

Susquehanna
UNIVERSITY

THE APPRENTICE WRITER



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Introduction

Welcome. *The Apprentice Writer* annually features the best writing and photographs from 2,000 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 160 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 <http://www.apprenticewriter.com/submission-guidelines/>. Please be sure to include your name and address on each page. The deadline for submissions is March 10, 2017.

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Table of Contents

POETRY

- 3 SIXTEEN - Sydney Kim
- 3 GROUND ZERO - Abbey Zhu
- 3 ADULTERY - Sabah Iqbal
- 4 LOUISIANA SUMMERS - Elizabeth Dunn
- 4 YOU ASK ME IF I RECALL GREENNOBLE - Maitreyi Rajaram
- 6 A CIRCLE OF CIRCLES - Hunter DiCicco
- 6 OF THE SCENT OF HYACINTHS - Christopher Louzon
- 6 ACCIDENT - Jolinda Sciscione
- 10 EXIT SIGNS - Melody Xiao
- 11 ELYSIUM - Mairead Kilgallon
- 11 FEARS - Georgia Cyriax
- 11 MOON EYES - Leah Gaush
- 11 AFTER THE HANDSHAKE - Emma Weiss
- 12 IF I HAD NO MEMORY, I WOULD SAY THIS IS PERFECT - Dylan Winsick
- 14 PORCELAIN - Ellie Zupancic
- 15 DAISIES - Maitreyi Rajaram
- 15 KEEPSAKE - Isabelle Kulick
- 19 THE ORCHESTRA - Victoria Laboz
- 19 GRAVEYARD TONGUE - Victoria Laboz
- 21 LIKE JULY - Jessica Wang
- 22 ETERNAL RETURN - Maitreyi Rajaram
- 22 HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN SOMETHING THAT KILLS YOU? - Sarah Minchin
- 23 PICKLE - Melody Xiao
- 23 EARLY MORNINGS - Abigail Walker
- 24 CALIFORNIA DREAM - Katherine Brown
- 25 AUNT HELEN'S - Leandena Dankese
- 30 THE SUMMER WE WERE FREE - Emma Gallagher
- 30 HISTORY OF BATHING - Letitia Chan
- 31 NATURE - Jenna Lebovits
- 31 LITTLE THINGS - Katharine Boyajian
- 32 HOME - Jack Li
- 34 A WINTER NOTE FROM GREYLOCK - Pierce Gidez
- 39 OTHER - Catherine Wise
- 40 A STUDY IN SILENCE - Leandena Dankese
- 43 LA BANDA - Abigail Walker
- 45 MIXED KIDS THANKSGIVING - Youssef Ahmed Mezrioui

PROSE

- 5 IT'S NOT WORTH IT - Olivia Cardenas
- 7 BYSTANDER - Stephen Hunt
- 12 A GROWING CONCERN - Bethany Disanno
- 16 AMBIDEXTERITY - Alan Lin
- 17 THE NIGHT MY SISTER LEFT - Alexandra Paul
- 18 CONFESSIONS OF A SOCIAL PHOBIC - Alexandra Franchino
- 20 SEVENTEEN LAPS - Kristen Martucci
- 24 CHOPSTICKS - Evelyn Ho
- 26 ICE COLD REALITY - Caroline Benedetti
- 27 RIDE - Dongeun Kim
- 31 SKIN - Emily Kirshner
- 33 MOTHER KNOWS, FATHER TELLS - Leandena Dankese
- 35 ELEMENTAL - Joni Keaton
- 36 TRABAJADORES DEL TABACO: CUBANS ON THE CUSP - Warren Kennedy-Nolle
- 38 THE OTHER GIRL - Emma Bruder
- 40 THE SPUR - Tom Yuz
- 42 INDIGO - Alaina Johansson
- 44 VIOLET AND I - Madison Wade
- 46 HOW TO BE POPULAR - Allie Reed
- 47 THE COLUMBINERS - Lauren Toscano
- 49 TOIL AND TROUBLE - Julia Withers
- 50 A THING OF THE PAST - Katia Hardesty
- 52 BLACK SHEEP - Abigail Walker
- 53 HONEY - Liam Maguire
- 54 GOOD MORNING AND GOODBYE - Bobby Bruce

PHOTOGRAPHY

- 6 FOG OF ATHLETES - Rebecca Kanaskie
- 17 CUP OF TEA - Danielle DeVries
- 25 WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE - Vivian Holland
- 29 IF WINTER COMES CAN SPRING BE FAR BEHIND - Simran Malhotra
- 32 YOU KNIT ME TOGETHER - Kayley Goertzen
- 42 UNTITLED - Nolan Stern
- 46 TIME & SPACE - Jackie Young
- 51 FINGERPRINTS - Rebecca Kanaskie
- 54 BRIGHT EYES - Hannah Robertson

COVER PHOTO: Ariel Sabo, Allendale, NJ



Advanced Writers Workshops

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

The 2017 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 \$810 (early application by April 15th) covers all costs, including room and board.

Go to susqu.edu/writers and click on "Writers Workshop for H.S. Students" for more information and an electronic application.



sixteen

Sydney Kim
WESTON, MA

i swallow growing pains
like cough syrup
in that hospital of proficiency
i am incurable
un-diagnosable
one by one the doctors shake their heads.
their x-rays are grinning
singing of a fool's disease
with make-believe symptoms
springing from the brain.

today is yesterday's impersonator;
i move dimly through flat mornings,
unsettled by the artificial
lack of shadows in the hallways
mute when the slew of voices
splash the walls in loud colors
overrun by the clicking of keys
while my own fingernails frost over.
i am the carbon copy of nobody in particular;
there are fistfuls of sugary smoke
in my lungs.

and i suppose i have lived a chlorine pipe dream
where the panacea must exist—
perhaps i have lived the greatest deceit.
i say, the world's on sale but no one's buying
another capsule couldn't hurt
they form the column of my spine
the brittle sinew of my bones.
the doctors say, there's nothing there.
i am ready for the operation—
i am as healthy as can be.

Ground Zero

Abbey Zhu
MONTVILLE, NJ

After "Departure" by Carolyn Forché

I leave it behind, the roar
of an airplane piercing the sky
echoing into nothingness, a cold
alienation as when land disappears
beneath me and the windows
brush the clouds, where the ghosts
of my past lurk and drift for
a visit. The person sitting
next to me has ear buds
in, and I want to ask
if ghosts listen to music
to hide from their realities
as much as I do mine.
Row after row of straight-
backed seats, luggage stowed
in the overhead, faces that
fade in and out of existence—
I will be a different person
when I land. Here is the soil
of your homeland part n,
the scent of your best friend's detergent,
the last breath of goodbye
the only thing you'll have left.
I am the one you will all
forget, shrinking and shriveling
into a wilted flower, the death
of something already gone.

Adultery

Sabah Iqbal
ALBERTSON, NY

I was a woman
who was so much
Stronger
than they deemed me.

I was a woman
who would always
Fight
against what they said.

I was a woman
who stood
Tall
in front of the crowd.

I was the woman
who people
Gawked at.

But now
I am the woman
Banished from society,
A Pariah
is all that they call me.

For falling in love
with a man who
never loved me.
But was instead
Obsessed
with what he
had done with me.

Louisiana Summers

Elizabeth Dunn
GREENWICH, CT

Growing up, Louisiana summers meant Minnie guarding the door, the buttery smell of Coppertone permeating from her flour speckled apron as she dabbed the tips of our noses and ears with the thick, sticky whiteness.

We scampered past her protesting
“Aw, come on Minnie! Do you want us to be pale as ghosts forever?”
“Yes, ma’am,” Minnie would retort with a soft laugh,
“That’s exactly what I want.”

The day I packed up our silver car to begin the long trek towards a place of higher education, Minnie had been bustling all day long in the kitchen, baking my favorites: peach crumble, two dozen pralines and a whole caramel cake. She walked out of the kitchen at half past four and wiped her hair from her face, leaving a streak of flour and butter across her forehead.

I wrapped my long arms around her middle, clenching my fingers tightly together at her back and burying my head into the soft folds of her apron. She rested her chin on my hair as I listened to her breathe in and out, in and out, real slow.

“Minnie,” I whispered, keeping my cheek pressed firmly against her.
“Yeah, honey?” she cooed. I swallowed my breath, as I gazed at the front door and remembered the sun beating down on its white wood all those summers ago.
“Minnie,” I said again, my voice rocking back and forth between childhood and adolescence

as I pictured an empty room with four white-washed walls and a springy mattress one thousand and three hundred miles away.
“Minnie,” I croaked, but she hushed me with her soft, vanilla voice and stroked my hair
“Don’t worry, honey,” she said, “I know, I already know.”

You ask me if I recall Greenoble.

Maitreyi Rajaram
DAYTON, NJ

I’d like to tell you that I imagine the sloping roofs of Spanish-styled villas whenever I hear those lush syllables, the pine trees tugging at that eclectic space in my memory, bundles of fir spread against each lobe like mistletoe.

I’d rather inform you that my mind often trails along the wooded path from the back porch of your cousin’s brick house with the crumbling Greek stone pillars to the underpass where our grandfathers used to smoke amongst lime green moss, and our great grandfathers etched the names of their lovers in the mildew.

I’d recount with your mother’s alacrity that time when your uncle’s van got stuck in the mountains for weeks, some say it was a flat tire, your aunt says it was a pretty Ukrainian tourist. And maybe I could also narrate my daunting adventures up those peaks, in the midst of winter, your grandparents in tow. You never knew that I could drive clutch stick, I didn’t either, my urban feet shakily pumping on the gas pedal.

I wish I could tell you that it’s just like what we’ve all heard; it never snows in Greenoble, though it should according to David from three doors down who is a practiced meteorologist in theory, so long as he can finish his broadcasts at five to come home for Jeopardy and microwaved ravioli in the next hour. Shirley is still trying to write her lifetime romance novel—you know, the one she’s been at for years—in her aunt’s wine cellar. Carter insists that it’ll never make it out of the spaces between the corked glass bottles, he’s still going to night school every week though. Just as they say, every winter is warmer than the last.

I’d like to tell you this and more but the only memory I have of that place, a faint Polaroid of technicolor yellows and tainted browns under my eyelids, is my cousin lifting me on his shoulders so I could see the ice cream flavors on the vendor’s board, I chose vanilla of course.



It’s Not Worth It

Olivia Cardenas
HOUSTON, TX



It all started with Hae sitting on the library steps in Jake Machala’s cat hair-covered fleece. (Jake Machala is an idiot; he once confused Alcatraz and Auschwitz.) Their knees are touching, and he pokes at her nose and tugs on it as if he’s holding a drawer handle. That’s when I honk. She looks startled, like she has been caught doing something wrong.

Hae has a way of shrugging her shoulders whenever she sees me, and I’m tired of feeling like the green dog shit reeking under her shoe, always feeling like she’s pissed that I exist. So I drive around the block to calm down and come back for her.

“You’re late.”

“And you were talking to Jake again.”

“You were late! So you have no right to tell me who I can and cannot talk to.”

“It’s not about being late. It’s about trust, and I don’t trust him.”

“Or me apparently. But whatever, *maybe you shouldn’t.*”

She went on forcing ideas into the nooks and crannies of my brain, explaining that the root of our relationship issues was my hatred for her. That makes so much sense! I’m dating her yet I strongly despise her and am jealous of her “prestige” and accomplishments? This is all classic Hae. She’s smart enough to get a 2370 on her SAT but not mature enough to let me speak or think for myself.

I reach towards the radio, and she swats my hand away, leaving the pink trace of her fingers among my arm hair. This fight is not over, and as my brain starts to transfer her complaints into incomprehensible nasally squeaks, I decide I don’t want to go to her stupid house with the stupid cactus sculpture garden. All of her bullshit nagging is making me hungry, and usually smiley face pancakes are all it takes to shut her up. Time for a detour to IHOP because eating is one of the only things we both enjoy.

I turn the car around in search of the nearest pancakes, and we are hauling through the desert, surrounded by sand, rocks, and a hairy neck on a billboard for laser hair removal.

Hae has to pee. She always has to pee, and I refuse to drive back in the opposite direction, so she can go use the restroom at the gas station with homeless people who eat French-fries from the trash while sitting on the toilet. She would rant about that, something pretentious like “How can those people still live like they do with all the resources in this country? They have NO excuse.” Blah blah, blah and she’d drone on about her immigrant family and how if they made it, anybody can. So we’re not turning around.

As she “uses the potty” on the side of the road, it occurs to me that Hae has a mustache and that her breath always smells like Funyuns. She can’t even pronounce a double S and always says “Bleshh you” instead of bless you. I’m tired of being called “ISHHac.” I’m tired of being her coat provider when she’s cold. Is it really so hard to bring your own damn jacket? I’m tired of her pale neck. No matter how lightly I kiss it, she always ends up with hickeys and yells at me. I’m tired of having to tell her she’s “stunning and unique” when she’s being an insecure little bitch.

I decide I’m done with her calling my ideas “underdeveloped and unoriginal.” I’m done being a powerless little puppet existing only for her kissing desires and prom picture purposes.

“Damn it, ISHHac! I have sand in my underwear now.”

So here we are, ladies and gentlemen, on the side of the road in Nevada. Hae yelling at me for accommodating her bladder as best as I can, and I decide none of it is worth it.

When I sit down beside her in the sand and offer her some Kleenex, she snaps about how I’m invading her privacy and that I haven’t even given her the time to zip up her pants. She snatches the tissues, blows her nose and shoves the yellow-snotty mess back into my hands.

“Hae, I think we need to talk.”

“Talk about what? How you’re a dick for making me pee on the side of the road? How you’re an IDIOT who doesn’t understand common courtesy?”

“Nah, I want to talk about us.”

Hae recognizes the infamous break up lines; she’s not an idiot. To tell you the truth, I always worried she’d do it first, that I’d be left sniffing bags of Funyuns and calling her over and over again until she answered. I’ve envisioned her loudly inviting Jake Machala over to her house the day after the break up in order to create a sick and twisted love triangle where she’s pregnant with a nonexistent baby that could be Jake’s or mine. But this is going to hit her by surprise. It even surprises me. Being dumped by me probably feels like being called annoying and ugly by your grandma. It’s unexpected and embarrassing.

“That’s funny because I need to talk to you, ISHHac, about how this won’t work, ya know?” (Trust me, I know.)

And as the conversation escalates, she’s screaming in my face with her onion breath telling me about how her friends were right; it was a bad idea to sneak around with the hairy weirdo who wasn’t allowed to attend co-ed parties or watch the videos in history class that reenacted war.

“I thought you were going to be something different, culturally exotic like me. But you’re boring. Thoughtless. You’ve become too much of a sidekick and not enough of a boyfriend.”

“I’m sure as hell not a sidekick or even a loyal boyfriend for that matter. And by the way, you’re not unique, you suck at debate, and you’re kinda bad at sex.” Not my finest moment. And not hers either because there she is, in her 95-pound glory, shoveling handfuls of sand in my direction as she screams that she hates me.

The sand is in my mouth, coating my tongue and choking me, and as my vision becomes a gritty blur, my palms reach out to knock her muscular arms away. In this pixelated search, I find my chapped palms wrapped around her neck. She calls me a crazy-ass psycho, and I decide maybe I am.

So instead of letting go and proving her wrong, I grab on tighter, feeling the oil of her skin collecting on my fingertips. This moisture mixes with her tears and saliva, and I tighten my grip. I can feel her pulse slowing, the panic setting in as she comes to the realization that I will kill her.

Her eyeballs are threatening to explode out of their sockets and my knuckles are tired. But letting go is not an option. Hae always complains I never finish anything. I hold my grip for minutes until she is a sack of organs and skin lying in my lap. I hold hands with her as my body heaves and chunks of my vomit end up in her hair.

Her body is now pretzeled in the back of my car and as it cools, her skin pales. I am on autopilot: wipe the tears off of your face, get in the car, and go give her back.

Now I’m in front of the stupid cactus sculpture garden. I heave her dead weight over my shoulder and put her on the front step. I wipe some of the vomit out of her hair and kiss her cheek one last time.

I ring the doorbell and don’t bother running.



Fog of Athletes

Rebecca Kanaskie
TAMAQUA, PA

a circle of circlets

Hunter DiCicco
CREAM RIDGE, NJ

i'm harboring a group of light beings
in my ears, eyes, nose and mouth.

they are four legged circlets of purple
and pink, who headbutt each other at
high speeds to gel and mingle.

don't be frightened - they're friendly -
until you force them together.
once that's done, a light problem
will turn heavy.

they eat like pigs, write penny poems,
and dream of steam and outer space.

Of the Scent of Hyacinths

Christopher Louzon
MARRIOTSVILLE, MD

Bells with
petals of blown
glass rustle.

A breeze laced with drops of
rose water wisps along the blue
surface, leaves
miniscule clear spheres behind.

The sweet pheromone
seduces the
botanist.

Accident

Jolinda Sciscione
DENVER, PA

Glass shards scattered the stage;
A porcelain doll draped over the wheel.

She reaches out to the audience--

Her eyes one way, her arms in others--

Sirens applaud as a distant spectator,

All while her makeup continues to run.

Bystander

Stephen Hunt
OAK PARK, IL

The rain fell softly, the wind blew gently on the quiet, lonely interstate connecting Illinois and Iowa. Robert Mitchell's 2005 Honda Accord lurched and creaked, going 55 on a road with a speed limit of 75. His car was too old and defeated to meet the freeway's required speed. He was in no danger to, or from anyone. The road was abandoned. The moon could barely be seen through the mask of clouds, and the hazy rain fell silently on the road ahead. The night was darkest at this hour—12:13 a.m. Robert's journey began at 6 o'clock that night. He was not a wealthy man, not in any sort of way. When he heard the news of his mother's passing, he was forced to get in his worn out car with 100,000 miles on it, and drive to the site of his mother's funeral: Perry, Iowa. Perry was Robert's childhood home, and coincidentally the site of his tragic childhood, the childhood he would like to forget.

His mother wasn't a young woman, dying at the age of 61; and was not a healthy one either, sporting a smoking habit, and limping around with a bum knee from a bad fall on ice on her 30th birthday. Eventually lung cancer took her life. Not a surprise to Robert, or his two older brothers, Patrick and Chris. His brothers also made the trip back to Perry, to pay their respects to their lost parent; however, these men were far better off than Robert, with six-figure incomes, enough to buy plane tickets to Des Moines International airport. His brothers had arrived in the afternoon; Robert was to meet them the next morning.

The air became mistier, and fog began to creep further onto the road ahead. Robert's view of the road had become obstructed, the moonlight barely showed through the clouds, making the only clear part of the road the ground dimly lit by the weak high beam headlights of his 10-year-old broken down station wagon. The wind began to pick up. Driving had now

become dangerous and difficult, prompting Robert to pull off onto the shoulder of the road, to wait for the weather conditions to become more favorable. He pulled out the novel he'd been reading for some time now: *The Tortured Soul*. Robert found this story to be quite relatable. The story follows a young man Gregory Getties, through his childhood of parental abuse and schoolyard bullying from boys much bigger and stronger than he was. Abuse that both Gregory and Robert had endured during their childhoods. Gregory persevered through all of the adversity he faced at such a young age, and worked his way up through various newspapers and magazines, finally becoming an author, fulfilling his childhood dream. Robert always believed he had a knack for writing. He was good with words; his father always told him that.

The rain began to subside, the fog began to clear just far enough to see the surrounding cornfields, and the moonlight shone dimly through the clouds. Robert restarted the engine and continued on through the interstate highways of western Illinois. As he drove along, Robert's thoughts drifted away from the road. He wasn't sure yet if he was sad about his mother's passing. She was never particularly kind to him; she viewed him as the "problem child," at least that's what she told him. She always cared for Chris the most; he was the three-sport athlete, he made honor roll, he had the beautiful children, and he made the most money of all her sons. Robert was the youngest brother, and was treated as such. His brothers didn't care for him much either. They excluded him from games when they played as children, and didn't share toys. When his brothers would eat out with his mother, Robert was left at home. He continued to think of his past mile after mile, with every passing farm and cornfield. Rural Illinois highways made it easy for one's mind to drift.

The ride grew longer. It was approaching 1 a.m. and the moon continued to hide behind the clouds. The rain fell harder, and the wind started alternating, first blowing east, then west, then east again. Robert's

stomach growled, and his car began to sway because of the harsh winds and the under-inflated tires on the left side of his old station wagon. A break seemed ideal to him. He scanned the highway ahead, looking for signs identifying rest stops, or exits leading to fast food restaurants. He was truly in the middle of nowhere. There were very few trees and he'd seen only about one farm every 10 miles. Finally, he spotted the first sign of civilization he'd seen all night. He got off at an exit with a sign for a rest stop just a half mile off the highway. As he neared the ramp he heard sporadic, muffled thunder claps.

He reached the rest stop town, which had only a few businesses—a convenience store, a hardware store, a gas station, and a garage—all separated from each other by abandoned lots. It was an ominous location, empty, unknown. Off in the distance, a car turned off a side street, onto the road Robert rolled through. The vehicles passed, each driver exchanging a look through each windshield. Robert pulled into the "Grab N' Go Mini Mart" and parked in the lot occupied only by a 2009 Ford Mustang, presumably belonging to the owner of the store. The interior of the store was like the interior of any convenience store; they all looked the same. Aisles that go only up to a grown man's chest, rows and rows of candy, chips, and store brand donuts and pastries on poorly made wire racks. White floor, white walls, white ceiling, and buzzing white fluorescent lights. The counter was in the center of the small store. A man of about 30, white, backwards red St. Louis Cardinals flat brim hat with a shaved head underneath, leaned against the case of rolling hot dogs, yawning.

"What's up, bro?" he said as Robert walked in.

Robert nodded to acknowledge him. He moved towards the back of the store where the drinks were in a transparent refrigerator. He grabbed a Pepsi—he preferred that over Coke, unlike most—then moved back to the front and scanned the rows of candy bars.

"Twix or Reese's..." Robert mumbled to himself. "Twix or Reese's ...?" He

shook his head back and forth, weighing his options.

“You gonna pick something homie or are you just gonna keep talking to yourself?” asked the cashier.

“Sorry...I’m sorry, I just can’t decide. Which one’s cheaper?” Robert asked.

“They’re both \$2.50 bro, just pick something... you’re freaking me out.”

“They’re both \$2.50? That’s so expensive, how can you price something like this so high?”

“Just the way it is bro. You wanna go buy candy somewhere else, be my guest, this is the only store for 21 miles. I price my shit accordingly.”

“That’s like stealing,” Robert said. “I only have \$4.00 to spend. How much is this Pepsi?”

“\$4.99. If you can’t afford it, I don’t care, that ain’t my problem. I make plenty of money, so I can’t say I know how you feel.”

“This isn’t fair.” Robert replied softly, but sternly.

“I ain’t in this business to bargain, bro. If you don’t got money to pay, then leave me in peace, and stop talking to yourself, too. That shit’s weird.”

“Can’t you make any exceptions?” Robert was feeling desperate, eyeing the candy. “I’ve been driving all night, I need to eat something.”

“Not my issue, man. Just leave the store if you can’t pay.”

Robert didn’t object any longer. He made his way back towards the refrigerator and put the drink back. He walked back towards the front approaching the door. As he walked, a car pulled up. It was a broken down Chevy Impala, very old, wheels deflated, paint scratched, and the left side headlight didn’t shine. A white man dressed in all black, black coat, black hat, black pants, black worn out boots, hopped out and darted towards the door. He crashed through the glass door and pulled out a small handgun. He looked straight at Robert who stopped dead in his tracks when the man burst in.

“Back up!” he yelled, shoving Robert back, and into the front counter. “You ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

Robert let out a whimper of pain as his back slammed against the wooden frame. The pain made him drop to his knees and grasp his lower back.

“We ain’t lookin’ for trouble, man” the clerk said, a tone of panic in his voice.

“Empty your pockets, both of you, right now,” the man in black said sharply, yet calmly, as he waved his gun around,

first pointing at Robert, then at the clerk.

“It’s all good man, just relax...we ain’t lookin’ for trouble...” the clerk replied.

“Hey, scrawny boy on the floor, empty your pockets now! I ain’t playin’” the man screamed at Robert, getting impatient.

