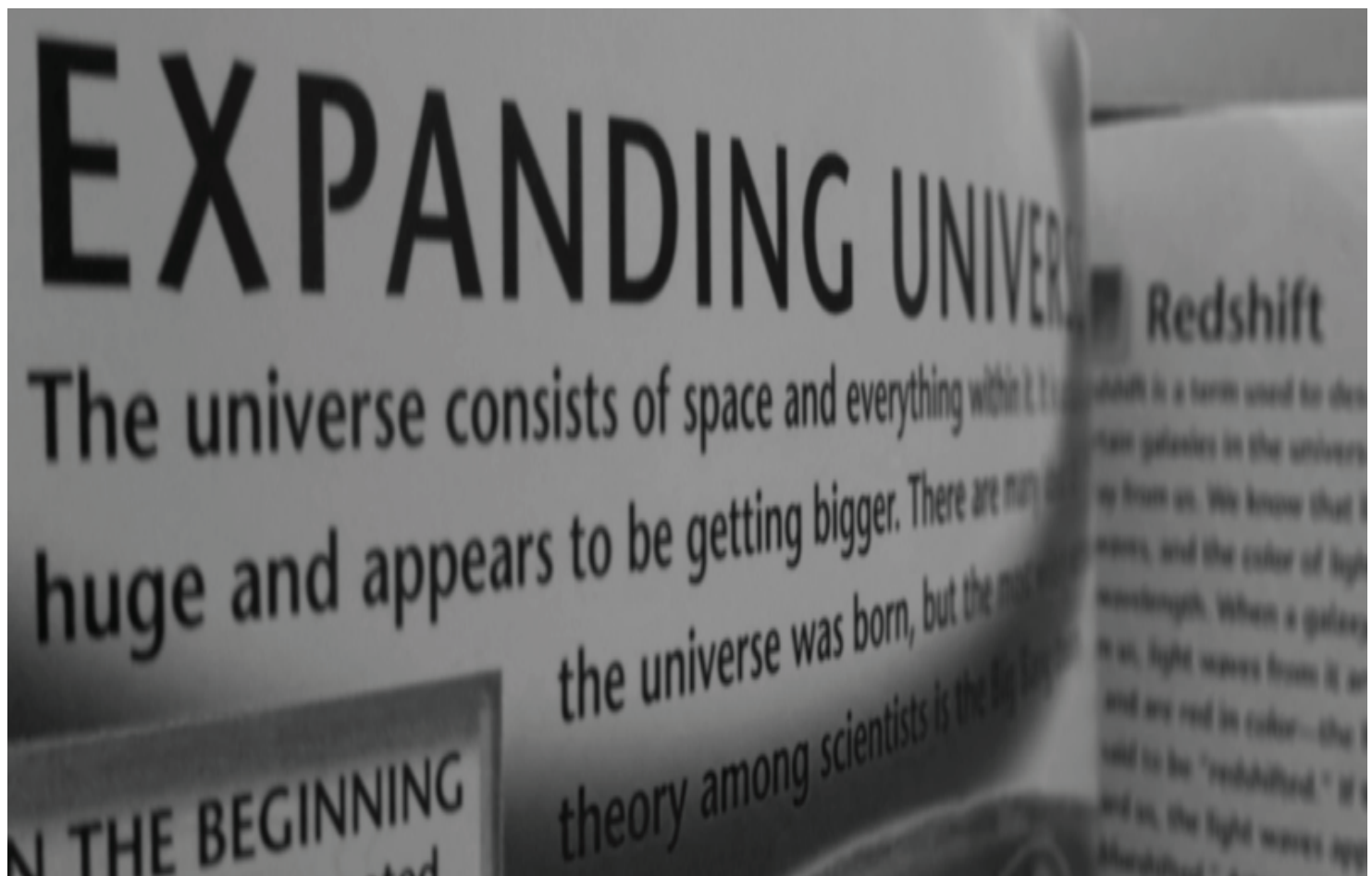


THE APPRENTICE WRITER



Introduction

Welcome. *The Apprentice Writer* annually features the best writing and photographs from 4,000 entries we receive each year from secondary schools throughout the United States. Every September we send copies printed as a public service by *The Daily Item* in Sunbury, PA to nearly 3,500 schools.

Susquehanna's Creative Writing major now enrolls 165 undergraduate students. Our program in Editing and Publishing gives our majors an opportunity to showcase what they have

learned by working on one or more of the four magazines the Susquehanna Writers Institute publishes each year. If you are interested in learning more about the Creative Writing major and programs related to writing sponsored by the Writers Institute, see the back page for a summary or go to susqu.edu/writers for details.

Send material to be considered for next year's issue to appwriter@susqu.edu. For full submission guidelines, please visit susqu.edu/academics/10602.asp. Please be sure to include your name and address on each page. The deadline for submissions is March 10, 2015.

EDITOR:

Gary Fincke

ASSOCIATE EDITORS:

Sarah Davis, Emma McClelland, Amanda Miceli, Jenna Rhodes

PRODUCTION EDITOR:

Kelsey Hails

Special thanks to
Codie Nevil Sauers

Table of Contents

PROSE

- 7 HER CLOSET ~ Cindy Choi
- 12 ALMOST BLUE ~ Samantha Pappas
- 12 TURNING ~ Lucy Silbaugh
- 18 TRAFFIC LIGHTS ~ Peter Samuel Kim
- 20 AT SEVENTEEN ~ Cierra Ingersoll
- 22 A CHAMPION'S GUIDE TO CLIMBING WHATEVER MOUNTAIN YOU WANT ~ Tina Weingroff
- 24 LUK KREUNG ~ Robert Conner
- 25 HIDE AND SEEK ~ Jacqueline Ose
- 26 GRAVITY ~ Catherine Aviles
- 27 PRESERVING CHESTNUTS ~ Rachael Allen
- 31 DETOX ~ Annalee Tai
- 33 WALKING HOME ~ Katie Cooke
- 33 STEVEN'S GRANARY ~ Tiara Sharma
- 34 LETTERS ON THE FLOOR ~ Madeline Smith
- 36 WORDING ~ Rachael Allen
- 38 SNAPSHOT ~ Alyson Schwartz
- 40 KEN BURNS ON THE BATTLEFIELD ~ Annika Jensen
- 42 THE YELLOW HOUSE ~ Sara Gramling
- 45 MY HAPPY PLACE ~ Jessica Maddox
- 47 A LIST OF THINGS THAT RING MORE OFTEN NOW ~ Stacey Cohen
- 49 SWIRLS OF WHITE PAINT ~ Hannah Phillips
- 51 CHALK DRAWINGS ~ Emily Guerra
- 52 CLOUD SECRETS ~ Allison Chu
- 54 MY EYES ~ Corinne Winters
- 55 SEEING THE WIZARD ~ Jessica Maddox
- 56 UNTITLED ~ Greta Skagerlind
- 57 IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET ~ Mollie Walker
- 58 HAPPINESS IS ~ Chasity Hale
- 59 THE PANG ~ Alisha Cheung
- 62 PRINCESSES AND SINGERS:
NOT BASKETBALL PLAYERS ~ Alyssa Matte

POETRY

- 3 FOR YOU, ANITA ~ Aidan Martinez
- 3 LABOR DAY AT THE LAKE HOUSE ~ Elle Wallace
- 4 SESTINA ~ Madeline Padner
- 4 FEELING FOR CORNERS
INSIDE A SPHERE ~ Alexis Hope Lerner
- 5 A BETTER ANSWER ~ Alexandra Kindahl
- 6 CLUTTER ~ Zachary de Stefan
- 11 MIAMI ~ Katharine Nichols
- 11 THE WINTER MOON ~ Danielle Fusaro
- 16 NOVEMBER 19TH ~ Alexis Beale

- 17 NEXT TO THE WINDOWSILL ~ Mariel Reilly
- 19 CITY KID ~ Elle Wallace
- 19 OUTSIDE, THERE WERE FIREFLIES ~ Robin Shafto
- 21 HORNET'S NEST ~ Taylor Petty
- 23 CIGARETTE ~ Jessica Maddox
- 24 SONNET FOR THE CAPTOR ~ Brittany Crow
- 26 GIRL-YOUTH GETS STEAMED ~ Katie Hibner
- 30 LIKE CREAM ON MILK ~ Rebecca Greenberg
- 31 WINDOW TO THE LEFT ~ Kate Busatto
- 31 THE MAGICIAN ~ Parisa Thepmankorn
- 32 SEGMENTED ~ Zachary de Stefan
- 34 DEAR AMERICA ~ Tiffany Spiegel
- 37 LOVE AND CARS ~ Greta Skagerlind
- 39 SO I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER THIS ~ Taylor Petty
- 39 SPEECH LIKE GLITTER ~ Alicja Madloch
- 40 RUST (BELT) ~ Zachary de Stefan
- 41 WAITING FOR THESE 90 DAYS ~ Adia Haven
- 43 SYMPHONY FOR THE LOST ~ Elizabeth Merrigan
- 44 A LOVE LETTER FROM OBESITY (BECAUSE YOU WANTED TO KNOW WHY) ~ Sarah Mughal
- 45 ELMER'S ~ Alexis Hope Lerner
- 45 THE BRUSH, POUR CYBELE ~ Rebecca Greenberg
- 46 JESUS SAVES ~ Elle Wallace
- 47 THINGS UNDER MY BED ~ Sarah Horner
- 47 DEAR SPERM DONOR ~ Whitney Agyeman
- 48 BROTHER ~ Alexis Hope Lerner
- 48 HIPSTER FRIEND ~ Kate Busatto
- 51 WALKING THE DOG IN A CIRCLE SKIRT ON A DAY WITH A BREEZE ~ Robin Shafto
- 54 ALL SHE EVER SAID ~ Alexandra Kindahl
- 54 TOO CAUGHT UP ~ Samara Spiler
- 55 THE OLD CITY ~ Anneliese Feldman
- 56 WHY I PRAY ON MY KNEES ~ Amani Garvin
- 58 TIME SIGNATURES ~ Amelia Carter
- 58 DACTYLOLOGY ~ Marissa Elias
- 63 DEAR LOST LIMB ~ Katharine Nichols

PHOTOGRAPHY

- 6 PIPES ~ Elena Haskins
- 17 UNTITLED ~ Alysha Smith
- 25 UNTITLED ~ Ben Knecht
- 32 ALLEY WAY ~ Elena Haskins
- 37 LISTEN ~ Samantha Moy
- 42 UNTITLED ~ Rheannon Lovell
- 46 LEAF ~ Jessica Bulkley

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WRITERS INSTITUTE
AT SUSQUEHANNA UNIVERSITY

Advanced Writers Workshops

Each summer, the Writers Institute offers the one-week **Advanced Writers Workshops** for High School Students.

The 2015 Summer Workshops will take place in late June or early July. Participants live on campus and concentrate on fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction.

The fee of \$800 (early application by April 15th) covers all costs, including room and board.

Go to susqu.edu/writers and click on “high school students” for more information and an electronic application.

Susquehanna
UNIVERSITY

For You, Anita

Aidan Martinez
TOWSON, MD

I found a folded scrap of paper
inside the cover of your old copy
of *The Catcher in the Rye*,
fragile as film and crisp
as the butterfly wings
sitting framed on my desk.
I wish you could see those wings,
orange as tiger lilies and
laced with black,
gifted to me by the father
I had said didn't love me.
You told me otherwise.
You told me over the hum
of the blood pressure monitor
that sucked at your slack skin
and your thinning muscle.
You told me as you carefully
penned the numbers, the dates:
4/13/11, 2:04 P.M.
systolic 142, diastolic 79.
You folded the paper, tore it
neatly at the creases, and
slipped it into the paperback
between Holden's red hunting hat
and the loneliness of New York.

I hold the scrap to my nose now,
almost afraid to
take another breath,
because if I handle it too much,
the scent of you
will shake loose
and be lost. The acrid aroma
of soap, the vanilla whiff
of yellowing pages, dust

and baby powder—
how has it been but two years
since that smell
faded from my life?
Did it leave me when we moved
from the house on Glendale Road,
letting the halls fill with the scent of
must and disuse?
Or did I hold my breath when
you began to fade
like a figure in an
ancient photograph,
like your memories and awareness,
like my patience?

What would I give
to breathe that scent again?
To tell myself to
hold onto it,
that fragrance of childhood,
of days when your comforter
was too warm to leave—
of days when you told me
that fathers could love.
Days when you still knew
what days were.
Days when you'd wake up and
nearly cry because you thought
you had woken up at home,
and Maryland was far from the Philippines.
Days when you sang
slow love songs from the 30s,
before you repeated your questions
and repeated your questions.
Before I knew what it was like
to lose you, the most important person.
Before I knew what it was like
to hurt you, my grandmother,
who had become
a stranger.

Labor Day at the Lake House

Elle Wallace

HUMMELSTOWN, PA

*Mom has the potato salad out
on the counter in the blue bowl
Where's Dad?
Jennie wants to know
On the deck at the grill, lost in a plume of white smoke
turning charred burgers
Dad's not laughing but Libby is
It sure is funny, burnt burgers, hilarious
he grumbles
Nana is centered in a bull's eye of ripples
in the lake
like she's hula-hooping the water
Her sons
are all grown up now
no longer knobby-kneed boys
playing baseball in the street
under the lights
buzzing with mayflies
but now thick-browed Italian men
who have wives
and children
and office jobs
Joyce and Kenny flip their kayaks
on purpose with giggles
rupturing the water's surface
like a flesh wound
Joyce and Kenny flip their hair
sending crystal drops of lake
soaring
as water birds
Libby is a Szabo photograph
a pretty image of
delinquency
in her white bikini
with legs glistening under a hot sun
Mom sits with pale legs
crossed
beneath the umbrellas
her face is washed in shade
Her ring finger
is without a ring
She sometimes forgets
to slip it back on
she only takes it off
when she's washing the dishes
she says
We play here
at the lake house
on labor day*

Sestina

Madeline Padner
ORANGEVILLE, PA

*Overwrought with the everyday worry
of accidentally running
into you, I uncover a map
showing how to get from point A to understanding
why you'll come back to me, the way a wave
returns to the shore, in a perfect summer photography.*

*A collection of years in worn-out photographs,
immediately I notice your lines of worry,
easily confused with lines of understanding.
You admitted to a fear to the waves,
and I'll never forget that you are still running,
trying to escape before they wash away your maps.*

*A simple, black and white map
of the difference spaces in your brain, shown in a photograph.
The way that you are pounded by the waves
is unfair. You are stuck running
away from the heavy weight of worry.
Maybe one day I'll be filled with enough understanding*

*To comprehend your lack of understanding
of a torn, heavily used road map
I used while I was running,
or, at least, trying to run from my worry
that was realized by the discovery of a photograph
of you, smiling at the waves.*

*The passing of minutes is noted by the waves,
but few will gain understanding
of the unrealistic worry
that comes with the snap of a photograph.
We've been circling, despite our possession of a map,
never enough time to put a stop to the running.*

*My greatest fear is to one day be running
back to you, directly into the waves.
Emotions, brought on by photographs,
plot points on an imaginary map.
One day I hope to find understanding
as to why we all overflow with worry.*

*Your entire life, the maps have led to worry.
As we watch the waves, you long for the understanding
of why we all are still running from dusty photographs.*

Feeling for Corners Inside a Sphere

Alexis Hope Lerner
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

My cousin Sandra called her ex-husband's ex-number twenty-three times yesterday, hoping that even once his voicemail would come to life with a different tone of hello.

A man off the southwestern coast of Alaska tried to save a beached whale by stretching his arms across her left fin, spanning his fingers across her smoothed ridges, telling her what a good life she had, what a wonderful whale she was, how much he loved her. Her eyes rolled independently in their sockets as he whispered into the thick rubbery blubber; his words couldn't penetrate like the scientists' needles of xylazine and death.

My cousin Sandra writes in her journal until the edges of the pages are tired of her scrawl and give out, cracking under the weight of her heavy hand. She searches in the ivory millimeters between letters for a meaning within those conjunctions of emptiness when she does the breakfast dishes with his ghost.

Peter Parker killed Gwen when he caught her from the bridge. He stared at his bloodless hands and forever avoided mirrors that painted him anything more like Spider-Man, anything less like a villain.

Joe feels for corners inside his hamster ball. No matter how far he runs, he only transports his green plastic universe another few inches across the living room floor. I scoop him up along with his sphere. I am his God. And I know that something is controlling me and my Earth the same way.

There is no way out.

Cannabis opens the ridge in my skull so I can see the mint light slant through the inside and illuminate my mind. But it's too narrow for me to slide my wrist through to feel it with my fingers, my breath.

Once, I held the tender green moss of your irises: rich, texturized, teeming with life. Once, ten years ago, I felt the green of Gwen's eyes, and Sandra's ex-husband's, and the whale's; when I remember how the light hummed in my palm, I still feel its lifelike vibration. Perhaps there is something more outside this cage.

I just don't know what it is yet.

Every few weeks or so, my hamster Joe finds a corner in his sphere and crawls right out, happy. I wish I could say the same for myself. For humanity.



A Better Answer

Alexandra Kindahl
COCKEYSVILLE, MD



“Lie to me—convince me that I’ve been sick forever, and all of this will make sense when I get better.”
-Amy Lee, “Breathe No More”

I’m going out to drive along one of the roads nearby, he tells me. You want to come along? I’ve finished Hate List and An Abundance of Katherines and Anthony Horowitz’s Short Horror Stories, and the only thing left to read is a journal still seventh-eighths blank. I say, no thanks, and my father shuts the door of the hotel room behind him. I could go out walking again, like I did in Ísafjörður—up and down the two residential streets, five commercial streets, alongside the shipping port with two or three boats and rusty chains lying abandoned on the concrete. But we’ll drive back into Reykjavík tomorrow, and I can wait a little longer to wear holes in my shoes. Tonight I’m still with unspoiled skin, looking at my father’s Swiss Army knife on the table across from my bed. The blade doesn’t laugh at me, doesn’t sing to me, doesn’t tell me to start or stop. It only comes down six times on my left thumb and leaves a row of racing stripes.

I’m going out to the pool downstairs, she tells me. You want to come along? I’m in the middle of Psych ER, between a chapter on depression and a chapter on mania. I say no thanks, and my mother lets the door click shut. After seven or eight passes through the resort hallways this morning, three circles of the parking lot through this West Virginia snowstorm, I can’t walk any farther. I heat water for tea in the hotel room’s kettle. It boils but doesn’t scream, doesn’t whisper, doesn’t tell me that I’m making a mistake. The metal only lies against my left arm for two seconds, then wrenches away. Five seconds, and away again. Ten, away. Two minutes. Away. I had sworn when I started five months ago to keep the scars only on my legs, but now I’ve left a circle on my forearm like the seal on a letter.

We’re going out in twenty minutes or so for kayaking, she tells me. You should wear your swimsuit. Through the sliding glass door and past the hotel room’s balcony, I can see Honolulu’s palm trees framed by skyscrapers and storefronts advertising for Easter. The calendar pages flipped through nine months of secrets, and now I say, But I won’t want to go swimming. Can I wear something over my swimsuit? And she walks towards the bed, asking, You aren’t really going to keep hiding your legs for the rest of your life, right? Let me see them. She doesn’t gasp, doesn’t yell, doesn’t tell me yet how disappointed she is. She only makes calls to a marching line of doctors back at home, then asks me why over and over. I have a lie ready for her and the swarm, some nonsense about guilt and anxiety— a better answer than I don’t know.



Pipes

Elena Haskins
DERUYTER, NY



Clutter

Zachary de Stefan

RIVER VALE, NJ

Mom collected
matchbooks,
pebbles she found
buried in riverbeds,
nickels appropriated
from laundromat
parking lots;

little things,
things that could be lost
without so much
as a second thought,
things she would lose

on purpose

/

Slow things:
the neighbor's hands,

the Fourth of July parade
funeral-marching down
Beaver Avenue,
the way winter settled
deep into Grandma's
bones
and never
turned to
spring

;

Quick things:
fires in dry woods,
water stains
spreading
across bedroom ceilings,

forgetting how to
breathe

//

Grandma collected
ghosts

and kept them
in the attic
of that house
on Coalridge Avenue,
tucked between wall
cracks alongside
the strays she put
there one summer
and forgot to feed,
but the neighbors
complained about frantic
scratching in the night

and out they came,
all the matchbooks,
pebbles, and pennies,
spilling out through
the floorboards
to land around
a girl who lost
her voice
that year
and never
got it
back

Her Closet

Cindy Choi
SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

The button closest to the neck of my crisp white shirt is starting to get on my nerves. It has been only two minutes since I put it on and already I am feeling edgy about how I'm going to survive tonight's dinner. This shirt would last no longer than the other garment my mom forced me to put on before it. White, knitted, long-sleeved, over the knee, and loose all around—it could practically have been for my grandma.

I hear the clock ticking steadily behind me. The consistent beat of the machinery is so unchanging, so stable. My hairline threatens to create beads of sweat. Mom will notice. With one hand, I lift the bottom half of the homely, uncomfortable outfit. I catch sight of the purity ring my parents practically assigned to me before the first day of high school in August. The silver band is topped with a muted emerald. It does not shine, but it twinkles when it catches the light. My wrists are cuffed with another set of buttons that keep the sleeves bound together. I manage to move them enough to wriggle myself into the skirt.

Despite Seoul's September heat, my mom has generously supplied me with a black skirt that goes down to cover my ankles. I reach for the soft, metal handle of the wooden door. My shirt limits me from extending my arms too much. I swallow my irritation as I walk a step closer to push down on the handle. Before I get a chance to walk out the door, I glance over at the snowy white canvas, sitting calmly on the easel stand. I feel my jaws unclench. A small grin tugs at my lips. It clears my head and helps me get through the door.

My dad, mom, and brother form a semicircle near the door. They look indisputably like my family, with white at the top and black at the bottom. Despite the hot laser beams shooting from their eyes, frigidly is evidently the temperature of the room tonight. They fail to hide their collective disappointment at my unfixed hair. A satisfying sensation warms me up

as I realize I don't fit. I don't close the circle. We walk in silence through the front door, down the elevator, and toward our car.

As I climb into the back of the car, I bump my knee. It throbs, but I do not check to see if it left any marks. I situate myself on the familiar, grey leather cushion. As soon as I slam the door shut, the car starts moving. We're heading to the only restaurant we've tried as a family, Sushi Hiroshima. It is dark enough outside that the windows reflect the opposite side of the car. I can see my brother facing forward with his right hand on top of his left, resting in his lap. He keeps his head lifted slightly away from the headrest to keep his combed hair tidy. When I slouch even lower in my seat, I notice my brother tense up, in response.

"It's already a quarter to six," my dad says. "If I remember correctly, which I do, because how many times have I driven this car to the restaurant we're going to right now, oh right, sixty-fourth time today, it takes thirty minutes to get there, not including traffic. It's rush hour now and there will be approximately one-point-eight times more cars squishing their way through, around, across from ours."

"Husband, I know a shortcut to the restaurant." My mom speaks softly.

A cumbersome silence follows and I feel the hair on my arms standing on end. We never digress from the main roads. Dad's forehead crinkles as his eyes narrow. A corner of his mouth is turned downward, causing him to look like a bloodhound pup. I suppress a snort.

"Turn left on the next signal," Mom says. "There'll be a street opening up other diagonal streets that cut through the main roads we've been traveling on."

"I trust you, wife." Dad reaches for the turn signal. It ticks regularly, like the clock that had resounded in my head. It is threatening to penetrate my consciousness.

I regulate my breathing, leaving a slit of space between my upper and lower lip. The car is quiet enough for my breathing to sound crepitated. I focus on my lungs expanding inside me, and try filling the lower parts. I see my stomach rise and fall. I breathe into the upper parts, and my chest heaves.

"Where is this leading us?" Dad's voice sounds strained.

No stoplights or crosswalks interrupt the endless rows of shoulder-height walls of maroon bricks, fixed together with white-grey cement; yet my dad seems to feel the need to use his turn signal at every twist of the way. It's becoming a challenge to listen to him whine about not being familiar with the roads, not to mention the faithful beat of the turn signals that fit somehow with the disarrayed sounds that my dad is producing. An eerie sense of pride runs through my veins as I decide to tune out. With the movement of the car, I let my head roll slightly from side to side. My thick, black hair forms scattered loops around my head. The messiness keeps its loopy form on the headrest from the static. Nobody notices. Tonight may not be as bad as the other dinners.

Dad is getting lost. I knew this as soon as he turned away from the main street towards the flickering lights of a small convenience store. I tell him that it would be best to reverse all the way back, but either my voice is too soft or my dad doesn't think I'm right. As the car keeps winding through the streets, I feel my eyelids droop. My shoulders drop as I allow myself to relax.

"What the hell is this?"

These are very pleasing words to wake up to. I straighten up, little by little, my movements limited by my dress shirt. I look to the front. Dad's neck is pink all the way up to his ears, which are as red as uncooked meat. I can nearly see his nose twitch with frustration. My heart almost stomps its way out of my chest. I am about to clear my throat but decide to swallow instead. This is hard, as the inside of my mouth has gone dry, along with my sleepy eyes and their crusty surroundings. I am more than tempted to rub my eyes as they begin to itch from the dryness.

"This is what happens when you do something new. It is out of routine, unfamiliar, and most of all, a waste of time. You know what's really important in life?" The voice that had once started out low and strained is now at a relatively high volume.

I check the time by lowering my gaze without moving my head. We should have been seated by now. My body is slammed backwards as the vehicle springs

itself in reverse mode. It is backing away from a blank wall of white bricks. On my left is a lamppost with a small metal sign. Dead end, it says, in black, painted letters that look as if they dried while dripping. I look at the post that is just standing there. There's something haunting about it. No words are spoken and my eyes do not drift to anything else as the sloppiness of this whole situation occupies my mind. Like the thick paint of the sign that had fallen slowly, we have no other choice than to drive the exact roads we drove to get to this stop. My brother, acknowledging mom's mistake and dad's vexation, offers to drive the rest of the way to the restaurant. Of course – it has always been Brother to the Rescue. But Dad will never sit in the backseat with me, which leaves Mom to sit where my brother is sitting now. These seat changes mean that I will have to straighten my back and devote all my efforts to being aware of where I place my hands and how I place them. Excluding the obvious, such as wearing a seatbelt or staying in the seats, most people would not know that there is a right way to sit in a car. I feel uncomfortable, rebellious or at risk, if I'm positioned in any other way. As the three shuffle around me, I twist the ring around my fourth finger. Though it was more of an assignment than a gift, the ring makes me feel appreciated. And to be appreciated is much more satisfying to me than to be wanted or needed. All I would ever need to do is be there; my presence would be doing the work. To be wanted or needed means having responsibilities. I know I am not incapable of being a good friend or daughter, but the pressure is not something I would ever like to deal with. With expectations come disappointment, and the ratios are horrible – the higher we fly, the faster we fall, and the harder we hit the floor. The ring is a promise, hence a responsibility. I guess it reminds me that my parents have simple hopes for me. It's simply success measured by the absence of something, not something I have to push myself to achieve.

The car reverses into the parking slot and the sounds of the seatbelts releasing ricochet throughout the vehicle.

"Wow, we got here in fifty minutes?" I mutter as I open the door. I hop off the high ledge of the car.

"It's actually forty-seven minutes," a dissatisfied voice replies from ahead of

me. The slam of the door follows. A pair of furrowed brows and a slightly crinkled nose turn to face me for a brief moment. The body attached to these features strides efficiently to the automatic revolving doors of the restaurant.

I start to follow, but my brother stops me. "Your hair looks a bit disheveled and your wrinkly skirt is not very helpful. Could you please straighten that out before our mother and father catch sight of them?"

Though his tone is stern, his smile seems apologetic. My brother's unusual, coffee-brown eyes—his only non-Korean feature—seem to flicker with hope. My lips part to respond but my eyes already see his back. I stride a little more briskly to catch up, and step into the revolving door. I know it perpetually turns at the same speed but it seems terrifyingly slower when I am inside it. I step out of the triangle and breathe in as much air as my lungs can hold. A waiter recognizes me at the entrance and brings me to my family's table. I arrive just in time to hear my dad order the same set meal for all four of us. Every syllable that slips off his tongue makes me gag, it sends my back into spasms. Not the stiff kind, the aching kind. It's too familiar to surprise me; yet it still initiates pain. I want to run back to the parking lot and breathe the fresh air.

I situate myself next to my brother and lay the napkin on my lap. I look down without moving my head. I catch sight of a brown spot on the crinkled surface. With my thumb and my middle finger I flick at it twice, but it doesn't move. I decide to move my whole head and take a proper look at what it is – a little spot of soy sauce from the last time somebody used it. Dad raises his hand, calls for the waiter, and asks for a new napkin, all the while maintaining eye contact with me. My table napkin is replaced with a fresh one that's still warm from the dryer. Along with the napkin come the plates of salad topped with grilled salmon. My mom and my brother clear their throats. My dad readjusts his collars. I pick up my fork and poke a piece of salmon and a bunch of green vegetables underneath. The salad here always has too much vinegar compared to the oil, the way I like it. The sound of the lettuce crunching fills the room. My dad raises his arm again, along with his voice. The table waiter

shuffles his way to our table with his well-polished black shoes and unreserved smile. He pulls out the order sheet from the front pocket of his stained apron, to which he's clipped a black pen that's almost as shiny as his shoes.

"Did I not order the Sashimi Course A?"

"Yes, sir, you did." The waiter double-checks the piece of paper. He brings out a menu from his back. "Would you like to order an additional dish?"

"Have the dishes in Course A changed in the nine days since we last visited?" Dad interrupts. I guess he doesn't want anything else from the menu.

"I believe not, sir. Is there a problem?" The smile is fixed on his face as if someone is pulling on each end of his lips. It'd be easier if someone could do that for me any time I converse with my parents. Not converse – any time they inform me.

"Where is the edamame? It's always the green beans, then the salad."

"Right. Sorry, sir. We're missing some of our workers today. I'll get it to you right away," the waiter is mumbling really fast, the smile still plastered on his face.

"You seem like a nice gentleman just doing his job. But do you know why the edamame is put in your hands before anything else? Do you know why your customers that order this specific course want, and deserve, the beans first?"

"No, sir, but I am truly sorry about the inconveni—"

"Sorry doesn't cut it, young man. Imagine if we had been too distracted to think about what was given to us and simply eaten the salad. What do you think that would do to us?" As my dad speaks, I feel the remainder of the salmon burning on my tongue. If I weren't so tired tonight, I would have quickly pooled my saliva and swallowed the taste. But I am, so I let it linger on the salty taste buds.

"It's a good thing you didn't," the waiter tries to laugh off the lecture.

"Pardon me? I will personally educate you in the way food is supposed to be tasted, savored, and eaten. Our taste buds are incredible. They also play an incredibly important role to the digestive system in our stomachs. Do you know why? I'll say it, just in case you don't. Our taste buds get upset when there is a sudden change of tastes, such as spicy to sweet, or salty to bitter. Our stomach acids rise up to the re-

volting tastes and cause our throats to feel hot and burning. In our case, the edamame is to prime our taste buds. The green salad with the salmon is for our taste buds to feel the lightly salted salmon that accompanies the mild taste of the green vegetables. The egg soufflé, which I expect will be served in the right order after you sort this disaster out, is to cure the boring and plain tastes and to give a little sweetness to comfort the tongue. It also prepares it for the big climax. If you don't know what comes next, it's the main sashimi. Now obviously, there are all sorts of different tastes of fish. That's why the next course is the traditional bean stew. The flavor is so strong it overtakes the unattractive taste that otherwise would have stayed in our mouths," Dad is giving his usual monologue.

I am about to tune out but the waiter turns to leave. My eyes widen in interest, as nobody is ever allowed to walk away when dad is saying something. I cry in my heart and pray five times for the waiter. I also remember to praise him for giving me a chance to see what it's like for my dad to be interrupted.

"Sir, the other tables need to order. I will make sure to serve the remainder of this course in the correct order," the waiter explains himself. He is on his second step out and Dad's ears are already the color of the salmon on our salads.

"Do you know who's paying for your job? Don't you know that the customer is king? I could speak to your boss if you think it's necessary. Before I do, though, I do need to finish educating your ignorant brain. I would've thought that something relatively decent was going on up there. Your smile's fooling everybody. So, the raspberry sherbet. It's there to freshen up the entire process. Then the coffee to top it off, because who doesn't love coffee?"

"I love coffee, Sir."

Of course he agrees with dad. My heart stops praying. I see the order sheet trembling. The waiter's smile is tense now. Maybe his jaw is locked or he needs to stop his teeth from chattering. My heart slows down to a normal rate.

The rest of the order files in. We talk about where my brother is going for college. None of his early applications have been accepted yet. He says he would be happy with Princeton.

"What about you?" My brother directs

his question at me. "Have you started thinking about your AP classes yet?"

"She should be doing the AP U.S. History, son," my dad replies.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I ask my brother in turn. There is no point in arguing with Dad. It would be a three-against-one situation.

My brother doesn't say anything.

I rephrase my question. "What's your dream?"

"Wife, I talked to a worker on our floor today," Dad interrupts. "He was talking about his wife needing a job and I offered her a job to work at our house as a housekeeper."

My stomach is full.

I don't know if any of what my dad says is true. I have memorized the process by heart, but I wonder why I have never tried doing it any other way until tonight. I loved the salad and salmon before my green peas. The peas got rid of the salmon taste so that it wouldn't get mixed up with the sweetness of the egg soufflé. I swallow my burp. Just the thought of more food makes my stomach feel bloated. We are on our way to the car now. The sky droops low and I wish it were coated in a sheet of glass so that the sky could glisten even without the stars. The darkness swallows everything up. As soon as I have situated myself in my seat, I release tension in my eyes and a different darkness swallows my vision.

I wake up to the gray parking lot of our apartment. As the four of us climb out and shut the door, I know what everybody will be doing after we ride the elevator and reach the house. The three will sit in front of the television to catch the news on time while I use my homework as an excuse to skip out. Mom and Dad have accepted the fact that I take longer than my brother does to complete the assignments. The elevator stops on the thirteenth floor. I step out first, open the front door, and hold it open, as I'm the youngest one in the family. Blackie runs over to the door. He got out again from his cage. We really need to get a new one, but I'm glad that we haven't. I smile and let him rub his ears against my leg.

"Shut the door. The more you leave it open, the more mosquitoes will come in to suck our blood," my dad yells.

I pat Blackie's head a few times before he runs into the living room. I shake off

my shoes and file them neatly in front of the shoe closet before chasing after the little puppy. I know mom and dad will flip out if they see him on the loose in their impeccably clean apartment. I find him trying to jump up onto the black leather sofa. He's making scratches on the legs of the furniture, and shedding black hair that I will have to clean later on. His shining eyes jump out from the other parts of his face and it makes me want to just sit down and claw at whatever's in front with him. My brother hurries in to turn on the television and set the cushions in the right places. Without saying a word, he marches to the only creature I can relate to, and picks it up.

"Use two hands," I mutter. He doesn't. "Put your left hand under his tail," I say, a little louder this time. I watch my brother in awe as he casually walks over to Blackie's cage, carrying the puppy by its two front legs. Blackie whimpers.

