

insomnia



Seoyoon Lee / Interlochen, MI

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APPRENTICE WRITER

SUSQUEHANNA UNIVERSITY

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Diversity in the Desert

Emmanuelle “Ella” Sim / *Manhasset, NY*

My dreams always take me back to Dubai, my forever happy place. Whenever I picture this city in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I see warm golden sand that is so sparkly that it blurs your vision, sunsets that produce bright orange radiant light, skyscrapers stacked on beaches that continue endlessly into an infinity of unknowns. Most of all, I feel homesick for this idiosyncratic manmade city that has shaped my childhood and the person I am today.

When I tell people about growing up as a third-culture kid in the UAE as the daughter of a US diplomat, what resonates most with them is the bougieness of the place. To them, Dubai is the ultimate playground for rich kids, the Arab version of the party lifestyle in Las Vegas. Their stereotypes are not completely wrong—\$300 dollar movie theaters with reclining beds and three course meals, indoor ski slopes, 7-star resorts, diamond-encrusted Mercedes Benzes—they all exist in Dubai...but those things are not what make Dubai enchanting. The opulence of Dubai is so loud that it can mute out of the rest of the city’s identity. But I know the rich cultural diversity that lies beneath all the bling. In Dubai, where 88% of the population are expats, diversity is so normal that it’s almost boring. What makes Dubai so miraculous are not its architectural wonders or gleaming shopping malls, but the way that people’s differences are deeply respected and celebrated.

Because most Americans do not have a good understanding of the Middle East or even know what Dubai is, I often felt isolated in my own bubble after moving to Long Island, New York last year. A classmate once asked me, “Is Dubai a restaurant?” I looked at her in horror, as an unexpected shock ran through my bones. I realized then that I would never be that typical Long Island kid who has lived here since birth. I began to understand why kids sometimes distanced themselves from me and why I felt shunned because here, being different is scary. This year’s presidential election drove home another reality—that differences are often the roots of hatred. Sadly, supporting competing presidential candidates and political parties and having contrasting views on global issues can result in lost opportunities to get to know the “other.”

Regardless of your race, religion, or politics, it is easy to connect with new people in the span of seconds in Dubai. For seven years, I attended an international school where I was exposed to kids from countries all over the world. My friends were from Ghana, Afghanistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, and Sweden, to name just a few. From a young age, every single person I interacted with looked different from me, a Korean-American, and yet our bonds were undeniable. Maybe this is why I still feel

more comfortable around those whose experiences have been so unlike my own. One memorable aspect of my international school was the “Week Without Walls” program. Each year, groups of high school students travel to countries throughout Asia, Europe and Africa to engage in community-based projects. By traveling the world together and capturing moments through camera lenses, we were given the freedom to express our identities as third culture kids. I learned that third culture kids have so much to offer the world as we tend to be more open minded and accepting of different people and perspectives. We skip past the stereotypes.

My most remarkable experiences in Dubai were Iftar dinners with my friends during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month when Muslims fast and engage in community service. After sunset, the daily fast is broken with an Iftar meal. Some days, my non-Muslim friends and I would fast as well. It was our small way of showing respect to our Muslim sisters and brothers. We would then break our fast with Iftar potluck dinners. One year, my German-Persian friend prepared baghali polo, my Turkish friend served shish kebabs, my Indian friend came with a basket of 15 exotic spices, my Lebanese friend prepared kibbeh, and I brought both mandu, traditional Korean dumplings, and McDonalds happy meals. My dishes represented my Korean heritage as well as my identity as a third-generation American. This Iftar was freeing for me as an Asian American—it taught me that although my race is a part of me and determines my physical appearance, it is not my only character trait. As I looked around the table at my group of diverse friends, I knew that even though

we could celebrate our racial and cultural differences, they didn’t have the last word in determining who we were.

In America, it is difficult for children of color to navigate a world where people assume that you conform to racial stereotypes and are not worth getting to know. Because of generalizations about Asian Americans, such as the model minority myth, I’ve often felt unseen. It hurts when people don’t want to hear the story of who I am because of racial stereotypes. My biology should not be my destiny.

I recently read the article “Look Twice” by Princeton Psychology Professor Susan Fiske, which explores how modern racism and segregation have evolved into a more subtle form of unconscious bias. Fiske discusses how one’s appearance easily shapes others’ views of them, as they “rely on physical characteristics to determine whether someone is in our in-group or out-group,” preventing them from even trying to know that person. She then establishes how unconscious biases can be greatly reduced with awareness and exposure through the right kinds of social conditions, such as teamwork and school integration, that teach children from a young age and even adults to connect in spite of differences. Reading Fiske’s words, it hit me that my own life was an experiment in Contact Hypothesis, the psychology theory that states that group prejudice and conflict can be reduced through greater interaction with members of different groups. If everyone hosted their own Ramadan Iftars with people different from them or attended international schools, wouldn’t there be less unconscious bias and ignorance in the world?

