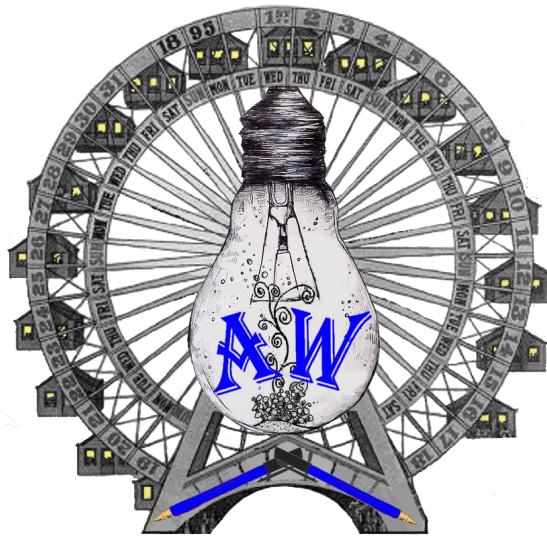


# Apprentice Writer



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Delhi, India

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# Apprentice Writer

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# A Brief History in Google Searches

Jonathan Chen

Livingston, NJ

*How to be fit. 5:10 PM. Tuesday, April 1, 2014.*

Ten minutes ago practice ended, and right now you're sitting in the backseat of your mom's three-year-old minivan. Salty April rain dangles in the sixty degree air before splattering the windshield, Jackson-Pollock style. For a few

seconds you watch the windshield wipers and follow them with your eyes, back and forth, back and forth.

But then you stop to look down at your screen, sucked in by its pallid glow. Your mom asks you how practice was, but you're only 50% sure what she said because your eyes are submerged in the search results.

*Menshealth.com, shape.com, mensfitnessmagazine.com.* They're all the same to you. Each has the big black block letters, the "How to Get Abs in Ten Minutes" plastered onto the body you dream of having. The jawline, veins leaking attraction, the taut abs stolen from Adonis himself.

You can't help but fall victim to the superficiality, this culture you've spent years trying to bury, pulling and tugging at your own skin as if it'd tear right off. Imagine that. The fat peeling right off like snakeskin, withering on the ground. Maybe then you wouldn't have to complain for the first ten minutes before Coach arrives in his turquoise-navy van, reminding yourself that you're only there because your parents said the "team atmosphere" would be "good for you" and they weren't picking you up until 5 anyways. You wouldn't have to chase the other guys down the road at practice; you'd lead. Coach would put you in races, and you'd get the gold. You wouldn't need to dream anymore. You'd live the fantasy each day, fall in love with its main character, this you that you want but not the one you are.

*Tips for losing weight. 9:04 AM. Saturday, April 5,*

*2014.*

This time you're eating breakfast when your hand squirms into your pocket. The usual morning: Cinnamon Toast Crunch until the bowl is  $\frac{2}{3}$  full, then just enough milk so it doesn't overflow and your mom makes you clean it up. Your brother Kevin is eating a plain bagel with peanut butter, even though he doesn't like bagels (He says they're too boring, like sad donuts). It's probably because last week your mom said his face looks wider than it did before he went to college and because he knew all those midnight Dunkin Donuts runs



**Industrial Jaws** Hewson Duffy Charlottesville, VA

weren't the best move for his stomach. You're watching him take each bite, monotony sprawled across his face. You spoon the first bites into your mouth. But then, as he stuffs the last bit down his throat, you get this feeling in your gut, rising up along your spine like a winter breeze. One that tells you that you should do that too, so you can be fast like they are and have taut abs like the men in the magazines do. And suddenly, the sugar on your tongue spoils and the cereal on your spoon doesn't taste as good. It tastes dry and sinful, like a mistake. *Low calorie foods. 12:18 AM. Monday, April 14, 2014.*

You've started looking at nutrition facts, flipping boxes upside down and on their sides. You used to think all those numbers were oppressive,

health nuts telling people what they could and couldn't eat. But when your mom tells you that she's going to Shoprite tomorrow, you realize that they might not be too crazy after all as you spend an hour looking online for foods that you can eat without guilt. You're looking for low fat but still no sugar, high energy but still low calorie, scrolling and scrolling page after page for something that doesn't exist. You're searching for rain in a drought, a feast in a famine. You're a moth flirting with flames, burning in your own desire.

*How to stop hunger cravings. 1:33 PM. Wednesday, April 16, 2014.*

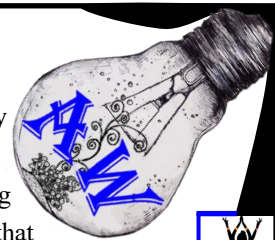
Two days ago you stopped going to practice. And it's not because the coach doesn't like you or you have a personal thing against running (though you do). It's that thirty minutes isn't as long as it used to be, and when you need to burn a thousand calories a day while only eating four hundred so you can lose thirty pounds in three weeks, it's not enough. So instead you take shelter in the basement, next to the rickety old fan and the TV. Because maybe, if the temperature is just right and the volume on the TV is so loud that you can't hear the patting of your dad's

six-year-old tennis shoes on the treadmill belt, running an hour every day won't hurt. It'll feel numb, and at least you can handle numb. Numb is good.

*How to feel better. 7:30 PM. Sunday, April 27, 2014.*

Dinner is different now. You're eager to pull apart the bread and drop it into your mouth, but stomaching the words "I'm full" after only a few bites while you can still hear your belly crying out for food gets harder every time your mom asks. Your fingers feel frail like glass, your lifeblood vacuumed from your fingertips.

Even your friends at school have started to notice. The way your back hangs and your eyes look so weary, beaten down by the world in only twelve years. You watch them eat





their sugar cookies and feel mocked.

They try to break off a piece, but you always push their hands away.

They tell you to “be a person” and “eat the goddamn cookie,” but the scariest part is that you don’t even really want to anymore. You can’t remember how it tastes, whether the sugar will crumble on your tongue or not, because all you see in their hands is the promise of fitness being snatched away from you. So you sit there eating your slice of bread, closing your eyes so you can imagine the crumbs falling into your stomach, trying to convince yourself that you will get through this. How naive you were back then, thinking that you could be so whole in half the body.

*Maintaining a healthy weight. 3:05 PM. Thursday, May 1, 2014.*

It’s over now. You’re twenty-six pounds lighter, twenty-six pounds freer. Elastic waistbands hang around your pelvis. In the shower, as steamy water sputters out of a chrome shower head, pouring onto your naked body, you stare down and marvel at your health. Your skin hugs your body in the cold, searching for the rest of it and the warmth it holds. But it doesn’t matter; you let it shiver. It’s over now, and your body feels warmer than it has in months. You can eat now, shovel spoonfuls of silky satin New York cheesecake into your mouth and let them melt into ecstasy. Chocolate is sweet again, never bitter. Big black block letters and numbers mean nothing. It’s over now. You can bite in.

But it doesn’t last. Because just as you accept it, just as you resign yourself to the calories resting on your silver spoon and settle into the peace like the lull of a slow song, questions will burn in your chest and breathe chills into the warm crevices of your body. You’ll step onto a glass scale and feel yourself fall through, the world opened up beneath you. You’ll stare into mirrors each morning and see a new face each time. Some days you’ll close your eyes. Some days you’ll touch your skin and wish you could run your hands right through, your body hollow. It’s starting again.

## Frying Pitch, Skip

Gloria Wang

Fairfax, VA

Home is the smoldered wick of nature,  
thick cross sections of heavy flesh  
layer over each other in angry violet strains.  
I stoke the curing / an offensive red against harried  
veins—  
milky fat split, down the center by bruise-bright  
bone,  
a pocked meridian between ourselves and the true  
unknown.  
The smokehouse lingers with you, flaps as the io  
moth,  
wafts its melancholy tease of day into the parlor  
tablecloth.  
I can see it from the way this father folds his  
newspaper:  
against its original crease, an unfurling caution—a  
scrape of toothy scowl  
against orange pulp, and scatters inky traces against  
a warm linen towel—  
Then, back in time to hold the page another shift.

We learn as children to swallow once for the rain  
that never hits  
twice to cough away the wetness that bubbles and  
soothes the splits.  
It’s dry season here, cracked fingertips, convulsing  
throats, and a lung-deep echo,  
when we skip across shriveled red rock clay and  
frying pitch meadows,  
with snake oil sheen, rejoinder to the worn soles of  
my feet.  
We are awakened like the toad neighbors with an  
old taunt of rain,  
sixteen years the older and with the sweet smell of  
thunder in the plains.  
Howl into the night for the coyote ghost, set out this  
mother’s  
glass jars and scatter old, sweet fennel for thick rain  
pelts, a prayer.  
When it comes, it’s May thunder, May the clouds  
finally pour in—  
like old friends waiting to arrive, wind wisps beaten

thin.

*Desierto*, I learn is what the red-rimmed sun calls as  
it rises.

A true picture, ash, zealous orange clay, scrapes of  
the verdigris prized  
off blunt steel plows to make a patchwork canvas,  
the ridges of paper  
drying into the creased mountain range. It’s the  
same life as it capers,  
the same one as we know it: in current against  
flood—  
a spare eagle flies through kitchen windows with a  
promise of lifeblood.  
We cloud watchers on peeling white post, we-  
happy, we-wild, as  
there in the sightline, we see pillows of chimneys,  
loud smell of prize heifer.  
Here, where the illicit sorrow should be, beckoning  
for you to decipher.  
But no, this poem is Love, home, mine to tell, and  
there will be no bitterness,  
as there can be none when the canyon sun bickers  
with its pan-fried land.  
*Desierto* means / wind-carried laughter, a gladness I  
cannot quite describe.





## Stratified

Ariel Kim

Fairfax, VA

It is as soon as I am  
Combed apart, row after  
Row that the newspaper columns begin to bulge,  
convolute—  
Some headlines in neon, ricochet across vision and  
the others  
The edge of fish bowls & memory

You & I our chemistry  
Reeks of heavy taxonomy & Vessalius taught us  
That it's what's visible inside  
Vein, artery, bone arranged in  
Neat strata  
And the predestined cells of outerness  
offer

An ultimatum— to be written in black  
& white, the nuances of thunderclouds serve  
Only  
As backdrop to the dripping undercurrents

Leaking ink down crosswords, pervading borders  
Smearred fingertips  
A breath scraping gravel & open windpipe

Reek of ice  
& gunpowder.



## Confessions

Destiny Perkins

Pittsburgh, PA

I vow that no one will ever see my naked  
body again.

I am redressing for the second time after a  
wild rendezvous in the bathroom of a college  
cathedral. I pull my clothes on eagerly on the other  
side of the room, watching as he checks his hair in  
the mirror, oblivious to the trembling of my chubby  
brown fingers. I didn't get pleasure, despite the hour  
we'd spent fulfilling the acts that thirteen year old  
me would have gazed upon in gull and envy. I'd  
spent an hour inserting moans and cries where I

assumed they would fit, to spare his feelings, to  
compensate for my lack of wetness and my  
inexperience in adult affairs. My body hurts, but I  
didn't receive any pleasure. As I am dressing, I am  
eager to jump back into my own skin—to tuck away  
the flaws of my raw, unfiltered form back into the  
shadows of my clothing. All I can think about is  
what he saw. When I am on my knees, I don't feel  
the presence of him pushing inside of me, instead  
all I can feel is the girth of my own stomach pressed  
to my thighs and the heaviness of my sack of skin  
dangling from my skeleton. I don't recall his  
presence at all, not the sound of his voice or the  
texture of his chocolate drop skin. All I can  
remember is the impounding urge to rip myself  
from my own skin.

Afterwards, as I sit in my bed, staring at  
the ceiling in the dark, I decide to cut off every man  
who I've had affairs with, every single liar who has  
dared to coo words of lust into my starved brown  
ears. I've decided that they are terrible for me  
because they have tolerated me, accused them of  
self-absorbed debauchery in order to suppress the  
guilty bile climbing up my throat as I exchange  
apologies for enduring my body for long weeks of  
absence. I reason my own sexual and affection  
deprivation with the fact that I have yet to  
experience an orgasm, and these men don't hold  
onto me long enough. I clamor into sleep hastily,  
eager to outrun the incoming horny hour.

After three weeks of silence, I find myself  
falling victim to my same irrational cravings. My  
mind continuously drifts back to the fading thrill of  
boys' hazy eyes lingering on my names, the warmth  
of the illusion of being desired. My skin itches, I  
find myself harboring rashes on my tender areas—  
red valleys outstretched across my thighs, my arms,  
and my neck. I dig my own skin from under my  
nails like an addict. My mind betrays me, takes  
advantage of the early morning daze between my  
slumber and consciousness, and allows their names  
to manifest in the caverns of my walls. I wake up,  
conscious and aroused—ashamed.

After three weeks and two days, I cave in.  
My fingers tingle as they tap out the

forbidden word, 'Hey.' I squeeze  
my eyes closed to keep my  
inevitable better thinking at bay.  
My heart is racing; I overturn the  
possibility of rejection in my chest. I've never been  
rejected before, in part because I scarcely provoke  
the interest of men on my own but mostly because I  
don't start wanting men until they want me. My  
childish self wonders what it's like to feel the scorn  
of rejection, to feel the burn of my paranoia's  
wildest fantasies materializing on my skin like the  
ravenous teeth of a specter. What is it like to be  
unwanted? In the minutes it takes for him to reply,  
I'm already trying on different sizes of  
disappointment, imagining my phone remaining  
mute for the remainder of time or the words, 'You  
fat fucking bitch. Fuck you want?' flashing across  
my screen in banners like the words I say to myself  
in the mirror through gritted teeth. I am already  
sliding my thick body into the perfect dress of 'He  
don't want you, sis,' size 18 when he replies.

"Hey. What's up? Did you have fun at the  
party Friday?" he quips, I can visualize his boyish  
smile shy against his dark skin, his long lashes  
fluttering as he types. I can taste him in the walls of  
my cheeks. I hate the flavor. I frown in  
disappointment.

Everyone wants me, but me.

I vow no one will ever see my body again  
even as I beg for the light skin with the chipped  
smile and the reckless heart to trace his vacant  
hands on my body again, to look at me directly as  
he utters my name. I try to fold myself into the  
space he's made for me, allow my goth girl roots to  
flourish in the darkness he nurses me in. I try to  
ignore the absence of a heart beat when my ear is  
pressed to his hollow, twiggy chest, convince  
myself that the thickness of my untamable kinks is  
what muffles the thud of his heart; I just wasn't  
listening hard enough. I learn to look at everything  
but his eyes when I'm with him.

When I dare look to his eyes, his dark eyes  
are clouded with preoccupation or he bites his  
thick brown lips as he stares at fine young queen  
across the room. My throat burns as I notice  
how alive he looks with them, and when





he revisits my bed at night, I do  
whatever I can to play

Frankenstein—bite my lip just so,  
talk to him as if he's a dear friend and  
not just a blood sucker caught between my sheets,  
anything that I think will show him that I'm 'down'  
for him just like the other girls. But I can't replicate  
the fire. I collect the heartbreak of my friends as  
they pile around me, their rosy cheeks grazed by his  
soft fingers that I know too well. They tell me  
secrets of how they fell in love with him and he fell  
hard for them, how he stole away in the middle of  
the night. I listen, turning my gaze to the floor as I  
rub the hickeys shaped like his high yella lip marks  
on my chest.

I should've jumped ship when I'd first  
discovered that my chubby body had become an  
instrument in my friend's destruction. I wanted to, I  
spent my nights seething and bent at the waist in  
prayer to all that is good in the world to smack him  
upside the head for me. But the thrill of being with  
him, being wanted by someone who could (and did)  
have any girl that he wanted was intoxicating. I was  
playing in leagues my ugly brown self was never  
intended to see. I was no longer mingling with the  
gorgeous out of pity, but now equipped as their  
competition. His vacant stare was all the validation  
that I needed.

But I knew my luck, the spell of the scent  
between my legs, was only temporary. My anxiety  
swells into the space that silence leaves, swells into  
the days that we don't speak, overflows into the  
warm milk that fills my bathtub. I sink into the  
cloudy film of my perfidy. On days where I don't  
see the chip of his smile, I feel my bones trembling  
with the chill of anticipated rejection, feeling his  
warmth exorcised from my body and repossessed in  
the tight smooth figure of some old flame. I know I  
can't compete.

## BLACKBERRIES ARE VIOLET

Carrie Hsu  
Roslyn, NY

*Please, God, let him telephone me now.*

My mother's home is old. A telephone  
hangs to wallpaper covered in tinted paisley and  
flowery turquoise. It's a pity I haven't left yet, and  
it's been a while since I've prayed, but I'm praying  
now. *Please, God, let him telephone me now.* It's  
been a week since the interview at the cafe, and  
although he seemed libertine, he was impressively  
successful. He was a city man, well-cut and prim,  
hair slicked back unfaithfully, lips pressed for time.  
For the blood taste of kale and paper, for the blare  
of street lights, for the smell of marble, anything.  
Cigarettes litter the bed, and I stare down the  
hallway at the black handle that rests too cozily on a  
suppressed hanger. God, how I longed for it to ring  
and for me to run childishly down the hall, like  
when I was just a little girl in a summer dress,  
running across a field of uncut dandelions, brushing  
seeds waiting to blown and bristling past wishes  
begging to be whispered to the clouds. I look back  
to the sheets. Straighten them. Place the pillows  
perfectly, although I had done so last week. I had  
whispered my wishes seductively to him, and he  
had happily complied. One time for one chance.  
That was the deal.

The smoke runs unprohibited in the  
summer breeze, and I feel him everywhere all over  
again, biting my shoulder too deep, sucking my  
breasts too tight, fucking me too hard. It was  
animalistic sex for such a slim chance, but it was a  
small leap for a big opportunity. He promised he'd  
talk to his boss, that I'd get the position. His suit  
was wrinkled, his ring compromised as he walked  
out without a word. He didn't know it, nor would he  
care, but I had bled. It was a first. The first. I had  
lost my virginity to a man I did not love on the bed I  
had slept in as a girl. I'm not a slut, no, don't call  
me that. I'm a woman willing to dream.

After he left, I had fallen asleep, my body  
exhausted and overused. I had dreamt of a sailboat  
with a slave at its wheel, the sun flashing like

cameras off a sea of free blue. She wore a bright red  
bandana and oddly white earrings, the only remains  
of a life on unsolicited land. She popped  
blackberries in her mouth as the wind combed  
through her curls and bounced them like springs at a  
carnival. Upon her arrival, my mother had  
awakened me to help with the groceries, ignorant  
and passive to what had occurred under her arms.

I walk unconsciously down the hallway  
towards this object of obscurity that could bring  
such great news as my slumped sweater engulfs my  
pants fatly. It's near the kitchen, and I tickle the  
counter as an ant would have picked up crumbs of a  
half-bitten sugar cookie. It's too silent, yet the  
obsidian refuses to bark. *Damn it, let the telephone  
ring.* Tell me that dreams aren't an American  
culture that nobody really gets, tell me I did what I  
had to do, tell me there's a God looking out for me.  
Tell me I'm not young, tell me I'm not desperate,  
tell me, I'm not stupid.

I sneak a look out at the crappy  
neighborhood I've been forced to call home for so  
many years, this suburban shithole of a town that I  
wanted to tear in half and burn from the sky to the  
ground. I watched trees sway and imagined caging  
them in small square pockets by a sidewalk across  
from business buildings and banks and red-brick  
vintage apartments. One day, I will rip up all the  
blades of grass without getting cut and smear  
cement over them; one day, I will forget what grass  
looks like. *Please, God, let the telephone ring, let  
him telephone me now. Let the grass incinerate like  
witches at the stake.*

There's a cerulean glass bowl of  
blackberries sitting patiently in the center of the  
wooden table. The lines of oak swirl endlessly in a  
daze, melding with grain and stroking corners. I  
pick one up and impale each ridge until the bulges  
deflate, defeated. I choose another. My nails are  
beginning to drink violet, as if I were cold, but the  
remnants of peeled-off glitter and the freshly  
painted layer of a cardinal on fire spit it out past my  
skin. I glance up buoyantly at the clock above the  
telephone. The second hand sweeps past the  
numbers like a carousel without wait. It'd just be a  
bit longer. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five,  
thirty, thirty-five.



## Spring at Last

Danielle Bongiovanni

Union, NJ

Was I the first to ask?

Was that why your answer was choked  
With flowers that kept pouring from your mouth?  
A simple question made you bloom,  
Stems thrusting through the gap between your front  
teeth

Desperate for sunlight, desperate to be seen.  
Their seeds must have been planted long ago  
And took root in your mind and heart

How did you live with leafy vines  
Winding through your veins and nerves?  
How did it feel to be a greenhouse?

Petals coated your words,  
And by the time you were done speaking  
The smell of springtime surrounded us.  
Since that day, spring has been  
The prettiest of seasons to me

What would have happened  
If I had never asked for your dreams?  
What if you had shied from my persuasions?  
I wonder if those plants would still have bloomed,  
Not needing my help because you are their rightful  
tender

Or if you would have let weeds run wild.  
Wrapping around your ribcage  
Until they choked you from inside



## The Stain

Ariel Glazman

Brooklyn, NY

When I asked my grandmother how being Jewish has affected her life, she summed it up for me in two simple and depressing sentences: “What’s the point of being a Jew? The label has been a stain on my life for all eighty years that I’ve been on this Earth.”

The word “Jew” is uttered phonetically as if it were an insult. It is a sharp and harsh declaration that requires the lips to tense up and assume a position similar to as if you were about to spit.

Besides phonetics, the oppression and harassment of Jews has become so normalized that even the word representing my people has a negative meaning associated with it. In my own experiences at school since probably the first grade, a teacher simply uttering the word “Jew” always causes at least one person in the class to giggle to themselves. For example, I noticed that while discussing *The Great Gatsby*, the stereotypical “crafty Jew” Meyer Wolfsheim, with his obnoxious nasal inflection and Yiddish accent, invoked smirks and titters in my own English class. These kids are not anti-Semites, but their laughter is simply a reflection of how society depicts Jews. Jews are treated like the kid at school who runs down the hallways to class with an unzipped book bag and raises his hand for every question. Some people directly pick on him, others just laugh at the thought of him, and a part of him hates who he is simply because everyone else does.

This self-hatred and consequent loss of Jewish identity due to society’s negative association and treatment toward Jews is prevalent amongst many of my friends and family. The first time I became familiar with the “Jewish stain” and the urge to get rid of it was in the 6th grade. I was sitting with my best friend Greg in the cafeteria, and an 8th grader (royalty at the time) came up to us.

“What’s good Greg, you trying out for the basketball team?” he asked my best friend while scanning me up and down.

“Who’s this kid bro, he looks like a Jew,” he snickered.

I probably should have realized he was just joking and didn’t really know if I was a Jew or not, but I foolishly gave myself away.

“Yeah I’m Jewish, what’s wrong with that?”

“I hate all of you,” he said calmly. He then chuckled and said he was just joking.

Confused and intimidated by an 8th grader, I didn’t know what to say. I sheepishly asked, “Why would you say something so random? Greg is also a Jew, you didn’t know that?”

My fully-Jewish friend nervously laughed. “I’m only half-Jewish,” he lied.

Frustrated by Greg’s avoidance of his own identity, I said, “Nah, stop lying bro you’re 100% a Jew, why are you switching all of sudden?”

At this point, the 8th grader simply didn’t want to be associated with us at all and left.

“THAT’S THE CAPTAIN OF THE BASKETBALL TEAM ARIEL, WHY WOULD YOU TELL HIM I’M A JEW!” Greg exclaimed.

“Are you not a Jew? Why did you have to lie and say, ‘you’re only half-Jewish’? Are you ashamed of yourself?”


“No I’m not ashamed of it bro, but I don’t need an extra sticker on my forehead saying ‘I’M A JEW.’”

“So you would let him keep saying all that anti-Semitic stuff just for a spot on the team?”

“I don’t know bro, but he was just joking anyway, you shouldn’t have taken it so seriously you know? Like now he’s going to single you out for that.”

And single me out he did. Once I made the basketball team, every practice involved me actively avoiding him. I was sure to be far behind him when we were running laps, never playing defense on him, and essentially drifting into the shadows for the remainder of the season simply not to garner any attention to myself. Nonetheless, he found ways to trip me while we were running suicides, elbow me while I was going up for a rebound, and sneak in a few Holocaust jokes here and there. Ironically, I was lucky because he





chose to keep the attacks very personal, instead of bringing the whole team in on it.

The experience that is clear in my mind from that year was the day he stole my jacket from the locker room after practice, hastily exited the school, and forced me to run after him for twenty or so blocks in the middle of the winter. As soon as I got close, we started tugging for the jacket, him wickedly laughing the whole time. The struggle caused the jacket to rip, and with that he went home, snickering, “that’s right, you dumb Jew.” Walking home that day in the cold, all I could think was, “He’s right, you’re an idiot for telling him that you’re a Jew.”

I could have lied to him about being a Jew when he first came up to me. I would have saved myself from a year of harassment and actually looked forward to going to basketball practice. Besides, even if I had lied to him, it wouldn’t have changed the fact that I was still Jewish. But I didn’t lie to him. Instead, the way I reacted was by embracing my Jewish identity.

### Inescapable

I remember the day I got into Stuyvesant. It was just what my dad wanted; years of pressure to work hard and make something of myself had paid off into admission to one of the best schools around. Academically I had some worries, sure. I had heard stories of countless all-nighters and truck-loads of work. But more than that, I didn’t know what to expect from the students. 70% Asian? My local middle school must have been around 10% Asian. Being torn from my childhood friends and thrust into a highly competitive, massive school where I only knew a few people, I wasn’t sure how well I could adjust.

However, the difficulties I anticipated were firmly on my end. I would have to adjust to a new culture and a new group of kids. I was never worried about how they would react to me. I figured that at such an intelligent, high-profile school like Stuyvesant, kids

wouldn’t even have the thought of being insensitive towards someone’s race or religion.

Fast forward three years, to an incident that took place just a few weeks ago. I was walking through the 5th floor, on the way to French class, when I saw my friend Jason from across the hallway.

“Yoooo!” I yelled to Jason, trying to catch his attention between the inter-period rush.

Suddenly, a girl cried out, “SHUT UP,



*As Above, So Below*      Jonah Hillman      Carmel, IN

YOU JEW!”

I was shocked. Furious, I went over to confront her, but seeing me charging towards her, she slipped into her classroom just as the bell rang. Jason came up to me and asked, “Did she really say that dude? What’d you do to piss her off?”

“Nothing bro!” I replied. “I was just saying what’s up to you and she went off!”

“That’s messed up man... I’ll say something to her, I see her next period”

I walked to my classroom and tried to focus on the lesson, but the girl’s words replaced the French ones on the board, and I couldn’t shake the memory of what she had said to me. Five periods later, sitting in math, my last and seemingly longest period of the day, I was still mulling over the events from around three hours before.

Why had she said that to me? Sure, maybe I was being obnoxious by yelling to my friend, but the random hate she had directed towards me was completely uncalled for. I’d had a few classes with her, but I wouldn’t say we were close. At the same time, I’d never done something to make her hate me; normally, she would even say hi to me in the hallways with not a touch of malice in her tone. How did she even know I was a Jew? Or had the term “Jew” become another pejorative? It was weird to realize how that small moment had affected me so greatly. It felt unfair that I had come so far from schoolyard bullies and worked so hard in my classes just to be greeted with the same garbage.

These thoughts stayed with me throughout the day, and when I got home I told my baba what had happened. She laughed.

“You think that is bad? When I was growing up, children could “disappear” for being Jews. The government had it out for all of us. When I signed up for secondary school, my father told me to put Russian instead of Jew as my background. He said that if I did not, it was likely I would not go to school at all. You are lucky your friend was on your side. If a school friend of mine had found out I was a Jew, I knew they were no longer my friend.”

“But grandma, that was like 70 years ago! Things are meant to be different now. Plus, we live in America, not Soviet Russia!”

“Vnook, nothing is ever different for us Jews. Wherever we go and whatever we do, people will think the same things, say the same things, and do the same things. Being a Jew stays with you, like a bad smell. And those who hate us will always sniff it out and punish us for it.”

“Are you sure grandma?”

“Ask your papa. He’ll tell you the same.”





## Conversations with God

Arushi Avachat  
Pleasanton, CA

We learn to pray in Mama's bedroom after dinnertime, when our nightclothes are on and the sky outside has faded to a muted purple. Fingers still slick with chicken grease from supper, we fold our hands together just like Mama. Close our eyes, bow our heads. I sit still, but Joseph is never able to. He's young but already big and bumbling, picking at his clothes, shifting his weight from knee to knee, restless, all the while.

Mama tells us praying is like having a conversation with God. First, we listen. Wait in silence for His presence, think of God's word before putting in our own. Then, we talk. Whisper our questions, our hopes, our fears. Always end by thanking God for our many blessings so He knows our gratitude.

Joseph and I pray along with Mama until we're hip-high, tall enough and old enough to say our evening prayers alone.

Every Sunday, we walk to church with Susie Meadows from next door. She has sunshine yellow curls and a pretty smile, and in the summertime she brings baskets of home grown peaches for all the families. She has a little daughter too, not yet old enough to walk, who likes to tug on her mother's curls when she needs something. Susie's husband died in a car accident while she was pregnant, and now she is all her baby has ever known.

I help Susie tend to her garden after service. Mama says that garden is how Susie grieves. She spends all her spare time there, caring for fruits and vegetables and greenery of every kind. There's a small patch in the soil of carrots and cucumbers and tomatoes. Two cherry trees in the back that litter the ground with pink blossoms every spring. Thick, winding grape vines growing on the fence that separates our two backyards. My favorite is the tall plum tree I helped plant so many years ago. It was so sickly at first we worried it wouldn't produce much of



### A Father's Pride

"Listen Ariel, the only reason we're here in New York is because the 'communists' from our homeland who claim to fight for equity for all people put a little asterisk next to Jews and said, 'maybe just not them.' I got beat up almost every day after school until I was fifteen by the Russian kids in my city. The beatings only stopped because I started going to a boxing gym where, unsurprisingly, there were tons of other Jewish teenagers getting jumped after school," my dad recounted to me.

And it wasn't just isolated cases like this, absolutely not, the government was in on the systematic Jew-bashing also. Dad told me, "I remember scoring in the top 1% of Belarus for the Physics Olympiad when I was around your age Ariel. Elite technical colleges across the USSR started calling me, offering me interviews. And at each interview, the admission officers asked the same question, 'are you a zhid?'" I wasn't going to forget my heritage for a spot in an elite college, so every time I told them yes, they asked me to get out."

"So dad, then it's like baba says, being a Jew was an irremovable stain on your life that led people to harass you and may have restricted you from getting further in life," I told my father.

"Absolutely, and that's why I love being a Jew."

### Why My Identity Remains Jewish


Like my father, I too love being a Jew. I love the food, the doting family, the proud uncles and loving aunts. I love the knowledge of my history, how we overcame innumerable challenges to get to where we are now. Even with the discrimination that I've faced, I'm grateful to have a Jewish community that I know will support me throughout my life. I'm glad that I don't have to hide my identity like my grandma. Furthermore, I refuse to choose to suppress my identity, like my friend Greg did in the sixth grade. Like him, many modern-day American Jews decide to hide the fact that they're Jewish. They say that they can't hang out on Friday because they have to study, not because of Shabbat. They tell their friends their

Christmas presents are 'still in the mail.' And when someone makes a crude joke about Anne Frank in history class, they say nothing and tell themselves that making a fuss would only make matters worse. I empathize with Greg. It's difficult to stand up for one's culture and beliefs, especially when there's not a clear downside to simply neglecting to mention them. But that doesn't mean it's not necessary.

The Jewish people have been oppressed for millennia. Just as my grandma said, no matter where Jews go, they are attacked. From Egypt to the USSR and even in the United States, Jews have always faced enormous prejudice from almost every other culture. This is not a reason to give up one's ancestry. It's a reason to hold it up high. Forces from across the world desire to erase the Jewish identity, denying the Holocaust and spreading conspiracy theories that paint Jews as scheming, underhanded and untrustworthy. If my generation of young, well-educated Jews does not continue to fight these perceptions, it is possible that contemporary conspiracy theories will once again turn into mainstream ideas.

I refuse to accept the 'stain of the Jew.' No matter what kinds of racism and negativity I encounter in my life, I am determined not to back down from my identity and take the easy way out. I am Ariel, proudly a Jew, but also proudly a Stuyvesant student, a NYC kid, a Russian, a basketball player and everything in between. I am a collage of multiple overlapping identities that combine with circumstance, location and luck to create my personality as a whole. I wouldn't sacrifice any one of these identities in order to promote another one. As a product of my heritage and also as my own independent person, I choose to uphold my history, denying the harsh words and beliefs people would like to assign to me.





anything, but now its thin branches droop low every July, heavy with swollen fruit, my very own miracle.

One day in late spring, I help Susie in her kitchen. I skip around the counter in a pair of pink pajama pants with flowers on them that Susie bought me for Easter. I helped her pick raspberries from the garden all afternoon, and now she's making her famous raspberry currant pie while I watch, bringing her ingredients as needed. Her baby sits in the high chair, red raspberry juice dribbling down her chin.

"Susie?" I say, leaning against the countertop. There's something delicate I want to ask and I know she won't make me feel like a child with her response. I trust Susie with most everything, especially my questions about God. She never misses Sunday service and her kind, open nature makes her seem to me the best person to come to with my worries.

"What, baby?" She asks. She swirls powdered sugar into the mixing bowl with her spatula and looks over to me, brushing a stray yellow curl out of her eyes.

"Sometimes," I start nervously, picking at the hem of my shirt. She hears my hesitation and stops mixing instantly, giving me all her attention. I take in a deep breath. "Sometimes I wonder if God hears me when I pray. If my thoughts reach Him."

My mind already feels easier having asked her, and I let out the breath I'd been holding. Susie bends down a little so we're at eye level. "Prayer is your hotline to God," she tells me firmly. "He is always listening." She licks sticky raspberry filling off her index finger and gives me a smile, sweet and pure.

I start junior high feeling terribly nervous and anxious. It's a much bigger campus and class size than I'm used to, and Joseph has filled my mind with all kinds of scary stories. He's entering his second year of junior high and the night before school starts, he tells me tales of how the big kids shove newcomers into their lockers on the first day of class. He only stops when Mama smacks him on the head and threatens to ground

him.

Mama drops me off at school in the morning even though the bus comes by our street because it's my first day. She warns me to stay clear of bad influences and wishes me a wonderful first day before placing a kiss on my forehead and driving off.

In homeroom, I'm assigned a seat next to a girl named Meera Patel. She's pretty, rosy lips and brown skin, and I've never seen her at church before.

When I ask her one day if she believes in God, she tells me, "Not your God." Then she smiles a little and turns back to the assignment we're supposed to be working on.

At first I'm amazed, because I've never met someone like her before, but then I remember Mama's warning about bad influences and wonder if this is what she meant.

But Meera is so kind this can't possibly be the case. She giggles at my jokes and shares her chocolate pretzels with me during snack time and always chooses me first when she's picked for captain in gym class.

It doesn't escape me though, the greater implications of her beliefs. I think about it every evening before my nighttime prayer, but it takes me weeks to work up the courage and voice my worries to Mama.

"Is Meera going to hell, Mama?" I ask softly one night after dinner. It's late October and the question has been troubling me since I first learned Meera prays to a different God. I can't bear it if the answer is yes. Meera is so sweet and pretty and one of the only true friends I've made at school.

"It's a sad thing," Mama says evasively, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. She doesn't want to give me an answer outright, but I can hear it in her voice and it makes my heart sink. "It's a sad thing when people reject God," she adds, and even as I nod my head I can't help but wonder if Meera thinks the same will happen to me for not believing in her God.

Meera moves away in the springtime. Her father lands a job in the city that requires the whole family to relocate. I write her a gushy card and weep at her goodbye party, but despite it all, there's

a part of me that can't help but feel a little relieved that she's leaving.

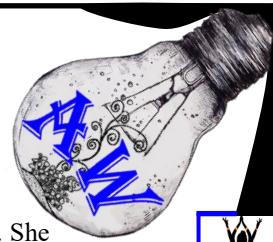
The summer of my fifteenth year, I spend my mornings in Susie Meadows' garden helping her pick peaches and plums to sell at the town fair. We pick enough to fill exactly one cardboard tray and leave the rest to ripen for tomorrow. I wear a thin cotton tee and one of Joseph's baseball hats, because even at nine AM the Georgia sun is blazing down on us. It doesn't help that the air is thick and heavy with moisture and I can't step outside without wanting a cool bath.

Susie's little girl is too young to be of much help, but she always stays outside with us still. She skips around the garden in a polka-dot dress and a matching bow, plucking June bugs off her mama's peaches. She blows them off her fingertips and giggles when they fly away clumsily.

By the time we finish and the fruit is all loaded into Susie's car, my skin is sticky with sweat and my face is pomegranate red from heat. "Tomorrow will be cooler," Susie always says before she drives off, a smile on her lips, and it makes me laugh, because she's always wrong.

I spend the rest of the day at the ice cream parlor on Main Street. I go there partly because it's one of the only shops in town with air conditioning but mostly because Ryan Westman from church works there. He has floppy brown hair and shiny gray eyes and always smiles hello to me when I walk in the door.





Everyone from town is packed into the church. Everyone loved Susie. I spot her daughter sitting with an aunt in the first row. She moved in with relatives immediately after Susie's death. I think about going over to say hello, but I don't have enough strength.

The minister starts the service by giving a few short words about Susie. He talks of her spirit and grace and tells us how Susie is in a better place now, but it doesn't make sense to me because Susie didn't want to go to a better place. She wanted to stay here, with her daughter and her garden, and all I can think of is how God stole that from her.

The service lasts for a half hour, and then we all go outside for refreshments and to pay our respects to Susie's family. It was cloudy earlier, but now it's starting to drizzle, so I stay under the roof for cover while Mama and Joseph mill about with the other attendees.

I've been standing alone for a few minutes when Ryan Westman walks up to me, hands shoved in pockets. His hair isn't floppy today; instead he's styled it back in a way that makes him look much older.

"I'm sorry your neighbor's dead," he tells me now, voice quiet, and he looks like he means it. "It isn't fair."

"Thank you," I say softly, and then my eyes start to water, because he's right, it isn't fair. Why would God choose to kill her? Why didn't He answer my prayers? I can't help but think for a moment that God must be either cruel or powerless, and how if that's true, I can't understand what He's good for.

