the  
stinging never seems to cease. There is a  
whispering voice in the back of my head,  
encouraging me to record the things I see  
and feel. And so I do. I try. Sit and watch  
the world change. Let your heavy eyes  
droop and wrench open them again to see  
the difference. It's so still, so serene and  
stoic and graceful yet somehow hesitant,  
as if a breath is being held in, because of  
fear (always because of fear). I felt my  
heart beating softly, trying to remind me  
of the rocks and the voices. Spin above  
my head and float down gently in a sea of  
familiar beauty. I can't seem to



*Nothing Less*

Regina Caggiano

Simsbury, CT

## Mountains of Words

Lucie Green

Pittsburgh, PA

“These are things and one can love things.

But one cannot love words.”

- Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

I find beauty in the written word –  
in poetry and in novels, in songs  
and in stories. I find beauty in  
stories that are told from the heart, stories  
into which the authors have poured their  
souls.

I remember summiting Table  
Mountain. At 11,106 feet, it was the  
highest peak I had ever climbed, and my





recall all that I have to say. Mountains and flowers, lakes and rivers. The sun and the moon and *the world, the world is ending*, you know, because I've seen it in the sky.

As continental plates move down and sideways into the mantle beneath another plate, the earth's crust is folded and deformed by lateral compression to form a mountain range. Over time, wind and water, and all the greater forces erode at the foundation until there is nothing left. And then the process repeats itself. Creation of something out of nothing. As humans, we don't live long enough to see this happen with our own eyes. And so for me, mountains are the strength and stability that never fades.

Pencil to paper. More meaningful, more powerful, more romantic. Somehow we have been given this gift, one that allows us to reach up and far and wide and one that allows us to compress, tighter and tighter, accepting the coolness of shadows. I like to think my grasp is strong. I want to do more than force and bend, I want to capture the moments and the senses. My eyes feel heavy and I just want to make sure my awe and gratitude are known. I love the noise and the look and the simple release. Turn me sideways and let me know what you find. Something elegant and beautiful and unnecessary.

Yet, as I stared into what I saw as the heart of the earth, nothing had ever seemed so fragile before. The mountain was a mirror, and I, its reflection. I saw myself broken open through change and I knew. I knew that I was human and I knew that mountains were words and I knew that words were mountains. And I knew that I loved the mountains and I knew that I loved the words. In that moment, all I wanted in the world was to capture all that I felt and all that I saw. And as I desperately clung to my emotions, I realized that I didn't know how to keep them alive.

## Thinking of Aleppo

Catherine Buchanan  
Clarion, PA

I am thinking of a city buried in the east of the ancient world  
where silk strands were stretched and cut  
now burned at the edges.

I think of the songs sung in the citadel  
today drowned out by buzzing metal birds  
and crumbling of rubble.

It must choke like concrete leaded lungs going to bed  
every night waiting in the darkness  
for the screams of your child.

It must be like a static slap to look out at the world  
with a hand outstretched  
and not another to hold.



*Rain Shadow Effect* James Blume Summit, NJ

sticks  
Glow to the walls of my plum  
Bedroom no more, I guess...  
Stay - to see my clock's face scale  
The paint in metabolic evening light.  
Before my eyes  
Are sheetrock palaces painted ghostly blue.

I used to see chocolate feathers outlined in blue  
Nail polish and red lipstick quickly shed in the mirror's light.  
I would rub sticky fists to my tired eyes,  
To pity the makeup rag tasked with removing continents from her face. She sticks  
them into the wastebbin, from which I will later retrieve them, humming scales  
To mask the noise of the crinkling bag ripe with Proximity's plums.

I called her "Orchard" for the parsley and plums  
Which inexplicably gave her only oppressive blues,

But which seemed to me great gifts from on high. Her bathroom scale  
Used to flicker, and in a moment light  
With the proof of her heavy harvest. Sticky  
Maple and cream incredulously dripped from my eyes.

And it was somewhere between the wanting I's  
And the cornucopian trips with fistfuls of plums  
That I first heard her curse the red-hatched sticks  
Of table shirts - and the neatly-screwed  
numbers - and the blue  
Nail polish. I asked her why she endured, and there was phoenix light  
Behind her deep, grey, half-smirk, replete with glimmering scales.

## Persephone Waits at the Door

Anthony Christiana  
Hopatcong, NJ

In tangled hatches of sticks,  
And in woven patterns of grease-laid scales,  
She sheds her daily coil for blue LEDs and leather couches, her eyes  
Running purple like fleshy plums.  
She asks me to turn on the light.

I oblige, but can't help but ask myself:  
How much longer of this light,  
Anyway? Until my taught-skinned wick

She said  
"It is for you that I carry my worth-weight to please the scales  
Of green-suited men - and that I wipe the continents from my eyes  
Here in the artificial Light  
Of our second-rate suburbial painted plum.  
It is a color chosen if only for the sale we found over the current blue  
Of my heart. Does melancholy have a hue? For you, alone, I hope my love sticks..."

For you I will renounce clock-face darkness with bathroom mirror lights, and minor scales.

For you will forge great cities of calcium sticks. They will be my body,

and I will be their eyes.

Even when my palette is deep plum with the churning mix of earth bent on isotonic equilibrium,

I will persist. And for you, I will make sure that the sky will be light blue.

## Here Lies Lobster

Jiwon (Elizabeth) Im  
Mercersburg, PA

I grab the muddy shell of a lobster; “Freshly caught,” the guy at the market had boasted this morning. It squirms in my hands, making it hard for me to hold. The lobster’s beady black eyes bore into mine and its feeble tremble reverberates through my fingertips.

“Hurry up!” my sister complains from the living room.

*One, two, three. I used to count. Four, five, six. I planned my steps before walking when I saw an ant trail marching down the road. I tiptoed and kept my eyes on the ground, cautious not to step on them. As I passed the ant trail, I remembered a bedtime story my mom read to me, Gulliver’s Travels. I wondered, would they think of me as Lilliputians did of Gulliver? My heart swelled with happiness when I successfully crossed the trail without harming them. I was proud of my difference from the boys in my kindergarten class who tore crickets apart with grins on their faces.*

*Until I stepped on an ant.*

*I imagined a giant looming over me and bringing her foot down on top of my head. I imagined dying slowly.*

*I imagined the air leaving my lungs. I imagined the pain becoming so much that it swallowed me and then—finally—becoming no more.*

*I gasped.*

*My breathing uneven, I kneeled*

*on the ground to examine the outcome of my horrible mistake. Its body was limp. Its antennae were broken. Four legs still moved in the air as if it was confused. I got up, stung.*

*Perhaps if the ant didn’t move at all, it wouldn’t have been so horrifying. But it moved to grasp onto life. I consoled myself that it was a mistake.*

Ten years later, I stand over boiling water. “Just put it in!” my sister pipes up behind me, getting more frustrated. “It’s no big deal!” I finally drop the lobster in the water carefully, and close the lid. I can no longer tell who is trembling. The lobster? Me? As my hands lower closer to the bubbling water, the heat brushes the surface of my skin. I can’t stop staring at the steel-lined, glass lid that fogged up from the steam.

As I watch the amorphous bluish-brown lump inside turn a bright red that seems artificial, I want to run away. I want to throw myself onto my bed, pull a blanket over my head and hide. But I can’t. As it loses its earthy muddy mark, something in me shifts.

Here are two competing truths: I like eating lobsters and I don’t like killing lobsters.



Caution Wet Paint Laura Suarez Ridgefield, NJ

These two statements are mutually exclusive. *Were* mutually exclusive. My younger self judged one to be either a villain or a saint—one couldn’t be both. A person couldn’t possibly have a good heart while she stepped on an ant? But I never wanted to be a villain, and most lobster eaters aren’t ill-hearted. Nonetheless, it is hard to accept that I am not as faultless as I had hoped to be. In my idealized world, the muddy lobster I grabbed twenty minutes ago and the

lobster in the pot are not the same. The first one is not food and the latter *is*!

This time, I accept both truths.

The girl who cried on the streets for the death of an ant, now cooked a lobster for her family.

The lobster doesn’t move anymore.

*Here lies Lobster, and yesterday’s perspectives.*

## The Year As I Experienced It In Color

Maya Berardi  
Pittsburgh, PA

summer stumbled to its fatty toes as a toddler, green.

our mouths pucker to paint with berries, blue.

I guzzle your laughter like lemonade, yellow.

my fingertips chill stiffly on the doorknob in winter, pink.

your tongue became a fire poker, striking hard and sizzling, black.

a lame apology dropped from your teeth, purple.

I deny you silent concession, and permit myself rage, red.

as the color wheel becomes a dinner plate

and I devour it whole.



(Continued from page 1:  
**Resurrection**)

to wash it all down i had iced tea and the cubes of ice hitting the glass was music to my ears.

- writing this during SAT prep classes

2. she made me grit my teeth until they fell onto what would have been gums. yet i had been rotting away ever since i realized that my work of art could be found in a god damn flea market. losing my job to a piece of garnet because i am only a pebble you can find at your local ninety nine cent store. the fear of falling in a hole of rent that is months overdue would have become my reality. and as soon as i was hanging on a wire she used her words to lure me into world i had never considered. but of course the fluid movement of her hand against that college ruled paper had been the birth of greatness. instead of losing my job, i was able to create the most earth shattering novel with my most destructive competitor and come home with a thick paycheck at the end of the day.

- that song reminded me of you

3. you remind me that i need to be humble. you have seen the most ugliest character come out of me. it'll hit me at night on sunday. there's this show i like to watch and the main character will say something and she'll just sound like you. i press the power button on the remote control and i will choke on the foggy Californian air. and i begin to cry cause i remember that everything people know me for, what i have grown into, this title that i have is erased when i remember who i was a few years back. just because aging happened

doesn't mean my father's forgetfulness has left a mark on me. so why should i forget how i have treated you. you remind me of myself. i will call you and tell you we should get the tattoos now. your eye roll comes through the phone and i'll tell you i'll pick you up and we can have breakfast at 2 a.m. in the morning. meet you halfway to the tattoo shop. don't ask me why i called you now, let's just do this. i have always needed you. i need you to remind me that i exist in the most loving and hateful forms of human nature.

- i need you

4. there's a lot black women have to be mad about. but personally her history is gold. oh so gold, a young one like me has no right to go down chasing down her past. and still i write. our bodies they curve like routes that lead to unmapped locations. runaway runaway into his chambers. our men it is in their genes to not protect us. i wonder if the boys who sag now would have put as much effort into protecting our bodies during the 1800's. we've created a dynamic that is not an excuse for how my future husband could act. the opposite female she too hates me. once upon a time her husband found her body to take the shape of a washboard. a woman had taken her place, and now when i'm seen with her husband

all i receive is scornful looks. we're always preaching about love is love. there's so much confined anger in my melanin sometimes i step out and remember that my body once changed the entire east coast.

- for black dark skin girls only.

6. he takes me out on nice dinners like his daddy taught him right. good thing about me is i don't make up a fright. i'm good to him. i don't argue and i never look at other men. his devotion to me is equal to the one i have with God and it turns me off. i act the part a man like him needs. in this relationship i am the woman but he sees problems. this salary is for a girl who goes out with friends and comes back home with men who make seven figures. he makes four and he found out about how much i make and all hell broke loose. now my dinners aren't good enough and neither is my expensive body. he's out there working late for not much and still he pays the bills he says to me. oh i'm sorry dave i'm more productive than you ever could be even as you being an able bodied straight white male. i know my worth so he stops yelling at me with anger when we've already broken up. his words spit out bolts infused with pain about my dad and other irrelevant things.

then he goes i'm special to you. my tongue drips honey *but you aren't the woman in everyone one of my books.*

- for feminists.

if i was your boyfriend i'd be the one who'd ask to get me a cold beer from the fridge. sometimes you'd take my crap, but tonight you wouldn't. i'd slam the fridge door hard as i'd swallow down your "f\*\*k off". we'd like to drink and i'd chuck the beer at you hard enough so that it'd hurt but that you wouldn't bleed from my anger. the drink not being cold would push you to yell at me the way i do to you. i'm tender so i'd let you have mine and because of



*Dreaming and Drifting* Jennalynn Fung Chandler, AZ

our nature our fingers  
would touch and you'd  
never really understand a  
man's need for touch so you'd laugh like  
love ends once i start punching walls that  
remind me of you. after i came from that  
bar i'd find you shaking from a panic  
attack and i'd act as if everything was  
fine until you'd start heaving. my arms  
would hold you tight while i tease you  
about how panic attacks are only for pale  
skin. we'd talk about writing at midnight  
and call it love so that we could call it a  
night. the next day we'd wake up and say  
i hate you more times than we'd greet  
each other. i'd ponder why the shrivel  
down my spine felt beautiful as you told  
me to break my skull. we'd talk about  
writing at midnight everyday, call it love  
so that we could call it a night.

- for something little for us

### *Amelia's Amaranth*

Paris Cipollone  
Purchase, NY

She traveled her mundane route,  
when the flower picked her.

It secreted its enticement,  
dipping and swirling until  
it hit her:

fresh octopus from the Mediterranean  
Sea,  
crisp drops from the first Saharan rain,  
soothing spring blossoms in luscious  
meadows,  
sweet carnival cotton candy.

She followed its scent  
into a sea of flowers:  
cordial chrysanthemums,  
dotting daisies,  
zealous zephyranthes,  
each caressing her senses,  
each pinching away her vitality,  
only one flower offering.

She spotted her flower.  
The lonely amaranth  
reached, proud, toward the sky.

It curled its stalks  
to the wind's will,  
but didn't bend.

It suffered winter's wail  
and summer's scorn,  
but didn't perish.

It surpassed the garden's creation,  
but didn't bear time's burden.

She leaned forward.

Her fingers brushed its fuchsia petals  
and she inhaled

the amaranth's never ending  
life.

### *Caroline*

Charis Shin  
Woodcliff Lake, NJ

The smell starts to linger on  
your clothes even after you  
come home and put them  
through a few cycles in the wash—tumble  
dry, just like it says to on the tags tucked  
away in the inseams. And that smell, it  
bothers you, because the only way you  
really know how to get rid of it is to stop  
talking to Caroline. You like her; you've  
known each other since you've been in  
diapers, and tolerating that God awful  
smell seems like a small price to pay. She  
can make you break into laughter just by  
twisting her delicate features into a silly  
face that just doesn't seem to fit her, since  
she's got a pretty thoughtful look about  
her most of the time.

— — — — —  
***SHE'S LYING ON THE GROUND  
WITH HER LEGS PROPPED UP  
AGAINST THE WALL, STARING UP  
AT THE SKY, WATCHING PLANES  
PASS BY AND TRYING TO GUESS  
THE STORIES OF THE PASSENGERS  
THAT SHE CAN'T SEE.***  
— — — — —

But it's hard to keep all of that in  
mind when her words are swallowed up  
by that cloying scent. You can almost see  
it, wafting around her in the same way  
that ink or paint feathers away when a  
drop of it falls into water, kind of like  
tentacles that reach desperately out  
towards her. You've given up on trying to  
get them away from people for a while  
now, but because it's Caroline, you've  
been pushing them aside when you see  
them. The tentacles always seem to jolt in  
annoyance. They ease away for a bit, but  
you know that they won't leave forever.

You're sitting outside with her,  
cutting class because c'mon, it's June and  
school ends in a week and you have to  
loosen up a little, Caroline tells you.  
You're leaning against the brick wall near  
the back entrance, feeling your skin  
prickle every time a janitor or  
groundskeeper walks by, but nobody says  
anything. Caroline's not sitting normally;  
she doesn't get why people have chosen  
an upright position to be the go-to. She's  
lying on the ground with her legs propped  
up against the wall, staring up at the sky,


watching planes pass by  
and trying to guess the  
stories of the passengers that she can't  
see.

"Seat 15C. She's stuck in the  
middle seat, but that's okay, because she's  
on her way home to see her husband, so  
being sandwiched between a few  
strangers is the last thing on her mind. She  
got that promotion a few years ago, but it  
meant that they'd be sending her abroad  
to China to handle the marketing branch  
there, so this is her first time back in the  
States in a while. And she's excited,"  
Caroline looks at you out of the corner of  
her eye, "because she's making it back in  
time to celebrate the five year marriage  
anniversary, and she has all of these  
things planned. What do you think is  
waiting for her?"

"Well," you say, tilting your head  
back and feeling the brick wall dig into  
your neck. You close your eyes for a split  
second, trying to imagine Passenger 15C,  
a thin woman with a habit of fiddling with  
the ring on her finger. "Her husband, he's  
a nice guy and all, but a little bit wishy-  
washy, always struggling with  
commitment. And being away has made  
her gloss over all of his faults, it's tinged  
all of her memories with nostalgia so they  
seem a little bit sweeter than they actually  
were. She's got a fancy dinner reserved, at  
the restaurant where they had their first  
date, but little does she know that when  
she gets home, she's going to find him  
tangled up with another woman on a  
couch that's unfamiliar, 'cause he bought  
it while she was gone, and she looks







around and realizes that nothing looks the same anymore and—”

Caroline cuts you off. “That’s twisted,” she half smiles, “but I guess I should’ve expected that from you, huh?”

“Things like that happen. You’re just a serial sugar-coater.”

“I can think of worse things to be,” she retorts, and you can’t help but laugh because yes, there are so many worse things to be, and you’re glad that Caroline is as different from you as she is. And it’s in that split second that you think that when the smell gets so startlingly strong that you rear away from her. It’s such a sudden movement that you fall backwards against the brick, hitting your head, hard. It’s funny, you didn’t even realize that you were leaning towards her in the first place.

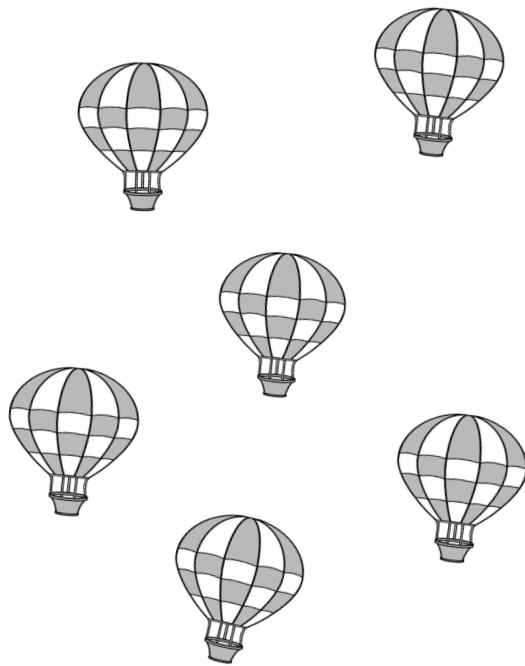
“Are you okay?” Terror flashes across Caroline’s face when you reach up to the back of your head, and your hand comes away dripping with blood. “Hey, what happened? You okay?” She props herself up on her elbows, reaching out to you. You try not to flinch away— that smell, it both nauseates and worries you, and you should be the one asking *her* if she’s okay.

In a flash, you remember the first time that you smelled that smell. It was back in the first grade and Caroline was there with you, even then. She was climbing the slide during recess, instead of going down it. She had asked you to slide down while she went up, so the two of you ended up in a pile of limbs somewhere along the middle. And it was probably around the fifteenth time that you were doing this when Caroline stopped, and squealed at you to come, hurry and come, because look at that little baby squirrel over there, don’t you see it, it’s on the lowest branch of that tree over there, and isn’t it just adorable.

Caroline had insisted on going closer, and she had grabbed your hands that were still a little bit grubby from digging into the dirt earlier to drag you closer. It was then, as you neared that little squirrel, that you smelled something sickly sweet, like fermenting

apples. You had looked around curiously, but you couldn’t see anything until you noticed thin, nearly transparent tendrils that you could trace back to the little squirrel. “Caroline—” you had started to say, because something was wrong, something was off, but she was too busy tiptoeing closer and closer.

She was just a few feet away, reaching out with an outstretched finger, and the smell had grown stronger and stronger until, in a disconcerting instant, in a flurry of feathers, the squirrel was plucked from the ground. As a hawk carried the squirrel away, its talons dug into soft flesh, and tufts of fur and drops of blood rained down onto Caroline’s horrified face. But you hardly noticed, because you realized, in a moment of alarm, that the smell was fading away as the hawk rose higher and higher into the sky.