“I...I... OK” Robert said, trying to sound calm. He slowly reached for his left side pocket, pulled out his wallet, grabbed the \$4.00 he had in the cash slot, and handed it towards the armed robber.

“What the hell! Is this all you got? This is nothing! Are you serious?”

“I don’t carry a lot of money around with me.” Robert replied meekly.

“Whatever, whatever. Credit cards, gift cards, pool pass, AARP card, everything you got.” He paused. Robert didn’t move.

“Now!” the robber fired back.

“They won’t do you much good, they’re all maxed out,” Robert explained.

“Give me your wallet, kid, you’re starting to piss me off. I don’t got time for this.”

Robert tossed the wallet to the man in all black and attempted to sit up. The pain in his back was tough to handle, so he eased back up and tried to stretch it out.

“Who said you could stand up?” the robber belted. “Sit down!” He darted towards Robert, and angrily shoved him back down. “Don’t you ever move again... you try anything I’ll pop your ass,” he barked at Robert.

“Now you.” he looked at the clerk. “Give me what you got, credit cards, debit cards, cash, anything else, give it up. Then I want the register, all of it. Every quarter, nickel, and dime you got.”

“I got you man, I got you,” the clerk said quietly, slowly. “Just put that gun down...we all good...I ain’t lookin’ for trouble...neither is the kid down there.

We cool.” The clerk handed over his wallet. The man in all black took everything out, driver’s license, credit cards, even his GameStop PowerUp Rewards card. Then he threw the wallet at Robert, hitting him in the cheek. The robber raised his Glock 9 in line with the clerk’s head.

“Register, now,” he said calmly.

“Whoa...whoa...Yo...” the clerk said, still talking softly, taking short breaths.

“Put that down, bro...we all good...I got you.” He moved his hands slowly to the cash register. “I’m opening it...see?... just calm down.” The clerk pressed some keys and the cash drawer popped open. The man in black took out an old yellow pillow case from his black bag, and held it open while the clerk scooped out all the cash and coins, and dropped it in the sack.

“Are we good now?” the clerk asked, catching his breath. “I gave all I have to give.”

“We’re good,” the man said, with his guard still up, eyeing the door. “You both made this harder than it had to be.”

“Hold on, man,” the clerk said, looking down. “I dropped some cash on the ground. Let me get it.” The clerk paused, reached under the counter for a few seconds, then completely dropped down behind the counter.

“Whoa! Get back up here now!” the armed robber shouted, as he peered over the edge of the counter.

Suddenly the clerk shot up from behind the counter and punched the robber square in the face, causing him to stumble back, disoriented. As a reflex, he blindly fired his gun in the clerk’s direction.

“Ah!” the clerk screamed. The bullet hit in his left shoulder, just under the collarbone.

“Oh shit...” the armed robber gasped. “Shit.”

“Ah! Ah!” The clerk was screaming and wailing in pain, gasping with every breath.

Stepping backwards, the burglar reached his hands to his head, momentarily thrown off by the gunshot, and still reeling from the punch. Then, gathering himself he quickly holstered the gun in his waistband. He looked around franti-

cally with panic on his face. His eyes met Robert’s, whose mouth was wide open in horror of what he’d just seen. The gunman rushed towards Robert, grabbed him, and stood him up.

“Listen to me, boy. You ain’t seen nothin’. This never happened,” the robber said as he pressed Robert up against the counter.

“What? You just shot someone!” Robert stuttered.

“Shut up!” the gunman smacked Robert across the face and pressed him even harder up against the counter, digging into his already bruised lower back. “You ain’t seen nothin’! This never happened! Say it with me, ‘I ain’t seen nothin.’”

“But...” Robert closed his eyes in fear.

“But nothing!” The robber smacked him harder and continued to press him up against the counter. “Say it! ‘I ain’t seen nothin.’”

“Alright, alright...I didn’t see anything!” Robert blurted out. “Just please, let me go...I didn’t do anything.”

The gunman grunted, dropped Robert, darted out the door, hopped in his car and sped away. Robert was so panicked by the crook’s assault on him, that he hadn’t noticed the clerk had stopped screaming. He was passed out with his head on the checkout counter. Robert, coming out of his shock, grabbed his phone and dialed 911.

When the ambulance arrived, with a cop car following, the clerk remained passed out, and Robert sat against the desk, with his hands covering his face, horrified at what he’d just seen. The paramedics rushed in and strapped the clerk to a gurney.

“We’ll take it from here sir,” the one in charge said to Robert.

The state trooper walked in a few minutes after the paramedics had left, with the clerk in the back of the ambulance. Robert told him how the incident went down.

“Are you gonna be OK, kid?” the trooper asked when Robert was finished.

“I don’t know...” he replied shakily.

“Go home and get some rest; it’s late

and you’ve been through quite the ordeal. I’ll call some units in and we’ll review the security tape. It’s going to be fine.”

Robert thanked him, then walked out the door, and back to his car. The rain fell harder than it had all night, and the wind continued to rock his Honda back and forth. As Robert drove away he reflected on what he’d just seen. The images were haunting him, and making him lose concentration on the road. He wondered about the clerk, and he wondered how he was ever going to get over watching a man be shot. He approached the exit ramp leading back onto the interstate, but when he got close he just couldn’t bring himself to get back on the road. He was too shaken up to drive right now, and he understood this. He drove past the exit and continued moving through the quiet rest stop town, with very few homes, very few businesses; pure emptiness. The wind blew the trees back and forth, side to side, east to west, never deciding on a true direction. Robert’s mind continued to drift, uncontrollably, the night’s events on his mind.

As Robert drove deeper and deeper into nowhere, the rain fell harder, thunder claps alternated with large flashes of lightning both up close and off in the distance. It seemed to get darker and darker the further he went.

“You ain’t seen nothin’! You ain’t seen nothin’!” the voice of the armed robber still rang in Robert’s ears.

Off in the distance, there was a red light, dim, barely visible. Robert increased his speed, curious to see the source of the mysterious light. As he got closer, it became clear that this red light was a brake light, on the rear of what appeared to be a white car, but the make and model were too tough to make out because of the heavy rain. Robert drove closer, and saw that this white vehicle was smashed dead center into a large tree, hood crumpled, car totaled. He slowed as he drove up alongside it and tried to look through the side window, but the weather was too bad and he was too far away to see through it. He was still shaken up, but felt obli-

gated to get out and see what happened. He grabbed a coat he’d kept in the back seat, pulled it over his head, and dashed out of his car door. The wind blew hard in his face, then hard on his back. The rain made it hard to see, and he struggled to walk through the uneven grass to get to the crash site.

When he finally reached the door, he knocked on the window. The door opened, and inside sat the armed robber, a look of pain on his face.

“Ah! Help,” he said. “Please...my gun went off when I hit this tree, I can’t reach my phone, I need help!”

There was an obvious bullet wound in his leg. He was grabbing it, putting pressure on it, but it continued to bleed. He looked pale, but seemed coherent as he begged Robert for help.

“Please...call an ambulance, I need one now! I’m bleeding out!”

Robert stood in the rain, with a dead stare fixed on the man’s bloodied leg. He didn’t know what to do, again. His arms holding the jacket above his head went limp, as his mind raced with flashbacks of his previous encounter with this man.

“Please...! Please call help...please!”

Suddenly, a rush of confidence fell over Robert. Now he was in control for the first time all night. He continued to stand, deep in thought, soaked by the buckets of rain being dumped on top of him. He broke the stare, and looked up at the man in all black.

“I don’t see nothin’,” Robert said.

“What? C’m on kid...Help me, please!”

“I don’t see nothin’.”

“Ple-” Robert shut the door before the man could speak what would most likely be his last words to another person.

“No more.” Robert said to himself, as he walked away from the broken down Chevy Impala, breathing its last breaths on the side of the road to nowhere.

Robert got back to his car, soaked, cold, but too confident to shiver. He opened the door, sat down, started the engine, and drove away.

“No more.”

Exit Signs

Melody Xiao
LIVINGSTON, NJ

1. There are peacock feathers in the kitchen
and the mirror's broken in the bathroom.

A cold hand brushes my shoulder
as I walk by the open door.

An open umbrella hangs
from a ladder in the garage.

One of the dining room chairs
pulls away from the table by itself.

I open the drapes to let the sunlight in
and everything is okay.

2. It may be three in the morning
but your earphones still thread their way
around your arm and throat,
blood vessels journeying towards
an iPod heart
playing something you never listen to.

A dog barks down the street,
a tolling bell in the London fog
that has moved out of London.

And softly,
ever so softly,
your heart taps
against the ironwork of your ribs.

It is quiet.

3. Inside your temple body,
a monk walks over dusty marble
and bows before the idol in the cage.

You don't know
if there's anybody left
besides him
and the dragon
curled up around the idol's neck,
roaring.

Perhaps they just don't have a way out.

4. A faucet is dripping
somewhere in the house,
a quivering *plink* on metal,
a violin string on a brightly lit stage
shivering and throwing rosin into the air,
a young girl standing in the snow
at a bus station,
waiting for the one twenty-six to New York.

5. A name.

A word
that holds a person in its swoops and dashes,
cradles a head on its knees,
and whispers instructions
sweet as honey
into the listening ear.

It dresses up as a gentleman
and gives you a matching mask;
it claims a romance,
an obsessive possession,
and it calls the noose it loops around your neck
jewelry.

And only in the dark of night,
when the name slumbers on the ceiling above you
can you see your own face.

6. I have ten pairs of shoes,
of which I wear four.

I have seventeen black pens,
of which I use three.

I have nine lives,
of which I have wasted all.

7. The plane is dropping from the sky.

Everything shakes,
rattling like frozen bones
that are about to hit the ground
and shatter.

The safety demonstration
never warned you about this.

In a moment of calm
you think that the lights on the floor
are redundant.

The walls tear outwards
like origami lotuses.

Maybe this is what the shooting stars
you once wished upon as a child
really were.

And as the wind howls in
to suck your screams
out of your mouth,
you fall into your bed.

Fears

Georgia Cyriax
ALLENDALE, NJ

after Dorianne Laux

I was afraid of everything: pretty
girls, mean boys, the daily dinner
table bout of shouting, tears from
the friend who's never sad, The
Wall in gym class, the mirror on
bad nights, and monstrous parasites
that probably only exist in click-
bait articles. I was terrified that my
mom could sense when I have done
things she won't like, that maybe
things were as bad as she thought,
or that maybe they were much
worse. I was afraid of becoming
lost and never found again, like a
lone green sock in a pile of whit-
ish socks, travelling the whole of
the universe without a pair. I was
afraid of my arms, of the school,
which seemed to be a powerful,
easily offended authority figure,
the bunnies living in my backyard,
their short lives made shorter by
the cat who fell asleep on top of my
feet each night. I was scared that
I could be a millimeter away from
death and not even realize it. I was
afraid of being too sad, too gay, too
straight, too whatever, so I only
ever pretended to be happy, my
smile stretching to the end of the
universe, past my lonely house, past
my school, past the moon and mars,
into another dimension completely,
a dimension where fear comes in
monster form, not in family or
scars or friends trying so desperately
to make up for the monsters that
they become them.

Moon Eyes

Leah Gaush
WOODBRIDGE, VA

She had two moon eyes
Delicate frames of black holes
Buried deep and wise

Rich craters untold
Penned upon dark honey crisp
Savored midnight coal

Orbit through the mist
Of ancient cereal bowls
Milking ideas

Cows jump overhead
Man in the moon, dyslexia,
Love's aura is dead

She pushes and pulls water
Tides of emotion taught her

After the Handshake

Emma Weiss
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

I have a dream about my
dead grandfather.
He takes out his disjointed fingers
and puts them in mine
and they form
two moist towelettes
dirtied from his frown.

Clouds too low,
air too slick,
grip too tight.
He watches our
hushed conversation
between two
naked,
shivering
ring fingers.
Bidding goodbye,
I head home and
sleep with dragons
and their smelly ashes
of forgotten lessons
and proper demonstrations.

All I do is think,
and
everyone else does it right.

Elysium

Mairead Kilgallon
BEDFORD HILLS, NY

Is there anything left to find?
I have been digging for seashells
for so long that I have forgotten
what flat, expansive sand
looks like. I found aches
in places that I never gave a
second thought, while those
same shells rest on my counter,
my bedside table, my windowsill,
my chandelier. I find beauty in
small things, the whistle of
a cold wind that seems less so
now. I have been traveling and
discovering and seeking and
questioning for so long that I
have forgotten what peace feels
like. But then I find hope in
the soft rustle of footsteps
on a snowy day, in the cathedrals
made purely out of vowels and consonants
adorning shelves, in the ecstatic beauty
splattered on canvas from the
splinters of fraying minds. This hopes leads
me to realize that I have not
forgotten peace. I have found it.

If I Had No Memory, I Would Say This Is Perfect

Dylan Winsick
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

I sit inside,
trying to swallow water,
looking for a reflection
of my face bouncing off my glass.
There's nothing there.
Memories cloud my vision,
I'm trapped.
"Clean up your trash,"
I tell myself,
"everything'll feel squeaky."
She doesn't believe it.
She's facing me,
raising her glass
to me and say
"Cheers!"
my mouth refuses to move,
but she doesn't care.
She's always believed in me,
always reminding me
I'm still tangible.
She makes me want
to stay strong
and be proud of who I am.
I don't want to forget.
I want to sit
right in this chair
to celebrate.
To smell New York's toxicity
To live with the trash
on the world's muddled surface.

A Growing Concern

Bethany Disanno
SADDLE BROOK, NJ

Train rides were long. I always forgot that, especially just before my little brother Teddy and I actually had to ride one for a while. Which was why I only brought the essentials during today's trip. If I had remembered how long the ride was going to be, I would've packed a little more. Like a book that I hadn't already finished, or a notebook that wasn't completely full or *something*. But, that nagging voice in my head had to point out, it's not like you'd be able to move with Teddy using you as a pillow leaving you with his goldfish on your lap. Sure, my arm was beginning to go numb, but hey, the kid was asleep at least. He needed some rest after getting up who knows how many hours ago to catch our stupid train anyway. Plus, he looked pretty happy. As happy as a comatose, drooling eight year old can look I guess. So really, it was just me who was suffering on the way.

Everything was pretty much normal then.

With nothing to do and no one to do it with, I was stuck watching every other poor soul that had ended up on our train car that day too. Even though only people on quests like us were allowed on, there sure were a lot of occupied seats. The section that we had settled into was fairly full. It wasn't packed exactly, otherwise Teddy and I wouldn't have been able to dump some books on the fold-out table without getting dirty looks. Still, it was full enough before to keep one of us from spreading out on the seats, which was partly the reason why my little brother was currently sinking into my arm the same way

someone sinks into a couch after a long day.

Since I was stuck in the same position that I had been sitting in for the past few hours, I decided that I should entertain myself. It was either that, or stare off into space, which was a thing I had discovered was way less fun than it looks like. If you were going to rate it from one to ten on the fun scale, I'd give it a -12. -12 because while it was mind-numbingly boring, there were things that were definitely worse out there.

Like being stuck in another world with only an eight year old and a goldfish to keep you company. That would rate a -20 on a good day and a -100 on a bad one. But it's not like I would know anything about that. Not at all.

Anyway.

The first unusual thing that I noticed in our train car was the quietness. I mean, I didn't expect it to be noisy or anything, but there was usually some sound in there. Like teams going over their quest requirements in thinly veiled excitement, or a couple playfully complaining about their last mission with the people in the seats next to them, or a group of friends cheering over their last adventure so loudly that the conductor could hear them way up in front. Teddy and I made noise on the train sometimes, since the kid could warm up to strangers like he'd known them for his entire life.

But today, I could barely hear a whisper coming from the rows around us, even from the regulars that we had become friendly with coming and going before. It was like all of the energy that was usually bursting out and about was sucked up. Which was weird, since it wasn't the early morning anymore. Not too many people would still be catching up on the sleep

they missed. It wasn't late enough that they would've been too tired from their last quest to stay awake either. Teddy would sleep wherever he could, whenever he could. But everyone else? They *could* like weird sleeping places like Teddy. Maybe.

Of course, if I was right, then the man staring at us from across the aisle and a little to my left would've looked completely tired too. Unfortunately he wasn't, since I could see his burning stare in the corner of my eye.

I remembered that he had been there since Teddy and I had shuffled onto the train earlier this morning. He was a regular. I could tell. You learn to pick out the regulars and the newbies once you go on these trains often enough. Regulars had a system. They knew which seats they sat at and they knew the ticket collectors well enough to chat with them as they went down each row. They knew that no one would care if you took up more than one seat, since none of them bothered to use the baggage compartments anymore. Those things always got stuck, so if you needed to rush off the train after it stopped, you'd be better off keeping everything next to you. Giggling and joking around with the people next to you was fine, so long as you didn't bother the ones who were napping between jobs. Being friendly and welcoming to the newbies was always encouraged, so they wouldn't be scared out of their pants. The regular riders always made the train fun. Seeing one of them as we plopped into our usual seat always made Teddy's face light up like Christmas had come early, and gave me a warm, familiar feeling in my chest. Like I was back home, even though we hadn't made any progress getting back to our own world yet.

I liked the regulars.

Just not that one. He gave me the

creeps. Especially with the way he kept glancing over at Teddy.

"Hey mister," I cleared my throat, "do you need something?" I turned my head to look him in the eye, since that was currently the only body part I *could* move.

He smiled. It wasn't a smile that I would call malicious or anything, but it wasn't genuine either. (Trust me, I've seen a lot of genuine smiles from babysitting Teddy all the time.) His eyes didn't crinkle all the way, and his lips didn't part into a grin. It was a smile that I usually saw on my aunts and uncles when Teddy started getting too energetic about something he liked. Like they were looking down on him for some reason.

Shoot, his mouth opened, didn't it?

Quickly, I snapped back from drifting off into wondering if this guy was like one of my boring old relatives and actually tried to catch the last few words of his sentence. "...just observing...little light..."

What did he say?

"Sorry, but I didn't catch that," I said.

Hearing this, he finally cracked a smile. If you looked carefully, you would've noticed that he was missing a few teeth. "It is fine. I was just observing your brother's progress, little light."

"Um..." I started to speak, but I paused to think, staring down at Teddy's goldfish instead. "That's not my name, mister."

His grin grew wider, if that was even possible. "Your name, Lucas, it means light. You are the little light." My gaze whipped up to meet his. How the heck did he- Wait? He was a regular on the train right? So he was bound to have heard my name sometime, right? It's not like I just went around shouting my name everywhere though. Teddy was the social one. Most people knew me

as "Teddy's big brother", or "Luc", since Teddy adored that nickname. He wasn't a stalker or a kidnapper or something, was he? *Was he?*

Maybe I was overreacting a *little*. I could protect myself. I did learn some self-defense and all, even if it was because Mom wanted me to be able to protect Teddy. I wasn't great at it, but I had reached blue belt at least.

"Oh, okay. Cool." I answered as I felt Teddy sink further into my arm.

"Are you not proud of him?" the man asked, glancing over at my brother, "he is doing very well so far. I have heard from the others."

I shrugged weakly. Teddy would fall face first into the goldfish bowl if I didn't. "They're just fetch quests. It's not a big deal. We're really just looking for a way home." A nauseous feeling began to pool in my stomach when he kept staring at Teddy, like he was some sort of deity. Everyone in this world did, when they thought we weren't looking. I guess this guy didn't think I would notice. Or maybe he didn't care. I wasn't sure which was worse, if I was being honest. My stomach hurt either way.

He frowned after hearing this. "He could be a proper hero for this world. Why must you leave so soon?" He sounded almost disappointed, like when an adult is about to go preaching about your "full potential" when you don't do as well as you should.

"I'm not." I deadpanned, "We have to go home."

"Why?" He reminded me of Teddy when he was learning something new.

I froze. Why wouldn't we want to go back? This was home he was talking about here. Home, with Mom and Dad and our house and everything. "Because," I huffed, "we have to."

“That is not a proper explanation.” He was just as stubborn as Teddy too.

“...It’s our home. We’ve gotta go back.” I knew that the second that we ended up here. So why didn’t I sound more sure of myself?

“Do you wish to take him away from us? From his calling?” I heard that stuff before. I never got the full story, but people in this world seemed to think Teddy was a hero or something. I still don’t know where they got that idea from. I didn’t want to know. Teddy was Teddy, and that’s all he needed to be.

I shifted in my seat, the weird feeling getting stronger and stronger. “I guess. I guess I do.”

“This world needs him, Lucas,” he explained, “Why are you being so selfish?”

Selfish?

“I am?”

“Of course. Do you think your brother wants to go back? When he can be a hero here?” By now, I had noticed that his grin had turned into a smirk. “Have you even asked him?”

“Well...I...” I couldn’t remember if I ever brought it up. Going home was what you’re supposed to do, right? When you leave home, you have to go back sometime, right? I was sure of that, but what about Teddy? What was his choice? “...I didn’t.”

Hearing this, the man leaned back into his seat. “I thought so. *You’re* the one that wants to leave. Is there something wrong with this world to you? Are things too different here for you? Do you dislike being only a hero’s brother?” His smirk grew wider, “Are you afraid that’s all you’ll ever be? Stuck in the shadows never noticed, never praised while you watch the one you’ve given up everything for prospers? Are you jealous?”

“Shut up!”

I must have shouted, since the lazy quiet of the train car suddenly snapped. Anyone who wasn’t absorbed in their own business was definitely alert then. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, burning into my skull. It was almost like they wished to say something, but they were shocked into silence. The stillness in the air was suffocating. Earlier, I might’ve been glad that the pain in my stomach stopped, but now I would’ve been happy feeling anything besides the trembling in my hands and the twisting knot in my stomach.

When I looked up, I saw that the man wasn’t fazed at all. Heck, he looked...pleased. Proud, even. “You’ve got more spunk than I heard.”

“Shut up.” I whispered, holding onto the goldfish bowl for dear life. Mom would’ve lectured me if she was around. We were never allowed to tell an adult to shut up once. Twice was enough to get me killed. But I don’t think I really cared then. “Teddy’s *eight*. He shouldn’t hafta be a hero or save the world. He should be a kid. It’s not *fair* he’s gotta grow up so fast.”

“You are speaking from experience.” He wasn’t asking, I noticed. It sounded more like he was saying a fact.

Before I could say anything, the train screeched to a stop, making our luggage look like jumping beans for a few seconds.

The man sighed, almost like he didn’t want to leave. “This is my stop.” He stretched before shuffling to get his bag next to him. “I apologize for upsetting you. I was curious about you two. Making you shed those tears was never my intention.”

Was that why my eyes felt wet?

He continued, “You care a lot about your brother. Good. You both

will be well prepared for the journey ahead.” He began to make his way down the aisle to the end of the train car, his voice getting further and further away with each step. “I’m sure we’ll meet again. Good luck, little light.”

“Hey wait a minute!”

That man, whoever he was, was gone before my question could even pop into my head. Stuck in the quiet again, I could clearly hear Teddy groan and move his head back into a comfy spot. The two of us probably had another hour or two until we finally could get off, I thought. More time sitting around doing nothing.

At least I had something to think about.

Porcelain

Ellie Zupancic

LE CLAIRE, IA

lace kissing skin
and lace in your hands,
i imagine your whirring breaths
are comets streaking the sky.
your chest rises and sets like
the sun, rises and sets like the
metronome
to which i inversely breathe.
you etch my skin into marble
like porcelain china,
streaks of blue
to match the timbre of your
voice.
vibrations of honeyed words
dancing across my surface. sun-
streaks smooth your spine;
winking and humming
and kissing you farewell,
just as i do.

Daisies

Maitreyi Rajaram

DAYTON, NJ

I wanted to call Tom before his recital, though I imagined he would probably be in church now, humming Jacob’s Ladder along with the other dreary-eyed, slouching men in tight pews, or maybe watching the quick curls of the small children’s dresses as they rotate with daisies around the gossiping women, yet regardless I know he is pressing her face indefinitely to his aging memory, fingers still laced in the yellow petals crinkling across pages of his Bible.

He’s never been particularly religious, but sometimes the stiff collar of his Sunday shirt dampens around the edge, near his silver hair, when he brings his mother along, knowing he must recite the prayers with a newfound fervor - usually concealed in the streaming digits of her health bills that rest in sags beneath his eyes.