A few days ago, the Burj Khalifa, the

world’s tallest building, was lit up in red, white, green and blue, the colors of the UAE flag. As I watched Instagram videos of this National Day celebration, I was reminded that this country is just 49 years old, still so new as a nation. Just as the Broadway musical Hamilton captures the exhilaration of living in a young and vibrant country, it struck me that people move to Dubai today for many of the same reasons. 230 years later after America’s founding, people today leave their countries to go to Dubai to make something of themselves through working with others from completely different backgrounds.

So no, Dubai is not Vegas. It is an extraterrestrial world of crazy diversity that taught me not only to look beneath the surface of the city, but to also look way past immediate assumptions when it comes to people. This applies to how I see myself as well. When I look in the mirror, I no longer see the fish out of water who lived in “a desert located in the middle of a war zone.” Instead, I see a uniquely American girl who uses her remarkable third culture experiences and voice to try and convince the world that everyone’s story is worth hearing.

I Forget

Jason Ball / *Apex, NC*

I forget the last time
I set foot in a park
I forget my old friends
Their, laughs and smiles and mannerisms
I forget what my grandfather looked like
He exists solely in sepia tone portraits
Painstakingly
and instantaneously printed on papers
Crammed into books and folders
I forget to even put
The bookmark on the page
Leaving the continuation of the story
To a veritable dice roll by fate
I forget when I stopped writing and painting
When worlds stopped existing
In the back of my mind
Only to bleed onto paper through a ballpoint vein
I forget what I want
to be in life
I usually forget my own birthday
Three years running
I often forget I'm perceived by others
I forget my own friends are there
And some days, oh some days
I forget my own name
Only for a split second or two
Or three or more
And I'll have a small existential crisis
In the self-checkout of a grocery store
Surrounded by equally indifferent and forgetful

People with cloth hidden sneers and smiles
and frowns
And tired sad eyes
Around the block
From nowhere in particular
I sometimes forget who I am
Driving in a car before the sun rises
To nowhere in particular
Running from monsters
That are no longer under the bed
But strapped into the passenger seat
I forget that I'm going to have to be someone
That I'll have to be an interdependent
Set of functions and beliefs and aspirations
I forget to tell my friends I love them
I forget to allow even myself
The truth because my god is that scary
And that forgetfulness holds me together
Like a paper mache boat
In the middle of a stormy sea
with waves growing
Higher and higher
Rising and falling
Waning and rushing
Crashing and crashing,
Crashing, always crashing
But
I want to forget so much more
Because to forget something
You have to know it first

The Labyrinth

Lena Levey / *Chevy Chase, MD*

“Tell me what you can’t forget, and I’ll tell you who you are.” - Julie Buntin, Marlena

I wrote that line in lavender on the first page of my notebook when I was in fifth grade under a heading that said, “Book Quotes I Like.” I had bought the notebook to match with Mara, my science partner and new best friend. I was in the process of witnessing my sister enter the enticing world of urban adolescence, and I was fascinated with the idea of reckless youth, which is why I picked up the book from the high school library about a young woman and the teenaged mistakes that haunted her adult life. It was the sort of tragedy I thought I could handle: to be haunted by something beautiful. That’s the sort of thing I could say before I knew any better, when we were still standing anxiously at adulthood’s starting line, where life was school and Mara’s kitchen, and bipolar was nothing more than a hyperbolic criticism of our chemistry teacher.

Seven years later, as I packed up my books to escape the city forever, I found my old notebook again, and I thought of Mara with a twist of regret in my chest.

How can I explain the Mara I can’t forget? I’ve written down the story about a hundred times, and I still don’t know what kind of person it makes me. The problem is Mara is the sort of person that evades description. She slips between adjectives like an escape artist and leaves me with words that are half-truths, which I can desperately attempt to weave into a world that resembles my memory.

I can call her a force, which is both a cliché and an understatement. She is impossible to forget with dark red lipstick, six-inch white heeled boots, a frightening knowledge of Greek mythology, and a sharp British accent that cuts through every doubt that creeps into my mind. She is maybe the only person on Earth more stubborn than I am, and if she declares something, it will happen. No one can stop her.

No one can stop her. These words echo in my mind when I discovered I could also describe Mara as manic. There’s a painful irony in this particular Achilles heel. Her energy is what makes her the only person I can never release, but it also is the reason I must hold on so tightly.