Terrible shame crawls into my stomach the second after for letting the thought enter my mind, and I swallow hard, turning back to Ryan. His eyes are so clear and he looks so worried for me that it makes my heart hurt. My fingers feel numb and my head starts to ache and I have the sudden, overpowering urge to do something completely rash and impulsive.

"Do you want to get some dinner?" I ask before I can lose my nerve. I can't stay here in a place filled with God and Susie's memory and grieving people a moment longer, and

I don't quite believe it at first. It can't be true; Susie would have said something if it were. I saw her just this morning, and nothing looked the matter with her. She was smiling like always, yellow curls tucked under a flowery cap, rosy color blooming in her cheeks. On television people always look pale and sallow when they're sickly and I've never seen Susie look anything other than perfect.

But Mama has no reason to lie to us, and after a few moments of trying to talk myself out of it, I give into the truth. Something heavy sinks in my stomach, like there are stones inside of me, and then I am crying.

That night, I talk to God for hours. I don't want her to die, and I know she won't because God can't want it either, but still I pray and pray and pray. I pray and ask Him to keep her here, if not for me for that poor little girl of hers, who wears pretty bows in her sunshine yellow hair and likes to pick the June bugs off her mama's peaches. By the time I fall asleep, my face is stiff with dried tears and the night outside is fading to day.

I ask Susie in the morning why she didn't tell me about the illness herself. We're sitting on a bench in the garden, watching her daughter pluck petals off a wildflower weed.

She doesn't look at me when she responds. "I didn't want to have that conversation more times than absolutely necessary." Then she turns to me, eyes a little watery but a small smile playing on her lips, and squeezes my hand tightly. "You don't need to worry, sweet girl. I trust myself, and I trust God. I can beat this," she says firmly, and I nearly believe her.

Susie dies in mid-February. I don't own a black dress, so I borrow one of Mama's to wear to the memorial. I put on a pair of pointy shoes and brush my hair until it looks presentable, then walk with Mama and Joseph to the church. For a moment, it feels like we're walking to another Sunday service, but then I remember it's not a Sunday and Susie isn't here to walk with us. Her absence sinks heavy in my chest and I have to squeeze my eyes shut when they start to sting.

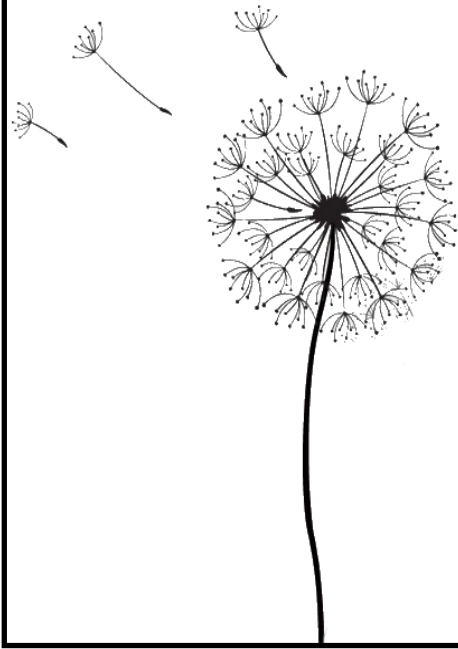
I bring a book to read and order a chocolate milkshake and sit at one of the booths in the back. Every once in a while, he'll come and sit with me on his breaks. My heart beats faster and my hands turn clammy whenever he does, but I try my best to appear perfectly calm and composed.

Sometimes we'll talk about the book I'm reading or his favorite band's new album, and sometimes we won't talk about anything at all. He'll sit across from me in silence, twirling a straw around his drink and doodling away in a brown leather journal while I read. I don't mind either scenario, because just his presence is enough to make me feel warm. And always, before he leaves, he smiles a smile only for me. It's something boyish, sweet, and it makes me think in the moment he feels for me what I do for him.

One evening, a few weeks before the start of school, Mama sits us down on the couch and tells us Susie Meadows is sick.

Joseph frowns at her words. He's just come back from a run and his face is shiny and sticky with sweat. "Flu sick?"

Mama's face crumples. "No, baby," she says, and then she explains how Susie is sick-sick, has a rare kind of illness deep in her bones, and we should all keep her in our prayers while she goes through treatment. Mama doesn't outright say it, but from her manner of speaking, I know she's scared Susie won't get better.





it doesn't matter to me that we're dressed in funeral attire and there is food all around us. His eyebrows fly up and my cheeks burn at my own impropriety. I start to worry it matters to him, but then the corners of his mouth lift up.

"Yes," he says, and I feel calmer immediately. "I'd like that a lot."

So we walk to the diner a few blocks away. It's starting to rain a little harder now, and by the time we arrive my hair is damp and Mama's dress is dripping. We both order soup to make ourselves feel warmer and eat mostly in silence, breaking bread and soaking it in creamy tomato soup for flavor.

The next day, Ryan comes by the house to see me. I answer the door before Mama can and we spend the afternoon together, just the two us.

A few months after Susie dies, Mama buys me a purity ring for my birthday. It's a thin, silver loop with a crucifix in the center.

"This is something every young woman should have in her life," Mama says. "My mama gave me one when I was your age, and it's about time I gave you yours." But I know she's also thinking of Ryan as she gives it to me, because we've been spending lots of time together lately, and she doesn't like him very much.

There's nothing I can do but take it. "It's very nice, Mama," I say and slide it on.

I show it off to Ryan when we meet at the park. He's sitting at the wooden benches near the birch trees when I arrive, but he stands up when he sees me.

"What do you think?" I ask, wiggling my hand out in front of him. I explain about Mama and the ring, and he laughs softly. He pulls my hand up to see it. "Pretty," he says.

We spend the evening eating Ryan's homemade picnic dinner on the grass. He forgot to bring a blanket, and the blades of grass make our legs itch, so we take off our jackets and place them under us. When we finish dinner, I lean against his shoulder and he wraps an arm around me and we stay like that, silent, for a few moments.

"Sometimes I don't know if I

believe," he whispers suddenly, so softly I nearly miss it. I stop smoothing his shirt, but don't move away from him.

"In God?" I ask, my voice filled with astonishment.

He nods and picks at his jeans, right where they're fraying. "There is so much cruelty in the world," he says. "I don't like thinking there's someone up there who can see it all, can do anything, but chooses not to."

I swallow, something twisting in my stomach. I want to explain his doubts away, the same doubts that are in my mind, but I don't know how. I try anyway. "It didn't start like this," I say softly. "Adam and Eve were banished from paradise when they disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree. That's why the world is the way it is."

He looks at me. "An eternally vengeful God?" He shakes his head. "I don't want to believe that either."

I don't know how to respond to that, so I don't.

In the autumn, a new family moves into Susie Meadows' home. Mama makes them a cherry pie to welcome them to the neighborhood and has Joseph and me take it over one morning before school starts.

There's a mother and a father, and they have two blonde boys too small yet to talk. The mother gushes over our thoughtfulness, asking if we want to come inside and have a piece before leaving for class. We tell her no thank you and hurry down the street to catch the bus before it takes off without us.

The school day moves too slowly today, so when I get a chance, I slip out of class with Ryan. We walk behind school to the grassy field overrun with wild dandelions, fingers laced tight, bodies so close our elbows bump together with every step. I think of what Mama would say if she could see me now but instead of guilt I feel giddy, drunk on rebellion.

He presses himself against me, his body warm and careful against my own, and kisses my neck, my cheek, my mouth. His lips are soft, sweet

like honey, and he is delicate with me, fingers pausing before they slip lower, asking *is this okay?* I tell him yes by the way I kiss him back, bolder and longer until we are nothing.

During church on Sunday, I can't make myself sit still. My eyes flutter open in prayer and my fingers tap nervous rhythms against my leg. I don't know what it is, but I can't make myself pay attention today. My mind is too noisy, too alive. In the middle of service, unable to concentrate, I find myself searching for Ryan in the pews behind me.

He catches me looking and smiles softly at me, something secret and pure that makes my whole body warm. My skin tingles, electric, the same dizzy feeling of rebellion from the day in the dandelion field washing over me. We haven't seen each other since cutting class together on Friday but when I touch my lips I can still feel him there.

Mama tugs on my arm gently when she notices me distracted, and I turn my focus back to the front quickly. I try to follow along with the rest of the congregation while the minister leads us in final prayer. Bow my head, fold my hands together, talk to God. But then my thoughts drift to Ryan again, to our conversation in the park that night, and something hard settles in my stomach. I've been talking to God my whole life. What good has come of it?

In that moment, I can't help but wonder if I've outgrown God the way I outgrew the pink pajama pants I used to love so dearly. He doesn't fit right with me anymore. Prayer feels like a chore, doesn't bring me the same comfort it used to.

I haven't felt like I have a hotline to God, haven't wanted one, really, for a while now. Not for months, not since Susie Meadows died.

I go into Mama's bedroom in the evening. I think of all the nights I spent here, so young and so new, talking to God. I think of how much easier my world would be if I were still that young girl. I know that I'm not.

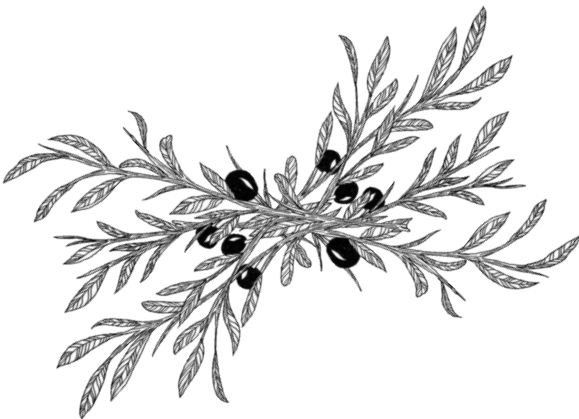
I sit on my knees by the windowsill, right where Mama, Joseph, and I used to pray together so many years ago. I'm quiet for a few moments, watching a June bug crawl clumsily across the

curtain rod. Tonight, I don't fold my hands together or close my eyes or lower my head, but I still want one last conversation with God.

First, I listen. I hear faint, bluesy tunes coming from next door. The new neighbors must be playing music. The air outside hums with gentle wind. A sleepy night breeze drifts through the open window and the hair on my arms stands up.

Then, I talk.

"I don't believe in you anymore," I whisper to him, and God is silent.



## My Baba

Ariel Glazman

Brooklyn, NY

The neon green sphere seemed to be floating over the net like a soap bubble, slowly pushing its way through the air. I started sprinting towards the tennis ball from the opposite side of the court, hoping it would bounce in my direction. The ball hit the cracked asphalt surface under me and headed even further away from me. I knew my only chance at hitting that ball would be to dive for it, racket first.

The next moments for me were a blur; I only remember getting up with a dark red color coating my legs. I had deep cuts at the knees, and I realized that it hurt to walk. "ARIEL, YOU FINISH DIZ MATCH! NO QUIT TIME!" my grandmother yelled at me in a heavy Russian accent.

"No quit time" was a phrase I heard often throughout my childhood, and still do from my grandmother, or Baba, as I call her.

Whether I was doing a thousandth practice problem for a math test or running my last lap at practice, it always felt like my Baba was right behind me, letting me know that stopping now was not an option. She instilled in me the idea that giving up is not even an idea in the first place. My Baba developed this ideal through, frankly put, a lifetime of oppression.

As a little girl growing up in Belarus, many of my grandmother's first memories were of running away from the Nazis. She very distinctly remembers an episode where she was boarding a train from Belarus into Russia to escape the Nazi invasion with her mother, aunts, and cousins. She recounted how Nazi warplanes were bombing the train cars. In front of her, shrapnel had made its way through the windows of the train car and into the bodies of her relatives. As a four or five-year-old, my Baba could do nothing but sit in the corner of the train car and wail, watching as her relatives, some as young as two years old, bled out in front of her. When she finally got out of the train in Moscow, the only people still alive were her mother and one out of three of her baby cousins.

Her full account of the experience frightened me for days when I first heard it and still gives me chills. What is most disturbing about her story is that when she returned as a little girl with just her mother and cousin to Belarus, the Belarusians in her hometown of Vitebsk told them that no Jews were welcome in the city.

This anti-Semitism would be a constant theme in my Baba's life. Although the Soviet Union was built on the idea of "equality for all people," to the government "all people" did not include Jews. This itself has been a leitmotif in the history of the Jews, that no matter what "land of opportunity" we go to, we are a group with an asterisk next to its name.

My Baba told me of her love for chemistry as a student and how she was one of the most gifted students at the subject in her high school. She had dreams of going to the best universities to do research, but was time and again denied entry, as admissions officers followed the openly discriminatory and anti-Semitic policies of the Soviet government.

Adult life for her was no different. She was consistently singled out as a Jew while she worked as a chemistry teacher in her old high school and lived in an organized ghetto of Jews.

Growing up, my Baba never forgot to remind me that if she had given up on any part of her journey, she most likely would have ended up in a Gulag or dead.

She never forgot to remind me that if she hadn't been sitting at home studying as much as she was breathing, then the Soviet government would have found a way to discard of her and her Jewishness.

She never forgot to remind me that if she hadn't kept fighting despite nearly everyone wanting to see her and her people gone, then I would have never been born in the first place.

I took my Baba's advice and decided it wasn't quit time. I wiped the blood off of my legs and shorts and got ready to serve.

## Portrait of a Bookmaker

Akanksha Basil

Chappaqua, NY

I  
The bookmaker  
the gatekeeper of lost worlds.  
He is a surgeon for universes  
His face is riddled with words  
And in their wrinkles there is charcoal and  
he uses poetry to stave off his hunger.

II  
His bookcase is lined with ocean and cavern.  
Within the antique rows  
A sailor's broken compass  
Someone's forgotten postcard  
A relinquished seabird  
Daguerreotypes of tin and failed luster  
Books scrawled in unknown script  
Their lines forgotten





III  
In Morocco over-cloth  
Leather bound  
an anthology of dreams

1896.

This is his latest endeavor.  
Its threads, frail,  
Lacy

scattered  
Upon city lines whose rise  
filled with wine and mahogany seas he remembers  
when he was a sailor  
and he had his arms and legs and his eyes too.  
And he can just see the rending over the horizon  
and if he could touch it maybe he'd see a further  
century.

IV

But this is made for another day.

VI

And he wants to create elucidating mistakes  
And remember this  
Years later

VII

There is a marvel in found willow-wilds. The way  
they revel in  
famine, sigh for the summer. The way there are  
Lily roots coughing beneath their skin.  
The stories are printed with flaws  
Always.

There are extra commas  
(*Better than periods*)

Some letters are more persistent to arrive and  
Nestle in your hands  
Some words dance a Charleston while others  
a slow waltz

VIII

The paper smells of saffron and  
Hillside grass. Forcing breath through  
Its familiar distant catastrophic forest scent.  
It is old and was there, nailed to the earth  
before he was himself.

IX

You, the bookmaker, and me,  
a dancer. I was a monster once  
But now I think you know who I am.  
But you know nothing about who  
you are. You never will.  
You are bound, destroyer of worlds  
father of paper reams

musician for the threads of a guitar.

You are madness you are sighing  
you are winter

You are sewn  
by your own story.

## Freedom?

Calvin Allume

Jersey City, NJ

I walk the streets not looking at anyone  
Yet, everyone is looking at me as if I am different  
I am black but I don't want to feel black today  
I just want to feel like a human being  
I go into a store and he looks me up and down  
Is this what freedom feels like?  
I walk out of the store and it still doesn't feel right

I walk on the sidewalks and I am still being looked  
at  
I look at my hands and realized it's because I am  
black

I was a slave for 15 years and was just granted  
freedom

But now I feel more alone than ever. My family was  
killed

Every single last one of them but they don't care  
I walk into an alley and I sit down to think  
As I get a bitter taste in my mouth  
Is this what freedom feels like?

## Golgotha in Texas

Brianna Kline Costa

Pittsburgh, PA

We had only walked a few steps into the blessed  
lands of America, through the golden gates,  
when she collapsed, her eyes rolling back in her  
head, brown body convulsing in the mud.

It had been a month since we left our home. A  
month of walking through checkpoints,  
jumping on the backs of moving trains, avoiding the  
gangs and the military men

who accept money for freedom, and the coyotes  
whose eyes shine in desert darkness  
with false promises. We walk through the night, to  
avoid the men who patrol the borders.

We have to travel under unrelenting darkness,  
because the helicopters flying over  
would spot our flashlights and fires, like eyes  
staring up at them from the tired dust.

The soles of our shoes have fallen off. Scorpions  
and snakes slither  
across the desert, looking for the soft spots of our  
bodies.

My sister's shirt smells of vomit and sweat and the  
muddy water of the Rio Grande.  
She saw the cool dark face of a rain puddle along  
the highway where we walked,

and put her mouth down to drink. Now the devil  
lives in her belly,  
and she vomits blood, trying to stifle her gags when  
we hide in the bushes

as *la migra* walk across the hardened dirt. Their  
footsteps echo like scripture.  
Our clothes drip and cling to our skin. We emerge  
from the water of the Rio Grande

baptized, swimming to fight current, mud clinging  
to our skin, stomachs empty  
and gnawing at us. We are novitiates to the  
beautiful American dream. The holy converted.

After one hundred miles walked, she tells me she  
can move no more.  
Her face is gaunt and her breath smells of warm  
sickness. I leave her lying

in the dust. My sister's death sounds like parables  
to the disciples.  
I drag my body through an unforgiving night. I  
worship the country

who locked its gates to me. I worship the men who  
will put me in handcuffs  
when they storm the fields where I work for cents a  
day, to detain me for months

before they send me back to a life of poverty and  
terror. I know my sister  
doesn't watch over me. When illegals die, they  
don't become angels.

When I left her, her arms and legs were not spread  
around her body, beautiful  
and soft, her expression gentle and pale, like  
frescoes of cherubs on a church ceiling.

I imagine the harsh lights of a helicopter revealing  
her body, the border officials  
crouched around her with their batons in their  
hands, checking for a pulse,

my sister's corpse stinking of rot in the Texas sun,  
illegal still in death.  
Her lifelessness an atonement to their deity.



# Greyscale

Victoria Maung  
Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ

An eclectic indie SoHo boutique specializing in avant-garde clothing for women: various monochromatic racks of clothing litter the corners of the store. The one to the right sports a body of white like a chunk from a glacier. The one behind houses a gradient of greys. The lone rack to the left swims in a sea of black.

Approach the curtain of white: stark white button downs, off white pleated trousers, bone white silk blouses, and ghost white tulle sweaters. The stark whites engage in conversation with their off white counterparts, akin to the rice noodles and fish soup in my bowl of *mo hin ga*. I meld into my memories. This is the destination of my Brooklyn weekends: chatter bounces back and forth between restaurant tables, snippets of Burmese conversation murmur through the room. The cacophonous duet between the waitress' witty quips and the cook's intermittent ire. Instant recognition, faster than in my native English tongue. Home, in this Burmese lexicon.

A twinkle at the end of the clothes rack catches my eye. I take the sleeve of the angelic white glitter top and raise it, allowing rays of light to shimmer through the sheer garment. The crystalline sparkle is reminiscent of the blinding spotlights above Carnegie Hall's stage. Arched clammy fingers trembling against cold flute keys. Pursed lips pressed against my metal mouthpiece, primed to produce my first note. The piercing light grounds me, dissolving the discernable faces of the crowd into nocturnal nothingness. I release a hushed breath and play, the first touch of sound propelling me forwards; electrifying.

Gravitate towards the grey. A smoke colored cardigan stuffed within a unified body of stone hues emerges from a pebbled crevice, revealing the marled detailing in its stitching. I recall hovering over a container of developer in the darkroom, eagerly waiting for the ghostly figures to form with each passing second on my photo paper. Ten. The skeletal outlines materialize,

instantaneously. Twenty. The tones of faded grey deepen their bodies. Thirty. Revealed—the fully formed umbral figures. They dance with one another, intertwining their greyscale shades, whispering, in phantom conversation.

Cross over to the sea of black. Amidst the monotone, my eyes latch onto the raspberry lettering of a pair of Chinese characters on a t-shirt—*bao zi*. Cue nostalgia of dim sum mornings. The scent of freshly steamed *jiao zi* and *xiao long bao* wafts through the air. Abundant laughter among family members. I nibble into my *xiao long bao* and the savory soup floods my mouth with the richness of our generational recipe. With my aunties, I roll dumpling skins into boat shaped *bao*. The repeated motions: roll, stuff, pinch. The time tried tradition of creation. I work my fingers till they are floured to the tips. Suspended within the sizzling canola air: the echoing of ancestral spirits.

Upon closer inspection, each garment bleeds into the next: a dark washed ruched tank top, a tinged blue black asymmetric dress, a jet black turtleneck sweater. I dissolve into liquid memory: family, huddled around the excavated grave. A crane, poised to lower the wooden casket. We form a circle of ravens, donning this forbidden Chinese color. We, the black sea. We cast out our roses together, our clenched hands drawing strength from one another. The choked sobs of my father, muffled, grapple to preserve his composure. The resonant pangs of filial piety. I vow to discard the entirety of my monotone black wardrobe. I grip his hands, steadying them, as droplets stain his cheeks. In replacement: red, the lucky color. We say our goodbyes in dignified silence.

A harmony exists: shades within a shade, each subtle dissonance marks individuality, yet creates a unified togetherness.

White.

Grey.

Black.

Become me.

# To The Mother Tongue

Shaam Beed

Livingston, NJ

Mother tells me of a time when she was young: 1996 ESL class, Webster's Dictionary faded and yellowed with time, musty like the moss-green suitcase tucked away in a laundry room in Oakland.

Her tongue, once coated in turmeric and pan-fried with curry leaves, dipped in oregano-green chutney, and sour like thick yogurt left on the deck too long, now tumbles over itself: overgrown roots, slippery with moss and mossy with age and aged with the smoke pulling at the hairs at the back of her neck, smoky thin like her voice warbling as it travels through the plaster walls of our kingdom, meekly authoritative, bending to the will of washed out voices.

Mother tells me of a time when I was young: 2005 trip to India, my sharp tongue laden with language, experienced with the sharp honks of the rickshaws during the torrential days of monsoon season, guided by the high-pitched hum of Grandfather's oxygen tank running through the night. Her words are wistful; she tells me I have lost the mother tongue, my mother's tongue. Now it is just a joke, an irony, as my tongue navigates the twists and angles, each accent misplaced, every nuance a battle I cannot conquer.

We are all just pawns in a game of speed. The victors are the fastest at locking their past in the overhead compartment before disembarking, the fastest at abandoning their mother in the dust as they chase their dreams. I have won, and my mother tongue has escaped me, but it was warm, and it licked my mistakes when I was young.





# Aging Backwards

Victoria Choe  
Livingston, NJ

I remember lugging my grandmother's seventy pound luggage up the street to her apartment. My arms were about to fall off and I was gasping for breath but she walked coolly in front of me, wearing a zebra print scarf and a pair of fake Chanel shades she purchased from her trip to Kenya. She was the aged Audrey Hepburn—chic, witty, and tough. As I struggled to push those seventy pounds of whatever Kenyan goodies she brought back, I followed behind with admiration.

*When I become old, I thought, I want to be just like her.*

It was not until she started to live with us that we realized how bad it was—Alzheimer's. The other day my aunt called, flustered at how Grandma wandered the airport for three hours because she could not find her way back from the restroom. I tried to picture her—a short, frail old lady with red lipstick, perfume, a silk blouse, permed hair, hands held behind her back needlessly roaming the airport—the woman who flossed her teeth after each meal, the woman who sang gospel music at 5 am at the top of her lungs, the woman who cooked tofu soup like how Gordon Ramsay makes a Beef Wellington, the woman who always had something to do whether it was going out to the city, making trips to the sauna, or attending prayer meetings at church. But she was also the woman who sometimes forgot to put sugar in the steam buns like most people do when they have too many things going on at once. I wanted to believe that forgetting was just human nature, not a disease.

But her curly hair was now tangled, red lipstick smudged onto teeth she forgot to brush for the past two days, and the buttons on her blouse were mismatched and loose. She was just an old lady—a guest at our house who woke up late, wandered the halls without purpose and never ventured into the kitchen because cooking was another activity she forgot how to do.

Every morning she would sit in the back seat with me on the way to school, strapped into her seat belt, looking out at the window with a dazed expression on her face. She would ask where we were going like a broken record even though we gave her the same reply: school. Each day after dinner I would hear her slippers shuffle up the stairs straight into my room. She would look around, pause, turn back into the hallway with disappointment and mumble, "I wonder where the bathroom is."

But she still knows my name. She can still recite John 3:16 and she remembers how she first met Grandpa: "At a red light."

They say that it's getting worse, and the adults wonder when she'll get to the point where she'll be like the Alzheimer's patients on the news: calling 911 at the sight of a candle, knocking on doors in an attempt to start a revolution, smearing poop on the bathroom walls.

But I see more of her through this aging process. Having Alzheimer's is not a process of losing, but a shift from confidence to naivety, concealment to vulnerability. It's almost as if she is shedding her bright petals into something more wholesome, innocent, and youthful. She nods her head profusely, agrees with everything everyone says, and holds my hand when we go on walks because she does not know where we are or where we are going but simply trusts. Every five minutes she tells me the same story about how she made an oath to God by shedding blood from her fingers, but she does it with so much passion and pride it sounds fresh and new each time. Instead of cooking or going to the city she watches television shows with me and on the way to school I tease her about asking the same question too many times.

I like it when she mistakenly steps into my room and asks for the bathroom because when she does, I invite her in and ask her to tell me stories about Dad and how he would always get grounded for sneaking out. I like waking her up in the morning by singing gospel songs with her, combing the tangles out of her hair, applying lip gloss instead of lipstick so that when it smears, her teeth will shine rather than bleed, and dressing her with real Chanel sunglasses and cashmere sweaters because she *is* Audrey Hepburn—chic,

witty, and tough. And when I grow old, I want to be just like her.

# The Spirit of the Buffalo

Joshua Lewin  
West Chester, PA

A stifling summer heat pressed against my face as I restlessly dragged the bowstring back and forth across my upper back; a tender rash began to take shape under the rough cord of twisted sinew tethering the weapon tightly to my shoulder. Thin blades of tall grass scratched my tired legs, exacerbating the apprehension suspended in the strained joints of my crouching knees. We waited just below the crest of the hill, silently surveying the stagnant landscape while the strong scent of earth drifted lazily through the plains.

As my first hunt crawled slowly toward completion, I reflected on our six day journey across the region, stealthily tracking a populous group of wild bison to this location. Sensing our weariness after walking all morning, our pack leader Yahto – a lean boy of athletic build and dark complexion, roughly four years older than me – called for a break. Presently, we rested on the outer rim of an enormous basin north of our current camp.

The elders of our tribe once explained the origin of this boundless valley when I was a young boy: long ago, Wakinyan, the mighty thunderbird of the sky, and Unktehi, the fierce water serpent of the land, engaged in an earth-shattering battle. For several tempestuous years, the powerful wings of Wakinyan beat down on the plains, whipping up a ruinous hurricane that erased all life on the ground; enraged, Unktehi retaliated with her razor sharp claws and





vicious fangs, summoning calamitous floods to submerge the world in violent rapids. After eons of stormy combat, the turmoil finally abated when the colossal thunder spirit cast a striking bolt of lightning from its glowing eyes, vanquishing the seething viper and carving this crater into the terrain.

A subtle furor growing amongst the pack interrupted my train of thought. As if awaking from a light sleep, I suddenly became aware of a distant rumbling growing quietly beyond our vision. The warm soil clenched firmly beneath my toes began to tremble, loosening from the earth's grasp. Immediately, Yahto and the others snapped their gazes toward the opposite ridge, an identical flash of untamed excitement igniting briefly in their eyes before the gravity of the hunt regained control of their countenances. Peeking over the hill in anxious anticipation, the source of the reverberations became apparent.

The muffled sound of ten thousand ceremonial drums poured over the horizon in a viscous mass of brown and black. The faint rhythm of the entity evolved into a dampened thunder, muted by the vast entirety of the basin. We remained silent.

A few moments passed – the drums grew louder. The herd broke apart into irregular throngs of legs and horns, rapidly covering the expansive prairie and halving the length of composure between the horizon and our pack. With my mind racing, I glanced urgently at Yahto, wondering when he would signal the attack. He remained motionless, a recognizable look of attentive solemnity resting easily on his face. With slightly parted lips and narrow eyes, he inspected the developing movement. We remained silent.

A few seconds passed – the drums grew louder. The hordes charged closer, replacing the scent of sunbaked earth with the overwhelming odor of the musky beasts' fur. My vision shuddered as the powerful animals trampled the ground around us. I unconsciously quickened the pace at which I pulled the bow string up and down my shoulder, breaking the surface of my sensitive skin; warm blood trickled aimlessly down my bicep, mixing with beads of sweat before pooling at the base of

my forearm. Like swarming insects, hundreds of bison surrounded our location, rushing past in flurries of two and five; their bustling haste contrasted our still passivity, shaping the intensely delicate cusp of order and disarray. We remained silent.

Louder. Louder. Louder. The drums became deafening, engulfing my thoughts. My breath became terse and shallow. Panic flooded through my veins, spilling into my lungs. Drowning in a sea of dread, I tried to call out but my throat was arid. Just as terror began to drag me under, Yahto caught my distressed gaze and released a short, high-pitched whistle, yanking me out of the turbulent water with the much awaited signal.

We sprang up and over the hill. Adrenaline drenched our muscles, electrifying our reflexes. Arrows were notched, strings were drawn back, and bows were raised in one fluid motion. The target was selected and for a split second our eyes locked, both filled with fear. With a fierce howl, we released the arrows in unison, slicing through the parched air and piercing the massive creature's rugged hide with a cacophony of thuds.

The Buffalo stumbled frantically in protest as the crowd of bison scattered across the prairie; a fleeting look of disoriented anguish crossed its face while its final seconds ticked immutably into oblivion. With its last semblance of life, the Buffalo swung its head weakly in my direction, peering into my heart with broken curiosity. Then, after letting out an exhausted sigh of defeat, it closed its eyes in acceptance, collapsing onto the somber earth.

Silence swiftly reappeared in the breeze as the sun began to sink low in the deep blue lake above our heads. With the Buffalo's final cry echoing in my mind, we disassembled the beautiful animal, packing away each piece of vitality the creature could offer us before starting the long, quiet journey back to our village.

Treading steadily over the gentle grasslands in wistful rumination, I looked onward to see the skyline ablaze with evening's perennial courting of daylight: she swayed perilously on the brink of the horizon, dipping casually between ephemeral strokes of soft amber and radiant crimson before falling over the edge, elegantly gliding into tomorrow. Her last thoughts gleamed briefly off the

Buffalo's dark coat as the cool mauve of dusk enveloped the plains.

Upon entering the camp, we were welcomed by a robust current of tangible excitement. The women and children of our tribe wrapped us in warm laughter and praise as an intimate murmur of familiar noise wafted through the village, washing away the tension of the hunt and absorbing our languor.

After carrying the Buffalo to the center of the camp for ceremonial preparation, I eagerly slipped into ritual attire, smearing two lines of bright red paint along my forehead: beginning at each temple, the vibrant streaks raced freely toward each other before blending in the center of my brow and cascading downward over the ridge of my nose. The column of tepid dye quickly split like a stream rushing around a rock, arcing under each eye and shooting around my cheekbones, flowing down the sides of my face before dripping over my jawline like two scarlet tears.

Without waiting for the paint to dry, I darted to the center of the village, weaving between neighboring families and teepees amidst the hum of colloquial conversation. Arriving at the clearing just as the celebration was beginning, I took my place next to Yahto before the great bonfire. Reverent flames burned and crackled through the night as the sound of traditional Sioux drums and chants honoring the spirit of the Buffalo filled the valley.

## Sea Glass

Akanksha Basil

Chappaqua, NY

Evening, and some ships

Never return

Morning

And strangled bones lie

*(Strangely, it seems)*

like oracles

Tarot cards on cinnamon sand

Centuries stacked far too high

*(Perhaps they will tumble to entropy.)*

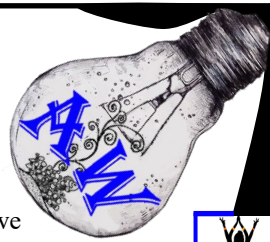
Listless

a spreading hemorrhage

Orphans

*(But the jewels are left)*

In colors imponderable.





## Red

Colleen Avila  
Monrovia, MD

He said  
“Can you speak English?”  
and his ignorance spewed through his teeth  
and his privilege cackled with him  
and his riotous laughs mixed with his  
posse of practiced chortles  
hiding behind seats as if we had  
cotton in our ears.

He sang  
a fatigued chorus of offense  
and they widened their eyes  
but still showed the pink on the roofs of their  
mouths.

He chased their gasps like he was suffocating  
and my tongue was stone  
and my face was red  
and my hands are brown.

I choke  
and I sputter out voiceless mumbles  
I cough out ash without flames  
and my teeth are ground down from  
biting on my stone of a tongue.  
What a shame  
fear swallows resentment  
and indecisiveness strangles desire.  
What a shame  
I had chosen the silence  
I had picked up my sandbags  
when my face is red  
and my hands are brown  
and I am ashamed.



## A Kisaeng's Sijo

Hye In Lee  
Cresskill, NJ

### I. Flower

When the taut strings of the *gayageum* are plucked  
and the rhythm of the *janggu* beats in our chests  
we rise and dance.

One face of the knives flirting in our hands reflect  
the men's cheeks as rosy as the setting sky.  
On the other: the blood-red of our spinning dresses  
and what hides beneath—  
the hands feeling at our ivory ankles, calves, and  
thighs.

If we sang more festively or  
stretched out our silk-laden arms more like an  
iridescent magpie,  
our trembling fingertips white like the tips of its  
majestic wings,  
we thought the hands would refrain from slipping  
under our bodices.

*But pulling away means being reined in tighter,*  
said the broken bones and beaten breasts of our  
elder *kisaeng*.

The nation's flowers aren't flowers  
when they refuse to bloom open their legs.  
Amidst the twinkling eyes of the foolish children  
and the  
paper hot-air balloons lighting the endlessly dark  
night sky  
at the *Daeboreum* Full Moon festival,  
we do not wish on the moon that closes its eyes  
for the locked, lusting chambers of the privileged  
men.

### II. Mother

I left the dirt streets of the countryside as a flat-  
chested girl.  
My bedridden mother reached for  
the sock-clad ankle of her daughter,  
but she ran for the creases of the vibrant *kisaeng*  
dresses—  
promising of return with golden coins strung on her  
waist

and enough sacks of rice to build a new fence  
around the house.

But *mother*, the yearning *sijo* we recite for the silk-  
clad, scholarly men  
with faces pinker than the cherry blossoms on our  
dresses

never speak of your watery rice porridge that  
filled our empty stomachs by candlelight.  
We sing of longing for the pine verandas in distant  
bamboo gardens  
and a pure moon gracing a vast ocean we've never  
seen.

Words tumble from our rose-powdered lips,

entangling  
us in the *kisaeng's* limbo dance of existence.  
After a decade in the *kisaeng* house, where is our  
home?

Sacks of rice and golden coins are nowhere in sight,  
neither are the dirt-walled rooms of our birth.  
Perhaps we do belong in these courtyards—the  
courtesan's theatre of life—our eyes watchful  
for the next empty porcelain cup and our fingers  
docile,  
plucking the *gayageum* strings.

\* *Kisaeng were Korean women from slave families  
who entertained aristocrats during the Goryeo and  
Joseon dynasties.*

## Swan Road

Olivia Stoltzfus  
New Providence, PA

My grandparents' transition from a cattle  
farm to a small ranch house was sudden and  
unforeseen. It was a needed change, as they were no  
longer able to maintain the property, but the move  
left many childhood memories in that home on  
Swan Road.

Their second home was never quite settled  
in to. Familiar smells of roast beef, coffee, and  
cinnamon scented candles permeated the air; vibrant  
fiesta dishes were displayed on shelves in the  
kitchen; embroidered family tree diagrams were  
proudly hung on the walls. Grandpa's history books  
were splayed in disrupted piles around the feet of  
his recliner and crowded into the glass shelves  
behind the back of his chair. The small property  
could finally allow them to relax in the time that  
gave way to quiet, time they had previously spent  
tending to the farm. It all gave the impression of  
settling in.

Instead, Grandma had more grievances  
than ever. She couldn't sleep at night. She couldn't  
eat. The medication wasn't working. During the day  
she read and slept. My grandmother, once a  
vivacious, healthy woman was at last meeting her  
age as the stroke built a wall between her and the  
fulfillment she found in running a business and  
creating the lavish Sunday dinners for the family.  
She missed that most of all: contribution. She had  
known her purpose as she meticulously set the table



on those Sunday afternoons while the roast stewed in the oven; she skinned each potato and set quarter-inch-thick pads of butter beside each plate. She gave to the family in this way, showing her love through this simple art form.

The stroke changed the comfortable momentum she lived by. She watched as pounds melted off her body, like leaves falling as they surrender to a new season. Her knuckles protruded, creating deep valleys between her fingers that converged at her narrow wrist. Her veins ran like bubbling rivers over the back of her hands, her temples, her forearms. Her hair thinned. Her neck sagged as the fat disappeared, leaving loose skin in its wake.

Grandpa, on the other hand, was unphased by the change. Perhaps thankful for the smaller amount of land to mow, but unobservant of all else. While Grandma spent time at the house, he rose early to have breakfast at a restaurant where the waiters knew his name, where he met the same faces, enjoyed the same food, and then bowled with friends from forty years back. He was a man who relied on routine. If it wasn't canned green beans, regular chips, mashed potatoes or applesauce, he refused to eat it.

When the evening came, forcing him to return home, he watched the news with a world map pinned to the wall—a portal to all the places he had never explored.

He talks of his childhood farm, of his horse. He talks of his "I Like Ike" pin displayed proudly amongst Grandma's dishes. He talks of the war times he claims to have remembered from his first few years of childhood.

"1937. The war didn't start until soon after they bombed Pearl Harbor. I was about five years. I thought my mom acted so different that morning. Something wrong with her. I couldn't hardly keep up with her. So she went and got what she needed at the store: sugar and salt, and stuff like that or she couldn't get it no more. Well everybody wanted it and when she got there, it was all gone already. Well, that was back 75 years ago." At this point, his son-in-law would roll his eyes, partially from annoyance, partially from the familiar recount of a

story he was not sure ever happened.

"I remember sitting on the horse's back. I always liked horses, to sit on their back. And they had to hold me on, or I'd fall off. Out in the field, you know, then I got acquainted with horses."



*Eyes of the Hawk* Jessica Hess Lehighton, PA

"And you taught them to pray, right?"