From her bedroom, I can now make out the soft linens planted in patterns of rectangular suits and curves of long skirts. The fresh smelling lavender, cotton wisps from the old department store’s freshener, float amongst the tropical conditioner in her damp hair.

The room is her garden, and the ripened fruit that dangles from strands of her curls unfold their roots in the creases of stained business suits.

His boss was surprised in the confidence he proudly wore when he asked for the day off, though it is unmatched to the exuberance of the priest when the ripples of Tom’s bowstrings on his fourth grade violin had finally danced to “Amazing Grace”, echoing in the still chambers of her heavy bones, and through the roof of her lead lungs.

He likes to remember that his mother told him he was born as gold as the daisies that grew between the cracks of the sidewalks on their front lawn, though his aunts would call it jaundice.

The steam iron mimics the low hiss from the crowd on another Saturday Night Live, and her full lips form the crowns of petals as she watches tired bags fill the corners of her eyes - they all seem to match a sigh.

Lately, she’s been sinking in her bottle of daily pills, in medicine drawers lined up across the living room, and he can’t seem to find a way out of the plastic tubes stemming from her pale lips.

Keepsake

Isabelle Kulick

UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

The sky is prowling
underneath a cake of
pearly fog.

A pearl pierces flesh,
drooping a wrinkly ear.

The ear begins to bleed, heating the pruned skin.
The pearl becomes too heavy,
yanking against the old hole.

Numbness breaks the heat,
and she drops the earring to the ceramic floor.

Her heart falls into her stomach
as the earring glistens on the tiles
like a glass vase, shattered.

Her mother’s voice sounds
with the wind.

The fog shatters
her late mother’s earring.

She longs for Spring.

Ambidexterity

Alan Lin
WARREN, NJ

September

Reeds were wetted, ligatures were tightened, and doors were opened. I gingerly stepped past the moderator into the audition room, three judges' backs staring back at me. Poised behind the lone music stand in the repurposed classroom, my muscle memory kicked in. Flurries of semi-confident notes crept out of the horn of my alto sax: scales, jazz etudes, improvisation, and the like. A sigh escaped me as the mouthpiece dropped from my lips. Whispering a quick "thank you," to the moderator, I scurried out of the classroom, into the bathroom, and vomited into one of the open stalls. Well, not quite, but that was what my brain wanted to do after that blunder-ridden audition.

I had never intended to learn the alto sax. It had always appeared to be a heavy, unwieldy lump of instrument to me. I myself much preferred the intricate silver keys and subtle, African Blackwood curves of the clarinet. Unlike the alto sax's awkward plastic pads, my fingers molded over the clarinet's engraved holes with ease, like an NBA player swooshing in a foul shot. But, when you get accepted into a school with a jazz band as fantabulous as NA's, you got to do as the Romans do. The clarinet was an accessory instrument in the jazz band. I had to play some other instrument to be able to join. I was learning alto sax to play clarinet.

May

I forgot to bring my sax to my first sax lesson. In my defense, I didn't even know it was my first sax lesson. My previous lesson with jazz band director Mr. T had been exclusively on clarinet. But still, I felt pretty dopey as Mr. T fumbled through the back closet of the band room for a backup sax, backup mouthpiece, backup reed, and so on. Fully suited up, I placed the cumbersome, large reed onto the mouthpiece, tightened the neck strap, and brought the strange instrument to my lips for the first time.

I blew into the mouthpiece with a smidgen of force, drawing no response from the horn. Anxiously, I applied more and more pressure into the instrument. A single sound finally escaped its bell: a squeak. My eyes widened as if I was caught in the plot twist of a cliché horror movie. The mouthpiece dropped from my lips. A sigh escaped me. Mr. T placed a reassuring hand on the back of my shoulder.

"Loosen your embouchure. Think of a round tone. Try again," he told me like a swinging reincarnation of Mr. Miyagi. I gave him a small nod and turned back to the horn.

"OK," I thought to myself, "Loose. Think loose thoughts. Baggy pants. Solids and/or gases that don't have surface tension, unlike liquids."

Once again, I blew into the mouthpiece, this time with a rounded embouchure and a rounded mindset.

A shallow cry escaped from the end of the instrument, more in tune to the note directly below it

crashed down onto me, and I immediately tightened my mouth, bringing the note up into tune like the cart of a roller coaster reaching the peak of a hill. And unlike that roller coaster cart, it could only go up from here.

September

I vaulted out the door of the gray Honda SUV I had carpooled to my high school in and prepared to gun it to the band room. Audition results were out. After pushing past crowds of upperclassmen and actually entering the school, I was already out of breath. Pretty embarrassing, considering all the cross-country training I've endured, or at least tried to. However, before I could make my final sprint, I heard a voice calling out my name.

"Alan, Alan!" called the mysterious voice, "You made Chameleon!"

The voice belonged to friend and fellow auditionee Tyler, who had made Chameleon himself on his trusty trumpet. My body responded with a monotonous "wow, cool," as I was running on five hours of sleep and no coffee. My brain, however, shed tears of joy. Loud tears.

The past five months have been comprised of transition after transition: from the straightforward classes of middle school to the rigor of high school, from the pure, straight tone of the clarinet to the raw power and vigorous vibrato of the alto sax, from the technicality of classical music to the freedom of expression found only in jazz, from the known to the unknown; And yet, I'm ready for more.

Cup of Tea

Danielle DeVries
JOHNSON, NY



The Night My Sister Left

Alexandra Paul
DOVER, MA

She dyes her hair first. Ink spills down her blonde curls, hesitating at the tips. I watch her in the mirror from the bathroom floor,

pleas tipping my tongue. The shutters sway on their hinges and her suitcase is at the door with the zipper jammed halfway. She wrings her hair and washes her hands. Her callouses are stained steel blue now.

She leaves the sink with dye smearing the eggshell countertop. The door clicks shut, and I listen to the leaky faucet. The drops engorge, drinking from the mouth of the faucet, then they fall. Drop. Drop. Drop. Stay.

Confessions of a Social Phobic

Alexandra Franchino
LIVINGSTON, NJ

We are hidden all over. Seeking shelter in the quiet places, the insignificant places. At the local pond, we sit at the furthest bench from the entryway, the one fully engulfed in shade. In class, we can be found in the back corner, vigorously retracing our notes to appear too busy to be called on. We are those who stutter at the cash register, those who write the correct answer on the page but refrain from raising our hand to share it, those who stare at the telephone for an hour before gaining the nerve to pick it up and make a call. We hide behind memorized food orders imprinted on our tongues as we sit in the same restaurants, never needing to glance at the menu. We hide inside ourselves, the shell that is our body, built to shield us from the outside. We live beneath the radar, where our only goal is to be absolutely unremarkable to the point where we go unnoticed, bathing in seclusion. Invisibility is quite the art, and we have become masters of it. So if you are trying to find us, good luck. You're going to need it.



The raging music's slow thumping was no match for the

rate at which my heart was beating. The lights were dim, and the air, thick with laughter, was making it near impossible to hear anything else. The surfaces of tables, and even some couches, were completely submerged in a sea of red plastic cups. From my strategic position in the corner of the room, I prayed I would remain disguised. I watched as girls confidently strode past me, choosing any boy they liked and finding their way to them. They batted their long, mascara-drenched eyelashes, intertwined feet, and ran manicured pointer fingers down the legs of their prey. Quizzically, I observed their methods, taking notes in my head and growing even more convinced of the fact that this was not where I belonged. I made my way across the room, leaving my comfortable corner for an increasing sense of vulnerability. Searching the many faces for my friend, hoping to fake a sudden illness and make my swift getaway, I became a target. A boy had placed himself between the door and me, resting against the counter, blocking my path and appearing to have no intention of moving. Meeting my eyes for half a second before they quickly found the floor, he started to make conversation. Racking my brain for a response to his abrupt interest in me, I felt my cheeks flame, as each word climbing up my throat with the hope of escaping my mouth was swallowed

back. I was overcome as panic welled up inside me, and I made a last ditch effort to save myself the imminent embarrassment. My mouth opened and out came an incoherent squeak, mimicking the sound a mouse might make upon the realization that it has caught the eye of a house cat.



Dragging myself through the treacherous school hallways, I avoid eye contact with the faces swimming past me, wearing their expectations like chains around my ankles. God forbid anyone tries to be polite and greet me with a smile; I start to ramble to myself as sweat droplets begin to form on my neck. *What if my voice catches? What if it comes out sounding weak? What if they can tell I am weak? What if it wasn't me they were speaking to? What if I respond and they don't hear me? What if they choose not to?* My breathing quickens as I try to resist the pair of invisible hands tightening its grip around my throat. I live for my walks home. My hollow footsteps are the background music to the silence that soothes my heart. Finally free of the day's obligations. But each step is greeted with an impending loneliness. Each step reminds me how close I am to spending the remainder of the day in my room. Being alone is not a choice; it is a vital survival tactic. Disliking com-

pany and fearing it are two very different things. I try to busy myself until it is time to sleep, but even then I am haunted by the prospect of tomorrow. I slip deeply into a fit of worry, intense and persistent. Sleep is not my friend. It melts the days into one another, and as soon as my eyes flutter to a close, they will just as quickly reopen, joining the dread a new day holds.

I spend all of my time making excuses to avoid the simple things. Why go to the library for the book I've been dying to read when I won't be able to ask the librarian for guidance in finding it? Why go to the mall to shop when I can just do it online? Why keep a journal of poems locked in my nightstand drawer when I will never allow anyone to read them? Waking up each day with such a compelling fear of life, it is hard to see the beauty in living.

And yet, I do. I see how this fear is simply a disguise for my ferocious desire to live. I see how much I want my life. So badly it seems, that it is with every bone in this tired body that I wouldn't consider trading any of it: the trembling hands, racing heart, and shortened breaths. Because how could you be this terrified of losing everything, without first possessing an undeniable, all-consuming love for everything.

The Orchestra

Victoria Laboz
NEW YORK, NY

I walked to the beat that monotonously pulsated and pounded *in-a-de-quate* in my ear drums.

The guitar strummed *hope* on a high and *less* on a low. The pianoforte trilled *mis-er-y* in a glissando downwards. The trombone bellowed *pain* in a legato. And the cello howled *numb*, reverberating against the walls of my hollow mind.

But the musicians lost themselves in the sound of the doleful music that emanated from their instruments. Fingers bleeding and eyes bloodshot, the sticks beat holes into the drums, the guitar strings wore and tore, the pianoforte trilled out of tune, the trombone squealed with friction, and the cello bow shred. The orchestra continued on with its lost staccato rhythm and chaotic melody. I snapped my baton in two, but there was no stopping the noise.

Graveyard Tongue

Victoria Laboz
NEW YORK, NY

My tongue is a graveyard buried deep with the bones of unspoken thoughts that sprawl out like the snapping branches of a tree in the dead of winter, or my shivering veins underneath my thin blanket of skin, an irrigation system of sorrow.

I open my mouth to speak and the bones begin to rattle and the ground begins to shake. A gust of wind kicks at the soiled memories and swooshes out as I howl at the bare sky barren of life. My own echo is the only response in this blackout of a world. My howl recedes back into myself as I realize that my graveyard tongue is the most spirited place that remains.

It unravels into a path like a scroll accounting the past. My nails dig deep into their stepping-stone names and I leave a trail of paw prints in my wake. I dig, excavating the bones and crunching my sharp teeth into them, sucking my own marrow thoughts dry and burying the hollow bones as I dismantle my graveyard tongue.

Seventeen Laps

Kristen Martucci

PENNINGTON, NJ

She would let me sit on her lap in the front seat of our car, parked outside of Starbucks at Mercer Mall. She would tell me in jest or in subtle caution (I could not tell at age three) that Mercer Mall had a high crime rate but the Starbucks was good so we would continue to go. She would say, “Climb up here Peanut, and we’ll read a *Bob Book*.”

Before dropping Daniel and Lauren off at Princeton Junior School, we had listened, on audiobook, to *Dacey’s Song*, most words of which I knew but meaning I could not comprehend. In the car ride as a pre-reading exercise, I would ask her to give me spelling tests, too, and to be a harsh grader, not to grade me easily just because I was the youngest. I felt most included through connections with words, and I was quite proud that I could spell “kindergarten” and “punctuation” by kindergarten.

With their usual bout of morning crankiness, my siblings slammed the car door, upset at Mom for making them go to school when they did not want to. Tough lot. “You’re my last hope, little K,” Mom said, patting me on the back with humor in her eyes. “Daniel and Lauren have already turned mean.” Grown up some—that is what I think she meant; I was young and attached and listened to her, because I was serious. I silently etched my Mom’s words into my mouth—but not to be repeated—as I extended my little hand, returning the pat less noticeably.

I climbed into her lap seated on the driver’s side, and with my *Bob*

Book leaning up against the steering wheel, we read it together as I giggled at the triangle and oval-shaped people. The silence that filled my mouth in between the words I carefully composed felt natural. My Mom and I enjoyed not talking as much as we did. She wanted me to learn and to know words. It did not come easier to me than my siblings; I just happened to spend a larger portion of my childhood listening and observing. Reading was my preferred source of meaningful interaction. I loved learning new words and knowing the way they held *so much more* than a word. Our time together was short yet long-lasting.

By the time we picked-up Daniel and Lauren, I knew that reading would be independent and her attention would be split. I was fine with that, content just to think and snack on a tiny sandwich. Absolutely no crust, I would think. Triangles, always, just like the *Bob Book* figures. Four in first grade, and two in second. If my parents cut my tuna sandwiches into rectangles or squares, or ever left a trace of brown on our white, family-sized bread, my stomach would refuse their mistake and allow no chance of redemption.

I was too young to realize that *Bob Books* did not graduate me to a higher level of reading, and I was also too young to realize that, as I grew, speaking began to carry much more significance. And I thought my Mom then was also young because we read the same level together—I did not know what age *really* was.

Reading with her was big to me then because it seemed infinite. It was fulfilling, and relaxing, and time passed a little more freely.

But now reading time is consumed with talking time because a moment’s rest must stay productive. Now I know that age for us has been talking all along—the attentiveness of my voice in pronouncing a new word and year-by-year catching onto the intricacies unique to English.

So, we take walks. Morning, night, mostly around our backyard. I find it hard placing purpose on walking if I am not at home, where all the relevance of our most recent pasts is stored.

Lap one is “get to know you this morning. What has been going on today?” Even though we have both been at home since we got home together. I am tired because I always am, and she is awake and well because “every day is a new day.” My voice is the sound of my eyes when I first wake up—foreign to the light and being used again so soon.

Lap two should be louder but we walk too fast for early in the morning, and I should exercise more.

I listen at first. I do not have much to say when I have not been up for hours like she has. “Dad has been breathing down my neck to call the insurance company, and make sure the eye doctor bill is paid, so, I’m going, ‘Okay, well, I’ve had five hours of sleep, and I have to tutor and make you and Daniel something to eat,’ it’s like ‘Oh Mom has all the time in the world, she just has nothing better to do,’” she tells me. I give my answer to this story I know well, peaceful in knowing we can talk about more at my age: “Do what makes you happy,” I say. She laughs, “...if only,” as we finish another three laps.

But, by lap six, I am hard to keep quiet as we talk about everything under the growing sun—or under

the universe—because relating life to space gives a measure of worthiness. “Obligations would be a little bit less of an obligation if everyone kept perspective,” we agree. We would like to follow our own philosophy.

Like a sugar rush, it comes crumbling down all at once. By lap seven, we are done for this part of the day; conversation winds back down and enough deep thinking tides us over until our second round in the evening. “Oh, I found a heads-up penny on the way to the Chapel this morning; I put it in our little chest,” my Mom said. “Hopefully, it will bring good luck,” I respond.

The day drags on until lap eight, when it has started again: “Hey, I have a lot of work yet to do but I haven’t done it yet because I’ve been too busy doing pretty much nothing, which I don’t really regret because it was great.” A little less formal than morning because fretfulness turns casual when there is some sort of end near. We set off at a brisker pace, which, unfortunately for my friends, dictates how fast I walk at school. To this day, I have never been able to walk in a straight line, and I cut her off consistently, just like when I speak. My brain scatters with each step until new thoughts arise because talking can do that to me:

“Have you ever thought about word pictures—can you see them? The ones in Latin, for example, where the words ‘snout’ and ‘extended’ are placed at opposite ends of the lines of text to represent the dog’s extended snout in the simile of the dog chasing the hare in the story of Daphne and Apollo. We can’t do that in English, but it’s worth knowing; it’s like writing a run-on sentence and placing the

word ‘long’ at the end—that’s a word picture.”

She had not realized this, and neither had I until recently—I could not interpret these things at age three, I could only feel the shape of the words between my teeth, and that was enough.

At that moment, I did not know what Daniel and Lauren were doing, and I would talk with them later. Only being part of this exchange in words weighed by sentiment was significant.

Eventually, our conversation comes full-circle: talking to her is one of the most pleasant ways to end my day. But, like reading when I was younger, there is no way to end a story, a conversation—I have learned that an “okay” and a pat on the back will do.

Lap seventeen may or may not have existed. It was insignificant, and sixteen was close enough, but my Mom and I like to consider that seventeen means something—the number of years I have been alive, the months that had passed before I first said ‘I love you’—just for con-

sistency in our days.

It is time to get back to work which I do not want to do; I would rather find time to read again—*Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, *This Side of Paradise*, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. “We are going to read this year, Mama, and talk about the books like we used to,” I say. But we are both busy and talking will just have to do for the moment—one day, after it feels like the future is in our hands, and the present does not include business, those books will still be waiting.

And when I am too tired to work, I will go downstairs and watch the eleven o’clock news on CNN with her; it is nice to hear someone else talk. She is going through a bunch of old things, and says, “Remember this? Maybe we could give it away,” holding up *Bob Books Set 1: Beginning Readers*. That past is no longer so recent. I remember it, and I am not upset, but I am sad because I know that at one point I would have been.

Like July

Jessica Wang
MADISON, WI

we will watch
the pearls of purple
plop
fire from
weeping air

listen to the boom
of exploding
stars
and the murmurs
floating through fog

wait for
the dotted
ink
to paint our pain
on night mirrors

before
we fade
too
into pockets
of light

find the
roof
to feel
the thrum of bodies
falling so close

promise
to leave the pink
pansies
for white, and let’s please
avoid the cliché.

Eternal Return

Maitreyi Rajaram
DAYTON, NJ

My single best shot was a cappuccino.
It was warm by the counter, and the
steam from the machine spun dizzily
across the room, sticky summer heat
and striped shorts, and swinging ponytails,
it felt like Christmas and cocoa and jumpers. There
was a line past the pastries and I waited behind
a Mets Baseball Cap with a slender blonde occasionally
fondling his waist. I watched a fly dance over the
baguettes. Mets Baseball Cap was turning on his
tablet and asking the arm attached to his waist about
the free wifi, and ordering a whole wheat muffin with
his debit card. I held Tolstoy in large print in my right hand,
and changed my name for the fumbling barista that stood
with a baffled smile and a Sharpie grasped in his left hand.

My wifi password's twenty digits long,
a slur of unconnected letters and numbers
that my dad can shout from the file folders
under the cable box if you want it, and I can
pull a twenty from a pair of jeans in the
laundry hamper if I haven't used it on books
for my English class yet this week, because I
really love to read old classics at midnight sitting in the
corridor of faint light next to the humming fridge in my
oversized sweaters, developing my irregular eating habits,
lengthy verses and uncensored thighs.

I drank an Espresso at three yesterday and puked
before I missed the bus. I doubled over and heaved
streams of milky brown and thought of skipping my
first class because my stomach was lighting flames
across my chest and burning holes in my brain.
It is difficult to write my English paper when
heavy pools of cream slide along the edges of
my throat, and all I can think of is my history teacher
replaying the assassination of Kennedy until I can see a
silhouette of his upturned face under my eyelids. The kids in
my class cover their eyes but I can't stop staring as the
bullet skims his jaw, and ricochets off his skull, and I always

wonder if he could feel the pain like we can.

Sometimes I think that my math teacher moves in circles.
He drinks black in tall porcelain mugs, the thick spoons
sliding like tar along the edges of his lips and dampened
overlapping rings wetting the edges of stacks of paper.
He tells us that we are growing up too fast. I do not feel old
and I do not feel young, though I do feel both simultaneously.
He is recurrence: in his sets of ties, and hourly breaks,
incessant cycles of coffee and weekly grading with
red pen highlighting the sides of his hands; I am
Kennedy's bullet, Tolstoy's revolution, and the coffee shop.

There used to be a Buddhist monk on the side of the
subway platform by my street, who sat cross-legged,
with waxy pupils shifting under heavy eyelids and
bare feet pressing against the cold, callous bricks.
From the street, his thin image folded in between
January's snowfall and the creases on his palms
reminded me of the dulled pages of newspapers,
the unclassifieds lying open against my warm morning
cup, as I try to comprehend another string of weary
headlines and distant names. It is then that I remember
I only pray with my eyes open.

I saw Mets Baseball Cap on the C line last week.
He got in two cars down and I felt the side of my ear
heat up at his lopsided stare. I allowed myself a small
glance; he was carrying two long duffel bags across his
shoulder, wrinkled brown paper bag- probably a muffin - in
his left, and a mocha with a green sleeve in his right. He
raised an eyebrow. As the subway began to move,
my mind was pulsing with the sour extremities of caffeine,
and the rhythmic intersecting tracks, cars lurching
on either side like gunshots. If he was also thinking about
cappuccinos and old baguettes and muffins and
baristas with green caps and generic nametags and the
lifting veil of steam around the checkered tables, and if
we are connected by steel wire and glass door and tired
reflections of tight suits and pencil skirts and stained sleeves
and twenty seven three-digit avenues, then maybe:

I will always be in two places at once.

How do you explain something that kills you?

Sarah Minchin
HO-HO-KUS, NJ

Sometimes I sit awake at
night wondering about how
the world works.

As cheesy and pathetic as it
sounds, it's true. I lie there
looking at the ceiling think-
ing about my life, reviewing
and critiquing it.

Flashing memories come up,
like when a word triggers a
thought. I see my grandma's
old house. I see her healthy.
I see her smile. A real smile.
Then I see her getting older,
putting the "for sale" sign in
the front of her soon-to-be
old house. I see her moving
into a smaller house. I see my
brother and I sleeping on the
floor of her living room, and I
see myself climbing into bed
with her when I got scared.
I see my brother, and I wake
up smelling bacon and pan-
cakes in the shapes of stars.

Then it goes blank.

Now, the part I don't hardly
ever want to remember.

I see my mom come in my
room and tell me "Grandma
has cancer."
I see myself lying on the
ground crying asking God
out of all the stars in the sky
why dull the brightest one?

My grandma is a strong
woman. And cancer has and
still is taking a toll on her. I
can hear my mom in the back
of my head saying, "I thought
we lost her."

I see my grandma losing hair.
I see her with no hair. And
see her sitting on my aunt's
couch at Christmas opening
a gift my brother gave her,
a knitted blue hat he made.
I see her put it on her cold
head. I see her cold smile turn
warm, just like her head did.

pickle

Melody Xiao
LIVINGSTON, NJ

1.
as you grow up
you begin to realize some things

2.
pickle the teddy bear
stood sentinel at the head of your bed
since the days you still sucked
on a pacifier

you believed
that he could fight the dragons
that came to burn your castle down
in your dreams

and maybe even now
you have trouble believing
that pickle
doesn't actually do that

3.
i was five
the first time i remember scraping
my knee on the
pavement
on my way to
school

mommy gave me a
kiss on
the forehead
before putting a band
aid on
the bloody patch

but the older you
get the more
wounds a kiss and a
word can't fix

because no
words are going to fix
the bloodless fracture inside your
mind

4.
a dog
is not
prone to
the kinds
of thoughts
we are
maybe
because
it does
not care
at all

5.
newtons law of inertia states that
a still object will stay still
and

a moving object will stay moving
until an external force acts upon it

i do wonder
what
exactly
made my mind start moving
in the first place

6.
happiness
is more of a burden to be hoisted around
upon aging joints and weary shoulders
than it is a
relief

the smiles that hang upon our lips
are weights
that drag the rest of our faces down
and a lackadaisical happiness
is better than a real one

7.
big words like
ANTEDILUVIAN
and
FECUND
seem to be necessities
for our future success

what do they even mean

a guignol
is probably what you
drink on the holidays
hoping others find you to be
sophisticated
before you find yourself
staring at the inside of a plastic bag

and nugatory
may be the word that describes
your friend
pushing you towards the one
who makes your heart
dance inside the oversized jail cell
of your ribcage
with looks that tell you
if the flowers die instead of bloom
she won't be there

and a lacuna
sounds like the azure glass
of a bay in the caribbean islands
ever so slowly
tearing at the chains of
dirt and stone
to meet its brother
on the other side

8.
pickle
was once the keeper of dreams

i gave him swords
and knives

and arrows
to keep away the monsters under the bed

until i realized

there are no monsters
more real
than the ones
we become

9.
its eleven at night
and im writing this

even though
my math homework isn't done
my tea is half drunk
my brother is crying for a companion
i don't want to go to bed

there may be angels at the four corners
there may be lambs crossing fields
there may be numbers in red
blue
yellow

but

cypresses root between the trenches of my chest
poppies bloom in place of my eyes
and a single white rose sways
in the breeze of my breath.