I’ve never called her an addict. Not to her face anyway. Maybe if I had, her image wouldn’t linger in my thoughts, and my memories wouldn’t be wrapped in secondhand smoke. I think back to a rooftop in April, at an afterparty so disgustingly gaudy it has since become my mascot for the materialism I left London to escape. Mara used to joke that our classmates were the best argument against legacy admissions since the generation that came before them. She stopped saying that after she started buying from the boy who was throwing up in the corner of one of the most exclusive clubs in the city. “I need some air,” I had told her, and we weaved our way through the sweaty fifteen-year-olds who were still as

enthralled as we used to be by this whole spectacle.

On that rooftop, at the party that I would only enjoy in my memories, Mara lit a cigarette, and I became haunted. On that rooftop, at the party that I would only enjoy in my memories, Mara lit a cigarette, and I became haunted. The smoke moved through my consciousness, blowing through her phone calls and the one time -- I pretended to believe her when she promised that it was the first -- I saw blood dripping down her arm, through every drug that she started and would not stop, right back to the first time she called me her soulmate. The Nat Sherman ghost rested in my notebook and danced its way through each line of purple cursive.

“Tell me what you can’t forget, and I’ll tell you who you are.” Nat Sherman reads the line in a mocking tone. With a paintbrush of thick smoke, it draws me a picture of the girl who wrote it and her best friend. They have bushy hair and bad skin and baby fat on their cheeks, and they can only dream of the life that I would run away from. It waves the cigarette, and I watch us grow. It seems faster this time. By fifteen, I could be mistaken for twenty-five, an Achilles heel that I wore as a feminine badge of honor. My ascension felt endless. I finally stopped glancing at my own reflection, but I started to sneak glances over my shoulder as I walked home. Only this time do I see how my weakness, too, was the price that I paid for my strengths.

I watch this Mara made of smoke on a park bench in ninth grade as she washes down her Seroquel with Bacardi. It’s 10am. I watch myself laugh because I

did not yet know that I shouldn’t, and because Mara managed to make even her descent into something mesmerizing. Nat Sherman puts a hand around my waist, and I am locked in. I wonder if I had just missed my last chance to get away.

The smoke shifts again, and we are in her kitchen. I am curled up next to her oven, desperate for the warmth to reach my bones. I am sobbing from my stomach to tether myself to the ground as if my tears were heavy enough to keep me from floating away. Mara pours a glass of wine, the same sweet red from our family dinners, and sits down next to me. I tell her everything I think I remember; it’s flashes of light and music that shakes the ground beneath me and a callused hand pressed tightly against my throat. It’s the man in the navy suit telling me to tell everyone that I wanted it, and our handshake that leaves bruises that linger long after the ones on my neck have faded because I did not yet know that an agreement for quiet was not the same as one for peace. Mara listens to my fragments and holds me tighter than I knew she could. We blend together, a melted pile of blood and tears and bone. That night, she lights a cigarette. It’s the first time.

Smoke swirls again. The images stop on that April rooftop where the two of us reached our stalemate. I am wearing one of her dresses, a silver wrap that I could never afford. Her dress is darker, and it has a cape that makes it look like she has wings. I hear myself cough and then try to release everything that has been building up in my chest. The pink and blue lights pulsed with the music from inside

the door, and Mara leaned against the fence to look over the city skyline.

“I’m going to say something, and if your answer is no, I promise I’ll drop it forever.” I sounded more confident than I was. Getting Mara to listen to anything was no small feat. But some combination of her three martinis and my impending departure made her nod and close her eyes. Nat Sherman and I watched as my words tumbled out of my mouth, and I fiddled with the hem of my dress.

“Is there anything I can do to make you stop?”

Mara stared at me for a minute. She glowed blue from the lights of the party. Finally, she responded.

“No.”

“Is any of this because of me?” My mind was on the kitchen, on my notebook, the three white lines of god-knows-what, and the souls that we had stitched together so tightly that we could never unravel them from each other without tearing every inch of ourselves apart.

“I promise I don’t regret anything.” It was the only answer she could have given. It was my answer too.

Mara rested her hand on my shoulder. In this smoky reconstruction, our skin blended together.

As Mara let out a puff of smoke that stung the back of my throat, I could see my breath curl through the air. If it were it not for the wings billowing out behind her, Mara and I would have been reflections of each other.

“We can’t really save each other, you know,” she said, softer than I had ever heard her speak. I nodded but said nothing. It was an agreement, if not an acceptance.

It's a strange thing—we each think to ourselves—to watch someone dissolve in front of you as you hold their hand in silence, gripping as tight as you can until you discover that you can't keep them with you and all you're left with is sweaty palms and survivor's guilt.

She lifted her hand from my shoulder, and our bodies became distinct again. I watched as my figure of smoke became solid and opaque. Mara's dress turned back to black satin, and her lips back to

the cherry red that had stained her glass. The scene disappeared, and I was back in a packed-up apartment with a notebook in my hand. The figure of smoke was sat by my side.