"Oh, my goodness yes. They'd get on their front legs and bow for me. Then I'd give them a treat or a rub. They loved that, oh yes."

Grandpa talks of the time he shut his hand in the wood stove, searing of the tips of his fingers. The smell. Thinking the nails would never grow back. He holds up his right hand, brandishing his fingers as a medal of honor. All but the thumb is shortened to the second knuckle, tapering to nails like talons.

He fails to mention that this incident was caused by a seizure. He never mentions his epileptic

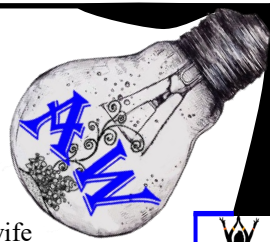
episodes, blacking out while driving with his daughter in the back seat. He never talks of the poverty on the farm as he and his wife struggled to feed their eight children. He lived happily in delusion as his children fought to protect themselves against the hostile environment created by an insecure mother and a father in denial.

Much of my grandparents suffering has yet to be uncovered. Although Amish traditions heavily emphasize community, to be raised in Amish culture is perhaps one of the most unprotected scenarios for a child. Families are large, inadvertently creating an environment where children are overlooked, free to run in the road or suffer from sexual assault at the hands of a family member. There is an unfathomable amount of suffering that remains unspoken, partially because there is no language for it in the community. How is a child, who is taught to submit to their parents and elders, supposed to understand that their own safety is priority? How is a child to understand that some evil is brought upon innocent people, and not by God's judgment?

Grandma is from a family of fifteen children, raised in the Amish community until age 29. What lies in her childhood that is too painful to speak of?

For being only two generations away from Amish blood, I know surprisingly little of what that life entails. I forget that my grandparents on both sides had lived for over twenty years without electricity, without technology I take for granted every day. I forget the oppression and authority of the church that dictated every action. I take for granted the freedom I have in deciding my involvement in church, when the majority of my family tree lived under one of the most structured and strict communities prevalent in modern America.

Grandma lives in the simple days of her childhood. She prides herself in the endless connections to families in this area, in her ability to trace back a name in the obituary to a distant facet of her pedigree. She left





the Amish community at age twenty-nine, turning her back on the church and her family to build a life aside from what she was raised to believe. She chose a new life for her children. Although her choice to leave the Amish community physically separates me from that lifestyle, there are values that have unconsciously seeped into my life, gifting me a subliminal attraction to simplicity and reticence.

One day I hope words can be put to the trauma my grandparents endured—both in their childhood and in the following misdirected shame. I hope to carry out the values established by generations before me, while also holding true to who I know myself to be: hard work with rest when needed; helping others in their times of need while not allowing myself to be taken advantage of; steadfast faith without fear of asking questions; and gratitude for simplicity while embracing change.

## Ducks

Alice Zhang  
Great Neck, NY

That day the ducks didn't show up. My father and I leaned with heavy hearts on the black fence surrounding the lake in Kissena Park and watched the turtles sunbathe. In his hands was a clear plastic bag filled generously with day-old bagels that we bought for three dollars from the deli near my parents' nail salon. My dad unwrapped the twist tie and pulled out a plain bagel for me before taking a poppy seed bagel for himself. The outside of the bagel was tough to chew on, not unlike leather, and I ripped mine in half so I could pick at the inside instead. What was meant for the ducks and the swans and the pigeons and the geese became our lunch. We put the rest of the bag in my tiny blue bike's basket, its colorful handlebar streamers waving at passerby innocently.

A man clutching his German Shepherd's leash power walked past us, and a pregnant woman pushed a stroller with a screaming infant to the bench behind us where she took off her

shoes and propped her feet up to rest. An elderly Chinese couple with matching visors on their heads nodded at us as they strolled by slowly with their hands clasped behind their backs. In the clearing nearby, a number of adults did Tai Chi, their movements synced up perfectly.

By the time we left the park, the sun was already beginning to set. My dad stopped at Dunkin' Donuts to buy me a hot chocolate before we headed to our nail salon, and in the matter of an hour the sun hid itself from us completely. We parked at our spot and my father told me to stay in the car with him for awhile longer. The light emitted by the shops in the mall revealed a group of five middle-aged men with curly beards and blue bandanas wrapped around their balding heads, and they were standing around their bikes in front of the abandoned dry-cleaning store next to ours, laughing loudly. Each held a paper bag wrapped around a glass bottle in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

We sat in the darkness for several more minutes before deciding to head into the store, because it didn't seem like the men were going to leave anytime soon. I pressed the button to open the passenger side door and slid from the seat out of the car, sipping at my delicious beverage while my father locked the doors behind us. The hot chocolate warmed my throat and had a soothing effect on me. It was obvious my father was unnerved, but I didn't think much of it.

One of them noticed us immediately. He laughed and immediately elbowed the person next to him, and soon we had everybody's full attention. I tried to make myself seem smaller and hid behind my father's leg as they began to yell taunts at us in the empty parking lot. I pulled my tiny red winter coat closer to my body. It wasn't long before I realized they weren't speaking English to us at first; they were yelling racial slurs and calling to us with *ching-chongs* and *ni-haos*. When we began to walk faster, they got more agitated and began to walk towards us instead of waiting for us to go to them. They began to rip pieces off of their sandwiches and threw them at the floor in our direction mockingly. "Do you want dinner, poor babies?" "Here, have some dinner!" "Pick it up! It's free!" For the first time in my life, I felt unsafe and ashamed to be

Chinese.

My dad cautioned me to stay silent and quickly hustled me into the store. The men threw their sandwiches onto the ground and got onto their bikes, whistling and whooping like one would after watching a Broadway show or a concert. The sight of their bikes pulling out of the lot filled me with unease as my family sat in silence, feeling violated. My hot chocolate tasted bitter and repulsive. I went into the bathroom and got on my tiptoes and looked into the mirror and examined my face with dull eyes and wished I were somebody else. What did I do to deserve to be mocked for my race?

The next day we discovered a colorful message with more slurs sprayed all over our windows in black ink. There was a thick, slimy substance smeared onto the doors and spilled on the pavement right outside our store. What seemed to be a brown-colored soda pooled in front of our door. I watched with new eyes as my parents took deep breaths with defeated expressions and wet two rags before heading outside to clean up the mess without saying another word.

I dragged a chair outside with a wet towel of my own to reach the higher parts of the window. I felt queasy and as if I was living out a nightmare. We cleaned up in uneasy silence before customers started arriving. We swept up the BLT sandwiches from the previous night afterward, feeling no better than dogs.

I didn't go back to feed the ducks for many weeks after that.



# Softly

Jillian Carson

Bayport, NY

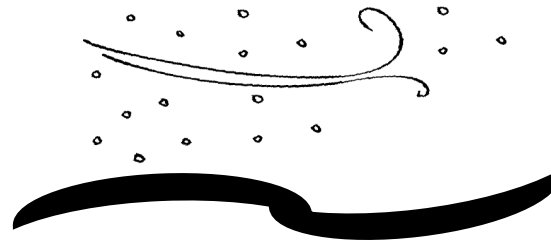
They told me to be soft;  
Live softly.  
So my thorns play hide and seek beneath rose petals.  
When you fell into me  
I was Swiss Army knives that could not stay concealed in coat pockets.  
I let down my outstretched hands to chew my fingernails  
And I could not catch you.  
I will always be the edge of a letter opener.  
The words I find beneath the folds break my stained glass heart every time.

Speak softly.  
I have not yet discover how to provide comfort while wearing sandpaper skin,  
For I am the razor that takes part of you with me but draws crimson from the crook of your knee.  
Like a pebble  
I give myself away to the waves;  
Ask them to caress my jagged edges until I am easier to hold.  
I invite you, chip away.  
I hand you a chisel  
And you look at it like it is the only weapon you have ever held.  
You must have forgotten about me.  
It somehow eluded you how I could never fit into the palm of your hand  
Without creating new creases.  
I wonder if you still have the calluses.

Feel softly  
Or not at all.  
I close my eyes and beg to remember how numb sits inside an otherwise hollow chest.  
I cannot conjure up the sensation.  
The irony of this leaves me defenseless.

I've been told the world bathes in soft colors;  
Pastel pinks in the six a.m. sky and turquoise before night fall.  
I see in shades of harsh black and blue  
Like bruises as the body embraces pain before healing itself.  
In art class, we learned how to create a tint by adding white paint to a color.  
You told me this made the sea that spanned your paper appear softer  
As dark crests curled across my canvas.

I am a churning pool of ink.  
I owe you neither suede skin nor satin lips.  
I cannot change that I am more flame than flesh.  
There is nothing soft about fire-  
But its warmth will bring you to your goddamn knees.



## Shrinking Distance

Madeline Figas

Pittsburgh, PA

My best friend left on Thursday  
before I could advise  
her to look out for earthquakes.

She said she was moving  
to dance across sharp coves and listen the sea  
wave. I asked her to think

of me, and pull shells from gravel  
to fill time and oceans until she was close enough,  
and could hear me scream,

*Don't forget I'm waiting!* I told her not to come back  
different. But the December sun  
toughened her skin and buried her smile.

I ask her to jump back, to rewind, but she empties  
her stomach, tells me she could hear me and hands  
me a fistful of shells.



## The Pecking Order

Clara Shapiro

Brooklyn, NY

In the midsummer heat and languor, Huck  
Peebles had forgotten to feed the chickens. They  
paced and strutted about the cramped confines of  
the coop, clucking out a chorus of indignation as  
dawn yielded to day.

“Where the deuce is the little fool, sleeping

when there's work to be done?”  
Grandpa Peebles would later say  
when he discovered the scene. The  
old man opened the coop door and  
sunlight rushed to greet the feathery inmates. Still  
clucking, the haughty chickens stepped into the pale  
field outside. Hunger had made them peevish. Two  
roosters pecked and jabbed at each other's necks,  
together a wild flurry of feathers and squawking.  
Soon, the squabble quieted, and the victor strutted  
off to gloat over his victory. Among the two  
feathery combatants and their beady-eyed  
spectators, Grandpa Peebles scattered bugs, and as  
the deprived animals pecked viciously at the earth,  
the old man swore to the mid-morning sky to teach  
Huck Peebles obedience.

When he reached Huck's summer loft in  
the barn, he found the boy still asleep. A rivulet of  
drool had crusted upon his chin. His hair was as  
coarse and colorless as the straw he lay upon.

“Get up, boy! Get up!” Grandpa Peebles  
shook the narrow, sinewy frame. Huck blinked into  
the glare of morning.

“Wha?” His fingers raked the dull field of  
his head.

“It's late morning,” Grandpa Peebles said.  
“Halfway to dinner by now, and here you's lying,  
lazy as a pig.”

“Sorry, sir.” He jumped from the loft,  
grinning jauntily at the old man. Grandpa Peebles  
turned away—the boy slept naked in the summer  
months. Behind him, he could hear the rustle of the  
boy's trousers and shirt.

“You won't be needing no clothes right  
now, boy.”

“Wha?”

“That's right,” Grandpa Peebles said.  
“You've been lazy today. And worse, you've been  
disobedient.” The boy clutched his soiled clothes to  
his body. “Now, I ain't gonna stand for no laziness  
and disobedience on my land. It ain't gonna go  
unpunished.” He turned.

“Aww, come on, Gramp, I swear I won't  
do it again!” Huck placed one grimy hand over the  
pallor of his chest.

“Now, boy, it ain't gonna hurt  
much,” Grandpa Peebles said, his voice





coaxing. "All it is is a little switch."

*Switch.* The word hissed, and Huck recoiled from it. "Come on, then." Grandpa Peebles pulled Huck from his spot. Grandpa Peebles led Huck towards the chicken coops, pausing only to select a switch from a tree. "Got any preference?" Huck shook his head. As he approached the coops, Huck resolved to be brave. He would not cry. He would stand firm and unyielding against the strokes. Yet dread turned the marrow of his bones to stone, and repressed tears rebelled against his fifteen-year-old dignity. They stopped before the chicken coop, where all the neglected animals could exult in the punishment of their master. Humiliation was the first whipmaster, for Huck's body was already blotchy and red. "Bend over," Grandpa Peebles said. "We'll call it a deal with twelve strokes, eh?" The old man thought himself generous. For a moment, Huck nearly whimpered and pleaded for mercy as he might have as a little boy, his cheeks quivering like strawberry jam. But he remembered his vow, and silently bent over.

The first stroke came as a sting. Two, three, four... Huck closed his eyes. Grandpa Peebles' arm gathered strength. Five, six, seven... Huck bit his lip to keep from crying out. Eight, nine, ten... With each stroke, Huck felt his fury rise. Livid welts swelled on his buttocks, and he sensed that the raw flesh would soon bleed. Ten, eleven... As Grandpa Peebles drew his arm back, Huck brushed the welts on his body. When he withdrew his hand, he saw blood upon his fingers.

"Stop!" Huck turned. He seized Grandpa Peebles' arm and wrenched the switch from his grasp. At fifteen, he was brawny and tall, and he easily overpowered the old man. Huck's arm rose as if to strike his grandfather, who yelped and lifted his hands to shield his face.

But the blow never came.

The old man straightened. "For Chrissake, what you think you're doing? You put that switch down!"

Huck held it tighter. "I ain't gonna stand for this, Grandpa! I never was your slave, and now I ain't no boy, neither!"

"What you say?"

"I said," Huck's voice was low, "I ain't a boy no more, and I ain't gonna stand for this no longer."

"Aww, come now, Huck." The old man's eyes flickered towards the switch. "Can't you see I only whipped you for your own good?"

Huck looked down and watched a black ant scramble across the dirt.

"Look..." Now, the old man's voice turned gentle. "I ain't trying to hurt you, Huck. You know that, don't you?"

Huck squashed the ant beneath his toe. Silent, smashed guts. "Huck! Huck, you listening?"

Huck grunted, continuing to stare at the ground.

"I'm teaching you obedience the way my pa taught me, the way his pa did, ever since us Peebles settled down on this land." The old man, his leathery face lifted to the sun, stared down the beaten dirt road, where red dust rose in eddying clouds. "Look off down the road there, boy." He gestured towards the path unfurling towards the barren hills. "What you see out there for yourself? Ain't no green land for miles around." Huck squinted at the sloping land beyond the farm.

"I can't see nothin' now," he said. "But maybe if I got closer, I'd find someplace where the skies is bluer and the soil's a richer for planting."

"The sky ain't blue enough for you here, boy?" Grandpa Peebles shook his head. "Right ungrateful, you are."

"Ain't hoping different from bein' ungrateful?"

Grandpa Peebles took a sharp breath of the ripe, sickly farm air. "On this land, boy, hoping don't mean nothing but being a fool."

"But ain't you never had a dream sometime, Gramp?"

The old man paused.

"Sure, but I was just a boy. Had all these clown ideas about... oh, never mind." He shook his head. "Good thing my pa set me straight, even if it took a switching now and then." Huck turned to the old man.

"But how you gonna whip the hoping from

my head?" Huck asked. He watched the old man close his eyes and raise his face to the sky. There he stood, silent and unmoving in the stagnant heat.

"Gramp!" The old man's eyes opened. "Well?"

"I don't know, Huck." His voice was tired. "I only know what my pa taught me. Sometime, a man's gotta make his boy cry."

"But you can't make me cry. And I ain't a boy."

Huck turned the rod in his hands. He snapped it in two. And he threw it far away, into the face of the sun.

The pair stood in silence, tired as the morning's two pugnacious roosters, their struggle for dominance since cooled.

In the mid-morning heat, the red barn sagged. The fields bared their exposed flesh to the scorching sun. And the chickens pecked viciously at the ground, searching for the bugs that were not there.

## Butterfly Man

Sneha Abraham

Williston Park, NY

I still remember the butterfly man. He came by a dirt path, because expensive carpeting would scratch the bottoms of his bare feet. He told me that the creek whispered secrets in his ear, and when I was grown, he promised to give those secrets to me.

I still remember the butterfly man. He gave me words on small papers and told me that someday I would be able to read them. He told me that words were a secret, too.

He told me that when I was grown, I would know many secrets, and when my children were grown, I would pass the secrets on to them.

I still remember the butterfly man. My mother made special meals for him when he came. There were tired lines on his face and dirty streaks on his skin, but when he saw us his smile was joyful and his eyes were free.

My mother said that magic wasn't real, but the butterfly man told me once that he felt he could fly.



# heliophile

Liliana Greyf

New York, NY

rooting myself into dry dirt,  
my fingers blossomed until they bled.  
i choked on medicine, cured myself with every  
word that broke me.  
they flowed down my throat,  
each mouthful honeyed into my plastic veins  
like rotted water i used to think was fresh.  
i stretched for sunlight, thought i liked the way it  
burned.  
thought i liked the way  
it boiled into my skin, bubbling,  
seeping through my core.  
drank my tears in place of water,  
twisted my body through the earth with reused  
sentences.  
convinced i could pollinate if given the chance.  
i grew until i withered.  
a dainty little thing,  
cracking ever so carefully.  
just a child,  
plucking a daffodil from the ground.

## A Brown Take on American Citizenship

Isha Agarwal

New York, NY

You spent the first 10 years of your life learning about the duality of America. The black and the white. The troubles of colonial America, the horrors of slavery, the fright of Ellis Island, and the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement were all you learned about. For all you knew, that was American history, and therefore it was your history. You had to write a letter to Martin Luther King Jr., thanking him for his service. You didn't know what to say. You asked him where you would have gone to school before he had desegregated them. You didn't know.

You were one of two Indian kids in elementary school. All the other kids joked that you guys should be best friends. You began to develop a secret, pent-up hatred for this girl, even though she had never wronged you. It wasn't that you wanted

her to disappear, it was that her existence made yours more noticeable— but, with that, your individuality began to melt into the fibers of her skin. You knew nothing about her and didn't care for her but you guys were destined to be best friends and that was decided for you and there was nothing you could do about it.

You started a new school and someone asked you if you could say the n word. You didn't understand why they were asking you this, and they called you an "honorary African American." You laughed and accepted your title but never uttered the n word. The other 5th graders didn't consider you Asian, and so you were automatically an "honorary African American." You hated those kids, but you continued to categorize yourself with their labels. Your silence throbs in your head, a migraine that you brought upon yourself. Why didn't you say anything?

You started another new school and one of your best friends asked if you were Italian. You couldn't tell if she was serious or not. After all, this was your new private school that was supposedly full of some of the smartest kids in America. You asked her if she was joking, and you guys laughed, but you never got an answer. Was it that she was ignorant, or were you too naive? It's probably better that you didn't get an answer anyway. You were a little afraid of what she would have said.

Roll call has always been difficult for you. You grow up hating your name. Your brother's name has Scottish and Irish origins, and Americans still spell it wrong. You get blank stares at roll call before you offer it up. There's a kid in your middle school whose last name is similar to yours. Not the same, but similar. Kids ask if you guys are twins or just married. There are white kids with the same last name who have never been interrogated about their relationship. You hate your name.

You remember when your teacher made you do a name project. She had printed out posters with everyone's name and the meaning behind it. You were so excited, your mom had always told you that your name meant "the ruling goddess" and

that's why she always called you princess. You were so excited until you saw that your poster mentioned the Hebrew meaning of your name – woman – and you could feel the alacrity dissolve off of your face. What's Hebrew? Your name was the name of a Hindu goddess, where was she? Where was her picture?

You were growing up and you began hanging out with white girls whose parents grew up in America. They had different curfews and different values. Your mother warned you not to become "too American." You didn't know what this meant, you were obviously American. It said so on your passport.

Ever since then, those words echoed in your head. You were hyper aware of the space you took up in any conversation, jumping over your words as if one wrong move would crack the ground and your brown body would disintegrate into the concrete sidewalks. You were ashamed of your lack of knowledge about your culture and your hatred of traveling to India. It was just so hot and so sticky and so *far*. Your parents had made the trip over here for a reason, didn't they? Every time you are in India you are conscious of your wealth, your accent, your very demeanor that separates you from everyone else. They just know that you are American. They call you an ABCD. An American-Born Confused Desi. Did that make you too American? Indians don't consider you Indian. But Americans don't consider you American either. What are you? Who are you?

You are introduced to the idea of the hyphen. You are not Indian, you are not American. You are Indian-American. The hyphen seems so choppy, as if you are forced to calibrate yourself through an aspect of English grammar. You hate the hyphen. You spend the next few years trying to convince people that India is, in fact, in Asia. They don't believe it, because in America, being Asian is being East Asian. No, not even that. Being Asian in America is being Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.

It's really convenient that Americans expand their definition of Asian when it works out nicely for White Americans.





When your brother applies to college, he is considered Asian American. "The worst thing to be in college applications is an Asian American boy." So now your family is Asian American? You reserve a special fuck you for American institutions for curating your identity as it best fits for them. You're packed away in neat little boxes with each American label, stickers of "handle with care" or "fragile" are absent, but the one that is burns like acid states "this way up." Be careful though—one of those labels is not simply "American."

You're now in high school, and you join your school's Asian appreciation club. You walk in a fashion show in typical Indian dress and learn a K-pop dance. You think your mom will be ecstatic that you are finally learning to embrace your culture. Except that she hates the club, and she thinks it's a waste of your time. She says it only appreciates East Asians. You say no, it's not, and you continue with the club, no matter what she says. She makes a special point of mispronouncing the name of the club, and you make a special point of applying for leadership.

You spend the next 2 years on leadership of the club fighting for a Bollywood dance. You never win, but it's your absolute mission to accomplish it your senior year. You pour your heart and soul into the club, they must honor you by letting you have this one thing. It's not that the kids are specifically holding a grudge against the South Asians. It's just that East Asian culture is more popular. You enjoy it too, and they still retain some aspects of South Asian culture, so you let it be. For now.

You experience a lot of changes in your Americanness. A businessman that hates Muslims is now your president. You don't hate Muslims, but Hindus and Muslims have been rivals since the beginning of time, Pakistan a reminder of the hatred ingrained in your being. You would think that as people of color, Indians would hate the businessman. Indians hate Muslims more, and you are ashamed when Indians support him. Your big brother had just started working out. He gets randomly stopped in airports now. He's 18. He has



*Reading*

Hewson Duffy

Charlottesville, VA

done nothing wrong. The government agent who is supposed to be protecting you is now taking advantage of his little bit of power to diminish yours. Often, you see people with only a little bit of power take advantage of what they can to assert themselves over whoever doesn't have the same authority as them, for no reason other than they get to feel better about themselves for making the world a safer place, one scared brown boy at a time. "Who watches the watchers?" You never thought this would apply to TSA Agents. They use patriotism as a guise to pick and choose, like people are outfits, who deserves to take part in our society. No, you're equal. It says it right there on the Constitution, so how could it not be true? You joke with your

friends that you're going to move to Canada. You have had to work extremely hard to prove you are American, prove your patriotism, and now you want to destroy all those years? "It's really awful what's happening to our country now," everyone says. *Now? What do you mean now?*

You go on a vacation to a different country with your white friends for a Sweet 16. You are beyond excited, your friends will be vacationing together! You all have matching passports. On the first night at dinner with your friends, you all laugh about how this is actually happening. "What if people ask how we all know each other?" "Oh, we can pretend we're sisters!" Everyone's eyes are on you. You chuckle. Your brown skin is melting onto the table and you just sit back and watch it merge with the purity of the clean, white table cloth.

You're older now and you meet upperclassmen through clubs and mutual friends. He's Indian and you guys become friends and start talking, and at the end of the year he asks you to go to prom with him. You're on the fence because you're not sure if that's the best idea for you socially and you're not even sure if your parents will let you go. Your best friend says:

"that'll be so cute, like an Indian couple!" Your best friend. Why is it that your Indianness makes it cuter somehow to be associated with him? Why should that make a difference? "Your mom will love him!" Why, because he's Indian? Because you have the same skin color? Because your parents come from the same country? Your race is intrinsic, but these classifications and associations made through your race are fabricated so that people can understand things in their own ignorant way.

You have been constantly torn between your heritage and your citizenship. What matters more, the very blood that runs through your veins or the privileges that you get? Your skin color or the



physical location of your body? Your tears sting as they follow two different channels down your face. The duality of America, right? You can feel your mortality with each internal argument as your skin dissolves into brown, muddy puddles. The melting pot of America separates like oil and water, your identity melting into the scalding flames of Uncle Sam's pristine, marbled kitchen.

## Scrapbook Woman

Jillian Laper-Dowling

Shoreham, NY

I was born in vintage roses and white girl afros  
I lived on the kind of street you could hold in your pocket, but was the loudest thing about you  
It's a place you learn to find silence in traffic  
Fill it with laughter engraved in the sidewalks  
Cigarette smoke fogs up a note in the bus window  
Skinny Minnie in a fluffy leopard coat smiles, such a hippie baby mashing all the colors together on perfect canvas  
The cold snaps for dinner  
I sit with women who knows something about anyone and then some  
My aunt breaks my hair into shiny knots  
My grandmother taught me no one could understand a family quite like ours  
My mother is a switch blade bent into a serving spoon  
She's got diamond words; they sparkle as they cut into you, and three girls' thank you in a mouthful  
Restless scrubs off in the sink  
Keeps her drive in her denim jacket and does it all over again  
You want to know where I come from  
Drive pass the diner, storms made oblivious with hot meals  
Around the corner of my sister's gapped teeth; innocence ripped out of her  
Make a left at teaching yourself to trust with your eyes open  
That way you know exactly who is going to hurt you  
All the way down to... if they don't  
If their Sketchers are clothed in mud just like yours  
If they come to school with that same type of hunger in their blood  
Let them in, lay your story all out, and they listen  
Remind them that if they wrong you there will be no hesitation to a sucker punch in the face that leaves a cowardly scar  
Remind them you've never lean on someone without falling and you don't intend to keep that

streak going  
Remind them you've been into more hearts than you can count; no one has a beat quite like theirs  
Remind yourself of the girl you grew up into  
Remind yourself of the girl standing in front of them

## halcyon, you did fuss

Gloria Wang

Fairfax, VA

based on the emotions below, is this a simile or metaphor?

Gas stove on, I've forgotten, it's the feeling  
of having all the time in the world to watch  
crescent asphyxiation and fond milk-cloud eyes of age.  
It's hospice, months to watch and breath in.

write an analysis on the efficacy of 'sender'

Today, I sent a letter titled Return To Sender,  
asked about empty pews, stained pewter, and cathedral candles.  
Today I pray in euphemisms, ask about my mother.  
Rib against cathedral, breathe candle snuff,  
when the smell of thick mother's medicine drifts from nowhere.  
It's watery serendipity in its most absolute sense.

how do you evaluate the purpose of life in this scenario?

We're calling this a runaway, throwaway-type of life.  
In a slow stasis, zealous decay,  
It's nothing personal, seems father's favorite phrase  
salt streaks from the wind vortices he throws up from following too closely.  
We all express grief in different ways  
'always' seems to be mother's equivocation.

what do you think the narrator was saying with—

After all, in the story, there's no other ending,  
the stove still burns bright blue in absence,

and maybe this static transforms canola quiet into keg  
and the mailman leaves the letter wedged between door  
and bills stuffed back into their envelopes, torn at the paper seams. Are you happy—I would like to know too.  
Who can say but in those gaps when we stick tongue out of the sedan, diesel air,  
early morning, too early to forget when the church bells ring but we're too far away to hear.

## Edges

Joanna Lau

Roslyn Heights, NY

Driving into Flushing for dinner, my younger sister wrinkles her nose and says, "Roll up the window, this neighborhood smells like Chinese people." We laugh, and my mom remarks, "Does that mean you smell?"

Some common etiquette: Receive the red envelope, the *lai si*, with two hands. There are two forms of thank you's: *Do ze* when they give you the *lai si*. *M goi* when the waiter changes your plate, when someone does something for you.

I know this like second nature, yet somehow all my other conversational skills have evaded me—left in the home videos of a babbling four-year-old I no longer remember.

My sister doesn't even bother trying. "Thank you," she says.

I am painfully aware of the dish corner jutting off the rim of the turntable, the teapot handle hovering outwards.

Under the pretense of polite phrases and Asian hair, my ears attempt to hang on to

Turntable (轉盤): Also called a "Lazy Susan," a circular rotating glass tray placed in the center of a circular table to aid in food distribution; common at Chinese restaurants.





every bit of conversation uttered and imprint the Chinese in my brain to stay. Repeat, don't forget again. But it vaporizes like a mist that I continually grasp at and still come up empty.

A fly lands on the edge of a plate. "There's a fly," I say. "There's a fly," I repeat again, louder. "*Yau ge wu ying*," I finally say, and a soft pang of pride thumps in my chest, though no one responds.

I don't think I spoke loud enough.

To me, my grandfather's Chinese is indecipherable. His Cantonese is mixed with *Toisan* but across the table, even the sounds I do comprehend sound like garbled mush. Every time he speaks to me is a moment of terror. My only strategy is to nod, smile, and hope he didn't ask a question. My dad translates, and while part of me wants to shush him, another part of me wants to understand.

The hovering teapot handle calls me. I gently push it back towards the center before it knocks over any cups. We all do that. Watch for items sticking off the turntable.

I eat without tasting, flavor overwhelming my eyes and ears.

A spoon is sticking out. Teetering.

My cousins both married Korean women. Conversation at the family dinner table has now become a mix of Cantonese and stilted English as communication comes to a crossroads of halting stop-go. Their toddlers—beautiful round Korean-Chinese faces—play with toys and respond to Cantonese and Korean directions, a wonderment to me. Four generations in America and we turn not purely Chinese for the first time.

Earlier that day, back at home, my mom asks me what career I will have. "We'll see," is all I say and repeat, thinking about my impulsiveness in deciding to major in English and Music

Performance. "It seems like you've already given up on Pre-Med," she says, and I imagine my parents' tight-lipped smiles in response to inquiring friends; their daughter who has indulged the stupid fly instead of crushing it under her heel.

I open my window in the evening after dinner, damp air and crickets streaming in. I have inherited my mom's poor eyesight, short stature, and stubborn willpower.

I have not been blessed with her meticulousness, but from my dad I received an unguarded abandon that means my handwriting blurs together, my drawers are never closed, and my lights are always on.

My mom says he was good at art. I think I can remember seeing glimpses of his drawings in his high school yearbook that he probably only showed us that once. He works at Citibank now, married to my mom, the girl who wanted to learn ballet and violin as a child but wasn't allowed, who shot spiders off her ceiling with rubber bands, who talked about boys to her friends over the phone until she realized no, my grandpa was not a mind reader, he had rigged the phone to record calls.

It has been raining a lot the past few nights—but only at night. It's like the sky waits for the sun to stop looking at it, stop shining on it, before it releases itself with a sob of a rumble and splatter that I don't see but hear outside my window.

I think back to the teapot, the handle hovering off the edge, wonder what would have been if I never pushed it back in.

## A Mouth Full

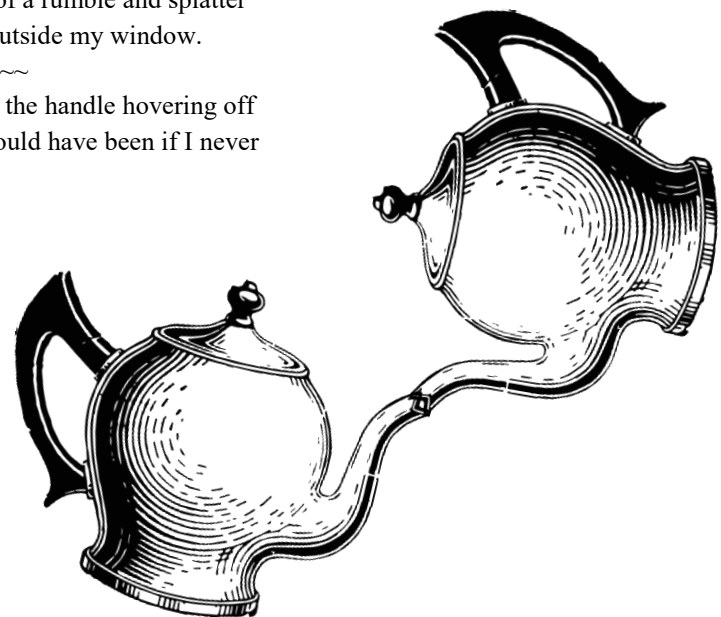
Khushi Daryani  
New Delhi, India

i occupy a tiny space in this universe. there are stars and nebulae, black holes and undiscovered planets, galaxies, species of fancy frogs and shit loads of people who seemingly talk a ludicrous amount about the weather. there are sad houses and sadder homes.

there's dancing, and festivals, and music that makes you gladly shriek out of sheer joy, smiling kids who smell of mud and grinning pets responsible for it, books close to your heart and fiction that made you sob. there are closets that have names of your previous lovers scratched out and dresses that don't fit anymore.

it's both exhilaratingly exhausting and ridiculously overwhelming to take so very little space in this world that seems to offer no answers, only increasingly lonely people and terribly good ice-cream flavours.

oh, and oreo's my favourite one. so when you tell me that the universe is twice as big as i think it is, i offer you a bite. and how quickly do we gulp it down, shielding it from the sun as we hold it in our palms, to keep it from melting.

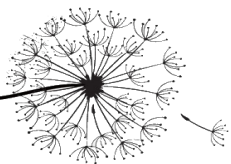


# What Tradition Is

Victoria Maung

Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ

strands of baby hairs from my bangs poke at my eyes  
as i squeeze them shut, flinching at my aunties' fingers  
snatching my nose with their grip, molding it like clay,  
perfecting it into a glorified round mound of prosperity.  
i retrieve the Chinese newspaper from the driveway  
while they work away in their uniform outfits: black  
from head-to-toe, donning no accessories or makeup.  
they swear by mascara, weapon of choice in battle  
against old age but today, their skin is taut, lacking  
their armor. i cannot help but notice the wrinkles  
creasing their skin, the effects of his passing  
having taken a toll far deeper than i imagined.  
i retrieve the papers and help unwrap them and  
we decorate the bathroom mirror, each paper,  
inky touch staining ours, until a sea of traditional  
characters fill the space of where our faces should,  
the space of where his face was once reflected.  
we return to the kitchen, cooking until family  
shuffle in with somber hellos, strained handshakes.  
the hallways of our household run black with  
family,  
like my aunties' mascara did with the first phone  
calls,  
filled with nothing but the distance between  
continents.  
we gather together, folding boats of paper money  
and  
throw them into the fire; our familial monetary  
offering  
for wealth in the afterlife. perhaps you say you  
understand  
these things, these traditions, but there is one you  
will never  
be able to fathom: the light we leave on in the  
family room,  
the one with a dim yellow glow illuminating the  
span of  
ancestral portraits. now, his with a red bow atop the  
frame.  
it is the light we leave on as reminder he is still with  
us,  
a facade for outsiders to convey that nothing within  
the house has changed, that everything is the same.  
but you will never know this because you will never  
be able to understand what Chinese tradition is.



# Childhood is the Shortest Season

Anna Boyer

Solon, OH

I am from the mornings  
Of lacy white curtains that flutter in the breeze.  
I am from the smell of coffee,  
The pile of books by my bed,  
The hum of lawnmowers, the sweet summer smell  
of grass.  
I am from Sunday services  
reluctantly attended.

I am, too, from the mornings  
Of silence.  
Of perilous toy cars littered across the floor.  
I am from closed doors, dirty clothes,  
Empty lunch boxes.  
I am from long walks to the bus  
As I shiver alone in the snow.

I am from the days  
Of playgrounds and refreshing leaps into the pool.  
From the melody of ice cream trucks,  
And the sticky syrup dripping down my arm.  
I am from swings that let me fly,  
And from the forest in my backyard,  
The one filled with magic.

I am from the days  
Of school and homework.  
I am from the red face of my brother  
As he picks yet another fight.  
I am from the shaking hand of my mother  
And the half-filled bottle of Xanax on the shelf.  
I am from the days  
That could not end fast enough.

I am from the nights  
Loud and bright.  
From the summer breeze rippling leaves,  
The whirring of my dad's saw in the garage.  
I am from walks down the marina with family  
And the soothing mumble of thunder.  
I am from late night movie marathons.  
And from the glow of our house in the darkness.  
I am from the nights  
Long and dark.  
The yells of my brother, the crack of a wooden  
spoon.  
I am from three people at a four person dining table  
And a driveway with one car missing.  
From doors slamming 'good night.'  
I am from the couch much too big for me alone  
And the all too quiet snow.

I am from the seasons of light  
And the seasons of dark.  
From the glowing summers  
And the freezing winters.  
I am from a small and cramped house.  
I am from a big, big world.

# Nonna

Emma Christopher

Rye, NY

Water, flour, and eggs kneaded to the rhythm of her  
melodious richly accented voice. Add a dusting of  
flour, as the dough mustn't stick. Her wise wrinkled  
hands work deftly and hypnotically as her words  
flow like the waters of the mighty Po River, placid  
on the surface with a raging undercurrent. She  
shares vivid memories from her birthplace in the  
fertile val Trebbia in the northern Apennines. I am  
riveted listening to echoes of her past. Running  
barefoot as a child through brilliant, fiery poppy  
fields that undulate in the breeze. *La dolce vita* is  
just this and this alone: Family, faith, good food.  
She always found joys from the simple things.

She was plunged into the horrors of the bloodiest of  
wars, when Nazi Germany invaded and occupied  
Northern Italy for the last two years of World War  
II. She once told me how flickering images plagued  
her sleep with metal tanks racing across the  
countryside, crushing her beloved poppy fields, her  
father fleeing for the hills to fight with the partisans  
as Nazi soldiers occupied her hearth and home.

Nightmares of her uncle's murder earlier in the war  
would always haunt her. He was shot at close range  
by hooded Fascists in black shirts while he exited  
the church with his vestal bride. Nonna tried to  
scrub from her memory the visions of a blood  
spattered dress and a pool of blood on scattered rice.

*Innocenza e la dolce vita distrutto.* What a violation  
and abomination for evil to reside for over a year  
under the sun-kissed terra cotta roof of her ancestral  
home! Its stoic stone facade belied the  
trauma it witnessed and harbored during





the occupation. Helpless and vulnerable, Nonna watched as her momma cried bitter tears hunched over her stove while stirring polenta to serve to these intruders. A peasant's dish of cornmeal to be stirred slow and long, then topped with *funghi porcini*.

In halcyon days, her family's favorite pastime was hunting for the prized aromatic *porcini* in the ancient woodland forest indigenous to the fecund crests and bluffs above the yawning Po valley. When forced to feed the Nazi soldiers who resided in her house, her momma often beckoned her to fetch her brother and gather *porcini* in the woods up past the Lambrusco vineyards that dotted the hillside. Foraging for red-brown caps in leaf litter at the base of ubiquitous beeches in this wooded haven, she found precious serenity in a world gone mad with war. In the shelter of the trees, she dared to imagine a world with no Fascists or Nazis or bloody weddings.