"Give me Blackie. I'll put him back," I say in an undertone. I learned from my dad that a louder voice does not get my point across any better. I try to take Blackie from him and feel only tension in my brother's hands. My brother and I always disagree, but never have we fought. I feel my throat tighten. "What the hell," I spit my words out without taking my eyes off Blackie. "Don't treat him like dad treats you." My brother tightens his grip.

"Stop. You're going to hurt him," I feel my cheeks growing hotter. The cuff of the crisp shirt restricts me from initiating any smooth motions of my wrists.

Dad comes over and snaps Blackie out of both of our hands. Dad glides over to the cage and tosses the puppy in. He doesn't forget to lock it. It is worse than what my brother has previously been doing. I feel dinner threatening to rise into my mouth to stop the thoughts in my head from coming out through my tongue. I direct my wrath to my legs. I want to stomp, or even jump up and down. I am breathless just walking past the kitchen through a dark, narrow corridor but I reach my bedroom.

My chest heaves up and down. My arms are weighted on my knees and I can barely see through the jungle of my hair over my face. I slide down and sit with my back against the door. I look to my left and see the canvas still blank. I grab the paintbrush and squeeze the black paint

directly onto it. I flick the paintbrush to the right, to the left, upwards. There isn't enough paint for me to paint downwards. I squeeze more paint onto the brush. My wrists feel strained. I can see the red marks the clothes are leaving. I don't stop. My palms are sweaty and dented by my fingernails, which are held tightly against them.

I hate muffling the sounds of a sob with a pillow because I feel like I'm breathing in dust. I just swallow the gasp for air and shove it down into my heart. My shoulders move quickly up and down three times before I can bite my lip to let the actual wet, salty liquid spill out of my eyes.

I walk over to the closet to change. I unbutton my shirt.

"Have you hung your clothes yet?" Mom calls from the laundry room.

No clothes are allowed to be lying around the room. Skirts and any other type of pants should be folded. Any top garment should be at the top so it doesn't create creases and wrinkles. Just hung in my closet.

"I'll do them now," I reply. No reply means mom barging into my room to make sure I am not doing anything bizarre like throwing my knit skirt over my chair instead of folding neatly and putting it in the closet. I pull the white shirt over my head but the button closest to my neck stops it from sliding out completely. I cough up another burp. I know I won't be throwing up tonight after all. I look at the empty hanger. Its bareness emphasizes the whiteness of it all. I look to the left, where my school uniform vest sits. I grab vest by the collars and pull where my left arm is supposed to go over my neck. My hands reach for the next piece of clothing. A soft-grey knit cardigan slips off the hanger effortlessly. I grab both sleeves and place the left sleeve on my left shoulder, right sleeve on my right shoulder. My arms start to ache in the high position that I'm holding them up at. I let them drop and both sleeves meet in front of each collarbone. I fasten a knot. I find a woven, brown leather belt hanging on the left side of the closet door. I first received it attached to a skirt but had cut it out. I use it to do the same thing I had done with the cardigan. It provides a stronger grasp around my neck. I breathe as if to create the frosty breath on a cold winter day outside. I look to the right door and look hard

at my reflection. I see a transparent streak of what I could never say to my family flowing through the canvas of my face. Past my nose, past my lips, curling under my chin as the curve gives them no other choice. I snatch the dark blue sweater I got as a team member of the middle school forensics team. My hands grip on the grey hoodie I wear when I'm cold before going to bed. I cannot stand; my upper half is getting too heavy. My knees hit the floor and I let my back lean against the right door. I can taste the wetness of my breath on the blouse I wore to dinner just half an hour ago. I stand up to finish. There is a teal scarf I bought for a charity event. My brother knew our parents would make me throw it out if they saw it. It was too colorful to fit into my closet. He helped me hide it in the second drawer of the closet, behind all the clothes. I have to take the rolling drawer completely out of its habitat to reach it. I use my feet to pull the drawer out until it's sitting on my bedroom floor by itself, detached from the closet. I try to lie down on my chest but only my thighs touch the ground. My toes are arched up, pressing against the ground to support the weight of everything below my knees. I am like a downhill slope with a drop at the end of the hill. Bigger than expected. More serious than anybody is ready for. I feel lightheaded. I inch my arms forward into the blank space where my drawer used to sit. I don't see the teal scarf. I twist my legs away from the closet. The top of my head touches the first drawer. I lift my arms above me, my biceps squishing against the thick masterpiece I created. I swipe the dusty ground a few times before realizing that with each swipe, I had brought the scarf closer to the end of the blank space. I tilt my head and let my left cheek to rest on the grey hoodie. The new salt droplets plop themselves on the bare floor. I thought tears were supposed to be transparent. I see them soiling the floor that the cleaner swipes over twice a day. Like soiling the beauty of the diamond-fresh snow with muddy footprints. My tears glisten in the darkness. Like the stars of the night sky, or the glass that portrays something unreal to knock hope into the eyes. There is too much glass.

I feel a warm breeze. The smell of salty air accompanies the perfect temperature of the wind. I keep walking and walking.

I occasionally step on some seashells but I don't feel anything. A painless journey.

Sitting on the gravelly beach, he has a puzzled look of bewilderment on his face. Each pebble that is in contact with this man makes him stiff with vulnerability. The man is wearing a suit, and a rumpled blue shirt with a tie that ends a few inches above his navel. He has on maroon socks that match the style of his suit. The tie has blue-and-white stripes running in a horizontal angle. He lifts the top flap of the tie. The lines are drawn as straight as the edges of photographs, or the signal of a long-gone heartbeat. He stares at it long enough to make his eyes water. I keep walking to the steady rhythm of the waves crashing the heavy gravel against the shoreline. It is eerily comforting. I see him let his hands fall. As he loses contact with his tie, the cheap and aged black watch on his wrist is slapped onto the sand. It makes a soft clank as it is cushioned with sharp stones of brown and black colors.

The man has dark bushy hair, which is unkempt and wavy. He is wearing black, horn-rimmed glasses, which shade the emotions in his eyes. It causes the look of indifference on his face. It is late afternoon. A dark shadow hangs over his left side, between himself and a box. The box is in an old case that is wrinkled and worn. The dark, tan-colored zipper on the side is closed all the way. He brushes individual stones off the box and keeps it close to him.

The man diverts his gaze towards me but from the look in his eyes, I does not notice me the way I do. His eyes are empty, and his eyebrows droop as if to block his vision. His eyes flick, catching glimpses of the lifeless activity around him. Then he struggles to bring his focus back to the sea, looking past me. Occasionally, he lifts his hand toward the box and brushes off the light layer of excess sand that has compiled from the whispers of the wind. The waves grow louder with every flick of his wrist. I stand still. I am only about ten feet away now. He knows it will make no difference in the space he chooses to sit, but uses his legs for the first time in hours to move forward. The wind swirls around me but I maintain perfect balance with my feet in the sandy water. The coolness of the wind barely affects the man. He grasps the box more tightly

as his fingers grow slippery with sweat. The man's face starts to reflect a darker shade of pink. His glasses threaten to slide all the way down to the tip of his nose, where the most sweat has accumulated. The waves usher him to sit down again, this time on wet sand and bigger, sharper pebbles.

The sky is turning to a muted shade of grey. The pebbles no longer bother him. The box is laid diagonally, slightly behind him now. He cannot afford to get it wet yet. He thinks of slipping it inside his jacket to be sure, but decides otherwise, remembering how tightly his suit fits. For a moment he considers finding some other way to hold it closer to his person. It never occurs to him to place it in his lap. It remains by his side and his eyes never wander to it.

His brow wrinkles as a cool draught envelops the beach. His nose twitches as bits of dry sand blow across his face. A few grains stick to his tongue and he tastes their bitterness. A bird flies overhead and he wearily shades his eyes as he looks up at it. The bird's wings seem to weigh it down but it soars higher and higher until the neck has to overextend to keep watching it. He lowers his neck from the straining position and his eyes wander down to see there is now a subtle orange glow behind the vast darkness spread out

in front of him. Flies continue to dart in and out of his vision. He makes some cursory attempts to shoo them away before giving up. A fly lands on his forehead, now covered in large beads of sweat. His forehead is pale, in contrast with the rest of his face, which has settled to the color of a frosted cupcake under orange lights.

The sun beats down and sweat covers his forehead. He suddenly falls to the ground, letting his arms curl inwards, towards what proved to be alive. He opens his mouth, but I am too far away to hear. His body seems to be disconnected to his demands. I focus on his eyes again: black but brown had mixed in, interrupted. The mesmerizing pair rolls back and forth, searching for something in the vast body of water set in front of him. I realize I am staring. His bony, flushed cheeks and his truncated nose moved up and down a little every time the wind tickles it.

He catches a glimpse of the box once more. The lack of vivaciousness in the man's eyes is familiar. He reaches up to scrunch up his already nested hair – I pat down my water-soaked head. He hesitates to open the box. He shifts his position and drops his head between his knees, as if

directing the heaviness to flow or fall or drop away.

The man trails his fingers along the border of the box. His fingers reach the pieces of tape on top of the latch that holds the contents safe inside. The box comes easily off the ground and doesn't make a sound when he shakes it. Or maybe I am still too far away. The tape doesn't peel cleanly. The waves come crashing slower, calmer now. The wind has died. The man pulls the crest out from under the envelope. Giving it one last kiss, he trudges towards the shoreline. His shoes are wet and his eyes are moist. He pushes the crest from the cradle of his arm, out towards me. It floats a little, bobbing aimlessly. He lifts the box up again, and his tears sprinkle the top, as if to decorate the crest. He pulls one leg after the other, moving forward, until the waves are too strong for him to stand steadily. The crest is still in his arms, and his feet float along with the current. I wonder if he can see me now.

Miami

Katherine Nichols
MIAMI SHORES, FL

*The pavement is baked
in our colossal oven,
forming intertwining cracks,
tripping tires and dirty shoes.*

*Cars that crawl on their backs
leak oil stains on worn streets,
their newly painted curves
withering away.*

*All movement deadens.
Other cars stagger by,
their horns overused—
disintegrating to nothing*

*on their stomachs
like the flipped bugs
they once were, their lives
whispering a last goodbye.*

The Winter Moon

Danielle Fusaro
DIX HILLS, NY

*There are nights when the moon is ripe
and dangling, a fruit of sorts,
waiting to be picked from the black and blue stain of sky.
Sometimes my sister cups her hands together
the same way she waits for communion,
hoping the beaming apple will fall into her palm for a moment
until it tumbles back off the edge of the earth.
There is something nurturing about the moonshine,
its light savoring the bed sheets
or the binding of a book
I've been trying so desperately to finish.
I dread the coming of summer
only because the nights are so short
and unfulfilling
and no one sleeps;
because paper plates litter the lawns
and tone-deaf crickets compose outside the window.
Because I like to be alone,
the winter inviting the moon in for coffee
and making the house drowsy.
There is a power in resisting sleep,
in gulping in the silence
and remembering how it feels to be drunk
on being awake.
I lie numb in the dark
while my sister sleeps
with her hands cradling a lazy cheek,
palms still outstretched
and waiting
for the moon to show her
what exactly her soul looks like.*

Almost Blue

Samantha Pappas
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

You've hated me since the time in second grade when I won the spelling bee and you got runner up, but it's not my fault you didn't know how to spell entrepreneur. Maybe I did have an advantage, considering my mother's Quebecois family and my father's Greek one, but I was just giving you a taste of the life ahead: frustrating, unjust, and causing eight year olds to run offstage in tears.

The other day I realized that I can spell phenolphthalein entirely from memory, and I think that I have you to blame. In third grade you won with magnolia and I sulked for an hour until swearing that next year I'd come on top again, but that wasn't necessary considering you got out in the second round after forgetting that there are two o's in mongoose. You brought out the competitive streak I didn't know I had, until it was fifth grade and you left for Australia.

This year you came back and you didn't even say hello when we brushed shoulders in the hallway. I knew it was you from the red of your hair, just barely long enough to tie up, and the blisters you've always had on your lips from biting them too much. I saw you in my AP Chemistry class, and we made eye contact, and I knew that you knew that I knew it was you as you signed your name with mine for lab groups.

I overshot our titration and you yelled at me, but I said it was your fault for not paying enough attention when it started getting blue. You said that phenolphthalein turns it pink, dumbass, not blue, and I argued that the iron makes it a teal color first, and when the bell rang we angrily agreed that it was both of our faults as we hurried to clean up before our next classes started.

You hated me and I probably hated you, too, but yesterday we competed over who could balance the most redox equations in ten minutes, and even when you won by one equation I found myself hiding a smile.

Turning

Lucy Silbaugh
WYNCOTE, PA

"Be careful," Olivia's father says to her, leaning over the unrolled window into the car. Olivia wonders why he says it to her instead of to Jonas; after all, he is the one who is new to driving, and he is the one with the keys in his fist. Maybe it's because he can't say it to her quite so often, now that she's two states away; maybe he misses taking care of her.

"Of course we'll be careful," she says. Jonas received his learner's permit only a week ago, and their father brought them to this grocery store parking lot so he could practice. If there were other cars here, Olivia knows, her dad wouldn't have agreed to walk down the block to a Starbucks, to let Olivia help Jonas with his three-point-turns. "Don't worry."

She takes him in as he stands outside the car window: his blue fleece, the new silver swirling out from his temples. He looks tired, worn down, and Olivia can't tell if this is something new or if maybe she's just forgotten, not seeing him day to day. She remembers a picture that stood on the mantelpiece before her parents separated -- her dad on their honeymoon, looking out over the orange horizon. Olivia's mother, behind the camera, had coaxed a smile out of him, but even then, the general air of the photograph was pensive and quiet. She hasn't seen the picture for a long time.

He scratches his cheek, as if maybe there's another paternal precaution he's forgetting to say. "I'll be back in an hour, all right?"

"Sounds good. See you."

Craning over the steering wheel with the caution of a beginner, Jonas pushes the key into the ignition. The thrum of the engine fills up the darkness.

It's hard to remember the last time they sat like this, side by side and alone.

Olivia sits forward. She likes silence in theory but has trouble with it in practice. "Okay," she directs, "Why don't you park in one of the spots by the curb? We'll start practicing there and then move around a little."

It is the first time Olivia has been

in her dad's car since she started college. All the other times when she's come back home for a holiday, her mother has taken Olivia and Jonas to their dad's apartment, dropping them off in front and then picking them up again a few hours later. But her mother is going out tonight, with a violist from the orchestra, and so their dad picked them up from her house. When they saw his car, Olivia and Jonas collected their things and went outside to greet him; their mother stayed behind the screen, watching to make sure they got in before she closed the door. Seeing her, Olivia's dad tooted the horn once and gave a small, perfunctory wave before turning out onto the street. Olivia thought how odd this was -- a relationship of seventeen years reduced to a single honk and wave.

It is Columbus Day weekend. Olivia hardly ever comes home for these short vacations. Flying is expensive, and ever since her parents' divorce, going home to Boston is almost more exhausting than it is relaxing. But Aaron has a big psych test on Wednesday. He's almost failing, so he needs to study. Besides, Olivia's mother confided, she is worried about Jonas. He has always been quiet, but lately, she said, he seems almost reclusive, practicing for hours in the basement and then retreating to his room to play on his computer.

Jonas is in high school now. Nearly three years have passed since Olivia's high school days, and already she can feel her memories softening, sneakers blurring into green locker doors, the clear shards of memory becoming few and far between. She was so different then, wearing headbands and pastel cardigans, spending hours each night studying her notes from biology, a subject that she now remembers little about, a subject that Jonas is taking now. He is taller than her, suddenly. He has become thinner, too -- when Olivia hugged him at the airport, she could feel the bones in his shoulders through his sweatshirt. Now, he obeys her instruction, steering the car over into one of the spaces along the edge.

"Okay," Olivia says. "For three-point-turns, we have to pretend we're on a street. This is one curb, obviously, and let's say the other one is, um...over there, where the second row of spaces starts. Okay? We're on a street."

"Yup, on a street," Jonas repeats, nodding quickly, the way he does when

he's nervous. Olivia wonders whether it's about the driving or whether maybe he is feeling the same nerves that she is -- being alone together, trying to remember when they were easy together. Olivia looks at his hands, holding the steering wheel -- those fingers, as long and straight as if they were carved out of wood. "The hands of a true musician," her mother used to say often, oblivious in these moments to Olivia, whose hands were average-looking and who, her mother had at last agreed, didn't have a knack for violin or piano. It was a great relief at the time, knowing that she would never again have to sit in one of the gray-carpeted practice rooms, trying to force melodies out of things far too concrete and bulky while her mother looked on and sighed.

But when Jonas turned four and asked to play the cello, Olivia's mother was ecstatic, and from then on Olivia couldn't help feeling that she'd come up short somehow. It is difficult to be around them when the conversation turns to music, as it often does. It is like they both know a language that she does not. Olivia never had a gold-star talent like that. Not like Jonas's cello-playing. Sometimes, seeing the audience ripple with applause for him, it is impossible not to feel a rush of envy.

Maybe, Olivia thinks, this is why her favorite memories of Jonas were often when he was sleeping; then he finally seemed like her little brother. She remembers the long road trips they used to take to go visit their cousins. Jonas would go to sleep as soon as they got on the highway, leaning over onto her lap. She remembers being totally transfixed by his torso rising and falling, his lips popping quietly.

Maybe that's why she gets along so much better with her dad. The two of them are simpler than Jonas and her mother, less interesting, less cultured and clever. Maybe that's why it was so surprising when Aaron asked her out. It was thrilling to think that a boy who plays the bass guitar and almost-flunks classes would like someone as normal as Olivia.

"Turn on your left flasher," she says to Jonas, and he obeys. "Awesome. Now drive over to the other curb but stop before you hit it. A little sharper--you want to end up perpendicular to the road."

She looks over at her brother, his eyebrows lowered in concentration. He does seem more serious than he did the last

time she visited. "He just acts so sad," her mother reiterated to Olivia the day before, as she chopped a zucchini for dinner. "I started taking him to a psychiatrist a couple months ago, so now he's on Prozac and he has an appointment every week. But he never wants to talk about it with me. I just don't know what's going on."

The sound of the knife clunking on the wooden cutting board was sadly familiar--it is a noise Olivia remembers from her childhood. She remembers playing with Jonas on the family room floor, only subconsciously aware of the noises from the kitchen: conversation, laughter, their mother cutting things, the faucet turned on, the fridge sucking open as their dad reached in for a beer.

But she didn't have any advice for her mother. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe just give him some time." That was what her friend Kasey had told her, months ago, back when Olivia still talked about Aaron, back when she thought she could fix things or make them better. Just give him some time. It was all she could think of.

Olivia wonders if maybe Jonas is just a quiet kind of person. Even when they were kids, he never minded being by himself. Together at their grandparents' house in Vermont, Jonas and Olivia made up a game called "police," creeping through the rustling woods with sticks over their shoulders like guns. When Olivia turned 10 and told Jonas that she had outgrown "Police," he didn't whine and sulk, as she secretly hoped he would. Instead, he just played the game by himself, acting out both parts and looking like he was having just as much fun as when she played, too.

Jonas steps on the brake just before they reached the imaginary curb, throwing Olivia forward in her seat a little.

"Sorry," he says.

She forces a smile. "That's okay. All right, so now you want to turn the car a little as you back up. Use your left hand, there we go. Okay, from here it's easy."

He finishes the turn.

"So how's school?" she asks.

"Fine." He pauses. "I have Mrs. Juniper for math."

Olivia laughs, an image of Mrs. Juniper flashing to mind. Rosy-cheeked, a little pudgy, hair always held up with colorful barrettes. Still functioned under the misconception that she was young enough

to sit on top of her desk and swing her stockinged legs, to ask her students what the 'word on the street' was.

"Oh my god, I remember her. Does she still talk about her blind dates?"

"All the time. I think maybe she'd have better luck if she ditched the orange sweaters."

They both laugh, and Olivia can feel the distance between them closing a little bit.

"And cello? How's that?"

"It's good." He looks at her oddly, seems to pull back, like he isn't sure why she's asking.

Mom says you're seeing a psychiatrist, she wants to say. Are you okay? How are things going? But she can't force herself to say it.

"Drive over there, by that streetlamp," she says instead. "We'll practice some more of those turns."

He sits upright as he drives, holding the steering wheel firm in his hands and making small, tight corrections. Olivia's mother, similar to Jonas in most other ways, can't understand this quietness that he has, this precision, as he cuts the car across the parking lot in a perfect line. Usually, Olivia is the one who takes after their dad, but in his quietness, Jonas is more like their father.

Olivia and Jonas will spend tomorrow with their mother. Then on Sunday, they will see their dad again. Jonas seems used to all of this switching between houses, to the packing and unpacking of toiletries and clothes, but to Olivia it still feels like a foreign game. She was already out of the house when her parents separated, and it was Jonas who first told her that her dad was staying with friends from work. She remembers that her first emotion was anger -- that they told him before they told her.

When she came home during those first months, before her dad found a place of his own, Olivia saw him only for an hour or two on the weekends, at museums or restaurants. Eventually, he found a fourth-floor suite in an old brownstone downtown, with a sunny sitting room and a wrought iron balcony that looked out over a small dog park. It was strange to see her dad fill the rooms with furniture of his own--broad sofas and simple beds, big framed maps and black-and-white prints. Their mother stayed in the house where

Olivia and Jonas grew up, with its oriental rugs and hardwood floors, the magnets on the fridge, the room in the basement where she gave clarinet lessons. Little changed there; the only large things her dad took with him were his dresser and his stereo and his elliptical. The lawn was cut less neatly than when her dad did it, and the stack of papers on the kitchen desk became even messier without him there to shuffle it neat, to nag Olivia's mother about going through it with him. But these were small details, things that an outside eye would find hard to discern.

Aaron doesn't understand Olivia's parents' relationship at all. The one time she opened up to him about it, after a particularly strained Thanksgiving weekend last year, he hardly seemed to care. "That's rough, Liv," he said. "Did one of them cheat?"

"No," she said. "It was mutual."

"If it makes you feel any better, my parents are split, too," he said. "My dad ran off with some girl from the gym," he said, leaning forward to kiss her. But it didn't really feel like good kissing. It felt more like he was trying to shut her up.

They arrive on the far edge of the parking lot.

"What should I do now?" Jonas asks her.

"Same thing as before. We're just going to try it again, but see if you can remember the steps this time."

He drives away from the streetlamp, stops before he hit the yellow line of paint.

"Really," Olivia insists. "How are things going?" She touches the stud in her nose, the tiny pebble of metal, and then returns her hand to her lap. She got it pierced a few months ago, at Aaron's urging. The drummer in his favorite band has a nose ring -- she is tough, sexy, and, Olivia privately thinks, a little scary. Both of her parents asked her about it, and she'd been vague. "It didn't hurt at all," she lied. "And I really wanted it. I went with a friend."

"They're okay."

She raises her eyebrows. "Really?"

He puts the car into reverse, looks over his shoulder, backs up.

"Yeah, sure. Why wouldn't they be?"

"Well, you know...Mom and Dad," she says obliquely. He shrugs, and

so Olivia takes a deep breath. Her heart is beating really fast. She pictures herself and Jonas as two trains on a track, approaching, waiting for the inevitable crash. The only way to end this waiting, she thinks, this painful suspension, is to speed up and do it herself. "Mom says you're on Prozac."

His eyes brighten with surprise for a second before the indignation sets in. "What? She told you that?"

Olivia flusters. "Well, uh. You know, I mean, it just came up --"

"Really. When did she tell you?"

The car is moving too fast, it seems, and Jonas is moving too slow. His head turns to her like a white moon.

"It doesn't matter --"

"No, I want to know. When?"

In her side mirror, Olivia can see the lamppost approaching like a big metal arm. "Watch out!" she says, but it's too late. The car crunches into the steel lamppost, and Olivia feels her body slam backward onto the seat.



The engine is still running, but Jonas doesn't really notice it because his heart is beating so loudly. Olivia's hand reaches over, cranks the key until the noise goes off. The parking lot is too quiet, like it is sealed in a jar.

"Well, shit," Olivia says, tugging at her lip with her teeth. She opens her door, lets it hang there for a second, and then she gets out and walks behind the car to take a better look. Through the rearview mirror, Jonas can see that the trunk is folded neatly around the pole.

"Come here," Olivia says, and so he does. The air is cold and silky in the way that it only is in early October.

"Can you squeeze under the car and take a look at the wheels?"

He inches his way underneath and looks up at the car belly, a labyrinth of gray tubes that look like intestines. None of it means anything. *Fuck fuck fuck*, he thinks. He can't believe he did this.

"I'm not sure," he says to Olivia. "I really don't know."

There's a pause, and then he can hear that she is talking on the phone, probably to one of their parents, but he can't make out any of the words. The blur of the conversation reminds him of the road trips they used to take when he and Olivia were younger, from Boston to Baltimore, where

their cousins lived. They would drive until late at night, sometimes, and Jonas remembers that he would lean his head on Olivia's lap and she'd cradle his shoulder with her hand. It was the best way to fall asleep, listening to the murmur of their parents' conversation from the front. Often, lying in his own lonely bed late at night, Jonas wishes that he could relive those moments.

He slides out from under the car, gravel scraping his palms. "Fuck," he says aloud, and takes a brief moment of pleasure in the metallic clicking of the word. "Fuck fuck fuck." He pictures his parents' reactions: his mother, face red, eyes flashing, repeating herself, shaking her head. His father, running his hands through his hair like he can't believe it, followed by that cool and disappointed silence.

His mom, Jonas knows, will want to blame people. She'll start with Jonas himself: "You have to be careful!" she will say. "I don't know what I would do if something happened to you." Then maybe she'll soften a little, saying, "I'm a musician, too, you know. I know what it's like to be absentminded. We just have to be more careful." She does that often, pulls the "we musicians" card as a way of bonding with him. People are always saying how alike Jonas and his mom are: because of their dark eyes, straight bangs, quiet voices -- but mostly, he knows, because they both play music. Sometimes he can't help wondering. If he hadn't stumbled into cello, would people still say that?

One time Jonas remembers coming into the basement to ask his mom a question while she was giving a clarinet lesson. The door to her studio was open an inch, and he could see his mom's back. "I know it's difficult," she was saying. "But you have to make it easy. Music is the easiest thing in the world if you just lean a little. Let yourself relax." Jonas knew exactly what she meant. He had returned upstairs without asking his question -- it was better, he thought, that she didn't know he heard. Now often when he practices he finds those words floating through his mind: "Let yourself relax." He never knew the right way to say it before.

"I'm sorry," he hears Olivia saying outside the car. "Yes, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Geez!"

He is almost more worried about facing his father. It is obvious how proud of Olivia his father is. He doesn't say so, of

course, but his actions speak. When Olivia was in high school, he came to every one of her softball games; he printed out her report cards and hung them on the refrigerator; he laughed hard at her jokes, even the inappropriate ones. Jonas still remembers how envious it made him -- a feeling unfurling in his stomach like a vine.

The previous Sunday, Jonas and his father tried throwing a frisbee back and forth in the dog park behind the apartment, but after twenty minutes of Jonas's short throws and fumbling catches, his father had sighed and called it quits. It seems like that's often his dad's attitude towards Jonas: resignation and quiet disappointment.

His mother seethes, his father retreats. That is the way they are. Olivia doesn't understand it; she was gone by the time they split. Sometimes it feels like she isn't even part of the family, really -- just a familiar-faced cousin who comes to stay every now and then. His parents change when she comes, the way they used to when Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Myron visited. His mom gets up earlier in the mornings, dressed and in the kitchen making eggs when Jonas comes downstairs. His father makes an effort, too. He buys the kind of cranberry juice Olivia likes and tries to start conversations more.

Outside, Jonas can hear that Olivia is still on the phone. When he hears her say, "okay, bye," he pushes his door open and gets out of the car.

"Did you call Dad or Mom?" he asks.

"Both," she says. "First Dad, but then I knew Mom would freak if I didn't tell her. You know how she is. They're on their way." She pauses and tilts her head. "I think you must have hit the accelerator by mistake as you were backing up, because we're crunched in pretty well. I'm, um, not even sure Dad'll be able to drive this thing."

He puts his face in his hands again.

"Don't worry," Olivia says. "I don't think it was really your fault." She looks up at the sky and he follows her gaze. The sky is clear and the stars look sharp somehow, like they could cut you. "Let's listen to some music." She reaches into her sweatshirt pocket and pulls out her iPod. "Want to check and see if Dad has a cup in the car?"

It is a trick she taught him long

ago -- putting an iPod in an empty cup or bowl to amplify the sound. She knows all sorts of other tricks, too. That you can bend a spoon back and forth until the silver gets all soft in the middle. That bananas are less yucky if you freeze them first. But the cup trick is the best. They used to keep a blue plastic bowl in her room for that exact purpose, and Jonas remembers spending many nights sitting there with her, trying to drown out the noise of their parents arguing downstairs. Olivia always knew just the right thing to do in those situations: that listening to music would help, and so would cracking the window to hear traffic outside, and so would leafing through old volumes of Calvin & Hobbes in the semi-darkness. One time last year, he went in her room to listen to some music when he couldn't fall asleep. But it wasn't the same without her there.

Sure enough, there is a slightly crunched plastic cup in the glove compartment. Jonas takes it and stepped back outside.

"I'm up here," Olivia calls, and he looks up to see her lying on her back on the roof of the car, arms bent into triangles behind her head. He feels that familiar pit of admiration for her: that she is the kind of person who can climb on top of a car without thinking twice; who can ace a test without studying at all; who can skip school to go sledding, as she did one winter day in her senior year, without feeling any regret. Olivia will never have to take pills or see a shrink. It's like the answers to life, to happiness, just come flashing out at her in perfect neon clarity.

"Come on up," she says.

He hoists himself up, the car creaking a little as it takes his weight. He stretches out next to her and puts her iPod into the cup. He starts scrolling through towards Simon and Garfunkel, which is what they always used to listen to together, but Olivia reaches forward and tilts it towards herself. "My friend introduced me to this band," she says, playing a different song instead, one he doesn't know. It sounds sharp and a little tinny, like barbed wire. Jonas knows she didn't mean it meanly, but he feels a little sting of nostalgia anyway, that things can't be like they used to.

They lie there and listen for a while.

Her voice cuts into the darkness.

"Do you think I should call myself Olive?" she asks him. "I kind of like it. It's got an edge to it that Olivia doesn't."

"What do you mean, an edge?"

"I don't know. I just think Olivia's kind of boring, don't you?"

You hate olives, he wants to say, even though he knows that isn't the point. He wants to say, you are the least boring person ever. People know me because I play the cello; people know you because you're Olivia and you're awesome and confident and bold and funny. I'd give anything for that, really I would. But he doesn't say that. He doesn't have Olivia's boldness, to break things open like that.

Instead, he looks at her, at her long nose and her squarish lips and her tank top with tiny holes cut down the sides. He wonders when she became the kind of person who needs to be named after a Mediterranean vegetable in order to feel like she has an 'edge.'

"I like Olivia," he says.

"Hmm," she murmurs noncommittally, exhaling long. Jonas likes the feeling of the car beneath his back -- the cool metal, the slight curve against his shoulders. "The stars are awesome tonight," she observes.

He looks up at the sky; she is right. What strikes him more than the stars themselves, though, is the negative indigo space between them, like ink has been poured across a piece of paper, leaving only a few white specks clean. The song ends and a new one plays. This one is softer, more melted-sounding.

"Did you know," says Olivia, "that the lifespan of a star is determined by its mass?"

Olivia is like this: she can pull random facts from the air, startle people. Did you know that all polar bears are left-handed? That laughing strengthens the immune system? A mayfly has a lifespan of less than 24 hours, did you know that?

"Small stars can live for trillions of years, while some big stars might live for only a million." She laughs. "Only a million. I guess that's not a phrase you hear too often."

They look at the sky. "Isn't it amazing," she says, "how slowly things change?"

He knows exactly what she means. How one day a tree outside your window is green and sun-splashed and in a

month it is yellow and in another month all the leaves are fallen, only the change was so gradual that you didn't even notice it happening. How you start playing cello when you are five and improve so slowly that it doesn't feel like anything, and then how suddenly you look around and realize that it is how everyone knows you. How your parents are happy and love each other and then start loving each other less and less, incrementally, until one day they sit you down in the living room and say, "We're splitting up." And how slowly people change, too. Sisters, even.

He remembers Olivia's graduation three years ago -- sitting with his parents in hot folding chairs while a lawn mower droned far away. He remembers watching her walk across the stage, her white robes loose and divine somehow. He remembers thinking, that is my sister, and when they said Olivia Adams and she leaned forward to accept her diploma, he felt this same fist-in-the-stomach of feelings: admiration and jealousy and pride and nostalgia all fused into one. It was the feeling, he now realizes, of missing someone who was still there.

"Sorry if I startled you earlier," she says. "I just, you know. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

He swallows. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be okay."

She doesn't press. She shifts a little closer to him on the car, so that their shoulders and elbows touch. It's nice.

"How's college?" he asks.

"Well..." He looks at her, hair splayed on the dark blue metal, her silhouette white against the sky. For a second he sees something as if from backstage, a quick flash of something familiar in the gap between the curtains. But then he blinks and she returns to herself, this new self. "It's good. It's okay."

He doesn't press either. They just look up at the stars together, and that is enough.

A car door slams across the parking lot, and they can both hear their mom's shoes moving over the asphalt.

Olivia giggles. "Shitty shitty shit," she whispers, and Jonas laughs too.

"Pile of shit."

Olivia tries to straighten her face, but she bursts out into giggles again. "We should really not be laughing," she

says. "This is a very serious matter."

"Grave," Jonas adds. They laugh and slide off the car roof onto the ground, Olivia still holding the cup with her iPod in it.

"Kids?" their father's voice rises over the music, loud and gruff.

Olivia snorts. "Of course," she says. "They got here at the exact same time. What are the odds of that, I mean, really?"

"Jonas and Olivia?" their mom's voice joins, too, and Jonas is reminded again of those road trips long ago -- his parents' voices calling his name as he surfaced slowly from his dreams.

"Mom?" Olivia calls.

"Dad?" Jonas says.

Olivia takes the iPod out of the cup and puts it in her pocket, and the music is sucked away. He can hear with perfect acuity all the noises of the night: the crickets in the trees beyond the lot, the bugs buzzing around the light from the streetlamp. Olivia breathing beside him, his mother coming over.

"Oh my god, are you guys okay?" She leans over, grips his shoulders tight. His father is a dark silhouette behind her. Then her voice changes and Jonas braces himself. "Jonas, I really can't tell you how ang--"

"We're fine," Olivia interrupts. She pushes her hair behind her ears.

"And Mom, Dad, please. This is totally my fault. I was talking to Jonas while he was trying to concentrate. I'm really, really sorry."

For once, their mom looks speechless. "I..."

Jonas's father steps forward. "It's okay," he says. "I've called for it to be towed. We'll see how much damage there is. It'll be fine."

Their mom seems to collect her bearings a little. "Yes. We'll talk about this more in the morning, but for now let's just get home." She turns to their father. "Can I give you a ride?"