When I wrote that line in purple ink, my God, what I would have given to be a woman on a skyscraper at a party that existed only in the legend of middle school gossip. I wish there were a way to warn myself that the sort of beauty I was daydreaming of comes at a price. There

are some sacrifices that you don't understand until you hear the ghost of someone who is still alive asks you if you've done enough, and all you can do is hold on to your soulmate as she flies towards the sun and pray that the wax won't melt off her wings before she makes it home.

Inconvenient Death

Maya Bose / *Wheaton, IL*

A woman walked a lonely road. It was a hot summer's night,
the wind whistling low and eerie over the yellow lines.
Or perhaps it was an overcast fall morning
when the clouds conspired to hide the murdered sun,
before too many people were strolling about downtown.

The nice thing about early mornings is that few people look up at the ledges.

A woman walked a lonely road.
No—it might have been a dirt country lane or a busy highway.
Quite possibly, it was not a road at all.

She raised her arms,
wobbling ever so slightly on that tightrope, if it was a tightrope.

The crowd clapped politely,
slightly bored at her dangerous performance.
A few tapped three quick numbers on their phone,
then decided perhaps this show was not worth so much effort.

The woman fell. Jumped? She was on a bridge—
no, a roof—
and her skull pounded into fine table salt and dust,
leaking unappetizing juices onto the wood chips of a nearby playground.

A few children noticed
and tugged at her hair,
thinking she was a rather large and lovely doll.

A few different sets of shoes paused beside her,
polished loafers or deadly stilettos,
waiting patiently as their owners made a quick decision. The shoes walked on after a few moments,
tap-tapping away nervously and preening themselves,
checking if they had been stained with red.

The splatter lay upon the ground for a few days
collecting buzzing fly admirers and many guilty stares.
Then the city volunteers tidied the rotting carcass up
with their neat little vacuums and latex gloves,
and a small obligatory monument was erected in the place where her wrist bone had been found.

To Almost Trip on Bricks

Gabriela Scott / *La Jolla, CA*

I remember chasing my sister around our grandparents' backyard. I'm five years old, stumbling after her in gleeful pursuit, almost tripping over every crack in the weathered, red brick that has paved their grounds for decades. She veers between potted plants and shrubbery, desperately trying to widen the gap between us. It's working—I'm now gasping for air, every breath so crisp that it burns my throat.

We always seem to end up playing this game, eternal tag between the two of us. Looking back, whenever we are forced every couple of weeks to make the never-ending drive out to Encinitas, I remember my sister and I always exchanged a side-eye glance. The only certainty of this drive is the boredom ahead of us.

As we pull into their driveway, our car shifts and bumps along the crumbling bricks. The house is tall, blocking out the sun behind it so that the towering peak casts shadows all the way to the street. I'm hesitant to step out of the car and walk up to the front door, yet my mother is incessant about my need for manners. As I approach the foreboding entrance, I can see figures approaching through the blurred glass surrounding their front door and have very little time to prepare myself before my grandparents run out and sweep me off my feet in a hug. Their grasp is so strong, and although I know it's full of love, it still feels overpowering. I've been wrapped up by a snake, tighter and tighter until I can barely breathe. I know for certain that I won't grow to enjoy this closeness as the years go by and the visits continue. Even now, I still consider this affection to be overwhelming; when I pull up to the house, in my own car

and independently, I try my best to decline a hug and instead settle for a more adult-like handshake, finally being recognized for some level of maturity.

Upon entrance, the first room that I pass by is the grey, old-fashioned living room that our grandparents seemingly loved to spend all their time in. They would sit in there for hours, TV off or on, and I could never seem to understand why. Maybe I was too young—how could one want to sit inside for hours when you were only a few steps away from doors that led outside? What was it about golf and quiet talk that they found so intriguing? My parents are also apparently drawn to the promise of adult conversations and serious faces and immediately fade into the room. I have noticed that they have never asked my sister or I to stay in that room with them; our presence likely blocks some topics of importance. And so, the two of us always manage to run off at the first chance to the squeaky, sliding glass doors and throw them open with a sense of victory.

Their backyard is nothing short of chaotic. As we step outside, one would expect a clear path along the bricks to reach the faded green, scrappy sections of grass. Yet, every few steps a new plant seemed to appear until I felt like I was in a small jungle. The plant purchases should have stopped a long time ago, but now they overwhelmed the backyard with an unruly setup. Dozens of identical black, plastic pots held a variety of greenery. Most kids didn't grow up playing in as bare of a backyard as this one: no toys, swing set, not even a dog to chase around. Even the backyard of the house, outdoors where children are always supposed to play, is just a scrappy, gray wasteland.