As I study her delicate yet sturdy hands work through the tenacious dough, I find it difficult to fully grasp how she withstood the torment of her past and became the woman I call Nonna. She describes how shattered lives and economic ruin postbellum sowed the seeds for her dream of a better life across the ocean. America and all its promise of security and prosperity called to her. Though her soul would always long for the familiarity and peace of the wild poppy fields and fragrant woodlands of val Trebbia, America's allure was irresistible and intoxicating. She waited two years for approval due to the National Origins Quota Act, and then purchased a

tourist class ticket on the SS Andrea Doria for destination: New York City.

Nonna was bewitched by titillating soaring buildings, boisterous crowds, foreign foods, smells, and sounds. Cobblestoned streets peppered with carts, barking vendors peddling their wares. Settling in a dank cramped tenement in Manhattan's lower east side, she was stung by the venom of prejudice. Her ethnicity, appearance and language were unsavory here. I imagine how she felt with old country culture coursing through her veins, molded in a home filled with the aromas of cuisine from generations past, venturing forth in that alien world.



*Weapon*

*Karyssa Cendana*

Livingston, NJ

Her olive skin and chestnut eyes silently watching her parents struggle for subsistence, while scrimping and saving working to the bone, untold sacrifices, weary from life. They taught her what resilience and grit really are while casting their eyes on her to fulfill the promise of this American dream.

Always seeking approval, she desperately yearned to prove her worth. Quietly and diligently, she focused on her work with an immigrant mindset that emboldened her to toil harder than the rest. Seeking acceptance from friends knowing she was different, not truly belonging. As the years went by she checked the boxes that they said make a life full: a

career, a courtship, a family. In this alternate universe, each layer of her new enchanted life buried harrowing thoughts of darker times.

Nonna's time-worn hands stretch and fold the dough intently and nimbly as if molding a life—her palms always pushing forward with sure, cadenced strokes, incorporating air, never compressing, until the texture is elastic and silky. She shares with me a secret of Emilia-Romagna's ancient art of pasta making: "Knead until you can't knead it anymore, then knead it some more." Satisfied the raw ingredients have been transformed, she shifts her focus to rolling the dough on a rough wood board.

As I watch Nonna finish her work, I think about all the ingredients that go into making a life and how a soul is shaped by time.



# Anxiety's Realm

Lauren Azrin

White Plains, NY

my sleep breaks as the door shakes and the daisies freeze

He has come once again  
a rapid rush  
a haunting hush

His humid breath  
moistening the air  
scratching at my bones

i thought i had bolted my doors

apathy covered bricks sealed with locks of 'i'm fine'  
keys hidden  
yet His presence finds a way in

inescapable fire  
occasional desire  
unexplainable liar

a shadow of sorrow yet a flashlight of fear

the rush comes  
and another and  
another

one after the next  
no air  
no air

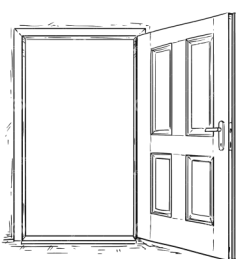
suffocated, surrounded

persistent anguish  
over avoidable worries  
and doubts

caught  
in a fishing net at sea  
too far from land

leaving no option  
but to drown with nothing  
but the pain of the heavy waves crushing me

to lull me back to sleep.



## seeing red

Dana Bahng

Cresskill, NJ

drain the fat from my  
bones, peel the skin off my  
teeth, pour the blood of my  
heart  
onto my soul, in rivulets of wet ochre clay  
so it cakes around the shattered pieces, crumbling  
away  
to reveal  
a single poinsettia.

## Gicadas

Elizabeth Kuhn

Pittsburgh, PA

hide  
in shifts of fours.  
Four night shifts in a row, years before  
we stop forgetting you exist.

We remember one hundred and twenty  
decibel screams. Something tangled in my hair.  
you're half deaf. Dad,  
in the car driving  
a mile away  
without us,  
so the sound cut off.

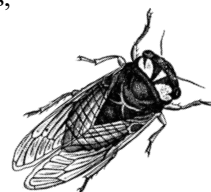
It didn't

You believe in coming out  
only when you taste November  
roots, like my toes  
in mulch, under the bush  
in our lawn. Your daughters burry you in

under sixty-four-degree soil  
so we don't see you for four years,  
or seventeen

before you dig out. You sprout  
like a weed  
and swarm the irises  
with a boot heel.

Your daughters pick your shells



off trees,  
dig membranous wings

from under our nails. You cling  
to the back porch, watch  
bugs turn branches brown.

Inborn sirens  
come in overwhelming swarms You don't hear  
when the trunk hits the grass.  
You don't pray  
for the cicadas singing in our ears.

## I Watched the Death of Titans

Sophia Hlavaty

Basking Ridge, NJ

**i. I am seven.**

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?  
My loathing or his animosity?

He is a wolf, a creature carved from the  
bowels of the darkness that whispers my name  
when I'm dreaming. His head is cocked to the right  
as he leers at me from the stairway. I can see the  
beads of sweat which have formed from trying to  
chase me on his forehead, fall slowly onto his arm,  
and then onto the floor. Silence.

All of a sudden he springs at me and has  
my arms pinned against the yellow wall. *Don't give  
up your wings*, I remember thinking. *Fight!* I try to  
kick him, but he yanks my hair so hard that the  
colors in the world blur together like fingerpaints.  
He pulls me towards him and rips my shirt clean  
through the middle, and then slaps my face. I fall to  
the ground, and he stands over me, grinning. I'm  
crying as I yell to my mom. "Stop it!" I beg. "Stop  
it please, Daddy!"

**ii. I am ten.**

We stand on the orange linoleum floor, our  
gaze upwards, watching her dip the cauliflower into  
the flour, egg, and breadcrumbs. Her hands move  
with practiced urgency as she lays each piece on a  
sheet of tinfoil and places the tray into the oven.  
From the room next door, we can hear the  
familiar sound of love. The shattering of





glass, the smashing of china. The parallel voices of my grandfather and father going up, up, up as they shout bitter words with the strength of years of resentment. I clamp my hands over my ears and begin to cry as if some part of my being recognizes the chronic fear that this fiery abyss will summon.

“Babička, what’s wrong with the oven?” As the acrid smell of burning food begins to fill the air, my brother asks again. If she hears him, she doesn’t answer. Her eyes are closed, and she grips the silver cross hanging from her neck. From the fear of God’s judgement, or for reassurance?

I follow my brother as we tiptoe out of the room towards the basement, where we turn on the tv and watch hours of Slovak cartoons. It’s always the same. The same wolf running in the same circles to eat the same bunny. We understand nothing, yet we keep it on, for the crackling static of the television set drowns out the noise from upstairs.

Later, I find a dusty tin of sweets. We eat cookies for dinner.

### iii. I am twelve.

The Royal Pine car-freshener is still slowly revolving around its hook by the time the car lurches to a halt at the cemetery. My grandfather’s knuckles are white as he lifts himself from the driver’s seat and walks through the rain to the tombstone.

My little sister asks, “Do you know that when it rains it’s actually God crying?”

“Shut up,” I say.

With my face pressed against the window, I can see his hands begin to shake as he places a fresh set of lilies by his own grave. He strikes a match, which goes out. He tries again, but covers it with his hand and quickly places it into the candle holder. Bowing his head, he places the candle on the grave where his family, my history, is buried side by side. He kneels on the earth and begins his prayers in the only way we know how to.

“Forgive me father, for I have sinned.”

### iv. I am fourteen.

The day I learned my father was

mortal was the day the gods watched him fall as his wings finally melted after years spent trying to cradle the sun. When he hit the Earth, the impact broke his back and his mind, and he spent days in the white room reciting a chant in a cipher only he could understand. As he breathed through tubes and machines, my mother’s shoulders curved inwards and shook.

### v. I am fifteen.

Up here in this place between light and deepest shadow, the heavens seem to be just a fingertip out of reach. As we near the summit, I look down at the base and picture my grandfather there, leaning on his cane as he waits for us to come down. He would grip my shoulder and ask why it took us so long, but I know that I would catch him smiling as he describes the climb to my grandma.

At the peak, my dad and I stop at a clearing and look at the trees, the mountains, the lakes, the whole expanse of the world beneath our feet. “Look over there! That’s Liptovský Mikuláš! Do you think Babička can see us?” I point to a small group of houses off into the distance and wave.

As my dad shakes his head, he grabs my hands as if in need of assurance. “Wow, it’s so tiny. Were we always that small?”

I pat them gently and say, “Don’t worry, Dad. You were always big to me.”



## On Recurrence

Erin Yuan

Lincolnshire, IL

The first time I met you, you told me you liked strawberries. In the summertime I follow you into the fields to pick out the biggest / reddest ones, stuffing them in our mouths until the soil below is spattered with blood. Some days I wear my heart out on my sleeve, waiting for you to pick it like those plump fruits; other days I hoard it for myself. You tease me that strawberries are sweeter / look better, but as soon as I tuck it away you search me all over until you feel it again, pulsing under your fingers (just like it always is). But summer’s spell is never invincible, & with winter’s wrath our endless fields shrivel / disappear—muted / buried / desiccated. By nature’s curse our tongues hang dry when the leaves fall down, & despite my desperate pleas for a lick / a drop / a touch I find no rubies hidden in the barren ice. I try to tell myself that everything is fine, even as my throat burns & my head screams— it is all fine / all fine / all fine (is it not?). When the earth finally sheds its skin & the dirt kisses the sky once more, only then do you return, awake after a long winter’s nap, hungry / thirsty / craving strawberry juice. Again it is summertime, so I lead you into the fields to gather our fruits. But they hang high & raw, so you pluck my heart from my sleeve instead. We are both smarter this time—we save the strawberries for when winter comes, to drop them on their heads so the white is stained red.



## Rock Hard

Ashley Barletta

Oil City, PA

Thick summer air  
gags me, and I hear  
the faint sounds  
of a train rumbling,  
as if the world is  
shaking it.  
Stars sprinkle the dingy  
royal sky as the sun  
bleeds its pinks  
and reds, begging  
for a second chance.  
I hear a frog take  
a leap of faith into  
the pond, and can't help  
thinking about how  
one thing leads  
to another. Fallen leaves need  
to be raked; fallen souls need  
to be carried to salvation.

Then I hear something—  
beside me,  
behind me,  
inside me.  
My own beating head.  
My own inner brute.  
*Do it* he tells me,  
and there is silence.  
The crickets stop chirping,  
the water runs still,  
the train passes away.  
Completely alone,  
I wade into  
the murky pond.  
My flesh freezes,  
and I become a  
rock, sinking to salvation.



## Seventeen Bamboo Pipes

Jeremy Hsiao

Walnut, CA

Steady hands caress a wooden frame,  
and he plays, with every breath  
exhaling, inhaling in a *sheng*, 笙, reverberating in  
gourd wind chambers, the breast of a robin,  
seventeen reed pipes of history  
etched in bone oracle writings.

The old man at a blood red railing with cracks  
like porcelain and dry land that surrounds the  
Temple of Heaven or 天壇, and  
Echo Wall, a skipping record.

He returns each day  
eating rice with crooked hands  
gray hair, split and aging,  
taking a sip of water before he continues.

The air in his lungs, clear passageways  
to his mother's house  
which smells of osmanthus fragrans flowers  
mystical incense in two teaspoons of  
apricot juice mixed with olive oil  
a vapor emitted out of bamboo.

Hunched over a small stool, baggy clothes hang  
like notes in a crowd of tourists.  
Valleys litter his body, sucked in cheekbones  
yearning to be flooded.  
Oak burnt skin, circles around his eyes  
like bark patterns  
swaying with the wind  
back and forth in waves  
to rock the hull of a *sheng* in melody  
taming his hunger like tigers.

With his songs, sifting sand into  
a story of home  
in intakes of air, a haunting melody  
His *sheng*, a telescope to the past  
through a prism, reflects into ink on sheet music  
notes blotted in each mark on his skin.

He stares into the distance  
shifting his fingers and hands  
singing to balmy bushes  
they rustle in response.  
The song of *Wuzikaimen*  
oscillates twisted silk,  
against serrated ridges in bamboo whisk.

## Pilot

Hannah Han

Los Angeles, CA

i.  
“Boy, stop staring at the sky.”  
“But Ma, look at that cloud! Doesn't it  
look like a dragon? Can you imagine flying—”  
“No, I can't,” Ma says, waving her plastic  
flyswatter at him. She reaches for his small hand  
and presses 200,000 *dong* into his palm. “Now go  
do something useful, and head to Cho Hom Market.  
Buy two stalks of cilantro and ginger.”

The boy tumbles off the blue plastic stool,  
the paper money, imprinted with Ho Chi Minh's  
placid face, crushed in his fist. He stands on his  
tiptoes and waves goodbye to his dragon, who sails  
across the charcoal smear of sky, belly churning,  
long white whiskers trailing from its thick, upturned  
snout.

For a moment, Ma watches the boy's  
poised figure, and the creases pressed around the  
corners of her mouth smoothen. Then she catches  
herself.


“Boy, are you going or not?” she snaps,  
until he finally looks up at her.

“Yes, Ma.”

He patters to the door of the apartment, and  
Ma only sees the flash of his burnt soles, calcified  
from running on hot, gummy pavement, before he is  
gone.

ii.  
The boy wanders in drunken parabolas  
along the sidewalk, watching a man in sweat-  
stained wife beaters delving into a bowl of *phở*, and  
a tired woman peeling lychees with wrinkled  
fingers. He follows the noise of the crowd to a line  
of wire cages, where two cocks swipe taloned spurs  
across each other's feathered throats, their glossy,  
beaded eyes pulsing with murderous ferocity. A  
man with a wadded bill held high above his head  
pushes through the crowd, yelling, *I bet 1,000,000*  
*dong the red one will win!* He spits on the ground,  
shoving the boy aside, and says, *Move!*  
Frightened, the boy turns away from the





roosters, and glances across the street at a huddled shop, painted lime-green, pressed between two apartment complexes.

*Dinh đồ chơi.* Dinh's Toys.

He sucks in a breath and enters.

iii.

Two hours later, the boy opens the splintered door of the apartment as quietly as he can. His hands are empty of cilantro, rice noodles, and money.

"Where were you, boy?" Ma says, standing upright. Her reading glasses leap off her nose and bounce on the red beaded chain she has attached them to.

"I..."

"Did you even go to Cho Hom Market? And what are you holding?"

Quickly, before the boy can protest, Ma snatches the thing concealed under the crook of his elbow.

She swears as she reads the words, printed on the box in electric blue. "A model plane kit? What is this useless thing?"

"I just liked—"

"No. You should be studying now, not playing." The creases on the sides of her mouth darken.

"But Ma, everyone at school has one. Can I please have it?"

"Boy—"

"Please."

Ma breathes out a sigh and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Only if you study now. Once you finish studying, you can play."

iv.



The walls of their apartment are yellow and cracked as an ostrich egg, and plastered with photographs of the boy—crawling on the carpet, wearing his uniform on the first day of school, eating his first bowl of *phở*. The air reeks of cinnamon incense, but the boy does not notice—it is all he knows.

He clammers onto his tiny, stained mattress, and rips open the packaging of the plane kit, laying out the perforated pieces of smooth, yellow wood. He begins gluing parts together, humming *Con Cò Bé Bé*, a lullaby about a baby stork who leaves his mother, under his breath. The boy imagines what it would be like to be a dragon, big and proud and alone, swimming across watery skies. And he decides to name his plane *The Dragon*.

v.

Ma squats on the blue plastic stool, flipping through finances, reading glasses perched on her nose.

If she works five extra shifts at Duong's Restaurant, serving the Western tourists, she should be able to pay the monthly rent. She squints and types 504,000 *dong*, her daily tip, into the calculator. But her fingers shake, and she keeps missing the four. A long trail of numbers crowds the screen, until the calculator blinks and reads ERROR.

vi.

Ma dreams of a willful little girl, ignored by a father and mother who wanted a son, more than anything in the world. The little girl cried and screamed for attention, earning only a slap on the cheek and a sharp, *Be quiet!* And then, when she was six years old, her parents had a son.

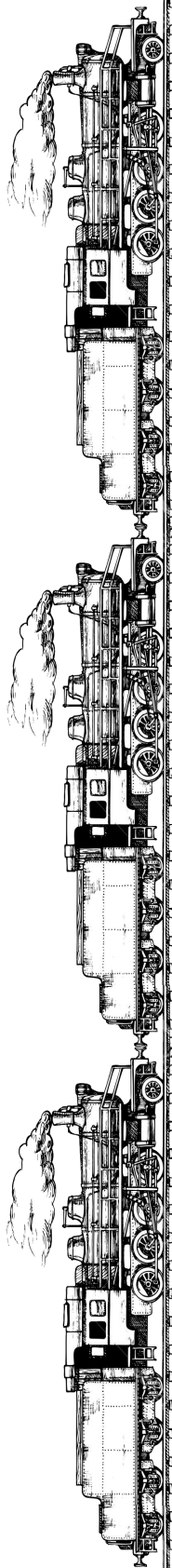
Each night, her parents would call them inside for dinner, and, running into their apartment, they would sit down on plastic stools, bouncing until their mother placed plastic bowls filled with steamed white rice in their hands. The boy would scoop aside the rice and find slivers of dried beef tucked on the bottom of his bowl. He would smile, and without another word, cram them all into his mouth at once. The girl followed suit, eagerly digging her chopsticks underneath the sticky white pebbles in her bowl. But she would find nothing.

They grew older, and one day, the brother asked his sister to play hide-and-seek with him. The girl told him, *No, I'm going to my friend's house*. Her brother screamed, *No, play with me*, and in a tantrum, he threw his prized toy truck across the room. It thudded against the wall, the thin plastic splintering. When the girl bent down, cooing to the boy and trying to mend the truck with her blundering fingers, the brother began wailing, kicking her stomach, scratching the soft skin under her chin with his fingernail. He screamed, *Linh broke my truck! Linh broke it!*

Later that night, the girl was dragged into her parents' bedroom and beaten with a wooden bamboo stick. *You foolish, selfish girl. Why can't you be like your brother?* The girl cried as the words wormed their way through her chest and her ribs, creeping into the dark spaces inside her heart. In that moment, the girl realized that her father had never once called her *daughter*. And when she looked up into his clouded eyes, she understood. She would never be as loved as her brother.

vii.

When Ma wakes, she touches the small scar beneath her chin, and then her stomach. She can still feel her brother's flailing kicks, the scrape of his fingers. Trembling, she stands and makes two bowls of *phở*, as she does every night, adding beef bones, fish sauce, ginger, and star anise to a pot of boiling water. She tosses in sliced beef and white rice noodles once the soup is cloudy





and sweet. Outside motorcycles shriek, skidding along the yellow-lit road, and men in street-side repair shops saw metal, sparks hissing, dispelling the pockets of night.

She brings a bowl of *phở* to the boy. He is sitting crossed-legged on his bed, fiddling with pieces of wood. The floor is littered with discarded packaging and jagged splinters.

“What are you doing? Did you do your homework?” she asks. When he doesn’t answer, she sets the bowl down on his desk and reaches into his backpack, pulling out a crumpled wad from the bottom. The paper is saturated with red. She squints; at the top of the page, she reads the numbers 41/60. She notes the graphite dragons and clouds scrawled in the margins of the test.

“What is this?” Ma asks.

The boy looks up and freezes. “A...a test,” he says, almost like a question.

“Where is your homework? Did you do it? Show me.”

The boy does not move. Ma sees her reflection in his onyx eyes, mouth thin and distorted, eyes liquid.

She remembers how she cried after her father first beat her with the bamboo stick. How she cut her hair to her ears months later, how she stopped doing homework, how she fell asleep sobbing and muffling her screams with her pillow, how she was beaten more frequently, how she failed out of her classes, how she was shunned by her classmates, how she slammed the apartment door

for the last time, how she left.

Now she is a waitress, serving *chả cá* and *cà phê đá* to her old classmates.

Ma clutches the paper with a white fist.

“Were you going to tell me about this?”

The boy’s lip quivers; his hands clench and unclench.

“Were you going to tell me about this?”

When she sees the truth in his eyes, she reaches out and slaps him across the face.  
viii.

The boy loses the fat in his cheeks. His limbs lengthen.

A month later, he finishes his plane, *The Dragon*, and suspends it from the ceiling with fishing wire. *The Dragon* faces out the window, almost as if with one strong gust of wind, it could shoot out of the weathered window frame and into the slice of gray sky.

He goes to Dinh’s Toys every day after school, buying more and more complicated kits. Some of his first planes fall from the ceiling, and he replaces them with new ones. He works until three in the morning at his desk, when even the motorcycles have ceased to grumble outside, and his hand are stained with glue and punctured with splinters. He builds a squadron of airplanes, so many that the ceiling becomes a collage of spinning wood and starts to sink, collapsing in on itself.

Ma yells at him. *Go to your room and study! Why can’t you work hard like everyone else? Did I raise you to be a slacker?* The boy learns to pinch his eyes shut, to pretend that he is a dragon, floating high, high above. Away.  
ix.

The boy grows his hair to cover his eyes. He shoots up like a pea plant until he is taller than his ma. At school, the boy squats in the corner of the restroom for hours, next to the toilet reeking of urine, sketching airplanes and dragons and writing poems in lined yellow pads. One day, the other boys, the badminton players, see the inside of his locker, stacked with crooked mountains of sketchbooks. They whisper and laugh, their red kerchiefs swinging bright and bloody against their uniforms. The next day, a Wednesday, they steal the pads as the boy is opening his locker, and read his

poems over the PA system while a life-sized portrait of Ho Chi Minh smiles from above.

A few badminton players shove him onto their shoulders, parading down the halls as he struggles and kicks. When other boys and girls pass, they laugh, the sound as grating as roosters rattling domed cages at a cock fight.

*Fag*, they spit. He punches another boy for the first time in his life.

Ma yells when he gets home. *I raised you myself, and this is how you pay me back. By failing out of all your classes. By getting in trouble with the principal. Do you not want to go to college? Do you not want to be successful? Maybe I can get a contract for you to work at McDonald’s in Ho Chi Minh so I don’t have to be reminded of what a disappointment you are every day.*

Both the boy and his ma cannot sleep that night. The boy lays in bed, pressing down as hard as he can with his pen, tracing airplanes between the blue lines in his yellow pad. He ignores the wet droplets, shaped like tears, soaked into the paper. On the other side of the hallway, Ma sets her reading glasses on the nightstand and curls under the starched blankets. She cries into her pillow for the first time she can remember since she was a teenager.

x.

The boy’s face hollows until his cheeks are murky pits. He refuses to go to school. He hides in the closet, locks it from the inside, and writes in yellow pads, the tired lightbulb glowing above. Ma finds cigarette packs and Saigon beer bottles shoved into the back of the fridge and the closet, among his too-small uniforms.

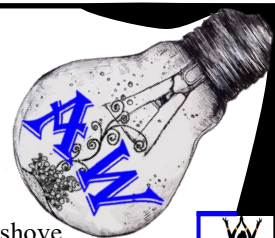
She yells, hands shaking as she grips an empty bottle of Saigon beer in her right fist and a plastic flyswatter in the other. “You are not my son. Get out of my house. Leave. I never want to see you again.”

“Fine!” he says.

He turns and leaves.

xi.

The boy remembers wanting to hit her, hit *anything*; he remembers how his fingers twitched at his sides like anxious birds,





how he slammed the bedroom door, stuffed 500,000 *dong* into his pocket, and grabbed a yellow pad, a ball point pen, and a thin jacket.

xii.

The firefighters said later that the fire started in the laundry room, by someone who had left their clothes in the dryer for too long. But when the boy first smells the smoke, he thinks it is his own anger collapsing in his gut, flooding the air with bitterness.

Then he sees the flames.

Crawling serpents, hissing with sparks, eat at the walls until he can spot the black of sky where there was plaster before. Picture flames plummet from their perches like dead parrots, and glass fractures on the thin carpet, scattering. The boy's smaller selves blink up at him with shining onyx eyes as they crawl on the floor and go to school and eat *phở* for the first time.

The boy screams, before he can think.

“Ma? Ma! Get out, *get out!* Fire, fire!”

The flames swallow the blue plastic stool, the black stove, the fridge. The heat makes the boy's skin melt, his back tingle.

“Ma!” he cries again, running and yanking open the bedroom door.

The wooden airplanes flutter above, agitated, as if trying to escape out the window. Tongues of flame brush the outer ranks of the squadron, searing spread wings and clunky bellies.

Ma is hunched on the ground, hummingbird body heaving as burning planes crash around her.

The boy stops. Suddenly, he is reminded of that day, eleven years ago, when his ma first asked him to go to Cho Hom Market. And he wishes, with everything inside of him, that he had never bought the airplane that day in Dinh's Toys, across the street from the cock fights. He wishes that he had just gone to the market and bought two stalks of cilantro and ginger, and that he had come directly home and hugged his ma.

The boy grabs his ma's hand, kicking aside tennis shoes and burning plaster, as fire traces their silhouettes in pure, scorching

gold. His body bends in half like a wishbone, and he holds onto his ma's wrist as if she is his last connection to life.

xi.

When the boy opens his crusted eyes, the first thing he sees is a skeleton of a building, stooped like an old man, pieces of wall sagging off gray bones. Then a news anchor, with black, thick-rimmed glasses, flashes into view, mouth gaping. The boy screams.

x.

Nurses hurry in, feed him ibuprofen and treat his burns with cool salve and bandages. The boy's breathing comes in gasps, so they must feed him oxygen too, in a body-sized tube. He hears blurry snatches of words. *First degree burns. Smoke inhalation. Hyperbaric oxygen therapy.*

ix.

The boy can speak and walk now. He limps to the restroom to relieve himself, to stare at the ashes in his hair and the rusted patches on his face. As nurses drip fluids down his IV tube, they tell him, *You're one of the lucky ones.*

viii.

Later the boy whispers, “Where's my ma?” The nurse startles as she records his respiration rate on a clipboard. “*Where is my ma?*”

The nurse puts down her clipboard. “I don't think you should see her at the moment.

It might worsen your current condition, and—”

“*I am her fucking son!*” the boy yells.

Nurses turn to stare, and patients jerk in their pill-induced sleep.

He bends over, coughing and shaking.

The nurse eyes him, looks around, and says softly, “Your ma is currently in the ICU.”

The boy's breath shakes. “I want to see her.”

“We'll see.”

vii.

Two days after, as the nurse is adjusting his IV, she leans over his bed. “You can go see your ma now.”

vi.

The nurse tells him that Ma's legs are elevated, wrapped in gauze, and that she has third

degree burns—that her flesh is pockmarked with liquid-filled bubbles, large as lychees.

Even then, he is not prepared. When he first sees her, he drops to his knees and bows on the floor.

“Ma?” he croaks. He stares at the stranger on the bed, shrunken like a silkworm trapped in a cocoon. The boy watches her heart beat on the vital signs monitor, electric green lines sinking and spiking like a seismometer. “Ma, Ma, how are you doing?” She does not answer. “Ma? *Ma, answer me, goddamnit!*”

Eventually he falls silent and sobs on the floor, kissing his reflection, until three nurses, snapping at each other about who decided it was a good idea for the patient to see his ma, heft him on a wheelchair and deposit him back on his bed.

v.

The boy asks for a pen and paper. They give him a yellow pad and a ball point pen, but he leaves them on the desk beside his bed, untouched. He turns, looks at the clouds blinking along the grey horizon, a parade of watery, amorphous shapes. He casts his mind out for what the clouds look like, but he can only see his ma, skin shriveled like a sun-dried plum. Eventually he stumbles out of bed and closes the blinds, blocking out the sky.

They release him from the hospital two weeks later.

iv.

The boy now lives in Ma's hospital room. He hadn't realized there would be so many papers to fill. The boy spoons hospital food—overcooked green beans and limp noodles—into his mouth with his left hand while calculating losses with his right.

It is difficult work, mainly because he does not know how much their apartment is—*was*—worth.

One night, the boy wonders how much of Ma's money he spent on airplanes. He researches the price of a model plane on Alibaba. 620,000 *dong*. He has built around eighty of them throughout his life, from when he was five to fifteen.

He types in the numbers, pushes the equals sign.



43,400,000 *dong*.

He freezes.

*How many extra shifts did Ma work at Duong's to pay for my obsession?*

The boy does not sleep until 4:26 in the morning. Involuntary shudders make his body tremble, his shiny burns stretch. When he eventually does fall asleep, the calculator shuts down, the screen going blank.

iii.

The next morning the nurse finds the boy stroking his ma's forehead with a towel. She frowns and tells him to go because he is *delaying his ma's recovery*.

It takes two nurses to remove him from the room. When he finally does leave, he goes home.

The boy sees the emptiness where the apartment stood, like a gap between two crooked teeth. He steps closer to the wreckage, feet crunching on concrete and glass. He finds picture frames, more than he expects: a child releasing turtles into Hoan Kiem Lake, a couple holding cups of egg coffee at Giang Café. He wonders if these people—his neighbors—are still alive.

When he gets closer, the boy recognizes a blue, half-melted, plastic stool, and underneath, a slice of yellow wood. He pries the stool away and pulls out a wooden airplane, unbroken. It is the one he built eleven years ago, the day Ma first hit him. *The Dragon*.

The boy's first instinct is to crush it under his sneakers. But he picks it up instead and finds a patch of dirt surrounded by a ring of concrete blocks.

He digs with his fingers. The still-healing flesh at his forearms screams, and blood wells under his nails, dying the earth crimson. The boy makes a crater, a foot deep, and lays the plane inside. Then he covers the hole with dirt, until he sees only upturned soil, laced with dark stains.

The boy wipes his hands on his shorts and turns, without looking back.

He walks three blocks to Cho Hom Market and haggles with the vendors, buying beef, cilantro, rice noodles, and ginger with the 500,000 *dong* he stole after leaving the house five weeks ago. The nurses had set it aside when they cut his burning

clothes from his skin.

He hurries back to the collapsed building and nears an older, wrinkled woman in a rice hat. She sits on the porch steps of the neighboring apartment, deftly peeling lychees and spitting the shiny seeds into the gutter.

"*Bà?*" he says. "I'm sorry. I know this sounds strange, but...may I use your kitchen?" The old woman looks up, squinting beneath her hat.

"Hm. You were the boy that lived over there, weren't you? I saw you coming out every week, wandering the streets carrying that same yellow pad and those airplanes under your arms, everywhere you went." She nods towards the wreckage.

"Yes," he says. The woman tilts her head, considering him. Then she wipes her sticky hands on her pants and stands up, leaving the half-empty basket of lychees on the side of the road. The boy follows her into the back of the apartment, to the kitchen, painted grass-green.

"Are you making *phở*?" she asks, surveying the ingredients in the plastic bags at his sides. He nods. "I can help you," she says.

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry, but this is something I have to do myself." As she makes to leave, he says, "Thank you, *Bà*. You don't know how much this means to me."

She waves an arm at him and exits.

ii.

When the boy enters Ma's room again, he moves the desk against the edge of her bed and lays the plastic container of *phở* on top. He sits down and rearranges the last pieces of his life so they match up: the ball point pen, the pad with his calculations, the calculator, the *phở*. He falls asleep.

i.

The boy wakes up fourteen hours later, neck crooked and pulsing. Ma lies in bed, eyes closed.

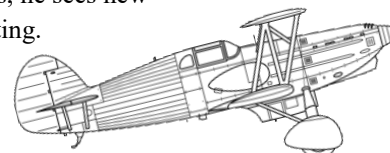
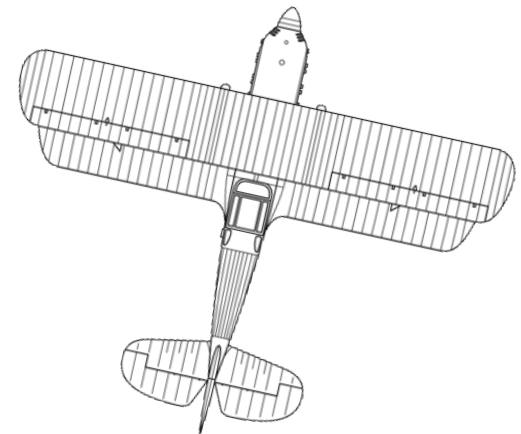
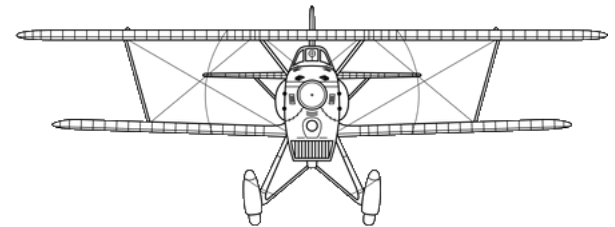
He stretches and glances at the cold bowl of *phở* and the pad on his desk through watery eyes.

He pauses. Looks again. There is less soup in the container. He is sure.

The boy sits up straighter and squints at the yellow pad. Beneath his decimals, he sees new words, printed in shaky handwriting.

*I love you so much.*

And under that, in smaller letters, like a whisper:  
*Son.*



# Outstanding Poetry



## If These Walls Could Speak

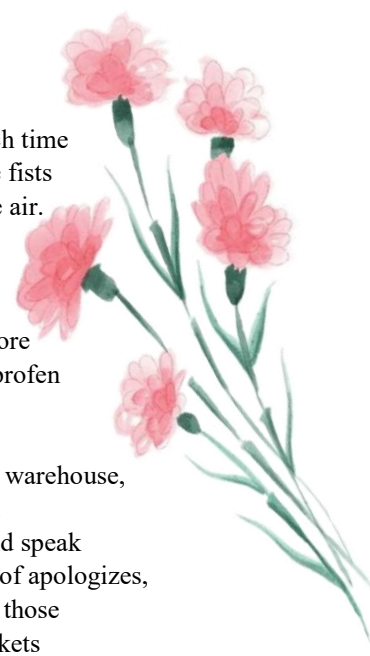
Madeline Bain

Pittsburgh, PA

A whistling wind  
most likely left over  
from some western film  
shoots like a slide rule  
through the warehouse.  
The industrial complex  
on twenty-second,  
crumbling and spacious,  
cracked open to the sky,  
filling with rain in autumn,  
and algae by June,  
is open door to door

like a human  
gutted septum to naval.  
What were once windows  
are now not—  
reach your hand out from within  
and touch the hanging pears.  
That very tree was the object  
of countless workers' affections,  
daydreams about its fruit,  
its cool, smooth trunk.  
Sixteen hour shifts  
on the assembly line,  
staggering home,  
tipsy with fatigue,  
metatarsals wearing through skin  
into the Earth below.  
Nights rocking the baby  
to the rhythms of its own colic,

pocketed coins  
ringing faintly each time  
his frustrated little fists  
flailed through the air.  
Those same coins  
would eventually  
sit in the vault  
of the company store  
to pay for the Ibuprofen  
and corn flour.  
A whistling wind  
blows through the warehouse,  
empty and aching.  
If these walls could speak  
they'd cry hymns of apologies,  
singing prayers to those  
robbed of full pockets  
and the pear tree's fruit.



## Poetry Runner-Up

### August in Mulund

Shaam Beed

Livingston, NJ

Misery is a word I only know  
through the milk peddler's arrival with  
warm plastic pouches of milk and the paper notes  
that rustle softly in his near-empty apron pockets.  
The cheap plastic chair bows  
under his weight as the aroma of burnt chai  
fills the air and mustard seeds sizzle in oil.  
  
When I see *Baa* standing at the stove,  
her right hand stirring with a stainless steel spatula  
and her left resting on the small of her back,  
an apology loiters at the edge of my tongue,  
hovering like the menacing rain cloud above,

but my teeth are the dam that keeps the torrents  
from rushing out.


I finger the edge of the table.  
The cheap marble-patterned paper  
has peeled off, leaving only old wood behind.  
One wheel is lost, and it leans  
ever so slightly to the right. I roam to the window  
seat,  
where the monsoon's tantrum has left its mark.

I know that summer has run off with the morning  
crows,  
leaving me alone, here, in Mulund.  
I see my grandmother, wailing atop her inflatable  
mattress  
and reaching for the black telephone resting on a  
stool,  
her arm the dogwood branch hanging over algae-

covered pond, dripping in toasted skin and lilac  
bruises.

She telephones her son; the landline rings but her  
throat,  
full of unsung abandonment and longing,  
is a closed corridor. He does not answer,  
and her whispers, soft and rasping like the air  
whistling through the grated window,  
are lost in translation.

I watch the old playground, now muddy  
and covered with ivy, but it sits untouched.  
A door slams upstairs, a rickshaw's horn  
rings in the distance,  
and the rain begins its relentless downpour.



# Outstanding Prose

## The Melting of the Flowers

Jieyan Wang

Fairfax, VA

I am sitting in Mr. Evan's classroom. He is smiling at me as he sips his coffee. It's black, like petroleum. He asks me how I am, how my family's doing. I say, *I'm fine. Thank you for asking.* He crinkles his eyes as if he is letting me in on a secret. *Good, he says. I'm glad to hear that. Talk to me if you need to. Are the new pills working?* I reply, *thanks for asking. That's very kind of you.*

\*\*\*

Mom is swinging Daniel around her in our backyard. She is trampling the newly sprouted grass like dirt, breaking their spines. I open my mouth to shout but Lory puts a hand on my shoulder. So, I

bite my nails and listen to Mom laugh *Spring is here! Spring is here!* She spreads her arms towards the sky, and Daniel flies out of her grip. When he hits the ground, he is gasping for air.

\*\*\*

The lady taps a pen to her chin. She asks me how I've been doing. Am I experiencing headaches, nausea, or anything other problems? Has anything changed since she changed my medication? Do I have any friends at school? I smile and nod at her. That's what Lory does, and everyone likes Lory. The lady smiles back and scribbles something onto her notepad.

\*\*\*

Lory is planting rose bushes into our garden. They are dripping red like her lipstick. Above us, the sun is glaring. It doesn't like the red.

"These roses are pretty, aren't they?" Lory says. Her teeth are shiny when she smiles. She's hungry. Maybe she should have a rose for lunch.

She plunges another bush into the earth. Its red seeps into the soil. The earth sucks it. The red is its blood. It needs it to grow. When it has enough it will begin moving because grown things never stay where they're born. It will carry the roses on its back like a dream that it wants to forget. Because the earth never looks backward. It understands that the future is what truly matters.

Lory looks at me, "Do you want to plant one? I feel so bad just having you stand there and bake in the sun!"