Caroline had run over to you, sobbing, and you had plucked a piece of fluffy white fur out of her golden-streaked hair, but your mind was churning. You had smelled that eerie smell, you had known that something was wrong, before that something wrong had ever even happened. And that smell would haunt you for the next ten years. It appeared around your next door neighbor the day before he suffered a heart attack, your family friend minutes before he left a house party a little bit too tipsy, and your grandmother the night before she passed away.

Caroline is standing over you right now, cupping the back of your neck and dabbing at the blood with a wadded up napkin she finds in her pocket. That smell is all over her. You suck in a sharp breath, and Caroline pulls her hands away. “Did that hurt? I’m sorry. Are you okay?” You’re okay, you know you will be,

you just don’t know about her, and there’s a lump in your throat that is too hard to swallow.

“I want to fix that story,” you tell her, looking back up at the sky. The plane is all but gone, leaving behind nothing but a cloudy trail.

She humors you, the way she always does, choosing to temporarily forget about the gash on your neck and instead plopping down next to you. The two of you stare at the heavens, and you turn slightly so that you can see her uplifted face out of the corner of your eye. “Passenger 15C,” you take a deep breath. “She’s been through it all. She struggled being so far away from home, thrown into a country all by herself, but it’s made her stronger.”

Caroline hums with approval, and while she’s not looking, you flick one of the tendrils away from her wrist, praying that they’ll go away forever. “It’s been a while since she’s seen her husband, so she’s not quite sure what’ll happen. Or, I guess, *I’m* not really sure what’ll happen,” you say slowly. “But she’s boarded the plane anyway, a little nervous to return after so long. And she finds herself next to another lady who’s going to her son’s wedding, and the two of them end up talking. And you end up realizing that every single person on that plane has a place to be, a set of arms to come home to, and every single one of them is hoping to get home safely.”

The school bell rings, and the double doors open as students pour out of the building. Caroline hops up. “I forgot. I have to watch Brady tonight,” she says, gathering her things. “Mom and Dad are going out for dinner.” She laughs, reaches out and squeezes your hand. “That was a better end to your story, you know.” Then, in a flash, she’s gone, because Caroline is a whirlwind wherever she goes, running towards the parking lot. She bumps into a few friends on the way, carrying the scent away with her, and you watch her as she gets smaller and smaller in the distance.

You feel sick to your stomach. You hope she’ll get home safely too.



## Bliss

Cecilia Innis  
Chesapeake, VA

Bliss is like falling.

The other day I received a glimpse of  
good in the world,  
and I think it's safe to say I was  
happy.

I knew it was temporary.  
I knew it was the most fleeting thing  
since daylight,  
but it was good enough.

There is this sort of  
bliss?  
in a perpetual  
"under the weather"  
way of living.

It's not too awful to  
mull about like  
everything  
is awful  
until you get this  
gut-wrenching,  
fleeting,  
beautiful,  
moment of

joy.  
that shatters the whole world.  
that sets fire to your  
complacent despair.  
that doesn't let you shut off your brain  
that drags you out of bed in the morning.  
that  
gives you an undeniable will  
to feel.

So, naturally, you loath that  
momentary spike.  
That motivation,  
That persistence to live.

You see that all this time you were

Falling.

And that falling was like  
dreaming,  
(numb and unreal)  
until you hit rock bottom  
and have to figure out  
how in the  
*World*  
you're going to  
crawl to the top  
just to fall  
again.

## Piano Hands

Charis Shin  
Woodcliff Lake, NJ

He had beautiful hands—  
hands with long, slender  
fingers meant to caress  
ivory piano keys. Knuckles, she knew,  
were never the most flattering part of  
anyone's body— gnarled and raisin-like  
skin stretched over delicate bones. And  
yet, there was a certain beauty in the way  
his knuckles bent and flexed over the  
piano, so she protested bitterly when he  
became a mechanic to make ends meet.



*Rapunzel's Tower*

Julia McDonnell

West Chester, PA

"We've got bills to pay," he said  
with a matter-of-fact shrug. "And I can  
always play at home." From that day on,  
he woke up every morning with the sun.  
She could never rouse her own body early  
enough, rising only to give him a groggy  
kiss before her drowsiness pulled her  
back under. But she would wake up later,  
with the rising guilt in the pit of her  
stomach keeping her from eating  
breakfast.

She would sit at her office desk,  
tracing her finger in the thin layer of dust  
blanketing it as she stared at the blinking  
cursor on her laptop. She had thought,  
once, that it was the laptop that was the  
problem, and had bought a beautiful  
leather-bound notebook on a whim. But  
just a few days later, she spilled coffee on  
its thick, cream colored pages, and was  
filled with such inexplicable anger that  
she tried to tear the book to shreds. Its  
leather had refused to yield, and she sat  
and cried in the middle of the linoleum  
kitchen floor until he came home from  
work.

He knelt down next to her, pulling

her close to his heart,  
and its gentle beating  
soothed her until she could

feel the pieces of herself clicking back  
together. She clasped his hand in hers, and  
she saw how motor oil and grease had  
made permanent homes underneath his  
nails, how his palms were rough and  
weathered. Her distress must've shown on  
her face, because he laughed and lifted up  
her chin so she would meet his eyes.

"Just write, my dear." And then  
she understood that he had quit  
performing for her, so that she could sleep  
in on the mornings when gravity seemed

stronger than  
normal and  
dragged her mood  
down, so that she  
could stay home  
and write like she  
had dreamed of  
doing since  
childhood, while he  
tinkered with cars  
even though he had  
always been more  
of a bike person.

But there was a clamp around her  
creativity that tightened whenever she sat  
down to write, and that tightness would  
spread to her throat, preventing her from  
speaking her mind. At first, she blamed  
the pills that she took every morning—  
blamed them for the hollowness that  
would blanket her thoughts. And yet, she  
knew that she could not stop taking them.  
She remembered, one day, how she had  
watched a documentary about victims of  
severe hypothermia, how, when it got  
cold enough, the blood in their bodies  
would rush away from the extremities to  
the vital organs. Perhaps, she mused, that  
was what was happening to her. All of the  
energy backing her creativity was being  
sapped so that she could muster the  
strength to wake up on the days that the  
world had a bleak gray tint.

And so she could not write, no  
matter how hard she tried.

On one particular morning, she  
managed to get up as he did. He made her  
breakfast, as she fiddled with the coffee  
pot and tried to figure out where the  
bottle of creamer was, and then




## Yours Truly

Karen Lu

Eatontown, NJ

September 2, 1995



she waved him out the door with a promise that she would see him in a few hours. Her heart lightened when, as he pulled out of the driveway, he rolled down the window and blew her kiss, and she spent the next few hours watching blinking cursors and empty pages, waiting for him to come home. The stifling silence seemed to magnify with the ticking of the clock's second hand, as the light outside faded into a startling darkness.

But just as her impatience and confusion began to give way to panic, the phone's tinny ringing filled the empty house, and she felt so reassured by the sounds of something, anything, that she almost just let it ring through. Eventually, she picked it up, but once she heard the words of the stiff, formal voice on the other end, her hands began to tremble and the phone clattered back onto the receiver.

He never came home.

Two months after that day, she pulled out the same leather notebook for the first time in what seemed like years. Her hands shook as she flipped through its warped, coffee-stained pages, and almost without thinking, she reached for the pen resting on her nightstand. "Write for me." She could almost feel him whisper over her shoulder, could almost feel his piano hands wrap around hers, guiding the pen to meet the paper. "Write for me," he whispered again, as the cloudiness in her consciousness slowly washed away. "Write for me," he said a final time, shaking loose the stopper on her creativity.


And so she wrote.

Dear Linda,

How are you? How have you been faring lately? Please don't mind my terribly clichéd intro. I actually want to know how you've been doing recently since I haven't heard from you in quite a while. I don't have a TV in my room and the one in the shared living room's always dominated by a patient with bipolar disorder. He only likes to watch the news and *Animal Planet*. He watches them all day. This really isn't a good place to treat people with bipolar disorder because they don't teach him how to control his emotions. They let him do as he pleases. He's already injured almost everyone who'd tried to use the television. Every time, the nurses have to use sedatives in order to move him away from the TV. I've been beaten up by him too. It happened on the first day I came here. He kept on watching news about terrorist attacks, even though the images were too despairing to watch. The ground was on fire, the buildings were crumbling, and the streets were littered with trash. I remember there was a limping dog wandering back and forth in the ruins as well. I didn't know if it was rummaging for food, or searching for its master. I also didn't know what that cameraman was thinking, either. He kept on filming that dog. Why did he do that? Everyone in the living room was crying. There was a girl who hid her face in her hands while she cried. Some people left, some continued playing chess, but the atmosphere was heavy. I could practically feel the dense air. I had wanted to switch the channel, so I got beaten up by that guy. But don't worry, it was nothing serious. He only broke my nose.

Regardless, I don't think they would have channels that air the Paris Fashion Week either. It's been over for a while, right?

Where are you at now? Are you on your holidays yet? I remember you'd been saying you wanted to bring Matt to



Disney World. We'd been discussing that when he was younger. Kids always grow up so quickly. He wouldn't get scared by Donald Duck now, would he? I have to apologize to the both of you for that. I shouldn't have fooled around and tried to scare him when he was two years old. I had worn a shirt with Donald Duck on it at that time.

As I was thinking about writing to you yesterday, I had been writing rough drafts in my mind all day (I had to plan the letter in my head because they wouldn't let me use a pencil). I thought of Matt and Donald Duck, so I wanted to find that shirt I was wearing that year. You know I only have a few shirts, so I thought it would have been here. But I couldn't find it. I even went to ask Dr. Williams. I asked him if he they had seen a shirt with Donald Duck on it when they were checking in my bags when I came here. He replied very quickly, and said they didn't. I wanted him to really think about it, so he pulled out my admission records and handed them to me.

In my personal suitcase, there was a grey shirt, a pair of jeans, a light blue scarf, a blanket, a pair of combat boots, a pair of sneakers, a wolf figurine, and a photo of you and me. I don't quite remember when we took it, but you were holding onto me and I looked kind of startled—I was still afraid of cameras at that time. I'm still no good even now. I'll never make any progress.

"That's impossible. That shirt must have come with me." I'd said to Dr. Williams.

"Are you sure you packed that shirt? Were you the one that packed your stuff?" Dr. Williams had asked me.

I was then silenced. I wasn't sure. I wasn't the one who'd packed. *He* packed for me.

It was an old and battered shirt. He probably threw it away.

About them not letting me use a pencil to write, don't worry. It wasn't because I did anything bad with pencils before, it was just that the doctors and nurses here are really careful about things like that. When I had asked to



write a letter, they suggested for a nurse to help me record my thoughts, but I declined. Anyhow, I'm cramped up in my room in a hot September afternoon right now, writing to you with a plump nurse sitting at my side. She never took her eyes off of me in fear that I might suddenly plunge the sharp tip of the pencil into my neck or eye in search of death.

I tried to make her leave. I told her, "I won't do it. I won't try to kill myself."

First of all, I haven't thought about dying in quite a while. I already made a choice between life and death a long time ago. I chose death. But let me explain. Consider this, you've only tasted Coca Cola before but not Pepsi, so how could you make any distinction between them? How can you make a decision when you don't even fully understand the choices given to you?

Now that I've experienced both life and death, I can say this: life is a wonderful thing. I still have so many books that I want to read, so many movies to watch. I still want to taste your homemade recipes and visit you and Matt. I want to take walks by the sea, hand in hand with Matt running ahead of us and tugging us along, his little feet leaving behind cute footprints. He would run so quickly and so far, that we would have to yell for him to wait. He would dive into the freezing ocean, shivering at the cold. Nevertheless, he could swim against the current, driving forward, just like his mother—you. He would take after all your wonderful qualities.

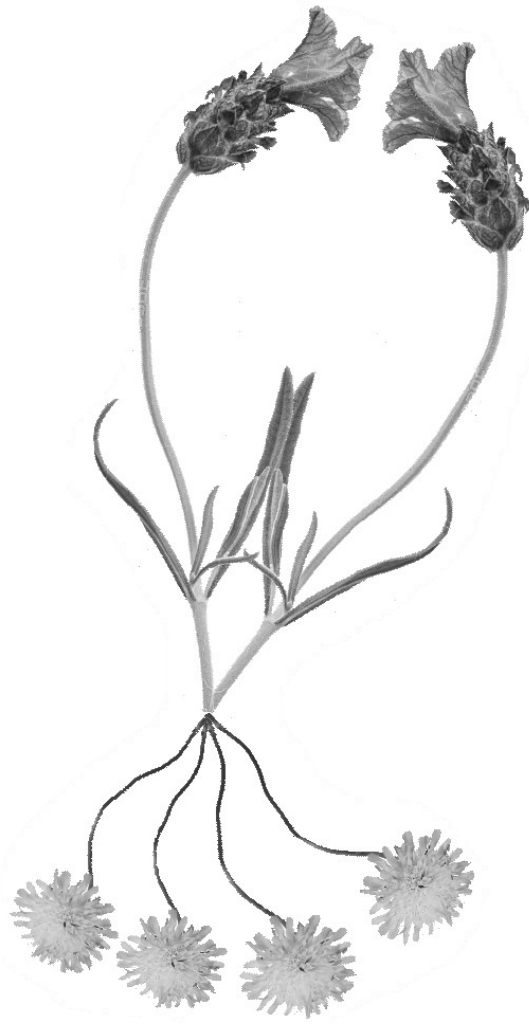
I digress. I was only informed that one could commit suicide with a pencil when the nurses brought it up. Who would even do that? Pencils are for writing, aren't they?

Yet, it is true that words can kill.

I really like the scratching sounds of pencil against paper. They remind me of the rustling of the leaves of the white oak we used to have in our yard. Do you remember? Mom used to love napping against that tree. We would lean against her, too, in the afternoons with

our arms tangled together. You always smelled like flowers. Not only flowers; you smelled like leaves and fresh earth. I had tried to find a scent like that at the candle store, but I couldn't describe it to the employee. However, he seemed to understand what I was trying to get at. He said it was a mix of orange blossom, alfalfa, peach, and tree ferns. I had one custom-made. It smells just like you.

I also recall that I had built a swing on that oak tree, from some old ropes and a slate from the broken boat. I had tried to build the same swing in our free space here a few days before, since there are barely any recreational activities here, but I wasn't able to do so. The security guards saw me when I tried to take the hammer from the storage room. They immediately dragged me back to my room and had Dr. Williams inject sedatives into my neck. After that incident, they spoke with me. They thought I was trying to commit suicide with that hammer.



Hammers are for building and fixing. Why would I do such a thing with a hammer?

Can't those people think of anything else other than suicide? Must they always assume that all of us here dream of nothing other than death?

If pain could be directly converted into death, then there would be no need for mental institutes in the world. We wouldn't need people like Dr. Williams. They would all lose their jobs and be forced to weed lawns and fields. Perhaps that *is* their job. They weed in our minds.

It's because of the savageness of misery that so many of us suffer from it in our heads, unable to weed it ourselves.

Anyway, back to what I was talking about before. The nursing home isn't bad at all. The Wi-Fi connection is stable and the scenery is pretty nice. You would love the sunset here, wouldn't you? Tell me. Reply to my letters.

After the swing incident, he sent me a radio. A portable one. The sound quality isn't the best, but it's a good way to pass time. I'm not using it anymore now because Dr. Williams took it away last night. He thought I had smashed the record disk to cut my wrists.

But it wasn't like that. I did break one of the records, but it wasn't like that.

I simply didn't like the songs on that record. I used the plastic knife I hid from lunch to cut myself.

After inspecting my wounds, Dr. Williams debunked his own theory about my method of suicide and decided to switch out the nurse that usually sent me my meals. So now, I have to face a much more experienced nurse. She's at least twice the size of me and always has a stony expression. Perhaps you've met her before. Her last name is Lee, and she has two sons. Does that ring a bell? She smokes, but I don't. Perhaps I would try. I should try to learn something new, develop new habits. Smoking, drinking, playing poker, or maybe something else? I'm not sure if I should have a clear goal or to simply live aimlessly. To strive for a destination, or to stop thinking and stop wanting altogether.

I'm starting to think that I shouldn't read so much, meet so many people, and speak with so many people. I shouldn't meditate or reflect in my free time as the nurses tell me to. Thinking too much can easily turn us into pessimists. After much consideration, I've come to a conclusion that I should throw away my ability of speech. It shouldn't be too difficult, for I've mastered the English language ten years earlier. Give me ten more years, and I should be able to completely throw my language abilities away.

Human languages don't make sense at all. Don't you think so?

The human language is vague.

I most admire the toddlers who are just learning to speak. They are able to express any of their thoughts in the clearest way possible no matter what. But with us, we only sound the surest when we say "I don't know."

What does Matt talk about nowadays? Does he tell you about his days at school? Does he complain about his teachers? Does he get along well with his classmates? Does he get jealous of kids that are able to play soccer with their fathers after school? Does he argue with you, and demand to know why you had him?

I know I'm already asking so much of you, but could you please treat him gently?

Just a little more gently.

I know both of you love him very much, but children are children. They don't understand that form of love. He stubbornly fights against the world and, when he injures himself, he would then think that your love is hurting him as well. We've all been through this, haven't we?

So please, treat him gently.

It's not that I believe that gentleness and love can truly change anything. Sometimes, they only make this world seem even more senseless. But at the same time, how would we survive without them? The world's too barren, yet too crowded.

I feel like my writing has begun to get worse. Perhaps I should ask for the nurses to check my spelling and grammar. I probably don't need to. You'd understand what I'm saying, right? The thoughts I'm trying to convey. I started learning later than you did, but my grades were still much better than yours. I remember we used to take French class together. When I would recite poems to you, you

would hug me and tell me that although you didn't understand what I was saying, you thought I was a genius and that you loved me.

I love you too. You mean everything to me. You must understand at least that, right?

Did you call me and leave voicemails?

Don't call me.

Reply to my letters. When was the last time you'd actually written anything on paper? When you signed the divorce papers?



*Heading Out* Aneesha Kumra Short Hills, NJ

I don't speed, I don't drink and drive, and I definitely haven't hit anyone with wine bottles. I get up at six o'clock every day, I make my own breakfast, I read, then I have lunch. After lunch, I would take walks and visit the garden. At five o'clock in the evening, I would go and visit the flowers that I'd gardened.

I'm doing very well. I just miss you so much while living a life of a prisoner.

I'm not complaining. I know I've been through much worse things in my life. It really was the worst. But I'm trying. I believe that I'll get better. I won't give up, and I'll get better.

I want to die. More than I've ever wanted to.

Yesterday, *he* came. We only spoke to each other briefly. He asked me what I was working on lately. I said I was writing poems. He looked very happy when I said that.

I will continue to send you my poems. I write all over my heart every day. Because I love you.

I try not to hold on to any hope.

I'm not feeling very well right now, it might be because of the side effects of the medication.

I really, really miss you. Has Matt grown taller again? I miss you both.



October 25, 1995

Dear Linda,

He visited again today. He finally spoke about you.

He said to me, "When you and I first met, my relationship with Linda had already begun to fall apart. That's why I went back; I wanted to relive that feeling I had when I met her for the first time."

To which I replied, "Love lasts only for a moment. After that, all there's left is tolerance and compromise."

Nurse Lee had left the room to us. He then asked me, "Is that what you really think?"

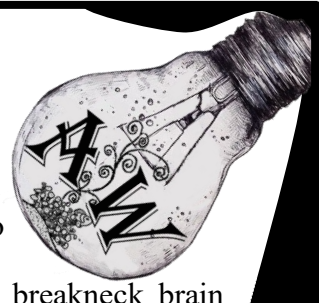
No. It wasn't.

I looked at him. He has beautiful eyes, they remind me of home, of a plain of warm earth filled with lush, green plants and colorful flowers. A piece of land full of hidden danger. It was like standing atop of a waterfall with turbulent tides at my feet. I dove, headfirst into the swirling current.

We embraced each other and we cried together.

I didn't expect him to say that he shouldn't have sent me here, alone. But he had no choice, he wanted me to get better because he thought I could. He hoped I could.