I can vaguely sense my parents walking past the kitchen windows and staring outside, most likely not approving of our game. They had complained on the car ride up about how the bricks outside needed to be fixed, their jagged edges begging to be tripped on. The way they always looked around the house, in fleeting, worried glances, was an obvious sign of their uneasiness, but they knew well enough to not voice their concerns. I do not pay attention to this parental de-

terrent and allow their silhouettes to blur into a couple of fuzzy shapes as the cold air continues to blast my face and cause tears to stream from my eyes.

I had taken off my old tennis sneakers earlier after being scolded by my grandparents for tracking mud on their spotless floors. I have no time to throw these shoes back on now that the chasing begins, and I can't bear to let my socks



Industrial Revolution / Chiwoon Lee / Montrose, CA

get all torn up out here. My bare feet are throbbing in pain, caused by a piercing mixture of the cutting wind and the unblunted flooring. This is my sister's advantage: her vibrant Converse, fresh out of the box and approved for the household, have stayed tightly laced on her feet and are now performing perfectly on this rough terrain. As my pained feet seem to hit the ground harder and hard-

er with each step, my breathing becomes louder, almost panting, and I know my sister hears this initial sign of defeat. The loud padding noise of her brand-new shoes ahead of me begins to dim as she pulls farther away. When I begin to swivel my head around the backyard, I can no longer spot her among the greenery. I slow my sprint to a jog and finally allow my tired legs to come to a stop as my pursuit ends.

I glance at the sliding door again—my grandparents have come outside, grins on their faces after having watched us run around in this otherwise unused space. I try to go back in with them, but a hand grabs my shoulder, a tight grip I will never get used to. “Your feet are muddy now too,” my grandmother complains. “Clean up before you come in again.”

She proceeds to stroll back indoors, wearing chunky white sneakers that will assuredly never touch a single piece of dirt. My grandfather and her stare, first at each other, and then at me, disappointment written all over their faces.

red delicious

Annabelle Smith / *Evesham Township, NJ*

what is woman?
a fraction of a ribcage.

she who licks the edges of illicit anathema with
a forked tongue and braced teeth, juice splashing
against pinball pimples.

she who crunches and crushes and chews open-
mouthed on the rolling words of Genesis and
the great beginning, a lotus flower subterranean
seductress.

she who cradles those pomegranate seeds along
the deep lines in her reddened palms, smelling
the roses and watching the coal burn and placing
kisses along the edges of lacus curtius. she with
the pen of a man but the tongue of a beast, words
dripping and draining from the corners of her red
delicious lips, flicking out to lick at the ear and
at the chin, rearward spines trailing tiny bumps
along the skin.

in fervor, she sucks in her cheeks and her chest,
slithering along the pavement among all that is
unthinkable, slick with sweat and with blood and
with ichor.

she who wails as she undresses and dances,
twisting before the humdrum happy masses, fury
spinning out from behind her sculpted ears, air-
raid two-noted siren.

she who trails faded red imprints and binds her
bones together with a tourniquet, hesitating

amidst the props and the dark corners of the
curtain call.

with shriek shrill scream into the one-way mir-
ror, she presses her finger against it just to check
with claws that grip around the edges of a sealed
box, and pointed fingers peel away masking tape,
bending meter in 4/4 to rip away at the wrapping
paper.

in agony, she snatches and steals cold breaths in
humid hell's summer months.

drifting consciousness half-birtherd

putrid pretty pretty

she's got an apple for breakfast.

adam was halved,
and then there she was.

The Little Girl in a Rice Paddy

Aki Yamaguchi / *New York, NY*

Don't cross the barrier. The little girl's mother had many rules but this was the one of utmost importance. The little girl could play outside, perhaps chase the squealing pigs or run her hands through the water of the fountain, but she could never leave the perimeter. No one could know they were there, hidden away with all sound and sight muted. The ancestral home appeared to be crisp ruins, burned away by the last conquerors. Yet, if you looked closely from the outside, you could see a shimmer as the little girl ran by, the barrier sensing the approach of one of its masters. Don't cross the barrier. The number one rule.

The little girl runs through the paddies of rice, splashing her legs as she hurries to the big house. Sugarcane grows along the paddies and little *dalags* swim beneath her toes. The sun is reaching its heat peak, the sweat starts to collect on her forehead. The big house is made out of stone and wood, it's green and the ancestral home of her family. A long time ago, her ancestors had built it out of the ruins of the last conquerors, defeated by the guerillas that her ancestor led. It had been blessed with the barrier, a thanks for protecting the land: the land protects back. It sits across from the graveyard full of generations who came before her, a little church built next to it. Next to the house, the water trickles in an altar to St. Mary: a little pond lush with lily pads and vegetation. The pigs run across the courtyard, grunting and squealing as they head for their mini stable.