Early Mornings

Abigail Walker
MARBLEHEAD, MA

Shampoo sheds the smell of imitation
lavender, a bitter kind that'll give a headache,
it catches on an eyelash, falls limp,
wills the suds on to eyes
that have grown familiar with the stinging--

for my habit of showering in the dark
is hereditary,
has rolled off the broad shoulders
of big-legged women whose brittle
hair is crisp like the dried out
shell of a tangerine
and their paunchy faces swallow
our cheekbones, any definition we
were allotted. But my
spongy stomach -- skin, pale
like soap, drives us
to undress
in blackness

Chopsticks

Evelyn Ho
LIVINGSTON, NJ

My grandpa sits on a metal chair that has no back and crumples up his napkin, placing it in front of me. He sees that I can't eat fish balls without poking one chopstick through them to get them to my mouth. He puts his right hand in front of me, using his left hand first to slide one chopstick between the tip of his thumb and third finger, then to slide the other between his thumb and fourth finger. He picks up the napkin with the sticks, puts it back down, and picks it up again. I watch, my chin barely clearing the table surface. My five year old mind is in awe.

It takes many more fish balls before I pick one up, unscathed, un-punctured. I eat it through a smile, and he laughs, taking one for himself.

The streetlight burns orange outside—one in a city of thousands. Through the window I see the pointy top of a scraggly tree that barely meets the windowsill. I am last. Every other pair of chopsticks is on the green and white tablecloth, and the water in my cup trembles as my dad paces back and forth in front of the TV, speaking in rapid Cantonese with my grandma. I sit on a chair wrapped in the plastic packaging it came in (my grandma likes to keep things “new”), my feet dangling off the edge, my legs too short to reach the ground. I pick at the rice in my bowl. Difficult to put in my mouth when it was hot, it is now cold and hard to swallow.

I feel the heat of voices rising in volume; both my dad and his mom think they know more than the other. *Eat faster, before they notice.* I try, and gag. They go into the back room. I scoop myself more eggs. My grandpa turns on the TV from his leather chair in the corner, asking me why I eat so slowly, and I cannot answer. It's not just because I don't speak Cantonese, and he doesn't know English.

My dad comes back into the main room of the apartment, exasperation twisting his face as he listens to my grandma try to talk to him from the other room. He sees my chopsticks, still in my small hands, and says,

“Hurry up.”

Every other pair of chopsticks sits on the restaurant's china plates, or is laid on the plain white tablecloth, which is now stained with soy sauce from dinner. The smell of wine and beer from ten or fifteen mouths is stronger than the smell of tofu and rice noodles and batter fried fish, which no longer steam in the air in front of me.

“Eat more—you're too skinny,” Aunt Margaret tells me. She puts chicken in my bowl, along with one of the Styrofoam-like chips that are really only there for show. I hear Uncle John laugh—maybe too loudly—from across the room, and Aunt Nancy plays with her newborn granddaughter, bouncing her up and down on a knee and pinching her cheeks.

Christmas lights blink near the entrance of the restaurant, distracting customers from the drab, grayish-green tree underneath. The lights in the restaurant reflect off the window. When I look outside, I can only see colorful shopping bags floating past in the night.

I listen to my cousin Christine ask my sister about school. The tips of my sneakers brush against the bristly, red carpet. I add some soy sauce to the noodles in my bowl, mixing everything with the tan plastic chopsticks from the restaurant. A few seats to my right, my mom whispers to my grandma, who smiles. My brother and sister run around with a younger cousin between the three or four tables our family has reserved at the back of the restaurant. Almost every seat is filled; my dad sits at my left, and my less-familiar relatives are at the next table. The golden dragon and jeweled phoenix look on, hanging from the wall, watching, as they would in any Chinese restaurant we go to.

I spin the Lazy Suzy in the center of the table to pour myself more Sprite. The Coca-Cola sits there, still sealed, as the foam in my glass dissipates to reveal the clear, carbonated sugar water underneath. (According to my mom, caffeine from Coke will make all the children hyper, including me.) I have to sit forward to put the soda back in the center, and my red napkin falls off the table into my lap. My dad picks it up, handing it to me and saying with a slight smile, “We'll be leaving soon. Finish your food.”

I open up the napkin into a red rect-

angle, fold it, and put it back on the table.

My grandma sits in her black rocking chair, reading the Chinese newspaper, her worn pink slippers on the floor in front of her. I lean back in my chair and look out the window from the dining table, my feet on the ground, my elbows on the table. The top of the tree is too high up to see, but it still does not bear many leaves—the side of the tree facing the building is mostly bark.

The fat, white noodles are submerged in the soup in my bowl. My siblings fool around on the couch, having just eaten. As they shove each other, laughing, my four year old cousin sits on a raised chair between me and our grandpa with a smaller bowl of noodles in front of her. Brigitte knows how to use a fork, but my grandparents have chopsticks out. My grandpa tries to teach her with the wooden chopsticks they have, and I hold mine out to demonstrate. She gets frustrated, letting out a small, dramatic sigh that she no doubt learned from watching so many kids' cartoons on TV. My grandma gets out a fork.

California Dream

Katherine Brown
WOODBRIDGE, VA

We stumbled through a Californian dream, scratching our way over stucco roofs, the Crayola blue sky a shaky median between the ocean and a smokescreen of dry atmosphere posing as heaven.

Your hands slipped from mine at the boardwalk, my mouth gritty with sand and dirty promises, the kind that were hard to swallow--pulpy Sangritas, sharp with alcohol.

I lost you to California, to the very thought of blurry west coasts you created when you were a teenager, your hands sticky with paint and disappointment.

Before I had even gotten to you, in undergrad, you were spiraling with this dream, your skin vibrating with its guarantee of sun, thick with yellow verandas and paper parasols.

And maybe I'll go on, stand out on ledges of rock and cold, frothy water, remember you as my skin reddens, peeling like citrus. I'll set you in the water, give you the amnesty to breathe in the sea brine, to inhale the smog, without me.



We're Not in Kansas Anymore

Vivian Holland
TENAFLY, NJ



Aunt Helen's

Leandena Dankese
LEXINGTON, MA

Today I will go to Aunt Helen's,
that clean white house in the woods.
The storm will have cleared
and the sun will come out.

I'll throw my wet coat aside
cold from the battering wind.
My boots left by the door
so that my tired feet may rest.
And Aunt Helen will take this tired pilgrim
in her arms so perhaps
she may relieve me from my tiresome journey.
Side by side we will sit on the screen porch
and it that moment it will seem like eternity.

Today I will go to Aunt Helen's
where the weather is fine
and no longer does the cold plague me.
Her garden will be ripe with vegetables and fruit
the lilies in full bloom now.
Where food will be bountiful
and I will finally be full.
Where all the shirts are pressed and starched,
where the linens are heavenly soft
so I may finally find some peaceful rest.

And side by side we will rest
on her screen porch
watching the lilies in full bloom.

Ice Cold Reality

Caroline Benedetti
MIDLOTHIAN, VA

I have an addiction. I'm addicted to the rush of air, the bite of the cold, the thrill of slicing snow beneath my skis. Every year, as the autumn months begin to fall away, I sit, biting my fingernails, waiting for the first snowflakes to dress the naked ski mountains.

I started skiing when I was six years old. The pizza-cutting, little pink puffball that I was fell in love with the sport immediately. I remember first conquering the easy greens, as I proudly bragged to my parents about how well I was doing. Then came the blues. Although terrifyingly steep at first, I soon began to crave the speed that came with the medium level slope. Soon, after hard work, and many ski trips later, I made the leap. I finally convinced myself to attempt a dreaded black diamond. As I cut the snow, swooshing across the mountain, an addiction started forming. Year after year, I kept coming back, taking another dose of the icy air. My time spent skiing grew, and so did my confidence. I began racing down slopes faster and faster, seemingly with no control.

The winter of my seventh grade year, I heard the news. The mom of my best friend, Rachel, was planning a ski trip with a few other girls. Immediately, I started piling my suitcase high with a helmet, gloves, goggles, sweaters, socks. I was ready for my next dose. The day of the trip crept closer and closer. My stomach began to fill with anticipation. Soon I was piling into Rachel's car, and

after what seemed like the blink of an eye, the looming mountains of Massanutten Ski Resort cast shadows across my face. The window, fogged with my breath, allowed mere glimpses of the snowy slopes, the trails that would be broken up by my brand new skis.

We spent all morning on blues, with a few greens sprinkled in, getting our stiff legs loose. Finally, it was time. Rachel and I skied down the short trail, which took us to the hardest section of the mountain—black diamonds. We skied for a bit, taking on all the challenges that we were confronted with. As we rode up the ski lift, Rachel and I joked the entire way up, making small conversation and talking about the condition of the snow.

"I noticed the last one had moguls on the left. We should probably avoid those," Rachel said absent-mindedly. I nodded, but I was barely listening, as I was formulating a plan in my head. I didn't have a GoPro, but I was going to film the mountain as Rachel and I rushed down it.

"Would you hold my poles for me?" I asked. "I want to use my phone to film our ride down the mountain." Rachel nodded her head, a grin filling her frozen face. The video would show the world our skills, how we slid down the mountain with ease.

At the top of mountain, I nervously handed over my poles, worrying about handing over my main source of comfort and control. Rachel noticed my slight shakes, smiled slightly, and I instantly reassured myself. I had skied my entire life. I had grabbed the bull by the horns before, and quelled the rebellion of the icy

slopes. I could conquer the trail again, even if I didn't have my poles. I was wrong.

I made it down a third of the slope before I lost any thought of control. Trees started to blur, and I started desperately trying to cut across the snow, fighting the icy grip of the mountain. Any thought of escape seemed to melt away as I was yanked left. Towards the moguls. Suddenly, I was tossed, thrown from hand to hand, like a child juggling a ball. My whole body seemed to disappear beneath the snow for years at a time before peeking back up, barely grabbing a breath as I again dove below the sea of snow. I was terrified. Worried that this was the end. I thought I would never get to say goodbye. But I got lucky. Instead of impaling myself on a branch in the woods, my ski got caught on the snow, and I suddenly saw white. I was tumbling down the hill, phone discarded, both skis strewn about on the mountain. When I finally halted to a stop, I lay there for a moment, staring at the sky, barely aware of the throbbing in my head and the now melted snow dripping down my back. A ski patrol stopped, worried about me, and I finally stood up, limbs groaning, to hike back up to retrieve all that I had lost: My skis, my glove, my phone, my confidence.

I did end up patching myself up and I still continue to ski, but the fall that day unearthed an ice-cold reality. Gone was the idea that I could conquer any slope easily. Gone was the hidden recklessness of speed. Replacing them was a stomach constantly edged with worry that I could tumble again, and, this time, I would not be so lucky.

Ride

Dongeun Kim
MILTON, MA

Marlie woke to the feeling of being stared at. She opened her eyes and saw a brown cat glaring at her from a shelf. She got up and shooed it away. Her house was full of cats and fish and smelled like rotting salt. The phone started ringing in the living room.

"Hello?"

"It's Jake."

"I don't know a Jake."

"Everyone knows a Jake."

"Well I don't."

"We met yesterday at the party."

Marlie remembered Jake but she didn't say anything.

"Are you alone?"

Jake was wearing glasses and an orange T-shirt, the kind street peddlers sold to tourists in Times Square. It said, "New York Dolls - Made in Queens."

"Hell girl, what's that smell?" He frowned, and white wrinkles sunk into his forehead like lines of cocaine. He walked into the apartment, swatting the air in front of him. "Is this some kind of zoo?"

Marlie laughed. "Cats and fish."

"The only good cats are dead cats," said Jake. "Why so many, though?"

"I'm pet-sitting this summer."

Jake nodded slowly and started taking off his shirt. "Where are your parents?"

"Dead."

Jake looked at her for the first time. "Charming."

Marlie felt the swelling of heat overtake her body. She watched as Jake tossed away his shirt and sat down on the couch. He was staring at her. The sound on the radio switched between static and soft punk rock. She knew what he had come for and she figured that this was her big chance, in a way. She didn't want to go to college as a virgin. She wanted people to think she was mean.

The whole time, Marlie looked outside the window. She pictured a girl smoking a pack of Virginia Slims on the highway curb. Cigarette butts scattered her feet, glowing red. Suddenly Jake clutched her leg and told her she was shaking.

"Look at you. You're a mess."

Marlie eyed him closely and gently pushed him away. "You have to go now."

"Why?"

"I have to go see my dad."

"I thought he was dead."

"I lied."

"Do you want a ride?"

"Sure."

They walked in silence, and Marlie thought that their dark shadows rippling over the pavement looked like cloaks.

"What kind of car is that?"

"A beautiful kind. She's a 1980 Chevrolet Silverado." Jake turned on the radio to a rap station. There was no static this time, just breeze, air, and beats.

Marlie searched for the girl as they entered the highway, but all she saw were plastic bags and crushed Coke cans. She dangled her hand outside the window and watched it surf to the rhythm of the road. They passed by a priest supervising construction workers painting over a wall of graffiti. They soaked red onto roller brush, and with each stroke, the wall lost color.

"Where to?"

"Take a left and go straight until you see West Florida Hospital."

"That's where you're going?"

"Yup."

"Is he sick?"

"Shh... don't ask so many questions," she mumbled. She turned the radio off and listened to the sweet sound of nothings. And for a moment, that's all the world was: nothing.

"Thanks for the ride," said Marlie

as she got off and slammed the door shut.

"Can I call you later?"

"You can try," she said. "Wait, Jake. Do you happen to have any cigarettes?" Marlie grinned as he tossed her a pack and a lighter. "You're the real deal." She stuffed the valuables into her bra and walked into the hospital. She saw the receptionist banging her head in the air with her earphones on, just like the Jesus bobble head that used to be in her parents' car. That was two years ago. Marlie tried to slip past the front desk unnoticed.

"I may be crazy but I'm not stupid." The receptionist took out her earphones and sighed.

Marlie groaned. "Penny, there's literally no one here."

"Rules are rules, kiddo," she said, passing Marlie a form to fill in and a waiting number. "Is he doing any better?"

Marlie raised one eyebrow and grabbed an apple from the front desk. "Sure, if you consider being dead as doing better" She bit into the apple and left.

Marlie's phone started ringing in front of the elevator. It was her mother. She picked up but didn't say anything.

"Marlie?"

"What."

"Open the door."

"I'm not home."

"Well then how am I supposed to get inside?"

Marlie didn't respond. She studied her reflection on the elevator. It split into two as the doors slid open.

"Marlie?"

"What."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm just tired."

"Says everybody. Tired of what?"

"Paying attention."

The elevator doors opened on the fifth floor and she saw a few patients and their visitors strolling in the hallway. She stuffed her cellphone into her

pocket and walked to her father's ward. She quickly yanked open the door. It was a habit. She had a feeling that this time she might catch her dad out of bed. She couldn't explain it. She was wrong.

Marlie made herself comfortable on the bed across from her father and fumbled for her cigarettes. Up until last week, they had been sharing the room with a lung cancer patient. He died. She lit one up and started smoking. As she laid there, she thought about what exactly it was that she liked about cigarettes. She liked the first bite—it tasted black. She liked the white smoke—it was her kind of art, fume art, so delicate and free. Suddenly, it occurred to her that smoke never sinks when it dies; it floats.

“Psst, hey, care to share?”

Marlie shot up and looked across the room. A girl about her age was smiling at her, ghostly in a hospital gown that was too big for her skinny bones. She was nearly bald and had blue eyes, but the flesh surrounding them was pink. Dark creases carved under them and sunk, trapped into her skin.

“Please?” The girl giggled and closed the door behind her. “I promise I won't tell.”

“It'll kill you.”

The girl sighed. “Well, then I would have finally managed to die after practicing for twenty years.”

Marlie watched closely as the girl tiptoed over to her father.

“Is he dead?”

Marlie laughed. “I wish. He's in a coma. Been laying there for over a year, now. A real human vegetable.” Marlie watched as the smoke she exhaled escaped out the window like ribbons of silk.

“You think he's going to wake up?”

“Hope not. My mom's selling the house so he won't have anywhere to go.”

“Then what are you going to do with him?”

“I don't know.”

The girl walked up to the bed Mar-

lie was sitting on and stole her cigarette. She smiled, and then she smoked real smooth, like a criminal.

Marlie frowned. “Rude,” she said. “Hasn't cancer ruined you enough?”

“Yeah, but it clearly hasn't ruined enough of me.”

Marlie laughed. “Yeah, clearly,” she said, imitating the girl's voice. “What's your name?”

“Kat,” she said, still smoking.

“Hey, Kat—”

“You think smoking is cool, do you?” Kat spoke slowly and quietly.

Marlie looked at Kat. She didn't say anything.

“Do you think that this,” said Kat, rubbing her bald head, “and this,” flashing a stitched scar that cut above where her right breast should have been, “is cool?” Her breath started coming in short gasps and her body started trembling.

“Kat, listen to—”

“You want your father to die, do you? You ungrateful little bitch.” Kat started screaming into Marlie's face and wouldn't stop. The nurses heard the noise from the hallway and came rushing in, and Marlie just stood there watching her scream, writhing to break out of their grips.

“I'm so sorry.” Marlie whispered into her hand. She grabbed her stuff and was gone.

Marlie walked out of the hospital and into a playground. It smelled like water. The swings and seesaws stood motionless and abandoned, the slides were empty, and the sandbox was wet with yesterday's rain. She walked to the benches and saw her mother. She was holding a Foster's beer bottle with her fingertips. She let it go and it broke.

“I knew you would come here,” her mother mumbled.

“What?”

Her mother began to roll over. She tried to stand up, and her feet smeared beer across rainbows of chalk art. Swirls of colors muddled and puddled.

“I'm going home,” Marlie said slowly.

“You are going nowhere.”

Suddenly it occurred to Marlie that her mother might slap her. Or even kill her.

“Stop visiting him.”

“Okay.”

“I said stop!”

Her mother fell off the bench, and Marlie ran. She ran into the streets and stopped when a strange Hispanic man fluttered towards her. He was trying to sell a baby. Strange words started pouring out of his mouth as if there were a torrent of woe, of red, of insanity in him that would never stop. From a distance, Marlie saw two joggers approach the street. She couldn't see their faces but their skin was sunlight. They disappeared. The man leaned over her, and his round, bald head covered the sun. He looked like an eclipse. He breathed heavily. She stood calmly. They both waited for something to happen. He roared and pushed her onto the ground. The baby's wails started to sound like sirens. Marlie clasped onto her dress and murmured, “Don't, don't....”

The floor shook and Marlie woke up. Her face was wet but she was flying. No. She was in a truck bed, but she still felt as if she were flying. She silently watched the world smudge into one color. Marlie peered into the back window and smiled. It was Jake. The car began to slow down as it approached her apartment. Marlie listened to Jake park the car. He walked to the back of the truck where she was. They looked at each other closely.

“Really nice truck,” said Marlie finally.

Jake nodded and climbed into the bed next to her. “It was my dad's first one.”

Marlie pulled the lighter and pack of cigarettes out of her bra. Jake laughed. She smiled and lit one up. She saw the light illuminate his face, and for a second, he looked very sad to her. He nodded again and took the cigarette. His body curled into a giant Z, like the way she used to sleep as a child. She asked what was wrong with him.

“Nothing. What do you mean?”

“I don't know, there must be something wrong with you.”

Soft words rolled off his tongue and into her ears. Marlie closed her eyes. She liked it when he spoke. His voice calmed down all the voices in her head.

Marlie jumped out of the bed and splashed into a puddle shimmering with an oil rainbow. She watched Jake drive away. A few feet away from her, she saw a familiar brown cat stretched out on the pavement. She picked it up and looked up to her apartment floor. Jake must have opened the window that morning and not have bothered to close it. She was surprised that the cat lived through the three-story jump. She was surprised that it hadn't fled.

Marlie fed all the cats and fish and turned on the radio. She never even listened to what the people were saying, it was just the sound of their voices that she liked. It was her way of treating loneliness.

“Marlie?”

Someone was knocking on the door and ringing the bell.

“Marlie.”

It was her mother. She hurried to the door and looked through the peephole.

“I can hear the radio, Marlie. Come on and open the door.”

Marlie couldn't hear a trace of drunkenness in her voice. Her mother could sink in lakes of liquor, it seemed, and float up to the surface as dry as a cardboard, flattened. Marlie watched as her mother held out her arms, waiting for her to open the door and fill them. But she didn't. She sunk to the floor with her back against the door and listened. She listened to the curses and the rattling door knob. She listened to her body bruising from the kicks against the door. She listened to the quiet. She listened to the sound of footsteps and wondered what exactly it was that made the sound of arriving footsteps sound different from leaving ones.



If Winter Comes Can Spring Be Far Behind?

Simran Malhotra

MILLBURN, NJ



the summer we were free

Emma Gallagher
RYE, NY

I lean out the window and it's already dark
seven at night and black swallows me up
stars here at home are small and scarce

I remember the nights
when they filled up the sky like the freckles on my arms and legs
and I was so dizzy with the most pure exhilaration
I was certain I would pass out

the phone connection crackles and gives out again
and I am left in the black alone
with nothing but the same grainy polaroids
and they don't even come near the truth of what they show

of dark water rushing fast underneath me
drowning in sweaters and salt and laughter
radio and freedom and purple sky all I know

of sleepless nights and never getting tired
worn out converse pounding the pavement
motels and hair dye and scary movies
yellow lights cast upon empty streets
the future can't touch us

of fiery sparks uncontainable as you and I
inked flowers on the envelopes of letters sent from home
secrets and stories that I only told you
sprinting in the middle of the night
breaking the rules just to feel the blood
coursing through our veins at the speed of light
soft mountains melt into deep sky
and my flannel still smells like smoke
reminds me of you and all of our friends

and I'm back on the phone
I laugh as you tell me about your week
and your hockey team
and the song you found that I need to listen to
and I tell you about the book I just read
and what happened at the football game last weekend
and we talk about who we like
and moving to the city
and what we want to do with our lives

I blink and my clock has gone from ten to two
there's nothing I can do to stop
the words you say
from winding away in the hushed breeze
and it kills me every time you call
that I can't capture the fleeting minutes like fireflies
glowing in my hand
until I let them fly free

I breathe in the autumn air
hear the crinkly laughter over the phone
lean out the window
look up and drink in the night sky
as the breeze that caresses my face
hushes on by.

History of Bathing

Letitia Chan
MILTON, MA

When my mother broke her arm I bathed her
like an only daughter. What surprised me
was the lack of grace in it, her low voice
of instruction and of something so long
stilled as though it had made sense of itself
before it happened, and I saw where I inherited
my body, two small breasts, isles of moles
and oiled marks, the stitches on her stomach
from which I must have emerged.

There was no frail like a winged thing,
no god offering to say aloud, no poetry
to make of it. Nothing to allow for breathing,
woman in her states of losing and staying,
spilling and wonder and dissolve.

And still, her put together so differently
I can hardly believe I am made from the same
rib and skin, she from my grandmother,
and my grandmother from a mother before her,
a shirt washed so many times it is faded,
made more of wash than white and then,
so far later on, my own children, their washing,
followed by the unwash, disintegration, trace
this distance between cleansing and cleansed,
perhaps an imprinting from inside.