I tell her yes because people like it when you agree with them. Especially Lory. Lory is someone to be pleased. She hands me a shovel, and I plunge the rose as deep as I can into the soil because only deep-rooted things stay. When I pull my hand from out, my fingers are bleeding. I'm not wearing gloves. Now my blood is the earth's.

"I just love gardening!" Lory says with a

*(Continued on page 38: Melting)*

## Prose Runner-Up

## I Remember Being Young

Akanksha Basil

Chappaqua, NY

### Music

When I was a child, and it was only my parents and I, my mother and father had a radio. It was not an antique, not even vintage, but now it would be considered outdated. My mother liked old music. She had, it had seemed to me, hundreds of CDs which were scattered throughout the house in plastic covers and cases and whatnot. I loved to open them and touch the shining rainbow of aluminum coating. The memory is faded, like peeling wallpaper on a Victorian house, seeming ancient in this short life of mine but truly only being about ten years ago. To me, it is amazing how long ago a memory can seem, like some secret and

unknown letter waiting to be opened and read by only one person, hidden from the knowledge and sight of countless other lives who have passed, still remain, and whose stories are not yet written. When the letter is read over by the eyes of innocence, from the perspective a young and laughing person, through one who is writing and reading their own story, you may peer into a section of time filled with love and eyes that smile instead of glare. A mouth that grins instead of sneers. A person not yet aware of the horrors of the waking world, whose life is a dream within a dream.

When my mother carefully placed the rainbow-sheen CDs onto the player, loud, lovely music blasted forth. I felt its pulse, satisfying, wonderful, a heartbeat on a minuscule section of the earth. I danced like the sky falling wouldn't stop me. I danced with anyone and anything, my mother, my father, a stuffed animal, even a wooden spoon once. Some tunes I craved, waited for more, asked

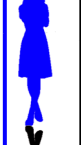
to repeat over and over and over again, waiting for both the simplicity of the music tickle my feet and tousle my hair again. And there was laughter and joy. Simple laughter and simple joy, dancing with me as I spun around, eyes closed, grinning at my parents, grinning at the world. From my clear experience, that is what a childhood should be - a time in a person's life that is filled with hope and love, the ideas of simple pleasures, music and laughter, and quiet cravings of joy fulfilled with love.

Most of this music was from the 1960s. I am older now and my interest in music from this time has peaked. Once, by chance, I stumbled upon a song I had heard before.

I remembered the familiarity of the tune slowly crawling its way back, manifesting a long ago memory in my head. And I smiled again.


*(Continued on page 39:*

*Remember)*





(Continued from page 37:  
*Melting*)



high-pitched laugh, "Isn't it nice?"

She takes the shovel from me and stabs another bush into the soil.

\*\*\*

Mr. Evans wants me to stay after school. The ticking of the clock on the wall is thundering. I sit across from him in his desk. He starts by asking me the usual. How am I feeling today? Do I like my grade in his class? Have my pills been causing me any trouble? I tell him that I'm fine, that I like his class very much.

His hand is on my leg. Was it there before?

The clock is screaming. He says that I'm a good student. *Thank you*, I say. He gives me a rose because he likes me so much that thinks I ought to have something pretty. *Thank you very much, Mr. Evans. How kind of you.*

\*\*\*

Mom is cooking beef-and-tomato ravioli. The noodle squares are bursting open, leaking red. I ask her if she needs any help. She says she doesn't. I protest that the pot is bleeding like Lory's flowers. Mom tells me to go. She'll call me to dinner when it's ready. An hour later, and she hasn't called me. So, I go to dining room by myself and find a bowl of red goop waiting for me, cold as fish.

\*\*\*

I put Mr. Evan's rose in a glass of water. Daniel knocks it over. I snap. *Fuck you! Don't touch my things!* But he is dancing, swirling his arms around him like a vortex. He was dancing before he knocked the rose over. He smiles because that's what dancers are told to do before they go onstage.

\*\*\*

"I'm sorry," I tell the lady, "I got angry at my brother and I shouldn't have."

"As long as you're sorry, it's okay," she says serenely.

"Do you think there's something wrong with me?"

"You're perfectly fine."

"That's very nice of you to say."

"No, really. You're fine."

\*\*\*

Lory tells me a story while she brushes her hair. She is talking about a boy. He has licorice hair and cherry lips. She wants to go to prom with him. Her dress is already picked out. It's green like apples. One day they will get married. They'll have green apple children and a licorice car. Their children grow up to be rainbow lollipops, and the whole family will be cheerful cherries. When they die, they'll be buried in chocolate crumble. The end. Lory turns around and asks me if anybody likes me. I say I think Mr. Evans likes me very much. She pauses for a moment but all she says is *A bit old for you, eh?*

\*\*\*

Mr. Evans asks me if I liked the rose. I did; it was very red. He says he's glad. What else can he do for me? I open my mouth to reply but then his lips are on mine. I don't pull away because people like it when you do what they want. But then my back is on the ground and his hands are beneath my shirt. I scream and try to pull his fingers from my waistband, but his hands keep coming and coming. My throat is raw. I sound like a dying crow. When I squirm out from under him, I run into the hallway, and everything is silent.

\*\*\*

Mom is looking out the window again. She sees grassy hills covered in dandelions, their heads white and fluffy. I used to blow on every dandelion head I could find. The seeds are fairies. They are carried by the wind to their homes in the earth. I bid each one a good flight. If they are the grateful kind, they will grant me a wish when they bloom.

A teardrop slides down Mom's cheeks. She's thinking about the dandelions too. She wants to leap to the hills and fly with them. They'll take her through the clouds and across the ocean. I tell her that it's okay. She'll find a way to fly with them eventually. She looks at me. The tears won't stop. I try to smile. She tells me to go play with Daniel.

\*\*\*

"It's important to me that you're telling the truth, all right?" the lady says.

"I always tell the truth."

"I didn't say that you don't."

"I'm sorry."

"You haven't been acting right lately."

I don't say anything.

"Do you know why?" she says.

"I think I'm fine."

"I would be happy to change your medication if that's what's wrong."

"The pills are fine."

"Okay, then what's not fine?"

My lip is trembling. The lady is tapping her pen on her clipboard. She wants an answer. She won't let me leave until she gets it.

"Tell me what's going on," she says.

The words spill over. I tell her about Mr. Evans pushing me to the ground while I screamed, about Lory stabbing the earth with roses, about Mom wanting to fly with the dandelions, about Daniel dancing, about the candy boy that Lory will marry, about Mr. Evans asking me to stay after school because he's so concerned with me.

When I'm done, she says, "I'm thinking about changing your prescription. Would you like that?"

\*\*\*

Daniel is playing with his toy train. *Vroom, vroom*, he says, spitting over the tracks. I ask him if he would like to know where the train came from. He says that Mom bought it. I tell him that he's wrong. Dad bought it from an old toymaker. The toymaker didn't like making trains. Nutcrackers and dolls were more his taste. But he made trains because that's what little boys like. Trains make boys like Daniel imagine. When children touch trains, they think they can go anywhere. Across continents. To the sky. Into the underworld. Dad bought the train so that Daniel could see through forests and over oceans. Then he gave the train to Mom and left to see the world himself. Daniel will follow him and meet Dad at the edge of the Earth. Together, they will look into the stars and forget about the mountains and seas behind them.

I finish. Daniel is staring at me. Slowly, he puts down the toy train. His hands are trembling as he walks out of the room. I follow him and look out the doorway. The hallway is dimly lit. Far away, it becomes pitch black. Daniel walks into the distance and begins to disappear. He does not look afraid.

\*\*\*

Mr. Evans is drawing on the chalkboard. Everybody else has their notebooks out. They scribble and scribble. It sounds like rats scratching wood. My palms are glued together. As he talks about barrelene and diabolic acid, his voice is smooth. Smooth like the edge of a knife. Outside, there are people chattering. They don't have to be in here. Their teeth are free to move, to bang against each other. It's loud in here.

Now Mr. Evans is looking at me. He's asking why I'm not taking notes. *I'm concerned you won't do well on the next test*, he says. *Why aren't you answering? You know it's disrespectful to ignore you teacher. Come see me after school*, he smiles at me, *we need to talk*.

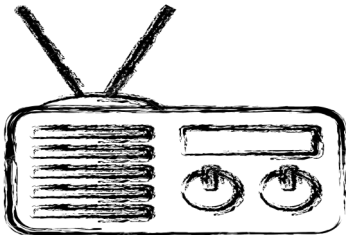
He goes back to his chalkboard and draws a thousand loops. As he talks about triple chemical bonds, they turn into ropes. They become nooses, smiling and waiting for the next neck to pull on. The people outside are yelling. The rats are banging on the desks. Something is squeezing my chest.

I stand up and scream. I scream until the people stop yelling and the rats go back to their places and Mr. Evans drops his chalk onto the ground, his smile gone. When I'm done, my throat is raw and all I can think is *I am not afraid*.

\*\*\*

It's nighttime. Mom, Daniel, and Lory are asleep. The world is asleep. But the sky isn't. Outside my window, there are stars. They're burning into the night sky's black fabric. The ashes they leave behind will become winter's first snow. But it's still spring; they still have a long way to go. I open my window and step outside. The grass is cold. The air is silent.

Above me, the sky is big. It's bigger than the ocean, and it is filled with stars. Stars that are moving. Stars that will one day burn the night sky completely through so that midnight is brighter than noon. Breathing in the smoke, I open my arms towards the stars and its sky. I will welcome the stars.



(Continued from page 37:

### Remember)

The radio now sits in the basement, no longer working. When I take a glance at it, I remember. I remember the music and the dancing and the laughter. And one can find that this is what a young life, still cradled in the arms of innocence, is about.

### Trees

The springtime is when one may have the subtle and familiar conviction that life starts over again, with the sun penetrating needles of honey-colored light, and the birds that sing a renewed song in the shelter of the vert and the lushness. It emerges from the said despair and frost of the colder months, which decays life but assumes a position to build it back up again. In this house in Chappaqua, where I have lived for a few years and already fallen in love with the serenity of time in afternoon and the friendliness of jovial neighbors, there is a cherry tree that rains its petals upon the freshly green earth. It was planted by my father, who admires the free-fall hang of the tree's skinny branches, whose droop does not signify weakness, but the proclivity of swaying where the wind blows. The same wind that spreads its petals in a silent blush of love for being free. When the velvet of the blush rains down, my sister and I go outside and revel in a quiet and wonderful moment of simple beauty.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I ask my sister, who was gazing up to the wide stretch of blue sky engulfing the universe, with its white surf-like wisps of soft cloud and the rain of baby-pink stars from the small perspective of man.

"Yeah," she says, "It sure is." she says as her eyes, reflecting the falling of the smooth pieces of velvet, reflecting the sky and its timelessness, its endlessness, reflecting joy and hope. Her long, dark eyelashes blink wide as her warm, brown eyes are newly colored with muted, mirrored shades of life from the sky.

There are other trees. Trees we planted. Four trees, six trees, eight trees. Skinny trees, finding their rustlings, their whisperings, their songs. Trees that flower newly as a baby walks or

talks. Little trees, large trees, awkward trees, graceful trees, cascading trees, green trees. Trees as old as time. Trees that have lived through history long before I was born. Trees that have witnessed love, growth, and death, and decay. For the earth is as timeless and as beautiful as we know, the land worked and lived on by people of the past. The land experienced time. Dark and bright time, time unknown to thought and to the prose of memory and to the humanity of the present. The earth who chose to allow life to spread, humans to take and creatures to die.

The cherry tree is like a child, slowly growing with the convictions of dying and living with the changes of the year. A girl who will live and live and live for times to come. When we first planted it, it was a sapling, a juvenile dwarfed by the elders around it. As time went by, it has matured into a young tree. It is much like a young woman, a girl who dances and blushes pink, who can't be bothered with frivolity and carelessness and spreads her arms where the wind takes her.

### A Record of Time

I remember the first time I touched a slice of history. It was an old book and I had found it in a small shop in a small town unknown by most others. An emerald-colored book, of forest green, with carefully pressed designs inscribed into the front cover. An illustriously designed front, with intricacies and subtle detail, as though an artist had crafted each flower, each spot, each letter, each branch and leaf as nature would craft the delicateness and freshness of a new leaf, where you can see each vein, each line and abstraction, and when the leaf glows through the sunlight's rays there is a sense of the perfection and beauty nature attempts to create only to be ravaged by time and chaos.

The front of the book held for my eyes a scroll, surrounded by lush vert, upon which there were the words 'Caxton Edition' pressed into the cloth. I handled the book carefully, aware of the age and the quality of older materials to come apart. Turning to the spine, I saw the gold-colored square inscribed with the words





‘Stoddard’s Readings and Recitations’. The title. The spine was laced with art and branches of flowers.

I opened the book to the title page, which indicated that the book was an anthology of old short stories. At the very bottom of the first page, below the publishing company, a date was listed. The book was dated to the year 1885.

When I first opened this section of time, I was immediately hit with a deep and floral fragrance. If you have ever opened up an old book, ever put your nose near the browning, soft pages, you will find that old smells quite wonderful. It often smells of mystery, like old Oriental spices from a place far away in a memory or significance; of a history old to our minds but reality to the people of then. Sometimes they smell of decaying vanillin, a perfume-like smell that is pleasant to most. Often, however, they smell of lost time. Lost time, of lost lives that perhaps experienced the same warm rain and summer hum and sunset, that loved and died and grew old and young and handled the same fragment of possibility I was holding in my young hands. Did a girl my age who lived through the archaic year of 1885 read the stories in this book? Did someone unknown to knowing read a story and understand what it meant to love? Did someone discover the power memories had to live and let die?

I looked through the type, admiring the style of representation common in such an old time, the imperfection of the printing and the poetry of old thoughts.

The book shone in the sunlight as I held it to my chest against the cold. It was starting to snow, but the book would be kept alive by those who still had the courage to preserve their memories.

### Decay

Recently, on my family’s trip to

Iceland, we took some time to drive (with a guide) up to a peninsula around five hours from where we were staying. The coast of Iceland is filled with countless hidden gems in which isolation in this world is possible. Oftentimes, it is just you, the sea, and the vastness of a landscape unchanged from when it was created.

On a particular stop, in seemingly the middle of nowhere, in which nowhere is somewhere and somewhere is everywhere, we left the car to a beach of black pebbles. The coast was magnificent. Heading into the area, your eyes are graced with the



*Fantasies Woven in Thread* Jennalynn Fung Chandler, AZ

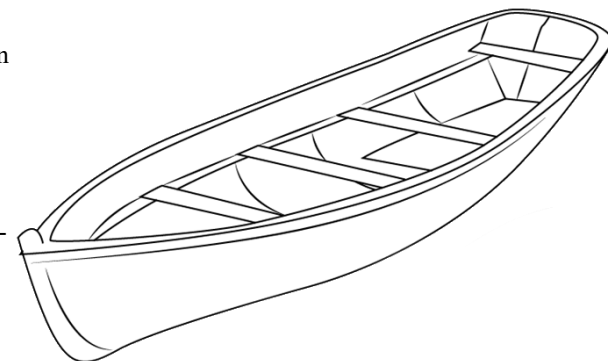
power of the surf-tortured shore and the dramatizations the geology demands as the glass waves crash against the sides. Looking back, take in the sight of a mossy hill on the left side and a quiet freshwater lake a little ways ahead. Behind that, in the clear distance, a mountain towered, pushing up against the sky, titanic from the limited perspective of humanity. On the mountain, a glacier lay, cloud-colored against the vert and the blackbird shaded stones and the azure bottle color of the wild and

unrestrained sea. It was the type of beauty you see when confronted with a brave and dazzling new world, the star-struck of poetry formed by your heart when first touched by love.

But perhaps the most eerie feature of this facet of the coast was the shipwreck pieces that had lain, untouched and haunting, on the smooth ebony of the pebble. The flotsam was over sixty years old and had been scattered in the usual way of ruin, from the hills to the lake to the basalt formations. The warship had crashed and broken up upon impact, leaving most to die among nature’s cruelty under the stars and the waves and the torment.

You could still see particular intact pieces of ship. During my time there, I spotted wires, parts of a hull, and pieces torn ruthlessly from the sides. Of the ship which had braved one of the edifices of the universe, who had been punished by some unknown cause, for some unknown cause, twisted and mangled as a lion maims its prey. All the iron had taken on a hue the color of Mars, the shade of war and blood and decay.

To look back was to look upon history, upon old times with old men and old lives and everything of decomposition and time and pain, of ghosts haunting the place of death and people intruding on a place of horror. To try and conquer nature is often taken as arrogance, and one could know that our machines and technology and crafts determined air or seaworthy will never survive among nature’s cruelty to be ruthless to all who intrude. Time was decaying, and the process of entropy would take over in nature’s own way, once again a reminder that humankind neither had dominance over nature nor could one bring forward the survival of a reality broken by time.





# Faith in Hollow Places

Jeffrey Liao  
Livingston, NJ

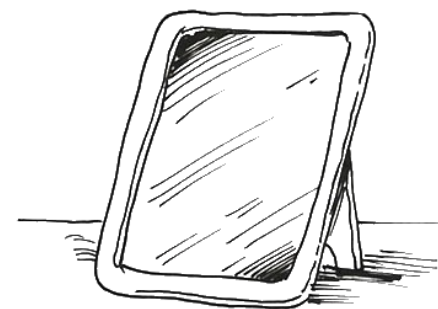
It is 1970. My grandmother wraps her daughter in her arms. She walks one hundred miles barefoot through the ruins of the Jiangsu countryside, escaping a Nanjing fractured by Chairman Mao's paramilitary forces. Uprturned dirt and artillery shells carve rivers of blood on the soles of her feet. Her daughter, blue and sick, cries endlessly as the pangs of hunger consume them. Two days earlier, my grandmother gave birth to ill-omened twins: a stillborn son and a living daughter. She begged her husband to forgive her, but he beat her senseless and bloody and left without a word. Hours later, when the soldiers descended upon Nanjing with gun-smoked fingers, my grandmother put her dead son in a cotton bag and grabbed her sleeping daughter. They fled the war-torn city, bullets sailing toward their fading bodies like hail. Now, my grandmother presses onward against the luster of dusk. The sun is an orb of fire burning into the horizon, staining the sky crimson. Tears sting my grandmother's eyes as a feral fear cuts through her, becomes her, destroys her. *Wo de tianshi*, she whispers to her daughter, caressing her like a porcelain doll. *My angel*. Sweat drips from her forehead, and she wipes it out of her windswept hair. Her bones ache, and as the light unclasps itself slowly from her eyes, my grandmother tells herself to *keep breathing, keep breathing*, if nothing else for the baby cradled in her arms, this miracle daughter who has become the pulse of her life, carrying her forward through the pain. Her feet, raw and blistered, kiss the cracked earth. She clutches onto hope the way she held her son, purple and miscarried but with a blind devotion that cannot be quelled. *Wo de tianshi*, she says. *My angel, we're almost there*. By the time she reaches her hometown, a lacking village strung along the Yangtze River, her daughter is weak with hypothermia yet still breathing. Between brewing herbs and preparing medicine, the apothecary bombards my grandmother with questions. She answers only in silence, for there are only so many words she can say without crying. The apothecary

will call it a swollen wonder that her daughter is alive. A dream. My grandmother will work back-breaking hours on a rice plantation to scrape by. She will bury her son under a wide patch of earth and sky. When the Revolution is over and my grandmother saves enough money to move back to the city, she will meet my grandfather. They will own a small apartment and send their daughter to school. She will birth a second daughter. The ice packed around her heart will start to melt. Decades later, the eldest daughter, the child of swollen wonders, will become my mother.

It is 2018. My mother and I sit at the kitchen table, kneading dough for pork dumplings, our American radio crackling with words that don't fit in our mouths, in a language that does not belong to us. She is practicing her English, which, even after all these years, is infested with an immigrant's broken cadence. Her eyes are bruised and weary with exhaustion – exhaustion from the grueling hours spent at work, or the disintegration of her marriage, or maybe from the unbearable weight of not being heard, of never being enough. When my mother moved to America, a graduate student with hopes of becoming a doctor, she was wide-eyed and eager, brimming with the insatiable curiosity of youth. But as she crossed an ocean for more opportunity and power, my mother soon realized that what she found wasn't what she was looking for. Besides the exoticism of her raven hair and unfolded eyelids, there was a cultural barrier that divided my mother from her peers. My mother remembers an incident: she saw a water fountain and mistakenly thought it was a place to wash her hands. Only when the snickers and whispers escalated into full-blown laughter did my mother realize the plight of her mistake. Her cheeks blushed flame-red and she casted her eyes downward. Another incident: after finishing a chemistry lab, my mother overheard a conversation between her professor and the teaching assistant. *There are enough people like her*, the professor remarked indignantly. *I don't want to endorse another Asian student. Why can't they just stay in their own country?* If there's anything my mother learned from graduate school, it is the toxicity of feeling like an alien in her own skin, of being seen as a construct rather than a human. One

day, I ask my mother why she came here. She looks at me with a far-away gaze. *I did it for you*, she says. *You are the reason I endure*. I wonder what it is she's enduring – this country, or the loneliness of being the perpetual foreigner, or maybe the impossible burden of *being*, of living. I imagine her as a student: twenty-three and packed with ambition, stripping away her whole identity to come here, only to meet nothing that wants her. My mother never got the PhD she wanted. She never became a doctor. Instead, she spent her days cleaning dishes at a seafood restaurant. At night, she searched through the local newspaper for job offerings. Eventually, she found a lowly position at an accounting firm, her old ambitions crumpled and disposed of like pieces of chewing gum. On the days my mother looks lost and small, I wonder if she regrets coming to America, if she misses the pieces of herself she left behind in China. I realize there are things I can't put into words, like how it feels to hear the desperation in her voice when she asks me to translate something for her in English, knowing that no matter what she does, she will never truly belong here. Or how the only time she is sincerely happy is while talking on the phone with her relatives, my mother slipping into her native tongue like a rush of water in a season of drought. Tonight, my mother and I will sit in front of the couch and watch a Chinese drama together – her favorite. Through the bright blue flickers of the TV screen, she will be reminded of the future she sacrificed in order to give me a better one. She will wrap her arm around mine, wishing life wasn't so bittersweet. That she could somehow make it all better. *But there's still hope*, I want to tell her. *There's still time*.

*Wo de tianshi*, you're still breathing.





## You used to make me breakfast

Jamie Paradis

Maplewood, NJ

My mind traps  
your words on a  
gilded leash  
Song stuck in  
my head,  
Left ear tilted after  
I step out of salty low tide,  
Won't stop.  
Louder than the hum  
of radiators we've  
grown used to  
but say it's  
quiet despite the  
buzzing  
Once you poured  
pancake batter into  
a waffle machine,  
Sliced strawberries  
on top of a rose gold  
plate you  
handed me.  
You smile.  
I work in a shoe store  
now, but never go  
for walks  
Once we walked  
to the laundromat  
And you said to me, "we're still  
not telling people about us"  
Secrets are fun  
We decided  
You decided



## Said

Aaliyah Thomas

Pittsburgh, PA

*Dear Missy,*

I'm sorry to say but your son is calloused menace,  
A blond hair—blue eye'd devil in the flesh.  
A boy who—couldn't keep himself compressed,  
A man who didn't want his life to be ruined.

And I was,

A little brown girl—a peach bottom,  
sprouting from the ground in a preteened mess like  
everyone was at one point.

But unlike everyone, I wasn't allowed to sprout on  
my own,

I was ten, if you can remember,  
A baby, a little seedling, a newly planted tomato  
seed.

I didn't know my left from my right—how to tie my  
shoes—how to use the stove—  
I didn't know how to say no to my older cousin.

*Dear Missy,*

Do you know what really happened? Or what  
Nathan lied about.

Nathan came to my cabin, it was mid June.  
The sun was just beginning to peak,  
leaving sunburned kisses on the back of my neck  
and shoulders.

Nathan told my Dad, "we'll only be gone for a  
little."

And with that malice tone, led me into the woods,  
A long walking stick between his fingers,  
A sinister smile playing on his pale face.



I remember the waterfall he showed me—the  
orange rocks—new grown ferns.  
I remember the sway of the trees in the summer  
breeze,  
the distant scent of pollen, birds singing in unison,  
the suns rays patterned on the forest floor.

We stopped at a cross in the creek.  
He told me we were playing a game and to keep my  
eyes closed, *not to open them or else.*  
Would you believe that I kept them shut the entire  
time?

Would you believe that I didn't cry when he hurt  
me.

I thought it was okay, even though a small—tiny—  
itty bitty voice told me it wasn't.

*Dear Missy,*

I told my sister what happened to me when I was  
fourteen.

A hormonal teenage mess; I couldn't hold it in  
anymore.

My emotions were everywhere and that nagging—  
constant thought brought me down.

She said it was okay, said everything would be fine  
and comforted me when I cried.

That was the first and last time I cried in front of  
someone for a very long time.

My sister told my mother—and she told my  
father—and he told the police.

*Dear Missy,*

The police didn't believe me.

They said I was too young to remember,  
said Nathan was too old to be tried now.

They said, "Why ruin his life?"

Even though he ruined mine.

It ate at me, what he did. How dirty and vile I felt.  
No amount of washing, cleansing of my skin and  
mind,  
Could ease the sense of filth residing in my soul.

Years passed, people stopped caring.  
Told me it was done and over with,  
told me, "It wasn't rape."

Missy, it hurts when nobody listens,  
When you reach a hand out,  
only to be shunned and scolded.

*Dear Missy,*

I wish I could talk to you,  
have a heart to heart,

Tell you why I still cry—why I hate Christmas—  
why I hate myself sometimes.

# Masculine

Why I just can't let it go.

Sometimes—a lot of times—  
I wonder why I said something.

I remember what my Dad said,  
The first time he heard the story,  
his face covered in a thick smear of tears.

“I'm sorry I couldn't protect you.”

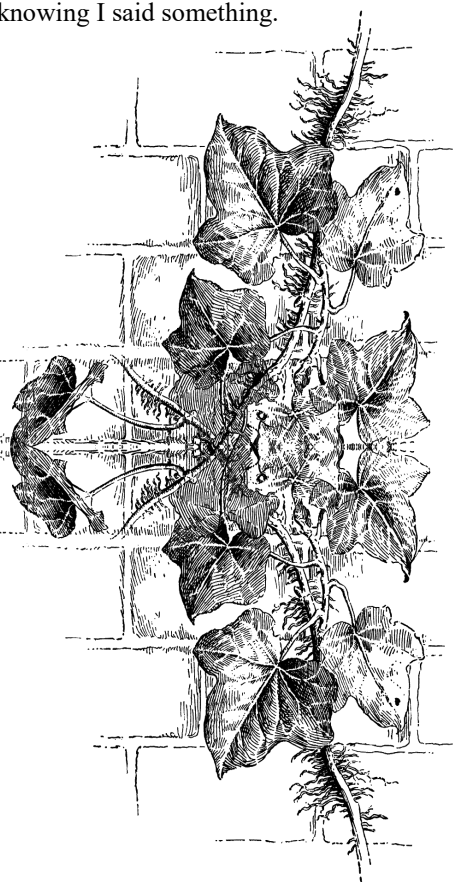
I said something to protect myself,  
To stop the pain in my chest from spreading, the  
hurt and worry  
in my veins from burning.

*Dear Missy,*  
You're still my favorite Aunt,  
I still love seeing you even  
if you spit vulgar words in my direction.

I still see the trees swaying,  
the sun blazing and  
think of how beautiful life can be.

Even if a twitch of pain—sadness—anger  
stabs me in the throat sometimes.

I just have to remember,  
I can find a way to heal—  
knowing I said something.



Jacob Voelker  
Pittsburgh, PA

Male king cobras will flare a hood when in the presence of other animals, regardless of whether they are considered predator or prey. There are specialized muscles in the snakes' necks that allow them to flare the excess tissue, used to assert their dominance over another. This accentuation of power is present throughout the entirety of nature.

\*\*\*

The summer after I turned fifteen, I handed in my application to Farma Family Campground along with a valid worker's permit, and was given the job almost immediately. I learned the computer software by heart and memorized daily rates, seasonal site availability, and pricing of firewood as though I were being tested. I was a good worker.

It didn't take long, however, to realize that I was clearly the odd one out.

At Farma Family Campground, men did not work in the store, they worked maintenance. This consisted of mowing fields, stacking firewood, fixing electrical issues, cleaning the pool, and any other miscellaneous work that needed to be done. They were based in the garage, a storage area that held the tractors and power tools. Every man who worked at Farma did maintenance, and every girl who worked at Farma was put in the store.

At the end of my first week, Issac, the most tenured of the maintenance boys at nineteen, came into the store to purchase a hot pocket on his lunch break. He threw it down on the counter and waited for me to scan it.

“Put it on my account—you can do that at least, can't you, Pretty Boy?”

\*\*\*

The male great-horned owl puffs out his feathers when he feels threatened. When eagles or other birds of prey fly overhead, the male great-horned owl will dilate himself to appear intimidating and discourage attackers from targeting him, his family, or his nest.

\*\*\*

My friend Olivia and I stopped at a

convenience shop on the corner of Ninth and Penn one day after school because she wanted a bag of Hot Cheetos and an iced tea. At checkout, she stood closest to the door and I was to her immediate left. The cashier took her bag and my five.

Two men hustled through the door. The first man held his hands up, the second spouted verbal threats. He cornered the first man and stood over him. He raised his fist, before hesitating. The first man held his breath and closed his eyes.

When he opened, the second man was gone. He got up, brushed off his pant legs, and went in the opposite direction.

Olivia and I had switched positions. I was to her right, closest to the door. I stood tall. I had raised my shoulders and stuck out my chest, which completely covered Olivia's smaller frame. The cashier handed us the change before we left. We have not talked about it since.

My entire life, I'd seen the storyline in movies and television on repeat: the man would sacrifice himself for the woman. He would protect her, and he became a hero in the end because of his strength, bravery, and courage.

I would like to believe that it was entirely out of love. Was it an act of selflessness? Or did the primitive ego I'd established from the movies get the best of me?

\*\*\*

Expansion is not confined to protection. The male peacock will spread the array of colored feathers plastered onto his tail into a fan-like shape in an attempt to attract a mate. The female is often times drawn to the impressive size of his tail and the extensive palette he displays so boldly. The male peacock has achieved his goal of allurements.

\*\*\*

One afternoon when I was eight years old, tears began to well in my eyes because of a trailer for a horror movie that came on in the set of commercials precluding my mother's TV show. My mother started to approach me, but my father stopped her and sat down next to me.

“You need to stop being so sensitive about every little thing, Jacob.





Mom won't be there to care for you forever. You need to start acting like a man. Toughen up a little bit."

I can count the number of times I remember letting myself cry since then on my right hand. I taught myself how to keep my feelings inside, where I believed for so long they belonged. I have pounded the idea into my head that emotion is bad, and constantly reinforced the negative connotation that accompanies crying in a man's life.

\*\*\*

Eric Forman loses a one-on-one basketball game to his girlfriend, Donna Pinciotti, in one of the first episodes of the Fox television series *That 70's Show*. This puts him at extreme unease, and forces him to prove to Donna (and himself, really) that he is masculine. He later challenges her to a game of air hockey at the Hub, the local hangout. Again, he loses, and is depicted wearing a dress in the next shot. This divide causes a rift in their relationship, as Donna refuses to accept that Eric feels obligated to have dominance over her. Throughout the entirety of the series, the juxtaposition of Eric's femininity and Donna's masculinity leads to deep-rooted issues about the abnormality of their dynamic.

Later in the same episode, Red Forman, Eric's father, is laid off work at the plant. His wife Kitty has taken shifts at the hospital, and Red is no longer the breadwinner of the family. To counteract this, he scans the house and fixes countless items of fully functioning house ware. He was stuck in his own head.

Each time, my mother let me nestle in her arms and rocked me until I caught my breath and calmed down. Each time, my father would tell me to get up, brush it off, and wipe the tears.

\*\*\*

The first time I let myself cry since seventh grade was after I hurt my back while rock climbing. It was a recurring injury I'd just recently gotten over, and I knew instantly it would be months before I could do anything more than a brisk walk. I held my tears until my friend dropped me off at my house, but once the front door shut I

collapsed onto the floor and started sobbing uncontrollably.

I was still sobbing ten minutes later when my father got home from the gym. He told me to take deep breaths, and I started to. He told me that it would be okay, and I believed him. He told me to stop crying because it solved nothing, and I stopped.

\*\*\*

Each morning, I dip my fingers into a jar of product and apply it to my hair. I run the product through the entirety of my head and style it to give shape and volume. It makes me feel confident when I fix my hair like this. It makes me feel attractive. I am obsessed with my hair, vanity intended. The subconscious correlation between the style of one's hair and the ego one possesses is far greater than I'd ever imagined growing up. But back then, I didn't know it mattered so much.

\*\*\*

The name stuck. Ask any of the maintenance boys who I was, and they would tell you that I was Pretty Boy, the runt that hid from hard work behind the counter who could flirt with all the girls, but didn't know how to operate a lawn mower. None of them knew I cut grass for money on my free time, or that my entire life I'd work on projects with my father until I could taste the salt from sweat dripping from my nose to my lips. Frankly, I don't think any of them cared.

Next summer, I asked to be switched to maintenance. I told the manager about my experience in outdoor working, and told him that I was willing to work to learn anything he needed me to.

"I appreciate it, Jacob," he said. "But you've got some competition. Makenna Fritz has asked to mow some lawns, so we'll see."

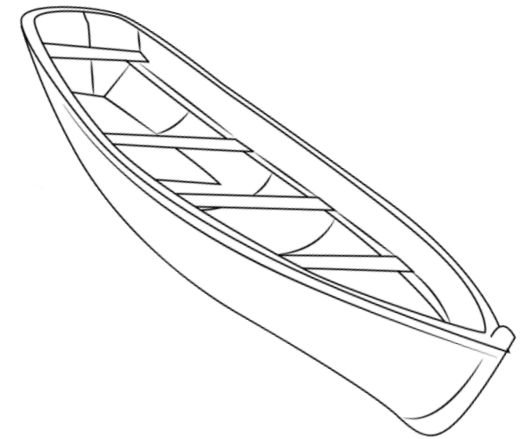
I nodded my head. He nudged my shoulder and chuckled. "You've got the job kid. We'll try and fit you into the schedule when we can."

\*\*\*

I see myself in Ben, my little brother. Ben's a sensitive kid, and he just turned eight last February. He cries about what the kids at his church youth group say to him. He cries about his incessant fear of clowns, and he cries when he doesn't understand how to do a question in his homework

packet.

My father has begun to teach Ben what has become instinctual to me.



## Somewhere Beyond

Alexandra Midler

La Jolla, CA

They left in the middle of the night. Maya was allowed to pack her school bag with clothes and her old sneakers, nothing more than she could carry. Her parents stuffed Lira into the lining of their jackets, and the family's phone was placed in a water tight bag.

The smugglers arrived outside the apartment in a truck. The headlights blinded Maya, and she raised her arm in protest, squinting into the light. As she moved closer, she made out twelve people crammed into the back. Maya and her little sister Uri squeezed into a corner, while their parents handed over the required cash. Maya's stomach churned with guilt. She thought about what the Qur'an taught: "As to the thief. Cut off their hand." Instinctively she put her hands in her pockets to keep them out of sight. Maya wondered what price she would pay for her theft and whether hell, Jahannam, awaited her. The thought scared her, and she gripped Uri's hand, as if proximity to innocence would cleanse her.

The truck drove from the city as the horizon brightened to an inky blue. She wondered if this would be the dawn of their new life, and she allowed a seed of hope to take root in her heart. After an hour, the truck turned off the main road



onto a gravel track. The purr of the engine stopped, and for a moment everything was still. A bird gave a tentative chirp, signaling the coming sunrise. Then the front door slammed and the smugglers yelled for them to get out. The spell was broken.

The group walked down a dirt path to the beach. Resting partly on shore were two small orange dinghies. A large crowd of people stood waiting.

“Papa. How are we going to fit?” Maya asked.

“Perhaps there are more boats coming?” Tarek answered.

The smugglers split the group into two lines, and began cramming people into the dinghies. Rasha tugged on her husband’s jacket.

“Let us go back, Tarek. I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“We have no choice. We can’t go back.”

Tarek helped Maya and Rasha into the orange life vests he had bought the day before. Then he inflated Uri’s armbands and strapped them on. Mickey Mouse stared up at her from the plastic; a single smiling face in a crowd of apprehension.

When it was their turn to board, Maya jumped into the dinghy ahead of a tentative Rasha. Tarek followed, carrying Uri gently in his arms.

After all the refugees were on board, one of the smugglers started talking to an elderly man. Maya watched as the smuggler pointed to controls and mimed steering actions. The old man looked overwhelmed.

“What’s happening?” Rasha asked. “Isn’t a driver coming with us?” Before anyone could answer, the smugglers began pushing the dinghy into the water.

A woman in the middle of the boat began to sob. Everyone else had faces of stone.

“What have we done?” Rasha whispered.

“What have I done?” Maya thought.

\*\*\*

One year earlier.

The room shook, startling Maya awake. She felt her teeth chatter, even though it was not cold. She pushed off the covers and walked over to the window. It was pitch black outside; even the

street lights had gone out. Then Maya saw a flash of light across Damascus. The explosion reminded her of a fireworks display, and the sight was horribly beautiful. There was a pause before another bomb shook the ground nearby, then another and another, everytime getting closer. Maya felt dust and paint chips from the ceiling falling into her hair. For some reason she was rooted to the quaking ground, unable to move.

“Maya, get away from the window!” her mother shouted. Then the explosion hit, shattering the glass and knocking Maya to the floor. Her eyes began to burn and she scratched them desperately. Her throat swelled, and each breath struggled to reach her lungs. Maya heard a horrible rasping sound, only to realize it was coming from her throat. Her heart pounded against her chest. Where was Uri? Her mother and father? Maya tried to stand but her legs gave out, and she sank back to the floor. The pain was excruciating. Every cell in her body was on fire. Was this how she would die? Before her twelfth birthday in pink pajamas? She rolled onto her back, too weak to fight, and begged for the pain to end. Then everything went dark.

Maya woke with a gasp as the icy water hit her chest. Tarek stood over his daughter holding an empty bucket. Maya’s skin was raw and bloody, and the water covered her like a soothing blanket.

Tarek smiled more with his own relief than with any comfort to offer. Maya noticed that she was now outside, and the scene filled her with horror. Bodies were everywhere: leaning up against walls, in doorways, and splayed out on the sidewalk. The living hardly looked better. Some gasped, still fighting to breathe, while others seemed nearer to surrender, white foam escaping from their mouths. Maya spotted her mother sitting nearby holding a wriggling Uri in one arm and their neighbor’s lifeless daughter in the other. Maya wanted to believe the girl was only sleeping; that she would open her eyes any second, but the body remained still.