He scratches his cheek. "Uh, sure. Thanks."

They get into their mom's car. Mom driving, Dad shotgun, Jonas and Olivia in the back. The streetlights blur outside Jonas's window, smudges of white and red and green. He leans towards Olivia instinctively, and she reaches her hand out to his shoulder, but she seems to realize at the same time he does that they have both grown and that there isn't enough space anymore. It is a change that has happened slowly; Jonas isn't surprised, really. So he settles for the dip between her shoulder and her neck, and she puts her arm around him. And as the car rumbles down the interstate, they let themselves relax.

November 19th

Alexis Beale
GERMANTOWN, MD

*Two years ago tomorrow was the first time I ever really drank with someone
And I remember how guilty I felt
Because I was supposed to visit you
And I didn't*

*Then you died the very next day
And I blamed myself,
Because maybe it was God punishing me
For what I had done*

*And I can't tell you how sorry I am
For choosing him over you that day
And that summer*

*It's almost been two years
And I still don't quite feel like myself sometimes
And I'm really not sure why that is.*

Alysha Smith
SOUTH HACKENSACK, NJ



Next to the Windowsill

Mariel Reilly
BEVERLY, MA

*I have words
and I have reason,
but there are days,
undoubtedly,
when I can not bind the two
in holy matrimony,
or duct tape them together,
held hostage.*

*I have but one emotion
and it lives without
identification.
To fold my knees to my chest
and rest my head
on the denim covered legs
of someone who was reading,
and politely ignoring me,
my inconsistent sleep
and my fidgeting.
No clichéd pattering of rain
on the roof and windows,
but rather just the sound*

*of heavy sighs
and turning pages.
Days like these have no reason.
I am almost thoroughly
convinced of that.
But at the time,
I don't have reason either.
And the words I need could be found
in the book I wasn't reading.*

Traffic Lights

Peter Samuel Kim

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

Eh. Fuck it.

The words don't sound like what they are supposed to. Rather than words, they are a whispery clamor. A breathy emphasis on the "F", heavy gasps, and barely audible syllables jumble out, all at the same time. Along with them, his body stumbles down on to the dark, dry asphalt road, right under the traffic lights. The moment his sweat-soaked windbreaker touches the elderly, yet lifeless surface, a cold shudder creeps down his spine, but quickly goes away as his body adjusts to the newfound sensation.

The night sky is a poignant reminder of the passing of time. Its eternal depth evokes both introspection and retrospection. Multiple emotions contradict within the minds under it.

Am I really alone?

He looks to his sides. Time smoothes the crevasses between the asphalt pebbles into obsidian. Time wears out the yellow centerline and cracks the paint, joining the parallel twin factions, who had been long separated. Time embeds memory within. The white-painted speed limit that read 30, now skewed into bland gibberish from his point of view, is no longer legible.

Then, he looks up. The traffic light above him has two luminescent orbs placed side by side, encased its cold metallic box. One at a time, the orbs emit blinking eerie orange. They blink 56 times per minute, and 1.071 times a second, from left to right, right to left, left to right, and so on.

As his body's desire for air slowly quenches, his panting breath, which was initially at a much faster tempo than the lights', calms into a similar rhythm, and then eventually goes silent. Finally, he lets out an exhausted, but satisfied sigh.

Shrubs of evergreen by the streets seem out of place, as they are innocently positioned under the winter branches of ginkgo trees.

Now with no sound to block his ears, he realizes the small ticking sounds from the blinking orbs. They are quite hypnotizing, as they are synchronized with the steady pulse of the lights.

They actually make sound...

Clarity is leaving his mind.

My family must be asleep right now.

The seemingly perpetual oscillating orange loses its sensibility.

Did I turn off the lights in the living room?

The coldness of the asphalt starts to numb his skin.

They'd be coming back tomorrow afternoon.

The chilly damp air does not taste like nor smell like anything.

What should I have for breakfast tomorrow?

Even the light's sound soon disintegrates into white noise.

Is this...

Thoughts fade out.

I...

He lets go.



There is something extremely liberating about this. It is something one wouldn't even imagine to do so without the intention of suicide.

Why?

After a couple seconds of a vain search for an answer, self-criticism follows. But he soon just shrugs it off, and decides not to look for a reason and not to think at all.

Soon, another cold shudder crawls down his spine. But this time, it is different. This time, it spreads to every corner of his body. This time, it stays.



When the rest of the world was asleep, he was awake. Again. As usual. As planned. A cold but pleasant winter breeze swiftly swept past his cheeks and his bare calves. Before him, stretched only perpetual asphalt, dimly lit by streetlights. His timeworn gray Nike running shoes, now enlarged to size 285 from 275, weakly treaded, showing that it wasn't their first time standing in front of the road's unfriendly gaping mouth.

After swaying his neck one more time from side to side for a final stretch, he felt uneasiness slither ahead of him. A tranquil sense of fear of being accompanied by solitude and being deafened by silence unsettlingly crept downwards, from his feet to his head. His shadow was the only shadow moving. His breath was the only breath taken. His presence was the only presence present.

Bizarre anxiety struck him, but not strong enough to send him back home. Step by step, he marched forward, slowly gaining speed. He passed by a green road sign that said "Gangnam - 1km". The nightly silence was finally refilled with footsteps and pants. He avoided sidewalks. The road was finally reinvigorated with adrenaline. Every inch of the road was a crosswalk for him. He was finally restored with life and security.

However, the moment he thought he had found comfort, uncertainty dominated. He still could not sense any tangible changes that were clearly around him. Was it the lights?

His eyes quickly scanned the streetlights ahead, who stood there remaining silently, just as they have been doing for years. Was it the road? The fading yellow street paint and eroding asphalt proved him wrong. Was it him?

I am alone.

The moment his family left him for his grandparent's house, the sweet taste of freedom delighted him. He was finally alone. He became the center of his world. The streetlights swirled around him, putting him on spotlight. Shadows were cast outwards from the soles of his feet. His parents were already exiled outcasts under his reign. Anything that didn't suit his taste was bound for banishment and his neglect. There wasn't a single person or entity in the whole city who could interfere with his decisions. He was finally free. Lunar New Year and the migration of people have granted him with complete independence, than no one could hamper with. January 30th's run was supposed to be just another nightly routine for him. Again, from 11PM to 11:27PM. As usual, 3 laps around his apartment area. 6.89 kilometers, as planned. Nothing was to disturb the system.

Only after the whole run does he realize that utter freedom is the source of his uneasiness. People are gone. Not just out of sight. Not just out of touch. Nonexistent. The sense of loneliness overwhelms him as the runner's high and adrenaline intoxicates his mind. The sense of complete autonomy, immature eagerness and absolute isolation swirl within him. With sweat and heat pouring down all over his body, he lies down. He looks to his sides. Then, he looks up. His glasses quickly fog. Something in his mind slowly swelled up, but as soon as he started to look for a way to explain it faded away. His glasses were not the only things fogged. The lights are no longer blinking; they are endlessly, quietly blaring. His skin burns from senselessness. The night air is barren. It smells bleak. A blanket of silence buries everything.

Outside, There Were Fireflies

Robin Shafto
LIVINGSTON, NJ

*I listened to gossip that wasn't meant for me:
Wouldn't dance with him. No... and so much lipstick...
by the chocolate fountain... wait. No it must have been...
acne and I thought it would be gone by...
Kyle dances close.*

*Candyland. That was the theme.
I wiped orange dust on my stiff dress.
It wasn't the dress's fault. I had no curves to hug,
so it jumped away from my body in anticipation of the female form
and was cold when I shifted my weight and felt the fabric on my hip.
I was larval, white and wormy like something from under a log.
My lip gloss smelled like artificial strawberries, but not enough to drown out
sweat and borrowed perfume on other girls.*

*I crossed my arms over my absent chest
and pressed my knobby knocking knees together.
Outside, there were fireflies. Warm clear air.
No loud soupy music pouring from cheap speakers.
Turning back to the table, I realized I was alone.
A slow song.
And I watched Kyle dance close.*

Is this remoteness really the independence that I wanted? Is freedom really worth this burdensome solitude? Am I actually even free?

But he decides not to look for an answer and not to think at all.

I...

He lets go.



City Kid

Elle Wallace
HUMMELSTOWN, PA

*he eats Wheaties on his porch steps
wrestles his brother to the sidewalk
c'mon man, play fair
tapes Michael Jordan to his bedroom door
punches at his mirror with Balboa eyes
walks alongside newspaper tumbleweeds
shuffles with nappy-haired boys
spinning basketballs on their fingers
leans on chain-link fences
whistling as the uptown girls pass
hip sway and lip gloss
home in time for dinner in the kitchen
rests his head on mom's shoulder at the stove
son don't you get in trouble
eyelids shut to nighttime sirens
calling, calling
to the bored city boys.*

At Seventeen

Cierra Ingersoll

LOS ANGELES, CA

I used to think I was a normal kid. The differences between most kids I knew and me were few, but major. I've always had an especially strong bond with my family, which to me, is my mother Stacie and my sister Celeste. My mom's two husbands were constantly straining to win affection from Celeste and me, but to us they remained neutral people. Like pieces of furniture that were always present, a vague addition to memories but not meaningful ones. Except when they abandoned their role of background fixtures and became swirling tornadoes of rage, threatening to destroy my mother's fragile self-esteem. But the happy times outweighed the bad. Things weren't perfect, but I recognized that the world could be both ugly and beautiful. I found peace and things to be happy about, never worried for long about problems that were small and easily fixable. While in those childhood and early teen years which I have so recently left, I never imagined that I would become a brooding teenager, the daughter of an alcoholic mother.

So many things have changed since then. My house, school, the state I lived in. My hair color.

I had just turned seventeen. That morning I crunched down the hill by the district office, on icy sidewalks and grass that accompanied the glassy fog of my breath. My boots were dark, with socks pulled over dark pants. I was wearing a thick coat over a sweater, knitted gloves, and a hat. So many layers protecting me from November in western Washington, but still the chill of the early morning clung to my body. I thought briefly of the large brick building on the Mount Vernon High School campus that I should've been inside, and the Algebra II that I should've been learning, but as I cut class I remember thinking that overall, this was a much better use of my time.

Headphones on, listening to Death Cab for Cutie croon his poems set to music, his starkly beautiful sentences sank into my heart and into my mood. He sang, "The rhythm of my footsteps crossing flatlands to your door have been silenced, forevermore... And the distance is quite simply much too far for me to row..."

I related the lyrics I heard to Joey, my first love and boyfriend of two years, and to

last year when I was blissfully unaware that I didn't have much time before he moved two states away. From northern Washington to southern California is a distance that can be driven in a few days, but too far to be any comfort to me.

I walked across the overpass into downtown Mount Vernon where the spicy warm smells of the natural foods co-op confronted my nose. There was a crowd spilling out from their packed deli, hippie looking people with dreadlocks who gripped steaming cups of coffee and chatted cheerfully. The music played on in my ears, muting the voices around me, the steps of people on the pavement, and the cars that drove by in the puddled filled street.

I continued on, hands stuffed snugly deep into my pockets, up the small hill past the art store to the bridge that separated east from west Mount Vernon. I walked slowly across the structure. I stopped and leaned over the edge to admire the steel gray of the cold river beneath me, the ghostly way water appeared in winter, so harsh and uninviting. The current flowed south as I walked west, crossing over to the other side and turning immediately left into the park.

The water and the air were cold, but I had grown warm under all my layers and unzipped my coat as I walked down past the playground and field to a secluded clearing that opened into the river once I walked past the trees. The water was too high to get too far, so I perched on the edge. Toes close to the icy water, I watched its perpetual flow and marveled at this one permanent thing in the world, one force that goes on no matter the constant change of fleeting things around it. It was solid and consistent.

I thought of five years earlier, when everything in my life was so different. A different step father, a different, home, a mother who I'd never seen drunk, no concept of romantic relationships or that feeling that chokes me when someone I love is far away. And five years earlier, this river had been flowing the same way, at the same rate and down the same route as it did now. Ice had been melting in the mountains and moving downhill to the Skagit River and then out to the Puget Sound for more centuries than I could imagine.

I unzipped a pocket of the bag hanging at my side and brought out a box holding two cigarettes and a dark blue lighter. I stuck a cigarette between my lips and shielded it from the breeze to light it. I flashed back to

a few nights earlier when I saw my mom make the exact same movement as we sat in two plastic chairs under a dim light bulb that hangs from the awning of our house. It was late, and she was slurring her words as she tried to explain to me things I couldn't understand. She apologized over and over for being drunk, and repeated things she'd already said and forgotten as she always does when she's that gone. Between little sobs and sentences that made no sense she mumbled a few words that told me of the fight she and my step dad had earlier.

"He wants me to be perfect. I just can't do it. I can't be perfect," she said.

"Nobody's perfect, Mom," I said.

Beyond the small circle of light that shined out of our one lonely light bulb, the night suddenly seemed darker.

This was the way it had been going most nights for the last many months. It didn't always end with us talking about what happened, but it always ended up with her drunk, hammered in the kitchen, banging and dropping things, pretending to be sober enough to put the dishes away. I don't know if the act was for her or me, but it didn't make either of us feel better. A few hours later she would be in bed if she made it, or blacked out on the bathroom floor. Her husband Scott would try to bring her to bed, but he wasn't strong enough to pick up and carry anyone. So he would have to wait until she was at least conscious, then drag her drooping frame over his shoulder to the bed.

I squeezed my eyes shut to erase that vision from my mind. There were other things in life to be happy about. I told myself to go back, to find the best memory I could think of. The cold river and gray sky faded away and for a moment I stood on a street on a Seattle night, city lights reflecting in the unnaturally large pupils of the people around me. I went back to that summer night when Joey and I stood outside the WAMU Theater, hearts pumping and minds alight with the effects of the magical potion we'd drank earlier that magnified every good sound or sensation and made it the best thing in the world. The cigarette we passed back and forth filled my head with a buzz that was as fantastically beautiful as the night around us. The music of Kaskade boomed. The theatre was packed with a massive crowd cheering and dancing and pulsing together under the spectacle of lights that flashed around us. And in the front, commanding this huge audience, was one of my favorite musicians, DJ Kaskade,

playing songs I'd only dreamed of hearing live. I felt like the whole night was a page ripped out of an imaginary book that described my dream life.

I traveled back three years further, to when my mom and first step dad divorced, and her, my older sister Celeste, and I lived alone. It was morning, and mom was driving us to school, and we were all smiling and laughing despite the fact that it was a Monday. When it was just the three of us, we were always happy, it didn't matter that life was suddenly different and we had no money. Every night we ate dinner together, and I would tell her about things we were doing at school, or new songs we were learning in band. She listened and had always had something sweet to say. She never responded with a patronizing, "Mmhhh, that's nice sweetie."

Most nights we would talk about ridiculous things, like how Celeste's history teacher resembled a walrus or other stupid bits of life that were so funny for no reason. I remember one time Celeste was making fun of something I had said, so I flicked an olive in her direction. It landed on her hand and she squealed and threw one back. Soon we were all chucking the remnant olives from that night's tacos at each other. One whizzed through the air and landed in my hair, another hit the window and stuck. Finally, hysterical, we realized that all the olives had been thrown and we collapsed into laughter. That was how my mom used to be; free, fun, my best friend.

A gust of wind shook the flashback from my mind. I remembered that despite every good thing that had ever happened, no matter how many Sundays of my childhood were spent with my mom at church, no matter how many years I remember her as a loving mother, there were some things she couldn't handle. I knew it wasn't all Scott's fault. Mom's parents divorced when she was twelve, and after that she never received much familial support. I don't think she'd ever been fully at peace. Her dad was distant and her relationship with her mom was shaky. At nineteen after giving birth to Celeste she left our drug addict father and moved in with her dad and his wife and started over. She tried to put her past insecurities behind her and focused on being a mother, and for a long time it worked. Then we grew up, her second marriage fell apart and then she married Scott. But that didn't develop into the fairytale she expected and all the sadness that she thought she had buried somehow rose up again. I don't know the whole story. I don't know every past demon that haunted her because she kept things from me. She changed when

she became a mother, into a happier person with more purpose, and that's the only version I knew of her. Until recently.

So many factors collided at just that wrong time and velocity, and after the dust settled, she was left clinging to alcohol. It was the last thing I would have ever imagined to happen to her, and it didn't make sense to me. But nothing made sense anymore. This was my mom who taught Sunday school at our Nazarene church, smiling in front of the kids, wearing a bright red skirt and looking like the picture of happiness. I didn't know how things had crumbled so far. I didn't know what, if any, role I played in her ordeal or how I could help. I just knew I was sad and cold. And it seemed like it had been this way for so long.

This bone chilling winter made me long for summer just as the pressing heat of July makes me wish for December. But when the chill in my life was from something besides the weather, all I could remember and wish for were the times before when there was a warmth in my soul that I had taken for granted. Now, being in both a literal and internal winter, I shivered. It started on my skin but I felt it go inside my soul until my whole body was trembling like the leaves clinging to branches above me.

When I checked the time it was nine a.m. I calculated how long it would take to walk back to school, and realized I had to leave. So I exhaled one last drag and flicked the butt where it fell, hissing, into the eternal river.

Hands in pockets and headphones on, I walked off in that huddled way that defined my mood and actions those first few months of my junior year. I was blown with the wind at my back across the bridge and onto the boardwalk that lined a small section of the river. It was so small, such a tiny structure of twigs that for some reason pulled my heart out and left it flopping at my feet. I could remember every Fourth of July for years, sitting on that boardwalk and watching the fireworks shoot and flare in the sky, lighting up the faces of my mom and Celeste and illuminating the crowd around us.

This mood lingered just as the rain did, and I felt the net of drops form on my hat like tiny bits of cloud. I stopped in at the co-op and tried fleetingly to do my algebra homework, though I soon lost patience, and packed up and left. My next class was French, which I slumped through, absorbing the beautiful words but none of the general happiness of the people around me. After I would return home and work on assignments for the online course I was taking at the local community college.

At 11:02 I took the short walk from the building to the back parking lot. I glanced at the cemetery adjacent to the high school, tombstones barely fifty yards away.

"No wonder this places always feels so grim," I thought as I pulled away in my little blue Kia, heater roaring.

Hornet's Nest

Taylor Petty

WOODBRIDGE, VA

*clover honey sunken through your fingertips, words heavy,
i kiss the sweetness from your pointed teeth,
acid clawing its way
from my lips to yours, scabs forming
in the corners of your mouth.*

*sunday, harvest,
peeling back layers of skin
to pull honeycombs from
brittle skeletons.*

*there are craters sinking into your lips
that bee stings won't swell.
my throat is clogging up*

*with scratching suffocating drowning honey,
and acid will burn everything through.*

*we did this to each other:
my orange blossom to your killer bee,
each "i love you" dragged out
like skinning an animal, extracting a splinter
that fractures bone.*

*autumn soon, and hibernation.
crystallization.
that quiet shaking humming
before the strike.*

A Champion's Guide to Climbing Whatever Mountain You Want

Tina Weingroff

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

Occasionally I think that spiders are filling my mouth, even when I'm awake, this essay is about that.

This is dedicated to Brian Sella and Mat Uychich of The Front Bottoms.

It is not unusual for me to feel absolutely nothing. Sometimes the medicine numbs out the sadness, but it doesn't plaster a smile on my face. So I settle for numb, because it is better than feeling suicidal. When I do feel something I have a range of emotions; happy, sad, angry, sleepy, tearful, joyful, grumpy, etc., but it is rare for me to be scared. I was scared for a long time. Somehow I implanted myself into a group of mentally unstable teenage girls, not the "OMG LOOK AT THOSE SHOES" mentally unstable kind of girls, the mentally unstable kind of girls that listened to punk music and did drugs. The kind of girls that had mental problems of all sorts. Somehow I survived the beginning years of our friendship. I survived the million late night phone calls, the tearful voices that were cracked and aged from smoking. I held hands with everyone, barely slept, and somehow managed to be the only one out of the six of us to not get sent to a mental hospital.

Until recently, Emma and I were the victors. We were secretly filled with pride, we rode incognito chariots of healthy minds and we were proud. The environment we were in was filled with toxic waste, they would gossip about the councilors at the hospital, how they had secretly hooked up with boys in the laundry room. They talked about everything except the treatment. Emma and I talked about the outside world. We talked about the shootings at Newtown, the party at Nick's house, and we whispered how much we missed our friends. They talked about the medication they took as if it was a prize. They compared milligram numbers and looked down their noses at people with less. They said horrible things about each other, about their boyfriends and even the bands they loved. I was still not scared.

They all thought about suicide, consid-

ered suicide, and contemplated suicide. I'm not going to lie, I did too. But who hasn't? When I died, would I be looking down on the people I adored? Where would I be looking from, a tree or the sky? Would I come back and not remember the life I had worked so hard to obtain? What if it was worse than right now. Could I give up pizza?

BREAKFAST PIZZA

Emma loves pizza.

She would eat it for breakfast.

I believe she has.

Emma and I were the only ones left. We were closer than ever, I felt like we were holding onto a life saver in a tumbling sea of our friends misery. We spent all of our time together, going shopping, watching movies, sending funny pictures back and forth, you know, friend stuff. We went to different schools but it didn't stop us from hanging out together several times a week. I would read her my poetry and she would make me cookies or cut my hair, we were artists in different respects. I didn't think anything could ever break us apart.

It was at lunch. I was sitting with Nick and Zack when I checked my phone for the 1st time that day. There was the text, surrounded by twitter notifications. "im being sent away.". A small message from Emma made me scared. I hadn't been scared in so long.

Emma: im being sent away

Tina: haha no way r u joking?

Emma: this one is real.

Tina: oh my god. what happened? are you okay?

Emma: sunday night was rough. ill call you from the hospital.

Tina: i love you so much it hurts, youre my best friend

Emma: i love you too, ill call you when i can.

Tina: i love you

I cried. It had been months since I cried. But it happened, the tears slipped out of my eyes like melting ice cream. They didn't taste like ice cream, and neither did the mascara that came with it. I bolted from the lunch table and locked myself in the bathroom, never wanting to come out again. After the tears had run out I went to the TVP room late and didn't say a word. I quietly played soccer in gym class, and went home like a zombie. I told my mom what had happened, she tried to support me as best as she could through the phone,

but her attempts were fruitless, I was the only one left.



The idiot didn't write down my number. What an idiot! Only my idiot of a best friend would forget to write down my number so she could call me from the hospital. Thank god her sister had it, otherwise I would be screwed. When she called from the 000-000-0000 number I picked up immediately, I was familiar with this secret correspondence. It could have been a call from the president, but I would have rathered it been from her. When she called she filled me in on all the lies our other friends had told. There was no microwave room to hook up in, we were idiots for believing that there was a room filled with microwaves. She told me the truths as well, the food was only subpar and they did give you your meds from paper cups just like in *Girl Interrupted*. I didn't ask how she had tried to kill herself and she didn't mention of it. I didn't want to know, it would only make my nightmares more vivid.

In my nightmares Emma and I would be sitting on a pier. The ocean would be a vibrant light blue color, like her hair was in September and the sunset was a beautiful pink-orange color. Our pinkies would be locked as we looked at the strange water. The nightmare started when I looked at her face. I would turn my head in slow motion and see the bones clearly under her skin. She had always been pale, but in this dream her skin was translucent. I could see her skull clearly, and as I examined her face she would start to cry. I would try to wipe the tears away but as I pulled my hand away her skin would come with it, like the film on a boiling pot of pasta if you let it sit for too long. That's when the screaming would start and I would wake up.

When she called she would hum *Twin Sized Mattress* by our favorite band *The Front Bottoms* to fill the silence. I wouldn't tell her about how I couldn't sleep, I would tell her that *Ingrid* and I attempted to make cookies and they burnt to a crisp, or how *Christopher* (my boyfriend) showed me a really cool new band and as soon as she got home we would drive aimlessly and listen to the whole album.

This is for the lions living in the wiry broke down frames of my friends bodies.

When the flood waters comes, it ain't gonna

be clear, it's gonna look like mud.

*But I will help you swim,
Yes I will help you swim.*

I told her that my brother had asked where she had been. My too-cool-newly-pubescent 16 year old brother that hid in his room whenever any of my friends came to the house. That made her cry. When we would hang up, around 9:30 every night, I would sit in silence and consider smoking the 3/4ths empty pack of Marlboro Reds sitting at the bottom of my sock drawer. I only smoked them when I was really distressed. I didn't even like smoking, I just liked watching the smoke gather above my head and slowly dissipate into nothing, something I wish I could do. I'm jealous of cigarettes and the power they have over people. No one would ever be addicted to me, constantly needing me every 45 minutes or so. I would never give someone cancer. I had never been treasured and held carefully like a lit cigarette.

I wish I had a dog. My dog had been named Theo, and he was the greatest dog in the universe. He only had one eye, and was losing vision in it fast. He wasn't the cuddliest, he was very prudent about coming to you first, but if he was curled up on the couch you could lay your head on him and sleep for hours. He was old, but he played like a puppy. He never bit or growled or jumped, but he would come when you called him and lick the make-up off your face. I went to camp for eight weeks one summer, and when I came back he was close to the end. We put him down in September. I started going to therapy three times a week instead of two.

By the time Emma went away I was only seeing my therapist once every other week. Bernice Killington, she was not a doctor but I called her Dr. K. She was in her late 50's, with saggy bronze skin and too much eyeliner on her lower waterline. Her lipstick never stayed on, and she didn't really give good advice, but she was cheap and would quietly sip on her XXL cup of Dunkin Donuts ice tea (which I'm pretty sure was 1/8th vodka) while I spilled my guts. She took notes when she felt like it on a yellow legal pad in the basement of an office building in Westwood. She asked me about my medication sometimes, just to see if it ever fluctuated (often) and she would write it down in tiny neat handwriting. I never asked about her children, even though there were pictures of them all over the room, and I still haven't. Sometimes she dyed her hair a dark red

color, and other times she got blonde highlights. I wasn't sure if she washed her hair. She helped me more than the meds.

When Emma came out of the hospital, we went to church an hour early. We sat in the back row and put our feet up on the pews, wearing bulky boots and skinny jeans. We ate pretzels and talked about nothing in particular, while we waited for everyone else to get there. We locked pinkies and prayed for her mom who had passed away from breast cancer in March. Well I did, in my head. But I don't know what she prayed for. I assume she did, but I can't read minds.

She was different. Her hands shook more than normal, and she dyed her pink hair to black. Her eye make-up had gone from pretty gold to black and blue, she didn't bother to cover the purple-ness under her eyes. Her lips were always chapped. Her fingernails were bitten down the nub and the scars on her arm that had been healing very well were tauntingly pink. The melody in her voice was gone, bare and raw. Even when she smiled her eyes didn't. I felt lost without her, I tried to be supportive, like I was when her Mom died, but there was nothing left for me to do. She wouldn't eat the food I brought over, she barely ate anything. She didn't do anything but lay in her bed and listen to the same sad albums over and over. She would only go out if there were boys to kiss or some kind of substance to take her mind off of the numbness she felt. That's what she told me, that she couldn't feel anything. She knew that I loved her, but my hugs just felt like pressure, she didn't feel the emotion. When I asked what I could do to help her, she said I could give her a gun.

This is bullshit. I don't even know what triggered her. I started to lean on my other friends. I couldn't be surrounded with negativity. I checked up on her as much as I could, but I was tired of the exhausted zombie like responses. This has happened before, with all of them, it would pass.

Christopher is older than me. He is 22 and is a senior at Rutgers. He's 6'4 and I'm 5'4. He's my boyfriend, and I don't think I would make it without him. We had only been dating for a month when Emma went away, and I leaned on him more than I should have, but he understood. He lives 43 minutes away from me, but he comes over whenever I ask or when he can tell I'm upset (which is often these

days). I think I love him, but I'm not entirely sure. I'm only 18 years old, I've got plenty of time to figure this shit out.

Emma is better. When we hang out, she actually laughs. She makes plans, and we go on hikes and to the movies. We hang out with Ingrid, one of the first to go who has almost fully turned back to her normal self. Emma and I go to church every Sunday, to the mass and then Youth Group where we both have a very strong support system and lots of friends. Things seem to be looking up for the best these days.

I still don't know what happened. I don't think I will ever know what happened. I don't think I ever want to know what



Cigarette

Jessica Maddox
TOWSON, MD

*Appreciate me
before the ash
burns your throat,
the wrinkles appear,
and the taxes go up:
you have five minutes.*

*Draw me
from my cardboard cave
and brandish me
like a sword
as I lie between your lips,
unlit, hanging,
ready for the spark.
Graciously,
I will accept
your ring of lipstick,
ruby red staining
my bleached skin
like an unforgotten kiss.
Strike the box,
lay me over the flame
and inhale,
feeling the bittersweet smoke
kiss the crevices
of your lungs
as I unravel for you.
Watch me bloom
like a small wildflower,
full, dripping grey
petals of ash
onto your skirt
before I'm brushed away.
In a moment
I will lie in a cemetery
of soggy remains,
but I will laugh
as you strut away,
carrying my thick perfume
in your chest.*

Luk Kreung

Robert Conner

EXETER, NH

A collection of golden brown gazebos dotted around a vast central pagoda makes up the newest Buddhist temple in Korat, grandmother's hometown. A knee-length fence of white bars encircles the compound, extending towards many corners of the Thai countryside, and reaching the lush, lime-green foothills of the rainforest-clad mountain range. As I enter the compound, my shoes submerge into the soil with each step I take along the temple paths. A glossy banner suspends across the part of the fence facing the main road and declares in bold Thai letters: "Vesak Holiday May 2007 – Worship the lord Buddha on the full moon of the sixth lunar month." A rich, garlicky and creamy aroma of green curry from the nearby market filters through the mango trees and fences, swarming the vacant spaces between each gazebo. Grandma giggles, "Bobby, I think you know what we will be having for lunch today!"

I nod and smile. "Yes Grandma. Korat green curry." The aroma floats amidst the humid air and overpowers the faint scents of orchids on wild vines that interlace the edges of gazebos and fences. A muffled chiming of water against rocks from the adjacent river mingles through the lingering silence of the new morning.

The mango trees, gazebos, and pagoda cast sheltering shadows for the temple's young student-monks to sit and meditate. A dozen or so boys meditate in complete stillness, like statues sinking into the ground. Their loose, saffron robes flow over their bodies, covering up all breathing movements. In keeping with traditional Buddhist customs, the young student-monks have shaved their heads and eyebrows. The boys meditating are Thai. Full Thai. Their complexions are the common shade of dark and sandy beige with a tawny undertone. However, not all the student-monks are meditating. A few of the boys run around as if the temple is their playground. Mud tints the tips of their saffron robes. One or two of them are bald, whereas the other few have visible hints of unshaven hair. All of these boys have eyebrows. These boys have complexions that are a blend of the Thai dark beige and a Caucasian paleness. The mixture creates a hue in between honey and ivory. These boys, like myself, are *luk kreungs*, the Thai word for "half child."

Sighing, Grandma says, "I'm glad you didn't turn out like those *luk kreungs*. Whatever families they have tend to drop them

off in places like temples and hope that they will be someone else's problem...It's a shame..."

I hold Grandma's warm hands and we stride through the compound, towards the soaring stairways of the central pagoda. Although her back hunches as if she is diving towards the floor, her head tilts toward me, allowing the few evidences of teeth she has left to glint at the touch of the sun's rays. She talks in a hoarse whisper, but at times, her voice switches from a low growl to a sharp, high-pitched cheer, as though she is singing. "What a blessing it is that Vesak falls on one of your long weekends this year."

"Yeah!" Chuckling, I respond, "It's nice to take a break from the whole family and all that city pollution to spend it here in Korat for once."

"What a precious grandson you are. Now, we are at this new temple as they still need donations for some of their gazebos." Grandma slips a white envelope into my pocket and I take it as a hint that it is my duty as a boy to hand over a donation to the older monks, as they cannot interact with females. Flawless soapstone steps make up the stairways. As we climb up the countless levels, I press my hands into the railings to savor the grainy mosaic that invokes a light, prickling sensation on my palms. At the top of the stairs, a chain of towering columns gleams under a thick coating of varnish and the columns align both sides of an archway, leading into the main hall with all the senior monks. Multiple tiers of slanted roofs rest on the columns. The roofs create visual rhythms as sparkly Garuda ornaments resembling the beaks of a bird perch at each end.

Inside the main hallway, the monks sit on long rows on a raised platform. Respecting basic temple etiquette, I take off my shoes and go down on my knees. I shuffle over to one of the monks. I hold onto Grandma's envelope as she sits in one corner. As I move closer to him, his eyes focus onto something, somewhere else, and I do not exist. I glance down the platform and the other monks are whispering amongst each other. The monk I edge closer towards mutters a string of fragmented English words in a thick and husky tone: "Not. No. Sorry. Not. Cannot. Now. Sorry." I stay still and silent. He then shouts right through me, his words, in Thai, directed towards Grandma. "Ma'am, we are deeply sorry for your circumstances, but we simply cannot accept any more *luk kreungs* into our monastery. There are many alternatives to orphanages. The monkhood is a sacred experience for those youngsters with

the right will."

I turn my head to Grandma and it is as if the bones and muscles fueling her spirit have withered like dead leaves during a dreaded Thai drought. I shake myself out of the shock and start speaking Thai to the monk. Enunciating each syllable, I state, "Holy father. I trust you may have made a mistake. I am just here to visit my Grandmother during this sacred holiday. We wish to donate to this temple, as it is new and not all the gazebos are complete." The monk silences. A blank expression washes over his face and he stares at me with squinting eyes.

"Son, I apologize. I should not have made false guesses nor should I have spoken those words I did. Your family must be proud that you can speak Thai so well! Most *luk kreungs* who come here cannot speak Thai very well, and so we have a very hard time communicating with them. Many of them also come from very difficult situations..."

I nod my head and say, "Yes holy father, I completely understand." I place the envelope on a tray in front of him as the other monks closest to us shift their weights to focus their attention onto me.

One of them asks, "Son, if you were to enter a monastery as a student-monk, would you shave off all your hair?"

"Yes holy father, I promise I would shave off my hair and both my eyebrows." The head monk places his hands together and recites a prayer. The monks around him join the deep and throaty chants while I look back at Grandma's smiling face.

Sonnet for the Captor

Brittany Crow

WOODBRIDGE, VA

*They say I write to satisfy the lips,
That my fingers lost their virginity
As a paper symphony stroked their tips
And the loose leaf love letter bridled me.*

*They say I bleed ink from a liar's whip,
That my veins spill in foolish submission
As the King of Hearts (yes mine) deals a trip
Which ever sends me falling into him.*

*And they say I'll be nothing in the end,
That I will be ground into words and ink
As I become something they cannot mend:
A broken poem that does naught but think.*

*And think and think and think will I, then be
The lyric work of art he wrenched from me.*



Ben Knecht
HUBBARDSVILLE, NY



Hide and Seek

Jacqueline Ose
VERNON, CT

“Hey this is a good one; what do you call a cow with no legs?” Aidan shouted ahead. “Shhhhh! Oliver’s going to hear us. You can tell your little jokes later.” Maddy whispered, pulling him behind the wood-pile. A smooth spring breeze rustled the tarp above them. They sat in the prickly grass, listening to the faint rhythm of Oliver’s counting.