I told him with my arms still around him that I loved this world. I love every tree and leaf, every speck of dust, every ray of sunshine. I love the pack of wolves that had raised us, our mother, our siblings, the first gust of spring



breeze, moths that fling themselves into the fire, the smell of buttered popcorn, the fairy tales we used to read, poems, art. I love everything that I see, I love everything that I hear. There are so many wonderful things in this world, so many things worthy of loving.

Living. Life. Even simply existing is such a glorious thing.

I love you and Matt.

I love him, too.

I asked him, "Could we just stay in this moment forever?"

To stay in the moment when I loved the world. To make this moment last forever.

He started to cry harder. He said, "Linda is dead. She's been dead for five years. It isn't your fault. No one knew that a drunk driver was going to be speeding towards her when she crossed that street."

What was the use of telling me? What would change if I knew? I refuse to accept it. You were my family and my closest friend. Without you, I am nothing.

My life ended the same moment yours did.

"She didn't blame you. She said you were brave, that you were battling against your weaknesses this whole time."

You've given me the perfect answer.

I have been consumed with fighting against my weaknesses my whole life. It sounds so heroic as if I'm a warrior that's been battling against the hideous beasts.

I guess I must come to a conclusion. I've told you everything about me, so please don't mind such a short letter.

And please don't mind all of the letters I've been sending you.

It won't be happening again.

I'll be leaving, too. I'll be treading against the night to welcome the dawn. I will become another speck of dirt in the earth, and a butterfly will carry me somewhere far, far away. As its wings flap ceaselessly, I will fall into a

peaceful sleep amidst the hurricane. I'll be thinking of you, of Matt, and of him.

So please, don't set up a grave for me. There's no need of memorial for my lifeless soul because by then, I will be part of this world already. Part of the tree and leaf I fell in love with, part of the flowers, part of the drifting clouds in the sky.

I'm no longer fearful.

Yours truly.

## An Anatomical Order

Maya Berardi  
Pittsburgh, PA

in biology, we learned genus and species and the words tasted delicious in my mouth.

*genus, species* I whispered then renamed my cat *felis* with so much scientific grandeur.

the next day in class we awed as we touched skull. real, an elk's, hard and white like kitchen countertop.

then driving home I passed a farm, the blur of a horses flicking tail and a sheep's soft mass,

and Darwin would've been so proud I saw them under proper labels, as *equus, ovis*, and despite the warmth, the farmer's hand,

the moonish eyes, the tongue, the bleating birth

mourns, the bells tinkling arrival or silent when folded in sleep, underneath it all, only bone.

## So Different Yet the Same

Allison Lin  
Albany, NY

Whether we're plumbers for the average American household toilet, Con Edison workers figuring out why the damned plug isn't working, landlords complaining about the tardiness that magically overcomes their tenants when payday comes rolling around, or CEOs of prodigious companies overseas, we are all human.

Homo sapiens. A species prone to incomparable sensation, breakneck brain function, and authoritative decision-making capabilities. A species with quirks beyond imaginable and a drive genetically enhanced for optimum survival. But the fundamental life question still comes into play each time we look out the window at any vast expanse of greenery or sweeping plane of water. Why are we human? How are we different than the deer that roam about on highways, the dogs we have domesticated, the pigs and chickens we slaughter for their meat? How are we different than our college dorm mates, that random passenger on the bus, our grad school English Literature professor? Why are we who we are? Why am I me?

Some argue that it's science that defines who we are. Anatomy. The inside of a human is so pungently distinctive from that of an ape's, or a chimpanzee's, or even another human's. Firm advocates of science focus on the brain, a human's proudest organ, when searching for an answer to the basic philosophical query. The human brain is the largest of all animals when it is compared to the corresponding body size. One-tenth of our entire body is comprised of this one organ that operates for us, thinks for us, prepares for us, reacts for us.

Human brains have about 5 main sections. The right and left hemispheres are split by the corpus callosum, a wide length of fibers bridging between the two sides. In front is the aptly named frontal lobe, which harbors personality and association areas for thoughts and memories. On the top of our skull lies the parietal lobe, maintaining speech and understanding. Above our ears are the human temporal lobes, coordinating the sensory sites for hearing. Hidden underneath the back of our skulls, like an unpolished gem, is the occipital lobe, in charge of visual acuity and corresponding sensory phenomena. The final and perhaps most important part of the brain sojourns beneath all the lobes, decisively leading down into the spinal cord. Our limbic system and brainstem, made up of some seemingly insignificant

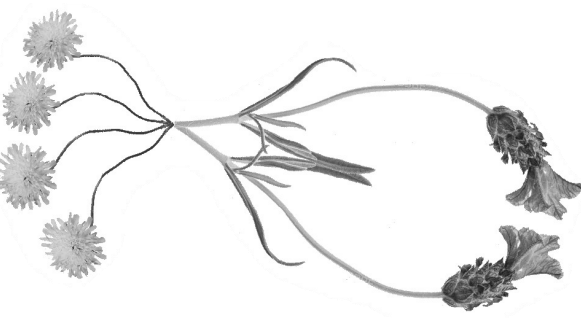


organs, don't look it, but contribute a huge amount to our overall well-being and survival. The amygdala manages all the nasty emotions like anger, fear, and surprise. You don't want this to be triggered, especially not in a hormonal female. Gentlemen, take note. On a more serious note, the medulla oblongata, a funny name, has a not so funny function. If disturbed, this thing could mess up your involuntary bodily functions, such as your eyes blinking, your nose breathing, and yes, your heart beating. Next up, the cerebellum, commonly (and jokingly) referred to by many biologists as the "little brain," controls basic motor skills and balance. More fine-tuned motor skills are managed by the central nervous system, through the passage of motor neurons firing after receiving 'messages' from sensory neurons located throughout your body.

This collaboration of organelles and cells make, as scientists so fervently claim, humans human. They claim it to be science that can explain why we are smarter than other animals, why we can form civilizations, why we can utilize technology to its fullest potential. And that part may be true. But then you ask. Why is it that we don't practice cannibalism most of the time? Why is it that we have specific gender roles, some more severe than others? Why is it that we have a hierarchy where the poor and deplorable suffer while the rich and sometimes undeserving benefit? Those questions can't be answered by science, and while biologists and chemists may sit scratching their heads, you can be open-minded. Since science can't answer all of our philosophical uncertainties, let us look for a different approach. See the human through another lens.

Language. Humans have a written and spoken language, unlike the animals. We are unique in that we can speak, record, and manipulate a conjoined set of strokes on a piece of paper to gather meaning from it. Global evidence can be seen in the studies done by renowned professors and researchers worldwide on children raised without human contact, either in isolation or by

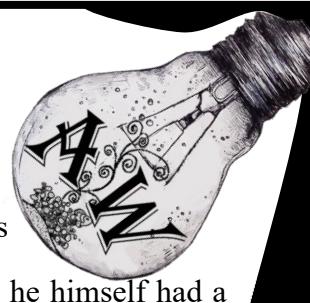
another species. The studies proved that humans have a distinct learning age for language, proving right (or wrong) the hypotheses of both John Locke, who proposed the ability to learn language is possible despite age, and Noam Chomsky, who promoted the idea of an innate language acquisition device at birth. Speaking individually, a person's language can set them apart from so many others. Communication relies heavily on the ability to understand each other, and language is the primary factor in how we comprehend each other. We have over 6,900 languages in the world, not counting the hundreds of dialects (from different parts of the country where the mother language is spoken) that have formed over the years. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Russian, Hindu, Swahili, British, English, just to name a few. Thus we can be divided from the animals and into smaller groups, but how can each one of us distinguish one another from the next person who also speaks our dialect? Language is who we are, but if you think about it, is that all really you amount to? I believe that we are more than just the words that come out of our mouth and the way they come out.



Religion. After all, we fight great wars for it. Why wouldn't it be able to explain why we are who we are? You are what you believe in, as so many great gurus have once said. A frame of mind. A set of values. We'll never know if animals have religion like ours, but it can be affirmatively said that ours is the most intricate of them all. Religion has shaped world history so immensely during the era of the Earth. Animism that worshiped nature and spirits, Roman paganism that featured 12 gods and goddesses based off of Ancient Greek mythology, Confucianism that stressed filial piety and education, and a plethora of others. Religious 'homelands' were sacred to a specific sect of people and taking that away from them meant war. The

Crusades, fought between Muslims and Christians, waged thousands of people against each other in order to secure Jerusalem, or the more current Palestinian-Israeli conflict for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Shi'a and Sunni Muslims constantly instigated clashes with the opposing party, the reason being their dissimilar views on Islam. Hereditary disputes led to civil war in tens of hundreds of small city-states. Imperialism wasn't much of a religion, but it can readily be classified as a belief that led countries to oppressive tactics in an attempt to satisfy their overwhelming greed. The Spanish believed that they were superior to the Native Americans, and so slaughtered and displaced them without so much a moment's hesitation. White man's burden was a similar belief that caused Rudyard Kipling to transcribe the now famous poem under the same name as the ideology, then leading to European country after European country to go out into the world and force their way into lands that were already securely inhabited. Nevertheless, religion is only another part of your mindset, however dominant it may be in some people. It could never account for your entire being. Thus, our original question remains uncovered- and unanswered. Let us continue pursuing that elusive definition.

What about emotion? True, the joys and sadness of life do make up a lot of who we are. In various studies about 'feral children' from around the world, it has been discovered that children who were raised without human contact whatsoever were generally incapable of experiencing emotion as fully as 'normal' humans do. Compassion, kindness, anger, happiness, depression, shame, guilt, sorrow, joy, the list goes on. And on. Ancient Greek mythology noted emotions such as revenge, spite, and envy to be illnesses that would plague mankind for millennia. Sumerian, Roman, and early Olmec and Aztec polytheistic gods were excruciatingly fickle, a quality given to them by the original creators of oratory myth, in what many historians believe to be an attempt to humanize them. Obviously, they play a huge



part in the lifestyle of humanity, and contribute principally to how we can separate ourselves from other species that roam the planet. Each person can respond to the same stimulus differently. While you may start wrinkling your nose in disgust at a cheesy romance film, the next person can just as easily begin crying hysterically at the heartfelt tone of the movie. You might experience high indifference at a typical city landscape, while I might 'ooh' and 'aah' with delight.

Emotions make us the same, yet at the same time they set us apart from one another. Closely linked with personality, emotions are the silent but deadly catalyst of all levels of conflict: physical, mental, and verbal. However, they can only account for what you do in the present. Only your 'now' is affected by your emotions; only in your present can you react to the stimuli thrown your way. Almost there, but not quite.

Memories? Interesting take. We will never know for sure, but we can suppose that animals do not have the same encoding proficiencies as us. The sheer size difference in our brains gives further evidence that our memories as humans are much more detailed and vivid than those of the animals. As science would have it, we have much greater capacity for both trivial and substantial information; our power to retain knowledge of past events is unequalled in the animal kingdom. Each one of us has a unique collection of memories from our past; no one's "full stack" is quite the same. Our hippocampus directs the short-term memory, before it is filed away into long term memories in the previously discussed association areas. We are generally able to remember our past after the age of 3 or 4.

Before that is a blur scientists label the infantile amnesia

period, where you really can't recall anything because your brain hasn't developed enough. After that, our memory spans anything and everything, but still varying depending on personal neurological characteristics. Usually flashbulb memories, or memories that stand out strongly because of their link to a particular emotion or feeling, make up the majority of what we can recollect from our earlier years in life. For instance, I can remember my first day in pre-kindergarten, when I met my best friend for the first time. I remember the colors of the foam puzzle carpet that lay strewn across the floor, the wooden smell of the individual cubbies, and even the tiny pink and white shoes I was wearing at the time. I can remember painting strange twisted roses with my childhood friend as a gift for our second-grade teacher, the pride I felt when the blob of red paint on the page took on a shape that resembled less an amoeba and more a flower. My best friend's mom's daycare; the white rickety stairs leading down to the basement; the soft luminosity of the bathroom light that he always claimed he would change but never did; the bleached lace-filled room upstairs he and I would go to study for an upcoming test by quizzing each other relentlessly. Just as



*Mariposa* Abigail Dehney Elizabethtown, PA

how my memories reflect my life and the things important to me, my brother's memories reflect his. Maybe he remembers with utmost clarity the first day he fell into the pond by our house, the frigid air, the laughter of his friends on the banks, the weight of his clothes dragging him down. Maybe he remembers the regret at being team captain and not choosing one particular boy to be in his group, because that boy

was always alone, and then realizing that boy's cousin had just died and he himself had a strong learning deficiency. Wait. That's actually my memory, but you get the idea. Our memories make us who we are. And they define us from the other animal species. Personally, I think memories are a great indication of who we really are. They hold snapshots of our world: the things we hold closest to our heart, the stimuli from the outside world, our reactions to them, our perceptions of the thoughts of others, our personality, our family, our friends. Distinct from all else, your memories are something that can never be taken away from you by another person. They're yours and only yours. They're your gift from that greater being up there spinning our fates.

But then the argument claims that it's only your past. The older you are, the more memories you will accumulate over the years, but the same also applies to the opposite: younger people have fewer memories. So the young look towards the future, which is not encompassed under the span of what you can remember. Therefore, memories alone can't be the answer.

Alone. That's the key. If just memories cannot answer the question of who we are, why not combine memories, emotions, physiology, language, and religion. Together they have the power to explain life's greatest and most essential inquiry. Why are we who we are? What makes us who we are? Your emotions, paving the way sporadically with highs and lows. Your memories, cradling your past as gently as the barely-there touch of a mother to her newborn. Your language and your religion, boosting the emotive quality of the present. Your physiology, representing the foundation of your future, and your personality formulating the details along the road. Your world, your life, your... you.



## Rituals

Malia Chung  
Milton, MA

“When elephants encounter the skeleton of an elephant out in the open, they methodically take up each of the bones and distribute them, in a ponderous ceremony, over the neighboring acres.”

- Lewis Thomas, *Lives of a Cell*

Into a clearing the herd moves, its gentle hulk, its ghostly shadow, pausing in hushed hesitation before the body, now collapsed to a modest pile, bleached and brittle, skinned ears like ocean Rays.

The elephants curl their trunks around bones in eerie kindness, exploring holes in the skeleton.

One trunk latches onto a femur, rocking it back and forth, dried joints.

A bird lets loose a mournful call from across the watering hole, stirring them

from this study of grief, this recognition of their own existence, before lumbering back into their lives.

## My Goddamn Pink House

Kaya Dierks  
San Francisco, CA

I live smack-dab in the middle of Nowhere, Ohio: twelve square miles of bobbing rooftops and soggy fold-up lawn chairs wrapped in sticky ribbons of interstate. My town's like a city stretched and pulled into distortion — houses and trailers dotted across an endless highway.

It's a place made of tar roadways, hot and tacky like bad black licorice. Of rusty bitter water and grimy plastic garden gnomes. Greasy windows, crinkled metal. Fried chicken that comes in a bucket.

Ohio's like molasses — syrupy, slow. People just get *stuck*.

“Eddie,” Kimberley calls. “Get plates.”

She's making breakfast, smearing floppy bacon around in fat and flipping doughy pancakes. Her cigarette dangles out of the corner of her mouth, smoke curling into her hair.

Kimberley's my sister. She's nineteen, and she's the one who remembers to buy the toilet paper. She works at the Payless, tucking scattered shoes into mashed cardboard boxes.

“We're out of plates,” Edward says, stealing a bag of chips. “And you shouldn't smoke indoors.”

“Ed, you can't eat crap and then talk about health.”

“Uhhh...Fair.”

My brother's full name is Edward John George Baker — you know, like a bunch of British kings mashed together. He's frumpy and kind of chubby and a huge pushover, and the only resemblance I see to royalty is that he sometimes stutters like George VI. But Kimberley says the name fits him. He's going to get out of here.

“Taylor, have some eggs.” Kimberley flops scrambled eggs into a pink plastic cup. “We're out of plates. Get a fork from the bin.”

“I don't want any eggs.” Taylor rubs her lips together, coating them in matte pink. She checks her reflection in a spoon.

“Eat the eggs.”

Taylor's the youngest. She just got platform heels and she's been hobbling around all summer. Like she doesn't know how to use her legs.

“Kathy,” Kimberley says to me. “Take a plate to Momma.”

And then there's me — Kathy. Katherine. I'm the kind of girl you forget about. I've got straight brown hair and sun-stained reddish freckled skin, little nicks littered across my forehead from where I've picked at my pimples. I'm tallish and steal Edward's oversized Star Wars t-shirts because they hide my breasts. And I like Fritos.

“Kath,” Kimberley nudges me.

“The plate.”

“Make Edward do it,” I say.

“Hey, I thought we didn't have any more plates,” Taylor whines, a piece of egg stuck to the corner of her mouth. “I ate dinner on a *Tupperware lid*.”

“It's for Momma,” Kimberley shrugs.

“You're *stupid*,” Taylor huffs. “Look, you even gave her the best bacon.”

“Taylor...” Edward sighs, picking up Momma's plate.

“It's not like she'll even *look* at it,” I snort.

“C'mon, Kath. Shut up.”

With my Momma, there's no nice way to put it: She's been dead for five years.

*Not actually.*

As in, she's still here. Still fat and meat and bone, still blood and flesh. Heart still jumping in her ribcage, fluttering in her wrists, creaking in her chest. Still made of muscles shifting under skin and sour breath.

But trust me. She's not *alive*.

“Let's paint again today,” Kimberley decides.

“It's dry?” I sigh.

“Yeah.”

The painting thing is Kimberley's project. Momma loves flamingos, so Kimberley has been repainting the whole house pink. Not a blush pink, either, but this bright fluorescent color that looks like highlighter barf.

I don't really get it. Like, a neon house.


“Make Edward do it.” I rub my sweaty palms down my jeans.

“Katherine!”

“Alright, alright. I'm coming.”

Kimberley peels open tubs of gloss hot fuchsia. The paint's the cheap stuff, moldy and clumpy. It smells of sour milk and hand sanitizer mixed into a soggy puddle.

I smear the paint onto the roller, then glop it over the wood. In a



few hours, the surface will fracture, gloss crinkling like aluminum foil. The paint keeps bubbling and peeling, cracking over the wood, so we keep having to start over. But Kimberley doesn't care. She rolls her paint on smooth, covering the splintering edges.

"Kimberley—"

"Oh, get over it."



On Sunday, Kimberley decides to go out and get a Denny's steak for Momma. It's thick and reeks of butter and blood. It's even got a little lump of potatoes sitting on the side. Kimberley pays for it with her last, crinkled, ten dollar bill.

"Taylor, take it to Momma," Kimberley says, pressing the styrofoam box into Taylor's hands. "She likes you best, God knows why."

Taylor walks up to Momma's door, resting her fingers over the brass knob. Pauses.

"I don't know," she whispers.

"Go on," Edward says. "It's alright."

She pushes the door open. The hinges whine. Momma's laying on the bed, turned away. I can count the brittle knobs of her spine through t-shirt. The television is on mute, pixelated screen flat and flashy. The images flutter like butterflies over Momma's glassy, open eyes. Yesterday's breakfast sits on her bedside, cold, the bacon soggy from congealed fat.

Momma's so thin that her bones look two sizes too big, her delicate skin barely stretched over her skeleton. Her shoulder blades are sharp under her shirt, prominent like angel's wings. Her eyes bulge like grapes, too fat for her starved skull. It's like her insides have been scooped out, and she's just left as a shell, a carcass.

Taylor strokes a greasy clump of hair from Momma's face, her fingers gentle. I'm careful to breathe. Like Momma could just blow away. I squeeze at the fat of Edward's arm, digging my nails in, feeling his tendons pop over his bones as he squirms. I can feel

his pulse shuttering under my fingers, alive.

"Ouch, Kath," he whispers.

"Hey, Momma," Taylor says, laying a hand on her bony shoulder.

"We've got some food."

"Is that my Miracle?" Momma's voice is rusty and wispy, broken. "Taylor, Taylor."

"Momma, eat," Taylor places the Styrofoam package in her hands. "You must be hungry."

"Oh, my little Miracle. You know you're Momma's little Miracle? Yes, you are. My Taylor." Momma sighs.

"Momma, please. We got this for you. Denny's. Please. You *loved* steak."