She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the horror, but the image of the young girl’s tortured face was seared into her mind.

\*\*\*

Maya surveyed the mess around her that used to be home. It had been three months since the attack, and now bags covered the floor, stuffed with clothes, pictures, jewelry, and food. Her parents rushed between rooms, making sure they had packed everything. Uri wandered into the hallway dragging a stuffed animal behind her. She had a dazed look on her face. Since the gas attack she had barely spoken.

“Have you got Uri’s medication?” Tarek asked Rasha. She nodded. “Good, we must get moving.” He said, closing a suitcase.

“Papa, where are we going?” Maya asked. Outside, the faint pop of gunfire pierced the night silence.

“Somewhere beyond the fighting.”

\*\*\*

Winter’s dawn filtered through the shutters, squeezing into the cramped rental apartment. Outside, the sky started to brighten, and tentative bands of pink arched above Izmir, Turkey. Maya sat up, careful not to wake Uri next to her.

She slipped on a tattered pair of jeans and pullover, then left the apartment and descended the stairs to the street. The goal was to stay invisible. How many times had she heard the lecture since leaving Damascus? Blend in. Keep your head down. Remember, we’re in someone else’s home.

As the rush of commuters whisked by on the sidewalk, Maya weaved between them yelling, “Phone chargers, thirty percent off!”

Occasionally she approached strangers, tapping them on the arm and displaying her merchandise. Most ignored Maya or headed down the street. Some jerked away violently, cursing her. Maya never got used to the scorn, though she pretended it didn’t hurt.

Down the block, Maya saw a group of children in uniforms waiting for the traffic to stop. Their shirts were freshly ironed, and one girl wore a ribbon in her hair. But the light changed, and they crossed the street; lost to Maya forever.

She continued slowly onto the park, where she spotted her father and Mr. Eid sitting in the grass. Displayed on a blanket





at their feet were an assortment of cigarette cartons and a sign reading “Low Prices.”

“Hello Maya. How was your morning?” Mr. Eid asked.

“Slow. Very slow.” She pulled out a few crumpled Lira from her jeans.

“I don’t know how we’ll pay the rent this month.” Tarek said.

“It’s been difficult with all the new refugees arriving. We’re all selling to the same fed-up Turks.” Mr. Eid sighed. Then he leaned closer to Tarek and lowered his voice. “There’s a rumor. The police are doing raids. You need to get out if you don’t want to end up in a refugee camp. We’re leaving this week.” He saw Maya’s scared face and changed the subject. “Oh, my wife needs someone to watch Isaam this afternoon and tomorrow. Interested?” He smiled, but the cheerfulness didn’t reach his eyes.

“Sure. I’d love too.”

“Maya, meet me here when you’re done. We’ll walk home together.” Tarek squeezed his daughter’s hand.

\*\*\*

“Thank you for coming!” Mrs. Eid said. Her long hair was brushed over one soldier, and the lines below her eyes crinkled as she smiled.

Maya followed her through the tiny kitchen and into the other room, where baby Isaam lay asleep on the single mattress.

“If Issam starts to cry, he might need a new diaper. They’re in the cabinet in the kitchen.” Mrs. Eid began to put on her scarf and threadbare jacket. “How is your sister?”

Maya looked down at the floor, not wishing to show how much the question cut to her heart. Everything was always about Uri. The whispers late at night between her parents, the extra money she made at market, their squalid home; all were about helping Uri, either making or saving money for the medicine she needed.

Sometimes when Maya was tired and missed her mother’s caress or father’s storytelling, she wished the bomb had

come closer and taken Uri. Then she would fill with guilt and pray to keep her sister safe, staying longer on the streets to sell more. She cursed the evil inside her and knew she would go to hell for her selfishness and never see her family again; a thought that made tears well in her eyes.

Mrs. Eid laid a hand on Maya’s shoulder. “I understand. I wish I could help.” Maya wanted to slam her fist into the wall and yell into Ms. Eid’s face because no one could possibly understand, least of all herself. Instead she nodded meekly and sat down next to Isaam.

The hours passed slowly. Storm clouds swelled, and a grey light filtered through the windows. Then the stillness was pierced by Isaam’s wails.

Diapers. Maya sighed and walked into the kitchen, opening cabinets at random. Cereal. Tea. Fruit. Where were the diapers? She emptied one cupboard, putting all the boxes on the floor, and just as she was about to give up, she noticed it. The panel at the back of the cupboard was loose. With her nails Maya was able to pry the board away and reveal a hidden compartment with a black box. She pulled it out and opened the lid. Inside lay messy stacks of lira. Maya closed the box quickly and put it back in its hiding spot.

The wind picked up as she left the apartment. Maya shivered, wishing she had a jacket to wrap around herself. Dusk was approaching, and the street lights flicked on. The park was still crowded with refugees selling their wares to the few remaining Turks heading home. Maya noticed a police car screech to a stop at the far end of the square. She turned and sprinted back down the road, but another police car pulled up in front of her. Two men got out, and before Maya could flee, one of them grabbed her arm. She fought furiously, desperate to escape. There was a short whistle of air, and then a burst of pain exploded across Maya’s face. She screamed, writhing in agony and kicking her legs out in every direction.

There was a shuffle of feet, and then the officer cried out, releasing his grip on her pullover. Maya looked up to see her father next to the doubled over police man. She scrambled to her feet, and together they raced into the street. The

pounding of footsteps followed, but Maya and Tarek soon lost them in the crowd.

\*\*\*

“It’s getting too risky.”

Rasha said. “What if you hadn’t been there? They would have taken Maya.”

“I know.”

“We need to go somewhere beyond Izmir.”

“But where? We cannot afford to leave. Besides, the weather is not good in winter.”

“If only we had the money.”

There was a pause. Maya held still, pretending to be asleep next to Uri on the mattress. She forced her breaths to stay steady; the gentle rise and fall of her chest hiding the turmoil in her heart.

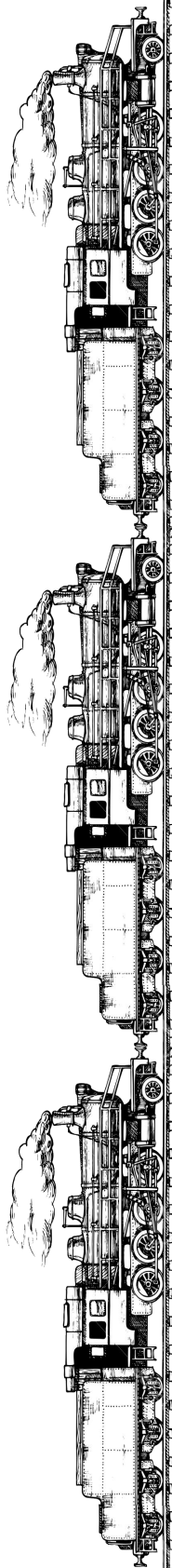
“Whatever happens, we’re together. That’s the most important thing.”

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The next morning Rasha braided Maya’s hair, something she had not done in years; as if realizing how close she had come to losing her daughter. Maya helped her mother prepare breakfast, both enjoying the luxury of routines.

“Go get your sister,” Rasha said. But as Maya approached the bed, she noticed Uri starting to shake. Her legs and arms jerked like a wind-up toy, and she began to groan. Her sister was having another attack. “Mama! Its Uri. Bring the medicine!”

Rasha and Tarek hurried over. “There’s no more.” he said grimly. They watched helplessly as



Uri convulsed, her groans getting louder until she was screaming. Tears streamed down her face, and Maya felt ill. She had caused this. She had wished her sister dead, and now Uri was suffering a pain and helplessness that Maya knew all too well. That horrible night came rushing back, and she struggled for breath, imagining the gas pressing in, the stinging in her eyes and the sight of the dead girl's face, pale with foam coming from her mouth. All she could do was watch as her sister writhed in her own pain.

Tarek wrapped a blanket around his youngest daughter, pinning her arms to her side. Then he held Uri in place, shaking her occasionally to remind her to take a breath. They waited together for the fit to pass and for Uri to be returned to them.

No one spoke. Finally Uri looked up at Maya, her eyes glassy and dazed.

A tear streaked Maya's face, slipping off her stubborn chin and falling to the floor. She had failed her sister once more. Maya swore it would never happen again. Uri would not be like that girl in Damascus.

\*\*\*

It was late when Maya returned from babysitting. Tarek was sitting hunched on the stairs outside the apartment, always anxious until his family was together. Since the raid he had not dared to sell his cigarettes. He looked weary in the moonlight, and Maya realized he was no longer the superhero she had thought he was. They had all grown older.

"Mrs. Eid kept you late?" Maya didn't answer. Instead, she put her hand deep in her pocket and pulled out a wad of lira.

"Where did you get that?"

"Please don't ask." She thought he would protest. They were not that kind of people. But instead he reached out his hands to envelop Maya's while bowing his head to hide the tears racing down his cheek. Perhaps he had failed at being a good man. He did not want to fail at being a good father. "We can go somewhere beyond Greece," she urged. "Uri can get help."

He lifted his head and they met each other's gaze. Neither was smiling. Both knew what

they had done, the line they had crossed, and what they would now do together.

\*\*\*

The boat swayed, rocking Maya gently. The salty air cracked and split Maya's lips. Her sleepy haze was disrupted by a cold sensation in her feet. She looked down to see a layer of water sloshing in the boat. Others had noticed too, and worried whispers broke out.

"It's okay. We're nearly there." It was the old man steering. "I can see Greece."

"I don't think there is a leak," a young woman said. "It's probably water from the waves." Time passed in slow motion. Maya felt the water creeping up her leg. It seemed to be coming in faster now. Soon her calf was submerged. She looked longingly at the smudge of brown on the horizon. Greece didn't seem any closer.

"There is definitely a leak." A man reported from the front of the dingy as he started to bail. "We are gaining water too quickly."

"We will all drown!" Someone wailed, setting off a surge of panic. The commotion caused the boat to rock dangerously, letting in even more water.

"Stay calm." Tarek addressed the group. "We need to keep cool heads."

The old man in the back began giving directions. "Listen! If we get out of the boat and hold onto the sides, we'll lighten the pressure. The leak will slow. Once we enter Greek waters, the coast guard can save us."

"What about the children?" Rasha called.

"It's the only way."

Cries of protest broke out but soon quieted. Everyone knew it was their only chance. Tarek gently lowered Maya and Rasha into the water before following. Uri was light enough to stay on board. She peered down at them from the side of the dinghy, grasping Maya's cold hand.

"Don't worry." Tarek told his family in an upbeat voice. "The coastguards will find us soon."

The water's blackness enveloped Maya; its tentacles of ice wrapped themselves around her legs, then arms, inching their way closer to her heart. She looked into the waves and saw no end,

only darkness, and shivered. She looked up towards the sky, letting her head roll back against her life-vest, the waves rocking her in their arms. Time seemed adrift as the cold slowed everything, numbing her body and mind so she had no concept of the hour. Her eyelids felt heavy, and it seemed foolish to fight the summons of sleep. In the distance she heard her mother singing a lullaby; the one she and Uri heard every night before going to bed. The melody embraced Maya with its warmth and comfort. She dreamed of lying next to her sister in their old bedroom, with their parents arms encircling them in love. She was safe at last, somewhere beyond this world.

## When the TSA asked my grandmother for Fingerprints

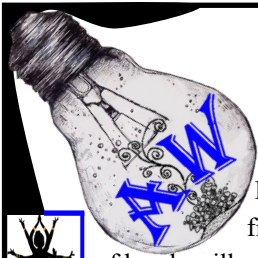
Grace Tan  
Fort Lee, NJ

*When the TSA asked my grandmother for fingerprints for identification*

Grandmother's hands are wide, like heirloom bowls etched with deep, red-amber cracks through the insides of her palms, and closed, they are a pair of pacific oysters set at the head of each new year's table, protective of her opaline secrets to the shimmering plates of abalone and jadelike sprouts of *nai bai*.

The ends of her reaches are jeweled with nail beds each like a sky in which a half-flushed Saturn's peachy edge sinks into the desert horizon of her skin. Ten fingers trimmed with tips like the undersides of yellow clouds, forming talons broad and pointed, the color and curve of a great whale's bones, the rest of that limestone skeleton buried deep in the sands of her flesh, a latticework of arthritic joints and marrow





crackling alive  
through every knuckle.  
Her hands are pottery blasted by a  
fiery kiln my kind  
of hands will never know.

Where mine are slim ropes of clay unworked,  
hers were kneaded by the humid clutches of  
newborns,  
tempered by steam rolling off of fresh tilapia  
and cooled in the bitter dishwater of a family she  
created,  
collecting a distillation of life itself —

These hands tugged hair into braids and beat dough  
into cakes,  
plucked the stems of bean sprouts, nipped the ears  
of her children,  
pulled slaughtered crates of warm pigs to market  
under blue lids of dawn  
and pushed four daughters through college and out  
of the land that denied her the same,

and held me when I arrived in crimson varnish,  
wailing my first breath,  
her hands my cradle anointed by cold water and  
butchery blood,  
polished by steel wool and silver scales  
for me —

How much of her skin have  
we swallowed? How much of her spit  
is imbibed into my being?

She tipped those hands and poured herself into all of  
us, and we grew  
on papaya soup and clothes-hangers and pork fat  
and willow canes,

So when she presses the spade of her touch to the  
scanner  
no mark registers at all,  
ten fingers erased as pink  
and smooth  
and filled  
as the cheeks of a new year's suckling pig  
being lead into the back room of U.S. customs.

## BLACK SPECKS

Carrie Hsu

Roslyn, NY

### To Want Mangoes

How to tell if a champagne mango is ripe  
and plump for a feast—inhal the top and scan it  
sacrificially. If the mote at the top is bleeding dew,  
a sticky juice, if the flesh surpasses the crevice as  
mountains do valleys, if the pond that used to be an  
ocean is sunken in and the mango has become  
independent of its roots, if summer caves in to  
fragrance and that little black belly button at the  
very top is not at the very top any more, and the  
fruit has blossomed past where it used to be  
attached to a family of parties and patio breezes, if  
gold is speckled with black, then that is the one you  
must take.

We buy nine mangoes, my mother and I,  
and I sniff the caps and smell the fruit past rigid  
skin that hides it from heat and scars. They're now  
suffocated in a plastic bag, thrashing to be bitten  
and killed so that their blood can flow soundly,  
sweetly, down our cheeks. An ant crawls past them  
as we plop them on the sidewalk; their weight  
wedges indents into our fingertips and promises  
revenge come nighttime. The ant is not alarming,  
merely secular, as it avoids invisible barriers and  
scurries indecisively in every direction upon paths  
we cannot see.

To my left, a daughter sits in a stroller  
blowing bubbles gaily. Her mother pushes her  
along, her elder daughter still shorter than she but  
standing tall. They are the perfect picture of a trio  
of girls, black hair combed back by the wind, eyes  
clashed half-shut to polarize the rays that stab  
drably at their bald skin. I turn to my right, watch  
cars pass and cigarettes drop. The cry of a child  
slices a humid bubble, and my eyes snap back to  
the daughters and their mother. The one in the  
stroller is now rotating violently, squirming away  
from her mother's arms. Her eyes are clenched  
shut in an effort, her face red with trivial fury. The  
mother yells, aggravated, and the bubbles float

away. They fuss and struggle, and the mother shouts  
in crimson Chinese, and all I can comprehend of  
this scene is the mother saying repeatedly, 媽媽

(Mama), 媽媽. The daughter fights unresponsively  
to her mother saying her own name, and there is no  
comfort withheld from such dialogue. The standing  
sister watches, silent in her own game, and the  
mother pushes them forward in a declarative march,  
her sunflower pants splattered boldly with large  
flowers. A child cries so easily.

My mother walks out the supermarket with  
a new bag, full of flour and a jungle vegetable. I lie  
on her shoulders and hug her dependently, and her  
arms barely wrap around my waist as I tower over  
her short, sturdy structure. Her grip is secure around  
me as we stand in waiting for 爸爸(Baba)'s car to  
round the corner. I watch the frail, aged men and  
women in the beige car as they watch us in return. I  
wonder what they think of my mother and me, two  
women standing in the midst of the heat of a  
Chinese supermarket. *What a wonderful pair,* they  
must think. *How wonderful it must be to have a  
daughter that loves her mother. That hasn't left her  
to the confines of a lonely home, that hasn't  
dropped her in an ocean of age and despair. How  
wonderful it must be for a mother to love her  
daughter as dearly as she loves her.* They watch,  
longingly, as we stand in a resolute air.





### Four to Three

The sun shines shyly through the skylight as 媽媽(Mama) makes the call for lunch. It's a clear Saturday morning and the house is fragrant with the smell of the sea burnt to crisps. Lunch is salmon fried rice with carrots and onion and lima beans and a foreign tinge of ginger, slyly erect in my mouth. It's oddly quiet but it's a pleasant meal; the coolness of the Japanese cucumbers marinated with fungus and yet more ginger slices tingle hotly against the rice, fresh off the fire. I eat it slowly with the oat-cereal and blueberries and grapes and cranberries dried with time, an odd offense against my skin. My mother turns silently into a tempest, watching us like a hawk flying over dingleberries, a balloon soaring above the sky and popping without notice. *I'm going to eat* (she stumbles, but it does little to belittle her demeanor) *somewhere else*. Her feet make dreaded thuds on our wooden floors that resonate more like planks when she strikes them, like xylophone bars helplessly pinned beneath mallets supposedly soft and padded, but really very stoned. They ascend upstairs, and my father shrugs his shoulders. The sun still shines obliviously through the skylight, indifferent to the absence of a woman at the head of the table. My father, my sister, and I sit in a wondrous silence, each bathing in remorse of what we may or may not have done to have caused such disturbance to our pleasantly quiet Saturday lunch. I wash down the ginger with a bitter freshness of jasmine tea fermented in the refrigerator for four, perhaps three days.

### Goodnight, Moon

Car ride home, my mother drives. It's too warm. The sun's shining everywhere unwanted, and the car seat is warmer than me. It's too warm; one day it'll melt and the leather and steering wheel and radio and metal will all have made their final stand. *Enough*, they'd say, and then they'd join hands and reminisce those car rides and talks and walks when nobody cared to abide. But that was a faraway dream of some ten, twenty years. For now, they're

blind and argumentative and lashing with resent.

A dog walks astray, its fur black and shabby, unleashed and wild and carefree. It's lost, but it wanders mindlessly to itself, its tail held high,



*This is Getting Out of Hand* Francesca Grazioli Charlottesville, VA

its nose cautiously independent. A house blurs past, its face hidden by evergreens and uncut grass. There's a field of dandelions at its feet, seeds readily begging to be blown, wishes unwished.

I do as my mother directed. New scenery, new floor, new chair, new desk. Papers scatter; they don't want to go. I collect them gracefully, ashamedly, and walk upstairs to where my father sits. I will sit across from him. I collect papers and bring them to the abandoned bar. If only there were red wine and champagne in that empty honeycomb cabinet, perhaps glass shards would sweep up the

papers and push them away as ripples wave apart leaves and such.

Mother's here again. ... *You know what your one problem is?* That's

爸爸(Baba)'s line; and it flows strangely, as if the sky had rained dirt. ... *We are normal people*... Am I? I think not. I'm a rat in a cat's game.

Wordlessly, I walk out to the garage, feel the chill of the tile beneath my toes, fill an old wine bottle with tap water by the kitchen sink, then walk out to the battering sun. The leaves of my lemon tree have turned a yellow-green since I moved it outdoors beyond my affection in the greenhouse. I move it from under the shadows of my house and allow it to prosper in the sun. A centipede crawls from behind it, scuttles into a crevice between the time-polished brick driveway and the garage floor painted over several times, then vanishes. A red fly circulates it endlessly, and I soak the soil excessively, then wash away the spider web after entertaining the droplets that balanced ripely on intricate threads of white. It's now a decimated apartment that children walk hurriedly past, left only with the sides clinging to leaves and the center slaughtered in a seamed smoke. The wine bottle is placed back by the kitchen sink. It makes a soft, dying thud against the perfect, resilient marble, diminishing as if absorbed, like the sound of 媽媽(Mama)'s fingers pulling gently

at an infant's earlobe.

I like my earlobes cold; it's a habit.

As I sit and watch the new scenery of the dull white wall before me, my feet scrape back and forth above the new wooden floor like a clock awaiting a cuckoo's sunrise. My back leans unfittingly against the back of a new chair, and my computer lays in sharp angles, poking at my new desk. It was always mine.

There are two picture frames against the white wall. One is of my sister hugging me when she was taller, labeled "Big Sister Little Sister." It's framed in a rosy picket fence, bright green leaves sprouting from spiraled





circles and magenta dots sprinkling white. They aren't real roses, more like candy balls that circle around like cotton candy snails. The second is framed in a deeper pink, the color of cheeks after a summer jog by the sidewalks. It holds, mysteriously, elements of *Goodnight Moon*—the golden moon, a sprawled cow, a laughing puppy, a spoon in a bowl, a plate served acutely, a troubled tea cup, and a gay cat playing the fiddle. Stickers of velvet pink and amber yellow stars stick gladly to it, holding a photo of a toddler in my mother's arms and my sister in my father's. We're smiling boldly, each shiny and daring and wispy and young. I had placed my water bottle and pencil holder in front of it earlier as I had moved up, but I shift them aside now. My mother's face is visible, and I trace the lines of her face with mine.

### How to Cry Grown-Up Tears

You think that because you're more grown up now, you won't cry, and if you do, you'll have some very explicit reason in your head, and then you'll go off to the side, wipe away a few tears, recover within a minute or so, and then waltz right back into conversation. No. That's not how it goes. Let me tell you how it goes.

First, there's a wave. A rush of blood and memories and a default childhood response floods up to your face. Your face heats up and swells like a balloon gone wild. Next, the latch. There's too much of it; it just comes all at once. Around your throat, under your skin, against your tongue. It squeezes, and squeezes, and squeezes, until you scrunch up your shirt upwards as if it were your favorite blanket and pull it towards your eyes, because there's nothing more attractive to saltwater rain than watching saltwater rain fall. The ping of droplet after droplet diluting the first, making everything fuzzy and unclear, adhering to each other until a pond forms. Expanding outwards like a disease, a virus that wraps around every speck of pain you've felt, every hurt you've ignored, every word, every slap that you buried deep under your skin, your muscle, your tissues, until it's been secured tightly in your bone.

And like an injured fawn, you

glance around quickly, naively, looking for some cave, some hole, some void you can jump into until everything stops and there's nothing but solid, solid black. But they know. It's home, but it's not; it's *their* home and not really yours, and they know every inch from top to bottom, left to right. The only difference is, now, you've grown up. You're older. You get to lock the door to the bathroom. So when they come calling out of guilt from their spontaneous rampage, you can shout back "I'm fine." You've learned, over the years, to perfect that shouting voice that pushes down the sultry screams in your eyes. There's no voice to tears, they simply, fall. And there you are, pacing in solid black in a room with no windows, the door locked, more alone than when you were younger and had to pace in an open space where they'd knock on the door until you stopped pressing your back against it and let them in. And then they'd give you a hug and you'd melt for love, for any affection, and then, forgiveness was default. But not here. Here, black is the new default. It's not resentment, rather, self-exorcism.

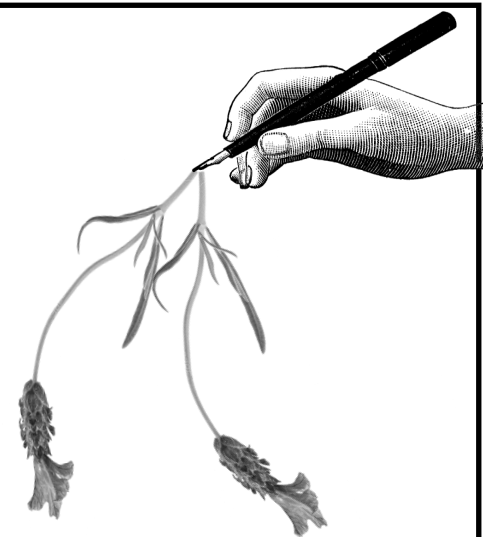
It latches on, around your throat, under your skin, against your tongue. Around her throat, under her skin, against her tongue. Around his throat, around his skin, around his tongue. My tongue screams silently. Hers lashes out, quick, blood red, pellets shot fast enough to reach my bone.

### Holes

We're all living holes. Not assholes, not black holes, just holes. Spaces in between our bones that we fill with muscle and skin. Eyeballs, ears, nostrils, mouths. Armpits, belly buttons, that space in between ribs, that space under them, that hole until your hips. The holes under you.

And we fill them up slowly, like sand fills in dunes in that hourglass, piling up layers around these holes to make us feel less like lonely, needy whores. It takes time, lots of it, but slowly, surely, we fill them up. We fill up the sacks that we carry on our backs, and we fill them up with people. They become saturated, pregnant with fat and luxuries and love and purpose.

But just as quickly as an hourglass shatters—insert a knife into any one of these holes,



any one of them, and we spill.

### Instinct

At night, I turn into an open-mouthed ghost stuck in perdition, eyes red and wet with fury, fists absorbed against the bed like hammers plodding against heaven.

Tonight, I think I hear thuds against the wall.

Then I realize these thuds are merely the pigment of my impulse.

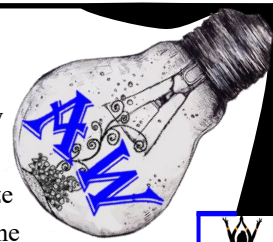
I realize the audibility of crying comes from breathing in. The pain and the expansion inside the head is only from squeezing air and tears and everything out. The crying is trying to resurface and realizing you still must breathe to live. Realizing that crying is an involuntary path to live.

### Hung Flowers

Today I hang flowers in my greenhouse. I am reminded that lovely things don't last, and that flowers are beautiful, so they must die. I like that about them. I hang them upside down, hoping to turn the tables for a while, so that I may preserve their beauty a little longer.

Today I hug my mother as she lays her head on my chest, remembering how my head was on hers not long ago. It was so long ago that I heard her heartbeat by my ear as she stroked my ears.

Today I massage my father's back as he lays stomach flat before me, belly down like a retired trout. I remember when my limbs were not quite as long and he carried me on that same back, my stomach flat on it like a baby cub clinging to its home.



# Wo Ai Ni

Jessica Jiang  
Brooklyn, NY

## Part 1: My Story

I started working at my parents' Chinese takeout restaurant when I was nine. One night, my mom handed me a menu and the phone and said, "Take this." I stammered and my hands shook, but I did it: I got through my first order. My parents were beaming, and even though I was confused and more than a little frightened, I was beaming too.

I arrived in America when I was six years old; overweight, and insecure, I was thrown into first grade. I don't know what factor alienated me from having any friends. Perhaps it was the fact that I didn't know any English and that I was socially awkward to boot. Perhaps it was because I was always surrounded by the potent smell of Chinese food, as if I proudly sprayed it on every morning like some sort of perfume. The reason I smelled like Chinese food all the time was because I stayed at my parents' restaurant all the time, even if I didn't have to work. Everyone in my family worked, so they were afraid of me staying home alone. The front of the store had huge transparent windows, so that whenever you walked by it you could see whatever I had for dinner that night. For all these years, I felt like I was on a reality show. I always wondered what people thought when they walked by and saw a little Chinese girl surrounded by mountains of books, as if she believed that if she read enough, she could make herself believe that she was anywhere but here.

I was miserable. I still remembered the pain and the exhaustion after that came from working a 12-shift. My hands and legs shook, and I all wanted to do was scream at the world to leave me alone. At the age of ten, I was frying bucketloads of chicken wings and cooking pans of "pork-fried-rice-with-extra-scallions-please." I did not want to know by heart the names of all the items on our menu and their respective prices. I did not want to have the ability recite the addresses of each

of our regular customers with only the sound of their voice to go on. No, I wanted to be able to recognize the voices of all the members of One Direction so that I could finally fit in with my friends. I wanted to know who the Kardashians were, and why the jokes mentioning their names were funny. I hated working, and I continued to hate everything and everyone until I entered high school; by then, I was old enough to stay at home and I was finally liberated from working at the restaurant.

Throughout elementary and middle school, my mom yelled at me all the time: big and small, important and immaterial. The words that she yelled when she was angry were harsh words, words that you would remember for days afterwards, wondering if what you did was really so bad that your own mother questions why she gave birth to you. They were harsh enough that some part of me knew, even then, that she couldn't have meant them. But nevertheless, they hurt. Sometimes it was about school and about me getting good grades. Sometimes it was about my performance at the restaurant: "WHY DID YOU FORGET TO PUT THE WHITE RICE IN THE BAG, ARE YOU BLIND?" Or, the most common, "SPEAK LOUDER, WHY DO YOU ALWAYS ACT LIKE YOU'RE AFRAID OF EVERYONE?"

I hadn't understood why she yelled at me so much, and then I realized as I grew older that if I were her, I would yell at me too. Not because the things that I did were really all that bad, but because if I was working 12 hour shifts every day, I would want to scream at someone too. After I realized that, I would stand as still as I could, and I would try to imagine myself as an inanimate object, allowing her words to bounce off of me, as if I was a punching bag. But then her words turned into a knife, and it would cut me open until all of the sand spilled out.

Perhaps the only reason I loved books so much was because I was forced to. What else could I do besides read? Nothing: she wouldn't let me. She was deadly scared of the world. She read newspapers about girls being



Today I eat red bean soup at my dinner table, three people around a table meant for four. I recall drinking this soup with my sister, my mother, my father, and smile fondly at how my sister took hours to consume it whilst I secretly added sugar. My mother adds sugar for me now, and I look across the table at them both, my mother and my father. And I hope that this does not fade.

## Grow

Each summer morning I walk past this small bricked off area bulging uncharacteristically from a building. There's an old Chinese man there, hunching his back, his shirt sticking to his back as the front hangs down sleepily, the humid air suffocating leaves and cultivating soil. The ground is puddled from the hose, yet there's no dirt elsewhere. Every morning I watch as I walk past and he gracefully tends to each sprout like children of the sun.

I wish I could grow like that, vines erupting from my heart and around my ankles, lapping at my neck and erupting from my mouth as my eyes turn forever to the sky. Leaves sprouting at the corners of my eyes, fingertips thinning to unfurled potential green, alive with promise.

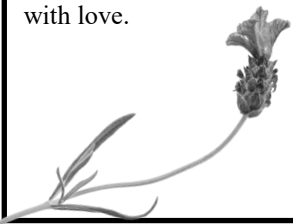
## Ants Are Not Your Mother

Years ago, when I was young enough to sprawl time out onto my driveway, watching ants elope over stones and bricks, I'd asked a lot of curious questions. 媽媽(Mama), I had asked, *why are you always so mean to me? You criticize me, you call me stupid, you tell me I'm nothing, you say I'm not your daughter. Look at the ants; they're so nice to me. They crawl around and they don't criticize me; they don't call me stupid or tell me I'm nothing.*

She had replied, *that's why I'm your mother, not ants. I'll always tell you the truth. When we go out, I call other kids pretty or <<好可愛!>> (so cute!) even if they're fat or ugly or stupid.*

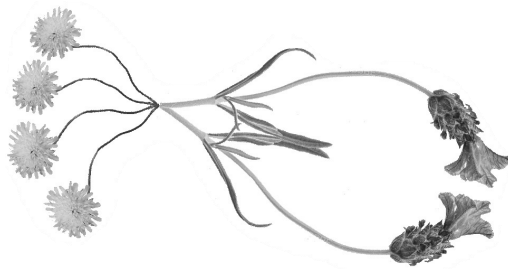
*That's why ants are not your mother.*

I had sulked off in a fog of bliss, nurturing the small specks of black into hands that grew open with love.





kidnapped off the streets, their cries for help going unnoticed, and their organs ripped out to be sold for money. She read about cars intentionally veering off the road, and killing innocent pedestrians on the streets. She was afraid of that happening to any of her daughters, and when I try to explain how unlikely it would happen to any of us, she got more mad. Because of her fear, she didn't allow me to watch TV or have friends. I couldn't go to most school meetings because they lasted too late into the night. She gave more restraints and responsibilities on me than most mothers do, so we had more arguments than most mothers and daughters.



I dreamt of running away all the time when I was younger. The thought became larger and more insistant when I started working at my parent's restaurant. But it started when she was so mad that she pointed to the door and screamed, "Don't you dare give me that look. If you don't want to be here, then get out. GET OUT. I would rather have no daughter than an unappreciative one." I sat paralyzed on my chair, tears streaming down my face as I shook my head. At such a young age, I was mature enough to know that it would be the dumbest mistake that I would ever make. It wasn't the thought that I would never see my family again that made me shake my head, it was the knowledge that starvation and being homeless would be worse than anything I would experience under this roof. But the possibility stayed in my head. Sometimes, it would get better, and sometimes it would get worse. But when things get noticeably worse, I would tuck a 50 dollar bill into my pocket, so that if I do run away, I could at least get by for a few weeks without starving. I think after that, the idea

of running away solidified in my mind. The possibility became so real that I told my sister about it.

"Niki," I whispered late one night. "If I run away, would you go with me?" I was twelve then, and she was only eight. I close my eyes and squeeze them tight, knowing that if she said no, I would never run away. I would have never gathered enough courage to go without her.

She made a noncommittal grunt and I continued on: "I'll do it when I'm 14, when I get my working papers. Then, I could work and be able to support myself." She was asleep, or at least pretending to be.

It was so real in my mind: at the age of twelve, I dreamt it and I believed it. I got my working papers this summer. At the age of fourteen, I had forgotten about my plans, but I remembered as soon as it was in my hands. *Working papers*, I remember thinking, *I got my working papers*. I didn't feel anything: no excitement, no anger, no relief, no nothing. I realized then that that particular dream died, perhaps not years ago, but definitely months ago when I entered high school. By then, with all my school work and extracurriculars, I hardly ever see my mother anymore.

But back then, the possibility of me running away reassured me: that there is always another life I could live if I choose to take it. But I never did take it. Sometimes I thought that I was being pragmatic. Other times, I felt like a coward for never gathering enough courage to step through the door.

#### Part 2: Prologue: For You, Mom. Always.

I am 14 now, and throughout my years, I eventually grew to first understand her, and then love her despite all her faults and shortcomings. I hope that by writing this, you too could appreciate all the beauty that she possesses. I hope that you would grow to love her too.

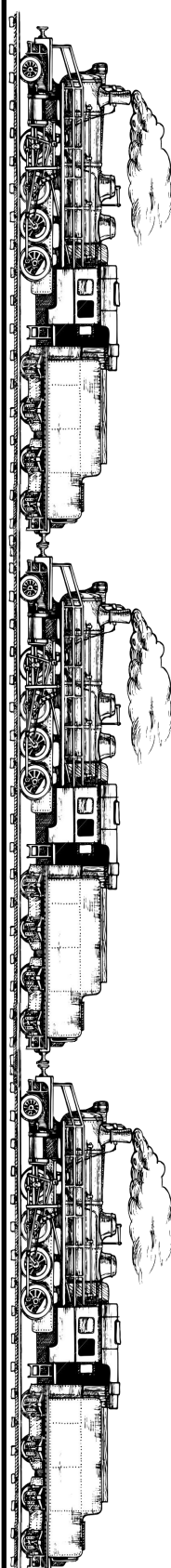
There were times when I feel like there is

an enormous chasm between me and my mom. Sometimes when we walked together to go shopping, there was just dead silence between us. And the times that we do speak, she would ask me questions like "how are your grades," "what is your worst subject," and "when are you planning to take the SAT?" Even though I understand that it is a way for her to show that she cares, I also feel that no matter how hard I try to explain, she will never really understand what I am going through, just like how I will never completely understand her. But I think that what really matters is that I try and that she tries, and that every conversation brings us closer together. These are my collection of her stories. This is for you, Mom. Always.

#### Part 2: My Mother's Story

My mother came from one of the poorer parts of Fujian, which is at the southeast coast of China. Most houses didn't have indoor plumbing or running water, and her family was no exception. She told me that she had to wake up at the crack of dawn to retrieve water from miles away. She never had any formal schooling, and she never received a high school diploma, much less think about going to college. The one time that she did go to school was a few months before she moved to America, and it was only because her brother insisted that she learn some English before she came here. I once asked her why she immigrated to America. I was expecting a romanticized answer: maybe she was looking for love, and she found my dad here in America. She simply replied, "Because I saw how hard my mother was working and I wanted a better life for her, even if I had to work harder than her."

I realized then that I never saw my mother as a human being. I only ever knew her as a mother, but she was also a daughter, a sister, and a wife. That realization shocked me. I knew that she was strict, loving, kind, caring, which are all the traits that a good mother possesses. But I realized then that she was also selfless, altruistic, and brave, which are all the traits that a good human being possesses. From then on, she was no longer a stranger that I could never reach, but someone who I can actually see. I wanted to be able to have enough courage to travel to a far away land, where I



could barely speak the language, where I would have no friends, just to give my mother a better life. I want to be... to be... to be *human* enough so that I am willing to give everything that I have for someone else. *I wanted to be exactly like her.* That was the first time that I had that thought.

Owning a restaurant was a great achievement for my parents. Although they were dirt poor when they arrived in the United States, they saved enough money to finally buy their own restaurant. But it took them around five years. My mom once told me that they were once so poor that they were able to pack all their earthly possessions in two plastic bags. My mom would swing her bag around her shoulder, and my dad would swing his, and they went across the country doing odd jobs. It was all that they were able to accomplish despite who they were that made me realize that being Chinese could be a source of pride. That having yellow skin in this country doesn't automatically mean that you're poor, or that you're uneducated just because you speak in pidgin English. It means courage and determination, because you've chosen to arrive to this country knowing the fact that you don't know the language. It means that you're hardworking, because you've got to work harder than anyone else to earn even half as much as they do. And I love them for it. They are my role models.


What took the longest time to understand was why she wanted

me to work at the restaurant, and I think that the hardest part in trying to love my mom is trying to appreciate the experiences that I gained there. I wanted to scream at her, "you knew how tiring it was going to be, didn't you? If you knew, why did you force me to work?" I think that was what made me stop and realize how stupid I was being. Of course they knew, I realized. She knew it a hundred times more than me how exhausting it was going to be, because she had to work every day, but I only had to do this once a week. *So suck it up Jess, and stop acting like a big baby.* But I didn't. I didn't grow up until I left middle school, and by then I didn't have to work anymore. By then I understood everything too late. Now, I am eternally grateful for all that they had endured for me. On those days, I saw only a glimpse of her everyday life, and even though it was only a tiny window, I think that I matured faster on the days when my hands were shaking from exhaustion than on any other day of my life.