Nature

Jenna Lebovitz
ALLENDALE, NJ

It's that strange time of the year when
the weather can't seem to make up her mind.

On the calendar it's fall,
but some days it still feels like spring
and others like winter,
like mood swings,
like the way anxiety causes your breath
to change instantaneously,
from slow to a pace you can't control.
Today it feels like winter,
fog hugs the dry, hard ground
and I am wrapped in a blanket
of icy, brisk air,
that masks your arms and legs in goosebumps,
and turns your cheeks a pale pink.

The sky is a gloomy, pale, pastel gray
and several light, thin clouds hang low,
almost kissing the frozen ground.

Today it feels like winter,
there are no birds chirping,
no sky gently painted
in blue watercolors,
no vibrant lilac or purple flowers.
It's almost a ghost town, everything's dark and hazy.
But this is nature to me.

I love the smell of the cold air,
the dark and pale grays in the sky,
and the stillness.

The stillness is ever occurring,
almost another form of silence.

Connecting us
to the plants,
animals,
and ourselves.

It is everywhere,
we are the stillness.

Skin

Emily Kirshner

I have pale Skin. I cannot tan in
the sun, and I have freckles every-
where. I'm always the person at the
beach with 70+ SPF, while all of my
friends are lying out getting darker
and darker by the minute. I look at
photos of my mom and my grand-
mother and my aunt, all with dark,
sun-kissed complexions and my
cousins with soft bronze Skin with
not a freckle in sight. Then, there's
me.

I am the only one in my family
who cannot get a tan. My mom
thinks I'm insane, when every topic
of conversation always ends up back
to my Casper the Ghost-esque com-
plexion. I hate that I cannot get tan,
and that has made me hate my Skin.
I hate that I spend so much time
worrying about my Skin, and I feel
crazy that this is the extent of my
worries. My relationship with my
Skin has caused me so much trouble
that we resent each other. I blame
my Skin for all of my insecurities. It
has become such a problem that all
I seem to talk about anymore is my
Skin and its color. Then I start to
think is this all I am? An empty,
shallow person only worried about
my Skin?

Throughout history, Skin has
been wreaking havoc for people all
over the world. Skin has caused
wars and violence. Skin has in-
troduced segregation and racism.
Skin has allowed one person to
take another as a slave. Skin has
caused so much trouble as long as
humans could write that the color
of our Skin is not just a fact but a
culture, a personality, and a trait.
Skin can make you a criminal.
Skin can make you rich, poor, or
a thief. Skin has caused people to
literally wear their stereotype on
their sleeve, but why?

Why has society let the color of
our Skin define who we are?

Even I, a white girl from Con-
necticut, not at all a part of the
minority, have let the color of my
Skin define who I am. Skin has

decided whether or not you feel
pretty but also has decided whether
or not you are accepted into soci-
ety.

Why do we give Skin so much
power? Why is what's on the sur-
face more important than what's
on the inside? I long for the day
when Skin is no longer omnipo-
tent. When humans finally strip
Skin of its power, and it does not
create unequal barriers between
equal people. Skin is only as power-
ful as we make it, and the day we
decide to stop paying attention, it
will cease to be anything more than
what it is.

I am more than the color of my
Skin. "Pale" is not the only adjec-
tive that describes me. I am more
than what I look like, and so are
you.

Little things

Katharine Boyajian
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

Living in the real world means
a broken fog light and scratched paint.
It means your Mother has to skip her PTA
meeting to fix the problems you stir up.

Living in the real world means buying
half priced valentine's day chocolate for
your friend, the kind with gummy caramel
and orange crème filling,
after that kid with the crimson sneakers said
"I can't" to prom.

Living in the real world means seeing the
dead cat on your lawn, and the feeling of
salted tears, when the police officer tells you to get
a trash bag.

Living in the real world means hearing your
little sister walk down the stairs in high heels.
"we are going to be late,"
but no kiss goodbye.

Living in the real world means, staying
up until midnight to see your favorite star,
only to realize the sky is nothing but bloated
black space.



You Knit Me Together

Kayley Goertzen
WHEATON, IL

Home

Jack Li
LOS ANGELES, CA

For weeks my nanny
Ms. Aida coughed and slept in pain
she refused to spend any more on medicine;
cancer had emptied her coffers

She wanted to return home,
*where all her family were buried
embracing beneath the ground*

She took a flaky Ibuprofen,
fingering the pale white tablet
before swallowing it
with lukewarm water.

Last night,
she cried

remembering stories of her home
torn and pitted with

burnt-out apartments and rusty
pale pools of crimson

Her brothers and sisters and betrothed shot down,
lost, one by one in the civil strife

Ms. Aida opened her suitcase -

inside lay her ancestral wedding gown
stroked, for the last time

the smooth dragon and phoenix
The sun, moon, and the faint glowing stars

And flying white horses...

In its lace hummed the warmth of the
ancient bodies of her ancestors.

This morning:
I helped Ms. Aida into the car

leaving for a flight
that costs a little under

the tender care she gave me
my entire life.

My nanny Ms. Aida won't return
She is longing for the rustic cherry blossoms

and azaleas beckoning in some bomb-proof nook.
She carried her suitcase

across oceans, wars, and memories, her only
dowry all her life -

Some peoples' lives are in others' eyes
a disaster, sadness

but Ms. Aida knows her purpose -
She will trudge for miles to her old village

she knows that soon
her brothers and sisters will find her

And her beloved will once again
take Aida into his arms

She will don her wedding gown, and
he will gently pull her away
from the ruins of home -

Aida will leave her suitcase behind.

Mother Knows, Father Tells

Leandena Dankese
LEXINGTON, MA

It was the 13th of May, and a miserable May it was, since the April showers did not indeed bring May flowers but rather more May showers. The grey skies loomed over the city as sharp wind and heavy rain cut through the streets. The city laid in silence on this miserable day, the only sign of life the blinking red lights crowning the monoliths. Most everyone had gone home long ago, and little kiosks lined up along the street announced the curfew: *ALL STUDENTS MUST BE ACCOUNTED FOR BY 8:30.*

A plastic bag fluttered its way uptown as Dora Martin attempted to run down the stairs and into the metropolitan underground. It was a tedious task with an ill-fitting school dress that rode up higher on her with each step. The boy standing with his mother at the auto-ticket glanced her over once and then twice and then again.

"Daniel, you do realize that it's rude to stare." She attempted to chastise him before looking over to the girl. "Well, boys will be boys." She sighed smiling at the woman in line next to her.

"Well at least you know the he's not like that," she mollified the mother in a hushed whisper.

And over the rails where the cars depart there hung a moving graphic that was far too large for indoor display. The screen swayed ever so slightly back and forth as the tunnels trembled with a happy woman and man standing side by side at the altar on it. *TO PROTECT ALL THAT IS RIGHT AND SACRED*, the wording flashed as the graphic repeated itself.

"The next train will be arriving shortly." The automated voice announced. It was an unneeded announcement though and more for courtesy than informing. You see, this city was constructed as sturdy as a paper model. The metropolitan was very old, the oldest in the country perhaps. And since it was old it had the unfortunate conundrum of being more of a prototype than a working model. The street acted as the roof, and even in the newer buildings people on the fifth floor and below could feel the shaking and vibration of the passing trains.

Of course Dora Martin rather preferred it this way. The city had been discussing plans for a newer metropolitan under-

ground, one further underground like in the Capitol. They would build it deeper for protection against attacks. But Dora had heard about the underground there, where the escalators took so long to reach the bottom that people sat down on them. There was no reception there either, and it seemed to be more of a tomb than transportation.

The shaking soon became increasingly violent until out of the pitch dark tunnel the train thrust forward just as it seemed that the whole building would collapse from the tremors.

Martin rushed in as the doors opened. The great, big blue eyes of a woman watched her from the poster above the rail, smiling down at all. *MOTHER KNOWS BEST.* The posters were plastered all over the old tiles and brick walls of the tunnel. *MOTHER KNOWS BEST* and *FATHER IS ALWAYS RIGHT.*



The trains ran on time today. I had to run down the stairs to catch mine. The tunnels are abandoned again. No one on the stairs, no one at the gates, or at the platform. It was completely abandoned until the upper level by the auto-ticket. Two gossiping housewives stood there, one with a brat. I almost pity them. They're as trapped as rats.

And then there was a cop three blocks down near the fruit stand on the corner of the jeweler's district. It was a fruit stand at least. I remember going to the market with my family members, buying wholesale from the vendors. The mix of languages flowing between tentpoles, carts running against the cobblestone, and cop cars would sometimes go by chasing on the highway just past us. During the summer months when the sky was clear and blue, you could see planes going overhead, the commercial kind that were freelance. The city was loud with the honking of horns, the chattering and smiling people, the wailing of sirens chasing through the city, and plane engines sputtering overhead. The city is forever trapped under a cloud of oppressive silence now.

There is a girl sitting next to me in the abandoned car. It is safer to be alone together. We sit side by side with our legs drawn together and heads bowed. We are tortoises attempting to withdraw further into our invisible shells. There is no sound but the screeching and halting of metal against metal as the great beast spirals further down into its lair. The lights flicker back and forth sometimes, but they are no Atlas, so unequipped for their bur-

den. The grey lights give the filthy car a metallic sterility. It reminds me of the cliché hospital morgue [so cold, so unfeeling. My skin rises at the cold, seeking out the heat beside me, but I stay still.

The lights flicker again, soon they will burn out. Energy —electricity, has better use and down below —so deep and dark down below— no one needs it. No one cares.

We stare straight ahead, side by side, like perfect soldiers. My eyes drift up to the posters staring down at us. A woman, bending happily over the floor with her head bowed, smiling in contentment at the floor. I wonder how it must feel, clad in a dress and heels, as she polishes her floor, circle after circle. Do her hands smell like polish? Are they rough and coarse or soft like I imagine her hair to be? Her perfect hair, coiffed in curls with not a strand out of place, an angelic halo crowning her as the pinnacle achievement of society. *CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS* are proudly displayed under her —the only thing that ever will be.

The faceless man, whose torso and below we only ever see, stands behind her with his arms crossed. I wonder, do they use the same model for him as the one next to him? The moving graphic constantly showing the sad specimen of a male. So small and skimpy he seems to belong more to his mother's womb than this world. The mockery of his small frame shudders as he attempts to push open the pharmacy doors. The pills —the sports, the work, the strength that follows those white little tablets— until at last the shadow of a boy is chased out from him as a titan replaces it. The grabbing that follows as the girl who mocked him, who rejected him, submits happily to his grabbing, greedy hands. *Mendes co., MALE MUSCLE SUPPLEMENTS. MAKE HER YOURS!* flashes proudly before my eyes. Oh how nice it must be to be a boy.

The metro scrambles onward towards the homestretch. I glance over to my right, twisting and contorting my body to see the mother plastered above us. Secretly I steal a look at her. Her lips are the color of spring hyacinth with small pink buds. Do her lips feel as soft as a flower's petal? My heart races faster as I imagine those very lips parts gently in a kiss.

Before this, I could test my hypothesis. A few glances and choice words, a rebuff or an invitation, and in the emptiness of the night an answer would be found. I remember before, in the crook of a school hallway or the crevice of the metropolitan underground. Before, when no one asked

and no one told and there were only whispers and looks to guide us.

MOTHER KNOWS BEST.

The lights go out and we are left in complete darkness now. There are no shouts of surprise or groans of complaint. The only surprise is that they held out that long.

Gently, something brushes past me. The girl must be shifting in her seat. She is older than me, but there is no 'husband' with her. Not quite a girl but not a woman yet.

The workers' lights briefly flash bright light into our car. They're always doing something down here. It's one large network of never ending uncompleted projects. I wonder if they're building nuclear fallout shelters in here. Somewhere, I think the news said in the east, there is a new threat arising. We've gone this long without killing each other in international conflict; I wonder why they think it will happen now. I wish there was war though. A real war with fighting. They'd need nurses then, and I could volunteer. After all, don't they say 'A WOMAN'S CARE DOES THE TRICK'? Maybe I would get shelled or shot there. Some action at least.

The light disappears again, and we are left alone in the dark. The car jolts, and the girl is pushed against me and into my lap. She steadies herself but says no apology. Her hands shift against my thigh, and I freeze. I knew that there were feelers on the underground but I never came in direct contact with one. They were just a myth of the government. Should I scream? Or maybe it's just an accident and my dirty mind's betraying me. I stay still, and she shifts back into her seat.

How long though has it been since I was last touched by a woman? The math would be tedious but it has been so long, too long. The feelers are everywhere now. Half a year ago, they got Samantha Miller, caught her in her brother's uniform. They sent her for 'corrective gender behavior therapy' since her dress was 'unbefitting for a woman'. You don't hear much about them now. I wonder what they're up to.

"University Stop." The voice says.

The station lights come into view and I can see the girl's reflection across from me. Her eyes shift to mine before she gets up. This must be her stop. A college student. I doubt the feelers would take in someone with the ability to think. She brushes past me as the doors open, and I stare at her swaying hips. In the background a poster of a man pointing stares back at me. FATHER CAN TELL.

A Winter Note from Greylock

PIERCE GIDEZ

ORADELL, NJ

The blending from fall to winter is the most nostalgic time of year.

The moody oranges and tonal reds twisting themselves from their perches

And cascading down towards the muddled pool of browns and greens.

As the night tugs at both ends of the day, and the rolling winds toss the leaves across the landscape, their color fades.

By the first twinkling of winter, the color has all but drained from the leaves and returned back to the earth for a long winter's nap —

Or so that is the story that, like the leaves, passed down from those above to those below.

Wandering through the virgin wintry scape that legend nags at the strings of my memory.

The story goes that when all the color has gone, and the earth is still and quiet, the spirits above cry.

Their falling tears chill as they get closer to the ground and become snowflakes.

Once the mountains and valleys are blanketed in delicate sheets of snow, color can come.

They say that white is the first color.

As a child, the first snow was a sacred event.

In a single breath, time rested its relentless pursuit forward, and watched

As the first timid snowflakes fluttered down to the ground.

The purity of their simple white contrasted to the terrific storm of colors in the sky.

There was nothing gray about that first snowfall —

In each snowflake a piece of the sun lit up the ground

In the sky above, the brilliant reds and pinks full of fire tumbled into the gentle blues:

An abstract reflection of the deepest reality painted across the largest canvas in the universe.

The further the days plunged themselves into the nights, the more could be seen.

To the eyes of a child, the vastness of the delicate scape felt scared and alone.

Yet it was in those remote moments of light that the stirrings of life lifted themselves from their dormant chill

And cried out to be seen.

Knobs of chapped bark and fragrant pine needles played colors off each other

Like two symphonies vying for the same childish prize.

The still water in the pond beneath, not quite frozen over but strong enough to stand against the wind,

Turned the landscape back on itself.

Staring into that mirror, the matrix of empty maple branches and snowdrifts laced the facade of the majestic Berkshires soaring behind.

The humbling image staring back was extraordinarily introspective:

Each resemblance reflecting beyond the imperfect blemishes and attempting to understand their life of the past season — what lived, what died, what was born, and what dreamed.

Trudging through the silent carpet of snow, that story stung as the bitter winds slapped it in my face back and again.

Each gust chased the warmth from my cheeks as tiny cottontails burrowed deep in the crevasses of my wrinkled eyes and bare ears.

Now, broken ground and shards of timber blot the hills and separate the land in an ever changing puzzle, Altering the familiar air that lifted my young spirit and cradled it.

They say the story is dying, never to reveal its secrets again.

But the free winds blowing through the deep roots of the forests beg to disagree.

This new winter may have erased all the color from the surface

but white is the first color: beneath it, a storm of life and excitement waiting, just waiting.

Elemental

Joni Keaton

ROCKVILLE, MD

"Copper 69874."

The nurse stood in the doorway, patiently gazing around at those who sat in the room. Her eyes seemed to be reading who they were, what they were made of. Copper stood up slowly and walked carefully toward her, her eyes shifting nervously down, right, down again. She looked back, her mother nodding approval, and identified herself to the nurse. She was led down several winding hallways, the walls all bleach-white and the lights too harsh. They turned a final corner and stopped in front of a room.

"Please wait inside. Doctor K will be in shortly."

With that, Copper was left alone. This was her first harvest, and her nerves were on edge as she examined the items in the room. On one side there was a large poster explaining the history of the Elemental System. It proclaimed the salvation it offered, how the growing of elements inside people was what allowed life to continue. There was a picture of a child with a cartoon bubble proclaiming the words: "My name is Xenon 249. That was the element selected for me to grow, and I shall faithfully provide the xenon that will sustain us."

It was a phrase she was familiar with, recited from a young age, but with the name replaced for her own. Copper thought about the nurse and the name tag that had been pinned to her shirt, which had displayed in bold letters: Arsenic 11326. It was her experience that people named Arsenic did not tend to live very long, despite assurances that this had nothing to do with their element. But either way, elements were selected randomly and distribution was fair, which was another thing she had always been taught.

A tall man walked in the door

then, a pair of slim spectacles balancing on his nose.

"Copper."

He shook her hand firmly but said nothing else. He busied himself with the instruments in the room, arranging several metal objects on a counter and checking the readings on a machine before coming back over to her.

"I am going to give you a numbing shot to eliminate any pain you might feel. There will be no anesthesia, so you will have the chance to see inside yourself, to see what your contribution to society is. I am obliged to say that you are now an official member of it."

With that she felt a sharp pinch in her left arm, and then immediately felt nothing. The doctor made her lie down on the table in the middle of the room, and in a few swift movements with a scalpel had the layers of skin covering her abdomen peeled back. It was difficult to see looking down her chin, but she could just make out the small terrarium inside of her. It was nestled where other less vital organs had been, her appendix, spleen, and a section of her small intestine having been removed years ago. The doctor picked up a small pair of shears and began clipping at a bronze-colored substance, cutting away at the metal stem. He placed the carefully collected substance onto a small tray on a cart beside him, collecting all but the root of it. When he was satisfied with his work, he picked up a vial containing a murky green fluid, and, using a dropper, let six droplets splash into the small garden inside of her. This would prepare her for the next harvest. Then, as methodically as the rest of the procedure had been, he stitched her skin. Finally, he spoke.

"See you next month, Copper."

He injected another shot that brought her nerve endings back to life, and made to head out of the room.

"Wait."

The doctor looked back at her, puzzled.

"W-why," she began, "why can't you just grow them in labs? The elements? Why are we the soil in which they must grow? Isn't it an awfully big hassle for nothing?"

Chuckling to himself, the doctor turned back towards her. It was apparent that her question amused him, and he seemed to be mulling over how best to answer this brash girl.

"Where do you live, Copper?"

"The Pennsylvania countryside. Near Blue Bell." Copper struggled to keep her voice even, trying to ignore the strange smile creeping over the doctor's face.

"Not such a place exists as country, my dear. Call it what you want. But it is all concrete. All barren. That's why we're where we are today, why you have such an artificial organ with such artificial things in it."

"But now, I won't let your question linger. One word answers it entirely: corruption. The process of collecting the elements is, as you say, tedious, but safe. Safe from manipulation, safe from people willing to risk humanity to sate a materialistic desire. You see, we're all connected in this funny way. The ink in your pen could be composed of a girl your own age living halfway across the world. But our dependency on one another is ever pervaded by our skepticism of the human race. Infuriating, isn't it?"

All she could do was stare at the doctor, and it occurred to her then that K, in Doctor K, stood for potassium.

"Good-bye, Copper."

The doctor left the room then. And she listened to his receding footsteps as they echoed in the halls, getting further and further away. She sat for a few minutes, pondering his words, and then left the room herself. She took the back exit that led into the alley behind the building, and slouched against the wall, closing her eyes.

She plucked at the stitches marking her side, and wondered if the next wire she handled would be made of her.

Trabajadores del Tabaco: Cubans on the Cusp

Warren Kennedy-Nolle
BEDFORD, NY

The smell of tobacco was the first thing that hit me. It was as stale as an old attic, but as promising as dank cellar soil. We stopped alongside a frayed frame *secadero*, or tobacco drying house, and got out to explore. We were just outside Vinales, in the heart of Cuba's tobacco territory. It was harvest season now, but stout, green stalks were drooping from drought. Three *trabajadores del tabaco*, or tobacco workers, glanced up from the fields and slowly made their ways through the dry rows. One wore no shoes, the other only the soles of worn-down flip-flops, and the third, a pair of worn ebony boots the shade of his skin.

"Hola, mi amigo," one of the men said to Frank, our guide, who answered briefly, heavy in his own Paco Rabanne aroma. In Cuba, Frank told us, everyone was family. By the looks of Frank's potbelly, it was hard to imagine he had any relation to the stick-figure tobacco workers. Frank's signature sunglasses (Louis Vuitton) glared under the late March sun, while sweat dripped off his head like off a glazed ham. From the time he had picked us up at the airport, he had bragged about his rich clients like "Mr. Nabisco," who left him with big tips and standing invitations to their yachts. The *trabajadores* eyed us warily.

"Qué deseas?" They wanted to know why we were there.

Traveling on the required academic visas, my family wanted to learn everything about Cuba, including tobacco agriculture. One ironic benefit of the 1962 American embargo was that all produce grown in Cuba was perforce organic. Denied Dow and DuPont, Cuban farmers had to rely on manure for fertilizer, so the food

was healthful. For some time, we peppered the workers with questions. How do you dry it? How much money do you make? How much does the government take?

They demonstrated the process of hanging and drying the leaves, each as big and brown as a baseball glove. First, the workers strung together the day's crop on twine, puncturing the stems and skewering each leaf, careful not to damage each one. The full skewers were then placed between poles stretched across the high warehouse ceiling. This would air-cure the tobacco, leaving it tanned and with a nicotine concentration. Roughly 70% of Cuban tobacco is grown in the rich Vinales valley. At the end of the fermentation period, the government takes 90% of the best crop. The remainder is sold to tourists or locals (Baker).

"How long have you been a tobacco worker?" Frank translated, and one worker pointed at his hands, which revealed his gnarled, furrowed history. His fingers were caked in a tar-like, gluey substance that stank and looked like it wouldn't come out no matter how hard the scrubbing. Calluses crested the top of the palm from picking tobacco leaves day after day. Another *trabajadores* was fifty-two, but he had the features of someone twenty years older. His hair was graying and receding. His mouth was pinched, and when he opened it to speak, there were large gaps, some stained black, like his hands. After every shy answer, he asked, "Comprendes?" His eyes crinkled up when he talked, as though we were in the way. When I snapped a shot of them, they all looked at the ground, almost apologetically.

While we talked, all three *trabajadores* emptied pack after pack of their Cohibas. What fumed from the corner of their mouths might have been made from the tobacco they picked and sold for nearly nothing. Once exported and refined with chemicals, it was

shipped back for them to purchase at nearly 1.2 CUCs (around \$2.00). They consumed what they made even while it consumed them.

Yet tobacco has always been a mainstay of the Cuban economy. While we were there, we were often approached by *jiniteros* who tried to get us to buy cigars for smuggling back into the U.S. Before the Revolution, the expensive smell of hand-rolled Petit Upmanns filled Havana cabarets and casinos like the Tropicana and the Capri. Catering to the usual vices of gambling, prostitution, and drugs, such places offered a chance for well-heeled Americans to rub shoulders with mobsters and movie stars. The nightlife was immortalized in the many black and white photographs of Errol Flynn, Ava Gardner, and Lucky Luciano, framing the lounge at the Hotel Nacional. While Ernest Hemingway made his daily visit to La Floridita and La Bodeguita bars, the mass of Cubans were like the *trabajadores del tabaco*: poor, illiterate, and powerless.

With one stroke of the pen, Fidel Castro changed all that in 1959. He nationalized industries and closed down the vice operations. Starting in the island's "Oriente" three years earlier, Castro first organized rebels who overthrew the corrupt Batista regime, which had cooperated fully in letting the mob-run hot spots flourish. With the revolution came abuses, but also free, quality medical care. Castro's literacy brigades were the greatest legacy of the era. Cuba now boasts a 99.8% literacy rate.¹ Cuban citizens can now study to the level of a Ph.D, as long as they pursue a degree in an under-represented field and attend a local school. They only make \$20 month, but that money goes far in a socialist country. I wonder if these revolutionary benefits will remain as the country sidles over to an American way of life.