The sounds of boots marching get louder and louder.

The little girl runs through the gates surrounding the green-house, a whoosh of noise as she crosses the invisible barrier. She takes the steps two at a time as she slowly tiptoes to the second floor, pushing the door open. Sitting on the chair made out of soft willows and bamboo, her mother sits, waiting and staring out of the window. Her siblings play on the floor, her sisters with their dolls and her brothers with their tin soldiers. The girl runs quickly across the room, hoping her mother doesn't notice. Rushing into the library to pick out a book, she sits in the hidden alcove, pretending she had never left. She reads *The Little House on the Prairie*, learning about the adventures of Laura Ingalls as she travels across America. America is a magical place. She sometimes hears about it, the place of innovation. It's full of big moving crafts that could travel through the air or medicine that stops you from getting sick. Sometimes, the little girl wonders what her life would be like if she lived in another country. Would the medicine be able to help her father?

Her father is dying. The tooth in his mouth had slowly started to tear him apart. The pain explodes

across his head, fireworks dancing across his vision. It was a decay of death, his body was slowly coming closer to ascension, her father on his way to God. The little girl's mother refuses to cross the barrier outside, she won't risk leaving safety, not even for him. She will not get help, it isn't worth the other lives at stake. The radio had been dead for a long time and there were no cars in their little town. Putting a cold towel to her husband's forehead as she swats the flies buzzing around him. She calls for her eldest to go outside and pick a coconut. The little girl's brother runs to the coconut tree, the wide flat leaves and the hard ridges of bark. Slowly putting the ladder against the tree, he starts to climb until he gets to the top, picking a nice looking coconut. Her mother cracks it open, the juice spilling out. Quickly, she puts it against her husband's lips, already cracked and dry. He starts to lean forward, opening his eyes, but he falls back down with a shudder. His body shakes with pain as he closes his eyes once again.

The sounds of boots marching get louder and louder.

The little girl hears snores and soft sighs. Her family has all sat down for their nap, a way to cool down from the heat. She slowly tiptoes across the floor, making sure not to hit that one piece that creaks or groans as she runs down the stairs. She slowly sticks her head through the barrier, mak-

ing sure no one is in sight. With the road silent and empty, she runs to her paddies of rice and the little calamansi trees. The sun is slowly setting, the light breeze kisses the toes of her feet as she moves through the water. The orchids surrounding her little stone seat dance in the wind as she lies next to it, staring off into the sky. She's certain no one can see her as she forms characters and objects out of the soft, white clouds. The light rain hits her face, misting her and leaving glistening drops on the leaves of her plants. The little girl feels safe, as though she hasn't been hiding for the past year in her little green house. She can forget her father is dying, the heat of the atmosphere cools. She closes her eyes and dreams of the little girl who lives on the prairie and the magic of a different world.

The road wasn't empty, the little girl had run by unseen eyes. The soldier had his own barrier, crouched within a bush. He had been a scout, looking for the next resting site for the army behind him and

any survivors left. The army had sailed in from the land of the rising sun across the ocean, continuing their conquest. As he had squatted to pee, the little girl had popped out of nowhere, her bright eyes shining as she ran for a paddy of rice. He smiled, his eyes black like the pits of hell, and his smile crooked. He had found someone; terror was coming.

The sounds of boots marching are louder and louder. They're here.

The green house burns, the wood crackling and the beams falling. The little girl's father lies in his bedroom, slowly welcoming the faster path to death. The mother pulls her children tighter as the soldiers push them along, her dress is torn and scratches on her legs. The barrier's magic is broken, tainted by the horror these soldiers have brought to a haven of safety. It now shimmers in pain as it melts away, watching its masters being taken. The little girl is woken up from her nap full of dreams to a reality built from a nightmare. The soldier leers

at her, his body filthy and grimy, and grabs her by the arm. It leaves an imprint, one she can never wash away. The little girl on the prairie never mentioned the conflict growing around her, she remained innocent of any violence. The little girl in the rice paddy, her reality is different: innocence is gone. The water is no longer trickling, the courtyard silent.



Nature, Food / Brandon Kim / Princeton, NJ

Between Main Street and a Bao Shop

Madison Xu / *New York, NY*

When I tore my ligaments falling off the playground swing, my mom took me to the residential building between Main St. and the ‘xiao long bao’ shop near the Asiatic Hotel in Flushing, Queens.

“I used to live near here before I had you and before I made enough money,” she said, laughing. The words rolled over her tongue in the way that distant memories do, slipping out between teeth like a held breath.