“Do you think he’ll find us?” the little boy whispered. “I don’t know. Maybe if you shush, we’ll actually win this time.” Maddy murmured as she peeked around the massive pile. They sat in silence for a while, listening to the squeals and shouts of their friends running around the yard. Aidan shuffled through the weeds. He turned to Maddy and watched her intently as she searched the lawn.

“What are you looking for?” he asked tentatively.

“Someplace new to hide. We have to win the game, remember?” Maddy whispered back. “Why don’t you tell me another cow joke while we’re waiting?” She watched as Aidan’s blue eyes lit up for the first time in months.

“Oh! Okay what do you get from a pampered cow?” Aidan beamed. Maddy tapped her finger against her nose, pretending to be stumped.

“Hmm, I don’t remember this one...”

“Spoiled milk! Haha I got you!” he teased.

“You’re such a silly goose. Okay Aidan, it’s our turn for the game. Last one over the fence is spoiled milk!” Their mud-caked feet raced across the lawn and scrambled over the barbed wire fence. Their striped uniforms flapped in the breeze to the cacophony of German soldiers’ shouts and gunfire.

Gravity

Catherine Aviles
EAST SANDWICH, MA

Wax isn't like clay. You can't cut it with a wire and have the lovely, smooth-sided, moldable chunks slide off. You have to use a spike or a knife to stab the block, careful not to stab yourself or the cutting board, chipping off bits and pieces with pressure-whitened crackly edges. The chipping inevitably produces a lot of useless white dust that looks like the coconut shavings my grandmother uses for snow on her gingerbread houses at Christmastime.

I sweep my collection of wax chunks into the pot on the stove, brushing the dust in as well just in case it will add anything, and go back to work on the stippled wax block with my knife.

I stood at this same green granite counter about this time last year, rolling pin in hand, my brother and sister on my right and left and my aunt and uncle across from me, the countertop in between littered with cutting boards, sugar dough, flour, bowls of icing and food coloring, and jars on jars of sprinkles. It was pretty cramped, but it could have been more cramped, and happier, even though it was Christmastime and there was coconut snow on the gingerbread houses. I wished, as I had every year before and would every year after, that I could not move my elbows to reach for the yellow frosting for my bell-shaped cookie. I wished that I would bump into the arm of a girl about my height and she would tell me to watch it because my elbows are sharp. I wished that her brother – like mine – would laugh and say yeah, stay away from those things. Always caught between being the oldest at the children's table and the youngest at the adults', my brother and I had wondered what it would be like to grow up with them, our cousins, and they with us. Would her hair have turned dark and curly? Would he have loved rugby shirts and pumpkin seeds?

I toss six bits of broken Robin's Egg Blue crayon into the pot of melting wax and set to work setting the eight-inch wick in the bottom of the empty jelly glass, sticking

the circular metal base down with a gob of wax and holding the string upright with a popsicle stick.

Cianan and Cecilia were too young to eat popsicles, too young to hold a knife, too young to use a stove, too young to color with crayons. Once I start thinking about all the things they never got to do, I can't stop. I see a tree and I think, they never got to climb a tree. I eat an apple and I wonder, would they have tossed it up like a baseball before the first bite, too? I'll never know.

Every picture I have of them is landscaped, a sideways smiling face with a tuft of light brown hair and a thin yellow rubber tube running under the nose, because they couldn't lift their heads.

My diving coach once told me a human head weighs ten pounds, and he threw a ten pound weight to the bottom of the pool and made me fetch it back to prove that ten pounds is a lot for a little girl to carry through the water. I learned to tuck my head in correctly after that, but my head never feels that heavy. I wonder if their heads felt heavy, or if they could even understand what heavy felt like. If their muscles didn't work, did they still try?

The Robin's Egg Blue wax from the crayon bits spreads like a cold-blooded blush into the liquefying ice, and I turn up the heat to even it out. I rip open the package of scent I bought this morning and take out the vial labeled "Ocean."

We moved here – to the ocean – because they were dying. When I drive over

the rise in the road each morning on the way to school, I look in the rearview mirror and see the sunrise over the water, the pastel colors different depending on the time of year. I see the water, sometimes dotted with a sail or two, and I don't think of them. It's very wrong of me, because I probably wouldn't live here if it weren't for them. So maybe we wouldn't have grown up together anyway, and my brother and I would be Eagles fans and I wouldn't be afraid of cities. Maybe it's all moot.

I see that the wax has melted to an even hue, so I uncork the tiny vial of "Ocean" fragrance and squeeze a few clear drops into the blue. Lifting the pot by the handle with my left hand, I steady the jelly glass on the counter with my right. The blue wax creeps viscously to the edge as I tip the pot carefully, and then it falls and fills the jelly glass, clouding behind the walls. When it reaches the lip, I stop. The surface of the wax quavers as I adjust the popsicle stick to keep the wick from being sucked down and drowned, and I sigh because when the wax hardens, it will cave, and my new candle will have a depression in the center. I love the flatness of the wax before it dries, and I hate to see it sink.

Maybe once I chip the rock-hard block, melting and changing, the wax starts to feel a heaviness and cannot lift its head. I can look at the miniature sink-hole and see the dimples at the corners of my cousin's mouths, because in my mind they are infants, and their spine muscles didn't work, but their smile muscles never skipped a beat.

Girl-Youth Gets Steamed

Katie Hibner
MASON, OH

*Shards of soprano trills hail girls as they
peel from the kiddie pool,
crossing into the convenient corn-syrup slushee
tundra where their fellow volcanoes shudder
beneath their high school-malted glazes and rumble
to hook holes. Then their tanned-orange legs rickety
to bound them up to their own personal
head-ballooning; they're an Amstel aurora, only
to be reclaimed, saran-wrapped
into a man's half-numb appendage:
an elephant ear draped over
his fireplace.*

Preserving Chestnuts

Rachael Allen
CANTON, MA

When I was fifteen, my aunt was in the army. At least, that's what I imagined when we watched her commercial on television. Huddled in our living room, we saw her figure lean out of a top floor apartment in Boston's North End and beckon her television son home for dinner as if she were waving American planes onto the tarmac. *Anthony, Anthony!* Her voice rang deep, gritty. The announcer called for *Prince Spaghetti*, the slogan brimming with what felt like Auntie's call for John, her real son, a corporal in the 604th Air Commando Squadron, to come sit at the head of the table.

Dad liked to say that after Auntie took her husband's name over twenty years ago, her name didn't sound very Italian. *Mary O'Brien*. My name, though, fitting my olive skin and curly brown hair, sounded like a cartoon character. *Francesca Fellini, Frankie Fellini*. Nickie used to joke it sounded so goofy that I would look good at the drive-in next to Donald Duck. Maybe I'd make the title shot with Sophia Loren if people believed I was related to Federico Fellini. Auntie would have hated it if I became an actress.

"Do something with those brains of yours, Frankie!" she liked to say while I was at her apartment eating something, usually *fiadoni* cookies or a piece of ricotta pie. She'd pinch my cheek, bloated with pastry dough, and screw her eyebrows up, the way she did when her Italian soccer team was losing. She'd sigh, "*Que faccia bella!*"

I had been waiting to tell Auntie about my first job until we were alone.

"At Russell's Mart, the one off Atlantic Avenue, Auntie." We were sitting at her kitchen table, my head bent under the low-hanging light. Auntie's apartment was the human-size version of a mouse hole. Everything knit together: couches skinned with sheets to block sunlight, the television wedged in a corner, tuned to the news, its antennas kinked like Auntie's hair at the end of the day, and four kitchen chairs glued to the linoleum floor.

Auntie was forty-one, Dad's younger sister by four years. Widow to Uncle Sean, Auntie was still pretty. She was the type of pretty that made men has-

ten to open doors for her and producers pluck her off the street to be on television. I only noticed when her face relaxed and she looked unfamiliar, a beautiful guest in her own home. Auntie would have made a good actress, without even trying. I guess she did.

"How much are they paying you down there?" Auntie narrowed her eyes. She was tracing patterns in the sticky wooden table as she looked at me.

"\$1.60 an hour."

"\$1.60? For dealing with the loons in this town?" Auntie called everyone a loon who wasn't Italian. "Here, I'll double that if you clean my basement." She got up for her purse.

"You already promised that to Nickie." I paused. "Not that he'll do it." Nickie milked his position as eldest son in the family now that John was away—he got everything and did nothing.

Auntie sat back down, money in hand. "Take it anyways." She took a couple Jordan almonds from the bowl in the center of the table and placed them on top of the bills. "What am I supposed to do with the money from the commercial anyways? Spend it on pasta?"

"Thanks, Auntie." I gnawed on one of the almonds. I could never get just the sweet topcoat.

"You shouldn't be working. Remind your father. Marry you to a doctor, lawyer—"

"—Engineer. I know. Auntie, I'm only fifteen."

"I was only two years older when I married your Uncle Sean," Auntie said. She stood and moved two steps to the stove to start dinner, a lemon patterned dishcloth thrown over her shoulder.

I ate another almond to keep from saying that she didn't marry a doctor, lawyer or engineer, but an army drum major.

Auntie was on television almost every night. I sometimes waited for it, sitting cross-legged in front of the television, holding my breath or counting the dents in the ceiling or something else mindless until her voice sounded from the screen. It was as if she were standing in our kitchen, calling *Anthony!* the way she used to call John when he and Nickie would take too long to come in for dinner. Auntie hated waiting. "Food doesn't taste good cold," she'd say, then seat herself at the head of the table before one of the boys had the chance.

"Dad, can I go out for dinner tomorrow night?" Nickie asked Dad one Thursday night during Auntie's commer-

cial. Mama and I were sitting on the couch, cloth crumpled between us, the result of Mama's attempt to hem a stout man's suit from South Boston. Mama sometimes tailored clothes or mended curtains from home to bring in more money, dropping off the repaired pieces at the drapery factory off of the highway. I went with her once to deliver curtains she'd made and pick up her check, and felt glad she worked at home, glad she wasn't bent into a seat in the factory, barely touching the fabric as it bit through a sewing machine that beat ceaselessly against itself, one in a hundred machines studding the warehouse.

Dad looked at Nickie, then glanced at Auntie on television. The screen switched from her to Anthony running through the streets of the North End. The voice-over filled the silence.

"With Rich, Steve and Chris?" I could tell Nickie was trying to look taller by the way he pushed his shoulders back. He held his arms against his sides, as if he were preparing to salute a lieutenant.

Dad shook his head.

Nickie's shoulders deflated and Mama sat up straighter.

"Angelo..." Mama nodded towards Nickie, who had sat back down and was sullenly digging his fist into the couch.

"Regina," he said with the same inflection. He started speaking in Italian. His words slurred together around Mama's responses, the rhythms fading to background noise. Their accents didn't sound so strong within our house, not the way their words seemed to clip like broken English at the store or at school. Nickie and I didn't know Italian, other than the basics and random words like "handkerchief" or "fig." Dad always thought we should learn, but Mama wanted us to be American, dunked straight into the pot.

Auntie was plunging pasta into the boiling water on television. The steam bubbled up at her.

Dad looked up when they were ready for us to understand.

"Nick, you can go, *if*—" Dad held out his hand for Nickie to shake, "*if*, you apologize to Auntie for missing dinner with her and you walk Frankie home from the market next week, so she doesn't have to walk alone in the dark."

"We have dinner with Auntie almost every night," Nickie said. "It's just one time."

"Don't be disrespectful."

I kept my eyes focused on the screen, watching for a hint, a plate placed down too casually or a smile too wide

when the boy walked in, some motion on screen to expose the Auntie of us from the Auntie of them, the clean cut Italian family who wore their immigrant status on their sleeves. I sometimes wore long sleeves in the summer to keep my skin from tanning too much.

"Sorry." Nickie shook Dad's hand. Auntie's commercial ended.

"And walk Frankie home next week." Dad winked at me as Nickie frowned.

I smirked at Nickie. I knew Dad was proud of my job. His smile had twisted approvingly when I told him, an expression Mama in particular usually reserved for Nickie. I found him at work, the place where Dad was tucked into the in between, the neutrality of the airport and its unknown crowds. For ten years, he had worked at the lost baggage claim, the foreign man with the wide toothed grin behind the desk, amidst the conveyor belt of people entering Boston and losing parts of themselves.

"A job that will never be outdated," he liked to say. "People will always be losing luggage, Frankie."

He had clapped his hand on my shoulder when I first told him.

"Good for you," he said, ears rising with his grin. His accent was fainter in the airport, or maybe I just wasn't as aware of it. Waiting for his shift to finish, I wandered around the airport that night, feeling proud, as if the airport and its terminals were mine, as if I could condense them and pack them inside me. I sat in the domestic flight waiting area for an hour and watched the flight list rotate, sporadically clacking to another place in America.

Auntie once decided we should go on a cruise. She planned the whole thing out: we would go the last week in September because that was Dad's slowest time at work; we'd get a room for Nickie and John, a room for Dad and Mama, and then a room for her and me.

"We'll get the one closest to the pool," she told me, and my nine-year old self smiled, feeling special. She began saving too, picking pennies and quarters up off the ground during her walks as if her old jam jar could be filled up with enough metal to furnish our trip.

"I just want to move around," she told Dad one day during dinner, tugging her wedding ring on and off.

"We've moved enough," Dad replied.

The planning ended when the wait ended, three weeks long, short compared to John's yearlong absence now. Auntie got the call she'd been expecting ever since

Uncle Sean lost his job at the shipyard and decided to enlist in the army. There was a misfire incident at Fort Chaffee. He died quick. The army base was not at fault. They were sorry for her loss. His name came with the honor of dying for the country. I remembered playing checkers on the floor with Nickie and John the week after and hearing Auntie and Dad in the kitchen.

"Private O'Brien, they said, Angelo!" Auntie was talking fast. "*Mannaggia*, not even Sean O'Brien! Some *stupido* allegiance to a country."

I let John win that round. Auntie spoke only Italian for the next two weeks and John started swearing in Italian.

I wondered what John was like now. It had been a year since Auntie's only son, freckled and pale like his Irish father, had tucked himself into the American Air Force. John was probably the one who told the most jokes and stayed the longest after drills, and I bet he had no idea his mother was now on television. That's what Nickie would be like anyways.

Dad was different though. Dad, unlike Uncle Sean, served for four years in World War II. I only heard him talk about it twice. The first came the night after John was drafted. At dinner, Nickie said he wished he were a year older. Dad put down his fork and stiffened, turning towards him.

"Don't wish to fight for something you don't know."

The second time happened during a car ride to get my braces checked. At stoplights, Dad turned and looked at me, then let slip some detail about his tour in Europe. At one light, he told me that the sergeant would take him outside the classroom during training and give him tests orally, since he was the only one who couldn't read English. At another light, he said he was assigned to Germany, and then to Rome to flag down American planes onto the tarmac.

"They liked us there," he said, referring to himself and the eight Americans stationed there, "the uniforms. Just four years older than you. Nineteen." He said it again, before realizing the light had turned green.

Dad's accent was even thicker when he talked about Italy, Auntie's and Mama's too. I usually didn't like them to talk to my friends from outside the five blocks of our neighborhood because then they might think I sounded different, too. Auntie's accent wasn't as noticeable in the commercial, but she had the strongest accent, the most pronounced gap between

her front teeth, the "Fellini Gap." We all had it, except for Mama. Mine had finally started to close with my braces.

I liked hearing them talk about Italy, though. It felt as if we were special, sealed safely into our four by four kitchen. Auntie started telling us the most stories once John left, narratives of *Nonno John* coming to America when Auntie was two and Dad six. He worked as a cobbler and sent money home each month, until Dad finally came over at sixteen, having never met his father.

I could hardly picture Dad in any way but the now, my father with the slight build and hunched shoulders that somehow made him appear stronger. I tried to envision the story of a younger Dad winning an orange for packing the most tomatoes into a glass bottle to store for winter. Auntie had to wait inside and wedge chestnuts in jars of sand to preserve them, the bark of eleven chestnut chunks plopped into earthy grain callusing Auntie's fingertips. She kept busy while Dad got to play outside by the water fountains.

"Naples wasn't so dirty then," Auntie said that New Year's Eve, blowing smoke between her lips. We were all crammed out onto the fire escape, waiting to see fireworks over Boston Harbor. Dad was inside, his head bowed out the window. I leaned against Mama's legs, the backs of my thighs laced with the metal pattern beneath me. The air tasted stale from Auntie's cigarette.

Auntie rested against the railing, hand curving over bumpy metal. Her voice fit into the night, whoops and hum of cars falling into place behind her. She told us how she and Dad would run up and down the stairs from the town center to the wharf, the smell of humid fish sticking to them. When Dad was twelve, he snuck onto the back of a poultry cart set for Casadrino. I watched Dad. He was looking away, watching the lights crack in the sky, but Auntie was still talking, unfazed. A trail of smoke from her cigarette marked her hand gestures as she spoke. Dad blinked roughly as it blew his way. I didn't know what to say when Dad became serious.

"He went to find our uncle because we were out of money. We'd already spent Nonno John's money that month on a doctor when I had the mumps." Auntie glanced at Dad, waiting for him to jump in, but he just looked at her.

I had heard the story so many times, I knew how it went, how the cart had to pass Nazi officers, how they checked the back for stowaways, how Dad had to lie

down by the chickens, holding his breath, feeling his heart strike his chest and feathers tickle his nose as he tried not to sneeze, the strobes of American planes patrolling above flickering through the slates in the cart like the fireworks above us.

Dad told us to go to bed after that story. The heat from the radiator bit at us, tingling, as we went inside. I heard Nickie switch on the radio in his room. I closed my eyes, turning into my pillow. I could feel my shoulder start to numb under my weight and I imagined Auntie calling Anthony home for dinner, which morphed into John in Vietnam, uniformed in airplane cockpits, flying over Dad like crows.

Russell's Mart was the kind of store where nobody bought more than vegetables for dinner or where the passerby chose to ask if he could use the restroom. The store's stout frame was wedged between two much taller office buildings. Its brick exterior blobbed with graffiti was painted over white but for a small window.

I had been walking home from school with Eveline Rogers to pick up her mother's curtains Mama had patched. We went inside the market to buy wax bottle candies. The wax tasted like dried glue and I ate only the blue ones, spitting the rubbery tops onto the sidewalk as we stopped to watch the television perched in the small corner window. Eveline had somehow reached the topic of Dad's job.

"They don't get confused and think he's a tourist?" she said.

I squinted a bit and swallowed.

"Oh, did you get a sour one?" She pointed to the candies.

I shook my head.

I turned to the television for somewhere to look. News about the war, then an insurance commercial, and then Auntie. Auntie said marry a doctor, lawyer or engineer, but there she was, wide face, gap grin, heavy voice hemorrhaging into the screen. I didn't say anything to Eveline, wanting to hoard Auntie's presence myself, as if I could fill up that much space too. I asked the store manager for a job at the market the next day, thinking that Auntie's commercial was telling me *go do something, Frankie*.

Most days I stacked shelves, but Wednesdays I slugged the slushie machine. The blue sludge was mostly bought by the middle school girls who made their cups sticky with Bonne Bell crescents and filled the tip can considerably, not wanting to carry change.

"Frank!" Nickie walked in the door on a Wednesday. His friends, Rich and

Steve, loitered behind him. Seventeen and almost out of high school, they tucked themselves into oxford shirts and high-waisted pants, Nickie wearing a leather jacket. He nodded towards my nametag, which the manager had printed "Frank" and I had added "ie." "You haven't quit yet?"

I rolled my eyes. "What's up, Nickie?" He wouldn't be spotted buying something from me unless he had to tell me something. And he had long since abandoned his promise to Dad to walk me home.

"Ma's working tonight. Dinner's at Auntie's." Nickie started to turn towards the door. "Oh, and Rich here will have a pack of cigarettes." Rich and Steve, who were flicking pennies into the tip jar, cracked up.

I glared at Nickie. "This is the slushie counter. Go over to the cashiers."

Nickie copied my face. "Fine." He glanced over his shoulder and saw the manager was looking. He jumped up to reach me over the counter and pinched my cheek. "*Que faccia bella!*" he said loudly, laying on an accent.

I swatted his hand away, knocking over a basket of straws instead. The manager still stood by the canned foods aisle, watching. "Go away, Nickie!" I said.

He laughed and ducked outside, friends behind him. I jabbed the straws back into the plastic container one by one.

It was the fourth night we'd had dinner with Auntie that week and she was particularly focused on chopping peppers. She'd been having dinner with us almost every night since the New Year. That New Year marked a new decade, and, for Auntie, a three-month silence from John since her last letter.

Auntie lived two streets down from us, in an apartment on Prince Street. It bulged out of the alley where she and her neighbors sat at night to smoke and talk. In late summer, when the feasts came around, we'd drape a ribbon of dollar bills out the window to the statue of Madonna. Auntie would blow a kiss out the window to the people trailing below, in the way she blew us kisses out the door when we would leave. Auntie liked to think she knew everyone down the North End.

I lay on my back that night by the radiator, feeling the heat on my scalp. I could see Dad cutting up vegetables for the salad next to Auntie. Their shoulders bent in the same way from this angle. The boiling water foamed as Auntie tossed in a pinch of salt. I knew she had done that motion hundreds of times, but she stepped back

quickly as the water hissed. Dad put his hand out behind her back.

We turned at Nickie's intake of breath. He was fiddling with the porcelain figurines that dotted the windowsill, the smallest of which had almost fallen.

"Nickie, be careful with those. John sent them back from Saigon last summer." Auntie said Saigon with a certain twinge in her voice. I stiffened at the mention of John. Auntie didn't usually talk about him. Nickie's cheeks visibly burned. He placed the figurine back gently as if the glass was already shattered. Auntie quickly turned back to the stove.

I stared at the raised paint pattern on the ceiling. The heat dried my eyes. It stung like the time Nickie and I tried one of Auntie's cigarettes. I was nine and Nickie eleven, the two of us sitting cross-legged on Auntie's living room floor, the box in front of us as unimposing as the cigarette box we had at home, jammed with screws and nails. I started crying once Nickie lit the rolls, afraid the smoke would fog up Auntie's four windows until we couldn't see.

"Frankie," Nickie called ten minutes later that night. "Can you get the cheese? You're closest." He smiled so I could see the chewed pasta in his mouth.

"No. Gross." I sat down and reached for the bread.

Auntie looked at me and I knew what was coming.

"Fine! I'll get the cheese. Because Nickie's my *brother*." I tugged open the refrigerator door, almost knocking down a cutting board from the top. I put the bowl of cheese in front of Nickie, letting it clatter. Auntie flinched. Her hands moved quickly to pat her hair.

"Regina's working tonight?" Auntie said. She spooned cheese onto her pasta.

Dad nodded. "Rush order on curtains."

Auntie had moved the spoon too hastily. Grains of cheese spilt onto the tablecloth and she exhaled sharply. She got up for the sponge and began scraping the cheese into her palm cupped below the table. I watched crumbs escape onto the floor. Auntie walked to the sink and threw the sponge in, clapping her hands loudly over the drain to brush off the cheese.

"I'm thinking of selling books," she said suddenly. She turned to face us, reddened hands grasping the countertop behind her.

Dad looked up.

"There's this bookstore, down by Fleet Street that sells books in Italian, and I was thinking of working there." She flipped a strand of hair back into her bun, then seemed to remember her hands were still

sticky. She pulled it back out.

"Do you...need to, Mary?" Dad was clearly uncomfortable speaking about money at the table. Nickie stared at the ceiling.

"I need to do something. John isn't here."

Dad seemed to recognize something more in that sentence because his shoulders softened with his voice. He put down his fork. "Mary, you can't blame him for going."

Auntie turned back to the sink, letting the water splat against the metal. I could see her starting to detach, the way she did when someone would mention John or the war or, at one point, Uncle Sean. Nickie and I were too young to remember, but Dad told us that after Uncle Sean left for the army Auntie wouldn't talk about him. A week after his departure, she started taking walks around the harbor at five in the morning. One night on his way home from work, Dad found her sitting on someone's boat. Auntie told him she was waiting for the fish to emerge from the water, watching the wrinkles they made from beneath, the flicks of their tails. On the way home she had told Dad we should go on the cruise.

"I know. I can't blame *him* for missing Christmas."

Auntie had raised her voice over the running water, twisting the word "him" as if she didn't know John. I realized Auntie didn't believe John was coming home. She seemed already preparing herself, not strong with the independence I admired but distant as she had become with Uncle Sean, the commercial, the dinners, the eldest male respect for Nickie. Maybe it was so unconscious at first that she missed the awful irony of calling another son home in a commercial only to return to her vacant top floor apartment. I didn't talk the rest of dinner, trying to find the moment when Auntie had changed and I had missed it.

I went over to Auntie's the next day after work. She was stuffing chestnuts into an empty jar. I thought of the way she had saved coins for our cruise. Leaving a red lipstick mark, she gave me a kiss on the cheek, then motioned for me to sit down and help.

"I bought them from the supermarket this morning," Auntie said, moving the plastic bag of chestnuts closer to me. "Don't you think they'd make good presents?" She pointed to one of the ribboned jars she had finished, crammed with chestnuts stuck together with sand.

I nodded. Last night, I watched Aun-

tie's commercial on television while waiting for Nickie to finish taking a shower. Auntie had told us she pretended she was Mary Tyler Moore all throughout filming, even when they brought in new boxes of tomatoes and pasta for each of the takes, uneaten food she took home for dinner that night. The producers loved that.

"Authenticity, right there," they said when I packed up the food," Auntie said later. "But really, they think I look young enough to be a twelve-year old's mother?"

And she didn't look young enough to be a twelve-year old's mother. She was pressed flat into the screen, her voice bending to the wrong son. It was all wrong. The little boy with the curly hair was wrong and the pasta plunged into the pot the wrong way and Auntie kept smiling even though I knew she was just filling her time with waiting for the wrong son.

I dropped one chestnut in the jar now. I think it cracked when it hit the bottom.

"Your father working today?" Auntie asked.

"Yeah. Mama, too."

Auntie placed a filled jar to the side and started a new one. She seemed comforted by the motion.

I thought of a question and bit my lip. "Auntie," I said. She glanced up and smiled and looked like Dad. "What did you want to be when you were my age?"

She paused for a moment. "An artist. I liked to paint the ocean." She went back to filling the jar. "I also wanted to be a pilot, though." Auntie laughed quietly.

I smiled. I liked thinking of Auntie as a pilot, flying across oceans.

She looked up at me then, fixedly, and she seemed like Auntie again, the one who filled up the streets of the North End with her voice. "You need someone for security, though," she said. "More than just money."

I started to nod automatically, then stopped. I could see myself years from now, hair twisted up, *Dr. F. Fellini*, combing through medical charts of patients who would come to me, in some hospital, somewhere.

Auntie sunk back in her seat to placing chestnuts in the jar. I watched.

I wanted to break the wait. I wanted John to come home in a uniform or as a phone call. I wanted Auntie just to know, to stop plopping chestnuts into jars like she had in Italy as a girl, waiting for her turn to come over to America after Dad. I wanted to topple over the stacked jars of chestnuts that balanced on the table before us, for the glass to break and the pent up chestnuts to tumble out, gutted open to wrinkled caramel flesh, sand spitting out on top of them like a gash without a tourniquet.

Like Cream on Milk

Rebecca Greenberg
PROVIDENCE, RI

*Forget, for a moment,
the thirsty sidewalk,
the salt, the plows—
just take in the spruce-tops,
the corniced roofs that surround you.
What would the world become
were its concavity to fill—
if the earth refused to absorb,
if the sun refused to melt winter's caprice?
around us would settle thick linen, falling
delicately but packing hard with the coldness of*

Permanence.

*Around us would be the beginnings of a solid Deluge,
and one so lovely
no one would think of an Ark.
Slowly our asphalt-and-steel world
would be
erased
into
white as the world would turn
a new page,
Slowly,
Flake
by
flake the hungry ground,
a satiated lover,
would rise to meet the skies
--a new Babel of white sent from heaven—
God's last parting joke to man.*

*Believe me,
it would be the most beautiful mass extinction
of all time:
The world would
become all feather,
froth and wisp,
its only denizens
the light things,
the aerial angels of squirrel,
finch and dragonfly,
rising to the rim
like cream on milk,
their wraithlike bodies
holding up the sky,
barely poking the surface
of our sepulcher.*

Detox

Annalee Tai
NEW YORK, NY

She shaved her head. It was not the work of her mother's hair stylists who spoke in sharp, piquant English and clicked their tongues. Her cut was from a cramped studio apartment bathroom, with aromas of bleach and sour stench urging her to work hastily and messily. She had found an old electric razor between her father's bottles of pungent cologne and after-shave. At night, she would play with the idea, switching the razor on and off again, snipping at the ends of her brick-red mane, bristle and wiry. The abrasive buzz terrified her, making the experience all the more enticing. On a loud night, she screamed at the razor as it penetrated her knotted head of burnt straw. The electric razor gave her a fuzzy military cut, with which she was fervently unsatisfied. So she grabbed the open blade-razor sitting beside her sink and viscerally shaped her scalp like a deranged sculptor working with wet clay. She didn't bother to use a mirror and nicked the skin around her ears and around the nape of her neck.

She claimed the experience was purely physical, "Have you ever felt your scalp? I have" she told the monsters under her bed. She explained in lengthy detail the sensation of stroking your hairless head, entirely vulnerable and softened. The shadows nodded and smiled but she heard their conniving whispers and sheepish condemnations. She then assured herself it was a political statement-- a feminist gesture to empower unconventional beauty. "Its a sort of exploration, an introspective reflection of fragility" But she saw she was only confusing her friends so she stopped-- she didn't understand half of those big words herself, anyway. She even pleaded to her mother that it was purely for practicality. Her hair had gotten so tangled and knotted that it was impossible to tame. Maintenance was never her priority and this way she had absolved herself of all the trouble. She thrashed and shrieked that she felt better than she had in a long time.

As her auburn hair started to slowly grow back, sprouting from her pale head, she faced an old friend, whose eyes were large and wandering. They sat on the window-pane by the green vines that ran through her brick house, speaking small. She stared at the trampled mud outside and asked "do you know why I cut my hair" tempted by the fact that this was the only person who had not addressed the drastic

change. She heard the reply, a blatant "no." Their hands clasped and she gave a truthful expression that spoke more than words. Her eyebrows lifted in melancholy bend and her eyes dilated, softened. Her lips parted then closed again with dissolution, as if to respond in acceptance of her uncertainty; she had trouble pinning it down but for some reason the tangibility of absence was incredibly soothing.

Her fingers laced around her ears and tickled the temples of her glass forehead. In her head spun the buzz of others, whispering that she only did it for the attention. But the vibrations only made her laugh and her index traced zigzags around her bare cranium. Her shoulders collapsed over fetal-tucked knees and her intertwined hands encompassed the whole of her head. She had always said presence was a mere hair away from burden-- a smile grew from this moment of redemption that was feasible and satisfying. Youthful nakedness was simply refreshing, and old minds never seemed to understand such simplicity, always searching for some implicit reasoning or concealed emotion. It was a shame because it gave everything an oppressive weight-- little did they realize that it was from these loaded perceptions that she was withdrawing, detoxing with absence.

Window to the Left

Kate Busatto
SEWICKLEY, PA

*I hear transcendentalists whisper
louder than the snow falls
outside my window.
Perhaps I should be sitting
at the shoulder of the valley-
waiting for persevering snowflakes
to fall through the fingers of trees
instead of in my home
with a heated mattress and cable TV.
Perhaps, in August's pyre,
I should not have been standing
on a metal bridge made by engineers
with ink spots on their breast pockets
but in God's heart
in the thick of British Columbia.
But then again,
I've seen things as beautiful
like the two in the alley, running for nothing
or the snoring boy at the symphony.
Perhaps all transcendence isn't in nature
but in the human nature to capture it
and the transcendent moment
when we finally do
without even trying.*

The Magician

Parisa Thepmankorn
DENVER, NJ

*you pull creaky cream doves
from your sleeves,
release them, but they always return
like the helpless flowers
they are, a street performer
wedged between happy and
wealthy, lighting matches into flames
for a career. my hairdresser's kids
lined up, all three crow-skin dreamers,
slack-jawed and awed into
silence like the rest.
me.*

*i wondered how many times
you can repeat a trick
until their licorice eyes finally
glaze over or your deft fingers stutter
like groggy first words,
but it is a secret and you are a magician
and you say its answer you can't reveal.
that night your tin can slept
with a hollow stomach. for now,
their sorrow and suffering
is dispelled.*

*day after day i stay solemnly still -
i never realized how hard it is
to stand among mars-eyed children
and really see them,
not just their skin, imprinted with a sun-scar,
coal black and irregular
like malformed stick-and-pokes
from the night you got too
drunk and wavered the needle
like a steering wheel.
we are not too different, they and i:
my mouth like theirs, filled
with inquisitive flies; identical stupors
from your cards and flames
and rabbits and cheeky smiles.*

*knowledge settles inside of me, a
sunken boat of facts, murky
blue and twisted brown with wretched truth:
there isn't much to do
for these kids, some with the root
only just removed, cancer
already interwoven into cells,
and others prepped for surgery,
for a man with a forget-me-not
blue gown and bright knives ready
to cut away a childhood
friend turned nefarious.*

*but you, you carry their happiness
in your sleeve and their white
teeth stretching from eye
to eye ending in jolts
of wondrous electricity,
crackling like splitting wood.
if clicks of metal keep you here, treating
their bandana-wrapped heads like
no other medicine can - then, tonight,
hear the sound of copper
studs clanging against the roof
of the washing machine and return with
your kings and queens and knaves,
Magician.*



Alley Way

Elena Haskins
DERUYTER, NY



Segmented

Zachary de Stefan
RIVER VALE, NJ

I.

*Her fingers
pierce the flesh
so effortlessly,
it is easy to forget
that you are watching
death
on the formica countertop.*

*Nothing is wasted,
nothing save the fibrous muscle:
the blood you sip
as an accompaniment
to your breakfast of eggs and toast,
the body you find wrapped
in tin foil, tucked inside your lunch bag,
and the skin she grates up and stashes
away for a chiffon pie that will be
offered up at the church potluck
supper next week.*

II.

*As a child,
the only fruits
she would eat
were ones with pits
because she liked
how it felt to hold hearts
that could not be broken
between her teeth.*

III.

*A girl of eight runs barefoot
through a peach orchard,
hair mussed, her hands and feet
caked with dirt,*

*while up ahead, Grandma brings
her hatchet down upon the rattler
that took a bite out of the neighbor's
tabby cat,*

*and she, witness to both murder
and execution, understands
that hunger is something
much more than wheat fields
lush like sunburned boys
and penny candy from
the Greek with bubblegum*

lips at the corner store;

*something entirely different
from the embarrassment she felt
choking on her first
and last cigarette,
something like what she saw
in the pomegranate eyes
of a dead snake
hanging over Grandma's
shoulder -*

*Hunger, like snake skins
left out on the porch
to dry in the late afternoon
sun.*

IV.