Perhaps the most ironic product of the Revolution concerns

its most rebellious professional, the legendary Argentine doctor, Ernesto "Che" Guevara. After winning the crucial battle of the Revolution at Santa Clara, this Marxist served as minister of industries and head of the Cuban bank. Although he sought to ally the Soviet Union with Cuba, he later criticized the Soviets for capitulating to the Americans after the Cuban Missile Crisis; for this, he was exiled from Cuba to start Revolutions elsewhere. But Che believed in his ideals of labor, discipline, and self-sufficiency. Soon after, he became minister, the asthmatic cigar smoker insisted that the plan for an elevator in his new office building be scrapped. After all, if *he* could walk up the flights, so could everybody else. Never mind his office was on the fourteenth floor.ⁱⁱ

Now a giant hanging of Che's beret-clad profile, along with that of fellow Revolutionary, Camilo Cienfuegos, frames the outside of that office building in Revolutionary Plaza. In the years following his CIA-execution in Bolivia in October 1969, Che was forgotten. Then, after his body and the piranha-eaten remains of the other revolutionaries were finally found and returned to Cuba, his defiant image was resurrected to the cultural forefront. Once an embarrassment to the regime, he's now a popstar, hip epitome of '60s attitudes. Martyrdom sells. Tiny Santa Clara now draws thousands of *turistas* who flock to the pyramidal mausoleum for Che and his doomed *compañeros* from the Bolivian mission. It was opened in 1997 with Castro's lighting of an eternal flame, and attached to it is a museum dedicated in his honor.

Moreover, in every town, Che's handsome, determined face appears on billboards along with his sayings like "*Hasta la Victoria siempre*" and "*Libertad o Muerte*?" The man who loathed imperialist Yanquis is now the ironic icon of capitalism. Plastered on license plates, mugs, and

tee shirts for tourists, his cigar-chomping visage has become a critical means for Cubans trying to eke out a living.

Like second-hand smoke, what comes around goes around. Nowadays, Cubans are trying to sell anything to tourists as they readjust to the thawing U.S-Cuba relations. Whether it's a lone Bayamo pedestrian cooing, "Americanos, I LOVE Americanos," or buskers peddling handmade wares of carved birds, woven reed snakes, or needle pointed tablecloths, many Cubans are desperately trying to find a path to the prosperity that lies just ninety miles off their coast.

Their isolation has left them with rarely a phone (forget about cell phones!). There is usually just one T.V, like one doctor, assigned to each village whose buildings more often than not crumble into ruin. Instead, Cubans enjoy using their doorsteps and take full advantage of other simple ways to socialize, found, say, in long bus queues. What will happen to these intangibles when Cubans are lured by the coming flood of gringo goods?

Blissfully oblivious to the dangers of the digital age, young men focus for now on selling an antiquated Cuba aimed at baby boomers of the Ricky Ricardo era. They proudly pastel-paint their 1950s cars, relics from before the embargo. But it's true that these diesel-belching antiques are all they have to get around with. While visiting Havana, my family was one of many that took part in the nightly auto-tour caravan along the Malecón, the otherwise deserted, famed Corniche of Havana. The *turistas* perched tipsily on the trunks and cheered wildly. But we were tourists, too. In a hot pink convertible Chevy, we joined the nightly caravan of Ford Edsels, Chrysler Plymouths, and Hudson Hornets that cruised Havana. With a Cuban car ownership ratio of only 38 cars per 1000 (as opposed to America's

rate of roughly 800 to every 1000), you'd think we'd raise eyebrows, but we hardly raised a local head (Sainsbury and Waterson 465).

These big fins deposit their elderly tourists at Vedado and Old Havana restaurants like El Patio, where one can sometimes catch Frank Sinatra songs being performed in Cathedral Square again. Each day, American tourists totter along, repeating Hemingway's pub crawl from Hotel Ambos Mundos to La Floridita. His hotel room is a shrine you can visit, replete with his typewriter, straw hat, and a model of *Pilar*, his beloved boat. This kind of tourism is all the country can offer; it is the decade they have been stuck in. But how can you go forward when you always have to look backward to make a living?

Probably only those like Frank, and not the *trabajadores del tabaco*, will benefit. Even so, our Frank was no Frank Sinatra. He boasted his ancestors were key players in the Revolution, printing leaflets in Santiago and running guns for Castro's uprising at Comandancia de la Plata, Castro's guerrilla compound in the Sierra Maestra. Yet Frank could just as easily disavow this past, telling *turistas* in the next breath how his Chinese grandpa ran a store that the revolutionaries closed down, reducing him to begging, not much different from the tobacco workers we were now confronting.

It was almost sundown and they were shifting their feet, probably expecting a tip for the time taken. Even though I wanted to help them, I didn't want to appear patronizing. I gave them a 20 CUC note. They never told us their names, and they were surprised that we wanted to shake hands. But I like to think that we took some of the sludge off their hands, and, for a moment, took some Cubano culture into our own. Then they asked Frank, "Hey, why don't you bring more tourists to us?"

The Other Girl

Emma Bruder

FRANKLIN LAKES, NJ

He and I sat on the tall rock wall, about six feet up off the ground by the deck of boats. His feet dangled over the edge, and I sat cross-legged, facing him. The sun was setting, as the moon and the stars were revealing themselves, but we had to go a curfew to make. We had been talking for hours, sharing stories about family, friends, and other silly randomness.

“What time is it?” I finally asked, dreading the answer.

“We’ll go in a minute,” he murmured while his light brown eyes beckoned me closer.

Our fingers touched when we both reached for the sweet Twizzlers concealed in my lap, as we weren’t allowed to have food in the auditorium during recitals. I felt a tinge of electricity, or maybe I just imagined it. I drew my fingers back, slowly, giving up the heat from his skin. His strong hand found mine again, grazing my skin and bringing it back to him. A smile turned on my lips, and I glanced at him. He stared at me. The butterflies swarming in my stomach batted their wings as I realized I had never felt anything like this before.

My head leaned against his strong shoulder as we sat on the wooden swing and looked out onto the lake. I could hear distant shrieks of happy toddlers swim-

ming and splashing. The weight of his arm around me felt as necessary as oxygen.

“I ended things with her. She could never be more than what she is right now to me. I only want to be here with you.”

“I trust you,” I told him simply. He had wormed his way around my shield.

Feeling his chest expand and contract against my back with his breath, I snuggled as close as possible to him on the couch. His long arm tightened around my waist, and I shifted my head to make sure I didn’t crush his other arm. When I told him I didn’t want to move too quickly, he smiled at me with those dimples and wonderfully light eyes and reassured me as I was drifting into a peaceful sleep.

“Don’t worry, I can wait. I like you... a lot.”

I dropped my bags and lay on the carpeted floor, too tired from the hot summer day to move. Even with my eyes closed, I could feel his gaze on me. I struggled to keep a smile off my face as his footsteps came closer, and he bent down next to me. I readied my lips for the soft pressure of his. Instead, I felt a sudden grasp on my waist as he started to tickle my exposed stomach. He was too big for me to fight back. It was no use. Shrieking and laughing uncontrollably, I was on a new kind of high.

We walked hand-in-hand around the fair, appreciating all of the performers and booths. There were artists creating masterpieces with chalk on the ground, bead-ers surrounded by pre-teens, a string quartet serenading us, and much more. Stopping at an origami booth, I watched the younger kids folding paper and shook my head when he suggested we join them.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. I’ll help you with it,” he persisted. A quick peck on my lips eventually melted my resolve. His swift hands finished his crane in less than two minutes, and the woman aided me with my mess of a project. Embarrassed, I held up my crooked monstrosity by his pristine bird in flight. He folded my small fingers around his crane, gently took mine from my other hand, and paid me an infectious smile. I kept the gift on my nightstand, hoping it would grant me dreams of him.

The dreams were beautiful, but I woke up too soon. I knew it; the sunlight was too bright.

“Is everything okay, with us, I mean?” I asked as we walked back to our friends who were waiting for us.

“Yes, Emily.” He draped his familiar arm around my shoulders. “I promise, I’m a pretty honest guy. I’ll tell you if something is up.” I believed him, or at least I desperately wanted to. I was too paranoid; I didn’t want to lose this.

I asked after fifteen minutes of silence, “what are we even doing?” We were sitting on the same porch with the beloved swing, but this time we were on two separate chairs.

“I don’t know what you’re saying.” His voice was monotone, and his eyes faced the lake.

“You know what I mean. We haven’t even touched each other in a week.”

“What do you want?” He still wouldn’t look at me.

“I want things to go back to how they were. Us, that is.”

“Okay.” Standing and picking up his red bag, he claimed, “They will.”

I sat next to him at the table with our friends. Even there, he felt miles apart. Turning my head to look at him, I hoped he would return my gaze. This time, he was staring straight ahead.

Saying goodbye to him when he moved was still difficult, even though I knew we weren’t together anymore. Maybe him leaving made our separation all too real for me. My friends and I got together to see him off. I gave him one last hug before he turned and walked away, breathing in his scent and imagining I could hear his steady heartbeat.

I found out about her a couple of weeks later, through a picture on social media.

Happy one year, baby, I love you

Instagram screamed profanities at me beneath the picture of the happy couple. Their arms were around each other, and his magical eyes smiled at the girl with fiery red hair. My head began to spin, and my ears rang. I was at a fancy restaurant with my family, so I excused myself to go to the

bathroom.

My heels felt like knives on my unsteady feet. I braced myself on the sink. Who was I? Certainly not *this* person. I couldn’t be. He couldn’t be. I didn’t think he was capable of that, that I was capable of it. My disbelieving eyes travelled up to the mirror, staring at the other girl.

Take another swig. Change into a more exposing shirt. Wink and touch the boy who has the swagger-filled saunter and confident hair flip. Anything I can do to get you out of

my head. Look for something to fill the void where the weight of your arm used to be, make it all go away.

I wonder if she knows about me. Something to dull the racing thoughts through my head of the role I served for you: merely a distraction, a notch on your belt. I’ve already burned all the traces from that time that I could: the red paper crane we exchanged and the pictures are ashes, but you’re still so present. Yet in a completely different world.

So cheers, here’s to hoping that you are waiting for me at the bottom of the bottle.

Other

Catherine Wise

WAYLAND, MA

On Christmas morning, grandma makes *Arroz Caldo*, says it is healthy, good for bones, and scoops for me. She tells me to never forget I am Filipino, that Asian is not good enough. She tells stories

of herself, my age, a little girl unaware she was in a warzone – remembering how she was chased down a dusted street by Japanese soldiers, guns in hand, until she fell

and rolled down a cliff, split her head. Her brother found her, and carried her back home. They had to leave, her mother said it was not safe – she left with only one thing: a recipe book.

Mother scoffs, remembering her childhood of straight A’s and home on weekends. She left one time, wanting to be white for a night, not knowing she would be locked out, sleeping in cold.

She pulls me aside, says grandma isn’t able to understand that times are different, always growing with my bones and body – says I represent my own past, that we each make our stories

from stories we choose to hear. I see what I’ve made: nose of mother, mouth of father. I am a mix, a mutt, and belong to no breed, a disrespect to grandma.

Every day I become less and less of the past, forgetting the *Arroz Caldo* and the Japanese, forgetting to get straight A’s because I choose not to listen – lost in a future that has no past, and never will.

The Spur

Tom Yuz

PARAMUS, NJ

On Sundays, Josh stole Mason's newspaper. Even as the sun climbed the sky's clouded ladder, Josh was awake and halfway through his blue-jelly pop tarts. Passing through his petite living room, its sagging upholstery aging like fine wine, he gave himself a nod in the porcelain-framed mirror. He liked to think it was subtle, a move that only he would be able to notice.

Stepping outside, Josh cast his glance past the Victorian columns of his porch and into Mason's garden. From his vantage point he could see a plaid shirt crawling around three Autumn Rouge bushes. Hurricane season was particularly quarrelsome last year, and Mason's week-day labors vanished like melting snow. Suddenly Josh could no longer hear the crunching of defeated leaves, and up popped Mason's black-bearded face.

With a tempered sophistication, Josh waved at his neighbor, and Mason gestured back grinning. So began a war of attrition. His back pressed up against a mahogany chair, warm from the sun's caresses, Josh smoked a Marlboro while Mason molded the freshly-watered soil of his garden. Taking a deep breath, Josh could smell the bitter scent of cigarettes

congesting the air. The way he saw it there were two types of people: the environmentalists and their smoking next door neighbors.

From the corner of his eye, Josh saw Mason press his forefinger into his lower spine, as if searching for what lay below. Heaving himself up, the gardener gazed intently up and down his front lawn, willing the summer to resuscitate what already grew a season before. From the way Mason's chest widened like an umbrella, Josh knew that some primitive pride continued to make him flush with excitement. Ears piercing the stale air, Josh felt his heart pound rhythmically with the tapping of Mason's steps up his awning's granite stairs. A crooning jingle marked the opening and closing of Mason's Romanesque steel door, and Josh wondered if Christmas had arrived early.

Shoes drumming on the pavement, Josh walked straight to Mason's driveway, bent under an old 2004 Subaru hatchback, and picked up the Sunday Review that always inadvertently rolled there. It was a grand scene.

Turning and strutting on a rubber heel, Josh stopped to peer at Mason's pillared cottage. Though chiffon curtains blocked his view, Josh still painted Mason's living room with the colors of his imagination. He pictured Mason's wife making spicy pumpkin pie or slipping a needle masterfully through an azure scarf or maybe even flirting with a canvas and a brush. Then,

Mason's wife began to have chestnut hair, propped up in a messy bun that spilled slightly in the front, alsoelvish ears and a Grecian nose. When she suddenly attained eyes like honey-dipped pinecones, Josh rushed back into his house and slammed the door behind him. Yet again he found himself recanting the haunting images of his ex-wife, an exercise that threatened to snap the thin thread of his already tender will to live.

Calm now, Josh shot himself a nod as he made his way to the unfinished kitchen. In the corner was an antique, scallop-stripped Elizabethan chair. Declaring a silent victory, he slipped out of his clothes and sat down on it, reading the newspaper. He never understood why his wife adored the damn chair. After all, Queens had backsides just like everyone else. Shaking his head, Josh scrutinized the black-inked letters encased on the unfeeling white background. Five years reading a stranger's newspaper and nothing had yet to change. From the blanched faces of those touched by the blind hands of disaster, to pictures of modern Machiavelli's drinking apple martinis, living vicariously through the thin leaflets became quite redundant.

Sighing, he folded the paper over and approached his calendar. The marble tiles of the floor chilled his feet as he searched for the date. Blue ink handwritten notes, outlining restaurant dinners and Midtown plays packed the margins. A strang-

er might have considered this the schedule of a businessman in high fashion, or perhaps a renowned actor. In reality, the calendar was four years old, its columns heavy with the ink that embodied Josh's life. A snapshot of the past and a reminder of the future, the calendar masterfully tricked time to be available in the present.

Today is Sunday the 21st, Josh thought. Searching for the third Sunday of July, Josh found the box labeled Sunday the 24th; as the years change, so do the dates describing them. As a matter of fact, the only persevering constant proved to be Josh. Index finger pressing down on the date's number, Josh read, "Meeting with Daren, 4 o'clock behind Van Swan Park."

Seeing Daren's name stirred in him the deep, placid pools of memory. Friendship forged in the fertile soil of childhood begets a root stronger than steel. To Josh, Daren provided an internal corridor of courage. In the midst of his divorce, the one memory infused in Josh's mind is Daren pushing aside an open door at 3 A.M. with a bottle of beer and a sympathetic ear. Daren had given him the calendar that day, and Josh had kept it since.

Gingerly Josh reached for the key taped to the calendar's spine. Returning to his kitchen, Josh unlocked a thin mahogany cabinet and looked inside: indeed he needed to refill his stockpiles of Cuban cigars. Although Josh thought clever platitudes the bane of intellectual reason, he still conceded that business was business. Without tribute to pay the bills, he would have no place to lean back and read his stolen newspapers.

Reluctantly putting on his checkered Polo and matching khakis, Josh made his way to the 84 Pontiac resting in his driveway, rust plaguing the maroon edges of its doors. Purposefully, he played his alternative rock station 103.9 at a volume of exactly 23. In the past he would have had to keep it down in the car, with a volume of 20 serving as both a physical and moral ceiling. But now, there was only the ghost of a woman sitting in the passenger seat, and ghosts, fortunately, could not turn dusty knobs.

He saw that Daren's bumblebee Mustang convertible was already waiting for him in the lot of the park as he slid beside it. Josh could hear the persistent buzz of the Mustang's engine floating over the narrow gap between the two cars.

"Hey there, Daren, how are the kids?" Josh asked, taking note of Daren's eyes, with bags under them like crushed blueberries.

Shrugging with an air of blasé indiffer-

ence, Daren said, "been better, but we'll be fine real soon. Planning on leaving any day now."

Josh shrugged off a faint shadow of unease, knowing that Daren had been planning on escaping the city for years. Family was not meant to wander apart.

"Good to hear. I know you have a client at 2 so I won't hold you for long. Do you have the sixteen pre-rolled?"

Daren picked up a yellow Curious George tee, wrapped up like a hitchhiker's knapsack. Josh could see the grey face of a cigar sticking out curiously from the side. Nodding, Josh motioned the package over.

Teeth grazing his lower lip, Daren threw the bundle over, and Josh felt a heavy thunk as it fell into his lap. Scanning the empty parking lot, Josh quickly passed over two neatly bundled stacks of 20's through his window.

A pin would not have had time to drop before Daren gunned his engine and took off. Dazed for a moment, Josh's immediate thought was to wonder if Daren would still make the reservation for dinner on Tuesday. Hands as tranquil as the surgeon's scalpel, Josh undid the top of the knapsack and looked in. There was a half empty glass bottle of pink lemonade and one Cuban Cigar masterfully tucked in the shirt's ragged edges.

Sighing, Josh smiled to himself as he thought to call the police, feeling forgotten phantoms of panic grazing his stomach. He almost found it funny that Daren had chosen to steal from him, a habitual thief and his brother by anything but blood. After so many years of nonchalant thievery of Mason's belongings, Josh had become desensitized to the concept of possession. Betrayed by and literally divorced from the past, Josh allowed himself to be stranded in the routine of the present, and complacency thus robbed him of a future.

But still, to have Daren, oh Daren, steal from him thawed the fragile encasement of his nerves. To be cast aside by anybody else would have been akin to a bug landing on his windshield, but with Daren it was like looking at himself through the fragments of a broken mirror.

At that moment, Josh knew that Daren was gone, really gone. For the first time, Josh ran his fingers over memories he once thought were sealed in the cages of his subconscious; here Daren had cracked a small hole in a wall he once helped to build. In a flash, grief and loneliness festered for four whole years blazed in a volcanic eruption, and the telluric spew of raw emotion left Josh feeling numb.

Aa distant church bell bellowed, marking the passage of another hour, the death of a moment, the protracted progress of a falling sun. And abruptly Josh was calm, flying lightly above despair on his thin wings. Life like whiskey flowed from the September dawn into Josh's frigid shell, and as the heavens burned above him he was elucidated, a dreamer awaking in the real world as all dreamers do.

Josh turned the key in the ignition, and put on 103.9 at a volume of 23. Reaching over to the passenger compartment, he pulled out a jade lighter and gently burned the cigar's expressionless face. Slipping out of his Polo, he put on the curious George Shirt, and admired his slightly exposed belly in the mirror. One last time he would reap the merits of a distant past.

For a while he alternated between smoking and listening to music, until eventually he could no longer hear the faint buzzing of Daren's Mustang in the parking lot, until he could no longer see the disapproving woman sitting in his passenger seat. Then he gunned his own engine and drove home, one hand on the steering wheel and another on the bottle of pink lemonade.

By the time he saw Victorian columns glinting in the sunlight's dying rays, the bottle was empty. This time, he walked into the house and stopped by the mirror, hands on his three-legged console table. Josh nodded nice and slow, for the whole world to witness, unmasking his very existence in the nascent air.

Taking the newspaper and tucking it under his armpit, Josh picked up the calendar on his way out, planning on addressing his wife's chair later. He went around the back of his house, and, lifting a tin cover, threw the calendar in the garbage.

Shoes drumming on the pavement, Josh walked straight to Mason's driveway, bent under the old 2004 Subaru hatchback, and dropped the Sunday Review as if it had inadvertently rolled there. Eyes glinting with traces of subtle bemusement, he noticed now that Mason's curtains were drawn aside, revealing a poorly lit living room furnished with two archaic, plush couches and a plastic dining set.

Josh paused for a moment, just watching the house, waiting for something to happen. In his mind's eye, he felt himself close the shades to a home that he once yearned to emulate. Then he slipped out of his clothes, and lay down right in Mason's garden. Like the August Rouge, he felt as if he was being born anew.

A Study in Silence

Leandena Dankese

LEXINGTON, MA

Today I saw someone in the hall. Passing by,
I turned my head to down the other end —where the mirror sits on the wall.
We did not smile at one another,
disappointment reflected.
At noon I heard someone at the door. Staring at it in fear,
the mail fell through the slot. I forgot the mailman has a key to the gates.
It wasn't till the iron swung shut and the truck rattled away —going tat tat tat—
that I ventured near.
The grandfather clock rung
— breaking the silence.
I thought I heard someone in the parlor, the pitter-patter of feet.
But I am alone here.
These old houses have soul they say. It feels too empty for me.
I wonder if houses get lonely too.
Then maybe, in silence,
we'll be together.



Untitled

Nolan Stern
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ



Indigo

Alaina Johansson

I hate that I did this to myself. If I had known how permanent it would be, maybe I would've at least done it less but maybe not. My motives were never very true. It turned into a fun way to see red instead of the release everyone else valued it for. It was my teenage version of alcohol, and alcohol is what replaced it. It was just like vodka. It burned, but I got a buzz. So my teenage self drank it again and again and again.

The worst part was that I wasn't sad like all of my friends were. I will honestly admit that I did it for the attention, for the affection. I did it so that I would be spoken to the way I spoke to others. I want-

ed to be cherished and cradled in the arms of another, a lover. My intentions were not pure, but I got what I wanted. And eventually, I got what I deserved.

Most people will tell you that, either way, I'm screwed up in the head. They're right to an extent, but I didn't do anything out of self-hatred. I did it out of a need to fit into a group that was so tight you could only make it in if you were just like them. So I became just like them. I saw a group of people my age who had infinite love and support for each other, so I wanted to take it all for myself. I was malicious back then.

But in the grand scheme of things, I received a heaping portion of consequences that are still working their black magic on me to this day. I tore into myself. I

mean, everyone was doing it so why not? But now I can't wear short sleeves without looks of worry and disgust. I can't walk by families without mothers pulling their children out of my way.

Why the hell did I do this to myself? You know, hindsight is such a haunting thing, but it's worse when you have a body full of regrets. Weeks at the beach have turned into thousands of horrified glances landing on my hips, my wrists. Every date I go on turns into a pep talk and a false promise to call me. Every one night stand becomes a midnight confirmation that I'm not acting like this to feel better and a waste of a seventeen dollar romantically scented candle.

I used to be able to look in the mirror without contempt. I was

a stupid teenager, single-minded. I didn't hate myself. I didn't hate myself. I didn't hate myself. I don't. I don't hate myself. I made an ill-advised decision that changed the course of my life from easy and sultry to heavy and nothing but talk.

Every kiss I am granted is tear-filled, pity drenched or stopped short of its climax. Every touch riddled with anxiety, I am held the way you might embrace a lit stick of TNT, the way you might caress a knife pressed against the fragile skin of your neck. A smile in my direction is reminiscent of the grin given to a gun directed toward your heart.

If I had just known I wouldn't have gotten addicted to the toxic habit. If I had known I would have a love made of autumn and lukewarm, orange fire. He would warm my indigo fingertips with his breath but he would never burn me. He would see my body and ignore the wreckage of another time, a time before him, a time before the version of me he knows. He would run his fingers up discolored hips as if they are pristine, as if they are not what they are. He would run his fingers up my hips as if they are not evidence of my barbaric brutality.