"Know why? Because — everyone said that — that it wasn't possible. That I was too old. And I said, I said to your Daddy, 'Let's hope for a miracle.' And here you are." Momma pets Taylor's hair, her knuckles swollen yet boney. "Taylor."


"Momma, please eat," Taylor whispers, forcing a fork into Momma's limp hand. Momma's muscles are like uncooked dough, the fork flopping through her fingers. "Eat."

"Taylor, when you were born, your Daddy said, 'Oh, Suzanna, it's a God-Damn Miracle baby.' Jus' like that, a God-Damn Miracle. Oh, Taylor," she sighs. "I miss your Daddy, I do. But he'll be back — he'll be back, see, because he needs to see his Miracle Baby. He just *has* to. He'll come back in no time, see, because a Daddy like that, he just can't - won't ever leave without seeing his little God-Damn Miracle."

"Please, Momma. Just a bite." But Momma's gone now. "Please, for me."

"Your Daddy's just a little lost, but he's searching for his home. Right by his Taylor." Momma smiles, her chapped lips cracking. "He'll come back! I know it, he'll *come!*" Momma squeezes Taylor's knuckles together until they turn white. "Promise me, God-Damn-Miracle, *promise* that you'll stay until he comes! You *gotta* — because he's *comin'* for you!"

"Don't worry, Momma, I'm not going to leave," Taylor mumbles,



dropping the fork and slumping. She places the food on Momma's bedside table, sighing. "We're not going anywhere."



It's hot outside, the summer fat and heavy. The heat seeps into my joints, curls in my lungs, presses into my skin. The air hangs, unmoving, thick as cheesecake. I'm stuck painting again, drops of sweat rolling between my breasts. Sunburn is splashed over Kimberley's nose and neck.

We've only done a little bit of the painting, and have been covering the wood in random rectangular patches, so our house looks like it's wrapped in a strange sort of pink quilt. Kimberley's next to me, half-dried paint peeling off her hand. My Dr. Pepper is sweating in my hand, tears of water condensing on the can's sides.

"Hey, Kimberley?" I ask. "Why are we doing this?"

"Because." She puffs on her cigarette. "I want a goddamn pink house."

"Momma won't ever see it, you know."

"Shut up and *paint*, Kath."





Kimberley struggles with her lighter, her hands fumbling over the catch. Her fingers slip once, twice.

"Here," Edward says. His fingers are sure as he flicks the switch. He presses the dancing flame to her dangling cigarette. Kimberley puffs lazily.

"Thanks."

He sighs. "You should quit."

She blows smoke in his face.

"Shut up, Eddie."

"He's right," I whisper. "He just doesn't want you to *die*, Kimberley."

"I'm not going to die," Kimberley huffs, shifting her weight. "Smoking can't take me down."

Kimberley started smoking when Dad left. She went out for a bit and came back with mint toothpaste and a pack of Camels. I don't know who'd sell cigarettes to a fifteen year old wearing a frayed Bobcats baseball cap and cherry flavored drugstore lipgloss.

"Kimberley, would you ever let me smoke?" Edward asks, quiet. Kimberley chuckles, scuffing her shoe against the ground. "I'm *serious*."

"No," Kimberley says, crossing her arms.

"So *why*? Tell me. *Why* are you—" Edward exhales, shaky. "Just *tell* me."

"Because," Kimberley says.

"Because *why*?"

"I might as well live my life how I want to," Kimberley says, staring at the half-pink house. Her eyes are glassy, shaded.

"You want to *die*? Just go one random day?"

"What does it *matter*?" Kimberley chuckles weakly. "I don't have a future."

"Kimberley, that's." Edward sighs, running a hand through his hair. "That's *not*. True."

"Oh, Ed," Kimberley breathes. She smiles. Tiny, sad. "You're so *sweet*, you know that?" She takes a last puff, smoke curling artfully over her ears. She grinds the smoking butt into the ground with the tip of her sneaker. "So *goddamn* sweet." She flips open her pack, pulls out a fresh cigarette. Sticks it

between her lips. "Now give me a light, would you?"

"I...*Kimberley*."

"Kathy, then."

I just stare at her. She's got straight brown-blond hair, her skin tanned to a permanent, crinkled crimson. Eyes a hazel like confused mud. There's a gap between her two front teeth, big enough you could slide a penny through it.

Dad was going to have it fixed for her.

"Any year now," Kimberley says.

"Okay."

I grip the lighter, flick it. Watch the little flame flicker in the crisp sunset air. Press it to Kimberley's cigarette. She inhales, long, holding for a few seconds before slowly exhaling, eyes pressed shut. Smoke drifts between her lips like a whisper.



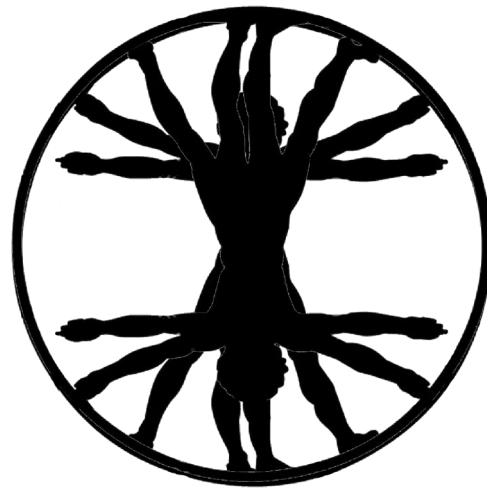
Today the paint is like mucous — sticky, clumpy, runny. Kimberley clamps down on the cigarette between her teeth and sucks in.

"Kath," she breathes, looking up and squinting. "We're almost halfway."

I look up. The pink is practically radioactive puke: It's hideous.

"Yeah. I guess we are," I say.

Kimberley traces the paint, where the gloss shell is splintering. "Momma's gonna love it."



"You think so?" I stare at the dripping paint. "You *really* think she's gonna come out here and see this?"

"Kath, I don't just think." Kimberley exhales long, smoke drifting out of her mouth and resting in the hot air. She grins. Sincere and small. "God, I *know* so."



Momma is getting worse, and

nobody knows what to do.

Kimberley brings the food in today. She opens the door, holding a floppy styrofoam takeout steak. Momma just stares right through her, like she isn't even there.

"Momma," she whispers. "It's time to eat."

"Is that my Miracle?" Momma asks, unmoving. "Taylor?"

"No, Momma, it's me," Kimberley says, shifting closer to her. "Kimberley."

"Taylor?"

"No, Taylor's in her room."

"Oh." She pauses, then stares at Kimberley, eyes milky. "My Taylor."

"*Kimberley*," Kimberley corrects. She opens the takeout box and unfolds the napkin, placing it on Momma's lap. She presses a plastic fork into Momma's fist. "Eat."

"My Taylor," Momma says. "My miracle." She pets Kimberley's boney hand, empty eyes staring into the paint of the wall.

"Momma, I'm Kimberley," Kimberley argues, voice strained. "Kimberley. Not Taylor. *Kimberley*."

"Everyone said that — that it wasn't possible," Momma mutters. "That I was too old. And I said, I said to your Daddy, 'Let's hope for a miracle.' And here you are. My Taylor."

Kimberley sighs, closing the takeout box. She pauses, pressing her eyes shut.

"I know, Momma," she whispers, defeated. "I *know*."



It happens on a Saturday.

I get home from my shift at Happy Joe's, apron hanging off my neck, greasy bag of takeout in my hands. I push the door open and shuffle through.

"Kath?" Taylor asks, looking up from her homework. "Do you have food?"

"Yeah," I say. "Here." I slide a soggy burger over, slouching into a seat. We sit, chewing in silence.

"*Death of a Salesman*," Taylor announces, "has got to be the

stupidest thing ever  
written.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I steal one of her  
fries.

“Like, a dude just offs himself.  
It’s plain stupid.”

“Sometimes stuff isn’t supposed  
to make sense. That’s just life.”

Taylor stares at me, Coke halfway  
to her lips.

“You know what, Kath?” She  
frowns. “You’re pretty smart, for a stupid  
person.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Seriously.”

“Shut up, Taylor.” I grin at her.  
“Take some of this to Momma, okay?”

“Fine.” She grabs the bag and  
walks down the hallway. I hear the door  
creak open. And then — a shriek, raw  
and red, terrified.

“Taylor?” I ask, jogging towards  
Momma’s room, pushing open the door.  
“Taylor? Taylor, what’s happen—*Oh,  
God.*”

“Kath,” Taylor’s eyes are red.  
“Kath — she’s. *She’s* —”

The funeral is small. We stand  
under a blue tarp tent, priest sweating in  
his robes and scratching his stiff collar. A  
dog won’t stop barking.

Momma rests in a coffin, her  
broken body contorted, pained features  
smoothed over by foundation. She’s like  
a doll, painted, primped, posed. I imagine  
her body under the layers of deodorant:  
muscles exhaling, fat liquidizing, heart  
rotting.

It’s over quickly. That’s because  
it was cheap.

“Should’ve gotten insurance,” the  
priest jokes.

Once we get home, I steal  
Kimberly’s box of cigarettes. I tap one  
out onto my palm and stare at it: a little  
paper worm stuffed with sticky tobacco. I  
roll it between my fingers, then slip it  
between my lips, my hands shaking.

“Give me a light, would you?” I  
stand opposite of Kimberly, the cigarette  
dangling on the edge of my

mouth.  
Kimberly walks up to me and  
flicks her lighter on. She pauses.

“Your teeth will get really nasty,  
you know,” she says.

“I know.”

I inhale deep, the sharp smoke  
curving into my throat and burning. I  
exhale, smoke spiraling. I watch it curl  
into the air, then vanish.

After the service, Kimberley pulls  
out the paint.

“We,” she huffs. “We are going to  
paint this house pink, goddammit.”

It takes hours. We glop clumps of  
paint onto walls, windows, jeans.  
Kimberley climbs onto the roof and  
almost falls off. Edward picks at his  
fingers until they bleed. Taylor cries  
silently, face contorted.

And then the house is done. We  
stand on the street and stare at it: neon  
paint falling off in clumps, porch curving  
with age, brittle wood splintering.

“Look at that,” Kimberley says.  
“Our goddamn pink house.”

The sky cracks open and a shard  
of sunlight dribbles onto the porch, the  
gutters, the roof. It sets the color aflame,  
the gloss pink like a thousand flickering  
fires, the slivers of scraggly wood like  
burning butterflies.

“God,” Taylor whispers. “It’s so  
*beautiful.*”

The world comes to life around  
our house: The sun falls and fades,

fingers of light reaching  
over the pink roof.  
Grasses breathe with the wind, flirt with  
the spilling sunshine. We stand there  
together and watch the sky bloom, purple  
and red water coloring into a blurry mess  
at the horizon, veins of ink seeping  
through the color.

“She’d have loved it,” Edward  
sighs. “I just know she would’ve.”

“Yeah.” I feel my lips cracking  
into a smile. “*Yeah.*”

This is my Momma’s legacy:

A soft dead body, the four broken  
kids huddled around it. A room in our  
house, door closed, bedsheets still  
rumpled. A smoking habit. A thousand  
wasted steaks, a God-Damn Miracle. And  
a neon pink suburban house in the middle  
of sticky, slow Ohio.

It’s enough.

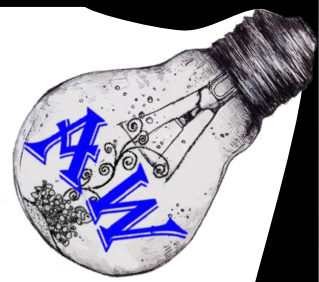


*Somewhere in the Pacific*

Rachel Brown

Newark, DE

# Outstanding Poetry



## Impalpable

Hana Widerman  
Milton, MA

I'd never heard of putting sugar on grapefruits, of peeling them to eat

instead of cutting them in half, knifing around their edges

like my mother does. I began to steal sugar packets from the dining hall,

eat them on the roof of the observatory where I once saw a blond girl

wrapped in a green blanket with a boy. They impressed each other

softly in the metal of the roof. They looked like my mother

yearning to eat a small plum, the juice slipping down past her wrists.

She keeps her real veins deep in her skin, even the doctor said so

when he tried to draw her blood. He told her to make a fist, searched her forearm

like he was running his fingers over a plate of dried rice. I wasn't too surprised.

I haven't seen her kiss my father since I was ten. Even then it was puckered

and awkward, eyes open. In the kitchen my mother mentions her first boyfriend,

an engineer student at Tokyo University. She peels pears, leaves their skins

in the sink. I wonder if she had ever felt like a pear yielding to gentle pressure,

if she ever wants to feel soft fingers pressing in between her knuckles.

She hands me cold slips of pear before

turning to the stove, flips fried rice over itself

with a wooden spoon: bits of ham, bean sprouts, onion. The kitchen fan

turns on to scatter the smoke. We have to worry about the fire alarms

even when we take showers with hot water, scrape our hands across the mirror

to see parts of ourselves. My mother doesn't close the bathroom door anymore.

It's always a crack open, light punching through. For years, my father

has been calling her naked body ugly. He still wants her to look at him,

wants to joke with me now that I'm old enough to understand

the innuendo of how they used to tear up the bedroom sheets

when they were feeling young.

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## Poetry Runner-Up

### Ode to Miami Beach

Malia Chung  
Milton, MA

To its faded red sidewalks, bubble gummed and cigarette butted, strip club advertisements pulled by prop planes, its women who cross their Prada heels—cocktails by embryo shaped pools, and the hard-core techno which pumps past midnight, washing out onto the boardwalk, pulsing underwater like modern Morse code. To its high-school dropout who sells restaurant appliances and dreams of being a restaurant owner; almost fifty, still partying on weekdays, smoking pot with breakfast, wondering where time has gone, where

money has disappeared to, yet insistent that he stay right here: "can't leave the warm weather," when really he doesn't know how else to live. To the strangers who race along the jetty waving off the *Royal Caribbean*, which will return next week, 200 of its passengers violently food poisoned, and the armless man on Lincoln who taught himself to paint landscapes with his toes. To its opioid addicted lady who waits in her wheelchair on Ocean Drive, mutters about taking off your underwear "when your legs don't work no more." To its speedo-ed roller skaters, and the baristas downtown with long ponytails and stretch-lobed piercings, the red moped dressed as Santa Claus, and the Cuban Uber driver who "does

[his] best, does [his] best." To its waiter at the taco joint who worries about his brother jailed in a DEA bust and stops to help the pretty student practice her Spanish. To its overpriced waffles, to its full friction. To Langston Hughes' *Dreams* and Adrian Castro's *The Sound Of One Immigrant Clapping* hammered into the rails of an apartment building in a back alley off Washington. *Say I arrived through this portal This is now my home....* And just over the bridge, to Wyndwood's unbound street art of sleeping women, alligator princesses, Hollywood's original gangsters, and Bob Marley's "Loveism," its throbbing neon-pink heart.

# Outstanding Prose

## of honey and spice

Arushi Avachat  
Pleasanton, CA

This is what I know of India:

1. Summers spent on dirty rooftops. My cousins and I go up here every afternoon of our visit. The streets of Jaipur glitter below us, and there is dusty air and peeling paint and laughter.
2. Baba's singing. His music fills the space between us on car rides to school. His voice is rough like crumpled paper and thick, gravelly, but it carries a certain sweetness to it too. I don't always understand the words; my Marathi isn't strong enough, but I like to listen anyway.
3. My mother's beauty. Baba has a picture of her from when they were young. She is in black and white and the corners of the photo are creased from time, but you can see her there, dark eyes and fair skin and

elegance.

4. Language, a little from both sides of my family. When I was younger, I spoke a tangled conflation of Hindi and Marathi, all muddled into one. I pull the two apart as I get older, learn the differences in their sounds. Hindi is softer, lighter, has more shape to it. Crushed velvet and honey. Marathi is harsher, sharper, has more jugular sounds. Edges and corners and spice.

I don't know much else.

i.

I'm seven when I learn my culture is something to be ashamed of.

It's lunchtime, late summer, and I'm sitting at the shaded tables near the cafeteria. I'm with Taylor, the first friend I made after moving into town, and a few other girls I don't know too well. They all have inside jokes I don't understand and shared memories without me. I try, but it's hard for me to fit in.

I have homemade aloo paratha for lunch that day, one of my favorite foods. I watched my mother roll spiced potato and dough into thin, circular sheets the night before, every movement patient and deliberate. She let me help her make the last few, but mine were obviously amateur, bumpy instead of smooth, more paint-splatter shaped than round.

"What is that?" Taylor asks me when I open my lunch box. Her voice is curious, not very kind. She leans in closer, wrinkling her nose. "It looks weird."

Embarrassment crawls into my stomach. "It's called aloo paratha," I tell her in a tiny voice. "My mom made it."

She wrinkles her nose again, and her freckles stand out darker from the movement. "Looks gross."

A little heat rises in my cheeks. I want to tell her it doesn't taste gross, but I don't. I'm too embarrassed to say a word.

*(Continued on page 22: honey)*

## Prose Runner-Up

### The Windy City

Sophia David  
Swarthmore, PA

Drivers slammed their brakes, jammed their horns, and rammed their cars, doing anything to barge into the endless stream of motion. Tires sent slush flying, soiling pant suits of angry women and striking fear in the hearts of unprepared pigeons. People flooded the doors of Starbucks, pushing and shoving, all for a much needed cup of coffee. The cup of coffee that would get them through frustrating phone calls, incompetent secretaries, slow Uber drivers, and a misheard lunch order. The whirling wind was barely heard over the voices of distracted coffee-drinkers, obliviously yelling into their phones. It was only felt, a silent force of nature, pushing into the faces of each and every living thing, attempting to hold them back. Hard as it tried, the determined population persevered, ignoring its icy chill. They moved faster, heads down, not stopping for a minute, not taking a second to look around. Mothers

tightened their children's jackets and encouraged them to move with a purpose. Overprotective chihuahua owners bundled their babies in the finest doggy fleece. Dedicated joggers dashed through the snow, letting nothing keep them from their exercise.

The world was a blur. Each person on their own track, like trains. Watching it all was Edward, like a derailed car sitting unnoticed in a bustling station. Through it all, the wind continued to roar, blowing sharp needles into faces, especially Edward's. He tugged on the sides of his worn out jacket, sinking down a little lower. He watched feet. All day. Everyday. He saw the dress shoes of millionaires, the six-inch heels of their wives, the sneakers of yoga instructors, the sparkly flats of little princesses, and the shoes of spoiled puppies. After years of sitting on the side of almost every sidewalk in the city, Edward had found the best observation deck. He sat on a small ledge, leaning against the short black fence of a glorious church. It had a

soaring steeple, ivy covered sides, and intricate stained-glass windows. He liked to imagine that he was on a real observation deck. Perhaps at the top of the Willis Tower, on the real ledge, the one he had dreamed of standing on so many times. He imagined how the city would look, seeing the tops of buildings instead of the bottoms of feet. He imagined what life would be like as one of those whom he so closely watched each and every day. No, he didn't imagine, he remembered.

Edward had not always been homeless, in and out of shelters, and without family. He spent his first years in a loving home with two caring parents and a younger sister. They were by no means wealthy, but they had everything they needed to be happy. Edward was on track to go to college, when his father lost his job. Falling into a deep depression, his father took to alcohol. Soon after, Edward's mother left, "looking for the husband she deserved," and took Edward's sweet sister with her.

*(Continued on page 23: Windy)*

(Continued from page 21: honey)

The conversation moves on to another topic after a few short moments, but the shame still sticks there, thick and heavy. I realize I've found another reason I don't fit in here.

I don't bring Indian food to school again for years and years.

ii.

I hate speaking in Hindi and Marathi when people are around. I don't want to be Indian in public.

At home though, my parents always have me speak to them in honey and spice. Baba actually makes me repeat my words in Marathi every time I speak to him in English.

"Why?" I whine after one such moment. It's elementary school, just a few months after the Taylor incident, and I hate the terrible *weirdness* of the Indian syllables that roll off my tongue. "I only need to know English. I'm American." I don't say it, but it's implied: *Not like you.*

My words must hurt him, but he stands firm, and eventually, I repeat myself in Marathi.

iii.

When we were little, my older sister and I spent our weekends choreographing dances to Bollywood songs. Or rather, she choreographed, and I followed her lead. We would spend hours twirling our hands and shimmying our hips and mouthing lyrics we didn't fully understand.