*You wonder why she tends
to forgo a knife in favor
of her bare hands, but then
you remember that strength
is sometimes as simple
as sneaking a pregnant
peach from the bushel
when Grandma isn't looking
and planting its pit
deep,
deep down
in your pocket.*

Walking Home

Katie Cooke

OLD TAPPAN, NJ

When I was in middle school, I remember seeing the same girl walking home from school whenever my mom drove me home. She was always sulking, trudging, or just dragging herself; I was never really able to give one single word to how she walked. I couldn't even define her expression; it wasn't sad, but it wasn't angry either, just stoic. She walked in an eerily uniform fashion, like a soldier marching alongside an army of ghosts. One step after another, as if making progress in this path of life meant nothing to her. Seeing her always made me sad, so I never really liked looking in her direction. Sooner or later, even though we always took the same route home, I felt that we had parted ways.

Her name was Jessica. I knew who Jessica was at school: always a really aloof, quiet, and sort of mysterious girl who preferred to be alone. She was always hunched over, and she never had a smile on her face. All of her facial features were smeared down her face, giving her a droopy, old-beagle look. I was really active in everything in middle school (probably since I had the time to be), including the Set Design Crew for our musical. Jessica was in that too, and no matter how whimsical or happy her *Seussical* sets were, the way she painted them just seemed so miserable. Her paintbrush fell hard onto the canvas and the colorful paint just dripped down like tears. I didn't enjoy being in her presence, but high school brought about a change of heart.

I decided not to go to my local high school, but instead a high school that was thirty minutes away from my house. So I'd have to wake up early in the morning to catch my bus, and come home really late since I was one of the last stops on the bus route. My bus dropped me off at the local gas station and that was the first time that I started walking home.

At first I didn't really like it: my ears were too cold and it was just so lonely. The next day I brought a hat and mittens with me, but that didn't make much of a difference either. Then I started listening to music during my walks and that's

when I finally began liking this trek up to my house. I live on a hill, and, especially when the wind is blowing against you and the nights are starting to get darker and darker with each passing day, walking home seems like a terrible chore to say the least. But with music on, it wasn't half bad: playing some Benny Goodman made streetlights turn into bright city lights, Alternative Rock made kicking a pebble on the street an entertaining rhythmic game, but most of all Tchaikovsky made even the darkest nights and the most grueling walks times of personal and introspective musing.

Classical music became my "walking music" of choice, and my walk home soon became the most anticipated part of my day. If I was frustrated, I thought about what exactly made me frustrated; same goes for if I was feeling anxious, paranoid, or just angry. Walking home was a therapy session with myself; I soon discovered that I knew myself best, and it changed how I looked at the world. Walking home was one of the best things that had ever happened to me.

But it soon came to a halt. Not a screeching halt, but a halt nonetheless. Instead of helping myself out, I became a brewing pot of negativity. If I got off the bus feeling frustrated, my walk home only cultivated and bred it; I wasn't helping me, I was helping my anger. I helped my anxieties, paranoia, and frustrations and I let them consume me whole. I still enjoyed my walks, but only because it isolated me from everything that I hated.



I failed to mention this before, but I have a bad habit when I walk in that I always look at the ground. I'd much rather like to see where I'm going rather than who I'm going to meet and when. So whenever I walked home, I always looked at the ground. In the fall I stared down at the leaves, winter the snow, spring the pollen. One day I looked up. I looked up and saw something. Someone. Jessica.

She still sulked, and even though I couldn't see her face from where I walked, I assumed it was the same glum expression, as if her features were forever engraved in facial stone. There she was walking, and I soon realized that I followed slowly behind.

If someone were driving past us, they would have thought that they were seeing double.

Steven's Granary

Tiara Sharma

QUINCY, MA

It starts like it always does. She picks out her old floral dress and pulls it down over her head, pokes her arms through the holes, and adjusts it over her hips. Her arms tremble as she reaches behind her neck, fastening one side of the necklace to the other. She chooses a red wine shade of lipstick. He always said it made her eyes look bluer.

Down in the kitchen, she drags over the stool and slowly steps on, opens the cupboard that groans, and pulls out the mug with the chipped handle. Her arms sway under the weight of the rusty pot, letting the water spill over onto the linoleum where it will stay to dry on its own. She turns on the stove. Just waits. The water begins to bubble and then it splatters and she counts the drops that escape and sizzle on the stovetop. She steeps her chamomile: up and down and up and then shuffles to her armchair, the one with patches and springs that pop out sometimes. She sets the mug on the side table with the lamp, and sits on the edge of the armchair.

Three, two... Her wall clock chimes out of tune, waking the sleeping cottage. She rises and walks out into the dusk in her lavender kitten heels. She remembers how they would never feel the need to talk on their evening walks, but how she would always steal a glimpse of his face when he was not looking. She's sure she walks by a Giant Redwood tree. She was taught to recognize the cone shape of the trunk, the short, spiky needles that gather in clusters on each branch. Beside the Redwood lies a simple gravestone entangled by forest weed. She lingers and then takes a path that leads her out of the forest into a familiar place: the granary. She remembers how lush the surrounding meadow used to be, how she would get lost in the sea of small, white flowers, trying to count just how many there were. Sometimes she would just follow him here and watch him work from the window. She pushes open what is left of the wooden doors and welcomes the sweet rustic scent. When they were dating, he once gave her a tour of the building, but all she focused on were his moving lips and the way he twiddled his thumbs when he was shy. She plops down on a giant mound of grain. The faint moonlight leaks through the holes in the roof, giving every shape in the granary an iridescent glow. She takes in her hands a blade of wheat and runs her fingers over its grooves, surrounded by Steven.

Letters on the Floor

Madeline Smith

WOODBRIDGE, VA

The numbers are separating themselves from the chalkboard, intertwining with each other in mid air. Some even decide to hide under the desks of the kids in the front of the class. I think if I was a number that I would be the type of number to hide under a desk. I'm not sure what number I would be though. Definitely a single digit though because I know more than anyone else that the numbers with more than one digit intertwine WAY worse than digits that stand alone. I would probably be an even number too because those tend to be easier to spot when the hide under desks and things, I wouldn't want a kid to do bad on a test because of me.

Mr. Hunter is using a pointer to explain some sort of equation or something, but I don't see any numbers that are still on the board. Just a pointer violently inflicting itself on a blank chalkboard via Mr. Hunter. I can't blame the numbers though because I know that if I had the misfortune of being a number, I wouldn't want to spend my life on some stupid chalkboard either. I would want to experience the world, slip under the crack of the door and leave this place forever. That's why I never get mad at the numbers for vanishing. It's selfish to prioritize me understanding a concept that I honestly care less about over the youth of some poor, innocent little number.

I look around at my classmates and I see the faces of robots. A dead stare straight at the chalkboard, worshiping the mathematics that Mr. Hunter is preaching. I suppose for an outsider I look considerably similar to all of the other students in the class. But I'm not actually IN class, not mentally. The fact that my physical body is in the premises of these four walls is a mere technicality. My mind has traveled so far beyond this place in the past half hour that I've found myself confused on multiple occasions because I'd forgotten where I was.

"Mr. Watson!" Mr. Hunter shouts with an annoyed look on his face.

I give my head a slight shake to regain consciousness. "Whats up?"

"Care to remind the class how we use factoring to find the discriminant of a quadratic?"

I try my best to give him a stare that lets him know how unamused I am with his sarcasm. "No actually Mr. Hunter I would not care to explain that process to the class."

"And why is that Mr. Watson?"

"Just don't really feel like explaining a concept to the class when I know you only want me to do so for your own entertainment."

"Your statement is duly noted, but given your clear lack of understanding on the subject I will let your scantron scold you when the time comes that we take our test on this material" he says with a straight face. And then he turns

around and continues to babble and whack his pointer on the chalkboard.

Wow, public embarrassment, how original. You know, they always are telling you in school to report bullying, but what they don't know is that adults are just as guilty of bullying as teenagers. Which, of course I don't let affect me in the least. No one will ever understand what kind of things go on in my my, there is absolutely no use in letting their ignorant remarks contaminate it. I'll let everyone have their own ignorant opinions about me, I am the only one who knows the person that I really am.

My mind rushes back to all of the times teachers have passed judgment on me. The first and most major

Dear America

Tiffany Spiegel

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

Why do you serve super-sized McDonald's everything with a couple of carrots and granny smith apples tossed here and there in happy meals? Austrian restaurants will keep you satisfied but leave you with a little room for dessert and coffee, not feeling like you just ate your grandmother's stuffed turkeys at Thanksgiving. Why don't we have fast speed underground subways? Instead we rely on our American bulldozer cars leaking oil every blink of an eye. Why are we called the United States if we are more separated then ever? News reports flooded with information about the latest state that wants to secede. The thing is, nobody really knows, and if they do know, the information is left a secret. Why do we think we "need" when actually we "want?" We need to purchase coffee every morning, we need to buy expensive Halloween costumes thinking they will be impressive but never wearing them again is not. It seems as if communication is no longer popular, it's extinct from modern culture, exterminated from society and banished from our world. Blinking and buzzing screens flashing letters don't count. And what is so important about the name iPhone? Everyone is so used to them we don't even realize that we rely on them for almost everything. What happened to using cents? Change? Coins? I once watched a girl receive change from a cashier proceeding by her throwing her dimes and nickels into the trash. Isn't that illegal? What happened to morality? Just the other day, I was walking on a sidewalk of a neighboring street and found \$50 dollars soaked in a puddle. I put it under a hair dryer when I got home and it was good as new. I thought about who's it might have been, maybe a business man walking his usual route to work and forgot to shove his cab fare back into his wallet or maybe it was someone trying to save up for a special gift and luck wasn't on their side that day. I might not know why or how but I do know this is important.

one was in first grade. I was such an innocent little kid, I had absolutely no idea what kind of hell that year would bring. I was young, six years old, but I remember this event vividly and I think back on it every day of my life.

My class was learning how to read. My teacher, Mrs. Langley, a short, elderly woman who wore a facial expression that was terrifying for a child of my age, used a damn pointer, just like Mr. Hunter. Except instead of numbers crawling off of the chalkboard, it was letters, but to me there really isn't a difference, they're both symbols that run away from me. She would point at different letters and the whole class, with the exception of me, would scream out the names of the letters and then scream what the letters spelled. I could tell that Mrs. Langley didn't appreciate my lack of participation with the exercise, but I frankly could care less about what Mrs. Langley did and did not appreciate. Every day she would point at a blank chalkboard and I would follow the letters with my eyes as they hid under desks and played tag with each other while all of the other kids in my class shouted out the names of the letters that I saw running around on the floor.

One day I guess Mrs. Langley had reached her breaking point with me because right in the middle of a word, she suddenly stopped hitting that damn pointer on the board, slowly turned around, stared me straight in the eye, and said in a low, but stern voice "Trevor, why are you staring at the floor? The letters aren't on the floor, they're on the board. Now please, if you want to stop failing all of your spelling quizzes, pay attention to what is happening on the board and stop living inside your own mind." That was the first time a teacher had ever called me out in front of the class before. I didn't know what to do. She was wrong, the letters WERE on the floor. They were running around on the floor having a hell of a lot more fun than I was sitting here being chastised by Mrs. Langley for "living inside my own mind". I reacted the only way I could being a sensitive six year old whom had never been yelled at by a teacher before, I cried. I cried and cried and Mrs. Langley apologized for being so hostile. But I still didn't stop crying, I tried, but somehow I couldn't

seem to control my tear ducts, it was like there was a levy in there that collapsed and tears just kept on gushing out. My whole class was staring at me bawling my eyes out like I was some sort of emotional buffoon and Mrs. Langley eventually called my mother to take me home.

My mom bought me ice cream, which seemed to have lightened the flow of my tears significantly. She asked me why I got so upset. I took a lick of my double scoop mint chocolate chip and replied "cuz' Mrs. Langley is a liar."

"And what is it that Mrs. Langley lied about?" she asked.

"She told me that the letters weren't on the floor, she lied, the letters WERE on the floor, they were playing tag and hiding underneath desks."

I will never forget the color running from my mother's face when I told her that. That was when I knew that it wasn't a normal thing to see the letters playing tag on the floor of the classroom. As soon as I came to that realization I regretted telling my mom that I saw the letters running around on the floor instead of sitting still on the chalkboard.

The next day, the special education teacher pulled me out of Mrs. Langley's class and took me to a strange room. I immediately noticed multiple different stations with things like games and puzzles set up at them. There were a few other kids there sitting at the stations. The woman who took me out of class, Ms. Green, introduced herself and said that this is a class for kids who have a harder time with learning how to read and that it's okay to take my time because everyone learns at a different pace.

I spent my days in that classroom playing word games and popcorn reading. It was actually pretty fun, I made friends and I noticed some improvements on my spelling quizzes. But I still feel as if I never really learned anything from all the time spent in that classroom with the reading games. I think I was just really good at making the letters sit still for me long enough for me to memorize the order of them in the word so that I could pass the quiz and then promptly dump all of that information in the nearest waste bin. To this day, if someone held a gun up to my head and asked me the correct

spelling of the word 'houses' I would have a hole in my head.

The bell rings. All the other kids pack up their things in their backpacks, creating quite a cacophony of paper shifting and zippers zipping. I didn't take anything out of my backpack because I knew there would be no need for a paper and pen unless to doodle a picture of a magical land filled with unicorns and butterflies where some sicko never came up with the demented idea of math. And honestly, today I'm feeling rather creatively and emotionally drained. I don't know if it's the tedious, unimaginative routine of it all or if I'm just having a bad day, but since first period my sole motive for getting through the day has been the leftover sausage and olive pizza sitting in my refrigerator.

Luke is waiting for me outside of Mr. Hunter's classroom. "Dude! You will NEVER guess what just happened to me in Algebra!" Luke seventeen, same age as me, but he isn't exactly motivated in school. Major pothead. Not saying that I am motivated, I could honestly care less but for some reason whenever the time rolls around for our end of the year tests, I pass. I don't know how, it's not like I pay attention, I just see numbers on the backs of my eyelids sitting perfectly still and I write them on the test. So I'm sitting pretty in Algebra 2 while my genius friend Luke giving Algebra 1 his third go alongside his freshmen peers who are fascinated with him because of his age, but in reality share roughly the same maturity level as him or lack there of.

"What?"

"I found my soulmate."

"Really?"

"Dude, don't try and pull that whole 'you are too young for love' bullshit like my mom and my sister do. I'm telling you, I took one look into her soft, meaty body and I knew right then and there..."

"What Luke? What did you know right then and there?"

"I knew that I wanted her IN MY BELLY!" He shouts as he pulls out a roast beef hoagie from his backpack.

"Nice!" I congratulate him on his sandwich with a high-five. I mean this in the nicest way possible but I

love how simple Luke's mind works. He ALWAYS is smiling. And over the things that most people take for granted every day of their lives. Like his hoagie for example. I think if there were more people like Luke in this world of malice, existing on it would be a hell of a lot easier.

"Come on man, let's skip last period and go get high at my house" he says with his mouth full. Another thing I like about Luke, he's great at coming up with ideas.

"Great idea dude, let's go!"

Luke lives right across the street from the school, which is pretty awesome considering the fact that neither of us have a car. We have to take the back door through the library to get out because there is almost always a cop patrolling the front door, plus the school librarian is pretty chill, I can tell that she likes me because I am religious about attending her weekly book club every Thursday before school. I like having the other kids read me the words on the pages. I pretend to be following along in the book, but I'm really just drawing pictures behind my eyelids of the events that I hear.

We reach Luke's house with one-fourth of a hoagie left. He sets it on kitchen counter, probably without consciously realizing it. Luke lives in a little house that always seems to reek of incense with his mother and his older sister Jen. We drop our backpacks by the front door and run upstairs to Luke's room.

Luke opens the first drawer of his dresser and pulls out his stash, the stench of it immediately fills my nostrils. I can tell that this is going to be some good shit.

"What are you in the mood for Trevor? Bong or blunt wrap?"

"Your call dude, it's your shit."

"Trevor! Why do you do this to me! You know I get stressed out when I'm forced to make decisions!"

"Dude, calm down. Why don't you just flip a coin?"

"I like the way you think my friend" he says searching his pockets loose change. "Okay what should heads be?"

"Your call man."

"Trevor! You're doing it again!"

I laugh at his frustration, "okay,

okay sorry, heads... we use the bong."

"Thank you." he says and then he flips a dime in the air. We wait in anticipation for approximately one second while the coin rotates, free as a bird. Luke catches it in his hand and builds even more suspense by looking at me for a few seconds before revealing the fate of the means of travel in which smoke will enter our lungs.

He peeks at the coin and I await my fate with baited breath. "...heads." Moments later the all too familiar sound of water bubbling water fills my ears and the sweet smoke of quality marijuana fills my lungs. I exhale. The smoke expands, filling every corner of the room weightlessly. And for however brief the moment, the letters playing tag on the floor of Mrs. Langley's classroom seem irrelevant.



Wording

Rachael Allen
CANTON, MA

Cathy Evans got mailed. No, that's wrong. She mailed? She's got mail? The words feel funny on your tongue as you speak aloud. Why do the basic words trick you? You pray to angels, Zio, not angles, your niece Sophie said at church last week, trying not to giggle as you mumbled the wrong words. You hadn't wanted to embarrass your very young, very American family by speaking your language. They don't remember that it's theirs too.

The UPS truck is outside Cathy Evans' house, rattling below your window. The engine swallows as the deliveryman turns it off. Balancing the boxes, he manages up Cathy Evans' front steps. Maybe you should order something. It'd be nice for something to show up at your doorstep, your name printed on it to verify that you are part of this country, that you do share a last name with your family. The deliveryman places the boxes at Cathy Evans' front door, below a wreath hung above the doorknocker. There are three boxes, large enough

to fit books or winter coats. Maybe they're pieces for a crib. You know she's having a baby because you saw her framed in the front door waving to her husband a few weeks ago, her belly rounded. She looked like she could be Sophie fifteen years from now—small, easy shoulders, expressive body. Then again, you could say any brown-haired American looks like Sophie.

The deliveryman ambles down the steps, leaving the boxes on the porch. You'd like to place all you can't express in these boxes, everything you can't say to your very foreign family who too often don't feel like your family at all. It's awful to say that, isn't it? That even after years here, you, unmarried and thinning and clumsy, are still waiting to be shipped off to another place.

You've tried to pray aloud to sort this out, but it's as if your feelings have squirmed out your ear, unheard, not wanting to be clipped into words. Maybe God instead communicates in thoughts. You lean back in your chair, the toe of your shoe scuffing the floor. It makes sense God understands fragmented thoughts instead of thousands of languages. Why should an Italian bother learning English? You should bother learning English so you can talk to Sophie, so you come to see yourself less as an Italian and more as just you. You think this, but you know actually you won't be able to do this, and you feel more lonely as you peer out again at Cathy Evans' house. By now the deliveryman has moved on to another home, leaving the boxes waiting. You wonder where all the cardboard will go once Cathy Evans opens her boxes. It'll be discarded, surely, swept into the ocean to wash up at a foreign shore. Maybe it'll be buried beneath a mound of plastic and paper, ground heaving below. Most likely, it'll be recycled, God breathing folds and corners back into the boxes, a life after life, yet the word for that, too, has slipped from you.

Love and Cars

Greta Skagerlind

MAPLEWOOD, NJ

I was nine
when my heavy-metal teenage neighbor
backed his family minivan
into their old-and-rotting side door
but he wasn't drunk
just in love
with his girlfriend and
the way she'd been kissing his neck
at the time.

I was twelve
when my mother slammed our blue station wagon door
on my hand when I wasn't looking and I felt
a crunching in my carpal bones
when she screamed
louder than I did.

I was seventeen
when I fumbled with the too-smooth steering wheel and
almost crashed my car
into a white vinyl garage door in
the school parking lot
because in the rearview mirror
I was watching you walk away.



Listen

Samantha Moy
BERKELEY HEIGHTS, NJ



Snapshot

Alyson Schwartz

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

“Nostalgia” was both the key word and the nuisance of the assignment. In her six years as a photographer, Lindy never struggled to find picture-worthy moments, yet this single Photography assignment for school had her stumped.

“*Capture nostalgia in an image,*” her teacher told her class while staring into the distance and dramatically waving her arms like a windmill. The neon oranges and pinks of her abstract dress, combined with her thunderous voice, were enough to eliminate any student’s hope of dozing off. “*Make me feel emotion for one of your memories. I want to feel your nostalgia!*”

To Lindy, “feeling” someone’s nostalgia sounded more like a rare sinus infection than a photography project. Still, that Saturday morning she took care to reload her Polaroid with a new memory card and polish the cool, marble-smooth lens. Outside the double-paned window above her daybed, snowflakes like potato shavings swirled and fluttered toward the ground from a pale, blank sky. It even looked like they were beginning to stick. Like the wind, sudden memories swept her mind in a rush of sensations; cocoa powder, wet denim dried by a fireplace, and brown water rushing over a sparkling stone ledge.

And then there was that feeling in her side, like someone had clenched her stomach with an iron fist and deflated her lungs with the poke of a needle: the sudden longing to return, to seize that moment and relive it... and that was it; finally, she had an idea. Hastily, she tucked the short, choppy pieces of her hair under a blue knit hat, zipped her Polaroid beneath her heavy coat, scribbled a post-it note for her mom, and ran out the back door.

Although it’d been almost four years since her last visit, the way to the falls still came to Lindy as naturally as tying shoes: two blocks down and a turn to the right, a couple feet downhill into the woods, and over the fallen tree trunk that doubled as a bridge across the stream. The envelope of trees at the entrance to the woods smothered whatever

sunlight was left, and there was suddenly only her and the chilly shade and the flakes of snow brushing off tree branches like ash off paper. The water in the stream was lower than she remembered, and the walk across the moss-covered tree trunk no longer seemed like a daring, Indiana Jones-style mission.

Once on the other side of the stream, Lindy turned back and watched the ghosts of three pale, twelve year-old girls shrieking and laughing and tiptoeing across the same log, holding mittened hands and swearing promises to “never, ever, ever” let go.

The projections of her memory evaporated, and Lindy continued to follow the roaring sound in the distance. In the clearing up ahead, the leaning trees opened up to reveal a large pond and an overhang of boulders with a shower of water spewing over its edge, little droplets flying every which way and making the newly fallen snow glitter.

“LAB Falls,” Lindy breathed, but in her mind it was her twelve year-old self who spoke.

“*It’s perfect, see? Lindy, Angie, and Bea. L - A - B.*” Lindy’s little freckled ghost stepped up beside her with eyes wide and round like orbs, her breath catching at the view ahead.

“*Wow, it’s so beautiful,*” little Angie said in a voice that drew out the end of every word.

Little Bea nodded in agreement. “LAB Falls it is. For now on, this place is ours.”

Lindy shivered and unzipped her coat to retrieve her camera. She had expected her visit to be quick and simple, a couple easy nature shots and that’s it. Instead, her throat felt swollen and her stomach queasy as the ghosts refused to disappear, and instead splashed freezing water at one another and threw snowballs and took photos using crappy, outdated picture phones. Their eerie giggles sent chills down Lindy’s spine. Together, the little girls smiled, forgetting for the moment what prowled outside the woods. Here there were no family arguments or cheap middle school insults or awkward appearances; only the three of them in their own fantasy world.

Polaroid in hand, Lindy adjusted her footing and raised the lens, trying to shake their uneasy presence. Click. She turned toward the waterfall and was focusing in on the downward cascade when there was a sudden shuf-

fling of snow beside her, and a voice, a real voice.

“Lindy?”

From both surprise and frosted fingers, Lindy dropped the camera and it caught on the safety strap, swinging on her arm like a pendulum. The first thing she saw when turning toward the voice was pale yellow hair and cherry lips: Bea. Not the little Bea-ghost of her past with crooked teeth and frizzy hair, but the new Bea she’d come to know in the present. This was the Bea with styled hair and rosy cheeks and hands tucked into a blood red designer coat she would never have been caught dead wearing four years ago. The Bea she hadn’t spoken so much as a word to in the longest time.

“Bea,” Lindy breathed, her mouth gaping open. “Uh, hi, how have you been?” She lamely raised her arm to gesture a wave. *How have you been? Really?*

Bea half-smiled and picked at her open-fingered glove. “Pretty good,” she said, looking out over the pool of water. “What are you doing here?”

“I was taking pictures for my class and it started snowing and I decided it might be cool to come here, I guess because it’s been a while, ya know?” Lindy’s words came out rushed, and she lifted her Polaroid as testimony to what she was saying.

If Bea noticed her awkward stance and ridiculous rambling, she didn’t let on.

“Yeah, well, I come here pretty often, actually, but only when it snows. It falls in like a snow globe, see?”

They both looked up toward the circular sky beyond the encasing trees where snowflakes fell downward like shooting stars. Lindy had the urge to point out that Bea said the same thing about the snow globe when they were little kids, but she decided to hold her tongue. The sudden echo of giggles rang through her ears and she flinched, but seemed to realize nothing.

“So, have you spoken with Angie lately?” Bea asked.

Lindy’s heart stopped for a moment at the name. “No, I think she’s just hanging out with the same friend group as usually. Chris, Olivia, those kinds of people.” She nodded as if reporting the news.

The faces of those teens rolled through Lindy’s head like a slot machine as she

tried to pinpoint how their Angie ever came to be one of them. She couldn't help but wonder if things would be the same had Angie not fallen out of touch in the transition to high school; if she was perhaps the glue that held them together for so long. There was stale sadness in Lindy's heart, as well as some guilt; there was always that feeling of having somehow failed Angie as a friend. It was no secret that her home life was the harshest of the three girls, yet neither Lindy nor Bea ever saw it leading to fewer weekend hangouts, skipped days of school with new friends, and dark rumors of parties and alcohol.

"Right, right," Bea said, frowning. "Hopefully she's, uh, doing well."

Lindy was still lost in her thoughts. Bea's appearance, their conversation about Angie, and the ghostly memories that felt so real... she felt dizzy. They were all completely different people now, but did the memories mean nothing at all? They couldn't possibly have meant nothing; LAB Falls certainly meant something, or neither of them would have been standing there now.

"Well, I'll get going now so you have the place for your project; I wouldn't want to interrupt." Bea began to step backwards.

"No, no, stay," Lindy said, suddenly snapping out of her stupor. "It's cool having someone here. Besides, I may need a model, and it's better you than me." She raised her arms and dramatically indicated her puffy jacket that made her look like a brown marshmallow in comparison to Bea, who looked fresh out of a winter edition of *Vogue*.

Bea laughed and looked her straight in the eyes. "All right. I'll stay for a bit."

There was a moment of uneasy silence between them, an understanding hanging in the air that they weren't going to sit down and reveal their deepest secrets and rekindle their friendship like in the movies, and that come Monday morning at school they'd both go their separate ways as usual and probably not speak again for who knows how long. But for the moment, Lindy was okay with this.

Bea stepped near the water and plopped down into a pile of snow, tucking her arms into her coat and looking up at Lindy with a goofy smile. "So is

there anything I need to do for said photo-shoot?"

Lindy grinned. "No, you're perfect where you are. I'll just take a couple shots over the water and maybe a few of where you're sitting."

Bea nodded slightly and turned back toward the water, her smile fading; her light eyes lost in the landscape as the rising sun cast yellow beams across her nose. Lindy lifted her camera once more and kneeled to angle the shot out toward the cascade with Bea's silhouette to the side. She knew in the split second before hearing the shutter of the camera that this picture would be the one; solemn, telling, beautiful... nostalgic. She lowered the Polaroid and followed Bea's gaze across the clearing, and there Lindy could perfectly see those same ghosts skipping and jumping, passing a thermos of hot chocolate and spilling secrets from their mouths like water from the cascade. In her peripheral view, Lindy noticed Bea flinch before frowning at the same spot where the ghosts stood. In the dead silence of the moment, she knew Bea could see them, too.

so i want you to remember this

Taylor Petty
WOODBRIDGE, VA

*how we knelt by
the riverbank, at tree stumps,
looking for an altar
on which to place our affections
for each other, too scared
of touching the other's chest.
seeing our bones stark in the
cold and skin barely stretching
over, hardly keeping ourselves
inside, warmth and guts threatening
to spill out*

*which is why we kept our mouths shut,
because we would say something
dangerous, about love or the way
our mouths felt open against
each other's necks, the only
kind of heat we found*

*kneeling by the ashes and fallen branches, looking for
any holy place on which to call each other
worshipped, eyes wavering on our
white bone poking through the skin,
goosebumps raising up and something
longing in the warmth seeping through our breath.*

Speech like Glitter

Alicja Madloch
SHORT HILLS, NJ

*When words fall from the curve of your lips they don't die,
she said.*

*Because death is for the mortal and the weak,
the loveless and analytical.*

*She plays her cigarette
like a harmonica and glitters in the sun because no
rain can put her out.*

Words can slosh around.

*She chews with her mouth open to speech,
words can build worlds and you can paint an atlas with your
own creations.*

*And her letters get caught on your sweater
and they stay, dangling like wind chimes, like silver bells in
winter.*

*I want to be a doctor because I want to explore the
words inside you.*

*Her feet bent inwards with her words,
every heart beats to a story.*

*And she beat her boots on the pavement and each scuffmark
is a map to her destination because
she isn't from earth, she merely survives here, and the book
in her chipped black manicure is just another portal, and she
laughs with her hips and smiles with her soul because she knows
it's only life, not something to be scared of at all.*

Ken Burns on the Battlefield

Annika Jensen

COLUMBIA, MD

The first thing to come to my head was Comic Con. Women were dressed in bright hoop skirts; teenage boys in gray and blue wool uniforms sipped Gatorade. Older men were doing cosplays of Lee, Chamberlain, Armistead, their horses dressed in old-fashioned cavalry tack with heart-shaped breastplates. Booths stretched out across acres of dry, flattened dirt, boasting authentic photographs and shotguns. Weaving through the jungle of tarp and tents, I slowed to read a man's t-shirt: "If at first you don't secede, try, try again."

By noon, it had surpassed 95 degrees, and the long expanses of battlefield and clear sky offered hardly a tree or cloud for shade. I had deemed resistance to the heat futile, and settled instead to throw my hair up and wander about in a tank top, despite my discomfort with the tight, body-hugging cloth. The Gettysburg sun sank deep into my skin, singing my cheeks and weaving a rather unflattering pattern across my shoulders.

All around me, men in costume sprawled out below half-pitched tents,

chewing on ice or holding water bottles to their heads, resting before their next reenactment. A woman was wiping sweat from a behemoth draft horse, rubbing its belly with a cool cloth. I bent down to massage my ankles, sore from hours of walking and standing in the heat, and stretched, ignoring the dull pain that pulsed in the back of my head. A family walked past with funnel cakes and iced tea, huddling under the relief of a black umbrella.

I didn't really consider myself a Civil War "buff," even after *The Killer Angels*. The novel by Michael Shaara was brilliant, but I figured that the only other people who loved it as much as I did were old, bearded men. As far as I was concerned, I was neither old nor a man, and I certainly did not have a beard. Yet when my mother asked me to go to the Gettysburg reenactment with her, 150 years after the battle, I found myself agreeing, despite the weather forecasts straight from hell.

I figured at least I didn't have it as bad as the soldiers did.

The odor of sweat was omnipresent and the heat was baking me alive, yet my fascinations grew. There was something morbidly enchanting about walking the grounds that claimed 46,000 lives in just three days. My Converse shoes could

only tap the surface of the history that lay beneath them. I walked past a man cleaning his gun, who gave me a polite smile and his hat in common Southern courtesy. I wondered if he could tell me just what it was that prompted Pickett to lead his charge, what the camaraderie of war entailed. How it felt to lose a brother.

I walked, wondered, and out of the endless blue there sounded a sharp ring that broke through my curious trance. I would have recognized the violin anywhere. Raising my eyes from the dirt and dead grass, and I looked around for the source, following the somber melody across the battlefield. The song rang out with bittersweet vibrato, a tune that told of hope and loss without any words.

What I found was a young man, huge, in his late twenties. Towering well over six feet tall, he stood before me with closed eyes, his massive hands endangering the delicate wooden frame of the violin beneath his chin. Blue wool stretched across him, standing out against the black beard that tickled his face. Beside him, a boy, no older than eighteen, lay across the ground, not exactly an active listener, but hearing the music nonetheless.

The frayed strings ceased to sing. The man lowered his eyes and looked

Rust (Belt)

Zachary de Stefan

RIVER VALE, NJ

*Walks down those halls
were lessons in lung capacity;
anything to keep from breathing
in the air, stale and dry like old
bones --*

*if you were lucky, the pounding
in your head would drown out
the screaming woman
who'd claw at the walls in search
of nothing and everything
at once,*

*and there she sat,
eyes averted, facing the city
smeared outside the rain-slick
glass, and we'd bend down
in silent observation
of the woman we hardly
recognized, tucked deep*

*beneath the purpled skin
and the mane of hair that still
carried the faint scent
of lemons that Mom mistook
for hope*

/

*She said once that her Papa
had toiled away on train tracks
for twenty years in that city
of gristle and steel;
he's been buried up
on the north side of Dutch Hill
for half a century now,
and still those veins snake
across the ancient streets
like they'd been laid
just yesterday*

*People never go away,
she told me, not really;
and then -
still grinding your teeth?
You got that from me,*

you know

*How's Tiger doing?
I hope you've stopped
feeding him twice a day,
you know what Dr. Jacobi
said*

Good, good, good

//

*I want you to know
that I look for you often,
whenever we take a ride
down I-80, and I think
I see you now more than ever,
in those gutted barns that line
the highway, in the rolling hills
burned out like candlewick,
and I'm scared,
Grandma,
because Mom
can't bend down
anymore*

up, smiling.

"Afternoon, miss," he greeted me in a voice much less daunting than his disposition.

"Hey," I replied, a little flustered. Speaking in public, even just to one person, had never enthused me. "Sorry to interrupt. I was just listening." Then, in an uncharacteristic act, I added, "I'm a violinist, too."

The bearded face brightened. "Were you trained classically?" He asked, slipping momentarily out of character. The violin lay cradled beneath his mammoth arms, protected like a delicate child.

I said yes, since the age of three. This delighted him.

"Me, too," he told me. "I've been doing a lot of folk music lately, though. Obviously." He chuckled, gesturing to his uniform. "I didn't really consider this reenacting thing until they told me I could bring my instrument."

In his eyes there shone not only an azure haze, but a genuine love of music, and I felt suddenly a rare, pure curiosity growing, the kind that accompanied delight.

"I might even do it if I could just play violin and ride horses all day," I shrugged, trying to play it off as a joke but being alarmingly serious. "I'm not entirely competent with folk songs, though."

He waved his hand incredulously, all but scoffing.

"If you've had strings under your fingers since you were three, I'm sure you can manage something."

"I do know one, actually," I started, immediately shrinking back when the words came from my mouth. "No, nevermind, I don't. It's dumb." A small laugh was all I could manage before I hid my brightening face in shame.

The man's smug grin greeted me when I could look up again. "Yes, you do," he said with a brightening smile. "Tell me." He didn't demand, but there was a certain willingness present.