He would not trace my scars with his fingers. He would not kiss them as if he could make my inhumane actions disappear with the help of his saliva and pink lips. He would not make me tell him things that are not the truth just so his ears could hear what they want. He would never look at me as if I were a monster that crawled out of his closet one night.

This man, the man of my wildest dreams, the man that does not exist, he will understand me on such a level that it pisses me off. He will be cliché in his love for me. He will laugh when I tell him my sins and I will get mad at him but then I'll get over it. Because

his laugh will be contagious, and I will die knowing it was his disease that killed me. He will make me content. He will make me okay.

I will walk around in nothing but a bra and panties. I will look in the mirror and see through the spots of ice scattered about my tan limbs. I will talk to him about the mess in my head. And he will listen. He will listen to me.

I will live in a dream.
I will live in a dream.
I will live in a dream.
I will find my dream.



La Banda

Abigail Walker
MARBLEHEAD, MA

"Geovanni, who came from the southern state of Puebla and plans to return, said banda is both a distraction and a way of staying connected with Mexico." -The New York Times

In Queens, New York, after the sun slips, a man, thin, scraping griddles, longs to taste his grandmother's chalupas and beans, instead ducks out from his \$12 an hour apron and into snakeskin boots, carrying him to La Boom, a local club that can't stop thumping to El Recodo's Mexican hip-hop.

Strung together by a seven year old promise that he'd sit alongside his mother again, the young man unravels to the hissing of a snare drum, the bottled up honking, of trumpets which got him seeing double, drunk on la banda, and he's brought back to Jomulquillo with its roads that always coughed up dirt from the back of their throats, spewing gravel as cars rattled across their crooked spines.

But nightspots deflate at around 1AM when these cowboys, fathers, sisters, waiters, dishwashers are slowly sucked back to their drowsy apartments in Elmhurst-- a twenty minute, 2,000 mile walk. He treks up 58th St, swears he feels that heat of the desert sun frying his back, like leaving home and sneaking into this country, now with a similar shuffle across Queens Blvd, crouching behind scrawny shrubs, scrambling over foreign hills, his long, hard haul north, every Sunday night.

Violet and I

Madison Wade
LIVINGSTON, NJ

She was America's sweetheart, Daddy's little girl, Mommy's perfect angel. Titles that don't illustrate her; illusions she has displayed in order to save face, her face, her real face. I watch as she sits at the dinner table slightly uncomfortable, while conversation swarms around her. She is stuck in her own head thinking about how her 1 D, 2 C's, 3 B's, and 2 A's aren't sufficient enough for her dad. How the lack of drive to succeed has slowly drained from her developing body and been replaced by a "I'll get to that later" attitude.

Her eyes often have a hard time meeting others because she thinks if she makes eye contact long enough then her truths will spill out of her like a running faucet, and her lies will surface and everyone will know how fraudulent she has become. Her lies include: "I'm fine," "I was invited but can't go," "I never really liked him, I'm glad he would prefer her over me," "I'm just really tired." I know she would rather be sarcastic and dry instead of embarrassed and alone. I watch as she fiddles with her hands and scratches at her skin as if she is trying to remove lichens. She doesn't like my friends. She prefers a Friday night consisting of french fries and rom-coms drowning beside her in the sea of blankets instead of drowning in a sea of loud music, bodies on bodies, and the burn of liquor.

The best part is her naivety. Let's set the scene: boy meets girl, girl falls for boy, girl settles for being "one of the guys". Two years later on a Ferris Wheel at the town carnival, boy and girl kiss, boy says that they should define "what they are" after they "hit third base", girl says no, and the boy says, "we'd better stay friends."

Again, another story, different ending: girl meets boy, boy says that he thinks of her "as a really good friend", girl settles for being the best friend. She sits up on Friday nights waiting for him to get home so she doesn't have to worry about who his mouth is getting to know, because if he's home then she knows that he is alone. The next morning she is rewarded for her friendship and devotion with

the stories of how his mouth met whatshername's mouth and how gnarly the whole thing was.

One more story for the books: dark rooms, loud music, clouded and tainted air, a boy and girl dance and laugh and use their hands to memorize each other's curves and flaws as if their bodies are poems written for just their eyes. Like a trust fall she stands, arms crossed and ready to float into his awaiting arms, but he can't catch her fast enough, he can't protect her from the harsh reality that he never loved her.

I watch her sit up in bed and run her hands over her tired face. I watch as she notices flakes of herself littered across her hands like pieces of a puff pastry.

The dam that she has spent years building behind her eyes breaks suddenly. It starts to rain on my face. She cries as the memories of him lighting his cigarette and littering ash coated kisses on her arms and thighs bust through the tight vault they were secured in. He was supposed to love her. I vowed that there wouldn't be a next time; I would never let her feel pain again.

Saturday night a year later, her phone vibrates off the metal nightstand. "You up? I'm missin you right now." The digital prison guard reads 1:50am. The time in relation to the message breaks her, shatters her and the tears come faster this time than the last time. She reaches for a problem solver while I scream a plea for her to stop. He doesn't deserve her saltwater kisses, he doesn't deserve her body or mind or soul. She tells me she's okay and is heading to bed, but before I turn around and fall into my silent abyss, the blue light glows and a message is sent. "I am missin you too rn." is all she says.



Mixed kids thanksgiving

Youssef Ahmed Mezrioui

Peace is what I want
Happy family eating at a table
But what do I get

apartheid inside my own house
angry tremors
rusty painted crowbars which look like pimp canes
rusty axes

death threats
drama

my racist brother yelling pick my cotton
and me staring shocked talking him out of insanity
saying you are Hispanic
what if you got blamed for throwing cake at a car assumed you did it cuz u were poor meaning jealous at some ordinary man only different in color said mow my lawn like Hispanic man your mother

and he says uncivilized black people are meant for the n word
i said its all in your word choice
just remember that not all good black or Latino persons are rich
chilling in the hills or nameless in offices
and not all the poor people are causing kills or drug deals for profit

yea look at me i know ima dumb porch monkey
a moving target a prophet eating watermelon
there is order in the middle of the chaos
and there are righteous poor people in a bad rich city

I grow ashamed of the whiteness within me
Whats up with ya brother man
He's drunk buddy
pissing on the tar and asphalt and concrete and grass
pretending to protect us just to fight
over what
over what
cake on a Mazda
over color

i roamed the night shrugging my shoulder
i told him shouldnt say things like that thats rude
Generalizing the whole spiel
I can't change how he feels I can pray though

Sorry I ruined your thanksgiving god bless
trudged dragging my feet off the porch
I began tearing up biting the corner of my mouth in anger
a car stopped I was afraid who would come out seeking vengeance
It was some Africans darker then me
They said are you okay kid
good just wanted to make sure you were good

reminded me to lift my head up
we are all god's people
I am against racism in all forms
saying only uncivilized in society the n word
he got called white trash he has a trade job working for people
my brother is racist and wouldnt sit in the seats of
the corporate slave masters
because we are all slaves
they have us divided against ourselves
lets unite and change the system
This isn't a threat
Just consolations
Our ancestors death wish
The humble desire
to live in a house beside the road as a friend to man and not hurl the cynics ban nor sit in a scorners seat
that's the only poem my granddaddy knew when he tried to talk to me about poetry to relate to my interest which was heart warming
Tired of the nostalgia filters I wanna rest in peace
shove fingers in my ear don't kill my vibe
let me rest in peace and die

Time & Space

Jackie Young
Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ



How to Be Popular

Allie Reed
DOVER, MA

Don't pick your nose; nobody likes the nose picker. When the teacher says it's naptime, stay awake. Make sure others know that you stayed awake. Refuse to sweep up your crumbs after lunch. Have a best friend. Pressure that friend to sweep up your crumbs after lunch. If you ever throw up in the classroom, you're done. The kids will tease and you'll be referred to as "the girl who puked" for the rest of your life. Have a crush on Manny. Although you don't like Manny, everyone else does, so it doesn't matter. Manny always carries Chap Stick, and you should like that. Never wear the same shirt twice in one week. Even if it's washed and clean, don't wear it again; the mean girls will smirk and say, "Didn't you already wear that shirt this week?" and then you'll say, "No" and tuck your chin to your neck but they always know. Accumulate a group of friends, and always sit with them at a full lunch table. On some days you might just want to sit alone and read your book during lunch. You

can't. Giggle with your friends during class, and when the teacher says, "Girls, what are we giggling about?" giggle some more. Buy a trainer bra. Tell all of your friends. When everyone else buys trainer bras, buy a bra with cups. Tell all of your friends. Start dating Manny. Besides, you've grown to like him from pretending to like him. Hold hands whenever possible. Beg your parents for a cell phone. Get a cell phone. Place it under your desk between your legs, and text your best friend something mildly funny. She'll crack up. Tell your friends whenever you're on your period, and complain about how crampy you are, even if you're not. Invite Manny to the Sadie Hawkins dance. Even though it might be awkward, slow dance with him. Put your arms on his shoulders and let your eyes drift. Never stand by yourself. Kiss Manny. Ideally, you should be the first of your friends to kiss a boy. Tell them about the kiss, so they'll circulate the story through the school. Make sure this kiss happens in middle school. If your first kiss is in high school, keep it to yourself. After the age of 15 they'll make fun of you and say things like, "I just lost my virginity, and you still have virgin lips." Don't raise your hand in class. Hold your head up with the palm of your hand at all times to appear uninterested. If you

show too much interest you'll be called a nerd. You don't want to be a nerd. Shop at Forever 21. Start straightening your hair. It'll take away the frizz that makes people tell you to "go back to the circus." Wear makeup, but don't ever wear bright colored lipstick. Mascara and eyeliner will suffice. Go on a diet. Publicly check the calories of every piece of processed food you eat. Break up with Manny and tell your friends how clingy he was. You know he was really just in love with you, but they don't need to. Get bad grades. You're allowed to take honors classes, but you have to have at least one bad grade. Tell your friends you don't care about it. Get grounded by your parents for it. Go to every dance. Wear short shorts, even if it's cold out. Dance with multiple boys, letting them come up behind you and touch you however they'd like to. Let them place one hand on your right hip and work the other up your shirt, while their bulges rub against places you don't want them to. Never say no. If you tell them not to touch you, they'll call you a prude and point at you and laugh and you'll be known as the prude for the rest of your life. You have to be a slut because people like sluts and they flirt with sluts and flirtation is the gateway to popularity. Point out Manny to your friends. He's standing all alone with his hands in his pockets. You may want to be with him and tell him that you're sorry and that you love him. Laugh instead. Shop at Urban Outfitters. Don't be caught dead shopping at Forever 21. Wear leggings multiple times a week. Reference Mean Girls wherever possible. Play a sport, and be good at it. People can't wrap their brains around someone who simply doesn't like to play sports. Go out every Friday night. If you ever want to stay in when everyone else is going out, say that you're grounded. That's the only excuse. Start drinking coffee-- you hate the taste, but you'll get used to it. Go farther than anyone in your grade has gone with a guy. Next time, go even farther. Never say no. If you say no, you'll forever be "the only girl who ever said no." Leave Manny in the dust. Go out with your friends twice a month. Take pictures every time. If you didn't post it on Facebook, it doesn't count. People won't believe that you're having fun unless they see a picture to prove it. Go to a party. Drink. If you don't get drunk, pretend. Oh. You're not skinny? Don't bother.

The Columbiners

Lauren Toscano
DRUMS, PA

Growing up as a teenage girl, I'm aware of all the stereotypes that bombard others like me, saying we have posters of boy celebrities plastered all over our walls. I'm not going to deny this one; I've got Edward Cullen, the boys of NSYNC, and the Workaholics boys on my wall. But some girls have pictures on their wall that would disturb people. School shooters. Namely, the Columbine school shooters.

I don't even know if I was alive for Columbine. Maybe I was. I think I was probably a year old. It doesn't matter. A majority of these so-called "Columbiners" weren't alive for Columbine. They weren't even ideas in their parents' heads at that point. Yet, there are so many girls posting all over social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr about their love for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the perpetrators of the mass school shooting in Colorado.

Serial killers are interesting, I guess. My mom used to be obsessed with the OJ Simpson case and other crime cases. When I was in sixth grade, I watched a documentary on the Zodiac killer, and I was so intrigued by it. So, yes, I understand the *interest* with serial killers, but these "Columbiners" go one step further. These girls write lengthy fanfictions describing what it would be like to date Dylan or Eric. They edit pictures of them with hearts around the shooters' faces. They create different scenarios, like, "Imagine if Dylan carried your books to class for you!" They obsess over the home videos made by the pair. They've watched every documentary that even *mentions* Columbine. They make homemade t-shirts with "Natural Selection" and "Wrath" written on them, just like the ones Eric and Dylan wore when they committed the atrocity. I've even seen two girls on Tumblr post pictures of their Columbine-related tattoos.

And my question, as a seventeen-year-old girl who is the same age as some of these obsessed girls, is *why*? Don't they know that these two teenagers shot up a high school and killed thirteen people and injured many others? Don't they know how these victims' parents must feel day to day? Don't they understand that what Eric and Dylan did was disgusting and disturbing and will go down in infamy?

But they're cute. Dylan and Eric, I mean. They're cute. Typical grunge-y boys of the '90s who wanted to rebel against "society." Combat boots. Backwards baseball hats. Trench coats. Band t-shirts. Long hair. They were poster children for the grunge movement that blessed the 1990s. They looked like typical kids. If you look at regular pictures of them, pictures where they're not dead and bloody on the library floor or firing guns in the woods in a home video, they look like regular teenage boys. Dylan's nose is too big for his face. Eric has a baby face. They don't look like killers. They look like extras in a teen movie. I guess if I didn't know they were soulless killers, I'd think they were cute, too, maybe. But I realize and understand how wrong their actions were, so naturally

Toil and Trouble

Julia Withers

STATEN ISLAND, NY

These women stampeded through my doors like pink pack animals. Clutching their pearls and waiting for some release that felt more human than pills and parties.

Nancy arrived twenty minutes later. Until then the girls had held on to their drinks like they were life preservers, sipping slowly to give the impression that they weren't dying to swallow the whole thing down and be done with it. When Nancy floated into my living room, the women attacked her, swarming like lepers around Christ. She had the key to their happiness, the plastic products that would solve all their big important problems.

Charlotte as usual remained at my side, breathing her rancid breath all over me. I wondered if she could tell that I was sweating or if she knew why.

"How rude of her not to greet you," she spat into my ear. "And you're the hostess."

"I am, aren't I?" I forced out. "Do me a favor and offer her a drink. I've got to check on the, uh, boiler."

"Look at you, modern woman! Jim's back now. He should be taking care of that sort of thing!" She ejected a jarring laugh. I tried to ignore the lipstick on her teeth and stretched my lips into a convincing smile.

I rushed into the kitchen and down the stairs into the basement, forgetting to switch on the light beside the doorframe. At the bottom of the stairs, I felt a hot breath against my neck. I inhaled sharply.

"It's been nearly half an hour, Dorothy," he growled into my ear. I exhaled deeply, fumbling for the chain on the overhead lamp. I pulled so hard I nearly ripped the bulb out of its socket.

"You have no right to talk to me like that, Johnathan," I said calmly. My voice was steady, but my pulse was quickening. I could feel the 1-2, 1-2 speeding up in my wrist and neck. A warm body closing in on mine. Clutching, childish hands.

"Don't I?" he asked, playfully building courage.

"No, you damn don't!"

I spun around, pushing his 6'4" frame off of mine. I was surprised, then, by the volume of my own voice. I wondered if Charlotte could hear me or if she was ignoring me in the cocktail I had so dotingly made her.

"I'm not your woman," I said, quietly this time.

"But aren't you?"

His voice was angry that time. Angry that I would even dream of daring to stand up to him.

"You told me they wouldn't be here for

I do not feel inclined to think about them every night before I go to bed or write their names all over my math notes.

Thanks to Google, I found there's a fetish for serial killers. It's called *hybristophilia*, which is apparently when someone (usually a woman) is sexually aroused or attracted to someone (usually a man) who has committed atrocities like murder, rape, or armed robbery. This kind of stems off of one of the ideas that psychopaths are generally attractive to others because of their so-called charisma. However, I don't think these fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year old girls fall into this category. I think what attracts these young girls to the killers is the "bad boy" aesthetic.

Obviously the two were "bad boys", According to some glossy teen magazine I'd read when I was fourteen, girls like "bad boys" because they feel like they can "make them good." Dylan and Eric smoked, they got drunk, they partied. And, oh yeah, they shot up a school. Some girls feel like they could've changed them. Some of the girls on Tumblr think that if they were seventeen and attended Columbine in 1999, they could've gotten Dylan and Eric to fall in love with them, and maybe they wouldn't have shot up the school.

And oh yeah— *why* did Eric and Dylan shoot up the school? Revenge. Well, Dave Cullen, author of the book *Columbine*, thinks Eric was a sociopath and felt virtually no emotion, but the bottom line was revenge. They were misunderstood. Got bullied a lot. They were left out. In one of Eric's journal entries, he said something along the lines of, f-k you guys who never invited me to things. Something like that. One time, people pelted tampons covered in ketchup at Eric and Dylan and they didn't tell anyone, they just sat in class, covered in ketchup stains. Some people at Columbine say that they never saw Eric and Dylan get bullied, which infuriates the Columbiners. They say that the people who never saw bullying were the problem. The Columbiners insist that Eric and Dylan were broken, driven to commit such a deed because of the merciless bullying they faced by their peers.

And, yeah, that seems like that probably was the motivation. The only real people who know the true motivation are the police who confiscated the "basement tapes" which were videos shot in Dylan's basement where the two say their goodbyes and express their motives. But the police aren't releasing them, which just pisses off the Columbiners even more. Sorry.

While the revenge motive strikes pity and makes sense, it doesn't make it right. We've all been bullied. Some more than others. Some *way* more than others, and they haven't shot up a school. I think it really boils down to which kids are getting the help they need. Mental illness is such an unspoken topic in today's society. Yeah, Eric might've been a sociopath, but how would we know? He'd never been evaluated. It's not that his parents didn't care; from what I've read it seemed like his parents cared a lot. It's just that at that time, no one really thought about that stuff. Mental illness stuff. Now, we kind of have a grasp on it, but it's going the opposite way. Today, *all* teenagers think they have depression and anxiety disorders, and it's making it harder for the people who actually do have these things to get help because they're looked at as attention seekers. It's just as bad as it was in the 90s in some ways.

But can we martyr two teenage boys who killed thirteen people just because they were bullied? No. But does that mean we can identify with them? Obviously not the school shooter part, but the bullying part. We can identify with being an outcast. We can identify with having one friend or maybe no friends at all. We can identify with these boys in a lot of ways, when you think about it. Their teenage angst. Their sense of style that might've been rejected by their peers. Feeling lonely for no reason. And when you think about Eric and Dylan as just that, as just two boys, you do sympathize a little bit. In a way, the system failed them. In a way, we failed them. But it's too late. Thirteen people lost and too late.

But think about it— what are we always bombarded with on the news? Crime. Murder cases. Drug busts. Abuse. Robberies. We live in a society where we place murderers on the same platform as attractive celebrities. We're fed this mentality from such a young age— as soon as we're old enough to read or understand what's going on on television. "Charles Manson" is as much as a household name as "Kim Kardashian."

I don't know how long this Columbiner thing will last. For the girl who has a picture of Eric and Dylan tattooed on her ribcage, maybe forever. But for the rest? Who knows. Some of them take their obsession so seriously they say they want to go into the forensics field. And maybe that'll work out for them, or maybe they'll realize working in a forensics field doesn't mean you work with cute school shooters all day.

another hour, Dorothy. You're the one with no damn right to do this to me."

My skin flushed red every time Johnny said my full name like that. Jim only ever called me Dot because my full name reminded him of the Wizard of Oz and he didn't like the Wizard of Oz because his first girlfriend Katherine broke his heart in the cool dark of the cinema in 1939. That was eleven years ago, and Jim was a shell-shocked shell of himself now. I made him Pina Coladas because he said they taste like the Pacific where he was stationed and he said in his sleep that part of him died when he shot that old man for being out past curfew, when he yelled at that damned old man to turn around and show his hands but the man was deaf and kept stumbling along, and Jim got nervous and pulled the trigger. He got drunk and he told me he loved me but not as much as he loved the way he felt before he had blood on his hands. And he held me, kissed my neck, put on the T.V. and never ever called me Dorothy. Hadn't a single time since our wedding.

Still, I controlled myself.

"I never asked you to lie to Charlotte, and I never told you to come here," I stated defiantly. My eyes look over the furious body of the Adonis before me. I've seen him in the most vulgar, most human of ways, a thousand different times over, yet every smooth surface, every ripple, fold, scar- his body looks so deliberate. It is wrought with intention, carved precisely and cast in bronze.

"I want you to leave, Johnny. I can't keep doing this."

Johnny looked bewildered, his eyes crackling with electricity.

"I'm not leaving, Dorothy."

"I'm not asking. Get out."

"No."

"You're a pig, Johnny. I should tell Charlotte."

"Tell her you seduced her husband? That you're a whore?"

"It takes two, Johnny. You know damn well that it takes two."

Johnny was silent, bristling with rage. He looked mad enough to burst out of his own skin. He took a forceful step forward. I took a timid step back.

"I love you, Johnny," I whimpered, pressed up against the cold brick of my basement. Of Jimmy's basement.

Johnny took a step back and looked at me with what I could only call disgust.

"You don't love me, Dorothy. You love that you don't have to hear me talk in my sleep. You love that I don't cry when we make love." Johnny shook his head. He looked dejected. "He used to talk in his sleep during the war, too, Dorothy," Johnny said. "Something about the Wizard of Oz. We all called him the Cowardly Lion."

I wanted so badly to fall into his arms

right then.

"I love you, Johnny, because you don't lie about how much you hate women," I whisper. "You never lied to me about how much you hate me. I've always known, Johnny. That you hate me, and you think you can use me like this. You have no respect for me, or Charlotte, or anyone. You have a little bit of pity for Jim; you feel bad because he does cry when we make love, because the only person he ever killed was an old man by accident, and because he can never be as good as you. No one's as good as you, Johnny, are they?"

Johnny was silent.

"You're the only authentic thing in my life," I confessed. "None of them have any respect for any of us but at least you don't try to hide it."

"You're just as vapid as the rest of them. You think you're so much better because you say you're not like them? Because you don't pop your pills in private, and you sleep with your ugly best friend's husband? Someday, the boys in blue are going to find you like they find all of them, with your brand new KitchenAid toaster in the bathtub and your dead hands still clutching a bottle of brandy."

"Johnny—"

"You hate women too, Dorothy. It's sadder because you're one of them."

"Johnny—"

"I'm going now," he whispered hoarsely. "Bye, Johnny," I called after him as he crawled out the basement window.

"Bye, Dot."

I didn't have a name, this time, for what I was feeling. Johnny was slamming the window shut, and I was wringing my hands.

I headed up the basement stairs to join Charlotte and the girls. *They might be witches, but at least I have a coven*, I reassured myself. At the top of the stairs I reached for the closest bottle on the counter. For all I knew, it could've been gin or water or cough syrup. I let myself listen to the familiar sound of the cap unscrewing and wrapped my lips around the bottle. Holding it by the neck, I tilted my head back, tasting nothing, feeling nothing. I wasn't ready to go back in there but the *ooh's* and *aah's* of my guests were summoning me back. I was the hostess, after all.

Through the crack in the kitchen door I could see the girls gathered around Nancy and her tupperwares, just as I had left them. It was Salem in rose quartz and powder blue. These girls were the kind of witches who rode Dyson vacuums instead of broomsticks, traded in their bonnets for beehives.

So I smoothed my apron. *They might be witches*, I think to myself, *but at least I've got a coven*.

A Thing of the Past

Katia Hardesty
SADDLE RIVER, NJ

My full name is Ekaterina Alexandra Nurgatina. My name was changed to Ekaterina Rose Hardesty when I entered America, since my new parents had no idea of my complete name, and I was too young to tell them.

I was born in Siberia, Russia on July 17, 1997. The apartment we all lived in consisted of four rooms. My learning to walk along the corridor took me from wall to wall and bump to bump until bruises covered my body. When I thought I got a handle of it, the next thing I knew I was on the ground again, but that was just the beginning of my life and the least of my worries.