I remember this when I'm in sixth grade, and my mother pushes me to join the Bhangra Club. Bhangra is a type of Indian dance, different from the Bollywood moves my sister and I spent our summers practicing, but it's reminiscent of old times all the same. Mamma wants me to participate, just like Alina did when she was in middle school. I don't know how to say no to her, how to explain that I'm embarrassed, that I am insecure and care what people

might think in a way Alina never did, so in the end, I give in and join.

Our big performance is the talent show. It takes place during school, and all students attend. I wear salwar kameez and red lipstick and nervousness, and when I peek out through the curtains to see the crowd, I spot my two best friends sitting in the front row. I tell myself to breathe, that they won't make fun. No one will make fun.

— — — — —  
***I WATCHED MY MOTHER ROLL  
SPICED POTATO AND DOUGH  
INTO THIN, CIRCULAR SHEETS  
THE NIGHT BEFORE, EVERY  
MOVEMENT PATIENT AND  
DELIBERATE.***  
— — — — —

The boy I have a crush on is the MC for the talent show. He has chestnut-colored hair and dark chocolate eyes and I am as in love as an eleven year old can be. When he announces us, I walk onto the stage with all the confidence and poise I can manage.

The actual performance isn't too bad. The audience loves the exoticness of our costumes, the clacking of the wooden instruments, and I hear my friends clap and shout my name as we dance. I think I enjoy those five minutes, actually. It's just the moments after I hate.



Unearth Akhila Bandlora Phoenix, AZ

Nate, the MC, approaches me once we finish. I'm sitting backstage, drinking a bottle of water, exhausted from the dancing. "That was fun to watch," he tells me.

I smile and force myself to speak; I always forget how to when he's around. "You think so?"

"Yeah," he says. Pauses, laughs a little. "A little weird, but entertaining." He says it matter-of-a-factly, nothing cruel in his tone, but his words stick in

my mind, and it's all I can think about. Color flushes my cheeks because he's *right*, it is weird, and more than that, I'm weird for being a part of it.

I swallow hard and smile, like I'm not bothered, but thoughts are spiraling in my mind. I shouldn't have agreed when Mamma wanted me to join. I shouldn't have; I'm not like Alina; I care what people think. I don't want to be weird. I want to be liked.

Sixth grade is the only year I'm in Bhangra Club. When my parents ask me why I quit, I don't know what to tell them. I think I recognize even then that it's not about the dance and it's not about the boy; it's something bigger, something worse. The need to be like everyone else. Shame I can't get rid of. I want to unzip the skin they gave me.

iv.

Middle school passes on, and things at home start to change. Mamma and I fight constantly now. She is demanding, wants too much. I'm never good enough for her. My sharp mouth doesn't help things, either. Baba is the glue, the unlucky mediator, that keeps us from falling apart, holds us together.

When my mother is angry at me, and this is often, her careful English slips. There's a more obvious accent. Rounded vowels, forgotten *r*'s. Words squished together, off tempo. When I'm angry too, I'll point it out. Correct her pronunciation, make her feel stupid. It's cruel, another reminder of her otherness, and sickening guilt crawls into my stomach the moment after, when she falters in speech.

In a way, I'm projecting my shame onto her. Making her feel she should be embarrassed of her accent because I'm embarrassed of my culture. It's awful, wrong, and I don't know how to apologize for it, how to make it right, so I never do.



v.

One day, late in the winter of my freshman year, a boy tells me I look “exotic.” He’s handsome and tall with bright eyes and white skin, and for some reason, his opinion matters to me. “You’re pretty for an Indian girl,” he adds too, dimples cutting into his cheeks.

This is masked prejudice, not a compliment, but something like validation still flushes my cheeks. I give him a “thank you,” and it’s months before I regret saying it.

That’s the worst part for me. Not his words, but how I take them. For years, I let myself feel small because of the color of my skin. It took a boy to tell me there was some semblance of beauty to be found in my exoticism for me to feel worthy again, if only for a moment.

vi.

Spring rolls around. Soon, I see white girls like Taylor walking down the halls with henna-painted arms (“*I got it done at the fair!*”), talking of music festivals and bindis and cherry-picked pieces of

the very culture they made fun of me for belonging to.

The sight makes me sick, but there’s a part of me that wonders, *If they like Indian things, why can’t I?*

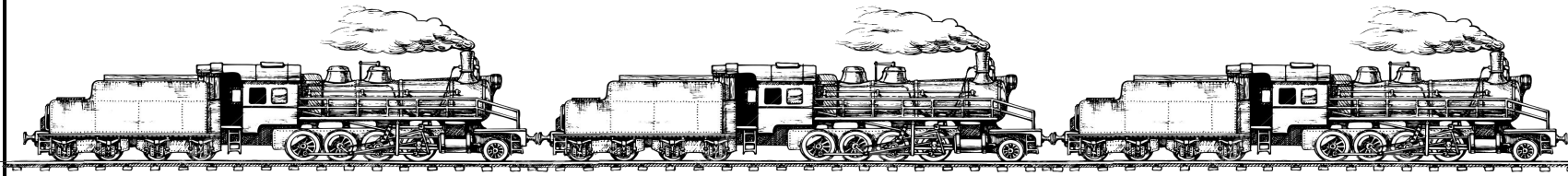
I think that’s when I start to realize the blame doesn’t rest with them, it rests with me. Their closed minds and prejudices are meaningless in this. I’m the only one responsible for my shame.

The problem with remorse is that it comes after, when the wrong has been done and can’t be made right. I feel it once too much is already lost.

When I can’t read the Hindi of my childhood journal entries, swirly loops of writing in a language that doesn’t belong to me anymore, when my grandmother calls to speak to me in Marathi and I have to ask her to repeat herself, because the edges and corners and spice of her words sound foreign in my ears, *then*, I finally understand what I’ve done.

This is the price of my shame. If I push my culture away for long enough, I might actually lose it.

vii.



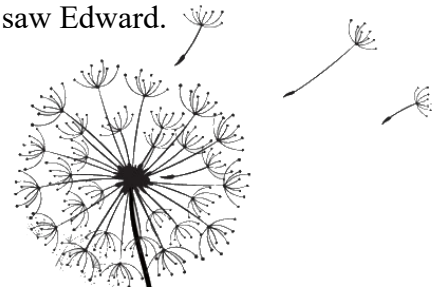
(Continued from page 21:  
*Windy*)

Edward did everything he could to make ends meet for him and his father until the final day of his father’s life. Truly alone, Edward became focused on money. He could not bear the thought of his own life repeating that of his father’s. Living on the southside of Chicago, Edward did what was easiest, he sold drugs. He told himself he would stop just as soon, as he had the money to figure out a new plan. This plan was one that he would never have. As all drug dealers inevitably were, Edward was arrested, and sentenced to years in jail. When his sentence ended, Edward was filled with hope, excited to start his new life, and determined to stay within the bounds of the law. He went north, staying away from the dangerous drugs and dark alleys of his home. Soon, Edward faced the discouraging reality that he, a criminal, would never be hired.

He slowly gave up, ate what he

could find, and stole what he needed. He spent decades in jail and decades on the streets, but he would always return to his favorite spot in front of the church.

From a window in her mother’s office far above, a little girl watched. Safe as she was from the frigid air, she knew it well. Each day she looked out at a small black fence and an even smaller black man huddled against it. She looked closely and saw his feet, peeking through the gaping holes and ripped soles of his shoes. She wondered how Edward had gotten there. She wondered how she could help him. What she didn’t realize, was that she already had, because for the first time in a long time, someone noticed him. Finally, the wind stopped blowing, the world opened its eyes, and the world saw Edward.



Diwali is on a Thursday this year.

Mamma spends hours in the kitchen making my favorite snacks, most fried and dripping oil and carrying the promise of heart failure if overeaten.

On the day of, I pack some chakli in a ziploc bag and bring it with me to school. I share the snack with my friends during lunch, and most of them love it. But the inevitable also happens, and someone tells me how strange my food looks.

This time, I don’t freeze up like I did all those years ago. I smile instead and tell her it tastes amazing.

I feel a new kind of shame now. Not of my culture, but of myself. I’m trying to make everything right, but it’s a slow process.

Every once in awhile, I like to remind myself of the things I know, the things I’m made of. Summers spent on dirty rooftops. Music, beauty. Honey and spice.

I add something else to the list eventually. Pride.

## Sandstorms at Delhi’s Bazaar

Adithi Raghavan  
Sammamish, WA

### (I) grounds for trickery’s proliferation:

sporadic firefly lights strung through the bazaar  
pierce the night’s licorice black tapestry,  
its boundless edges engulf boisterous cries  
perturbing forlorn stability.

sly ethereal vines of wandering scents  
saturated in rebellious smoke  
interwoven with aromatic cardamom,  
float  
nonchalantly.  
wafting tendrils tickle gleeful countenances  
marked with amber kisses of light.

outside the shacks outlining the streets,  
protruding talons of hooded conman vultures  
merge with inconspicuous soles.



within the crooked stalls  
balancing between lightly  
rooted wooden  
daggers and  
self-annihilation from the metal roof  
precariously sitting above,

a speckled veil of wind-whipped grains  
guiles the merchant's deceptive playing  
cards  
from the innocent's angelic orbs.

**(II) metamorphosis:**

yet the fervor from oil lamps flickering  
amongst the shadows  
transform this sandstorm into infallible  
glass of truth.

as thick as a conman's ego but as hollow  
as a vulture's soul and as clear as ma's  
last words

*I don't like liars*

**(III) clarity:**

finally.  
talons retract.

glass c r a c k s

*Lungs*

Jeremy Hsiao  
Walnut, CA

When you put your ear to the fertile soil  
the respiratory systems of the jungle of  
Malaysia  
breathe for you,  
in through the roots  
out through the cartilage  
the fingers that tingle in the wind  
always sensing.

It reaches out to be seized  
held, savored  
waving to be picked up.

The rambutan  
inhaling and exhaling in its place among  
branches juttied together  
waiting out its life to be snatched  
tossed in wooden buckets  
sold by the pound  
at bustling night markets.

Yet, it remains bronchi in the foliage  
held in the hands of those above.  
For now.

The fruit dangles like alveoli.  
Two hundred sixteen thousand beats,  
each  
glistens with dew in the mornings  
emanates honey through the

afternoon  
grows in the night  
until finally someone tears  
each trachea  
separated  
  
rib by rib  
All that is left is the beating seed  
the heavenly juice flowing through each  
vein.  
Stripped of those fingers  
that used to feel the breeze  
the nerves are gone.

*Les Troubadours*

Woojin Lim  
Surrey, British Columbia

*canso*  
forgetful lilacs fade away into sticky  
childhood  
campfires; the recounting of stone's story,  
the  
wrinkles in time forever silenced in a  
rosewood  
box, cradling clair de lune, marble &  
debussy  
the mellow orange bells of the cathedral  
drop  
icicles in fiddler throats, counting spiders  
& stars

in soft sheens of vigil, heavy thoughts  
remain  
below; the river weeps while she reads,  
halcyon.

*alba*  
the black swan perks her neck; she wakes  
up  
in slush, drifting atop ripples,  
evanescence &  
existence, here today, gone tomorrow,  
nibbling

on the soft-custard clouds she treasures  
dearly  
the night sky is filled with churning stars;  
under  
the moonlight's tense breath, there is  
music &  
light, her unsheathed heartbeat knocks on  
soul,  
footprints in the snow—all is reducible to  
poetry

*The Pancha  
Mahabhuta*

Woojin Lim  
Surrey, British Columbia

*bhūmi*  
what good is an abstract right to food if  
one has no tangible means to procure  
& distribute crops? how can a man be  
taught to fish if the river runs dry,  
infrastructure tatter-de-malion, war &

violence prolific? on  
what foundation  
ought the right to  
subsistence be grounded if the earth is  
abortifacient? the aid  
of the farmer is what one needs, not the  
light talk of armchair politicians;  
man shall not live on bread alone, but  
man cannot live without bread.  
*jala*  
the rickshaw leaves not the worker.  
noonday hours of walking in sultry dust,  
the water bearers fill matkis with sickly  
hemlock; waddling behind them,  
children with a puddle of lost tears, bone-  
dry throats, parched heels,  
cardboard & blood diamonds.

*agni*  
unguent, mud-cracked, confused,  
carius shrapnel, shibboleth—  
violence shouts & whispers  
a bit of chalk & bone in coal;  
pilgrims sell cows for beef.  
shantih. shantih. shantih.

*vayu*  
an underground cicada, she burrows  
& claws beneath yellamma's exoskeleton,  
yearning  
to revolt against her inborn condition; but  
she knows  
she cannot shed her skin & spread her  
wings, as wishes,  
like a butterfly, polka-dotted in flutely  
lyricism; her future  
is of hazy skies, thick layers of smog &  
nausea,  
veiled in the paradox of plenty. short-  
lived, death by  
asphyxiation; the beetles are dead,  
simulacra.

*shunya*  
the sisyphian task of the dalits, the  
untouchables, climbing  
barefoot & crumbling in dusk nihilism,  
the throes of red  
tape and black snow, falling, recurring on  
and  
ever onward, a soft broken cassette spool  
in  
möbius strip; ayyavazhi's pathis  
is a broken shard of terracotta, an  
asymmetrical kaleidoscope, a splintered  
mirror. the two ends of the ganga never  
meet.

*Suburban Street*

Brenne Hoeven  
Studio City, CA

Night shrouds the suburban street slope  
like a secret.

The sight, greyscale:  
true black asphalt,

mirrored ash gutters,  
 lawns like sooty lashes,  
 pairs of tarmac windows,  
 silver sparrow trees  
 and their linen halo,  
 footprints left  
 from a moon  
 which must be somewhere,  
 caught behind iron mountain hills  
 or waiting at the heels  
 of a pewter mug stop sign,  
 cotton knit bushes,  
 black currant roofs,  
 house numbers stark  
 against pearly backgrounds,  
 traffic lines,  
 bridal runways  
 sharply painted  
 down the road.

A siren  
 swallows closer,  
 the sound gulping up  
 space and space and space,  
 the man's voice, an eye  
 swollen shut in its socket.  
 Traffic lines disappear, one,  
 then two, three, four  
 the truck melted into the concrete,  
 only visible by light it covers up.  
 Bolted to the car top,  
 a megaphone, broadcasting  
 into starless sky,  
 blasting until he breaks  
 into static, the man's voice,  
 garbled bits of aluminum.  
 It bends sky,  
 warping air like exhaust fumes  
 as the truck's shadow passes,  
 trembling off into the night.

## Kings Stay Kings

David Wentzel  
 New Freedom, PA

That's how I got the job at Paulie's place; I mighta been twelve or thirteen at the time, lookin' for an after school job. I mighta been a fuckin' baby, but I knew the Italian men who drank all night were the big shots on the East Side—the gangsters. They amazed me, 'cus they did whatever they wanted: double parked n' nobody gave them a ticket, played poker all night n' nobody called the cops. Tony Cristo ran the cab stand for Paulie, a local spot for all of us, n' a few other places. Paulie was the boss of everyone on the East Side of Brooklyn—he might've

moved slow, but that was 'cus Paulie didn't move for any man alive. Or dead, now that I think of it. He was this fat, hairy guy with slicked back hair, a golden cross around his neck n' a cigar in his left hand. I remember he had this gravelly voice and a thick Brooklyn accent. At first my Pa and Ma liked that the job I had was across the street with some Italians from the same place that my Ma grew up in, n' it didn't hurt that my older brother was workin' there too. My old man said American kids were lazy bastards who never did nothin'. Big fellas would pull in n' toss me their keys n' trust me to park their Cadillacs. N' here I was, just a little kid—I could barely see over the steering wheel, n' I'm parkin' fuckin' Cadillacs! My brother was higher up than I was—he helped Paulie by runnin' to the local packie from time to time. He liked to talk 'bout how he would become the New Don of the East Side, like how he would waltz to the front of the line at the bakery without anyone given' 'im shit, n' the baker would come out sayin' "Hahwahya Frankie? Wha can I get ya today?" Christ, Frankie was a good kid.

I think it was a Friday, or it coulda been a Monday. I don't know—but it was fuckin' b-e-a-utiful. That's all I got for ya: beautiful. Ya ever been to Brooklyn in the fall? Ya should. The red leaves with the church brick—gorgeous, just gorgeous. It was the church we went to for the funeral, come to think of it. Wasn't a guy for the church, Paulie; always goin' on 'bout how sin wasn't forgiven in a church. Ma said that the Salvi's told 'er that Paulie ain't allowed in the church no more—bad business workin' with a gangster.

Anyways, me n' Frankie was outside of Paulie's place. He had just got this chess set as a business gift n' he let us take a look at it. Me n' Frankie was usin' Paulie's board for checkers—I had two crowns n' Frankie didn't have any. He didn't know how to be smart, Frankie didn't.

Frankie, well, Ma said he was a 'live wire'—I say he was a goddamn crazy sonuvabitch. He wanted to be a gangster like the other fellas, n' didn't let nothin' stop him; he just wasn't too good

at bein' a gangster, ya know? So then Paulie comes out from the bar, sees us playin' chess, n' tells me that the king don't move like that, n' I say I moved it like that cus we were playin' checkers.

"Ya tellin' me that ya boys don't know how to play chess?" Paulie asked.

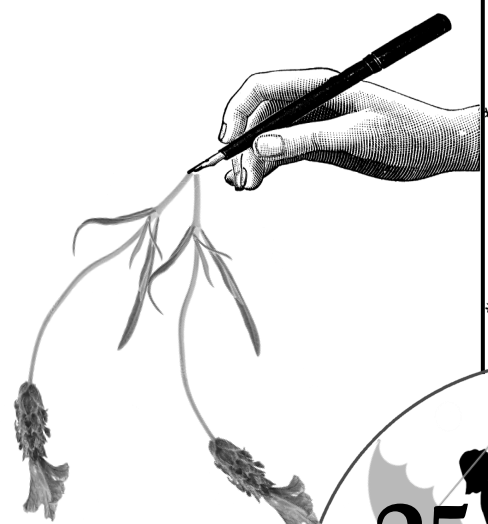
"Nah Paulie—I think I watched a game once, but I don't know it," Frankie replied.

Once Paulie was done laughin', he sat down n' started to teach us. If someone asks ya, I didn't say it, but Paulie don't look too scary—fat Italian men never do. But right then? Well, it might have just been a feelin', ya know? The sorta kind ya get before the bad stuff happens in movies? Just when all the shit is 'bout to be dropped on the pretty-boy-lead n' all? It was like that I guess. Paulie was sittin' in just the right place so the red lamp that was above the bar door drowned his face in this blood-red light. His eyes weren't black no more—they were sorta crazy lookin'. Ya could swear ya saw all of his past sins reflected back in his goddamn face. It was kinda freaky, that's all. I wasn't scared or nothin'.

So Paulie puts all the chess pieces where they're supposta go. He picks up king, n' puts it to his lips like ya do a cross, n' says in his gravelly voice, "This is the boss, the head honcho. Ya get the other guy's, ya win—simple. But he's tryin' to get your King, so ya gotta defend it. He moves any way he goddamn chooses, 'cus of he's fuckin' royal!" He laughs n' we laugh too 'cus we don't wanna be disrespectful. "But a king is nothin' without his army, and his army is so goddamn loyal he ain't gotta do jack shit."

"Sounds a bit like ya, Paulie" I says.

"Ya right there kid. This is the queen: she's the go get shit-done piece, ya know?" Me and Frankie nod—anyone





who's got an Italian mother knows she's the-go-get-shit-done one.

Fathers ain't nothin' compared to an angry mother.

"Sounds like your Carla," says Frankie. Carla is Paulie's wife; she's the typical gangster's wife: they have bad skin n' wear too much makeup, they don't look too good—the stuff they wore was thrown together in cheap, a lot of pant suits n' double knits. The worst part is that they look beat up—they mighta been goddamn crazy, but it didn't stop their husbands from takin' a swing. Shame I guess.

"This is the rook; it moves like this," he dragged it back n' forth, "n' this," n' left to right. "It's a lot like that stash house on O'Donnell street."