"Seriously, it's really dorky," I pleaded, overwhelmed with self-consciousness. "I'm embarrassed."

"Dude." The violinist took a step forward and bent down toward me, his stare persistent. "I'm twenty-five years old and I'm playing dress-up. I don't care what you tell me, I will be more embar-

rassed, no matter what."

I released a sigh that had been sitting in my chest, played with the ends of my hair momentarily, trying to find anywhere but his eyes to look to. I gave in.

"Okay," I surrendered. "Did you ever watch the PBS *Civil War* series?"

The man laughed suddenly; sharp, but not demeaning. "You know Ashokan Farewell, don't you?" His smile fell somewhere between genuine and excited.

I allowed the corners of my lips to curl up, if only slightly. "Yeah."

It was a song that had stuck with me since I first heard it. Something in its melancholy harmonies had reached the inner workings of my brain that normally didn't show, where I stored my most dangerous and beautiful thoughts. It reminded me of what I could have been, had I not been born with a terrible disease of the mind, and of what I would never be. It was what I had played when I heard of the suicide of a friend, imagining what might have been if I had taken his place. A letter from a soldier to his wife; from a teenage girl to her family, apologizing for what she had done.

"Good song," I said.

Before me, the man was holding his instrument out, offering it to me.

"Play it?" He asked, placing the bow in my right hand, and the neck of the violin in my left.

I hesitated, looking around at the hundreds of people milling about, feeling the sun on their backs just as I did.

I wasn't even brave enough to order a pizza over the phone.

Yet the glow in the man's eyes and his expectancy revealed untold stories that did not have a soundtrack to them. The birds calling from above, the heavy breathing of the cavalry horses across the hill, the booming voice of a general took me back 150 years, where a dying soldier lay at my feet, begging for one last melody. The heat was slowly infecting his sense of time and space, the sweat pouring from his body mingling with the blood that escaped his chest. His hands clutched my heart, yearning, and with only one purpose in his last moments, I put the bow to the string and played him a song.

One hundred and fifty years later, I looked up, drawing out one last melancholy note. A crowd had gathered

around; people videotaping on their phones, a few clapping. Someone shouted, "Was that Ken Burns?"

The heat rushing to my cheeks told me that I was probably redder than the Chili Peppers. I quickly handed the instrument back, keeping my eyes locked on the dirt below me.

"Thanks," I said to the behemoth violinist, trying to ignore the beaming smile that managed to outshine the sun. "I'm gonna go. There are a lot of people looking at me." I managed a tiny laugh.

"Ma'am," he called after me. I turned, a rare flutter of wind pushing my hair in front of my face. He walked toward me, the crowd dispersing, and removed his hat. "That was almost as beautiful as you are."

Waiting for These 90 Days

Adia Haven
TOWSON, MD

*Your sparkling spells spin lazily towards me.
Through the night they send warm tendrils
of liquid flowing light, radiant
as the sun's final burst of yolk
when it seeps through
twilight's velvet folds.
My soul recognizes and welcomes these gifts.
Stars tonight hang heavy like
pinholes winking bright,
the plasma pulsing in an electric hum.
The moon shines more bloated
than ever at its fullest phase,
and the twinkles of heavenly bodies illuminate
careless smoke spirals from
my precariously hung cigarettes
resting on the moist tier
of my lonely bottom lip.
On our frosted stoop,
my hands are numb with cold.
There's no room for them
in my overstuffed pockets;
I've packed them with presents for you.
I am waiting here for
our cream and honey combination
to dazzle this world again
so that civilians will have to shield
their eyes upon seeing us.
You will twirl your fingers slowly
through nappy golden strands,
and I can picture the beauty
like moonshine's milk unleashed.
When you come home,
my golden tendrils will wrap
nazareths of loving longing
around your legs
so you will never leave again.*



Rheannon Lovell
CHEPACHET, RI



The Yellow House

Sara Gramling
TOWSON, MD

The yellow house was somewhere between “Well, it’s got character” and “It could use some work.”

On the cusp of a town we could never afford, it was buried between people holding onto their last years and kids exploring with their playground eyes. The house itself is now a permanent yellow. According to stories, back when my grandfather was younger and able, it was painted wood. Now it is simply a muted, pale yellow aluminum siding. It’s got a new set of porch steps built in one afternoon by my uncle, but other than that, nothing has changed. Two bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, a finished attic

and a semi-finished basement make up the yellow house that the family of seven has called home.

The last two of the five kids my grandparents had were born here in the yellow house. And as my youngest aunt turns fifty this year, this house easily turns seventy. If walls could talk, I’d wonder if the house appreciated all the stomping children running around, and if it got somber when they moved on to pursue their futures and future homes.

The structure has settled over seventy years. Still it supports the family inside. The damaged hardwood floors creak when you walk, but that’s not as loud as the creaking of the house on a windy day. The sound of the house’s frame settling against itself was the nightly lullaby I had as a child. The house had little insulation from both

sound and the elements. You could stand in the dining room and talk just above an average decibel level and everyone in the house could hear you. There’s a leak in the light fixture above the sink when it rains.

Its modestly sized windows overlook our lawn, a botanical garden of every type of unwanted weed imaginable. Everything people in our street chased from their yards to ensure presentable street appeal seemed to find refuge in ours. In the spring time, we get a brief moment of beauty; three azalea bushes—peach, purple and red—line the front porch. The red and the purple seem to hug the pink in between. As I would cut across the grass on my way home from school, those azaleas always put a smile on my face. Besides the bushes, my grandmother, an accomplished mother

of five and grandmother to seven, only managed to keep a small potted begonia alive.

The only new thing in the house was the living room carpet, a Christmas present from my uncle last year. The installation was a family affair, involving my Aunt Gail and her husband, my Uncle John and his wife, my grandmother, grandfather, my Aunt Steph with her sense of humor, and myself. In order to remove the old carpet that had protected the knees of the kids who had played on it (and created a mosaic of stains), we had to move all of the furniture and place it haphazardly in other areas of our cramped home. I found great amusement in sitting on my grandfather's Lay-Z-Boy in the kitchen up until it was time to put it all back again.

The basement, for seventeen years, had belonged to two people, my mother and myself. Even though it is a big room, our big personalities filled it wall to wall. The tiles slide under your feet, and there's a pile of the ones that have released fully in the corner under the carpet. The carpet itself I'm sure at some point was a bright red, fluffy and lively, but it too has been matted down over the years. In the winter, the lack of heating in the basement makes for a specialized lifestyle. The tiles are so cold it's as if frost himself called them home, and yet I only just got myself a pair of slippers this winter.

As you would climb the old wooden steps that creak almost in anguish from so many generations of stomping, running, and other abuses, you reach the kitchen. Here, the tile is warmer, though just as patched and ragged. The small kitchen serves dinners made by my grandmother, and its back porch holds the grill that my grandfather uses for the occasional steak if it's affordable.

The dining room itself allows for banter and laughter, with table and chairs belonging to my great-grandfather. A china cabinet lines the wall, though after surviving two generations of curious children, it holds just about everything but china. In the morning, an old married couple sits at the aged wooden table, well beyond their golden years, but still their faces lie about their age. The sight of them eating breakfast side by side contradicts how they bicker with each other in every other situation. Anyone could tell they were still as close to each other as when they were married almost sixty years ago, but neither would

ever admit it. Seeing them together puts a smile on my face.

My grandmother's delicate needlework covers up the cracks on the walls. Even though they are often blue-ribbon recipients at the fair, all the awards are in a beat-up shoebox upstairs, where only dust knows what it contains. My grandfather's books of war heroes, pirates, sailors, and saints are strewn around everywhere—usually where no one would ever expect them.

Dents in the walls and scratches on the furniture still call to memory my aunts and uncles in their childhood. Since

then, I have left my own. Over the last seventeen years, my dents and mistakes have been added into the mix. With lessons hidden in small closets and warmth found in the loud atmosphere, I'm forever grateful to have my yellow house. The most maltreated-looking dwelling on the block is the one that seven people at some point had called home, and now with me, eight.



Symphony for the Lost

Elizabeth Merrigan

MORRISTOWN, NJ

*A boy in an orange beanie
whips his feet onto the curbside so he can
tightrope home.
But along the way
the cracks in the avenue
conspire, convening into a gaping maw
that consumes the names on the signs
and regurgitates them in a different language.*

*He finds a stooped back meditating atop a lime green stool
beneath full grown stars and dying ones.
The crossroads of a man's face are buried
in a windbreaker's crisp folds. He sleeps.
A wide-eyed paper dragon hangs above him from the awning,
boasting foreign gashes on its beckoning belly.
It sheds its faded, flaking scales,
curling, bemused, as they fall.*

*Ten steps down, the boy is stopped.
A huddled figure smiles a naked yellow smile
to please the moths,
her greying hair secured in a pinned halo around
an onion-shaped head.
She has her own constellations.
She presents six rows of neon polyester
shipped from somewhere far away,
hope sewn in their zigzag seams.
Their own straps confine them to the wall,
twenty-dollar Andromedas chained to the same cliffside.
Like petrified butterflies
they bare their pockets and zippers to
uneven temperatures,
indifferent glances, the tight lips of strangers.
Below them,
young and asphyxiated in their bubble wrap
lie the empty shells of plastic
suitcases.*

*The boy tugs the hat away,
saluting his abandonment. He knows he must go.
But gone is the smoky makeup of business hours.
Night applies the rouge and iridescent warpaint
of aureate street lights, of blazing LED
and their psychedelic mirrors on the pavement.
The boy listens closely with his blushing ears
to the rainwater tap-dancing behind bars beneath him,
swells of laughter ringing distant but so
so quick.*

A Love Letter From Obesity (Because You Wanted to Know Why)

Sarah Mughal
VESTAL, NY

The physical? The spots popped between the legs, the lines carved on the arms, the hair growths dusting the wide frontier of belly (and just about everywhere, they don't tell you this in health class), the strain of just crossing legs, the pimples dotting the face and the nape and the breasts, the gasping breaths at night, the companionable discomfort, stumping around the world in cropped thick bones, the world spinning when standing, the health you've never known forgotten into far away memory (*where there was some fairy like confidence bestowing wishes and dreams and Hope*), the ever wavering forecast of disease, the thudding heart dashing in the halls, the looks of people, the talk of people, the cutting pity of people?
I look into the mirror, ignore the boulders tumbling from above-
it is so easy to forgo now
in anticipation of when.
[*God has given me eyes to see and a brain to think but hands unrestrainable and a mouth uncontrollable.*]

The emotion? A never-ending fear, is that what you want to hear?
This hopeless hope, this monumental struggle that seems too lonely to surmount, and exploding anxiety and defeat-defeat-eat-eat, the juggling and the fumbling, not picking Achilles' torch up again, wanting to know why and knowing it, hearing it, ignoring it, the turmoiled mobs cry death to peace and the crucifixion of calm, the hate, pity self prescribed and overdosed, the screaming, the hope torn and fed to fire, the tears that should burn pounds away, the weight of the world (*ha*), the *constant anger*, fear, disappointment, despair, confusion, tears, the *fear the fear the fear* (my drug, my only solace). I can't feel a thing. (*why why why why WHY WHY WHY AM I A FAILURE?*)

The consequences. (*So many. So, so many.*) The tears of grandmothers, the soft voices and yells and sparring of mothers, the pretending and condescending of peers, the quiet angry discarding of fathers, the self hate, hating everyone, the slipping of subjects, the dropping of steam and the rise of mad, cackling electricity into a downward spiral of broken mettle, THE HEADACHES, the anxiety, the self doubt, the sudden ambush of new fears, the new occupation, the guns blazing and mowing down traces of sun, the anger, the resentment, everyone's frustration, everyone's pain, everyone's weight, everyone's business- growing up is being slapped and told you cannot cry anymore- the letting go.

The sinking ship.

True fear, when you remember you are the one and only captain, a lone silhouette on deck.

The dying hope.

Despair.

(*Will it ever end?*)



The wanting. The helpless wanting of dreams, the blacking out of boulders, the hopeless stargazing of the weighed down. The underserving. The losing of everything (*but you let it go*). Watching the dreams above flicker, don't even care you're drowning in waves of your own *body*. Your own body killing you, in every way and checking off every possible detail- your own personal, mental dictatorship. Not caring. Because there's no point. Your aspirations never happened. Never will.

Because sometimes it feels as if I'm pushed to kneel in a flickering gold dungeon, knees digging into sandpaper stone, writing the names of sins over and over into my wrists (*obese, obese, lazy, sinful, depressed, anxious, failure, dead*) and the blood spills and soils the gown and crawls into the cement mazes in the ground as if to get away from the reality and the head's thrown back and there's screaming and screaming so loud even the lowliest of angels hears the agony (*God might yet*), but keep scrawling and ripping and bleeding because somewhere between the pain and the loss there is a moment of the most unimaginable nothing.

And they only watch, the overtakers,
expressions concealed by a flat mask of disgust.

You think- this is your punishment. You, you make promises you will not keep, you pant under the weight of dreams you've only thought on
in passing, not even working, not even trying, or else there would be some sign, would there not? You cannot decide, you waver between great folly and great sin not even striking near mediocrity nor greatness, little fool. You gave nothing,
and now you will receive none.

(*Giving up is the sweetest poison.*)

Someone will fish you out. Drag you out of the dead seas, lay you out on the beach, and slap you. Slap you and beat you and chase you into a corner to kick you and make you cry and make you break and make you bleed sapphires and cry red rubies

because it is a revelation. And it cannot be painless. It cannot be seen coming, fury blazing and grief pouring rivers of black blood to overcome you and cleanse you. And it cannot be undone- only ignored. And then you've drowned.

If you're waiting for that to happen then maybe think of this- no one can help you but yourself anymore.

(*That last part's not about fatness, love- it's about failure.*)



Elmer's

Alexis Hope Lerner
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

look at the milk

*look at the milk
and the sandwiches
and the gum packs
chewing on the counter
and the cigarettes
burning in the cabinet
protected by a year's distance
between curiosity and proper age.*

*look at the milk
dusting away*

*the Arnold Palmer the prepsters drink
the Red Bull the jockies down.
not one wallet has yawned and lolled dollars
for a drink at Elmer's*

*but the milk has never seen
torn jacket lining or the lint inside
a deep, deep pocket. no one touches the milk
though it's fresh from yesterday.*

*look at the milk
and the condoms on the shelf
next to the Advil and floss and other necessities.*

*look at the milk
poured into the omelet the Hispanic
makes for me, wiping his greasy hands
on stained apron, offering a dirty smile
and the best breakfast i've ever had.
look at the milk*

*sitting in a glass bottle outside the rusted door
as we swivel in stools,
leaning on countertop and stories
from back when we were friends.*

*look at the milk jug
the cook burns his cig into
like an ashtray, crushing
glowing orange tip into cloudy white*

*and look at that milky smile
the cashier gives with ribbon tied 'round her teeth
when she opens her cobwebbed register for us.*

*look at all the milk
and the cigs behind the counter
and the sandwiches and condoms and brats in the corner
with Snapple hidden in their purses*

*look at the lottery ticket
next to the milk the cashier drinks
sitting shiny shiny buy one win some*

we should get one

but i've already won.

My Happy Place

Jessica Maddox
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

"Take a deep breath with your stomach, not your chest, Jessica. Find your happy place, imagine the feeling of the ground under your feet, the smell of the wind, and describe it." I've considered this request before. Therapist Number Six's exercise was as standard as the Ikea furniture in the waiting room.

Rolling the idea around like a marble in a maze, I smirk at her "University of Something Prestigious" diplomas, all shellacked onto the center of cheap oak slabs with inorganically cheery finishes. Matching her erect form, I pull my shoulders down from my neck and imagine releasing my words like smoke for her innocent lungs to inhale. "Well, I went to a river once... I remember balancing on the balls of my feet, trying to track the path a single leaf down the rushing freeway of water. It smelled like rotting leaves and I stood watching chocolate labs barking after a gnawed on tennis ball. Other kids my age splashed each other under a waterfall so high it must've been five stories tall, but I was happy to just be still and watch." Of course, I've never visited that river, if it even *does* exist, and sitting still is not my forte.

Therapist Number Six, otherwise known as Rita, is a thin woman so prim that wrinkles would never dare to disrupt the smooth fabric of her face. Adjusting her salmon pink accessories (which of course match her salmon pink shoes and salmon pink scarf), she watches me fidget. Uneasily curling my toes in my black boots laced loose, I wonder if she notices that I can't stay still.

Therapists always know when you're lying—their radar puts the NSA to shame. To Rita's credit, I have yet to survive a session under her judgmental gaze with a single lie still intact. Feeling like a traitor, my breathing picks itself up and runs in my chest at a rate so alarming some doctors would prescribe mild sedatives. Rita insists I set a pace to my breathing to the rhythm of six-

seconds-in, six-seconds-out, but my breath, stubborn and excited, is running at a rate of one-second-in, one-second-out. After seven sets of six-in, six-out, I coerce my breathing to slow to its usual brisk jog, taking timed laps around my circulatory system.

The truth of the matter is, I don't think I can share my "happy place" with her. My "happy place" isn't a memory buried in the veil of the fog called time. It's not the cover of a private island's brochure, luxurious sheets of white sand with two sets of footprints trailing into an endless desert of turquoise water. But I can write. I can ravage ten pages of my cracked and colored composition book with thin cursive, highlighting the thin silk of a spider web's geometric pattern with my pen. I can compose an arrangement of stars into a symphony of words where most people see only a "dipper" or "belt." When I allow myself to scratch at the itch of words tickling under my skin, I can feel the soothing aloe of clarity. Huddling inside the silly loops and sensual curves of letters, my friend's wrists, jagged with crusted marks, no longer beg for me to answer why she glares at her face in the mirror. As I cut my pen into a slice of paper, I dice the world with my ideas, and carve out my "happy place," syllable by slanted syllable..

While I stare at Rita's diplomas, words and sentences crowd my tongue, pleading to explain my reasons for stealing another six-in, six-out breath. I don't think she could handle the cacophony of syllables. Instead of describing another scene of some picturesque beach for her, I simply say, "I'll write about it for you."

The Brush, Pour Cybele

Rebecca Greenberg
PROVIDENCE, RI

*When she was here,
the brush would slip through her hair,
splitting the dark waters of a silent stream*

*Now it lies belly-up on her dressing table,
gold hairs glinting on the hull like wet seaweed—
or a pirate's foolish dream.*



Leaf

Jessica Bulkley
FRIENDSVILLE, PA

Jesus Saves

Elle Wallace
HUMMELSTOWN, PA

god help the man	who		to catch sight of greener	stands on tiptoes
			neighborshavesprinklers	grass
			weneedthemtoo	
				sorry son winter time treats all grass the same
getbackupboy	there's nothing	falls	and winters are bad around here	
	for you		know the man	who
		down		closes his eyes
		there		needs a rest
the congregation goes			and when he rises	tiredfromworkdon't botherme
hush-hush			he has grown old	he finds that
when he walks in				misshapen
>all eyes on< the lost soul				raised veins like blue rivers
hearts ripped from chest			pulsing	
and thrown to the hands			pulsing	
of temptation			no god has not forsaken	he has simply
	lust		forgotten	
	desire (those men can't control themselves)		to help	
control yourself boy!				
(god help) the man	who			

A List of Things That Ring More Often Now

Stacey Cohen
LIVINGSTON, NJ

1. The telephone that lies beside my mother's bed. It used to ring occasionally, its shrill sound piercing whatever sounds of life wafted through the house—music (that my father constantly played despite my mother's chastising), the canned laughter of a sitcom audience long gone, or the oven timer ticking away as my mother prepared a dinner we should have thanked her for. The phone ringing has blended into background noise now, as my mother picks up the phone and repeats the same story back into the cold receiver. It seems people who have lost touch suddenly remember our phone number.

Yes, she's doing fine, no she's not in much pain, thank you very much for your gift, we really appreciate it. She hangs up. News of appointments with her myriad doctors, her search for a wig, her plans for chemotherapy. Yet, she repeats the stories, listens to friends and family tell her about their normal lives, and manages to laugh right along with them. I ask her if she ever tires of having to put on a face for everyone, and she smiles and asks me, what face?

2. The alarm on my phone each morning before school. Before the surgery, my mother would wake up at a quarter to five each morning to prepare her breakfast, shower, walk the dog, and organize everything to make sure my brother and I were ready for school before she left for work. Sometimes, after reading an article in the newspaper she thought I would find interesting, she would leave a crinkled cutout by my seat in the dining room. After all this, she would open the door to my bedroom and peer into the darkness, with my dog racing into my room like she had not seen me in years. She would remind me to get up, urging me gently, unlike the harsh jabs of sunlight pushing their way through my window shade.

Now the sounds of a mechanical robot greet me at six every morning from my cell phone, while my mother catches up on the sleep that eluded her for years. She needs her rest, the doctors say. But every morning about twenty minutes into my fit of oversleeping, I hear her soft footsteps shuffling outside my door, reminding me to get up and face the day.

3. The doorbell, announcing the delivery of more food, adding onto the never-ending supply already sent by friends and family. For as long as I could remember, my mother and I went to the grocery store together every Friday night, but when high school came, Friday nights were reserved for other purposes—friends, books, or homework. I did not think of my mother carrying my 10-year-old brother, or her purse filled with coupons, more than half of which probably expired months before. I did not think of her pacing the aisles, leaning on the cheap plastic cover of the rattling shopping cart as she looked through the neon colored cereal boxes under stingy fluorescent lighting, urging her to save, save, save!

Now she spends her Friday nights in bed, and the flow of food has not stopped since her surgery. The deliverymen (so far no women) have smiled politely and accepted their tips, dropping off their packages and moving on to the next delivery. I wonder if they know, if there is some tint to her skin or slight smell that gives her condition away.

But she smiles and tells me her cancer is not something to be ashamed of, that it is just a part of her that desperately wants to survive—just as much as the rest of her.

Dear Sperm Donor

Whitney Agyeman
VERNON, CT

*I've been ignoring following mirrors,
Outlined with your face.
I've been chasing cars,
To find the one,
My lover hid into.
I was told I was just like you.
By a woman who hardly knew me or the real you.
I had your hard shaped head,
Plump lips,
Unseen freckles,
A nose an ape once had,
Because just like the ape,
It speaks right through my ears,
A language forbidden,
Repeatedly ignored.
I refuse to believe I was beget,
Out of a loving marriage,
By a woman-
Frozen in smiles,
And a father-
Hated by his second creation.*

things under my bed

Sarah Horner
PLEASANT GAP, PA

*last night after I turned off my light and
whispered your name into my pillow
I burrowed down into my sheets and my blanket
slid off into the crack next to the wall.
It's a funny thing that I was so tired before
because after I turned my light back on, un-burrowed myself
found the energy to reach for it
my fingers touched something else and I wasn't so tired anymore.*

*covered in a thin sheet of dust and memories
I found a small white tealight (one of the battery ones.
it doesn't work anymore).
a water bottle, half empty, drops clinging to the top,
reaching for sun from the window above.*

*A square of fabric that feels like grey
and the warmth of sleeping,
my head on your shoulder.
there was a yellow post-it note
with your lyrics on it
hot air balloon by owl city.*

*I took my hand away after using
my blanket to cover them because
I can't bear for these things to come to light
even though some of them don't matter
but neither do I.*

*your name is still on my wall
next to the calendar turned to July of last year –
I don't know when they'll ever come down.*

*maybe the paint behind them is a different color
untouched by the sun
unbleached by you.*

Brother

Alexis Hope Lerner

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

With each blink, I am inside
the nostalgic eye of the Sun 660:
we are standing beside the school bus together,
hands clasped in solidarity, matching in plaid & corduroy,
my pigtailed braids plus your pocketful of buttons,
two gapped grins shining for mom's old camera.
A Polaroid emerges like a mechanical tongue
and winds up crunched up in my hand

ten years later. There is white light bleeding onto the
film from my too-tense fingertips.
They shake; still I find your bedroom eyes
soaked into the storybooked princes on my shelf,
dignified men of chivalry and grace. (Too bad mom can't praise
you with those words (like medals) anymore.)

Our sibling honeymoon lasted for my first fourteen years:
during the latter seven, we stood beside the school bus together
hands clasped, a plaid & corduroy pair;
September after September, year after year--
a constant element like perennials.
Now we are less than a fresh pair of flowers
--less than an old married couple
--less than the frayed remnants of a divorce:

we are complete strangers.

This bleeding Polaroid--I saved it from the photo album
rotting on the top shelf of your armoire
along with a few expired acceptance letters
(last year's edition), mom's now-decrepit camera,
your old flashlight

and my pride. I hide my eavesdropping eyes
as I sit around the staircase corner so you can't see
your nervous sister fiddle with her sweatshirt-sleeves--
I watch my too-young older brother suffer
from his own reckless apathy.

Brother, I see in the living room the left corner of your lips
curl around that church girl's innocence, her open face a full moon
as you drape your arm around her shoulders
likes a shawl; her older brother (and our own Aunt Margaret)
had warned against vampires
like you.

Brother, I feel through the floorboards the force of rusty bedsprings
when your mattress holds one body
that weighs two--the way the walls pound
with the sound of loud noise from the radio
and loud lives against the headboard
while I try to forget that on your pillowcase are the same printed animals
from when you were six (the red bunny
was our favorite)--

--and I know what you conceal
in the shoebox in your closet (I'm not stupid;
they're clearly not for tea (or party balloons))

--and I don't mind the lies you tell our parents
when you're "going to class", "see you tonight",

"that's for tea (--no--) okay, it's Johnny's",
"I love you"
because although those aren't true

I know they definitely once were
back when you were shorter
(when we wore plaid & corduroys
and the underbellies of our shirts looked exactly the same.)
Every day I defended you against the fourth grade girls,
the ones who occupied the last row on the bus
and screeched and picked at your gawky hesitance
like crows on a carcass--
the things that Sun 660 couldn't capture.

Now those twenty-four-year-old "natural redheads"
are the ones you take upstairs to experience
your lips and adjectives--not chivalry and grace
(just as they corrupted you, you corrupt
the church girl with braces and braids
like mine.)

But just remember that holding them
doesn't feel nearly as wholesome
as when you held my hand in that beautiful Polaroid

or when you held up Grandma's quilt
for us to hide under long past our bedtimes
reading not about proper princes, but instead Peter Pan
and forming shadow puppets in that sacred dark.
Brother, don't forget the dog-eared pages,
cracked spine and faded illustrations. Don't forget
the snickers we stifled and Snickers we stuffed
under our pajamas to chew on at midnight.
And don't forget the flashlight we used--
that glowing beacon of the days
that were once all
mine.

Hipster Friend

Kate Busatto

SEWICKLEY, PA

*We've got the vegan kid,
listening to smooth jazz on weekdays,
and his weekend friend:
the wonders of the television set.
Why won't he turn on MTV?
Please reach a tattooed hand to the remote
and hook me up with some True Life.
Nope, music on that channel's a part of the mainstream.
He turns on the Educational Program
but thinks about drugs, sex
and other mind-pollutants.
How bout a smoke, kid, how bout a smoke?
Okay, and sticks it in his teeth as he finishes
shaving half his head for Kleptomaniac Awareness:
be aware that the klepts are stealing his look.
What is this, Camel? He only smokes
Virginia Slims to demolish the sexism of the corporations.
He's got a Starbucks cup of hot philosophy,
and nihilism means something to him.
When he dies he'll turn off
like his beloved iPhone
because he's trying to spread his message:
Hell is just another corporation.*

Swirls of White Paint

Hannah Phillips

CLIFFORD TOWNSHIP, PA

Even when she locks him out of the house, he can't leave.

Every vein inside of him is crackling, threatening to shrivel and fold up, and he can't fathom the idea of her perched inside somewhere, lips pursed delicately and eyes alight with nothing wilder than concern.

There are parts of her that fascinate Parker and ones that devastate him, but the only one that maintains an equilibrium between the two is her ability to leave things unsettled – as if these words don't clink around in her mind after midnight, don't scrape against each other like dead bolts, pretending to hold things together. Words like that can't just dissipate out into the universe, he wants to tell her. They have to stay close to you, have to bury themselves somewhere. He worries sometimes that they pool into her blood, thickening it like lead, so that one day, one unsettling remark, it will cripple her right on the spot. She'll just freeze over like a cold statue with dry pain flaking off of her.

For now, he paces over the patchwork floorboards of her family's front porch. He retraces his path until the boards seem to give slight way from under him, seem to find a rhythm that agrees to stick around as long as he does. *Like the house pulses with life beneath my feet*, he thinks, Like it writhes and chokes, like it knows the terrible sensations of being truly and utterly alive.

Or maybe it's just a house, he thinks.

Maybe, this is why she can sleep while he watches ceiling patterns shift.

When the rhythm proves disquieting, Parker takes to loitering around the front yard. It doesn't feel like that, though – shouldn't feel like loitering when the girl he plans on marrying one day is inside watching him, picking apart his symptoms like she probes at specimen. Mia has always treated his disorder as some sort of equation, as if it can be dissected on numerous occasions, each time to reveal the same misplaced emotions. Only he knows that if she tried to take him apart, there would be chaos – strings of eroded insecurities some days, chasms of dizzying misery others, and the occasional swell of fleeting inspiration.

To look at her hurts. It hollows out all the spare places inside of him, ones he didn't even know existed until now – craters beneath his shoulders and dips along

his rib cage – and carves into them every etch of numbed over trepidation, of chest-rocking salvation, of that fierce, teary kind of need to be something more, that half-men have ever felt tremble inside of them, looking into the eyes of girls they undoubtedly loved.

It's the first time he realizes that, perhaps, that feeling he has in his chest – the one that pushes out from inside like armor unable to stay put in place – can feel warm instead of heavy. He thinks that just maybe, when he finally does implode someday, a few good things will come leaking out over all the bad.



It occurs to him in a moment that holds semblance to a jolt: there is nothing for him to do but wait – for Mia to change her mind, for a concerned neighbor to peek out of a window with a phone to his or her ear, or for Helen to come home from the hospital.

The thought of Helen, Mia's mother, stalking toward him, eyes sharp and black like the two of them are standing on a crime site, rather than a yellowed, frozen over front yard, rattles around at the bottom of his stomach, clinking against the hollowed-out caverns there. Since the first time she met Parker, that woman has always looked at him like an animal awaiting termination, as if he was already caught in a snare without even knowing it. Now, he knows she's right. His own terrors swarm around him, wrench him down like netting; she never makes a striking move, because she knows he'll drag himself under, far from her daughter, just the same.



He's only been dating Mia Staudinger for a little over a month, but from what he takes of it, it's seldom that her mother eats dinner with her kids – or rather, her daughter and someone else's son. Mia's older stepbrother, Kyle, didn't have enough time to find a place in this family when his father was alive and certainly doesn't pose much of an interest in continuing to try now that he's gone.

So, perhaps, the fact that Kyle is staring down at the home-cooked food on porcelain like it's a poached alien isn't entirely an indication that moments like this, packed neat and homely, are rare between the three of them. Even so, there's something about the way the silence among them scrapes against itself, as if three quiet forces – each capable of carrying through this place alone, in its own way – have been forced to cross each other.

Mia prods at a carrot with the prongs

of her fork, flipping it over on a journey across her dish, but for once, he knows she's not stringing together atoms to make carrot molecules in her head. Instead, she's thinking about what it would be like to just be a simple morsel on her plate right now, entirely dependent on the others to get this meal over and done with.

"They have me taking care of this new kid," Helen states, as if it's not the first and only announcement of the night, as if Mia has just said something about her Chemistry project or Kyle about his job at the hardware store downtown. "Clinically depressed, post-traumatic stress from when he witnessed some accident as a kid, they're saying, but you know what, I think that's bullshit. There's a difference between being crazy – being downright sick in the head – and just wanting an excuse to give in."

Suddenly, he feels his own silence add to the scraping.



Helen's Subaru never does peel into the driveway. She never wrenches open the door and threatens to call the police should she ever find him "harassing" her daughter again. Instead, Kyle's old truck wobbles up over the curb, staggering on until it heaves to a stop – horrendously parked, blocking off both garage door entrances. But one look at that crumbling piece of machinery and a double-take of the crumbling boy sliding out of it, and it's clear that not much will be said about it.

Kyle is a lanky sort of kid. His limbs often look like, at one point, they were just haphazardly thrown together and miraculously, unexplainably, they've stayed put over the years. But up close, it's easier to see that his face is warm. It's something that starts in his eyes and pools out into the rest of his features, ruffling through his hair and hopping from freckle to freckle – the kind of face that, under no circumstances, could startle somebody around the turn of a corner.

"Hey, Parker," he mumbles. Kyle never says much anything more, but he also never forgets to say something.

Parker's throat feels too dry to answer, all cracked up inside. He just smiles as best he can.

"You need to get in . . . ?" He chuckles.

With the realization of just how strange he must look to Kyle – off-balanced and sauntering around on their front yard – something dives down, sharp and quick, in Parker's stomach. He has to remind himself that Kyle, for every time he's witnessed a near slip in composure, has never been one to wrap his mind around things he doesn't have to.

The night is so heavy around her house, like something radiates from it and pushes against his chest. She's probably upstairs in her room, practicing speaking with a German accent or trying to understand why the quadratic formula works the way it does – whatever current whim her curiosity has taken the form of – and in this moment, she probably doesn't even remember that she called him overbearing today. The memory, filed somewhere in that mind of hers, is probably just as weighted and real as the fact that German sounds replace w's with v's. Things, he's coming to see, clink and shuffle around in Mia's head, but they never bleed together or threaten to ooze out.

He circles the house three times, but of the few upstairs rooms that are lit-up, he can only catch glimpses of ceiling patterns. And they're all identical to the one he's always reserved for Mia's room. Parker has come to associate those swirls of white paint with nights spent holding her close to him – nights where things inside of him quieted down, overwhelming him with neither the good nor the bad, but just the real. Realizing now that Helen might look up at those same swirls every night, he feels like a kid who's just realized his favorite word is pronounced with a harder tongue. It makes his insides wallop around a bit.

He throws a pebble at one lit-up room, being quick to slink into the shadows behind the garage. It isn't Mia, he sees from his peering point, who comes to open the window, but mercifully, it isn't Helen either. Instead, Kyle, shirtless and with sleepy eyes and disheveled hair, slides his elbows out onto the screenless pane. He looks out and then directly down, but when he finds nothing, he merely slumps his head into his arms, cradling it for a minute and watching the sky. Eventually, he straightens himself out and disappears from Parker's view, cut off by the ceiling pattern. He leaves the window open, though – open for every little crunch of leaves, every cough of crisp autumn air, to come to his notice. Parker decides it's time to accept a sleepless night.

But just as he's about to slouch into his hood and make a silent run for his car, parked two blocks up the street, a flash of white flutters out of Kyle's window, down the side of the house. Then, the lit-up room inside of it goes dark, and the window is pushed shut by a quick set of arms.

When Parker's finally spun up and broken down enough courage, curiosity, and numbness to investigate it, he finds a crinkled up piece of notebook paper that reads:

Other side of the house, window farthest to the left, above the gas tank



He hadn't been sure whether or not to allow Kyle to let him inside. Sure, he needed to talk to Mia – needed to let her know that until something in her eyes said she was still there, still his, and still fascinating and devastating all at once, his body would play pinball with its fears – but something about taking advantage of Kyle's soft kind of ignorance makes thoughts of Mia sink down inside of him, allowing for guilt and fears of his own morbidity to pool up over them.