My sisters and I were probably deprived of many childhood experiences. We never had summer vacations, nor any kind of vacation for that matter, and we never went to Disneyland, nor traveled anywhere as a family. But we certainly weren't deprived of love. She would smile and laugh at our jokes, even though they're probably weren't as funny as we thought they would be, especially when they were spoken in pidgin Chinese. She slept later than us, to make sure we got all of our blankets, but still woke up earlier than us, dragging all us out of bed, and practically carrying us all to school. My mother is the strongest person I know, yet she is tired all the time. You can see it in her lined face, from the tightness of her mouth and from the blue of her eye bags. You can see it in the way she carries herself, the slope of her shoulders, and the slowness of her walk.

### Part 3: Epilogue: *Wo ai ni*

I love her. Sometimes I don't feel that way and most times we don't act that way, but gratitude and appreciation are the two feelings that are prevalent up to this very day. Different ethnic groups have different ways of showing love. Many Westerners show it very directly. "I love you," they



would say everyday without fail to everyone. But it embarrasses us to say those words and consequently, we say it infrequently. But we show it everyday. Instead of "I love you," my mom says "Eat more," or "Go to sleep, it's too late." To us, those words are equivalent to "I love you." To me, it's more monumental than just three simple words. *Wo ai ni, Mama.*

## Ellis Island

Anushka Thorat  
Edina, MN

The walls are crumbling into a sheetrock soup. I hear nothing but the hum of their decay. It is deafening. The doctor carries a lined white briefcase containing pointy needles perforating into my American dream and glasses wedged in between a graveyard of failed tests. His steely gray eyes refuse to meet mine.

He pulls out a jagged black chalk that gleams menacingly. He wields his sword with a dangerous indifference and I breathe steadily. Breathing steadily is good, I was told. You would be marked for heavy breaths. I cannot afford heavy breaths. He pinches my arms, squeezing out my foreign pride, and fixates on me like a piece of meat, silently calculating its worth. My flesh is deemed valuable.

But then, his eyes meet mine. The trachoma stares back at his silver irises. I am certain that he can feel the bacteria colonizing my whites. The rules are explicit: I need to be marked. He exhales quietly.

We stand together, the light streaming through the window bars refracting off two antithetical lives, one delicately holding the other's in its pale, wrinkled palms. I feel myself cracking to the rhythm of the rubble that envelopes us. The Island of Tears lives up to its name. An eternity passes in his quiet computation.

He touches my arm lightly, and it is as though I have been made human again. He sighs, shakes his head, and embeds the chalk back into his briefcase.



# The House of Magic on Main Street

Ashley Duraiswamy  
Princeton, NJ

I won't bother telling you where I'm from. You won't know it, and you wouldn't want to know it. Sometimes I wonder if the rest of the United States is even aware that it exists. The town smack dab in the middle of nowhere, so miniscule you'd need one of those magnifying glasses that no one uses anymore to pinpoint it on a map.

We have one Main Street, a ribbon flowing between twin rows of gingerbread-square shops. I could list all of the stores in one breath: Hank's Diner, clogged with the stench of stale hot dog buns and the kind of beer you can buy for \$2.99; Roses and Spice, the boutique where you can bet just about every woman in town buys her faded Sunday dress; and T. W. Goldsmith's Antiques, always ready to supply you with a cracked watch or a misty string of pearls if Valentine's Day catches you unawares. And there's the First Baptist Church and Maddie's Alterations and my no-name middle school, right at the center of town. You can tell someone tried to make it a pretty sort of place when it served as town hall in 1948; it's all rosy brick and sanded columns crowned with a mini bell tower, like the cherry sitting atop one of old Martha Salsbury's pies. Whenever I complain about the idiots who infest its halls half a century later, Sherry just waves a hand and says in her best Southern belle drawl,

"Don't be such a snob, Ness. It's not every child that can go to a real nice-lookin' school like yours."

And then she flounces off to dress for whatever party she's crashing that day. She never stays long enough for me to tell her that if she didn't waste my father's money on frilly cocktail dresses and barrels of mascara, then maybe I would be able to go to Hooper's. Hooper Academy is an hour away and the only private school within a

sixty-mile radius. I've never been there—Sherry can't drive down Main Street without bulldozing a lamppost or flattening one of Mrs. Fry's cats.

And so, as always, I've had to take matters into my own hands. That used to mean spending every evening down at the Kendall's, the only house in town with an actual library. Mr. Kendall, the mayor, sports three chins that waggle beneath a pair of watery blue eyes and a receding hairline. He has one daughter named Katherine—pretty as a Barbie doll, meaner than a skunk, and my all-time archenemy. She only permitted my presence in her manor because I wrote her English essays (and because she probably never sets foot in the library anyway). So the years dripped by as I gobbled my way through the Kendall's library, easing down book after untouched book, letting them whisper stories of war-infested lands and far-off oceans into my ears.

And then Mafalda Dawson arrived. At first she was just a murmur that swept through town, the first new arrival since that lawyer had stumbled in from God-knows-where and fallen for Sherry Albany. Few had seen her yet. Maddie Salsbury, who had spied Ms. Dawson strolling around her garden at 5:30 A.M., reported that she was an ugly sort of woman, with a cloud of raven hair and a lumpy nose. Pretty soon, word got out that Ms. Dawson was planning to resurrect the old library down at the corner of Main Street. I say library, but at the time it hardly warranted the name. Young hoodlums had wasted all the books as kindling for long-forgotten bonfires, and tendrils of ivy had slithered across the windows until the interior was a maze of dust motes and silhouettes.

Yet there was something about that library. The way the June breeze poured through the shattered windows and swished across the moth-eaten curtains, like wind in a corsair's sails. The words trapped within the oaken walls—short words, long words. Words that ricochet between your teeth and smash out of your mouth. Words that slip from tongue to tip and steal across your lips. I heard them all. And that's why I was in that library, that broken house of magic on Main Street, the day that I met Mafalda Dawson.

The town was dangling on the cusp of

June, when the Jasmine-perfumed air grew as clammy and thick as expired soup. I stood in the center of the rundown library. Alone. As I brushed my fingers along the barren shelves, I let my eyes flutter shut and pictured the hundreds of book that had once lived here, and the hundreds of ghosts that now drifted in their place.

"Sorry to interrupt, but what, may I ask, are you doing here?"

I whirled around and found myself staring into a pair of owl-grey eyes, set above a nose so gnarled that it resembled a knob of ginger.

"I-I lost my dog," I lied, "Figured he might've wandered in here..."

"Hmmm," the woman murmured. If she was surprised to find a thirteen-year-old snooping around an abandoned library, she didn't show it.

"Who are you?" I asked, more to break the silence than out of genuine curiosity. Of course I knew who she was. The only mystery in town.

The woman's mouth curved into a crescent moon.

"Mafalda Dawson, but you knew that. I suppose a better question is who are *you*?"

"Ness. Ness Albany."

"Well, Miss Albany, nice try, but in the future, I would recommend having a better excuse in mind. Because unless your dog can leap through windows, there's no chance of finding him here. And now that we've gotten through the introductions, I'm dying to know what you're really doing here."

Under normal circumstances I would have fired off a saucy comeback, but something about Mafalda's crisp diction and clipped tones froze the words on my lips. In the end, I figured the truth was my best option.

"I like it in here," I said, thrusting out my chin, waiting for the names. When it came to me, the other middle schoolers demonstrated a wit and creativity that went unused in the classroom. Vanessa the Wise, Book Kisser, and Nerdy Nessy were just a few of their creations. And the kindest.

But Mafalda Dawson just looked at me with those piercing eyes and smiled.

"Me too," she said. "Libraries are houses of magic, you know. They hold portals to other





realms, other lives. But not everyone knows how to use them. Which means that the people who love these houses of magic—people like you and me—have a little magic hidden inside of them, too.”

I had grown up in a town where the most interesting thing that came out of a grown up's mouth was gossip about the neighbors. I had never heard an adult speak about magic (or books, for that matter). My shock must have been splattered all over my face because Mafalda Dawson laughed and said,

“Here, why don't I prove it to you? Just follow me.”

Maybe it was a bad idea to follow a woman I had known for all of three minutes. In my defense, though, you don't really get the whole “don't talk to strangers” speech in a town where everyone knows everyone else and their third cousin. So I just nodded, silent, and padded behind Mafalda as she led the way towards the back of the room. There stood a door, as round as the entrance to a hobbit hole. After all these years, the wood still smelled of fresh cedar and forest earth. All my prying and kicking had never managed to open that door, but Mafalda pulled a key from her pocket and slid it into the lock. With a click and a creak, the door swung open.

June sunbeams poured through the skylight and circular windows, swirling across the floor in eddies of gold. It illuminated the desk in the corner, groaning under the piles of paper that sprawled across its surface and spilled over the sides. And in every niche, corner, and cranny were stacks upon stacks of books.

Although my fingers itched to grab the nearest book and start reading, I stuffed my hands into my pockets and approached the scrubbed oak table. A closer look revealed words that ran across the pages in a loopy, dancing script.

“My poems,” Mafalda said, coming up behind me. “I'm hoping to publish them, but they aren't quite right yet.”

“*Publish?*” I echoed. “You mean you're an *author?*”

I wasn't sure what I had imagined authors might be like, but certainly not this. If anything, I had pictured them as hooded figures that sat by their firesides day and night, pulling worlds from thin air and weaving them into books. What I had not pictured was a middle-aged woman in jeans, loafers, and a graphic t-shirt.



*Daydreaming*

*Sabrina Luzzi*

Woodbury, NY

“Not quite—my poems have never left that desk. But I am a writer. The real question is, are you?”

“I'm no writer,” I mumbled, staring at Mafalda's outdated penny loafers. “I'm not like you.”

In truth, there had once been a time (after I had learned the books came from people and did not coalesce out of thin air) when I had dreamed of

becoming an author. I spent hours writing a book about a bear who aspired to dance in a ballet. When I showed it to Sherry, sure she could publish it, she only criticized my handwriting. I learned two things that day. One, fairytales are wrong: a biological mother can be as mean as a wicked stepmother any day. Two, I was never going to be a writer.

“I know writing is hard,” Mafalda murmured, as if she had read my mind.

“But think about it. You have the power to trap an entire world with words. Why not use it?”

“Power?” I repeated. “What makes you think I have that? I know plenty of kids at school who can scrape passing grades on their essays. If so many people can write, then what's special about me?”

“I have no doubt that your classmates can string sentences together. But to write, to *really* write, you have to love words. You have to feel, smell, see, touch, and taste them. Has it ever occurred to you that while the whole town has been scrutinizing me, I have been staring right back? I've seen you bury your nose in a book while your mother shouts at you for not combing your hair. I've seen you run your finger over library shelves. You love words. And that makes all the difference.”

Now this was ironic. I'd spent my life standing up to people who thought I'd never amount to anything: Sherry, Katherine, this whole stupid town. And when I finally met someone who believed in me more than my own mother, all I felt was doubt.

“You have a secret weapon, you know,”

Mafalda said.

“What?” I whispered.

“Me,” she said. “I can teach you.”

An image flashed across my mind of me as an apprentice book-writer, pouring over a sheaf of paper as Mafalda hovered nearby, her hand resting on my shoulder. I saw myself opening a book, *my* book, and inhaling the





scent of its pages, sliding my fingers across words that were all my own.

I had so many of them, lost in the crevices of my mind. Here was my chance to get them out, to place them on a library shelf and watch them grow.

“All right.” I stared straight into those cool eyes for the first time and grinned. “You’re on.”

Everything after that is a blur. Time moved quickly, like a river tearing through a dam and cascading into the dust-choked gorge below. Evening after evening melted away in discussions of plot, and many a night found us sitting at that oak table, motionless save for our hands flying across the paper. All dreams of Hooper Academy had vanished; I no longer needed them. Under Mafalda’s steady gaze, I grew to love the hunt for the perfect word, the grapple for just the right phrase. Enchanted libraries, young heroines, and portals to other realms blossomed from the tip of my pen as I trapped word after word on the page. I finished my first story in July, received my first rejection letter in August, and kept on writing.

And here I am, still sitting at the same table in Mafalda’s now-restored library, still writing. I have lost count of the rejection letters. I’ve opened every one of them with Mafalda’s knobby arm draped across my shoulders. Her voice, cool and lovely, dampens the ache. But at night, when Mafalda is blocks away and I lie in bed listening to one of Sherry’s parties, I let myself think of all those rejections.

A thousand no’s equals a thousand struggles for victory. And all I need is one yes.

## We Are Not So Distinct

Alexander Chon

Upper Saddle River, NJ

The sun beats down on the faces of twenty-nine fellow second-graders, dressed in neon athletic apparel and the newest pair of signature basketball shoes. They walk in a single file line, bubbling in anticipation for their favorite part of the day: Recess. After the teachers’ few meager attempts to calm them down, shouting, Clap once if you can hear me!”, the students rush through the open gate like shoppers at Walmart on Black Friday. Some head straight for the jungle gym, others scramble for the assortment of balls, many make a beeline for the jump ropes. The familiar sound of lighthearted squeals fills the air as students savor their sweet thirty minutes of freedom while I sit alone in the distance, watching the waves of heat rise off the blacktop like the exhaust of a jet engine.

I feel so distinct.

The school year is coming to an end and I still feel uneasy walking to the playground every day, not knowing if I will be invited to play tag or whether I am going to be picked last for a soccer game. I am not like my classmates. Looking at my class picture, no one has any trouble picking out the tiny speck of yellow from the engulfing sea of white. My jet black, bowl cut hair, and almond-shaped eyes distinguish me from my classmates whose cookie-cutter appearances resemble Barbie and Ken. I am a second-generation Korean American born and raised in New York City, often labeled a “twinkie” or a “banana” the pejorative terms for having an Asian appearance but Caucasian mannerisms. Often, I am confused as to why people treat me differently based on my ethnic appearance even though I grew up in the same environment as them.

Just a few weeks later, I find myself in the sweltering heat, listening to the familiar sounds of children playing, only I am in the distant, faraway land of Cambodia. My parents decided it would be a good use of my summer vacation to volunteer

abroad. Instead of the well-manicured lawns of the schoolyard, I approach a field on the side of a small road that leads to a run-down school. As I trek along the street, lined with rusted barbed fences, plastic bottles, and broken glass carelessly strewn about, I notice children gathering curiously over the group of strangers.

I perform my best sampeah, pressing my hands together and bowing my head as I greet the children. “Chom reap suor!”

Many of the children giggle and hide shyly behind their older siblings. They grin at me with their mischievous crooked smiles, anticipating a new friend. I approach a slender boy with olive colored skin and coal black eyes who looks about my age. He wears a tattered school uniform a few sizes too small, paired with mud-stained pants and no shoes. His feet are calloused, and his heels are cracked from frequent play. I introduce myself.

“K’nyom chhmua Alex, chhmua ei?”

“K’nyom chhmua Seangly.”

After we share our brief pleasantries, Seangly takes me by the hand and motions me to play soccer with him and his friends. I call out to my dad to tell him I am going to play with my new friend, but he is too busy examining patients to pay any attention. I take his unresponsiveness as silent approval and proceed to follow Seangly onto the field. Without hesitation, I throw my fanny pack off to the side and peel off my sandals, smiling as I feel the wild grass brush against my bare feet.

Under the scorching sun, we run up and down the field kicking the raggedy, partially deflated ball, trying our best to kick it between the two trees that we designated as the goal. The salty beads of sweat trickle down my face and sting my eyes, unaccustomed to the sultry tropical weather. The heat and the humidity of the late-afternoon feel suffocating but do not appear to affect Seangly and the other boys at all. We are boisterous and energetic in our play, and although we come from the opposite ends of the globe, I find we share the same rituals when it comes to celebrating a goal. We both shriek as we sprint as fast as we can while pumping fists the air and finish by sliding on our knees with wild smiles painted on our faces. At this moment, I realize that though Seangly and I speak





two different languages, we have no problem communicating. I read his quick nod, toothy grin, and his encouraging holler, and I realize that our emotions and expressions transcend language. After playing through the entire afternoon, neither of us can remember the final score, but the moments of pure bliss during the game are memories we will not forget.

Following our game, Seangly takes me to a drink stand and treats me to a sugarcane beverage. As he signals me to follow him towards the shade of the palm trees, I remember that I had saved two lollipops in my fanny pack from the previous day. While he sits down at the base of the tree, I unzip my pouch and offer one to him.

He accepts with a big smile. “Acoon,” he says.  
“Minbach kuorosam te,” I reply.

Exhausted from the long, hard day of play, I let out an extended audible yawn as I plop down next to him. For a moment, we watch the sky turn cotton candy pink as the sun sets. We sit in silence, listening to nothing but the sound of the palm leaves rustling in the sweet summer wind and the distant chirps of crickets while we devour our lollipops. At this moment, I come to an inadvertent but profound realization

We are not so distinct.

It is September, and the school year is beginning once again. I sit in my classroom, staring out the window, looking over the playground. A wave of uneasiness rushes over me. As the metronomic ticks of the clock approach recess, my mouth turns to cotton and my palms begin to sweat. When the bell sounds, I jump from my desk, startled, and stumble into the dreaded single file line of now third graders, clenching my fists as we walk toward the playground. I hear my classmates giggling in excitement for their favorite part of the day, and I cannot help but feel the same anxiety from the previous year. As we approach the all too familiar white picket fence and well-trimmed grass of the schoolyard, my stomach turns and I break into a sweat. Then, all of a sudden, a small deflated soccer ball rolls towards me. For a moment, I stare at the ball and hesitate as the memories of the

summer flood into my head. I remember my time with Seangly and then smile as I kick the ball, running to join my fellow classmates on the field.

## Tempest

Akanksha Basil

Chappaqua, NY

She awoke to obsidian  
And gold painted fingers.

Far in the wild,  
An origin of brave and beautiful brown-skinned  
ancestors,  
Who sailed with willow-bark  
Galoped over the new world  
On windy, black-maned horses.  
To provide for more tempest and insistence  
to return to the soil and other trees, for  
more darkened bones and those who consume flesh  
Because they must.  
Rainy women and willow-wild men  
Who caught their reflections on leaves  
Saw their children, eyes tilted to a burning closure,  
Crow-hairs on baby heads and  
ravens upon great-grandfathers’ skulls.  
My mother’s mother used to say,  
“If you laugh too hard,  
You are sure to cry.”

And she is far off,  
in a land of silk and spiders and ancestors  
Homo sapien lovers who, I’m sure,  
for the sake of pleasure and sunrise,  
Used to retrieve mangoes from teardrop trees  
In the backyard, just like my father.

But for today, I am here, in a land  
Filled with extraneous silence  
And skies held upon  
stag skulls  
And my mother remembers Bombay, not Mumbai.

For elegant ancient names, their tastes  
Like spices in my young mouth  
are there, somewhere, strung in  
streaks of tiger and vermilion,  
Held, creased  
in wakeful hands on cave walls,  
Who never imagined  
how many legends there’d be.

## Mosaic

Tyler Econa

Woodbridge, VA

My hand is brown. Both of my hands, in fact, are brown. They’re identical copies of my fathers’: the same color and shape, the same look of our protruding green veins, but his mother gave me her fingers. Those are long, slender, joined with those knobbly knuckles we share. I recall how she’d hold me in her lap as I was learning to speak, teaching me to count the ten perfect digits sitting on my fist, teaching me my own name, and the Spanish word for ‘grandma’.

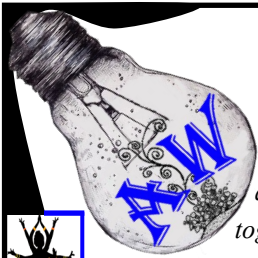
Our fingers hesitate as I attempt to type. They hover over the keyboard as I stare down at the little notebook on my lap once more. It’s blank, besides the one time I used it as a journal entry for the day my creative writing group received them. The nonfiction assignment seemed simple enough: “Write about your origin,” they’d told us.

I stare back at the blinking cursor, and then again at the notebook. I hate nonfiction.

I look down at what I’ve scribbled on the newest page so far. *Poland, Peru*, two countries of origin. *Mother, father*, people of direct lineage. *United States*, my country of birth, their country of immigration and residence. Everything’s jotted down sprucely, to each word its own neat line, until the list scatters: *assimilation, suburbs, marriage... interracial, cross-cultural, trilingual, nuclear family... recession, foreclosure, divorce*— and that’s where all words stop.

I became disillusioned with the idea of my “origins” as a young child; my formative years were stunted by the overwhelming desire for an all-American experience. My impressionable young self, while under the influence of school bullies and pop culture, dissociated from her roots. The massive rift in her family later on only helped to scatter the fractured pieces further. Within the memory of my grandmother and I sitting together lingers my baby brother’s milky-white fist, reaching over me to grab her braid. Strangers don’t believe we share the same set of parents.





Write about your origin.

Your two lifestyles, split into pieces and forcefully squeezed back together. My “origins” feel wet socks in the laundry — I’ll never be able to sort them out evenly. Each is solitary, but the whole collection is one clumped mass. I wake up at my father’s with a certain pair of socks in mind one morning, then realize I’ve lost one of them, only to rediscover it a week later tucked away in the drawer at my mother’s. I go back and forth. I become an expert at packing up my things in under twenty minutes because *it’s his Wednesday and he’s coming to pick us up at three, you better hurry*. I’m subject to Polish dinners and Babcia Anna’s phone calls Sundays through Wednesdays, and rapid-Spanish, Peruvian aunties, rice and beans Wednesdays through Saturdays. These household-specific rituals never meet; they only rotate. I cling to the memories of birthday parties and First Communion and New Year’s Eves, the times when all my socks had pairs, even if they were mismatched. One would hear Spanish in several corners of the room, Polish in the hallway, English in the kitchen and on the floor. The images, like once-colorful patterns, have since dulled in the washing machine. They’re replaced with the sound of arguing, something about money; I’m eight years old, I wake up to stern voices across the hall in the night and press my ear to my door to make out what they’re saying. I can never make out what they’re saying. I can’t remember anything else. I find gaps here and there, a toe sticks out; my oldest pair of socks frays with age.

I’m not only my grandmother’s hands. I’m also my mother’s lungs and my

great-grandmother’s feet— generations of limbs and minds, of religion and trauma. I’m a thousand different migrants scrambling for safety, stability, home.

Ellis Island, 1916. My great-great-grandmother arrives in New York from Austria-Hungary, safe from the perils of the Great War on her homefront. She wants to build a life, she’s looking at apartments, a husband. But she returns home thirteen years later, unmarried, childless, the Great Depression weighing heavy on her breast, her



*Bloom Later*

Anika Bahl

Arlington, VA

bags empty with the exception of a passport, a few scarves, and a pearl rosary.

I sit on my mother’s lap as she reads the letter my great-grandmother scrawled out in neat Polish-cursive to us, alphabet inked curly and careful, but I’m seven years old and I’m fidgeting with a hand-knit doily I grabbed off the bedside table, a souvenir from our last trip to Krakow. I don’t pay attention to how similar the writing looks to the way my mother jots her name down on all my school forms. I fit my finger through a doily and trace the flower-pattern. *All those stitches really*

*linked together to make that, huh? Must’ve taken generations.*

My paternal great-grandfather doesn’t scare me. No, it’s something different. He’s not scary, just unfamiliar. The adults in the room are all quiet, they’re watching my brother and I interact with him. Anticipation hangs heavy in the air, *but for what?* It’s a little unnerving. I try not to pay it much mind. I look at my brother squirming in that woman’s arms next to me. She’s much stouter than the old man whose lap I’m in, but her face is just as wrinkly. She’s my great-grandmother. My brother is three. She smiles at me and her skin crinkles up. The roots of her unnaturally raven hair are a soft, snowy white. I’m six. I can smell soap and spices on the man who holds me, I keep forgetting he’s something like family. He’s so thin I’m afraid he’ll break if I shift the wrong way.

“Abuelito Miguel is one-hundred years old today,” my father tells me. *Bisabuelo*. If he’s so important, why am I just now meeting him? I wish I could’ve known more. I wish my mother would stop talking to me in Polish when everyone else is speaking Spanish.

“Can I let go now?” They allow me to slip off the leathery couch

and my mother hands me a piece of fruit, a half-mango. I suck on its nectar and watch the big blue Lima sky. She murmurs to me, Slavic accent soft and motherly about the mess I’ve made on the clothes her mother hand-sewed me. The sundress drips with juice. It’s a flowery, Eastern-European pattern, like the one on her sheets at home. Years later, my great-grandfather dies at 102; something of a legacy left behind in my chubby, brown hands.

“Where are you from?”

I don’t answer that if I can help it. I don’t

think I've actually ever answered that. My automatic response since I've been old enough to understand what it implied has been: "Well, my mom's from Poland and my dad's from Peru."

*Where am I from? From whom?*

My mother's womb is safe and compact. No languages to learn. It's just me and her. I split off suddenly and kick her insides. That flesh — ours, all warm blood and tissue, cells multiplying, genes copying. I'm a person, I squirm, and then I'm a bundle, finally. I'm all red and pink and ready to take on the world, fists clenched, I don't know about gender or race or origin. I just am. This is where I originate.

*Mama* is the same in Polish and in Spanish.

I have her European nose and a pointed, Caucasian chin, but the apples of my cheeks protrude like the natives' of Cusco, like my father's. My delicate eyebrows fan out and touch in the middle. My skin's not *caramel* or *toffee* or *golden*, but I'm not *vanilla bean* or *shortbread* or *sweet cream* either. I'm a brown little kid, nine years old and barefoot in the summer, cheeks singed from the sun. Our backyard blooms with gardenias behind the white fence; suburban, domestic bliss. My two-year-old brother trails behind me with a universally content squeal, happy in all our languages. He's tanned too well to be white. My mother's red and pink all over, she applies sun lotion like it's lifeblood, but he's a lightly toasted marshmallow. His eyebrows fan out even more than mine, caterpillars on his peachy face, but his don't touch and mine are darker. He has a wide, bulbous nose and hooded eyelids — the recessive Peruvian gene. My eyelids protrude outwards, the dominant. Somewhere in their rich history, the Inca-descendants made contact with the Chinese and other East Asian travelers and tradesmen. We still put soy sauce in our stir-fry and seafood. My brother gets asked if he's Japanese.

*Tato* is the Polish word for father. I never picked up *Papá* or *Papi*. I was three, my brother copied me, and the name stuck. I'm sixteen and I still call him that in the kitchen. We make tamales. "Tato, you forgot the olives." He curses in Spanish and I hit him playfully, he moves to the salsa

rhythm blaring on the speakers, and the house swells with the aroma of boiled banana leaves and garlic rice.

He never learned Polish. My mother knows all three languages; she's fluently trilingual. She learned Spanish in all of two years. Polish, on the other hand, is ranked one of the top most difficult languages in the world to learn — rooted in Slavic, while Spanish is a Romance language and one of the easiest to pick up. I don't blame my father. The rest of our family lags behind too. I know the most immediately after Mama — I read Polish and Spanish, albeit slowly. I speak in stuttering phrases, muttered sentences and incorrect grammar tenses, but I speak. I can listen to radio dramas, watch TV, participate in family gossip on either side, and I'm perfectly fine. My brother can't speak or understand Polish except in bits and phrases, some words he recognises: food items and household objects. The difference is three years, a divorce and a split in households; I don't blame him either.

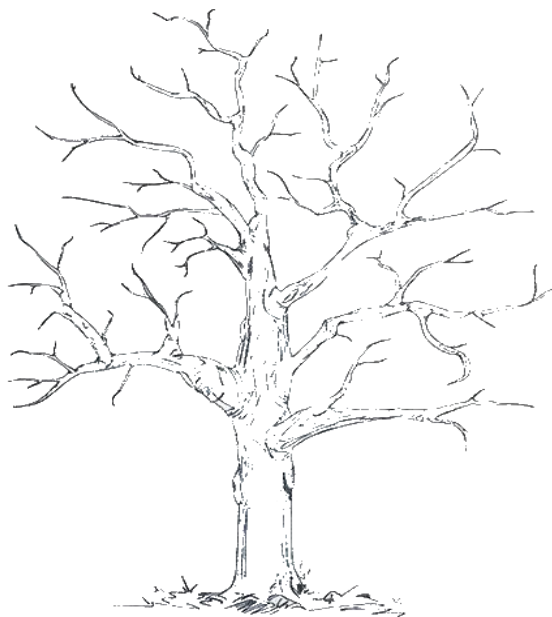
There's a certain shy shame behind it, I can sense his embarrassment. The village kids on my Polish grandmother's farm babble to him and I translate. They hang off my arms and call me *Cocia*, auntie, and ask:

"Why is your skin like that?"

"Like what?"

"It's so *dark!* Did the American sun make you brown like that?"

"Yes, but I'm like that all year round. I'm

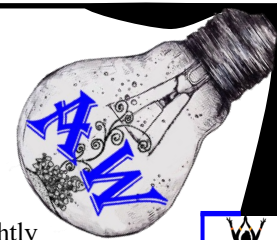


hispanic, like my dad. And so is Boleslav."

I point to my brother and they marvel at my words. He's only lightly tanned and I'm spoonful of cinnamon in comparison. They've never seen a hispanic person before — the most these kids have seen of anyone who isn't white are the Romani people who beg on the streets in the big city, the ones they call 'Gypsies'.

I get called *gypsy* as well, by one of the street performers in the town square, but I know it's meant as a compliment. I smile back, my coffee eyes gleaming. They call them *black*, black eyes, black hair, being brown is such a novelty in Poland that it's romanticised. They write songs about brown eyes, they're so unique, so beautifully dark. *Gypsy queen*, *Snow White*, *Pocahontas*. I walk into a cafe with my mother. She orders first, rapid Polish that the barista reciprocates. When I approach, she says "Hello," sweetly, attempting her best English. "What can I get you today?" She's thoroughly surprised, almost flustered when I answer back in fluent Polish. She enters my order and compliments me on how well I speak. "Thank you," I tell her. "Yeah, that's my mom." I point to my mother across the room, the white woman nonchalantly sipping her coffee.

My European features are praised in the mountains of Peru. The town's nestled right underneath Machu Picchu, swarming with tourists and indigenous peoples alike. "What a nice nose! And good hair, wow, and look at how nice your skin is..." It's not too deeply brown like my father's, they mean. The marketplaces are packed with products, alpaca wool dyed brilliant reds and purples. They eye my brother suspiciously as we explore like locals, my dad bargaining about price to get discounts. They don't discount tourists, the white men; exploitation of their cultures keeps them alive and fed. My brother gives us away. I pick up a geode for sale and caress its rough crystals. *Amethyst. This came from the ground*, I think. *This came right from an old murky cave, right from the ground with all the other rocks and dirt, but it's purple and familiar and has an*





identity of its own. Wonder how that is.

I stand at the peak of Machu Picchu after having climbed hundreds of steps from the bottom of the highest ruin, now at the top, wheezing, but we made it. All three of us—my brother, my father, and I, but my mother’s asthma gnaws at my own lungs. Our heads graze the clouds and I try to *feel my ancestry*, like our tour guide told us to, *feel it in the soil while you stand there at the top of the mountain, listen to the ghosts of those ancient people, your thousandth-great grandfathers, grandmothers and aunts and uncles growing corn, toiling to build these foundations, birthing generations of your family. Can you hear them?*

I can’t. Instead, I get sick behind a big rock formation—altitude sickness, the tour guide explains. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I don’t feel anything except a dull pain in my stomach from the air pressure. *How can this really be where I come from when it’s all so foreign to me?*

“I want to learn Quechua,” my father remarks. It’s one of the many surviving native languages of the region. I want to be able to speak Spanish again.

Usually, I don’t feel like a person. I’m an amalgam of identities, experiences, but they all overwhelm and cancel out, like when you mix all the brightest colors on your paint palette together and end up with a muddy grayish-brown. It’s so much that I don’t know what to do with it. Somewhere between ten and twelve years old, I withdrew. *I don’t want two households, two cultures, two birthday presents, I don’t care. I don’t want these origins. I just want to be normal.*

“I don’t know how to start. At all,” I complain to my friend on the bus ride home from the field trip. I tell her about the disconnect, how my cultures tear at me, how I feel like one big brown blob. She tells me: “A whole is more than the sum of its parts.” I consider the concept; it’s nice.

Like a mosaic of individual pieces, all glimmering different colors, but it’s more

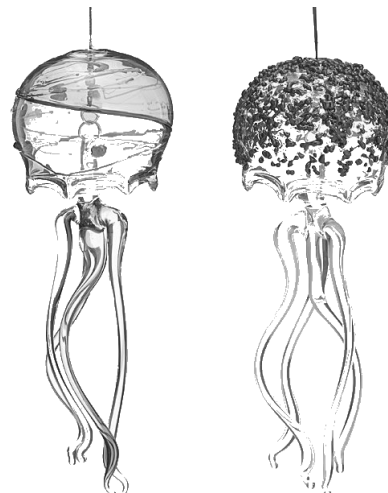
than just those bits glued together. “Who said that?” I ask, but I tune out of the conversation before I get to hear the clear answer. Some French philosopher, or was it a German psychologist? I guess it doesn’t matter. I look out the window. We’re passing hills and mountains, little farms dotting the grassy landscape, the afternoon sun pouring through and spilling onto my hands. I look at them in the light, through the glass, and I imagine a faint, colorful glimmer shining back.

## Ode to a Glass-Blown Wind Chime

Shaam Beed

Livingston, NJ

Which was conceived in the dusty air of an elementary art room, surrounded by oil paints and intoxicating pastels and the woody aroma of a fresh canvas, which was perched in the womb for hours as a t-shirt cloaked deity labored over its perfections before crowning in the kiln. Twenty-five hundred degrees circulated the fetus as its skin bubbled and burst, as its organs melded into one another and the ceramic chimes solidified to the brittleness of amber-colored, salt-coated pretzel sticks. It was brought home in a silver case held by the delighted child who had perfected it, loved it, baked it. Its beaded hook was hung on a nail underneath the silver kitchen clock by the delighted child who fiddled with its shrill ceramic toes during the entire bus ride home. Every bump, every squeal, every tongue stuck out at the cars behind were documented as the day a glass-blown wind chime was born.



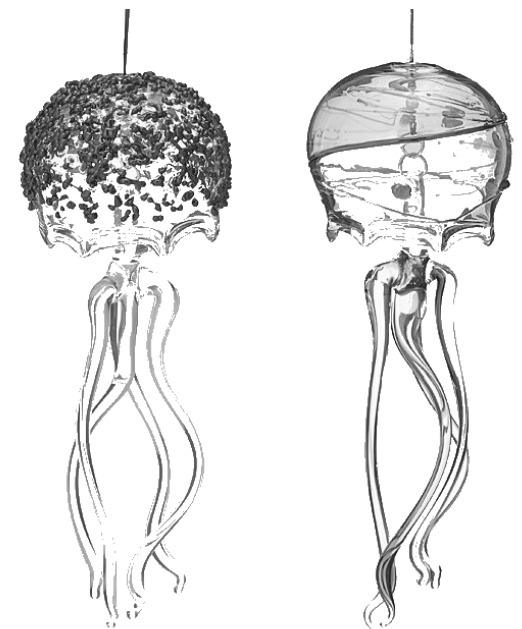
## your guide to life’s misapplication

Gloria Wang

Fairfax, VA

- (Select all that apply) the slim hours between midnight and three see your hands
  - latticed with charcoal and you bite into nail beds in frustration
  - wringing and wrung, for if you could, you would press the electrons out of me without compunction
  - frozen, caught in entropy as a mind wanders with abandon
- (Use a graphing calculator) if your absence took rot
 

three days and twenty three hours after you left,  
how long till I am diminished into inextricable decay?
- (True or false) if I rest my head on a glassy lake, I will leave a ripple.
- if you are three-seventeenths disingenuity and one-sixth glittering mirage
  - life is dying and you are already history, christened by the first breath
  - there is a glee to your gaze that never touches your smile
  - and you are close but never quite at the end.



# dreams not realized

Sam Bender-Prouty  
Arlington, VA

my grandfather told me when i was young  
son, it's time you learn that the more you age the  
less things seem to matter  
and as life goes on we just outgrow our dreams  
and we don't worry the way we used to about what  
happens when we die  
and what we mean  
and who we are  
we worry about the things that matter  
like if the mortgage is paid  
and when the contractor comes  
and if we should mow the lawn ourselves or call  
that neighborhood boy  
i know it  
someday you'll know it  
and the woman down the street knows it  
she doesn't worry the way she used to about if god  
can hear her  
and if there's really life out there  
she doesn't wonder anymore why her children never  
visit  
why her husband doesn't come around  
and why everybody leaves  
no, she worries about her taxes  
and the value of her house  
and she's stopped dreaming of the farmhouse she  
left behind when she moved to the big city  
the way the water felt on the last day of summer  
a stolen kiss from someone long forgotten  
and her old swing set  
buried in the ground.



# How Spring Thaws

Tyler Econa  
Woodbridge, VA

She came back to me in late March. At the height of its season, our callery pear tree, which we'd revived from its near-death last year, had begun to shed. Petals spread over the driveway and coated the hood of our car. I left the mounds of pale velvet to wilt there, didn't bother scooping them up with the snow shovel. Spring had emptied its vitality out onto the street and I was lucky to have her home alive.

She spent her first day home lingering in corners, rearranging things. Compulsion gripped her with glazed-over eyes and a silent fixation. She emptied the bookshelf, reordered it, dumped it all out again. Every window was left a crack up, pulled down, and then set wide open and left just so — and then the thermostat: up three degrees, up one more, then down six. That first night, my wife fell asleep trembling on our sofa.

Weeks earlier, alone in the vacuity of the house, I'd begun to turn on all the taps in our sinks at once, letting them run for hours. I did anything I could if only to fill the house with any sound other than television static and radio murmur. I spent every morning adjusting each stream to the perfect temperature. It went: warm water in the sinks, steaming hot in the kitchen, near-boiling in the bath. I used the thermometer to make sure. Anything, really, to delay having to look at the uneven number of eggs left in the fridge. Up until then, we'd always used eggs two at a time — always an even vacancy. Two plates in the sink, two slices of toast. When I learned she'd been found and rushed into surgery, I brought home two boxes: plastic utensils and frozen waffles.