"But a stash house ain't goin' nowhere," Frankie replied. Like I said, kinda slow.

"Think 'bout it: we tryda' move the stash last week after the Corrieri's took a crack at it." We both shook our heads up n' down n' mumbled, "Yeah yeah."

"So who are these?" I asked Paulie. I was holdin' up a pawn—they're the small ones, ya know? Look like they're fuckin' bald.

"Them? They're pawns: I guess they're like ya dealers, the lowest. They move like this," he said as he pulled it forward, "'cept when they fight." He tapped it twice on either side. Frankie hadn't been payin' the greatest of attention up until now, but just then he was

actually focusin'—one mention of those bastard pawns n' he's all in.

"So Paulie—howdoya getta be the king?" Frankie asked. Ya could tell he was tryin' to be all nonchalant 'bout it, real smooth n' all. 'Cept he fucked it up—he looked like he was tryin', n' that's the worst thing ya can do. Paulie got all defensive, and gave Frankie the eye.

"That ain't how it work, ya dimwit. The King—he stays king. Nobody's takin' his goddamn place. Ain't nobody got what he got—he got class. Ain't nobody takin' his goddamn place."

Then I remembered somethin'—I don't know how I fuckin' knew this, but I did. "I thought the pawn can change— Can't it Paulie? Can't it?"

"When ya right, ya right" Paulie said. He hadn't dropped the mean demeanor yet. "Yeah, kid—'cept the pawn, if he makes it to other guy's side, he gets to be a Queen. And remember, the Queen ain't no bitch"

"So if I get it to the end? I win?" Frankie asks.

"Ain't ya been listen' kid? Goddamnit, ya got shit for ears?" Frankie apologizes like a madman, n' Paulie waves his arms about until he finally cools down. "Ya gotta get his king in checkmate." Then he sorta got sad—like he had just hadda bad thought. He leaned back on his chair, pulled out a cigar, n' lit it. It was kinda beautiful, if ya can imagine it—a sad gangster with a cigar in his left hand, the smoke drifting through the red light. "Ya see, in this game, the pawns—well, they get killed quick." See, Paulie wasn't no youngen; he was an old bastard. Old bastards are sad fellas when ya know 'em.



*Nature's Ornament* Abhay Rao Holmdel, NJ

Sorry if I start up, I don't like talkin' 'bout this stuff—gimme a cigarette, will ya?

I think it was just then that the old fellas on the other side of the bar started playin' this old radio. My neighbor Rodney was there, n' he was passin' out this little flask to the other fellas there; they laughed like Italians, n' so nobody kicked 'em out. Rodney was a nice fella; used to work in the gang 'till people

started sellin' drugs. Lota people left after that. It was a good song, sorta jazzy:

*I knew I'd go from rags to riches*

*(do ba doo)*

*If you would only say you*

*care*

*(ba do da)*

*And though my pocket*  
*may be empty*

*(da do da)*

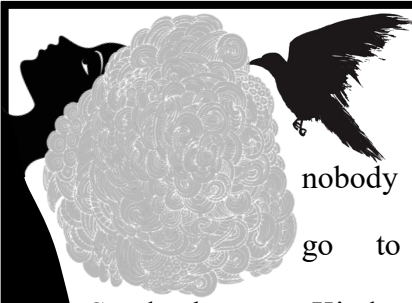
*I'd be a*  
*millionaire*

Paulie was smokin' with the red light over his face when Frankie got this wide grin n' said "Unless they're some smart pawns, right Paulie?" Paulie chuckled a bit, shook his head, n' said, "Not even then, ya wise guy."

I don't remember so good what happened next. I think Frankie stood up and pulled outa cigarette; he liked to smoke n' all—I used to tease him that he was rippin' off all the bastards at the bar. He told Paulie that there was a problem in the kitchen, and Paulie told him to deal with it, but Frankie kept sayin' that he hadda come back. They left and I started lookin' at the chess pieces. Then all outta nowhere I hear gunshots. Then more gunshots. I was fuckin' terrified and I ran

back home; I didn't look back or nothin'. The next day ma said that there had been a fight and that Frankie was in charge of sortin' out the problem—Paulie's orders. It was cool, knowin' my own brother was gettin' to be a gangster. But then he didn't come home for a

while, and ma started to cry a hell of a lot more. Somebody told me that Frankie'd try to shoot Paulie with a pistol, n' then Frankie got shot by somma Paulie's guys. I went to his funeral a week later—Pa wanted an open casket, but ya can't do that if ya face is fulla lead. He just got a memorial service, but only the family went—nobody from the bar. Paulie sent orders from the hospital that



nobody who wanted to go to church next Sunday betta go. Kinda sad, ya know? He wanted to be a big shot, but ended up tryin' to kill one.

Sorry that I'm gettin' all soft on ya. I don't like to tell nobody 'bout Frankie. I'd thought for a long time that God hadda plan for me—for my brother too. He wanted to be a big shot, and so he thought God wouldda got 'im there. After listening to the priest with his fuckin' handfulla dirt I couldn't believe none of that shit. I didn't know nothin' after Frankie died.

But I know this for sure: men die, countries fall, n' God betrays,

But the King?

Well, the King stays King.

## Girls in Gardens

Brenne Hoeven

Studio City, CA

Cub fingers grappling through  
Strawberry leaves searching  
For red  
For a sweet heart to split 16 ways  
For a bite to take home to Mom  
Squash cucumber basil radish  
Button-sized tomatoes still held  
Round inside their mouths  
& in their pockets  
Little dress floral ruffles  
Seeds collected  
In home-sewn patches  
& in their eyelashes  
Pollen from Tuesday's flowers  
Not one will grow to be afraid of bees  
Their buzzing or  
Sacrifice  
& in their dreams  
Hands held behind leaves  
Strawberries tucked in-between  
Every honied petal palm

## An Appetite for Success

Marcos Garcia

Memphis, TN

**B**ruised elbows, scraped knees, sweaty tears, and a starving determination. Try, fail. Try harder, fail harder. Never-ending lack of success, appearing so until the starving determination feasted upon the long-awaited savor of accomplishment.


Although quite an exaggeration,

learning how to ride a bike is one of my proudest memories yet.

I once lived in an apartment complex known as Ridgeway Trace, now extinct and wiped off the face of the earth due to the evil power of corporations. The apartment complex served as a haven for children that lived and worked their entire lives to win a game of hide-and-seek. To us children, the entire apartment complex was a metropolis of younglings: we formed gangs, established territory, and had the most competitive of competitions in Pokémon. We had factions, borders, alliances, oaths, wars, and everything else you'd find in a *Lord of the Rings* film. However, a cluster of welded metal pieces held our complex ecosystem together like a concrete foundation: bicycles.

Everyone had a bike in the apartments. Bicycles were our form of transportation, our cavalry, our pride, and for some, our life—although we did not have much of that anyways. In fact, as in many other cultures, we had our own social hierarchy ranging from the “losers” to the “cool kids,” which was based solely on three things: age, video games, and, most importantly, bikes. The older you were, the more video games you had, and the newer the bike you owned, the higher you traveled up the hierarchical ladder. Where was I placed in this prepubescent caste system? I was the equivalent of an Untouchable in Indian society.

I was not only one of the youngest, but I didn't have the privilege of being able to ride a bike. The kids who hadn't learned how to ride a bike were furniture to the rest of us, not even acknowledged as human beings. I happened to be a computer chair, as I was still in possession of the most humiliating object one could possess...training wheels. Asking to hang out with the cool kids was already a daring act, but asking to do so with training wheels was a death wish. Being as idiotic as I am, I regularly asked. At the time, I had one and only one goal I wanted to achieve in life, which was to be a cool kid. The group traveled in packs, and I always tried keeping up as much as my feeble training wheels would allow me. The group would also gather



around at certain spots so that the coolest kid of the bunch, an older boy named Edward, would perform a trick and all of us could stare in awe and bow down to his holy coolness. Of course, as soon as everyone left, I'd try to replicate the magic, but I always ended up with a couple of cuts and bruises.

One day, I grew weary of my peasant classification and decided it was time to take a massive step into manhood and learn how to ride a bike, no matter the circumstances. The first step: convincing my parents to teach me. The second step: ride all day every day until I get it right. The third and final step: profit. As you'd expect, the plan didn't go accordingly; it failed before I even reached the first step. My parents were unwilling to aid me on my dangerous journey into masculinity, so I had to travel the wretched trek all by my lonesome. Therefore, I went outside with my cheap, miniscule bicycle into my small “backyard,” which was just an awfully cramped fenced area of cemented gravel.

The backyard truthfully did not have much space to work with, as two-thirds of the fenced area was cemented gravel and the remaining was just a pile of rocks and pebbles. I placed my bike down on the rough terrain and screwed off and removed the training wheels along with my shame. It was time to discover my maturity, my masculinity, my independence, my pride, and my life. I hopped on the saddle of my small but mighty stallion and built up the courage to lift both of my feet off the earth. As soon as I fearlessly placed my feet on the pedals, I instantly fell with excessive force on the rugged ground. Being a four-year-old, I wanted to cry out to my mommy and completely give up, but I asked myself, *Does Spiderman cry and give up when things get tough? NO!* As a result, I got right back up, wiped off my childish tears, dusted the rock off my skin, and got right back on the bike. I continued riding straight into the pile of rocks and pebbles to cushion my fall for the rest of the day, from noon to dusk.

The sun began to drop along with my patience. Bedtime was



coming. Still, before I had to go back inside, I wanted to try one last time. All scraped and bruised, I sat on the bike saddle and glared directly into the soul of the rock pile. This time, I wasn't going to fall. I placed my feet on the pedals and started pushing, and with all the energy I had left, I forced myself to keep my balance. I could feel the rocks and dirt staining my skin and mixing with blood from the scrapes and cuts I had to form a dirty, brown color. The sweat poured into the openings of my skin which stung like hand sanitizer in a paper cut. I tasted salt on my lips as the sweat poured over my upper lip where it met with sand and gravel. It formed the most disgusting of tastes I ever tasted, which I had associated as the taste of perseverance. I closed my eyes, bracing for the impact against the rocks, but that didn't happen. I opened my eyes in confusion and realized I wasn't falling; the wind I felt against my face was not from falling, but from riding my bike. I did it, I could finally feel my hair blowing so freely with a smile I could not contain and tears escaping from my eyes. I was no longer a piece of furniture, but a part of the cavalry.

*The Art of Eight  
Lumbs*

Malia Chung  
Milton, MA

On Fridays my father drives bending round the sharp turn, a slight swerve into the left lane, past the empty truck lots, slowing as we cross the bridge, glimpse Boston before rolling forward again, the minivan bumping over train tracks and into Hyde Park. We pull up in front of the old mill building, bricks patchy-black, now Muay Thai kickboxing gym where eight men, shaved-heads, warm-up with jumps and squats. They prop open the fire escape door with a 50lb weight, let loose the slap of plastic skip-ropes against the sweaty blue mats, the low grunt of shin against pad: foot cocked

quick at ninety degrees (like snubbing out a cigarette) a knee caught in a chest, a knuckle ground between ribs. Sebastian raises a padded arm, beckoning; my father nods, and I move into the ring, squaring left foot forward, right foot back, green gloves raised to temples, then released upon my first jab, feeling the thrum in my shoulder as my arm fully extends, the give of the pad as my knuckles squeeze in their wraps, the momentary twist of my right hip, the image of my godmother, pinned down, gang-raped, on a beach, the sound of my quads quivering, fists snap back into place, Sebastian yells *Power, power!* the sting of sweat in my eyes as my thighs and arms bruise quietly—a Turkish man gropes my mother on a bus tour, *Again!* the tug of an overextended calf muscle as I jab, hook, block, then the ding of the bell, the shuffling apart of feet, the creak of backs bending in silent bows.

And when "Mi Gente" pumps through the speakers at the end of class, everyone begins dancing, Sebastian clapping to the beat as Stephen's body rolls with the big guy in the green muscle-T, Enrique breakdancing in the center of the room. Sebastian unraveling his knuckle wraps to the music's beat, waving the blue ribbons around his hip-swaying circles. The daughter of the guy in a grey t-shirt makes eye contact with me, and I want to smile. The song ends. We have to go home. My father says, "You drive."

*April Roses*  
Delaney Coldren  
Moncks Corner, SC

in a late summer field full of fear rather than newly budded sunflowers and overgrown grass anxiety sprouting among turnips

it first manifested itself in the loudness of September children barricaded in dog eared paperbacks and isolation there was the security of stillness silence paves a yellow brick road for unease i tried to ground myself in other people to let them grab my ankle before i floated into the dark October cumulonimbus clouds cupping their ideas gently in my hands as a child holds a blue Disneyland balloon but they gripped too tightly and i found myself half way full of helium to optimists half way to the thorny ground to pessimists careful not to pop popcorn yellow memories that taste of twenty five cent bubblegum flavor's the same fades as fast fear leaves the taste of long chewed juicy fruit sticks amplifies colors and sounds into a burton-esque wonderland of blue raspberry insecurity and green glass doubt sound gurgled by loudness tangled headphone cord symphony of talking fading in out in out in and suddenly it's still i see the uprooted oak trees of my November hurricane and fluorescent lit etchings of stained glass horror my salty face with red veined eyes crinkles like potato chip bag litter

the next morning has  
thick beads of sapphire  
rain

worn as a crown  
with arms leading to  
wet snow piles of winter  
month one was being gone

but not being laid to rest in a plot of  
slightly frozen earth  
or burned to ashes  
slowly slipping into the  
loss of myself and my words

stuck in December

i replayed the idea that i would be pulled  
along

in circular riptides of remembrance  
romanticizing meaningless memories  
dripping yellow paint  
and forgetting moments

circled in red sharpie  
the past an inkblot stain on morning

month two was made of relationships

with my friends  
made of January obligations

embroidery thread thin  
connections

keeping us together  
with the elmer's glue  
of past friendships

wearing out  
frigidness keeping me  
from forcing people to  
become paperweights  
for the blowing printer sheets  
in my thunderstorm of flurries

linger on the edge of  
winter iced window frames

waiting for an invitation  
to begin

as construction paper shards  
of elementary colors  
fly to the floor  
on the back of jack frost

February was what i could become

we buried my aunt in the cold  
with whispers of who she was  
covering her grave with evergreen

i was told i was like her and was afraid  
of sharing her high school hatred of her  
figure

so i hid my body from myself

as a mother would a child

she was a mother

she had a daughter in  
the backseat of  
her crashed first snow van

driving around sharp curves  
too fast to see

her girl bloom  
too early for spring flowers

i don't want my motherhood to be made  
of happy meals and abandonment

chemically imbalanced happiness  
sweet and quick

like blue raspberry pixie sticks

chasing stability until my family topples  
into icy water

so i buried myself on the last day of  
winter

to pave way for March saplings  
as the snow banks melted

easter laid thawing soil on scattered seeds

April roses awoke  
dressed in gowns of red  
as i unraveled in spring

## *Consumed*

Athena Ho  
Woodinville, WA

An anachronism in the concrete jungle

Shivering in the broken light of the  
lampposts

Resolutely turning from the man that  
follows too close, the pad of heavy boots  
a little too loud on cracked pavement

Stale air swirling, dancing, somehow  
more alive than she is

Consumed in her own being, oblivious,  
yet paradoxically self-aware, skin

vibrating with the subtle glances of the  
others rushing past, maybe walking a little  
faster, afraid of being infected by the  
parasite that makes her clutch her coat a  
little tighter

Am I truly captain of the ship I entitle  
myself?

## *Apocalypse*

Kate Foley  
Lebanon, PA

The women sat at a circular  
table, their hands folded on  
the surface to prove none of  
them had anything to hide. Rectangular

tables were out of the  
question. The ones who  
sat at the heads might

think they were in charge, and no matter  
how hard each of them tried to gain the  
upper hand, no woman could hold more  
power than the rest. Anarchy had to be a  
civil matter.

"I suggest we put it to a vote,"  
Pestilence said, lifting her chin so her face  
caught the light. Her blotchy skin and  
dark circles around her eyes were more  
prominent than usual.

"But we all think our ideas are  
best." Famine glared at her with piercing,  
silver irises, her cheeks hollow and bones  
jagged. She was sharp, every part of her.  
"Which you shouldn't, because only one  
of us is superior."

War laughed, her flaming red lips  
curved in a derisive smirk. She gestured  
to the pool of swirling water in the center  
of the table, the images blurred. "And that  
would be who, exactly? You? Famine,  
please. The apocalypse ought to come  
about with a bang, not a whimper."

"Ladies." Death's cool murmur  
silenced the others. The black hood and  
robe she wore hid all but her lips, her pale  
and spidery hands. "It will do us no good  
to bicker while the Doomsday clock ticks  
ever closer to midnight. We have minutes  
to decide. Let us use them wisely."

"You've been awfully quiet,"  
Famine said. "What do you suggest?"

"My ideas are of no importance.  
However we choose to end the humans, I  
will still have to play a role. The  
apocalypse can happen without starvation,  
bloodbath, and disease, but death is  
inevitable. It is best if I remain impartial."

Pestilence snorted. Her noise of  
impatience disturbed a fruit fly, which  
buzzed about her frizzy hair. "You think  
yourself noble to remove yourself from  
the equation, but really you are afraid to  
make your opinion heard. Silence is  
cowardice, sister. Cast your vote."

"We haven't taken anything to a  
vote yet!" Famine shouted, slamming her  
fists on the table. She was so frail, she  
barely rattled it. "There are still more  
details to discuss."

"Oh, for the love of



Lucifer.” War rolled her blazing eyes, swung her legs up onto the table to

They leaned forward, peering into the abyss.

And an abyss it was. A shadowy silence. An eerie nothingness. A wasteland.

“But—” Famine stuttered. “What happened? I didn’t do a thing, I swear!”

“Pestilence?” War questioned her sister.

Pestilence held up her hands. “I have done nothing.”

All eyes turned to Death. She twined her fingers together.

“It seems the humans needed no assistance from us, after all,” she mused. “They eradicated themselves, their own worst enemies.”



Forgotten America Regina Caggiano Simsbury, CT

cross them lackadaisically. Her attention could not be held for longer than a moment if the matter at hand did not involve swords clashing or blood spraying. “You and your details. Sisters, if we talk and do not act for much longer, I fear I will die of boredom before the humans have even been destroyed.”

“Typical,” Pestilence huffed. “War, you lack patience. We cannot let impulsivity rule us. Fighting is messy and unpredictable—”

“Much like you,” Famine added in an undertone, eyeing War’s crossed legs. Her fingers curled into fists on the table.

Pestilence continued as if Famine had said nothing. “—but disease is impossible to avoid. Eventually the water, food, even the air will be contaminated.”

“And disease *isn’t* messy?” Famine leaned over the table in an attempt to intimidate the others. “It makes me sick just thinking about what you’ll do to those humans. I’d rather watch them wither away, neat and tidy, than be forced to witness them vomiting up their intestines.”

“You paint such pleasant pictures, all of you,” Death said. “But your fatal flaw is your pride.”

“What do you mean?” Pestilence inquired.

Death’s shadowed lips curled up. “Instantly, you leap to the conclusion that your gifts serve the greatest purpose. Did you ever stop to think that perhaps there was another, simpler way?”

“Sister, cease these riddles,” War groaned. “Clearly you know something we don’t, otherwise you wouldn’t flash such a gloating grin.”

Death pointed to the whirlpool in the table. “Look for yourselves.”

Pestilence and Famine stared at Death quizzically. War waved her hand over the whirlpool, stilling it.

have stolen from me. Don’t speak to me of holiness for I am not whole. Don’t speak to me of love for I do not know it.

## Wolves

Briana Troise  
Upper Saddle River, NJ



“I went to church camp”

These are words I have mentioned to just about every person I’ve met after my trip to church camp. I have not said it to sound cool, however. I have neither boasted nor hid my experiences of the upstate island camp that harbored gay

kids, crazy spirituals, and the occasional wanderer who was only there for the fantastic cafe service. Contrary to the assumption of many, I did not hate church camp, nor did I hate the people who chanted about men in the sky all day. The food was great, the camp was beautiful, and the coffee was cheap. I met many

people who I find intriguing enough to remember the details of their character, yet, never their name. No, I don’t talk about church camp because I despised it, but rather because I was fascinated by it.