The air pulses around him. Mia doesn't show herself. Suddenly, all those spare places inside of him – the craters under his shoulders and the dips along his rib cage – feel washed through by ice. Standing at the foot of the Staudingers' staircase, glazed over by sunlight that has also stolen its passage inside, he feels the burning in the corners of his eyes, the tingling in his hands, the swells of fear beneath his chest, deflated now and yet so prevalent just moments ago that they bubbled up over all rationality. Shame sears through him, hot against the ice. It snaps his crinkling veins back into place.

"I don't think she's here," he manages to croak out to Kyle, who, doused in the sunlight, just kicks at a familiar rug in a familiar house, unaware that he's in the presence of two intruders. "Tell her I'll see her whenever. Tell her I'm sorry."

He turns back for the door, but Kyle reaches a friendly arm out to block his exit. "Stay a little while," he offers, "She'll show up any second now. You know Mia, she probably stopped at the library, because she developed some burning interest in Dr. Seuss' life story or something."

Despite the heaviness pushing at his chest, Parker snorts. Still, he mutters, "I don't know, man. To be honest, I don't even think that she wants to talk to me."

Kyle's mouth slides crookedly to the left, eyebrows hinting up in concern. "Something need to be fixed between the two of you?"

Something needs to be fixed in me, Parker thinks, but he only shrugs back at Kyle. Before he can make the cognitive decision to do so, he's following him into the kitchen, placing his elbows on the counter and watching as Kyle rummages through a refrigerator.

Without warning, Kyle turns and tosses a bottle of cola – the old-fashioned, glass kind that Mia picks up – at Parker, who, just by some stream of traveling luck using this house, this kitchen, as a bypass, manages to snag the neck of it.

Kyle turns to see Parker clutching the bottle just where he'd caught it, eyes wide and half-smiling in a mixture of amusement and shock. "Whoops," Kyle chuckles, "I forgot Mia likes to create as many unnecessary hazards in this place as possible."

Things have never been this way before. It only now occurs to Parker that in the time he spent memorizing this place and its ceiling patterns, Kyle may have been doing the same thing.



"Remind me again why I'm here, doing this in this very moment, because I sure can't answer that question myself."

Mia's small frame contorts with hefty laughter as she lets four grocery bags tumble out of her arms onto the kitchen counter. "Because, you know, I woke up this morning and realized I haven't the slightest idea how to make sushi. I don't know how to make arguably my favorite food on this planet, and that really put a damper on my day." She's laughing, playing at sarcasm, but he knows what she just said is truly the only reasoning she has. He's here for just this, of course – to see the corners of her eyes crinkle up, the colors of them flash with light and passion.

Kyle sits a few feet away at the dining table, an American History textbook opened in front of him. He smiles a little, uncomfortably though, as if he's not sure he's allowed, as if he's afraid that everything about Parker and Mia together is some sort of inside joke that will prove to be offensive, should he try to play along.

Mia, noticing him watching, saunters across the room to look over his shoulder. "History, huh?"

He nods, but it's more like a stutter of the neck.

"My favorite guy has always been Bismarck. God, was he a manipulative bastard. But he got two entire countries to act like sensitive, insecure little humans."

Kyle smiles to appease her, and Parker doesn't point out that the Franco-Prussian War isn't part of American history. Instead, he just jibes, "Well, believe it or not, dearest, that's what most countries are made up of – humans."

Mia arches an eyebrow and dances over to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Oh, but you'd be surprised how much smarter most people can get when they've got an entire nation depending on it."

He smirks. "Mm, and how much dumber they can get when they've got one pretty girl counting on it."

"You bet," she breathes, her face just inches from his. "Now, start unpacking the seaweed, dearest." She delivers a light sock to his stomach, and he doubles over the counter with a cross between a snort and a

groan. Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Kyle watching them again, lips curved up in a half-way grin. He watches them as if he's the visitor, and Parker is the one to be long here.



"You're not like her at all, are you?"

Parker watches the college athletes on the screen when he answers, wishing he was just as hard in the eyes as them – wishing he could channel all the things that don't make sense in the world into a game that does. "No, I'm not."

Kyle nods, and he's quiet for a moment, taking a slow sip of the cola. Parker thinks he might not say anything more, might let the comfortable distance that's always floated between them and these questions reshape itself. But then, he starts again, "It's like you get something that she just doesn't, as weird as that seems. I mean, I don't think I get it either, but that's nothing new. Mia gets everything."

"That makes me sound really cool, like I'm in on some secret everybody wants to know." Parker means to chuckle, but the words drip tiredly out of his lips in a sigh.

"Maybe, you are," Kyle murmurs.

"Nah, people like you guys are just smart enough to know" –

He stops, too abruptly, he realizes, but the truth is, he has no idea how to finish, no idea what separates him from the boy beside him, other than that one of them doesn't feel anything weighing down on him when he sleeps.

"When to stop thinking?"

Walking the Dog in a Circle Skirt on a Day with a Breeze

Robin Shafto
LIVINGSTON, NJ

*My dog pooped on your lawn.
You compliment my eyes.*

*I respond "Excuse me."
My voice cracks.*

*I mean to step to your right.
No. Your left. No.*

*Your right?
I am in your way.*

*My dog sniffs too far up your leg.
Your fly is undone. I say nothing.*

*Your underwear is striped.
So is mine.*

*You do not know this.
I hope.*

"Yeah," Parker huffs, and with that, something tumbles off of him – perhaps, just for the moment, but that's longer than it's ever stayed away before.

"You know, I don't know a whole lot about the mind or any of that stuff, but I'll tell you what, if I could feel all the good and all the bad that make up this world – if I could feel it all at once – I'm pretty sure there wouldn't be enough room inside of me. And you seem like you're a hell of a lot closer than the rest of us to knowing what that's like."

Kyle stops then, just as things are starting to fall off of Parker like layers of armor, and he turns to look over his shoulder. "Nice of you to show up."

Mia stands at the foot of the stairs, hair tied back and eyes glistening at their corners. Her throat folds in and then out as she swallows hard. Parker starts to stand – to embrace her, to flee from her, to drop to her feet – but her gaze skips passed him, landing on the athletes.

Her eyes dull down then, as if willed by her to do so. She pads across the room, almost lazily, perching beside him on the arm of the sofa. "What's the score?"

Chalk Drawings

Emily Guerra

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

The drizzles splattered down on the driveway. Her vibrant chalk drawings disappeared before she had time to blink; before she had time to realize that her tiny back was wet with raindrops. When she realized both of these things, her eyes began to get wet too. She slowly started whimpering as she watched all of her creations wash away with the rain.

It was the summer before she went into first grade and every day seemed better than the next. She drew butterflies with the blue and green chalk, hearts with the red and pink, and rainbows stretching all around the pavement. She drew grass and bees and trees and all the things she saw around her. These were all the things she knew. She didn't know how long she had been drawing, but the sun had gone from the middle of the clear sky to being hidden behind the trees.

She doesn't know any other place but here. Here was home. Here has always been home, and right now she thinks here will always be home. And every day will be better than the

next. She doesn't know that sooner than she can blink she'll find herself in her room for hours on end doing homework with her headphones in to block out the nightly yelling coming from downstairs, not chalking up the driveway or selling lemonade to strangers in cars. She'll be listening to loud angry music sung by loud angry men. She doesn't understand the genuine troubles of being an only child in a broken home. On the same driveway, in what seems to be no time at all, she will inhale smoke into her lungs and she will be angry. But right now she is sitting on the driveway, and everything was beautifully distilled, but she is angry because the rain is overwhelming her.

Her mom came outside when she saw the rain start to come down. She called for her to come inside, but the little girl didn't move from her spot on the ground.

*"Please come inside, you can draw again tomorrow when the sun is out."
"NO. This is not fair. I loved my drawings and now they are gone. Everything is ruined!"*

"You can make even prettier chalk drawings tomorrow. You're getting drenched honey, come inside now, it's time for dinner."

She stayed there, sitting on the pavement for a while longer, sopping and sobbing. Her mom walked over and sat down in the rain next to her daughter. She let out a long sigh and said, "There is no use in crying now, nothing is permanent." Then she stood up and went back to setting the kitchen table, leaving her toddler with those words. The crying stopped although there was still some sniffing. She'll remember this conversation with her mom forever.

She didn't know that the rain was coming. No one told her she should stop loving the drawings before the rain came and washed them away, so it wouldn't hurt so much. She can't see any beauty in clean, dark, wet pavement. She doesn't like the smell of fresh rain yet. She doesn't see the beauty in being cleansed, because she has never seen anything dirty. Everything is beautiful for now and she is angry.

Cloud Secrets

Allison Chu
HOLMDEL, NJ

The door shuts loudly when I walk in. Heads turn, watching me as I slink to my seat in the back corner. Pencils return to scratching, little whispers resume. The teacher glares at me briefly before returning to her lesson at the board. I'm late, again.

In the mornings on my way to the bus stop, the October sky above me is weary and shy, cautious about the day. As I pick my way around the wet puddles, the sky mimics me, passing tiny patches of faded blue through thin covers of silver-gray cloud.

In the afternoons, the foggy dregs of sleep are long gone; my mind is clear. I swing my lunchbox as I whistle a familiar melody, feet striding confidently against the sunlit pavement. The October sky is a brilliant blue, a picturesque sky complete with big fluffy white clouds that seem to suspend in mid-leap. Carefree children play in the streets and on the driveways of my neighborhood, shouting and shrieking in the warmth of the day.

In the evenings, my window blinds are always open, especially since it is October. From my little chair in the corner, knees drawn up as to make myself invisible to the passerby, I watch the October sky paint itself in beautiful, flamboyant oranges and pinks. The expansive blue stretches and camouflages itself among the purples, colors colliding and transforming in secret formations. Then, all too soon, the sky darkens into the deep blueness for the night. And like me, no matter how hard it tries, the October sky can never become invisible.

I bounce back and forth on the balls of my feet, dancing in place to the beat of the pounding bass drums behind me. Eyes dart across little plastic coated sheets of music while fingers skim across glistening brass keys. Flying sticks and blue dancing bodies catch my attention from the corner of my eyes. Mr. B announces something on the loudspeaker, and the crowd erupts with cheers. The drums pound in my ears; my feet sway in time to the rhythm... I can feel the vibrations down to my very core. This is music... and I'm home.

The clouds move in a different direction today. The white puffy floating masses fly towards me, towards my window- that's different. Yesterday, the clouds floated from left to right across the rectangle patch of sky my window proudly displays.

I never knew the sky was so variegated. Colors change within two minutes. In a half hour span, there are yellows and oranges and purples and periwinkles and indigos... Colors that define clouds as more than just puffy white or dense gray.

In the thirty-three minutes I laid on my back on the floor of my room, watching the sky, I saw more colors and shapes than I have in the past two days. It's a wonder how much we all miss because we look down rather than up. Once in a while, it's nice to lie on the floor and watch the sky.

Feet tap urgently on the carpeted floor as fingers fly across brass keys. A wall of noise organizes itself into a chord, then a melody. Lazily swinging from horn to horn, it skips around the room, flirting with each instrument. Players only move slightly, torsos minutely swaying to the music. A flash of gold distracts the melody as the whole chord breaks down and crumbles. A voice cuts through the last of the sound waves. Fingers twirl valves, feet shift, and papers shuffle. A sharp finger snap calls the gold horns to attention. Sounds are built on top of each other until the melody reappears, jumping for joy.

I'm not sure which sense reminded me the most about the memories I've tried to repress for so long. Was it the same color walls? Or maybe the desk and its placement in relation to the room? It's organized the same way as her office, the desk jutting out in the middle, her computer next to the wall...

If I close my eyes, I can envision myself back in the same chair, similar office, but with a different woman behind the desk. I sat there in that day... crying silently in shock... because somebody noticed, and it felt like my whole world was crashing down. I remember those anxious, silent minutes, time passing so quietly you could hear the second hand counting each eternity...

A tear fell. Then another. I remember angrily dashing them away,

ashamed that anyone should see me fall apart. But she was there. And she had only talked for a minute before turning the discussion to me. Already, I was crying.

Quietly, she walked around her desk and sat down in the chair beside me. She wore grey dress pants that day... I remember that because I couldn't raise my head to look her in the eye. She dragged the yellow tissue box across the desk and offered it to me. I took one, wiped my eyes, and balled it up into my temporary security blanket, a makeshift stress ball.

"It's okay, you know," she had said. And she had let me cry.

My pencil briefly touches the paper in feather light strokes. I never doodle in class, much less draw with pencil. But under my hesitant strokes a tree grows, branches reaching for the make-believe sky. A trunk appears, stretching to the base of my paper, its roots sprawling in messy, impossible tangles. Leaves float across the page, quivering in the windy paper air...

The teacher walks by, her shadow creating a dark pool on my desk. I slam my planner shut, hiding any trace of the tree. She gives me a strange look, a calculating stare, before moving on to the next student, glancing over his shoulder at his work.

I look down at my paper. It's blank. I open my planner again to the tree drawn on the pervious week. Branches intertwine with the dates and lines meant for assignments. It's smudged already. I knew there was a reason I hated using pencil.

At dusk, the sky turns into a royal blue, an ocean stretching across the horizon. Wisps of clouds scatter across, making swirly lines reminiscent of waves crashing on the sandy shore. Flying creatures flutter through the air as the ocean turns from blue to black. Hello, Night.

The lonely halls are mazes when silent... simply empty passages to wander down and get lost. It's easy to calm your thoughts by walking through the empty halls. *Like a labyrinth*, I think. Through each little doorway is an entrance to another world, transported into the microscopic particulars of biology or the dreary lifestyle of the Industrial Revolution era.

A loud monotonous drone sounds, and the halls exhale life. Doors open as students leave one isolated world in search of

the next. Hundreds of footsteps march in time to a thousand different tempos. Metal locker doors spit out books and inhale binders, papers flying everywhere. Backpacks play bumper cars as messenger bags are hoisted onto shoulders, the stray lunchbox grabbed after a moment of forgetfulness. The last few footsteps are hurried, racing against time. The drone sounds again, and the halls grow quiet once more.

I'm lost again, turned around in the hectic bustle. Seeing unfamiliar surroundings, I turn and walk in the opposite direction, through the halls that once again hold their breath.



The band stops when Mr. K waves his hand, the last of our notes reverberating in the outdoor setting. The cool air rustles between our music stands, teasing the corners of our sheets. Some parents sit on the ledge by the walkway, listening.

Mr. K says something. The band limbers up again, preparing to play. Sheets are rearranged and fastened. Spit valves are emptied; the horns retune. I scan the various parents, hoping for a familiar face. None.

Another half-hour of music passes. At the end of our last chart, there's a smattering of applause. I smile; the audience enjoyed it. The last stragglers hurry up the pathway, slowly ending the steady stream of parents. I stay in my seat, hopping. Around me, the other band members begin to pack up, and I grudgingly follow suit. Disappointment floods my mind. They didn't come.



Steam slowly creeps up the mirror, transforming the clear reflective surface into an opaque expanse. Water rains on my shoulders, running in rivets down my arms. I hold out my hand and watch as the water falls off in drops, each drop carrying a little piece of my sorrow away. They fall to the floor of the bathtub with little pattering plops and stream towards the drain. One by one, they descend through the little holes, disappearing from sight and erasing my thoughts from my head.



Nights are never filled with silence. There's always the crickets and cicadas singing the summer opera; there's the gentle snoring from the room next door; there's the little whirling of the fan. And there's the sound of my pen gliding along the worn page of my notebook.

Nights are also filled with the intangible, more so than the day. Dreams fill the air while nightmares paint it black. Little stories are produced inside our heads... And there are the thoughts, flying from one end of our minds to the ever expanding other.



That note... There was a note scribbled on a piece of loose-leaf paper. In pen, I think. A note left on the bedside table. Why did he leave a note?

There was medicine, little white pills lined up on the white kitchen table. Some were grouped into irregular white circular shapes. The white kitchen table had a white kitchen chair next to it. He sat on the white chair, feet planted squarely on the white linoleum floor. There was too much white in that room. And on the white table were the little white pills...

There was a lot of sofa-sitting that night. Hands clutched at the fabric, feet resting on the beige rug. Tense expressions clenched faces. Whispers floated between my brother and my mouth. Low conversations came from the kitchen.

There were frantic phone calls. The kitchen phone still had a spiral cord - white, to match the kitchen. The cord was stretched; it didn't reach any further. Panicked conversations gripped my dad's hunched shoulders. The phone cord didn't reach to where the sofa sat. Why haven't they switched their phone?

There were sirens that night, ear-piercing sirens that force cars to pull over to the side of the road. The doorbell joined in with the sirens, clashing in a painful harmony. A mess of noise, ear-piercing noise... Unnecessary noise.

There were men in clunky boots and navy jackets. They clomped up the stairway and into the kitchen, leaving dirt on the floor. It was all right at the time; the floor hadn't been cleaned anyway. They spoke loudly, adding to the confusion and the tension. We don't wear shoes in the house. But they wore heavy boots that clomped up the stairs.

There were red and white lights-flashing, blurring lights that faded down the streets. They stubbornly streamed in through the shut blinds... No blinds could have stopped them. In an instant, they were gone. The red and white lights left along with the men in clunky boots who took the only thing left on the kitchen table - the scribbled note.



When it gets dark outside, windows become rectangles of reflections. The light from my room illuminates the rectangle of black, and the outside world is hidden in shadow.

At night, my room is rarely completely dark. I dislike the cold, expansive, empty feeling of black windows. Instead, my windows become extensions of my room: another bed, complete with its messy purple covers, another faded wall map, another pink paper flower suspended from the ceiling. My desk has been extended another yard in width, and my bookshelf now has another side... Another reality.

But when I sit at my desk and look into my extended room, I see that someone has already moved in. She has the same hair as me, and she always wears the clothes that I wear. Her movements mirror mine, and she also always writes in purple ink, just like me. Everything about her is the same as me...

Except for her eyes. Her eyes are dark, with only a hint of white around the iris. There are always shadows under her eyes, and they always look sad. Even when I smile at her, she returns the smile, but it never reaches her eyes. I make conversation with her, too, but she never responds. Her eyes never seem happy.

Every night, I look for her in the alternate room, and every night, we sit down to write in our notebooks in purple ink. And I always smile at her. She smiles back at me, and I always watch her eyes. They've been sad for a while now, but maybe if I keep smiling at her, one day her eyes will sparkle and she'll say hello.



I saw a cloud today, floating in the sky. It was lonely, solitary in the expansive sea of sky. It was sunset, 6 o'clock in the evening, and I sat at my desk to watch the show.

Glittering light reflected off the bottom of the slivery cloud, illuminating only a thin strip. The rest of the cloud remained in the shadow, periwinkle purple in the shadow, hiding from the people on the ground. What was there to hide, cloud?

Maybe the cloud has secrets, tales too dark to tell. Maybe the cloud has had a stormy day, and it can't bear to spill any more tears. Maybe the cloud needs a place to hide, another cloud to lean upon and disappear into. Maybe the cloud needs a break. Or maybe the cloud finds it easier to simply hide behind its cheery orange cover, to pretend its whole entity is bright, to save its story for another day.

Like me.

Too Caught Up

Samara Spiler
LIVINGSTON, NJ

After Meg Kearny

I believe that curly hair is the worst hair
And that there's no anti-frizz product
Or flat iron that can make this poodle
That sits on my head look good,
That looking good is just a phrase
And that we get too caught up
Obsessing over this little fragment of a sentence.
I don't believe in love at first sight,
But I do believe you can find your soul mate
At a baseball game where you spill your
Fries all over that guy with dimples
In the Yankee shirt.
I believe in phone calls, smelly stickers,
Long showers, water balloon fights.

all she ever said

Alexandra Kindahl
COCKEYSVILLE, MD

*you spent a year telling her you loved her
in the din of coffee shops,
in scrawls of misspelled french,
in poems you wrote and rewrote
until they turned to dust.
all she ever said
was that she didn't believe you.*

*you held her when she let you,
kissed her when she let you,
ran your fingers through her hair,
telling her how long you'd wanted just
to touch her—as though she were really
the fresco you'd once described her as,
unearthed only to be kept far out of reach.
she asked you
if you were sick of her yet.*

*you took her hand
to tether her to the earth,
met her eyes again and again and again
to draw her back from the horizon.
you wrote out every memory you had of her
searching for novels on library shelves,
improvising on out-of-tune pianos,
walking beside you along sidewalks
soaked with rain and mud.
you spent a year telling her you loved her,
and all she ever said
was that you were wrong.*

I believe that you can always find me with a smile
When I'm sitting under that oak tree
On 40 Krouner Road.
I don't believe in God, or goodbyes,
Or luck. Halloween is just an excuse
To be half naked and not be judged.
I believe that judgmental people
Are looking from the wrong perspective,
And that perspective is often most important.
I believe that lying in bed all day
Watching *Grey's Anatomy* can make you forget
About stupid things. Stupid people who create
Stupid drama should also lie in bed all day
And watch *Grey's Anatomy*.
I believe that warm weather is much better
Than the cold, and that one day I'll be honey mooning
In Bora Bora with that dimpled guy I spilled my fries all over.
I'd like to believe that I'll go to a good college,
And that it takes a lot of hard work to get there.
I also believe that hard work is somewhat of a struggle,
Considering that season nine of *Grey's Anatomy*
Is waiting for me, just a few clicks away.
Netflix glows with so much promise, saying,
"Watch me! History can wait,"
Hypnotizing me.
I believe that thinking too much is dangerous
And if we just let loose and stop thinking so much
That we could maybe be a little happy.
I believe that teenage girls always think they're
Unhappy, when all they are is dramatic.
And that includes me.
I believe that the weekend cannot come soon enough,
And that the weekend is nothing but wasted time.
I believe that a king size dark chocolate Hershey's
Bar can get rid of tears, as much as it can add
A few calories to my thunder thighs.
I believe that 14 is a boring age,
And that I'd like to move on already, even though I believe
That rushing your life will do you no good.
I believe in springy picnics,
With the checkered blanket and everything
Out in the grass with the bugs and the sun.
I believe that contrary to popular belief,
Spiders are really not all that scary.
They're just creepy crawling their way
Through life, trying to survive,
Just as we are.
I believe that crying makes you weak,
But only if it's about boys.
I sometimes believe that rocks should be thrown at boys,
But don't go overboard.
I believe that next to a really good brownie,
Family is the most important things in our lives.
They will always be our warm and fuzzy security
Blanket. And even though sometimes this blanket
Makes us a little too warm, I have decided
That it's better to be a little warm than freezing.

My Eyes

Corinne Winters
CREAM RIDGE, NJ

*"I could not unpeach the peaches."
- Annie Dillard*

A scorpion. A dragon. A flying horse. Or random white dots. Sitting in the sky lab in fifth grade, listening to the teacher fire off constellations, I nodded mindlessly when she asked if everyone could see the shapes. That was a lie, because no matter how long I stared and blinked and squinted, Aquarius still looked like a potato. My classmates might have had trouble following as well, but I refused to be the one to raise my hand and voice a question. At that age, it would have been social suicide to say something so foolish. On my own, I stared up at the sky in an attempt to make sense of the shapes but all I got was a cramp in my neck. I pulled out binoculars, spun in circles, sketched star charts on blank sheets of paper, but still found nothing. What was I missing? Why could I not see what others had been seeing for thousands of years? Finally, I gave up and went to the teacher to reveal that, no, I could not see the shapes. Ursa Major was a mouse no matter which way I looked at it. And without hesitation, my teacher agreed.

The figures in that sky lab came from an astronomical consensus, not the Rule Book of Life. Not even all the ancients saw the same forms; what astronomers have officially labeled as Ursa Major, the ancient Sumerians saw as a wagon, the Greeks as a bear, and the Chinese as a chariot. For me, it looks like a mouse, and it is not from lack of trying or lack of caring that all I will ever see is a mouse. After printing star charts and holding them up to the sky, I was able to connect the dots, but I still could not see the shapes astronomers had labelled. I knew what Ursa Major was supposed to look like, but my brain twisted the image into a mouse. The only mistake I ever made was thinking that seeing things differently was a problem.

Trying to see what others see is the wrong way of going about life; it is seeing through someone else's eyes. I see my shapes, and I will always see my shapes. Annie Dillard cannot "unpeach the peaches" the same way I cannot "unpotato" Aquarius or "unmouse" Ursa Major. There is no such thing as "supposed to look like" or "should look like." Even when the stars are connected, Cepheus the King still looks like a five-year-old's attempt at a stick figure house. And that is perfectly fine. It does not make me wrong. It does not make me blind. It makes my eyes my own.

Seeing the Wizard

Jessica Maddox

TOWSON, MD

“The human aura is defined as an energy field which surrounds the physical body, in all directions, and will have a three-dimensional look and feel.....An aura’s color usually reflects the subtle energies which surround the individual.” –Psychic.com

Between chic boutiques and cozy coffee shops, a thin building squeezes its grey sides to fit into the eclectic Hampden scene. The wide window holds no definitive name, just a sputtering LED sign reading “PSYCHIC OPEN.” Its dim bulbs scream low budget. I run across the street in my old combat boots, weaving between cars, cigarette butts, and icy patches.

I heave my weight against the brown, chipping door, and the old hinges squeal profanities at me. “Nicer than I expected,” I mutter as I inspect the mild-mannered waiting room. Four chairs face a set of closet doors, which hide a small table and mismatched chairs. Beyond the closet, a game show murmurs through a muted brown curtain. With expectations of head wraps and gypsy skirts, I day-dream of hidden meanings and riches to come, maybe even a ghost or two.

With a flourish, a woman parts the curtain, revealing a man in his pajamas watching Jeopardy reruns. As she shuffles towards me, I glance from the dingy carpet to her attire, and I’m convinced she’s a fake. She’s all grey clothes, long sleeves and sweatpants with grey hair to match. Grey teeth (what few are left), nestle in rotted gums. I had done my research—in the psychic world, grey means guarded. Grey means poor health. Grey means disconnection. She is far from a gypsy cloaked in colors.

Without introduction, the woman recites her prices: twenty for palm reading, forty for tarot, sixty for aura reading, eighty for aura cleansings. I had nineteen dollars, and I wasn’t even willing to give her that, but there’s a cover fee for seeing the wizard. Four dimes, ten pennies, one quarter, and a load of nickels later, I’m sitting next to her in the closet. I spot a *Beginners Guide to Palm Reading*

tucked under a geode on her side of the table. Is it too late to get a refund?

Before I can snatch my money back and walk out, she grabs my hands. I let them lie over her own like dead fish. After only three seconds of looking at my hands, she’s ready to tell my entire life story.

“You will live a long life with many riches!”

...Seriously? Does she have a script? Are there fortune cookies at the door?

“You have had your heart broken three times, once by love, once by failure.”

She doesn’t tell me the third one.

“Who is the man who hurt you, dear?”

I think of the man who hurt me, and I wonder for a moment if she really does know. Concentrating on the memory makes my eyes water, and I look up at her smudged grey mass.

“He broke your heart, didn’t he? When he left you?”

I choke back a dark laugh, pretending it’s a sob. She has no idea what she’s talking about—leaving was the best thing he had ever done.

“You are not happy. You have money, I cleanse your aura. Your chakras are very messy.”

Pausing, I imagine my aura. Echoes of emerald green, lemon yellow, muddled orange, and stained rose emanate from the corners of my vision, signifying healing, controlling nature, anxious thinking, and survival-oriented instincts.

“You come back with a hundred dollars, yes? ATM down the street.” She insists on my return—my aura is tainted with streaks of muddy blue: insecurities. She must cleanse it.

Lady, I think, not in a million years will I give you a hundred dollars. In fact, dear grey lady, let me read your colors: grey, dark grey, pale grey, yellow grey. I predict that you haven’t lived a long life with riches. The only luck you’ve had is grabbing a nice location in an artsy town. I predict you will not be meeting Benjamin Franklin any time soon.

I walk out, twenty dollars poorer and a hundred times grumpier, imagining my colorful aura stained with grey.

The Old City

Anneliese Feldman

BALTIMORE, MD

Israel, 2011

*Outside the Dung Gate,
bullet holes
from World War II
remain in the walls
next to the arrow slits
carved into the sandstone.
I walk the path of the cross
and listen to the sobs of women
as they rub pieces of fabric
onto the site where he lay
dead. Candlelight dances
on the antique walls
inside the church
where people surround
the final monument of Jesus.
Sunlight bends itself
through colored glass windows
and hits the ground
like a crash of thunder.
As old Jewish men speed by
on their way to devotion,
a beautiful cry
from somewhere
outside the walls
rings in our ears.
The Muslim Call to Prayer
comes right on time.
Car horns and
sirens blend together
in the background
of the worship
surrounding me.
I can hear the murmurs
of the Jewish
men and women,
separated by a divider
as they bow and pray
at the sacred Western Wall.
People scribble their hopes and dreams
on scraps of paper
and shove them into every niche
between the ancient stones.
Islam, Christianity, and Judaism
are all fighting to claim
this one little spot on Earth.
Lost in the commotion
in the Old City,
I find myself.*

Untitled

Greta Skagerlind

MAPLEWOOD, NJ

I awake a tangled heap on the kitchen radiator with a violent headache. My floodgates are thrown open and a clicking noise fills the room. I'm short of breath, trying to remember some dream I'd just had about...waves? Whipping my head around, I notice the cracking sound is just a broken burner on the stove. I blink. Above me is a host of flyers and expired pizza coupons tacked precariously to a thinning, warped bulletin board. The burner doesn't stop. By now, the phone has also begun to ring, and usually by this point my mother would have picked it up. I sit up slowly with one hand touching my forehead; my back is burning from the hot metal cover on the radiator. I try to stop the throbbing in my temples and realize no one else is in the house. The phone's stopped going now, and so I swing my legs around the side of the radiator and walk towards the stove. Silence. I move to turn it off, and a small wave of concentrated heat blasts me in the face. I can smell the unmistakable scent of gasoline, and stumble awkwardly backwards. The odor takes my hand and leads me back eight years to a moment when my cat burned her tail on this same stove. My mother was making stew for a dinner party. What a shame, we all had said once the vet bills had to be paid. I am blinking hard, and reach out for my cat, Daphne, but a bubble of dizziness pops over my head and I can't extend my arm more than a couple of inches. Still groggy, I stumble toward the back door. The January night's utter and undisturbed absence of light sucks me further in and now I am standing flush against the cold windowpanes in the door, my sweaty hand fumbling at the knob. The door squeaks as it opens and now I am in the yard, digging, digging, clawing at the frozen ground for my dead cat. I awake again, this time on a hospital bed. No one's by my side...if something bad had happened, surely they would have called my parents by now. My jaw hangs dumbly open and I wait for the burner to act broken again, but I hear only soft beeps. I can feel my heartbeat steady in my forehead. It thumps dully, as if wrapped in a dishtowel. The dirt stuck under my fingernails reminds me... where's Daphne? Suddenly, I feel a light

pressure around my mouth. I reach for my lips but instead my fingers are met with plastic. I grope around a little and realize I'm wearing a mask of some kind. There's a small crack in the divider between my bed and what appears to be a hallway and through this crack I observe a steady stream of nurses and doctors. I imagine them coming and going and bringing people food and saving people's lives. I rip the mask off my face, skeptical about what it's pumping into my body. I slip into sleep as I diligently scan the ground for muddy pawprints. When I awake, my headache has returned. My head is a bass drum, and I croak weakly in pain. Suddenly, two familiar figures rush to my bedside and it takes me a blink or two to realize I'm looking at my parents. They dote and stroke my hair, Thank god you're okay. We were so worried—when we got home, you were passed out in the backyard! Their brows are deeply furrowed, and my mom takes my hand as she calls out into the hallway. A nurse shuffles toward the divider to see what the commotion is about and when we meet eyes, hers open wide. My throat feels like autumn leaves and I try to call out, fearing she might try to put the mask on me again. But leaves can't speak, only crack underfoot. The nurse throws open the cloth divider and

rushes to my bed. The steady stream of doctors becomes a pulsating, malignant sea, and I am filled to the brim with anxiety. Daphne is nowhere to be found, the nurse has called two others over, and one comes careening into the room with a metal cart of tools that jump up and down with every revolution its wheels make. The buzzing fluorescent lights overhead catch a gleam on the side of a blade on the nurse's cart, and I begin thrashing in the cot. Before long, IV fluid is pooling on the linoleum floor and my long legs are being tied to the sides of the bed. The nurses hold my forearms down, force them into the cool metal armrests of the cot, and I can already feel the bruises that will inevitably form in these newfound depressions. One of them lifts a gloved hand and forces another mouthpiece over my face. How long has she been without oxygen? One demands. My mom is now flustered beyond repair. She stammers. I, I don't know! She was sleeping without a mask for an hour? Two? We didn't know! Alarmed, I try to cry out for help but my lungs feel like empty toothpaste tubes. I don't understand... oxygen? I blink hard to try and keep from fading to black, but stop resisting once I see Daphne saunter up beside me, a back arched and a tufty, half-burnt tail raised indignantly in the air.

Why I Pray on My Knees

Amani Garvin
WEST ORANGE, NJ

*I'm sitting here laughing in the silent spaces
during conversations with some boy,
who texted me early this morning to call me beautiful.
It's winter in New Jersey and my tongue is between
first date Miyazaki-movie kisses and
the sour taste of lead-guilt.*

*Children are being beheaded and mutilated in the Central African Republic
because the people there can't decide whether to call
the man-in-the-sky God or Allah. They're missing the point
because either way they're dying in this world-
of deserted homes and half built fences around hospitals for refugees.*

*And yet; the world is already dead-
children are being beheaded,
I've been writing love poems.
The world is on its knees
begging for forgiveness,
"will we be saved?"*

Impossible to Forget

Mollie Walker

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

There's a sort of dry humor in the story my mother always tells people about 9/11. How I sat in my white plastic high chair just three days after it happened and calmly announced to my family that I "was tired of watching the plane show." Their drowned out faces with sullen smirks looked back at me. They all knew I could not possibly understand, and that was exactly how they wanted it to stay.

Every morning before school I'd sit at the head of the kitchen table eating my chocolate cocoa puffs out of my red bowl and watching the T.V. My grandmother would stand directly in front of it and yell at me every time I'd try to change the channel. She stood with her hands on her hips, fingernails matching her shirt, slowly shaking her head back and forth, not the head shake disapproval but the one of disbelief. Her feet were glued to the cream tiles below her feet and I thought her neck would get tired after a half hour or so. She wiped her eyes, grabbed my backpack and sent me to the car. She couldn't even turn the T.V off.