Holding my hand tight, her rings pressed into my knuckles as we weaved through the streets and the throng of early morning workers. The sun flung reflections off the sequins on my shirt to the ground, and they glazed over trampled cigarette butts and dried pollock led astray from the open-air stalls by the wind from passing cars.

The lady we came for lived on the fifth floor. In truth, it was the fourth floor, but four is a homonym for “death” in Mandarin and so the elevator buttons skipped from floor three to five.

I mouthed out in Mandarin the overlapping newspaper ads that were pasted on the elevator walls, pausing then skipping over the words that I didn’t know. Something like “REAL red ginseng that boosts the immune system, cures cancer, and occasionally heartbreak when brewed hot.”

The lady was short. I remembered the slight curve of her back and her feet in the same straw slippers with pink rubber soles that we too kept in our house for guests. She beckoned us, somewhat callously, through the front door, and we followed her through a hallway twice the width of my shoulders. The TV was switched on to some melodramatic Qing Dynasty romance, and the turtle in the tank was giving me agnostic looks.

She had lined the bed with newspaper, and it shifted and bunched together beneath me as I fidgeted against the mattress. I craned my head, curious about each open drawer and scribble on the calendar, whispering conspicuously to my mother about my every observation.

“You speak English so well. Were you born here?”

It was the first thing she said to me, and her hands didn’t skip a beat, putting together her tools in a well-practiced cadence.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a small stack of children’s English workbooks laid open on her desk, plastered with auspicious neon colors and some cartoon animals. It seemed as if every other page was dog-eared. The sheets frayed from being thumbed past hundreds of times, and the spine cut with deep wrinkles from being opened too far.

“In New York,” I answered while staring at the small, wrinkled indent of my shoe in the mattress of the bed, having not yet mastered the art of eye contact.

“We moved back from China a year or so ago. But my husband still lives there. It’s for his job,” my mom added.

My parents viewed this country as most Chinese immigrants of the 90’s do: the land of opportunity. In hopes of putting me and my sister in the famed “American schooling system,” my mother took my sister and I back to the states, letting the Atlantic Ocean and the clock that keeps one of us 12 hours ahead, cleave our family in two. We stayed connected only by pixelated FaceTime calls in the few hours that our days overlap.

“I see,” she said. Her fingers felt along the side of my ankle, pressing with steady pressure on the side of the small swollen lump that had started to grow. I stared ahead, fixating on the objects on her desk to keep myself from wincing, already prideful at the tender age of eight.

“How about your family?” my mom said to the woman. She drew circles on the back of my hand with her lithe fingers, the way she always does when she knows I’m nervous.

“It’s just my son and I here. He doesn’t live with me right now. It’s not easy, but I’m sure he’ll move me in once he starts earning more.” Her eyes softened into crescents, the wrinkles setting in deeper, and I wondered how long she’s had to smile at just a memory. She pressed and dragged the bian stone across my skin, and I clutched my mother’s hand tighter.

When the old lady was finished, the

relief I felt in my ankle was almost instantaneous. We thanked the lady, and I told her good luck in finding her son, but my mother pinched me because she hasn’t lost her son—they just can’t be together, but I thought, isn’t that all the same? The old lady bade us farewell in English, a now not-so-foreign recitation that still slurred and slipped down her throat.

“Have nice day. Please come back again.”

On the car ride home, my mom told me that to live in Flushing, you wouldn’t even need to know an ounce of English, and this was the way in which she lived when she first moved. From the booster seat in the back of the car, I leaned forward, pressing my sweaty cheek against the side of the driver’s seat, bewildered why the old lady would ever need to learn English if she would be just fine living with what she already knew.

Over the years, I realize why my mother worked so hard to leave Flushing, shedding that part of herself as one does when they grow out of their skin. The America that I know is Fifth Avenue and halal carts and musicians crooning tunes in Central Park. I am crooked around the edges and gorge on General Tso’s chicken in all its inauthenticity. I am American to the core. But when I step onto the streets of Flushing, Mandarin glides easily off my tongue, and I barter the price of knockoff sneakers in rapid fire the way my mother has taught me.

Whenever I look out the car window as we enter Flushing, I remain convinced we have gone through a portal straight back into China. We pass by the same stand selling dried seafood, but pol-

lock is now out of season, so it’s piled high with flatfish. The old lady’s apartment is just a block away from where we stand. Her healing skills have never been rivaled by any western doctors. My mother tells me that her friends still visit regularly and that they bring her Godiva chocolates that she won’t buy herself.