Two years passed, and I began to realize the world around me more vividly. I came to notice who the people in my life were and what use they were to me. My mom, I called her *Mama*, my grandma, *Babushka*, and my grandpa was called *Dedushka*. My dad, well, there was no such thing in my life. I have always thought he left *Mama* when I was just getting born, but that was just a supposition. I have never given a thought to why I didn't have a papa since it was the norm.

My grandparents were somewhat wealthy and could keep a family of four out of hunger for a period of time. *Babushka* was always good to me, always took care of me and helped my mother get through tough times, but I feared *Dedushka*. He was in a wheelchair and had no legs, well, he had legs but he had to put them on, and then when he put on legs he was a monster that hovered over me and stomped around like an elephant. I always ran and hid from him every time he had legs. How could he possibly have no legs one minute and legs the other? No words could ever describe my life in full detail then.

It was a year after that day that my pleasant days became a thing of the past. I became hungry and yearned to have food in my stomach every morning, so I'd sneak early to my grandparent's room to check if they were sleeping. Then I'd go behind the door where their coats hung and reach into their pockets to pull out money. I'd sneak back out and run to the store to buy bread, since that is all we could afford. After I bought it, I'd sit on the ground near the store and eat it. People stared at me, but were not surprised, since it wasn't uncom-

mon for a girl to sit by herself eating bread in the poor neighborhoods of Siberia. On my way home I'd run, afraid to get stopped by bullies.

After I arrived home one of these times, I heard sniffing and soft talk out of my grandparent's bedroom. I walked towards the sound, where I found *mama* crying in my grandparent's bedroom. I was afraid to go inside because I had never heard my mother cry so loudly, but I entered anyway, only to find her kneeling down by *Dedushka's* bed holding his hand, as *Babushka* comforted *Mama*, but still wept over my grandfather. I was unsure of why everyone was crying until I crept closer to look over my mother's shoulder.

His body was still and his face and fingers were a light shade of blue with wrinkles all over. His face showed no emotion as his right hand was placed upon his belly and his left was held by my mother. I never spoke a word to them, afraid to cry myself. I just stood there next to them until men arrived to check the time of death and plan a burial.

The next day I was told to dress and get ready to leave. There were black cars sitting outside our house. I saw a big, shadowed figure in the back seat that almost touched the ceiling of the car. I was told to get into that car and ride all the way to the cemetery. I then realized it was anything but ordinary. I was riding with a dead person next to me. Halfway through the ride, I gathered up the courage to touch it and say a prayer in my head, thinking I will never have him this close to me again. The ride soon came to an end, and we all went inside a church to hear a priest say his blessings and send him to heaven.

Months passed, and life just turned into a party. *Babushka* started to drink incessantly. *Mother* and *Babushka* stopped taking care of me. They seemingly forgot that I was in the room and looking at everything they were doing. Drinking had become an everyday thing from that day on.

Then one night, the worst of the worst happened. *Mama*, *Babushka*, and I were at a party that had plenty of liquor to go around, people were there talking and dancing and laughing like idiots, and *Babushka* and *Mama* drank a lot. Russians tend to do that, they drink a lot and then pass out until the next morning with a hangover. The night gradually progressed, and I sat on the couch to sleep.

In the middle of the night, I felt a figure lay next to me, putting its head on my shoulder, but I was too tired to wake up

and check who it was. Morning sun shone through the window the next day, and I started to awaken with the heavy feeling of a person up against me becoming more and more real. As I opened my blurry eyes, I looked over, and my grandmother was beside me sleeping soundlessly. Her face was blurry to me and misshapen, but my vision slowly came back. As it sharpened her, face become more clear and visible. Her wrinkly face and closed, veiny eyes were against my shoulder, wrinkling her face even more. Her face was blue-colored. Her hands were still, as was the rest of her body. There was no chest rising up and down. I jumped up, pushing her down on the couch with a sudden jolt, making her fall gracefully upon the couch. I looked at her with fear and pain in my eyes and started to shake her to wake up her un-beating heart, but nothing was working. I screamed and wailed for her to awaken and say one more thing to me, but nothing came from her sealed mouth.

I ran out of the apartment where *Mama* was, and when I ran through the doors of our apartment *Mother* was laying in her bed sound asleep. I shook her awake and screamed to her that *Babushka* wasn't moving. She sprang from her bed and ran out the door in her bed clothing, not caring about me. But I couldn't blame her, I wouldn't think about anything but my own mother at that moment in time if I were in her place. As I slowly made my way to where *Babushka* was, I saw my mother sitting by her near the couch, embracing my grandmother and hysterically crying.

I once again could do nothing but watch and reflect on the memories of her and me together. Like the one time where she told me to go buy something yummy like candy, but instead I went and bought a loaf of bread for the family. Little things that she did for me I tried to do back for her. That day changed my whole life from bad to worse.

One morning on my way to the store, I met a couple of girls that looked a little older than I, and they somehow became my friends. These friends were the only people that made my life seem somewhat normal, but that didn't last long. I walked with them to the store that morning and suddenly I heard a scream. "RUN!" I didn't know what they meant, so curious me looked back to see who was chasing us. They grabbed my hand and dragged me into a sprint. My feet couldn't carry me that far, and soon my legs and lungs gave out. I have never had to run before in my

life like that, and I had to slow down which made them slow down too. The boys that were behind us grabbed one of the girls and dragged her away with them. The other girls looked on, terrified, as if she was already dead. From what I could see, they were dark skinned and tall, about nine or ten years old. No one saw that kidnapped girl after that day, and I never got my food.

Two or three days after the incident, I met up with the girls again in the usual spot. It was kind of warm out, enough to not need a coat. Out of nowhere, the kidnapped girl showed up, torn and beaten down. She had a bruise around her eye and God knows if there were bruises on her body. She was covered up, so no one could know. Secrets were passed around which were not shared with me. I was told I was too young to know, but my eyes didn't lie. I saw those boys had beaten her badly. I became afraid to be around those girls again, yet something about them kept drawing me in, like they were my saviors, stopping

me from being alone.

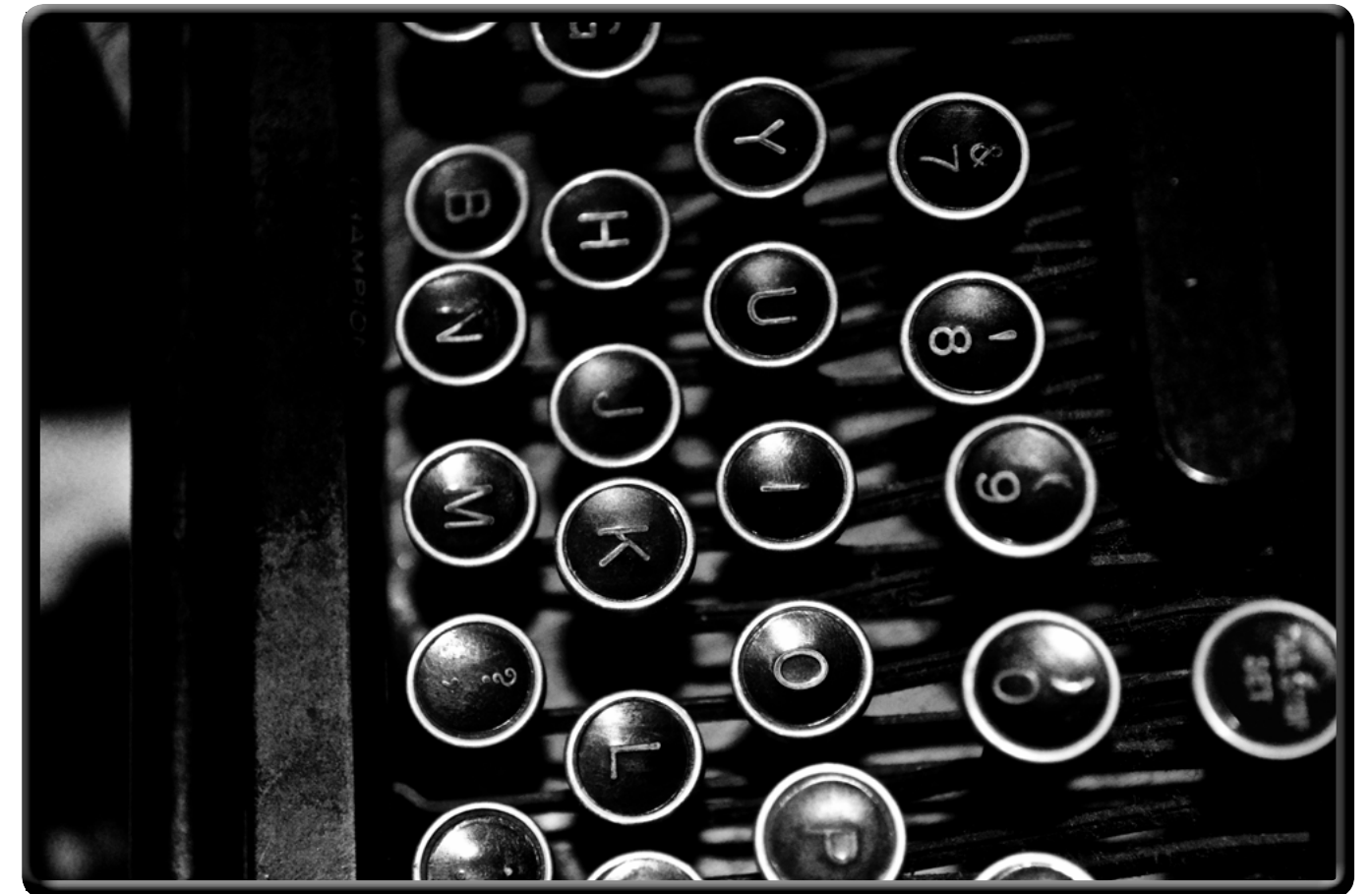
One afternoon when the girls and I went for the last walk to the store, they screamed "Malchik!" and sprinted, grabbing my hand once again and dragging me along like a rag doll. This time when I slowed down, they didn't slow down with me, but let go of my hand. I continued to run, but not fast enough, and before I knew it, they got me. I tried to resist, and wiggled and screamed, but no one helped me. The other girls all just looked back at me with terrified and apologetic faces. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I wondered if they were going to beat me up like that poor other girl. They spoke to me slowly but in a hard way, demanding that I follow them. I was now surrounded by two boys in front of me and two boys behind me. I couldn't ditch them, since they were faster and I couldn't hide, since they all were watching me. We walked up to a fence they told me to climb. The first two boys climbed over, forcing me to follow. I

tried to think my way out of it and suggested that the boys should go first since I would be slower. They were smarter than me and forced me to climb over. On the other side, we approached a pathway, and I saw my friends standing there. The boys stopped in their tracks and were about to strike when a tall, womanly figure confronted them. She was a teenager, but not a young one. She had a body of a teen but a face like an older woman. She said "let her go," and reluctantly, they actually did. I ran to the girls, and the boys disbanded. I never figured out who she was, but I was so extremely grateful she was there.

See, I was the ugly duckling in this situation, the runt in their litter of puppies. I don't even remember if I was scared for the girl who got beaten. Those girls were the barrier that protected me from the outside. They took me in like I was one of them, even though I wasn't. No one can know how it felt to be me. I was different, and I still am, because of the past.

Fingerprints

Rebecca Kanaskie
TAMAQUA, PA



Black Sheep

Abigail Walker
MARBLEHEAD, MA

Uncle Patrick's picking his nose, his grubby fingers half way up inside his face, and he's flicking it at his mother-in-law again. I've been hearing about his table manners for years, my father relaying stories whenever Mom left the room. Not that she didn't already hate her fat, parasitic brother with his white trash wife, white trash that's sitting out on the deck, trying to mooch Grandpa of a couple grand for this new project she's starting, some huge, original, world-spinning, hillbilly bullshit. And with every slap of her fist on the picnic table, each shake of a cocktail, his Alzheimer's progresses. She'll bark him right into a nursing home.

My father and I can laugh at the homeliness of Uncle Pat's absent-minded, snot-covered mother-in-law because we'll never need to see her again. She's sitting at the counter, talking to my sister about a time she went to Paris and had the finest pastries. Now her lipstick stains plastic cups, and there are clumps of mascara on her eyelids. She chews with her mouth open, her crooked teeth far from subtle. So I can't picture this *mademoiselle* sipping coffee or ordering *foie gras* with her flawless French. Dad and I just dip carrots in ranch dip and wonder where on God's green Earth she got her hair done.

But we have to knock it the hell off because we just got here,

and Jesus, we're going to make us look as awful as my mom's sister's new waistline. Boy, has she had a tough couple of decades. She bought a one way ticket to the city after ditching the 11th grade--no way her potential could fit in this rural town, let alone an algebra classroom. Besides, New York City would make her a star, one of those women you see holding perfume bottles on highway billboards, and she couldn't wait to live in a four story penthouse with an infinity pool and her own strikingly handsome butler. But she ended up sharing a run down, 400 square foot apartment with a man who she claimed to love. Though, once, he came home late, smelling like cheap scotch, slammed the door, punched a mirror, and dislocated her shoulder, so it only took a couple weeks for the bathroom walls to close in on her, push her into a corner, and empty her medicine cabinet with a glass of water. She woke up alone on the floor the next morning, still breathing.

It's been seven years since I've seen my three cousins, all boys, all at least five years older than me. The last time was Thanksgiving at my parents' house when I was eight, when my manners were as bad as Uncle Pat's, when a table full of mashed potatoes and homemade dinner rolls and pecan pie wasn't an anomaly, when my then six-year-old sister and I would poke fun at our cousin's acne. We made a point of sitting next to each other just to feed the dog turkey underneath the table, to wipe

the slobber on the good tablecloth and then deny everything when my mother asked why the dog was throwing up in the backyard.

Now Mom's talking to her sister in the corner, and my sister is still stuck at the kitchen counter. Dad's on the phone outside in the driveway plowing gravel with his feet and kicking up dirt and dust. So I sit on the couch with my cousins, saying nothing, unsure if they'd noticed me or if I'd want them to. We're playing a videogame, or they are. It's the kind with targets and guns and dead animals. You could tell these boys never get off their asses; they're as filthy and unmotivated as their goddamn parents. All of them live at home still, none went to college or even looked for a job, a perfect example of what I can never become, the most rotten a person could possibly be. The one in the middle shoots a lion in the back of the head with his rifle and asks me to pass him the orange soda.

But then my sister begins talking to that mother-in-law, and my name comes up, something about the time I started skipping classes, not the whole story.

And pulling myself out of the sofa, I say, "Quit it with that."

She turns around in her seat and towards me, her back to that mother-in-law, and spits out, "It's true, I heard mom talking to dad about it the other night."

"It's none of your business," I tell her, "and besides, you--"

You could hear the screen door shut, my father walk in, his stom-

ach churn. And once his face turned as red as Drunk Uncle Patrick's, he hurled out, "Girls, just drop it."



But she wouldn't stop talking about it, couldn't keep her mouth shut, so I walked over to the kitchen counter. Maybe I just wanted to defend myself to Mother-In-Law, to grab a handful of trail mix, to put my dirty plate in the dishwasher or maybe in the sink, to let the yappy Chihuahua back into the house, to stretch my legs. But a wine glass shattered on the hardwood floor. The thwack left White Trash's fist hanging unnaturally above the picnic table, and her eyes grazed my cheek without moving her head. So she sat with her mouth still stuck mid-sentence as Grandpa's wrinkles unlaced themselves in the clean cut silence. The sound zapped my uncle up straight with his shoulders stiff above his ears, and his Poor Excuses looked away from the television screen, stood up from their couch, and stared at my back-- not the glass. I sunk down to floor, thought about biting into the quiet with an explanation, and I sent my hands rattling towards the shards of glass. But I froze once I found my head hovering above the feet of Mom's broken sister. And as I looked up to see her expression, the way she must've been frowning down at the girl who skipped school, all I could see was her fork still stuck in that pecan pie.

Honey

Liam Maguire
HUMMELSTOWN, PA

What early morning light there was crested from beyond the cityscape spires and fell slant and dusty across the diner. A single patron sat in a booth and huddled over his table, sipping coffee. Dregs and water. Typical fare. "What'll it be, hon?" The patron glanced up, grimacing. Notepad and pen in her hand. Face pallid and fleshy, corpse-like. Bloated. Five days old, maybe a week. She smiled, dead-eyed, flashing false teeth barely glued to their blotched and speckled gums. Her sockets a ruinous waste, blue-lidded and watery. Too many late nights. Too much coffee. A thick and sagging throat, turkey's wattle. He thought a moment and said,

"Oh, yeah. Eggs, corn beef hash, some toast. Another cup, too."

"Sure thing, hon. How you want em?" she said.

"The eggs?" She nodded her head.

"Poached, thank you."

"White bread, whole grain, or...?"

"You got rye?"

"I think."

"Then rye."

"Okay hon," she said, turning around and waddling off. The man shook his head and looked up at the ceiling. Black patches of furred mold grew among the folds of corrugated tin. A fan *chink chink* faintly. Where the columnar light fell on its spinning blades, yellow motes of dust swirled. The man yawned and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and set an arm back on the boothseat and looked outside.

"Here you go, hon," the waitress said, setting a steaming plate of eggs and corn beef on the tabletop,

the bread neatly balanced on the rim of the plate. The man gave his thanks. She poured more coffee. He gave his thanks again. "Sure thing," she said.

The water from the eggs had soaked the corn beef hash and it had turned to something else entirely. Mush or meal. The eggs were tasteless. When he was finished with them, he pushed the plate back with his thumb and sipped his coffee.

"Everything good, honey?"

"Yes, hon." The waitress began to turn around, stopped. The patron watched her.

"What was that?" she said.

"Can I ask you a question, honey?" He said. She looked warily at him.

"Sho thing."

"Do I look sweet to you?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Huh?"

"Would you consider me sweet looking?"

"I don't..."

"Then why honey?"

"What?"

"If I ain't sweet, why call me honey?" he said. She sputtered, raising her hands.

"What'chu going on about?"

"Honey. Honey, you know, bees? Buzz buzz. Sugary. Cheerios." A dim flicker of realization crossed her face.

"Yer crazy, hon."

"There it is. Hon. I'm not a barbarian at the gates, am I?"

"How does that do with a thing about me speaking?"

"Do I look like Attila the Hun? Huh, hon? Am I the Scourge of God?" Her goitered gorge wobbled as she shook her head. "Then why call me hon?" The man looked up at her, tilting his head.

"Yer crazy," she said, waving him off. He simply shook his head and said nothing.



Bright Eyes

Hannah Robertson

CLARKSBURG, NJ



Good Morning and Goodbye

Bobby Bruce

PARK RAPIDS, MN

Waking up to coffee aromas on any morning is my preferred way of waking up. Throw in his wonderful cooking, and it was perfect. Sometimes, I could see the steam from his delicious cooking come through my floor vent from the kitchen underneath. In the morning, he always had our favorite radio talk show on, and we'd laugh the morning away.

I had to be up early that morning, I knew that getting adequate sleep was important, but I never liked getting up at seven on a Saturday. In fact, I hated it. Not to mention, how bad I was at getting to get myself up, but he said he'd wake me up. The thing is, he didn't wake me up that morning, there was no coffee brewing, no radio booming, and no steam rising from my vent.

Weird.

Maybe he overslept too.

My room started upstairs, in a loft. The stairs are a steep journey, but a journey well worth. At the bottom of the steps were two doors. One to the outside and the other for the bathroom. Our bathroom was never pretty best to leave it undescribed. Our house was shared by guys, so you can guess it wasn't always the cleanest. Our kitchen, cluttered with dishes, was pretty average. Sink, stove, fridge, but it did have the boombox, which we'd jam out with on nights where he wasn't tired. Our kitchen, dining room and living room were all connected. From the dining room, you were like an all seeing eyeball. Yeah, our house was tiny, but with all of us together, it didn't matter. We made the best of it every day. We had the most fun in our living room. We didn't have cable or internet, so our TV time consisted of rentals and Friends marathons.

My favorite thing was that he would always make the tastiest popcorn. Some could say, that this was my happy place. Not anymore.

That morning, last October, was eerily cold, heck, maybe he forgot to turn the heat on as well. October wasn't as cold to him as it was to us, and the old fart was getting more forgetful. I walked into the quiet kitchen to see my brother preparing to go. We both had to be gone by eight, so we could make it to Bemidji for Upward Bound, a college prep program, by nine. We didn't want to keep Jada waiting. I didn't honestly think I had the time or effort to make food, so gas station food sounded pretty swell. I didn't want to bother waking up my youngest brother, Adam. He would see me later. I did decide to go wake up dad and wish him farewell, maybe even give him a little crap for not waking me up. Matt told me he was in the living room hunched over the couch. What did that mean?

Weird.

My dad was well renowned for his awkward sleeping positions and his terribly bad snoring. But dad's knees were bad. Why was he sitting like that? I knew he wasn't asleep,

based on the fact that his snoring was nonexistent. Maybe he was stretching. He liked to stretch. Or, maybe he was just waiting for me to scratch his back. He loved it when I did that. . When I made it to the living room, I got the vibe that something was terribly wrong.

Very weird.

It didn't feel right, leaving him like that, so I asked him if he needed some help getting back on the couch. After about five seconds of silence, he said yeah. Silly dad. Why does he need my help? Maybe he is in some sort of deep sleep, like those episodes people have when they sleep talk and interact quite well. Coming from my

dad, I'd expect it. But he was awake... I knew that much. I started to lift him back onto the couch, except he wasn't using any effort none at all. That's when I called Matt in from the kitchen to come help me hoist our large father back to a comfortable spot. He is a big guy. I was proud that we lifted him up. Then I took a second to observe my strangely limp father. His left arm, we accidentally got it smushed under him. In any normal situation he would have yelped. I mean, it did look to be in a pretty painful spot. Matt helped him put it into a comfortable place. Dad must have really been tired to be acting like this. What was going on?

We could hear Jada pull into the driveway, and that's when we said our goodbyes. I have a rule that comes to hugging. I prefer a person to use two hands when they hug. My dad knew that. But when I hugged him, he didn't hug back. I looked at him straight in the eyes. His eyes were not focusing on mine. I told him that I loved him. I don't think it registered to him right away. But in a slurred speech, he said it back. Then Matt hugged him, and we left. When I walked out that front door, I felt sick. Something was terribly wrong. I knew that because of the staleness that wouldn't leave my mouth. We hopped into Jada's car and started to drive off. We explained to Jada what just happened the condition my father was in. The thing she told me made my heart sink.

"Call your mom, it sounds like your dad is having a stroke."

The next week was the hardest, most stressful week of my life, and that scenario of me waking up and seeing dad that way played like an endless record, haunting every second of my existence. Why didn't I see it sooner? Was I that stubborn to see my own father was in pain? He now only has use of the right side of

his body. He thinks slower and will hardly look people in the eyes. His hugs, still warm and cuddly, are one armed, but for him, I make an exception to my rule. I still blamed myself for not getting him help sooner. Somedays, I still catch myself blaming it all on me. The pain I felt, the pain I still feel, stays bottled up and locked away. It aches. But, we move on.

If dad would have been healthy, maybe none of this would have happened. We'd still be a happy family. I would still be able to visit him every weekend and have him take care of me, instead of me taking care of him. I miss the serious side of my father, the big scary guy. I miss his guidance his wise words. That side of him died after the stroke, never to be found again. He still has his humor though. I still have him. He still hugs me, holds me and tells me he loves me. Except I feel as if our roles have flopped. I tuck him in at night and wish him sweet dreams, just like he used to for me. It's as if I am fathering him, keeping him out of trouble. It's not so bad. At least I still have him... But... I miss him...

I thank God I still have him. I look at his silly grin when we drink coffee, and it makes me happy. Some mornings when I play our favorite radio talk show, I'll make him breakfast and we will sit and talk about the dumbest things like a father and son are supposed to do. It makes me feel better. I had a lot of time to look back on what happened and located the facts. Dad had bad health. I knew that. But I was so blind. Blind enough to forget all warning signs. It's all weird to think about. I try to ignore it as I sip my coffee and chat with my best buddy, my hero.



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