By kindergarten I didn't need my highchair anymore and I went to school for a full three hours. I'd sit on a foam mat with pop out letters and numbers that engulfed the entire room. I played with anyone who wanted to play and considered everyone in my class my best friend. Mrs. Eckert's voice crackled through the loud speaker beside the clock and greeted us with a smile that I could hear. Robotically, we all stood for the pledge of allegiance and directed ourselves towards the flag hanging above the coat rack at the corner of the room. I put my left hand on my heart and quickly switched to my right before anyone noticed. Slowly murmuring the pledge I scanned the room and quickly noticed that the blonde girl who sat across from me wasn't here. Mrs. Eckert went on to talk about how today was a different kind of day and how we should act and feel different than we usually do. She called for a moment of silence. It felt like the longest minute of my life. I knew today was important but a moment of silence was something that had never been asked of me before. Mrs. Eckert thanked us and told us to never forget. The blonde girl that sat across from me wasn't in school for

another week, and she never was present on that day for as long as I can remember.

I sat at my kitchen table a few months short of a year later, with the little blonde girl who sat across from me, coloring Ariel's hair a shade of blue. My mommy paced back and forth watching us color, smiling and giggling at our creative color choices.

"How's your mommy? Does your mommy work?" my mommy asked her.

"No."

"Oh, well, what does she do all day?"

"Stays home."

"That's nice, how about your daddy?"

The little blonde girl looked up at my mommy with her set of big blue eyes in curiosity. My mom let the question hang there for another moment or two, until the awkward silence needed to be broken.

"Does your daddy work?"

"I thought everybody knew about my daddy."

My mom glanced back at my grandmother and back at the little blonde girl. My grandmother puffed smoke out of her plum colored lips and coughed until the smoke evacuated from her lungs.

"No Sweetie, I'm sorry, I don't know about your daddy."

"I thought everybody knew."

"Is your daddy famous?"

"No."

My mommy chuckled and looked back at my grandmother again. The little blonde girl looked back down at her picture and grabbed a teal crayon from the box and made small strokes back and forth.

"Then what don't I know, Sweetie?"

The little blonde girl stopped stroking back and forth, slowly looked up at my mom and pursed her lips together.

"My daddy died in the building."

My mom's chest filled up with an obscene amount of air, and a look of distraught crept up onto her face as if someone was scratching at her rib cage. She started to breathe heavily as she turned back to my grandmother whose mouth was to the floor and whose cigarette was almost burned out. The little blonde girl looked back down at her book and resumed her small strokes back and forth, back and forth.

By freshman year I ate in front of my T.V and was at my school until at least eight o' clock every night. My backpack was bigger than me and every boy and girl that walked past me. I opened my creaky locker and shoved my books inside and threw the rest in my backpack, barely fit-

ting it all in. After a few minutes I slowed down and glanced at the time and looked around for the now not so little girl who'd sat across from me in kindergarten, and who now happens to have a locker right next to mine. She should be here right now, but isn't. Getting to homeroom on time was a struggle but that day I managed to be in the door and sitting in my desk at 7:39. Heavy sacs of black hung underneath everyone's eyes. A deep voice spoke through the loud speaker and told us to stand for the pledge of allegiance. Then to remain standing. He sounded rehearsed and rushed to get through this supposedly inspirational speech; concluding with of course, "never forget."

I haven't forgotten. Why do I always have to be reminded? I walked down what the upperclassmen call "Sunshine hallway," which left side was ceiling to floor tile narrow windows, side by side by side. But today I could not see the turf field or the track or the tie dyed forest across from the school that magnified vibrant reds and oranges in the fall. Instead it was patched up with slips of paper typed with two words in fine black ink. Names. From ceiling to tile, just names. My eyes moved up and my eyelashes tickled my eyelids, then I looked down. Up and down, up and down for the entire length of the hallway. I stopped next to a name that made my throat tense and my eyes blink repeatedly. I stood in front of it unable to move, just reading it from left right without hesitation. I looked back down the hallway and back at the one name, bit my bottom lip and walked to class.

I sat in front of my locker on the same day two years later waiting for the homeroom bell to ring. I pulled up my socks and put my books in my bag. The tile stung my knees and I quickly shoved my pencil into my front pocket. Abruptly, I felt a rattling of the locker next to me and I slowly looked up. The little blonde girl had a neutral expression woven onto her fair skinned face as she twisted her lock back and forth. I glared up and slowly hauled myself to my feet to match her face to face. I gently swung my backpack onto my shoulders being careful not to make too much movement, though I don't know why. She turned to me and caught my stare but returned it with an amiable smile. She looked down at her lock and quickly back up at me. I managed to pull up a smile. I watched her walk away, and I turned the other way; with a smile that made my cheeks hurt, but in a good way.

Happiness Is

Chasity Hale
MIAMI BEACH, FL

I learned how to fly once in this excerpt from a book called *The Encyclopedia of Immaturity*.

- It went something like:
- 1 Hold knees tightly together.
 - 2 Stick hands between them.
 - 3 Strain and strain. Try to separate your knees, but keep them locked for 60 seconds.
 - 4 After 60 seconds release. Close eyes, smile, and float away.

Flying this way is a nice alternative to growing wings or jumping off rooftops. It's probably much safer too. Flying cannot be measured making it so that the lengths of joy it brings are seemingly infinite. It makes me wonder how many different ways there are to fly . . . and how I'll only ever know a few flights in my lifetime.

Happiness is the same way. It's brief. There are millions of roads to it, yet in 2010, 33,687 people died from motor vehicle crashes.

In the same year 38,364 died from suicide. There are fourteen dead people for every one person. Happiness is brief.

I had it once. The fireworks at the coach's party lit up the sky and turned the winds red.

Another time, I was walking on a hill across a plain of evergreen grass. The river stretched out across the land like a thread unraveling from a sweater.

Water lilies settled on the surface and mimicked the best kinds of sunsets. The pink ones, fresh and puce, cold and jaded, ready to fade away.

The petals of the lily shot up skyward as if reaching toward the heavens. Each of the mantis green lily pads floated in place. The lilies are unaware that a part of them was and will be forever submerged in water. They're better off this way.

As a small child I had dreamt of a beautiful life in which I was something undeniably pretty as a flower. I am not a water lily. I am not the best kind of sunset, and I know that a part of me is

missing.

Sadness is the feeling after happiness. It is being able to compare the rest of your life to one moment and still never having anything be good enough.

I watched my reflection drown in the change in position of the light that day.

Then I realized I could skip across the lily pads, dance in the shadows, imagine every kind word ever borrowed brought back to me on the same winds from the coach's party yet still I'd be sad. They'd never feel the same. They'd never evoke the same emotions.

I am not a lily, but I wish I was. I'm just a girl with coffee-colored skin who observes sunsets rather than being them.

I had stood, stupidly triumphant, atop the hill over looking the river. The sun finished rising like life does. Instinctively breathing the second it exits the womb. Gasping for breath the moment it emerges from water. Struggling to inhale when it's crying, and it's quiet and late and it no longer wishes to go on.

Time Signatures

Amelia Carter
ROCHESTER, NY

*She was spun from a sonata,
born tap dancing across ledger lines
and spitting key signatures like
cherry pits. Treble and bass;
one hand spidering up, up, up,
along the ivory of the hospital crib,
the other only a pitter patter
along her mother's palm.*

*Her father pays for lessons
in brush strokes, coating
the teacher's house with red.
His brush moves in time
with his daughter's Breval—
dripping half notes down the siding,
splashing angry eighths
along each window sill.*

*The pigment, red like the poppies
growing outside her window,
stains his calluses for weeks,
matching the dress she wears on Sundays.
He picks her up, swings her like a rag doll,
singing and proclaiming
her to be better than Mozart,
finer than Shirley Temple.*

Dactylonomy

Marissa Elias
TRAFFORD, PA

*One, the number of years
I watched you from across
the coffee shop, your smile
cracked and slowly healing.*

*Two, the number of months
we trudged through the park
together, fingers tangled,
basking in the summer sun.*

*Three, the number of people
at our wedding. The minister,
the jogger that passed us every day
in the park, the barista that made
us our coffee on all those wordless
mornings.*

*Four, the number of days
we stayed curled in bed
learning the geography of our bodies
together.*

*Five, the number of times
you said I love you during
the sixty second descent
in the elevator punctuating
every word with a kiss
because we were young
and breathless and hopelessly
falling for each other.*

*Six, the number of times
I traced the outline of your
lips today, trying to remember
the first time you kissed me,
trying to remember where we stole
our magic from.*

*Seven, the number of times
I caught you on the phone
at three am, huddled in the corner,
wrapped up in the same blanket
I was cocooned in on our first
morning after.*

*Eight, the number of years
it took to finally admit that
love cannot be forged
on secrets and a foamy latte.
I hope the next girl that wants
to fix the cracks in your smile
knows how to keep her heart
from breaking in your palms.*

The Pang

Alisha Cheung

MINEOLA, NY

Emma was an average girl. Everybody said it, so it must have been true. Never mind the scars on her wrists or the redness in her eyes—a shade that only comes from crying.

“The scars are from my pet gerbil,” she smiled with first-lady grace. The delicate pearl beads of her bracelets contrasted sharply with the darkened redness of her skin and the pinkness surrounding her eyes, but she looked like an angel otherwise.

The angelic beauty, perhaps, was the one thing that made her more than average. The paleness of her beige skin—there was something underneath her that glowed. She was not a beauty queen, but something small and fragile and sparkling that you wanted to protect.

Something that was, indeed, quite easy to break apart.

“Where is Gene, Mr. Pates?”

“Gene?” He peered down through his glasses at Emma.

“Yes, Mr. Pates.”

“Gene Marino has been absent for quite some time, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, Mr. Pates,” she repeated.

“I don’t know, Emma. They don’t tell the teachers why students are absent.” He cleared his throat, and said in a louder voice, “Does anyone keep touch with Gene?”

The reply was pure silence, erupted by a slight cough and shuffle of papers.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon, Emma. Now, focus on your work. The midterms are coming up!”

She closed her notebook and stared at the pearls furiously, but nobody noticed.

It was a dreary day. Emma liked dreary days the most. She absorbed the grayness of the sky like a napkin; it flowed through her veins and fell like snow all over her heart. The nasty puddles in the ground soaked her beat-up shoes, and her feet ached.

It was the good kind of ache. Not the bad kind.

Emma hated the bad kind. When they told her, she felt it—the pang. The pang like no other. She once tried to ask a doctor about it. He replied with a long name. A disease.

She didn’t bother to remember the name. She didn’t want to.

Emma was walking alone, but

she was not alone. Other kids, who were also alone in their own way, trudged in front of her, chimneys of puffing steamy breaths.

It happened.

One boy’s boot hit the ice. The rest of his body followed suit in a horrible mechanism. Less than a breath, he fell and a thump vibrated straight into Emma’s insides.

Stop. Please, no.

The pang.

The pearls helped. They helped somewhat. Okay, they did not really help at all. But they rounded out the sharpness. They rounded out the pang.

Emma grabbed for them with animalistic need. They slipped under the pressure, and one by one they fell out of the string—bouncing off the ice, white against gray. “The pearls,” she breathed.

“Do you need help?” A voice came up from behind her. A male voice.

“No. No, no, no. I’m fine.” Her voice cracked at ‘fine’ and she doubled over. The pang. The pang.

The boy’s forehead on ice. Cold. Cold, cold, cold. No, no, no. She felt it; the bruising was beginning, just on her knee.

A warm hand. Warmth? Where?

Where could there possibly be warmth in such a cold, cold place?

Her hand was enveloped with another’s. Through the fabric of the mitten, her thirsty blood drank up the heat.

“You’re not fine. Not at all,” the boy said—but wait, this was a different boy. His eyes were a dark brown. For a second, she thought that he could be Gene—but then it stopped.

The world stopped turning.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Simon.”

She stared at him in one delirious instant. The sky was gray. His eyes were brown. But she looked down—her wrists were no longer red.

Emma heard beeping. Cold beeping. The memory of the boy falling surfaced like a glacier on water. Her knee throbbed as if the pang was still there.

But the pang was not there. In its place was a strange sensation. How to describe it? Spacious. Comfortable, even.

Her eyes opened. The shock of white jolted her heartbeat. White. Like the pearls that she lost.

“I need to get the pearls,” she said.

“Interesting thing to say when you’ve just woken up from fainting, Ms. Angara.”

This unfamiliar voice was not comfortable. It was spacious, though, and Emma sat up.

A doctor in white. So much

white. The pearls. The pearls! What if she forgot about them? The doctor’s hair was tied back harshly; her eyes watched Emma with mild interest.

Then a figure behind the doctor, a motion catching her eye. Dressed in blue. Emma breathed out a sigh of relief. “Simon.”

He nodded. “You passed out. I brought you here.”

“He carried you, so I heard,” the doctor said with an eyebrow raised. “Carried you the entire mile from the school to the hospital.”

Emma nearly choked. The pang was here again. But it felt... inside out. Like a shirt inside out. The sleeves were wrong, the stitching was shown. It felt new and... and spacious. And comfortable again.

She expected her arms to feel heavy. But she felt nothing but the inside-out pang. The good pang.

“Thank you,” she managed. Her voice was weak, but her heart felt strong.

“I don’t know why I didn’t just call a cab or something,” Simon shrugged. “But I felt... I felt like you wouldn’t be safe unless...”

“Unless?” The doctor asked after a pause. Emma felt like she had stolen a word that Emma was supposed to say.

“Never mind. It’s not important. Just a weird feeling. But back to Emma. She’s okay, now right?”

More words that Emma was supposed to say. Simon wasn’t supposed to be asking; he wasn’t supposed to care. Strangers do not care for each other in this way. Emma knew that.

“Your record says you have a disease,” the doctor looked at Emma inquiringly. “But I’ve never heard of a disease by that name.”

“There’s Google,” Simon said.

She turned to him. Emma guessed that the doctor had glared. “Yes, I know that. But neither Google, the hospital database, nor several books of diseases include it.”

“I know.” Emma grabbed the blankets surrounding her nervously. “I know. They say it’s rare. They say that I am one of the few.”

“Who are ‘they’?” the doctor asked.

Emma couldn’t speak. Her voice failed her. All she could do was stare at the doctor, who wasn’t exactly pleased with her lack of answer.

“Dr. Marcello,” Simon interrupted the silence. “Will there be a fee for this visit?”

“The insurance should have it covered,” she said quietly. “Ms. Angara. Which doctor here wrote this on your record? Who was the last doctor that you saw?”

“He—he didn’t tell me his

name.”

“What did he look like, at least? It was this hospital, wasn’t it?”

“He was...” Her mind emptied. Where she thought were shelves of books ended up being glass display cases. Was it even a male? She couldn’t remember. “I don’t—I don’t...”

“Dr. Marcello, I don’t think it’s a good idea to interrogate someone who has just fainted. Plus, I don’t think doctors are allowed to pressure their patients like that.”

The doctor’s mouth opened, then closed. It opened again—“I see.”—then, magically, the door opened, then closed and the doctor was out of the room.

Simon neared the edge of the bed. “You don’t have to tell me what disease you have if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Okay.”

Emma sighed. “I feel fine. Go back to your life. I don’t know why you are treating me so nicely. I don’t fully trust your intentions.” The words came out easily, but landed like sharp points into the ground.

Simon’s eyes were full of something. Full of contemplating. Emma expected him to be hurt, but instead he laughed.

Laughed like a child.

Laughed like a prisoner broken free.

“I guess that I must have come on a bit too strong,” he smiled. “Carrying you and all. But it really was a feeling. A feeling that you, well, that you would get hurt somehow in the cab.”

She stared at him. Then she laughed too. The feeling spread, from her heart to the space behind her ears and her fingertips. She felt warm. Warm and alive.

Gene came back on Tuesday. The last five days had been the best days of Emma’s life.

Once, Simon had knocked on her door. She’d thought it strange and even alarming. Her mother was out on a business trip; just another of many expeditions to the third-world. Every string of logic told her to not open the door. But every nerve in her body told her otherwise, and she found her hand turning the knob.

“Simon.”

“Emma.”

“You better go before my father comes to beat you up,” she lied. As if her father was home.

“I’d like to meet the man, actually. Or at least ask him if he’d let me take you to a soup kitchen.”

“A soup kitchen?” Emma had never been to one. She wondered of all the pangs she’d experience there; feelings

of hopelessness, maybe? Dead ends and dead possibilities. Death of dignity.

Then her own voice surprised her, “Okay.”

He smiled. “Really, though, I would like to meet your father. It’s the proper way of courting girls, isn’t it?”

Emma chuckled. “Courting? In your dreams. And what kind of date would going to a soup kitchen be?”

It ended up being much more—yet much less—than what Emma had expected. The faces, under fluorescence, that smiled at her so gratefully. The words exchanged and the hands shaken. The smell of beef cooking and the warmth of people.

The pang had not come—even when the people shared their stories.

“My father was in enormous debt when he had passed,” said one. Her wrinkles were premature, as were her hardships. She was not much older than Emma in reality; yet they were years and years of suffering apart. “I had to pay for it. I was helping my friend’s business for several years. It fell apart, and we were placed in even more debt. They took my apartment and everything in it; for several nights I was in the streets.”

Her language was pristine; she was a princess in her words. Emma closed her eyes. She saw darkness and trash piling in the streets. She counted. 1, 2 trash bags. Now 3, 4. A dog passing by, coating her with its urine. The dog owner laughing and giving her one measly penny. The penny landing in the pool of urine, and tears falling down her face as she thrust her hand in to pick it up.

Yet while she saw all this, her heart did not throb in agony. She handed the woman her bowl of soup and said somberly, “I am sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. I learned a lot. And the community center has helped me tremendously. It’s nice to know that this world has kind people. People who care for those in need, not just those who will benefit them.”

She paused, then looked at Emma in the eye. “People like you.”

Emma felt a feeling that she could not name. The comfortable, spacious, warm, tingly feeling that made her face break out in a smile. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

Emma turned to Simon with tears in her eyes. But they were not the same tears during the penny experience. They were tears of happiness. They made everything shine and swirl with color. Simon looked at her with concern.

“What’s wrong? I’m so sorry if this is too much for you, Emma. Do you want to go back home?”

“No,” she sobbed. “I’m just... I can’t believe that I had never done this before. I’ve always...”

“Always?”

She stepped closer until her head was on his shoulder. He held her awkwardly in an embrace. “I’ve always believed that because I felt the pain of others, that I was a good person. But no, I was... I was far from it. I’m just as cruel as those who inflict pain. I do nothing to end it.”

“Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself.” He paused. “Understanding others’ pain is admirable. I’ve never been one to. Maybe that’s why I go here so often. Because I want to understand their pain.”

“Did you ever?”

Silence. “No.”

She stopped crying, wiping her tears on her sleeve. The lack of pearls freed her hands, she thought to herself absentmindedly. “I don’t think you want to. It hurts.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Like... like...” She thought for a moment. “Sometimes it’s just a twinge of hurt, like you’ve been offended. Sometimes it’s heartbreak and it lasts forever. Sometimes it’s doom and fear and not knowing what comes after.”

“Do you ever feel the opposite of pain?”

“The opposite of pain?”

“Like happiness, but not just happiness.”

Emma found it. The answer. Why she had been feeling that deliciously warm feeling. The feeling that brought on slight guilt and the question--why no pang? “I have. I didn’t use to. It feels comfortable. It feels... spacious.”

She looked up at him and smiled.

Emma sat down at her desk. Something was different. Her senses tingled. Gene was back.

His hood was over his head; Emma would not have recognized him if it wasn’t for the fact that she had memorized where his seat was while he was absent.

The chair sunk under his weight like it hadn’t expected him to come. Emma hadn’t expected him to come, either.

“How have you been, buddy?” Mr. Pates patted him on the back, obviously not expecting an answer. Gene grunted in response.

It was a crucial question and Emma wasn’t sure if she wanted to hear the answer. But her recent experiences had showed her that the pang was gone for the most part; since she had met Simon, it had been replaced with that happiness. The happiness that was not solely happiness.

I will ask him, Emma told herself. I will, and he’ll tell me why, and I won’t feel the pang. Maybe I’ll even feel that warmth. And maybe he didn’t go

through pain after all. Maybe he was on a long vacation.

It was all lies, she knew. Lies to ease her emotions, just in case the pang really did come.

He sat alone in the library, a huddled mass of gray. Emma approached him, her footsteps as quiet as pages turning. “Gene.”

“Who is it?” Gene looked at her. “Emma? You look... different.”

“Do I?” She hadn’t noticed after everything that had been going on.

“Your eyes are no longer red... and her wrists aren’t covered in scars.”

It was ironic. A sad irony, because Gene and Emma had switched places. Gene’s own eyes were sunken and red. Emma couldn’t see his arms under the sweatshirt, but if she could guess... “You look different too.”

“Yeah.”

“Why were you gone this past month?”

“No reason. How much did I miss in Chemistry?”

Emma asked in a louder voice, “Why were you gone?”

Gene shrugged. “It was nothing. I had to visit my grandmother.”

“Is she sick?”

“No.”

“Dying?”

“No!” Gene glared. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Because I want to know! I want to know why you look like you’ve been crying! I want to know why you’re avoiding my question, and I want to know if you felt the pain that I thought you did! I want to know, so I can understand!”

Her voice had risen without her noticing; it was only the stare of everyone else in the library that made her say in a lower volume, “What happened?”

“It’s none of your business.

I barely know you, Emma. We were friends for a while last year, but you stopped talking to me. I don’t even tell my friends. Why would I tell you?” He said it all quietly. As quietly and as sharply as a needle while sewing.

Emma stared at him furiously. He turned away, and Emma noticed that he was wiping his head on his sleeve.

Emma had made him cry.

She turned on her heel like a wounded soldier. She wasn’t surprised to find that her own tears were falling down her cheeks.

Where was Simon? Who was Simon, anyway? If he didn’t go to this school, how old was he? Emma had assumed him to be Emma’s age, but that

would mean that he was home-schooled. Only troubled people were home-schooled, weren’t they?

She only saw Simon after school and on the weekend, after she had endured eight hours without him. Endured. She sounded desperate and dependent; she hated it, yet she knew it was true.

Emma walked home. She didn’t care that it was the middle of the school day. She wanted to go home and forget about Gene. She wanted to forget about the absence of the pang.

The pang had to be good, because she had felt it all her life. Simon was the one who got rid of it. And she didn’t want to need Simon.

Simon, who had said that her feeling of others’ pain was admirable. Simon, who made her care for others. Simon, who revealed her true character. And her true role in life.

But did she want this role? Did she want the change? Did she want to be free of the pang?

Her heart and her mind fought. She had never felt so broken before.

Snow started to fall. It fell like chunks, landing like powdered sugar over her world. Naked trees stood starkly and cars were soon enveloped in white. Emma should have gone inside, but at the sight of her house, she turned and went west, towards the park.

The cold numbed her frustration. She sat down in the middle of the tennis court, where snow collected on her hair, clothes, and eyelashes.

She wasn’t sure how long she was there. After a while, time felt like the snow around her. Immense, uncountable, useless to fight against.

“You want to freeze yourself to death out here?”

Who was that? Her conscience, maybe?

Emma’s eyes opened. She hadn’t realized that they were closed. She turned around and saw a startling black figure against white. Simon.

His dark coat neared closer. Emma supposed that she looked ridiculous at that moment, a real-life snowman.

“I talked to Gene.”

Emma could hardly believe it. “You did?”

Simon kicked some snow with his shoe. “Yeah. He told me why he was gone. I guess it was easy to tell the new kid, someone who didn’t know him before he left.”

A million questions swam in her

head. “He told—he told you? And you’re the, you’re going to my school now?”

“Yes and yes.”

“Why?” Anger surged in her.

“Why did he tell you and not me?”

“Why did you want to know so badly? I heard that you were shouting and stormed out of the library.”

“Because, because,” she struggled for words. “Because that’s what I do. That’s my... role. I sense when people have suffered. And I don’t know why—I probably sound crazy right now—I have this need. This need to feel their pain.”

“Empathy,” he said.

Emma stared at him in awe.

“You knew?”

“That’s the disease you have.”

She nodded. Em-pa-thy. She still couldn’t say it. Her mouth just wouldn’t reveal what caused her heart such ache.

“If you must know, Gene’s parents were undergoing divorce. Gene started cutting himself.”

“Oh.”

Simon knelt down next to her. He brushed snowflakes out of her hair with a gentle, gloved hand. “Do you feel the pain when they tell you themselves? When you see them in pain?”

“Both. Even when another person describes someone else’s pain. But,” she looked at him. “I haven’t felt any pain this past week. Besides today, but it wasn’t the pang. It was, it came from... It came from me.”

“It was your own pain.”

“Yes.”

He exhaled. “What do you believe in?”

“What do you mean, like God and religion?”

“Yes.”

She thought for a moment. “I believe in karma. I believe in spirits, and angels. I believe that we are put here for a reason.”

“What reason would that be?”

“I’m here to understand pain, and you... you’re here to relieve pain.”

Simon nodded. He stood up and offered her his hand. Emma let him pull her up.

Then Simon said, “I think I can finally understand now. Sympathy and empathy, together at last. Who would’ve imagined.”

Emma laughed. Then she reached her hand out to him. He took it with a smile and they walked home in the snow, two warm figures in a sea of cold.

Princesses and Singers: Not Basketball Players

Alyssa Matte
STRATFORD, CT

Blue team basketball players always have their shoes untied. At least that was the first thing I noticed when I watched one of their practices for the first time, because their coach kept yelling, “tie your shoes!” which rang out across the gym and echoed off the cold stone walls and shiny polished wood floor. The second thing I noticed was that they’re very short for basketball players. Well, three girls were sort of tall, (Kirwan, Bella, and Christina), but everyone else was very short. The girls also all had their hair up in the same way, in sloppy ponytails nearly slipping out of hair elastics, probably so it wouldn’t get in their face or distract them. The girls fiddled with their hair throughout practice none the less. The Blue team consists of eleven seventh graders and one eighth grader. All the other eighth graders dropped out after finding out that they were on the Blue team, the worst of the two middle school girls basketball teams.

One of the days I was at practice I was talking to Simmy, the eighth grader on the Blue team. Similarly to the other girls on the blue team, Simmy didn’t look like she played basketball. She always wore long baggy shorts and an oversized shirt to practice. Because she was Siek, an Indian religion where you do not cut your hair, she wore her hair in a long braid that went all the way down her back, not a ponytail like the other girls. I asked Simmy if she minded being the only eighth grader and she told me, “I knew I wasn’t going to be on the Red team, so I never even thought about it. I’d rather be decent on the Blue team then really bad on the red team.” Simmy shared the mentality of the other girls on the team. They don’t seem to care that they are on the Blue team. I thought that they would; that being on a better team would have some sort of social status to it in middle school, but that apparently not. When I was on a Blue team in middle school, you were seen as worse at all sports because you weren’t playing at the top level. I know people thought I wasn’t good at sports because I was on the Blue team for two different sports. Maybe their mentality was that if the sport was not their favor-

ite thing, they didn’t feel a need to be the best at it. I asked many of the girls what their favorite sport was, and none of them said basketball. Most of the girls said volleyball, soccer, or field hockey; sports you can’t play at school in the winter.

I asked Bryn, a seventh grader, how many wins she thought they’d get this season. Bryn was one of the girls on the team who looked like she actually wanted to get stuff out of practice. She was spunky and never got down on herself, or at least she didn’t show it. Her hair matched her personality perfectly; it bounced with every move she made. Bryn, unlike some of the other girls, would actually put effort into the drills and she would listen to what the coach said. I was told by a few people on the team that Bryn was one of the best players. When I asked Bryn how many games she thought they’d win, she told me, “hopefully four...but probably two.” Bryn was one of the few people who told me she wasn’t friends with everyone on the team. Most people told me that they were friends with everyone, but when I asked Bryn, she said, “I know everyone, but I’m definitely not friends with everyone.” I know it’s hard not having friends play the same sports that you play in middle school. When I was on the Blue team I had no friends with me either. The epitome of a middle school girl is to be well liked and popular, often causing those who aren’t to stand out in a team sport like basketball. Simply put, if you aren’t friends with the person who has the ball, then she might not pass it to you just because she doesn’t like you.

Besides the conversation I had with Bryn, I noticed a few times some of the stereotypical, “middle school drama.” I didn’t get to talk to all of the girls, and one of the girls I didn’t get to talk to but would have like to talk to, was Nicky. She dressed like she was modeling the latest sporting attire, not getting ready to play basketball. She was seventh grader and was noticeably popular, so I figured she was friends with everyone. Well, that wasn’t the case because during the second practice I watched, the girls were asked to pair off and she had to go with someone she didn’t like. She rolled her eyes, had so much attitude (to the point where I was waiting for her to put her hand up, a gesture almost like a high five, to the other girl, but instead meaning, “I don’t want to talk about it”) and nearly ignored the other girl she was paired with. Because

this is a team of middle school girls, I also figured they would have some opinion about their jerseys. I wasn’t there when the jerseys were handed out, but I was at the practice for their team picture, where they had to wear their jerseys. The jerseys didn’t fit anybody well. They were either too tight, too loose, or too long. I could imagine how self-conscious that made the girls feel. When I was on the Blue team, I was not a stick figure like half of these girls. My jersey was ordered two sizes too big so it would “fit me” and not be too tight, but, because I was short, the jersey nearly covered my shorts it was so long. One of the girls, Alex, didn’t have the right color shorts on, (bright pink to be exact) and was handed a blue pair by the photographer, who happened to be a male from the athletic staff, just to wear just for the picture. The entire three minutes she had them on, she was fiddling with them and trying to make them look somewhat flattering. I don’t know if she succeeded or not, but they took the picture anyway. If any of the girls thought about it, they would have realized how awful the lighting in the Coyle Gym makes people look. Fluorescent lighting does nobody justice, even super popular middle school girls.

Sometimes I could tell that the girls didn’t take practice seriously. They didn’t pay attention at all when the coach was explaining directions, and one time I noticed that the girls who weren’t part of the drill that they were doing, sat down and had their own conversations instead of paying attention to the directions when it came time for their turns. I know that when I was on the Blue team in middle school I wasn’t allowed to sit down when I wasn’t doing anything...but that probably has to do with the fact that I had an entirely different coach when I was on the blue team. If we sat down in practice, we had to run sprints later. Instead the girls told their coach that they “forgot” what she said, when they really weren’t paying attention. They laughed a lot when they messed up. They’re not allowed to sing in practice, and when they do, I was told they had to run the rest of practice. Some of them flinched when they catch the ball or in general, when it came within three feet of them.

Ok, so maybe they aren’t going to be the next Miami Heat, but they did have some of the most entertaining practices I’ve ever seen. Practices where the girls said, “For Narnia!” before doing

a bounce pass. Practices where the girls played dribble knockout, their favorite game as I now know. Practices where the girls, like Eva, a small blonde who I think might have actually tried to be oblivious to everything, took wild guesses about actual basketball stuff like saying, “zone defense is so you can get to the basket easier.” I don’t know that much about basketball, but I’m pretty sure defense involves guarding people, not scoring. According to the other girls, Eva was one of the worst on the team, but she provided comic relief.

I think part of the reason the girls seemed to enjoy practice was that they liked their coach. Jazzy graduated college not that long ago, so she’s a lot younger than the other coaches or teachers that the girls have had before. Her coaching style was unreal. The way she explained things to the girls was so different from the way I’ve seen other coaches explain the same things, because she really tried to make it so they understood what she’s trying to explain.

I think the best thing about having Jazzy as their coach was that despite the fact that she’s intimidating (their words, not mine), she’s somehow approachable. The intimidation factor probably came from the fact that she’s built from training to be a firefighter. She’s not tall in the basketball realm, just average there, but she was incredibly strong. She looked like she could use some of the smaller players as the basketball, and during demonstrations she had to be careful not to go too hard or she might knock someone over. I was at one practice where she was demonstrating how to do a lay-up and nearly flipped a girl over, entirely by accident. It was after that that I noticed how she took things down a level and go a little bit easier on her team...but not that much easier. Her years as a varsity athlete in high-school and college showed through when she demonstrated for her team. You could see her genuine passion for the sport.

At one of the practices I watched, Jazzy was explaining to the girls how to do chest passes, which according to her was, “like salsa dancing; you go forward and back.” I have never seen salsa dancing, aside from *Dancing with The Stars*, but I can imagine it would be like a bounce pass for basketball, at least how you move your body. Apparently you lead with your arms and then the rest of your body follows...or something like that. Jazzy liked to make the explanations fun,

something that the girls will remember later on, during a game. She actually demonstrated while she explained, as opposed to doing just one or the other, (which lead to some interesting replications of the team trying to mimic what she was demonstrating). She actually participated in some of the drills that she had the girls do, which I think showed the team that she was more than just their coach.

Jazzy could also get the same level as the girls if needed, which I think is something unique to her style of coaching. She would take the time to explain to the girls individually what they were doing wrong. Even if it’s in the middle of a drill, especially the lay-up drill that they did nearly every practice, she would pull girls aside and explain what they needed to do to improve. She could sense if one of her players was having a bad day or just needed somebody to talk to and she would tell everyone else to get water, and then pulled that person aside so she could talk to them. Her attention to each of her players, whether they like basketball or not, was unmatched.

I asked Kirwan, a seventh grader, if she liked Jazzy. She told me, “Yeah. Jazzy’s great!” That pretty much sums up what the rest of the team thought of Jazzy, too, because every person that I talked to on the team told me that they liked Jazzy. I have never heard of a team where everyone unanimously liked their coach so much.

Not to be pessimistic or anything, but I don’t think these girls have futures in basketball. By the age of fourteen girls drop out of sports twice as much as boys because of the social stigma that comes with being a female athlete. Thirty five percent of girls say that they plan to stop sports within the next year or plan to stop sometime soon. Most of these girls probably won’t even go on to play basketball in high school, given that none of them told me that basketball was their favorite sport.

I asked some of the girls if they could be any character or other person, who would they be? Most of them told me pop singers (like Taylor Swift), characters from teen fiction books (one girl said any girl from any Sara Dessen book), or Katniss from the *Hunger Games* (that was a pretty common one). I think the fact that none of them picked athletes as people who they would want to be fits with the fact that hardly any of them have futures in sports, and that they know that too.

But they did pick females that are super powerful, women or girls that could stand on their own. That is one of the things that I think being on a team with Jazzy as a coach does for you. It shows you that you can be yourself and still succeed. You don’t need to be good at everything, you just need to find something that you like, and do it regardless of what people think about you doing it.

The last day I was visiting their practice, Jazzy had to leave early. The girls looked at me and said, “You’re going to coach us, right?” I just looked at them and laughed. Like they will probably do, I stopped playing basketball after middle school. While the girls may never play basketball again, they can take some things from their practices, like being able to laugh at mistakes, learning that coaching styles like Jazzy’s are effective, or that being the best at something is not necessary to enjoy it. The girls might forget everything about basketball. But I hope they don’t forget what’s really important, and finally learn to keep their shoes tied.



Dear Lost Limb

Katherine Nichols
MIAMI SHORES, FL

*I crawled forward in bed,
bipolar twinges
up my arm, reaching*

*but grasping nothing,
a delicate hand
with painted fingers
no longer there.*

*I felt pains changing colors
like a chameleon’s skin,
and a calming night-blue*

*like a crooked crab,
strong aches a reminder
of your disappearance.
Your inability to grow back.*

*I say goodbye to you
but I am left
with your shadow.*

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