To see inside the looking glass of other people is something unlikely and usually unpreferred. Although they will tell you otherwise, mankind has always had an issue with seeing things from the other side. They skirt around the borders of other people’s world views, inspecting with suspicious glints in their eyes and unsure sniffs. They circle an opinion that differs from their own with their hind legs hunched, tail between their legs. I am not excluding myself from this experience. In fact, church camp gifted me with the one way I could see the other side without baring my sharp teeth.

Solitude and Survival.

It was when I handed my mother my new iPhone 6, hoisted my bags up to my sides, and sat on the old, white seats of the boat that would carry me to my week-long home that I realized I

She stood from the table.

“I wonder . . . why is that tale so familiar?”

The other three bowed their heads, unable to meet Death’s gaze for reasons other than the fact that her eyes were hidden by her hood.

“This is where I bid you farewell,” Death said. She turned with a gentle swish of her robe, striding from the room. “I have many souls to collect.”

## Confession

Meredith Tamirian  
Allendale, NJ

I want to grab men by their throats, down down down I will breathe my siren song till they are left with apricot pits in their stomachs, the fruit of my love, picked and spit out, picked and spit out. They will then understand what it feels like to be completely empty, barren: giving and giving but saving nothing for oneself. Forgive me Father for I want to steal from those who

wasn't in Kansas anymore. Staring at the ever-shrinking dock where my technology, my friends, and my world waited for me, I realized I had stepped into someone else's waterhole. Sitting in my cabin bed, hearing the rules of the camp recited to me even though I had been sent multiple letters with the camp rules in bold, I became acutely aware that my life, for a week, would be extraordinarily different.

The rules sounded something like this:

No tank tops. No loop earrings. No see through shirts. No crop tops. No two piece bathing suits. No shorts above the knee. No phones, no music players, no books that were not spiritual. No, no, no, no. Rebellious teen that I am, I felt I would get a kick out of showing them a little bit of my world.

"Why?"

My counselor, a perky blonde girl with a smile held up by bobby pins, looked up from her counselor's handbook, as if surprised. I was confident. She must have gotten this question before, must have heard it from many people, but I somehow felt empowered by putting my name onto that list.

"Why can't I wear tank tops or two piece bathing suits or short shorts?" I spoke what the girls in my cabin were thinking. Or, maybe I wasn't. I'm honestly not sure which one's worse.

"Well..." Ms. Smiley rested her handbook on her mattress, taking a deep breath. "Imagine a pizza."

That was it. That was my call, my waypoint in. That's how I got her, smoked her out from the back entrance and out where she was vulnerable. I listened to her with claws at the ready.

"You have the lid open on this pizza and you can *smell* it from the other side of the room. It looks delicious, but you can't have this pizza. So, don't do that to the boys. Don't bait them with the pizza."

I retracted my muzzle and sneered.

"I'm not a pizza. I'm a

human being and I'm not an object. I have the right to wear what I want."

For the rest of the week, Ms. Smiley smiled at me a little broader than the other kids. In fact, I got no praise for this defiance other than the other girls in my position, guilty into spending a week of their summer 5 hours away from home. I learned more over the long week I was there. I found out Ms. Smiley had recently been in a breakup. I found out she grew up in a strict, Christian family. I found out she cried in the shower when she thought no one could hear her. I tell this story to my friends, yet every time I remember the soft echo of weeping bouncing along the bathroom tiles and through the cabin door, I wish I hadn't. I wish she found something better. I wish she found someone better. I wish Ms. Smiley could wear whatever she wanted and give people genuine smiles. There was something mechanical and controlled about the way she talked about God. I felt the turmoil in her head as she explained the sin of homosexuality to a bunch of teenagers who just weren't buying it. The world was God to Ms. Smiley. She grew up on the other side of the looking glass, peering over at the strangers on the other side with the same suspicion her peers had, the same way I still do. I was forced to get to know Ms. Smiley for more than her sexist, homophobic undertones. I was forced to become a dog of her pack, to become her kind. I was forced to look into her head and see the copying machine inside.

## *A Portrait: My Mother*

Emily Perez  
Signal Mtn, TN

a portrait: my mother, eleven years lost, browns her blood before

cracking her heart into the frying pan, slickens the stovetop with

seeping spinal fluid, smears slices of bread with the insides of her

arteries, plates each dish delicately with the walls of her cells,

constructs herself: while deconstructing. the beginnings of fear:

she bears, breaks, approaches. another meal devoured and she

emerges from the cavern, a little worse for wear, and gratitude

only goes to those who do the unexpected. she, creating and

recreating, tears her stomach to shreds in a world where even

the birds speak in tongues, squares her shoulders and says life

is just the feeble trappings of a tired set of silicone teeth

anyhow, and I, Polyphemus reincarnate, hunger, slurp blindly, say

nothing. now the old birds are back but still she returns, diligent,

to the caverns. keep your eyes open too long in this darkness

and you'll go blind, that's what the man said mama and I,

dependent. somewhere in this choking there is a clock and it is

ticking and she, without and I, within and the rocks start to fall.

still life: two white pills, held between fingertips, swallowed swiftly before descending into hell. my father never used to eat breakfast,

now drinks a glass of orange juice, smacks his lips, smiles and hides the hands masticating his head. eight hours dancing atop

recalescent coals only to buy cleaner shoes and there's still just barely enough for one meal. two pills—call it a polynomial

function, increasing exponentially, and I, unnoticing, mock, belittle, sing sloth for his sitting. tireless tenacious tolerant tremendous

and I, thankless, tactless, terrified.

in me are these dual flames burning neon waters swiftly churning not done yet for yet I'm learning and all the while a steady turning

back and back again: a clock but louder this time.





-  
and I, Polyphemus  
reincarnate, awake.

## Looking Back

Sierra Archer

Port Allegany, PA

Rivulets of rain trailed down the glass of the window, blurring the landscape beyond the otherwise limpid glass. The air within the car was dry, the rattle of the ancient heater battling against the vocals of Dolly Parton on the radio. Every small pothole and bump caused the car to jolt and buck like the horses in the fields they passed.

Adalyn's breath created a haze across the window, her nose brushing the cold surface with every jerk of the vehicle. Though what little heat came from the heater had thoroughly warmed her, she pulled her denim jacket closer about her shoulders. The shuddering that seized her didn't come from being chilled. Her hazel eyes followed the curve of the land, every subtle slope and every dip. Adalyn knew each house that flitted past, knew how many fence posts were between the start and the finish.

The man in the front seat, a beefy man with a baseball cap on and one hand on the steering wheel, tilted his head back, his curiosity freely expressed on his chubby features. "So, what's *the* Ada Taylor doin' in my cab, forty miles from the city?" He asked curiously with a twist of his hand on the worn leather of the steering wheel.

Adalyn didn't turn to acknowledge his innocent question. The man had been going on for a while now, his ramblings only blending in with Dolly. "I mean, *Ada Taylor*. No one will believe me when I tell them you were in my cab. I mean, my wife has seen all your movies, Miss Taylor. Every single one." His southern accent pulled at his words and made them brighter somehow, friendlier.

His words continued, meeting deaf ears as Adalyn continued her intense concentration on the passing farmhouses.

There was a sudden lull in his constant speech and she turned

her head slightly, worried she'd offended the kind man. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

He smiled as he looked up into the rearview mirror. "I asked if you come from out thisaway?"

She offered him the briefest of smiles, lips quirking softly and her hands writhing in her lap. "I do," she replied quietly, hoping her tone would convey that she didn't wish to discuss any further details. She didn't have to worry what he took from her voice, however, as a huge oak tree came into view, the green leaves bobbing under the tapping of rain. "The next house ahead."

◆ — — — — ◆  
***SHE HICCUPPED AND A GREAT HOLE OPENED UP WITHIN HER CHEST, A STORM FILLING THE VOID THERE. ADALYN CAST ONE LAST LOOK OVER HER SHOULDER AS THE TAXI DROVE HER AWAY.***  
◆ — — — — ◆

The taxi slowed to a stop at an old farmhouse, white paint peeling as rain poured from the broken gutters. Adalyn stared at the old house and took in the sight of the pink rose bushes hugging the wraparound porch, the violet morning glory that crept up the lattice. Every color was accentuated and darkened by the heavy rain, making the white house seem bright against the dreary backdrop of a gray thunderhead rolling across the fields. An older Camry was parked in the driveway. Despite the way it had aged, it looked just as it did the day Adalyn left.

"You want me to wait? I can turn off the meter if you'd like." The driver turned around to face her, his right arm stretching to brace against the shoulder of the passenger seat.

Adalyn couldn't tear her gaze from the house. "That's alright. I don't plan to be too long."

She unlatched the door and exited the car. She ducked her head and quickened her pace to escape the cold drops of rain that fell on her hair. She shuddered when the water dripped down her collar onto the skin of her neck. She stepped up onto the porch, the stairs creaking with each step. Her heart pounded quickly in her chest, the tightness in her chest almost painful. She stared at the wide door, her hand coming to rest on the chipped banister. She was

flung into her memories at the feel of the rustic wood against her fingertips.

*"Adalyn! I told you to stop swinging on those posts. You'll fall and break something." Her mother sat on the porch swing, her hands sewing a hole in her brother's faded Levi's. Mama was a skinny woman who always wore an old skirt, her hair tucked into a wild bun, a few stray hairs hanging down over her brow. Her careful eye was focused on Adalyn, who was busy twirling along the banister, hands reaching for the next post as her bare feet danced upon the recently painted wood.*

*She smiled toothily, eyes gleaming, and her mother's words fell on deaf ears. "Watch Mama! I'm on a tightrope!"*

Adalyn brushed her hand past the railing, running one hand up her left arm. It had been broken shortly after the third time her mother had asked her to get down. She wished she could say she learned her lesson, but the following summer she broke the other arm.

The front door clicked open and her head snapped up, broken from her reverie. A young woman stood before her, possibly only a few years older than Adalyn herself. She was thin, with long blonde hair pulled into a ponytail. Her green eyes were wide as she took in Adalyn. Surprise was evident on her pretty features, but a warm smile graced her lips anyway. "Hello." Her lips remained parted as if she wished to continue, but didn't quite know what to say.

Adalyn, used to this reaction and understanding that she had come unannounced, stretched out her hand, trying not to peer past the woman into the house. "Hello. I know you don't know me, but I know this place." Feeling suddenly awkward with her hand held out before her, her other hand clenched against her jeans and she shuffled her feet. "I . . . uh, I used to live here." She has acted with the most famous of people and has been at ease at the biggest premieres and red carpet events, but now she was out of her comfort zone.

She hadn't felt this self-conscious since the first day of kindergarten.

The woman grasped her hand finally, her thin fingers warm and a bit dusty. Adalyn looked down and saw that she had flour clinging to her skin. The other woman seemed to catch on and immediately withdrew her hands and wiped them on the apron around her neck. "So sorry, I was just baking some pie. My name is Jenna Cooper."

"Adalyn Taylor." Adalyn offered her own smile.

Jenna tilted her head slightly, stepping back into the house to make way for her. "I know."

Adalyn dragged her shoes across the welcome mat as she stepped over the threshold. The scent of apples and baked goods tempted her immediately. She swallowed and felt her heartbeat continue its quick pace as she swept her gaze around the front room. There were a few changes. Pictures of a family she didn't know hung on the stairway. There was new trim along the doorway to the kitchen. The large archway to the living room was repainted an off-white. But she felt suddenly at ease, letting out a shaky breath. The ache in her chest was different now, an intense longing that grabbed her and whispered memories in her ears.

She could feel Jenna staring at her. Adalyn cleared her throat, feeling guilty again for intruding. "I'm sorry, I just needed to come here again. Recently, I lost my mother. And I . . . I just needed to come back. To see my home again. I swear, that's all, I just want to relive some old memories."

Jenna's smile had changed, a subtle change like the way the house had evolved over the years. It was a sad smile, one that pitied her. It was exactly what Adalyn hadn't wanted. She didn't want anyone's sympathy. She felt ready to run up the stairs and find her

window seat and just pull her knees up and watch the storm. This wasn't her house anymore. She wasn't even sure she would have permission to revisit.

Jenna crossed her hands across her chest, her eyes wrinkling as she studied her. Adalyn didn't blame her for her hesitation. Finally, after a few moments of pregnant silence, Jenna gestured for Adalyn to follow her. She complied, passing from the front room to the kitchen. Jenna crossed around the island and paused at the counter where she'd been rolling out some pie crust. "Why don't you join me for some pie? I can call for you when it's finished."

Adalyn felt relief so strong that tears came to her eyes. "Thank you."

Jenna nodded and turned back to her crust. Adalyn let out a few breaths before turning back to the front room. She quietly ascended the stairs, her hand slowly following the steady incline of the railing. She paused at the top stair, hearing the familiar squeak of a loose board.



Fishing

Elizabeth Epstein

Plymouth Meeting, PA

"Shhh." Adalyn whispered, pausing at the top stair. Her little brother, Will, clung to her arm, his eyes wide with excitement as they snuck through the dark. "I hear Mama and Daddy."

The distinct voices of their parents echoed through the large house, the kitchen light flooding into the dark foyer. Adalyn frowned; they didn't sound happy. Her Mama's voice was strained, like when she cried. Daddy's deep rumble was tired and filled with something Adalyn had never heard. She could only catch a few words from both of them.

"I don't know . . . a few years . . . we won't have enough."

"They need to go . . . so smart . . . going to do?"

"I know . . . think of something."

Adalyn heard quiet footsteps behind her and her older sister, Penny, stood there, her eyes sharp with sadness. She held out a hand to both of them. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

Adalyn skipped the loud stair and padded down the hallway. There were three bedrooms. Her parents' had slept in the largest room, the one on the left. The door was shut and Adalyn didn't go near it. Instead, she headed for the rustic door at the end of the hall. It was partially open and Adalyn gently pushed it open. It was the small bedroom her brother had lived in. A child lived in this room now, the walls covered in superhero posters and a twin bed pushed into the far corner. The large windows poured the dim light across the toy-covered floor. Adalyn smiled and could picture Will, glass all over the floor, a baseball bat in his hand as he cried that he hadn't mean to hit the ball towards the house.

She backed out and turned to the final white door. It was slightly ajar, inviting her to enter. She used her hand to guide it open. The first thing she noticed about the room she and Penny used to share was that the walls were still white. The carpet was still there, the very first step into the room stained by nail polish that Penny had dropped when Will had scared her. The room now seemed much bigger than she remembered. No furniture lined the walls, no wardrobes or nightstands or beds. Instead, an easel stood near the window, canvases lined the walls and a table of paints, brushes and other supplies stood nearby.

The canvases took her breath away. Each one held a watercolor painting of every aspect of the house. One depicted the house during a sunny day. Another clearly showed the tire swing that hung in the backyard.



Adalyn crept slowly into the room, crossing carefully in front of the easel. Her window seat was exactly the same. The same pink cushion, the same view. She crawled up into the seat and peered out the window. The lonely apple tree still stood near the fields, the rope and tire gently swaying. The storm was calming, and she felt her chest loosen with each *thump, thump* of her heart. She fell at ease against the cushion and watched the fat raindrops roll down the window.

*She clutched a pillow close to her chest, tears streaming down her face. Her parents had sold her horse this morning. Dawnchaser had been her best friend; she'd grown up with the spotted draft. She'd been a good work horse and once, during her birthday, they'd given out rides. But money had been tight lately and Dawnchaser wasn't needed. Her heart was broken. She watched out her window now, as the trailer was pulled away down the dusty road. Dark brown billows of dirt clouded her visibility and soon she lost sight of the horse's trailer.*

*She hadn't argued with her father when he'd declared that they were selling her. She had merely nodded meekly and hid away, despite his attempts to comfort her. She knew they didn't have much money, and she didn't blame him for trying to do what was necessary.*

*It didn't hurt any less.*

Jenna's call from downstairs announced that the pie was ready. Adalyn was startled that she had sat in the window for so long. She'd been lost in her thoughts, trying to recover precious memories.

She got to her feet and took one last long look around the room and the paintings of her home. Then she descended downstairs to the kitchen.

The sun was peeking out from behind clouds and pouring in through the windows of the kitchen. The kitchen had been her father's favorite place, the huge picture windows granting

access to early morning sunrises as he downed his coffee. Adalyn crossed the kitchen, her shoes making the smallest of noises against the hardwood floor. Jenna was cutting the pie at the island, eyes focused.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Jenna asked, not unkindly.

Adalyn watched the clouds part, the sky clearing to reveal the blue sky. Drops glittered on the emerald ocean of grass and the flowers bowed with the weight of rainwater. The dark thunderheads crept away in the distance.

"I think so." She said quietly. Sucking in another deep breath, she turned back to the woman. She moved silently over to the empty dining room table and sat down. Several papers littered the table top and she glanced over subtly.

Several bills.

A grocery list.

She glanced around the kitchen and little things suddenly stuck out to her like the apple tree in the flat yard. There was a small jar in the corner filled with coins and a few dollars. An old pair of jeans were stretched across the chair across her, a patch in the knee and a sewing kit on the countertop. A collection of water bottles and soda cans were gathered near the sink. She felt pain in her heart and looked once more to Jenna.

*hands gripped, her head hung in her hands. She said nothing and that hurt Adalyn more than if she had been angry.*

*"We can't live off five cent cans. I'm going to go out there and get us money." She growled back. "I'm sick of living like this. I'm sick of living here."*

*Daddy's upper lip curled. "We're getting by just fine." His anger faded, replaced by a deep weariness. "Where will you go?"*

*Adalyn's anger hadn't faded as her father's had. "Hopefully, far from here." She turned on one foot and left the house, making sure to slam the front door on the way out.*

Jenna set down a plate of fresh apple pie in front of Adalyn. She gathered up the mail and pushed it further down the table before sitting down as well. Adalyn picked up the fork and took a bite, the warm tang of the apples meeting her taste buds. The sugar from the crust matched the apple taste and she was reminded yet again of her Mama.

"You're an amazing artist," Adalyn murmured once she'd finished her pie. Jenna let out a soft chuckle and collected their plates.

"It's just a hobby of mine."

"I'd like to buy all your paintings."

A plate clattered to the floor and shattered. Adalyn shot to her feet and bent down to help pick up the shards. Jenna was fumbling to do so on her own. They both paused and looked up at each other. Jenna had utter shock and disbelief in her green eyes.

"Why?" she whispered.

Adalyn smiled widely, the first genuine smile she'd accomplished in years. "They hold a lot of memories for me. And the house I have now is too empty. They would look great on my walls." She knew that it wasn't the full truth. Jenna didn't need to hear her true intentions or how similar Adalyn had once been to her. A sudden thought crossed her mind.



*Gatsby* Christian Stone Paramus, NJ

*"You're gonna just up and leave then?" Daddy snapped, his calloused hands wrapped around the back of the dining chair. His face was red, but his eyes were even more so. They were bloodshot with late nights, with early mornings, with the stress of trying to take care of his family. His thin face was tired, age lining his eyes. His cheeks were sallow.*

*Mama sat in the chair where his*

“Unless you’d like to keep them. That’d be fine too.”

Jenna covered her mouth with her hand, a wobbly smile adorning her face. Her eyes shined with unshed tears. Flustered, she managed to get some sentences out. “No, no, I . . . I can always paint more. I live in the house; I don’t . . . I don’t need paintings.” Her voice shook with sincerity. “Thank you.”

Adalyn, secretly relieved, helped the crying woman to her feet and dumped the broken plate into the garbage. “I’ll be back in a few days with some people to collect them.” She promised. Perhaps it wasn’t much to her, but by Jenna’s reaction, it was a miracle. When she looked at the mother, she could only see her mother, trying her best to take care of her family.

She left shortly after, waving a goodbye. She traveled down the wet sidewalk, the sun warming her. She paused at the end of the lopsided sidewalk, glancing back. She imagined a little girl balancing on the banister, clinging to the posts with loud squeals of laughter.

Adalyn sat back within the leather seats of the taxi and the driver jumped up from his sleep, startled by the slamming of her car door. “Sorry, I was just catchin’ a few winks, Miss Taylor.”

She kept her focus on the house. “It’s alright. Just take me ho-” She paused, realizing what she’d been about to say. It didn’t seem right anymore. “Just take me back.”