I thought her odd ritual had been an imitation of my own tendencies, a nod to the habits of mine that she'd fallen in love with so many years ago. *I missed you*, those actions seemed to say. *But look, I'm home now*. In her hollow state, it was her last attempt at intimacy; she enveloped herself in my arms without once approaching me. My wife

rarely ever opened her mouth now, nevermind physical contact — when she did, it was only to soften my concern with one-word murmurs. After she moved back into our bed upstairs, I tried to engage whenever I could.

*Good morning.*

*Hello.* She'd just rolled over and opened her eyes. Her syllables glued together with slow lips and a croaky voice.

*How're you feeling?*

She contemplated it, chewed up the question and swallowed it dryly. Perhaps it was too early to know.

*Okay...*

Always 'okay', or 'dunno', but never silence, at least. I thanked God I didn't have to make my own noise now. The crinkle of the covers when she moved and the ghosts of her feet on the staircase were more than I could ever hope for.

I quickly learned my touch repelled her more than my words. The gentlest nudge or the graze of my hand sent shivers down her spine, made her retract like paper curling in a flame. It was then that I noticed the first trail of frost creeping up her arm.

We lay in the dark under miles of covers — a vast desert plane, reminiscent of a garden, but at least the warmth lingered. I'd rolled over and wound my arm around her waist in my sleep. She tore herself from me. I awoke and saw her trembling. It didn't stop after I pulled away; she ran a hand through her hair and let out a heavy exhale, like she'd swallowed the weight of some invisible force. I noticed it then: her breath evaporated in the air of our bedroom, as I sat there under the same insulated sheets. Permafrost particles settled over her skin and made a home like dust on a baby grand. Tears crystalized on her face, leaving her cheeks sparkling and raw. I didn't say a word.

She pushed her head off the pillow and sat up. I turned to look at her as she pulled off her nightshirt and revealed her frigid figure. My eyes caught her silhouette quivering in the





light of the open window, the curve of her breasts, the rolls of her body — all a familiar comfort to behold.

But new scars littered her torso, alight against the bluish tint of her skin. The longest one spanned lengthwise across her stomach, wide and pearly. The stippling of a surgical needle accompanied each side. I saw the movement of his wrist, the faceless assailant who'd robbed her of her warmth, in each mark he left behind. My sight fixed onto the one stamped to her neck, a thin white line between his knife and her writhing pulse. I felt the spectral grip of his hands on her wrists as he used her.

She stood up and left the room. I sat up after her, whispered her name, but she didn't look my way as she bound for the stairs. I found her on the couch again in the morning, half-uncovered by the membrane of a thin blanket.

Afterwards, her attempts to maintain the cold continued for days on end. She kept the temperature down and the windows up, never once breathing a word about it. If I went to change it, or close those windows, she'd get right back up again. Sometimes we moved in turns, back and forth to the thermostat in a delayed-action minuet — but I occasionally felt a pang of guilt and let the arctic settle. I quietly accepted it, figured I couldn't do much else besides allow her whatever comfort it

brought her.

There came nights when she couldn't hold food down. The cold coagulated inside her gut and nauseated her. She curled up on the rug in the bathroom and waited for it to make its way back up; sometimes she forced it. Those days, I watched the frost creep back up and consume her until it seemed it'd eaten away at her core. Her heart clenched with ice that had trickled into her veins, leaving her stiff and weak. But there came a point where she allowed my touch as I sat next to her on the rug, hand running up and down her back. She'd emerge from the bathroom welcoming my embrace.

*You're warm,* she noticed.

*Is that... okay?*

A little breath puffed from her nostrils as she contemplated it.

*Mm-hm. More than okay.*

By the end of the month, she'd picked up a few more habits. I noticed a newfound *force* with which she did things. Despite the bright weather, she rid her closet of anything that didn't cover her arms and legs entirely. Hot, heavy tub water steam flooded the bathroom when she could muster the energy to bathe. She ate without waiting for anything to cool. She attempted these near-aggressive acts of self-care while telling me, *We haven't come this far to let this stand in the way. I'm not going to let it happen.* The entire world —

our whole suburb, at least — had witnessed us establish everything we'd been told we would never be able to.

*A life like this, for people like us, domesticity... it's possible, and I want us to be living proof,* she'd said to me. She had come to the conclusion that she could still grow, even if solely out of spite.

*The pear tree needs pruning. I'm going out.*

*In this heat? Are you sure?*

*Yeah — the schoolchildren can catch a glimpse at the second half of the old neighborhood dykes for once. What have you done with the shears?*

But I discovered the indefinite nature of her defrosting the morning I reached for her hand, thinking it was time, now, that she withstood the contact. She'd retracted sharply. I watched the familiar glasslike shards spread over her hands, saw her breath evaporate again. She looked at me, and then away, like she couldn't stand to let me see what I'd done to her.

*I can't. I'm sorry.*

*No, it's okay, don't be.*

*It's just... touching—*

*I know. I shouldn't have, I'm sorry.*

She met her reflection in the dark brew before her. She'd told me she was determined to *down the entire damn thing, fresh from the pot if it kills me.* Particles of ice still clung to her eyelashes. I tried to keep her mind from wandering too far.

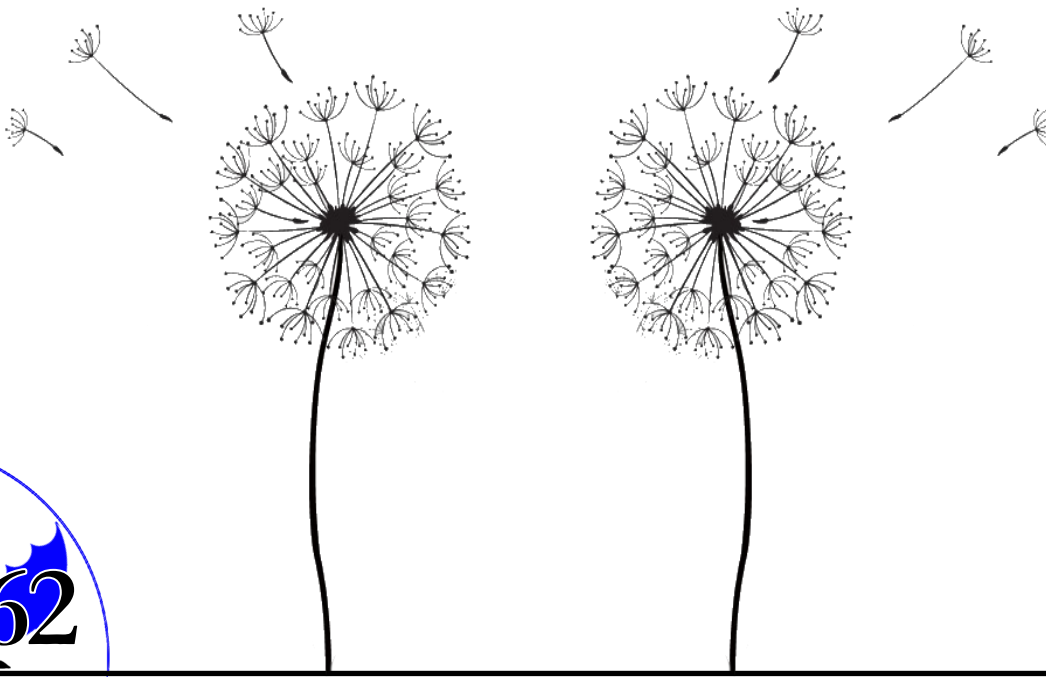
*How's your coffee?*

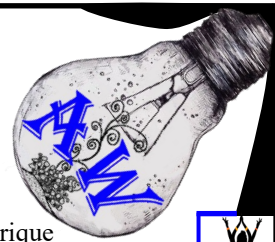
*...Hot.*

Her eyes darted to the window. She grasped her mug tighter. She loathed this process, I knew she did, but those stubborn efforts were undeniable. Her feet left wet prints on the kitchen floor after she left to get dressed.

We'd been young together, once — we'd seized our heat and ran with it. We were slower now, but the sentiment glowed in the embers we kindled together.

*Ten years,* she murmured to me one day





## ASHIA

Ailun Shi  
Palos Verdes Estates, CA

“Ah, the Amazon Rainforest. Quite a beauty, isn’t she?”

Enrique looked down at the see-through bottom of the plane. Below was an endless mass of lush green vegetation with flocks of birds flying out from it. He petted the huge cage next to him absent-mindedly. “Where are we dropping her off?”

Walt, the lead researcher of the expedition with an unnatural penchant for obnoxious comments, pointed a crooked finger at a particular spot in the distance that looked no different from the rest of the rainforest. “Right there. This is the *third* time you’ve asked.”

Enrique nodded and stroked the bars of the cage again. He waited for a few minutes—long enough that Walt would have calmed down a bit—before he asked, “Do you want me to...” he shifted his eyes to look at the cat sleeping inside the cage.

“We already went over this.” Walt pursed his lips, which disappeared completely behind his white-streaked beard. “You’re the best one qualified for the job.”

Enrique grimaced. Walt was the one with a PhD in environmental science. Ashley, asleep and snoring in her seat, was the one with biology and genetics degrees. But of course, with a computer programming and data science degree, *he* was the best person to be responsible for releasing a jaguar into the wild. If anyone ended up mutilated by the end of the expedition, it wasn’t going to be his fault. Not that he was hoping that someone would end up mutilated—they’d probably toss all the data entry work to him, and data entry work was the worst.

The hover plane whirred as it slowly descended to the forest ground, and Enrique watched, fascinated, as the trees below grew larger and larger. Their aircraft brushed against the thick tree canopies, producing the ominous sounds of rustling leaves and triggering the cries of disturbed animals. The lighting around them grew darker and darker until Enrique felt the telltale *thump* of the hover plane touching the ground, and the lights

flickered on.

The crackle of the intercom filled the cabin, and there was a suspenseful silence when Enrique thought something must have gone wrong when the autopilot settings warbled, “All clear.”

“Alright!” Walt immediately disengaged his seatbelt and bounced up, seeming much lighter than his fifty years. He clapped a hand on Ashley’s shoulder, shoving her awake before clapping his other hand on Enrique, sending him reeling. Before Enrique could recover, his seatbelt had been undone, courtesy of Walt. “Come on, come on. Not too much time. Hayes, grab the camera, would you?”

Ashley yawned as she dragged herself off her seat and aimed a half-hearted punch at Walt’s arm. “I didn’t drag myself through graduate school to play cameraman.”

“That’s the spirit!” Walt turned to Enrique, who was still sitting in his seat, a hand dragging along a bar of the cage. The cat was still asleep. How strange it was that they had come to his destination, and yet the cat wasn’t aware of it at all. Walt interrupted his thoughts. “Up, Enrique, up. Time’s wasting, and the sooner we get this kitty-cat out, the sooner she can start fixing the food chain.”

“Right, um, right.” Enrique pushed himself up from the chair and, forgetting that he had hooked his foot behind the cage during the flight, nearly tripped onto the ground. A heavy warning growl emitted from the cage.

“Oh, now you’ve awoken the beast,” Walt reproached, but a smile tugged at his lips—he was clearly excited. “Come now, come now. You grab that side.”

The two men, working together, disengaged the locks on the wheels before Walt smacked one of the many buttons on the walls to open the door panel on the opposite side of the plane. Outside revealed the dim underbrush of the rainforest. A few shafts of sunlight filtered through the leaves above. There was a calm sort of silence and peace—the same type that came after a particularly tremulous thunderstorm, and Enrique couldn’t stop himself from breathing in, expecting the scent of fresh

during breakfast. *Since I married you. Ten next month.*

I set our two plates in the sink and nodded in realization of that fact.

*God, we’re old.*

She almost laughed. There it was, I thought — the smile I’d seen in moments I could count on one hand.

*Remember when it wasn’t legal?*

*Course I do.*

*We showed them, huh? Marched on*

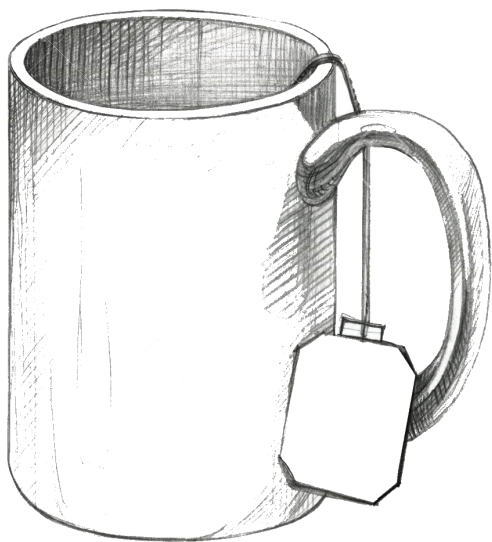
*Washington and everything. Remember when they lit up the White House all rainbow?*


*Yeah, that was really something.*

*And then that first lesbian congresswoman.*

*You turned to me and said, “Us dykes have finally infiltrated the state.”*

I kissed the top of her head as she mumbled about *The neighborhoods, now, too* with a squeeze to my hand. The thaw, as I witnessed it, happened in contradiction to every linear model I’d ever known. She taught me to reject them — that spring wasn’t about the progression of longer days and warmer nights. It was about the days where she held my hand in the middle of the worst frost, met my eyes, tangled our fingers together. It existed in her gasping as she clutched my arm and coughed her dinner back up. It fluctuated in degrees and days immeasurable to me. The only constant was us two, those plates and eggs and coffee mugs, finding her asleep the next day breathing soft against my shoulder, the both of us clinging to each other’s warmth and the branches of our pear tree.





rain. But it wasn't just rain he smelled. There was also the smell of soil, of vegetation, of plants and wood and metal—

Walt's voice distracted him. "Here, one, two—" They grunted. Slowly, they got the cage rolling across the plane, down the ramp, and onto the soft dirt. The wheel locks were engaged once more.

A few more seconds passed before Ashley emerged from the plane as well, a Canon camera with a long zoom lens in hand. She stalked toward them and wrinkled her nose before flourishing a mocking hand at Enrique. "The honor is yours," she said, her face upturned and sour.

Enrique bit his lip before he crouched down next to the cage. The cat's beaded eyes stared into his. He gulped.

A few flicks on the switches on the cage had the door unlocking. With another flick, the door popped open.

The cat didn't move, just bared its teeth and roared. By God, Enrique thought to himself, those teeth were huge. They seemed *too*

big to him, but who was he to talk? It wasn't like he had a degree in jaguar teeth or anything. Enrique shuffled his feet then unfolded and refolded his arms, but the cat continued staring at him.

Out of his peripheral vision, he saw Ashley lean towards Walt and whisper, "I thought you said he majored in computer programming and data science?"

Enrique backed up a few steps and crooked a finger at the jaguar. "Come here, Ashia."

The jaguar cocked her head. A

second passed. Two. And then the cat was walking toward him. Her stride almost looked normal.

Enrique bent down to pet Ashia. The fur was hard, the skin below cold. Perhaps he should have looked into fixing that earlier. Unconcerned, the jaguar purred and arched her back, leaning and rubbing against Enrique's legs like a housecat. Enrique glanced to the side where Ashley was leaning forward to take pictures. Walt stood to the side, his eyes darting about everywhere as he took notes on a pad of paper. Enrique asked, "Are we done here? Can I let her go?"



*Standing Alone*

*Caitlin E Grabowski*

Venetia, PA

Walt held up a finger. "Keep petting the cat, Flores, and act like you know what you're doing. Start the video, Hayes, and I'll do the voiceover."

Enrique forced himself to keep touching that cold skin, rubbing the jaguar's fur this way and that, over the neck and under the belly. He was already sweating from the humidity, and he swiped a hand across his hairline.

"Eight years ago, the jaguar population in the Amazon Rainforest was nearly wiped out," Walt began. His voice was gravely and deep, a whiplash

contrast to his light, joking tones earlier. "The effects were catastrophic, almost as bad as the extermination of the wolves from Yellowstone National Park. The herbivores on the forest floor—deer, tapirs, peccary, capybaras, monkeys—all increased while vegetation decreased. The food web became completely unbalanced, and the past few years has been a veritable struggle in saving the rainforest. Today is a culmination of the world's efforts—we are releasing what we hope to be the start of a long-term solution to this ecological crisis."

Enrique looked up to find Walt giving him a nod. "Alright," he murmured to himself. "You can do this." Enrique got down until he was lying on his back under the jaguar and very quickly, flicked open the control panel on the jaguar's stomach. Connect the red wire and disconnect the blue one. Set the timer. Flick the switch. Close the control panel. And there—that had to be right. Enrique scooted himself out from under the jaguar, who was now frozen in place. She had never looked more like a robot, but nothing could be changed about that.

"Animal Survival, Habitat, and Indicator Automaton, or ASHIA, is our newest project with cutting-edge technology. Ashia runs on rain power by harnessing the kinetic energy of rain and has the capability to hunt down over thirty times the amount of prey ordinary, living jaguars hunt every day. With Ashia, we hope to be able to mend the food web and eventually restore the Amazon Rainforest to its original splendor."

"And... cut." Ashley lowered her hands and shook out her arms one at a time. "Are we done here?"





“The timer’s good?” Walt asked. At Enrique’s nod, he declared, “Head back to the hover plane, everyone!”

They had barely shuffled onto the plane again when the tip of Ashia’s tail flashed once. The jaguar flicked her tail and turned about. She stared at the hover plane, right at Enrique, before bounding into the undergrowth and disappearing behind the trees.

Enrique stared after the dark forest the jaguar had disappeared in, the artificial trees that he knew were there blending in with the real ones.

“Well.” Walt clapped his hands with self-satisfaction. “I do suppose we can start working on those herbivores now.”

## The Dollhouse Rebellion

John Fitzgibbons  
Cornwall, PA

With the morning come the hands.

They reach through an opening in the back of the pretty little row house, cutting through streams of milky sunlight pouring in from vaulted windows, ready to begin the day’s activities.

The doll family waits with stiffened limbs, painted porcelain faces bearing the same wide smiles as the day before.

And each before that.

In a tiny bedroom on the topmost floor of the house, a girl doll appearing to be no older than twelve steels herself for the first touch of the hands. She glances over at a window facing out towards a little manicured square. The sweet melody of birdsong wafts through the glass panes, and she finds herself envying the tiny creatures as they hop giddily from roof to roof before taking off into the pale morning sky.

The sounds of water rushing out of a faucet and footsteps creaking down wooden steps signal the awakening of each family member before her, each noise a token of a different doll. She matches each noise to its owner in her mind: the crackle of the stove as mother doll prepares breakfast, the steady flow of water as brother doll takes a brief

morning shower, the whisper of footsteps on scuffed floorboards as father doll navigates the house, carefully opening silken curtains to let the entirety of the sun’s brilliance illuminate the darkened spaces inside.

And then her own turn.

The girl doll’s eyes snap back into position as the hands make their way into her bedroom. She withdraws inside herself as she feels them pull back the softness of her comforter, pinching her between two smooth fingers before placing her on the carpets sprawled across her bedroom floor.

She can feel the task being willed into her, a message in a bottle cast among the familiar stream of her thoughts. And, without daring to eye the hands as they recede into the back of the house, she performs.

The song flows out of her like honey, filling the air with a distinctly rich sweetness as she moves about the room. She smiles as she sings, all the while acutely aware of the presence of the hands somewhere just beyond the walls of the house. In her mind, she recoils at the words spilling out of her mouth. She wishes she could sing the songs of her childhood rather than that she sings now, foreign words heavy on her tongue.

But the hands have not willed her to do so, so she does not.

She sings all throughout the house, hugging her mother around the middle as she gratefully accepts the breakfast of rations they have dined on ever since the occupation began. The *Liberation*, as it is now called.

She feels the hands follow her every move as she proceeds with the morning, breathing only when the wide front door shuts behind her and she departs for school. She drags her little brother doll behind her, who, now that they are shielded from the hands, whines and complains about having to wake up so early.

Mother and father doll continue along on similar schedules. Father doll kisses his wife on the cheek before grabbing a worn, black briefcase and heading off to work at the Doll Museum. Mother doll walks him to the door as he leaves, stepping outside for a moment of freedom.

When the door shuts between them, she

finds herself alone in the house. She quickly crosses into the parlor to tune into a government-sponsored program on the radio, uneasy even as the booming voice of the newscaster fills the house with noise.

She hates this program, finding talk of war campaigns and fallen dolls unsettling. She wishes only for the vibrant orchestral notes that used to flow throughout her home. But, if anything, she listens only to distract herself from the ever-present feeling of being watched.

--

Several seats are empty at school that day.

The girl who sat by the window in the girl doll’s history class, brown hair catching the sunlight to appear almost golden.

The boy who always tried to talk to the girl doll as she walked between arithmetic and the lunch room, blonde locks so fair they appeared almost white.

Twins, a brother and a sister, whom brother doll frequently played with on the playground during breaks, befriended over how they, like him, had heads adorned with flaming red.

All gone.

*Who will be next?* The girl doll wonders as she walks home with her brother, who has managed in his youth to stay oblivious to the fact that anything is amiss.

The pair receive subtle looks as they make their way down pretty little city streets. A woman carrying a child walks to the other side of the street to avoid them, her severe face framed by black locks falling to her waist.

Mother dolls, father dolls, child dolls, shopkeeper dolls all turn their faces away when they catch sight of the two redheaded children making their way down the streets.

All have heads adorned in black.

The girl doll tightens her grip on her brother’s shoulder, lowering her head and picking up her pace ever so slightly as she makes her last turn and enters the open square where stands her house: still little, still pretty.

When they arrive home, brother doll quickly scales the brick steps leading





up to the front door, giving mother a doll a brief hug before racing to open his pack to show her what he acquired at school that day. The girl doll follows in behind him quickly, shutting the door behind her with more force than intended. The presence of the hands is almost stifling to her now, and she buries her face in the delicate fabric of her mother's shirt to try to block out the feeling. She tells herself it is better than the stares thrown her way by her fellow dolls. But is it?

When she pulls away, she opens her mouth as if to say something, but the look in her mother's eyes stops her.

This is not the time for talking. That will come after nightfall.

Brother doll finally finds what he's looking for in his pack and calls to mother doll from his place at the kitchen table, eager to show a poster given to every child in his class by the soldier who visited them today.

On it, a young boy stands, bearing the flag of the Liberators, his foot placed firmly on a map of the continent.

He is confident, athletic, and handsome.  
He is what you should be.  
And his hair shines, black as the night.



--

At nightfall, the presence of the hands recedes, and the doll family is free to talk.

Father doll returns from work, a grim look on his face as he tells of disappearances at the museum. Over the past month, ten employees stopped showing up. First the locksmith, then the friendly zoologist from up north. Each was replaced by a cold new counterpart wearing government insignia. All those gone had hair of a color other than black.

Mother doll realizes that a few friends from her book club failed to show up to their last meeting, too.

As the girl doll tells of her missing classmates in hushed whispers, the sound of another government-sponsored radio program drowns out her words to anyone other than the three other dolls huddled together in front of a little fireplace, trying to take comfort in its warmth.

Brother doll plays with a model airplane, only half-listening to the words churning around him.

"They will come for us," mother doll insists, fear having crept into eyes painted a deep blue.

"The hands must be behind this," the girl doll utters in a whisper almost imperceptible even to those directly around her. "They must be."

"They will come for us," father doll agrees, looking measuredly at each doll in turn.

"But we will be ready when they do."

--

That night, mother doll paints each doll's hair black with what shoe polish they managed to save before the rationing began.

In his bed, brother doll runs a hand through his now-wet hair, cringing as a pale porcelain hand comes back tainted black.

Circling his thumb through the blackness now coating his palm, he stares at the poster of the black-haired boy now strung on the wall across from his bed.

*This what you should be.*

*This is what you must be.*

He only wishes that he could.

--

The girl doll hates the way it feels against her scalp, wet and sticky.

She hates that she must do this, that she cannot be herself.

She hates the hands.

She hates her fellow dolls, for falling so easily under the hands' influence. But does she not, too, every time they so much as brush against her porcelain skin?

She expresses her anger to mother doll as the night turns into morning, before she must head back upstairs and crawl into her bed before the hands come out to play.

"Do not blame the others," mother doll tells her, weariness creeping into her voice. "Dolls do not act on their own free will. They are simply following what they have been influenced to think."

*But*, the girl doll thinks to herself as she heads back to bed, *are we not now acting on what we have thought ourselves?*

--

Five days pass before the polish wears away to reveal a muted red.

Five days of acceptance. Five days of friendly looks from neighbors and passersby.

Five days of survival.

It will not last.

--

On the first of the five nights, father doll decides that they must take action.

In the coming days, they will likely be taken, just as neighbor after neighbor was, only to be replaced by another pretty little doll family with hair dark as pitch.

It was the girl doll's idea at first. To, in the night, go into the space where the hands come out of, and attack. However, no doll knows where the hands come from. Every morning, when they reach through the walls and will actions into the doll family, each doll stares straight forward, as they should. Dolls are nothing without the hands. To look to where they come from would be to give themselves away.

So, the dolls decide that they must search.

Over the following days they gather supplies for their assault: bottles of champagne paired with cloths and lighters. Garden tools

reimagined into weapons. Knives slipped from the kitchen while all other dolls in the neighborhood lay fast asleep.

They hide their supplies in the girl doll's room, in the space between her wardrobe and the wall. On the day that the polish first begins to fade, they decide that they have one more day before they must take action.

The others were not ready, and they suffered the consequences.

They will not make the same mistakes.

--

They come in the night.

The doll family sits around the table in the parlor, going over one last time the plan for the next night.

At first, one knock on the door, quiet yet insistent.

All four heads snap to attention, the only thing breaking the tension that has settled over the house is the program bleating out of the box-like radio seated across the room.

The girl doll feels the room around her begin to close in, and her thoughts slow as her vision dims. Her heartbeat pounds like a war drum, and she feels around the folds of her dress for a knife hidden there five nights ago.

*We are not ready. It is too early.*

But the opportunity for rebellion has arrived.

The second knock is more forceful than the first, and father doll raises himself from his spot at the table to receive it.

"It could just be a friend, a neighbor, someone from the museum," he attempts to reassure them.

But who would come to visit in the dead of night?

The girl doll moves to the back of the

parlor, where the stairs loom—a mountain in the darkness of the night. Her mother stays perched at the tiny table, porcelain limbs rearranging themselves in prim patterns to hide their shaking. Brother doll is indecisive. He stands half out of his chair, looking first towards his father at the door, then towards his mother, then towards his sister, now poised on the first step of the ancient wooden



*A Longfellow of Phipps*

Riley Dinger

Erie, PA

stairs.

None look him in the eye, save his sister. She nods her head once, but he is too afraid. He sits back down and begins to cry, thinking of the boy on the poster, and how he wishes he could be like him.

Rebellion is not for everyone.

Father doll reaches for the door handle as the knocks sound a third time, louder, with a firmness absent from the first two occurrences.

The entire family holds in a collective breath, waiting for the fingers likely waiting outside.

But when father doll pulls the mahogany door inward, he is greeted by the sight of several soldiers, all clad in black to match their closely-cropped hair. Father doll smiles and welcomes them in, letting out the tiniest bit of breath before his hands are shoved into silver handcuffs.

The soldiers move to mother and brother doll next, grabbing them forcefully and thrusting the shiny metal over now pallid porcelain wrists.

The radio has gone silent, the only sound now being the shouts of mother and father doll as they demand to know what is happening. The breaking of glass follows as the soldiers make their way around pretty little rooms, smashing china and family photos. The cries of brother doll soon join the mix.

The girl doll stands frozen on the first step of the stairs, hidden from the soldiers by the shadows enveloping her tiny porcelain body. They will find her soon enough, they have numbers on the family and records of each member. But still she stands, transfixed by the horror playing out in front of her.

*Dolls do not act on their own free will.* She hears mother doll's

soothing voice in her head now, audible despite the cacophony rising from the scene splayed out before her.

*They are simply following what they have been influenced to think.*

But these dolls are under no influence. No hands grasp their shoulders, flowing thoughts and intentions into the courses of their doll thoughts. They act on their own volition, and they act to destroy her.





*Do not blame them.* She  
hears her mother once again.

But her mother was  
mistaken, and now she stands in  
handcuffs. The girl doll decides that she will not  
join her.

The girl doll bolts up the stairs, not caring  
as the soldiers realize her location and move to head  
after her. She runs full-pelt to her tiny room at the  
top of the house, locking the door behind her and  
shoving pieces of furniture in its way on her path  
across the room.

If these soldiers can act on their own wills,  
so will she.

She hears the pounding of boots on the  
stairs, hears the men as they reach her door and try  
relentlessly at its lock. She knows it will not hold,  
that her time is running out.

She grabs what she can from behind the  
wardrobe: a bottle of champagne, a ragged cloth, a  
matchbook, a garden hoe fashioned into a menacing  
blade. She steadies her breathing and turns towards  
the wall opposite the window, ignoring the shouts  
of the soldiers calling for a battering ram to be  
brought up.

She searches all along the back wall for the  
opening through which the hands come, looking for  
anything: a hollow noise, a loose brick, a seam  
hiding a door.

She rips at wallpaper. She throws aside  
pictures. She destroys furniture and anything in her  
way.

And yet she finds nothing.

As if there never were any hands at all.

With a shuddering release of breath, she  
turns back towards the door, weighing her tools in  
her two porcelain hands.

These dolls act upon their own free will.  
No hands influence their thoughts, and they will  
stop at no commands.

They have come to take her away.

And as they do so, she will take with her as  
many of them as she possibly can.

With several resounding cracks, the door  
shatters inward, splinters of wood raining  
down in all directions.

The girl doll raises her weapon and throws  
forward the now-flaming bottle of champagne,  
tracing its fiery path with two eyes painted green.  
Silent tears fall down her cheeks as she prepares for  
the sickening shattering that is the breaking of doll  
skin.

--

There is cleanup, and after several days,  
the little row house is pretty once again.

In the morning, the hands come out of the  
wall, greeting a new family of dolls just as pretty as  
the last, if not more so.

In the tiny room at the top of the house, a  
boy doll smiles as the hands make contact with his  
body, willing him to start the day.

His hair shines black and his skin gleams  
white, porcelain and cold.

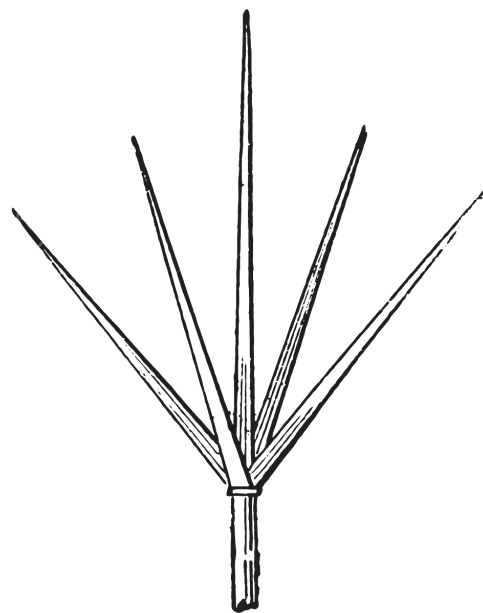
Outside, the birds chirp giddily, hopping  
between rooftops before catching the winds and  
floating off into the hazy morning sky.

The boy listens as he works, stealing gazes  
out the bedroom window at the beautiful little  
creatures. He thinks of the girl doll from class, the  
one with the bright red hair, who stopped showing  
up to school some days back. He thinks that he  
misses her, and wonders where she might be now.

But those thoughts are quickly swept away  
by the hands and the sweet melodies of the birds  
playing outside his window.

*To think is to be weak* he tells himself the  
lie offered time after time.

*And weak we are not.*



## After the Synagogue Shooting

Taylor Bechtel

Upper Saddle River, NJ

I first think of the stained glass windows  
overlooking  
the sanctuary. The small, bright panes  
casting a glow over hungry  
stomachs  
on the morning of Yom Kippur.

Of my Rabbi. The one who  
handed me  
the Torah  
on the day of my Bat Mitzvah, who named me  
Tikvah  
under the eternal light. The one  
who wore Converse  
to every service, who r ip pe d pillows  
apart  
to tell the story of Rosh Hashanah.

He lives in the city now.

I know a neighbor that owns chickens.  
Another owns shotguns. He keeps them  
in a locker, in the garage. There are at least  
fifteen of them  
for a single man. All shiny  
barrels and wooden,  
what do you call them? Handles, I  
guess.  
He hunts.

Swastikas

In red paint. They covered my  
grandfather's car,  
put there by his coworkers.

We're on the couch when I hear the news.  
Mom: *There's another shooting.*  
I can't take it anymore.  
Mom: *at a synagogue.*  
There are words, but I can't  
find  
them. My silence is endless.

I think of the mezuzah  
in my car, a gift  
for my seventeenth birthday. Of my friend  
that wears a Star of David  
around his neck and the people that place  
menorahs  
in their windows. My synagogue.  
I wonder if we're next.



## falling mirrors

Dana Bahng  
Cresskill, NJ

think  
a thought  
that flutters to the ground like a  
crumpled butterfly.

are you the wind?  
because you push me along, far off  
into the distance across the  
abyss.

fall away  
fall to you  
fall for me, as we  
fall down all together now

when the ground becomes the sky  
and  
i see that all your words were lies.

i can't fall apart because the world  
doesn't have time.  
do you have time?  
no, but you have the strength to  
fall asleep in your bed.



## summertime, suburban expatriate

Manu Sundaresan  
Potomac, MD

where do the crawdads go in the wintertime?  
they scuttle into the folds of tarnished skin  
i hide beneath my silt covered palms,  
willing them to life,  
rejector of crustation.

i fold my small body up into a heron  
pecking at the mud at the bottom of the river.  
fix-ed in space,  
watching from the shallows,  
disturbing the peace.

where do the frogs expel their dying breath?  
the plague-bringers sound seven trumpets to herald  
a requiem for syrup sweet summer heat  
unappreciated in the instant,  
chorus of viscous death.

i thrust my hands into spot-green algae  
pinching and scraping with bitten-short fingernails  
emerging with the scraps of childhood  
snatched from my hands,  
eviscerated.

where do the dogs go to feed their pups?  
concrete dens to soak sun and yield young  
to yelp with hot breath at the nape of my neck,  
daybreak in suburbia,  
denier of mother's milk.

i gut my knees on black top to watch blood drip  
weeping down my shin-bone, wickerwork shield  
lifting my skinny wrists as semaphore of infantile  
agony,  
sucking in baby teeth,  
no ointment for big kids.



## Thoughts on My Role as an Indian Daughter

Tejal Pendekanti  
Westlake, OH

I wonder if I am a disappointing daughter. I don't think that I grew into the daughter my father wanted. On May 22, 2002, I can picture him placing his face so close to mine that our noses are touching, in a paradoxical state of wanting to clutch me tightly but knowing to be gentle. I was named for the radiance in my resting smile. *Tejal*. Such a feminine description; bright but soft. I am not so soft, and I think this is a gross reminder to my father each day, but mostly on the days when we fight. This is not my child, not the one I wanted. Take her back.

I know that I am not a good Indian woman. If Hindi movies are any reflection of the expectations for Indian women (which they are), I am the antichrist of their beliefs. Those movies romanticize the objectification of women. She is only a daughter, sister, wife, never her own person. Any rebellion to her family's control is quickly suppressed because her anger is only created to be tamed. The only insurrection that can exist in its full form are timid whispers and subtle guidance.


But I am not like this. My friends joke that I am aggressive, intense, and loud, and they're right. At school, I make sure my voice is heard because it needs to be. At home, I am no different. Even though my mother always tells me to pick my battles, I choose to argue each time. I've grown less patient with the constant criticism and nagging—I *am studying for the ACT. I just can't focus on it right now because I have a test tomorrow.*

*Gudiya, you have to study for it now. All of this isn't important; the ACT is important.*

*Papa, no, I'm not going to do that. I have to study for this test because I can only take it once.*

*See, see, Anita? She's already given up on the ACT. What is the point of her taking it now if she's not even going to study? Just*





cancel the test now. Now!

Ok, fine you do that, but  
right now I'm going to study for my  
math test.

He leaves, frustrated.

No Indian movie would show that scene.

I know that I am not the daughter you expected. We really did have different childhoods. Your mother never finished high school because she was married off before she could complete her degree. But she's so smart. When you visited her room after she died, there were books piled on each other, lining the room—not one dusty. Your sister never completed her bachelor's degree because her husband whisked her away to another city in another state; rarely do we see her now because Bua's husband doesn't like our side of the family. At the whim of her husband. And your niece, just seven years older than me. Her father discouraged her from getting an MBA because the rich men of India don't get one. No man would marry a woman more educated than them.

Although you make sure to educate me, these sexist ideas still exist in your words. You tell me to walk less 'like a donkey,' and although you don't say it, it's because that's not what a girl should do. Thoda nazuk rena. Nazuk. Translated to fragile, vulnerable, tenuous. What a woman should be.

I reject these ideas, but I still cannot help wondering if I am a disappointment in his eyes because I am not what his world dictates. He lives in a state of duality: making sure I stand up for myself while being offended that I do not yield to him. He is still a product of his childhood but influenced by the liberal ideas of my mother. She refuses to let me marry before I am 26, old for Indian women. I'm not allowed to wash dishes because she wants me to be educated first. Probably stems from her own life.

You never outright say what happened after you were married. Sometimes the repugnance at your former life rises past

your lips, but usually you shut them tight to ensure that no one else gets hurt. But I remember everything you said...forced into the kitchen, serving your in-laws alongside the underpaid maids, before and after a full day's work. My father too weak to help you in the face of his family. Or maybe that's what he thought was normal. You—loved, strong, admired you—were cut from your father's will, while your brother was kept. I don't understand why, but I know why. You—stubborn,

is.

If even my mother, trailblazer in her family for utilizing her education to become more than a housewife, follows these obvious, unspoken rules, who am I to critique his beliefs? And if his life has created a perception that dictates the roles of women, isn't inevitable that I am a disappointment in his eyes? I do not fit into this romanticization of women, and I will not change. In doing this, I'm sentencing myself to never fulfilling the expectations I know he has.

I don't know how to feel about this situation that you have created. I am so *angry* that you have these ridiculous expectations about what I should be, but I am sorry for not following them. I don't know how to live with accepting this place in your mind—both loved and repulsed. You don't say it, but I know. I understand. Not the daughter you wanted, but what can you do now? She isn't willing to change, and you can't. So, I suppose, you must learn to live with such a disappointment, and she must too.



*Hangin' On*

Erin Mahoney

Pittsburgh, PA

smart you. *Woman* you. I know.

Yet, my mother still buys into these sexist ideas of what a woman should be. My mother is forceful with others but always yields to my father. No matter the nature of the argument, she apologizes first, extending the olive branch each time. Isn't she afraid that one day her arm will be too weak to cross the space between them? My arm



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