He started up the car, pulling out and away from her home. Adalyn stared a moment longer, heart full and memories pressing her mind as the distance increased between her and it, until she finally lost sight of her childhood house.

*Tears tracked down her face, her cheeks red, and eyes swollen. She hiccupped and a great hole opened up within her chest, a storm filling the void there. Adalyn cast one last look over her shoulder as the taxi drove her away. She was finally away from the poverty and the struggle. They would do better without her. One less mouth to feed. She could finally go make*

*something of herself.*

*She twisted back in her seat and tapped the driver. “To the city please.” She wiped the tears from her face and released a shuddering breath. She relaxed against her seat, wet eyes pointed forward, and a determined look on her face.*

*Adalyn didn’t ever plan on looking back.*

### *a poet’s curse*

Adithi Raghavan  
Sammamish, WA

*tick tock*

*mindless keys massage the seams of life’s endless toils  
crimson rivers sizzling at the unexpected bursts of rain falling from the sun’s eyes,  
trickle along the course of the veins  
at the center of it all: a ticking time bomb*

*tick tock. CLICK.*

*keys stop playing.  
sun stops crying.  
rivers begin fading.*

*tugs of sudden intense memories drawn  
strings of pathos.*

*a whirlwind of whirlwinds whisks  
fleeting letters into an incoherent jumble.  
a jigsaw.*

*it beckons you to solve it.  
you create sense out of nonsense until the  
pieces shapeshift into their final  
conjunction.*

*but it’s not finished.*

*your silent master of death whispers all  
the imperfections,  
creeping upon the edges of the puzzle and  
etching scars into our piece.*

*fix it.*

*an infinite loop begins as layers of  
evolution compound upon each other.  
minute details reveal countless hours of  
pensive moods like tree rings reveal age.*

*one day you manage to break out of the  
loop.*

*an onlooker analyzes your work.*

*and now, you’ve created a jigsaw for  
them to decipher.*

*so it begins and ends,*

back to nonsense from sense.

## *The North Korean Tractor*

Kaya Dierks  
San Francisco, CA



**O**n the other side, there was a tractor. After three years, I can still picture it: A machine like a Hotwheels car, creaking over the dirt hill, never quite reaching halfway before slipping down.

It was the summer of sixth grade, and I was in Yanji — a city in the furthest reaches of northeast China bordering North Korea and Russia. More importantly, it was the home to my grandfather’s extended family: two dozen cousins, aunts and great-uncles whom I had never met before.

That day, we had all trundled onto an aching bus and headed for the North Korean border. This was not the DMZ, but the China side. The border was a cracked concrete bridge connecting Yanji to the bleak, broken hills of North Korea. Shops and dirty convenience stores littered the surrounding streets — a tourist party embracing a grim wasteland. You could walk halfway across the bridge, unsupervised, if you were a Chinese citizen.

My brother Kian had bought an off-brand ice cream drumstick at one of the convenience stores. He licked it, slowly, his hands covered in sticky, melted vanilla goo. We watched the tractor together: up and down, up and down.

“It’s funny,” he said.

I stared at the broken-down town across the river surrounded by miles of starved, bare hills. People are trapped over there, I realized—some of my relatives are trapped over there, stranded in a world of headlines and debate, military marches and mysterious, terrifying super-weapons of global destruction.

I watched the tractor creep upwards, the desperate wheels snapping. Somehow, a part of me was there — and a part of that was *me*. Was I too made of sand and tree stumps, rusty

metal and nuclear  
bombs? A silent, cold  
terror crept over my

## *Pitampura, 1984*

Esha Kataria  
Ellington, CT

body.

“No, it’s not,” I finally said.

“What?”

“It’s not funny.”

The tractor slipped.

## *LILIES*

Blythe Petit  
Baltimore, MD

Eyes that barely clear the podium  
Gaze out and are met by hundreds  
Of strangers who gape back like  
monkeys.

Clinging to a tree that is no longer there,  
The perfume of funeral flowers  
Wafts through the air.  
Laughter and tears are the black  
Dots on a porcelain domino.  
Where is the line between appreciation  
and loss?

## *Bath Towel*

Emma Hubbard  
Baltimore, MD

Musty coral towel,  
You smell of peaches & basil  
As you swell above and below me  
And envelop me  
In garlands of underwater gardens but-

Not the deep & murky underwater  
That inhabits rusty buoys and haunted old  
trees  
(guttled and saturated  
like mossy mummies)

Nor the underwater of a downpour  
Of salty teardrop rain,  
The kind of rain that makes old men howl  
And dogs anticipate with eager, aching  
limbs

Rather the underwater of secret stone  
fountains  
From which cold, herbed water  
Gurgles and teases  
Beneath apricot and fig trees  
Before rushing  
In eddies and whirls  
To croon and cry  
Over the wilted crocuses

Cars buzzing around  
on the busy streets of Delhi  
honking angrily at each other  
like enemies impatiently waiting to attack

I wake up to the sounds;  
The cars, the street vendors, the white  
noise of the tv blaring  
the dust flying in through the window  
My eyes are blinded by the sun

I board the yellow crowded bus with  
children screaming fighting yelling  
I sit with a girl in my class and close my  
eyes trying to block out all the chaos  
  
I’m wearing my newly ironed blouse and  
my pleated skirt  
my black shiny flats have already turned  
brown from the dust  
The heat already creating  
sweat stains under my arms

I struggle to keep my eyes open  
I had stayed up last night studying

The bus finally parks in front of the  
large building, the Indian flag  
Blowing in the wind  
The colors orangewhitegreen  
merging into the sky along with the sun

I stand in the lines of hundreds of  
students at assembly  
I hear the Indian National Anthem  
playing and bow  
my head in respect

New day, but nothing new

I come home before my siblings  
the clothes still hanging from the  
line  
Only getting dirtier from  
the dust

a headache gnaws at my brain  
eating parts of it constantly

I walk into the tiny kitchen, the house girl  
is cleaning  
she is wearing a shaggy sari, its colors  
fading fast  
she nods to me in servitude almost  
Fear

Trying not to make eye  
contact as if  
I will taunt her

I make tea for grandma in her grey mug  
and walk upstairs to her bedroom  
the painting of Shiva lines the  
bedstand

On the verge of falling  
the tv box is screaming but she’s sleeping,  
like there is nothing wrong

Nothing at all  
I set the warm cup at her bedside table  
and walk out quietly, turning off the  
television on my way out, not wanting to  
wake her

My eyes are heavy with fatigue  
My clothes damp  
I jump into the cold shower and try to  
relax, unable  
To scrub off  
this burden of  
responsibility

## *Fried Rice*

Iris Martin  
Teaneck, NJ

**H**e is three years older than  
you, drives his father’s car  
and calls you baby. You’ve  
always been fiercely independent, but  
when he tells you to cook for him you  
throw your head back and laugh, but of  
course you agree. You agree and you tell  
him you’ll make him fried rice; you tell  
him that you’re so good at fried rice you  
can make it in your sleep.

But you don’t tell him you  
have. You don’t tell him that whenever  
someone mentions fried rice, even in  
passing, you remember the way you used  
to wake up at 6:30 and turn on the stove.  
You don’t tell him about putting the  
coffee on while you washed your face in  
the kitchen sink.

You tell him you’ve made it  
“bout a million times” but you don’t tell  
him that every time you used your coarse  
hands to separate the clumps of cold rice,  
you were just mirroring the movements of  
your mother and grandmother and every  
woman who came before you. Because  
fried rice is as hereditary as brown eyes  
and type 1 diabetes.

You tell him you used to make  
it for your family all the time, but you  
leave out the way your little brother

used to wake up around the same time the oil became hot enough to cook with. So you threw the rice in the pan while he cooed in the highchair, fussing over his formula. He loved the way you danced with a spatula in one hand, dancing to a song that has yet to play. You danced even though you were tired cause he'd cry if you didn't. Dancing and fried rice were always acts of loving servitude.

Loving servitude the same way you're willing to stand in this boy's kitchen and live out the role you were taught to fill. You became a woman the first time the popping oil burnt your forearm, and every sleepy morning since then. You want to care for him the same way you begrudgingly portioned fried rice for the rest of your family, selflessly and without question.

But he says he doesn't like rice, and you remember how hollow you felt falling asleep every night knowing you'd wake up and do it all over again. You remember the too-familiar ache of the early morning hustle and the new ache of leaving your father's house and the new pangs of uselessness.

You say nothing in reply and he tells you it's just rice.

And to him it's always been just rice.

## BEFORE (two koi fish in water)

Rukmini Kalamangalam  
Houston, TX

The shadow of whiskers like an invitation with the address missing. A fin like jellyfish but more tulle.

Craterous tulle; black swan pirouetting on the moon.

Tulle skirt with cigarette burn holes; laddered tights.

Iron stain on tulle; muddy.

Burned tulle drowned;  
Ophelia enters

the water with her head split open.

It sizzles.

Light glinting off scaled arms like merman preparing for battle. Drape him

in tadpoles- a garland to keep. See that collection of freckles

by his elbow? It's almost a constellation. Call it filtered sunshine on teenage boy & it won't come home with him.

An ink blot blossoms in the water. Looks like a smudge of blood on a war photographer's lens

except there's no war here. This is the moment—frozen—just before.

## Rebirth

Jeremy Hsiao  
Walnut, CA

Reshaped with added dust caught in the jet engines of Boeing 747's returning to the streets of Johor Bahru to live again.

The scent of Malaysia inhaled from touchdown, from the streets lined with water-wasted walls, to the apartment buildings that shelter shops beneath to the decaying waste in deep gutters, the country turned inside out.

Eyes peeled for a second time, refreshed in rain that pours a flickering bulb, fading in and out.

I find my second place of birth, half a heart pumping into the juices of fruit,

or the milk in ice kachang, the cooking oil in grills,

an array of beautiful collaboration of confusion and order, the battles of legendary Malay warriors like Hang Tuah against his long lost childhood friend, found in pasar malam booths.

Among her mountains are hidden treasures caressed with clouds coated in sprouts of trees, a city whose branches and skyscrapers reach the stars.

Malaysia wraps my skin in warm embrace.

Her soul slips down my throat in nasi lemak, in roti canai, in their soft drinks

with the air that I breathe two years, two views

a time capsule from both the past and future stored in one place.

## Food Doesn't Taste Good Anymore

Casey Rae Borella  
Verona, NJ

I used to count my calories like sheep. My head on the pillow, staring up at the ceiling, I re-played their leaps into my mouth. Usually by that point, I wanted to spit them out and send them back over the fence. But alas, unlike sheep, calories could not go back to where they came from unless I threw them up.

It's the first day of February 2010. I am in third grade and my 9<sup>th</sup> birthday was just yesterday. Today is special because my class has a special visitor: an exchange student named Jan from the Czech Republic. All the girls in my class are going to be fighting over him, so I need to make an impression on Jan. I wake up extra early today (I'm nine now and nine-year-olds need time in the morning to do their hair). I pick up the outfit that I laid out the night before, a white collared shirt, brown pants, and a brown sparkly sweater. I cover myself in fabric, inch by inch, until the ensemble is complete. Hairbrush in hand, I head to the mirror. My room has pictures all over it - mostly pictures of me and my friends.

Eleanore's legs are thin enough for her to wrap her fingers around them. I look in the mirror. Olivia eats ice cream and cheesy pasta every single day, but she still wears a size 8-10. I am not pleased with what I see. The MKA polo fits Maddie the right way. I throw my hairbrush at the mirror, but luckily - it flies into the wall instead. It is 6:45 a.m. and my hairbrush is stuck in the wall. It is 6:46 a.m. and I am on the floor, crying. I am the fattest girl in the third grade. And I'm not stupid. I know I'm the fattest girl in the third grade. Madison shouts across the hallway, proclaiming that she is still 50 pounds. I am a whole 35 pounds heavier than Madison. I am nine years old and I weigh 85 pounds. Madison asks me how much I weigh. I say that don't know, but we all know that's a lie. I could never forget how much I weigh - the number 85 is branded on my brain.

Dad still glares at me

when I eat off mom's plate. I usually cry after family dinners. *Eat your own food. Are you really sure you should be eating that? Haven't you eaten enough already?* Soon the echoes of his voice turned into the echoes of my own. We don't have family dinners anymore.

It's the summer after 8<sup>th</sup> grade and I'm going to the New Jersey State Fair.

Julia is picking me up at 6:00 and right now it's 5:30. Sometimes I like the way I look. I haven't bought new clothes in a while, but I know I can make do. Sometimes the boys at school say I'd be prettier if I made myself shrink. I want to get a nice

Instagram picture tonight. Maybe I should skip breakfast. I have a small walk in closet in my new house. Maybe I should skip lunch. It's never that organized though. Maybe I should skip dinner. I grab the first pair of shorts I see and put them on. Maybe I should just skip them all. The closet has a full-sized mirror that hangs on the door. I walk over to the mirror and suddenly I'm nine again. Here I am, staring at my reflection, so utterly displeased. My thighs are the size of the ocean and have craters all over them like the moon. I look like a washed up whale. I look like an elephant. I am drowning myself in the thoughts of how much I hate who I am. I want to rip my thighs off and let the tide pull them away. I want it all to go away. I want to be someone else. I want it all to **STOP**.

This time, I'm not holding a hairbrush. The glass shatters and my knuckles are bleeding. I'm on the ground again, just like third grade, except this time I'm trying not to sit on shards of glass. The mirror is broken and so am I.

My room doesn't have a full size mirror anymore. I have to go downstairs into my parents' room to use the mirror. On my bathroom mirror, sometimes I write my weight in pink expo marker. If I'm constantly reminded of what a disappointment that number is, then I will work harder for the number to decrease.

Tonight, I am

babysitting, and the kids are asleep. All I want is a fruit rollup, and there is a plethora of fruit rollups in the pantry. Breakfast: one hardboiled egg (70) and green tea (0). It's better to eat hardboiled eggs rather than scrambled –with scrambled you consume extra calories from the oil. Sometimes I skip the egg all together. Green tea is good for your immune system – it's like natural weight



*Toil* Ziya Xu Pittsburgh, PA

loss tea. I plug breakfast into "Lose It!," the calorie tracker I've been using for the past month. It tells me that in order to lose 10 pounds by when school starts, I can eat 1200 calories a day. But that's fine, it seems like more than enough to me. I check my tracker to see if I can fit in a fruit rollup. Lunch: one Rxbar (210). My mom's friends tell me that I look great. Skinny. They joke and ask how I did it, if I can share my secrets. I just laugh it off. Laughing burns 35 calories in 10-15 minutes, did you know that? Dinner: - wait, never mind. I'm not eating dinner tonight. I am well under my daily limit and it's probably fine if I eat this one, tiiiiiiiny fruit rollup. The crinkle of the wrapper and the bright red color entices me. I'm pretty excited for this fruit rollup. I open my mouth and I realize - I am physically incapable of eating this fruit rollup. I want to eat it, but I just can't. I try to bite of a piece but suddenly I can't chew. I try to chew, and I spit it right back up. How did I become this way? I am now 123 pounds, the skinniest I have been since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. And I am proud of myself. I am proud of the way I get dizzy when I stand up. I am proud of the way my hip bones protrude out. I am proud of the fact that people are jealous of how I look now. I am proud of the monster that I have become. Somehow, I have eaten myself whole and spit myself back out. I am a shell of who I used to be

and a skeleton of who I was.

I don't write my weight on my mirror anymore. I threw the pink expo marker out and replaced it with purple. My mirror now reads "love yourself first" and "today is what you make it." I try to remind myself that a few pounds heavier or a few pounds lighter, I am still me. I try to look at food without

immediately recognizing the calories of each item. I deleted the calorie tracker from my phone. Starving isn't cute anymore. I am not better all the time, and I will admit that. There are still days where I love watching my hands shake. But that's not every day. And that is what matters.

## *Horses of Catastrophe*

Sabrina Alvarez  
Taylor, PA

Winter's waste  
Wrapped white Waler.  
A king's crown  
Conquered from confinement.

Battles born from blood  
Bring Barb's blazing brick.  
Swords show stories  
Of snakes striking souls.


Bottomless bargains  
Beckon black Blazer.  
Bread burdened by balance  
Break by beggary.

Pale pink poppies  
Present pale Persano.  
Silenced slaughter  
Summons Samael's scythe.

## *Zero*

Nina Gerszberg  
Towaco, NJ

I do not believe in the number zero. I believe that when you subtract one from one you get a number called zero. But zero is but a number, and unlike other numbers, it cannot be applied to real life. Allow me to explain. All numbers show the amount of



something. So if you have the number one, and you apply it to the world, you can get one orange or one true love. However, I do not believe the number zero exists. See, zero implies that you have nothing, and I do not believe in nothing either, because nothing would mean you had the absence of something. But nothing is still something, and if you have an absence of nothing you have something. And since there is always something, there can't be a zero amount of anything. There is no zero. This is what I believe. I always have.

When there was only one bottle of alcohol and one scar cut into my face, I did not believe in zero. I did not think that the man holding the bottle was my father, but I did not have zero Fathers. I did not have no Father. I will always have my role model because I cannot have zero fathers, because I do not believe in the number zero.

Even after the 8th hospital visit, when my Mom took me out of the house and put me on the streets, I still did not believe in zero. I refuse to believe, because that would mean I had no place to call "home," meaning I had zero homes, and I know that cannot be true because I do not believe in the number zero.

Even when the man knocked me out and took my Mother away, I still did not believe in the number zero. I know I am right because even after the last of my family was torn away I still had a family. I know this because if I didn't I would have no Mother and I do not believe in having no Mother because that would mean I had zero amounts of family and I do not believe in the number zero.

Even as they forced me away from the last spot where I saw my Mother, taking away the very last thing I held onto, I still did not believe in the number zero. Even as they began treating me like my Father had, I knew I had something because if I didn't, it would mean I had zero amounts of anything and that can't be right because I do not believe in the number zero.

Even as I felt the wind taunting my bare skin. Even after all that

the men had done to me. Even after all my dignity was gone, I still did not believe in zero. If you took away my dignity then I would truly have nothing. Absolutely nothing. But you can't have nothing because you can't have a zero amount of something. And I know I do not lie when I say this since you can't have zero amounts of anything since there is no number zero. So even now, after everything, I still do not believe in the number zero.

Even as I swallowed the 20th pill, the most I had ate in as long as I could remember. Even as I faded out of consciousness. And even when I finally left all the pain behind, I still did not believe in the number zero. And this is the only thing I can remember to be true. I know it's true because an absence of something is nothing. And nothing is still something. Meaning, I cannot have nothing. I cannot have a zero amount of anything, because that would mean there is nothing, when really, there is always something. So even now, at the end, I still do not believe in the number zero.

## *The Good Hood*

Bobbi Asse  
Newark, NJ

Since day one I been on a mission  
Everyday people tell me my dreams are a fiction  
Because my form of glory can't be told  
inna short story

I am expected to be too good for the hood  
That I shoulda grew w/ a sophisticated  
childhood  
That when I grow up, I should move into

a better neighborhood

I don't even know what's that's supposed to mean

That when I see struggling situations  
Put up a black screen?  
Or when I see the color red automatically  
assume  
That's a juvenile teen?

Forget all that  
I embrace where I'm from  
And at least I got culture unlike you  
bougie lowlife bums

So listen up on what I plan to do  
Pay attention as to what I need to go thru  
Or else imma have serve you some  
serious deja vu

I plan to succeed  
Make sure that all my struggling brothas  
and sistas take the lead  
Give back so that struggling mothers can  
count up that rack  
Make sure they sons get that A+ back to  
back  
You say cut them no slack?  
Well Imma give em all of that  
So much to the point where it start to feel  
like crack

Since day one I been on a mission  
Everyday people tell me my dreams are a  
fiction  
But I won't let the conflicting  
contradiction stop the so much needed  
justification

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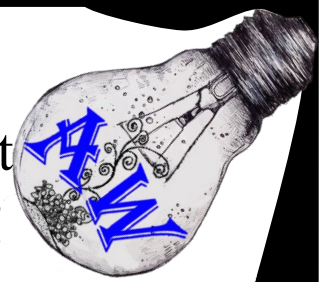
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—Robert Boswell, Guggenheim Fellow and *New Yorker* fiction writer

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