Here no one will appreciate her magic touch that is not backed up by science. Here she lives in some overpriced apartment complex in a commercialized replica of her home thousands of miles away from it. Here her son, perhaps only a car drive away, struggles to earn his keep and can’t seem to ever make the visit. America is the land of opportunity, but the old lady will only ever be remembered as some foreigner. I stare at the fifth floor of the crumbling apartment complex from where I stand, and I can almost see her now: fingers that so deftly pressed against my ligaments stumbling over the still unfamiliar blocks of ink on her workbook, turning the pages, and dreading to be left behind in the same place that she had started.

saturday afternoon groceries

Jesse Cai / Brentwood, TN

...leave

Home

destination: charlotte pike, nash-
ville, tn

妈妈 pushes the shopping cart from outside—b
um p p i t y y bu m p i t t y—
on the harsh gravel of the parking lot
the store's front is plasteredplasteredplastered
with wrinkly papers—
old advertisements with phone numbers in BIG
BLOCK letters
printed in the ink smeaaared text

the sharp scent of 花椒 (black pepper) entangles
itself
with the smell of myriad fruits in the nearby
aisle,
i wrinkle my nose. the strange fruits were oddly
labeled
in a language i could not fully understand...
not that i wanted or cared to...

“应该条... (pick the fruits...)” 妈妈 says to me,
but i am busy folding dolls from the grocery bags
and the twisty wires
if i could capture enough air in the bag before I
QUICKLY tied it up,

my doll would have a full gown,
but i must leave enough of the plastic bag so that
she could have long hair too...
then she would be beautiful enough

“no one likes girls with short hair” the friends
from my preschool once told me
my thick black hair was cut in a bob then, but not
anymore, of course

“才子西，帮我拿个袋子 (jesse, help me get a
bag),” my 妈妈 says
with her hands full of carefully selected 荔枝
(lychee)
i undo the knot from my doll and give my 妈妈
the cRinKleD bag
and as we leave the store, the familiar smell f a d
e s s s

but i find myself curiously sniffing the 荔枝 (ly-
chee) in the car

destination: 21st ave s, nashville, tn

it's last stop of saturday afternoon, sleepy in the
backseat
WRA—in the sun's gentle blanket—PPED
shopping carts are inside of the carpeted en-
trance,
and the store's front is quaintly decorated for fall
a bushel of hay, a smiling scarecrow

a gentle waft of bananas and the warm aroma

of the bakery's bread welcomes mom and me
my eager fists grab the snacks—"can we get
this?"
fruits first—apples, bananas, blueberries, then
vegetables—
i knew the names of all of them by reading the
neat little labels

near the end of our journey—there is an adver-
tisement:
a picture of a smiling girl. she was quite pretty—
beautiful even
with lonnnggg blond hair... i smiled, touching my
growing hair—
it was almost past my shoulders now, but a slight
frown crept onto my face
when i felt the thickness of my hair

it was neither wavy nor a beautiful blond like
hers,
but rather painfully straight and a boring jet-
black

"come on jesse, let's check out" my mom says,
pulling me away from the beautiful girl
back

Home.

when the sun swallows the stars

Sara Holden / *Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ*

we'll sing to the breeze. let the gentle ripple of
the river soak in our veins, its coolness lighting
us on fire. whistles of leaves will somersault
around us in boxy veils; we are their portrait.

we'll miss the wonder. the way the blackness
struck us had us tiptoeing through twigs and
moonlight, awaiting a howl or crack with fearful
eagerness. how our hands blended with bark.

but birds inhale the dark and exhale tunes of bril-
liant blue, and we'll grow to love the tingles
on our cheeks, the smell of damp leaves and
mulch, the crack of a squirrel munching an
acorn.

i know you'll relish the way the dew glazes the
grass, the soft crunch of dirt beneath our feet,
that you can't seem to describe the fresh aroma
of August air. because it's a memory, not a wish.

the world turns; that's the point, yet it feels still.
the sun crawls just slow enough for us to whis-
per our secrets to the wind and forget the hushed
voices that relentlessly echo around us.

just watch the ripples and the blues. sip it up
before it runs dry.

Grandparents Day

Z. A. Mello / Cambridge, MA

**Previously published by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, winner of The Silver Key.*

Each year, just about the time that the new school year stopped being a fun re-introduction to normal life and the realization that getting up at seven sucks hit me once more, my stomach began to churn. I knew that the second week would herald in that hallowed morning dreaded by so many children of immigrants: Grandparents Day.

The baseball-loving, apple pie making grandpas and grandmas of my peers would descend upon the classrooms of my elementary school. A host of awkward games and inevitably embarrassing stories about who your classmates took baths with as infants would ensue.

As a second-generation immigrant on my dad's side, my Macedonian grandparents have lived with me for most of my life. The smell of baklava and kiflichki hanging in my kitchen, warm yeast and the sharpness of feta cheese permeated by their impassioned rants in their native tongue mark the afternoons of my childhood. Despite my Baba and Dedo living in the United States for the majority of my lifetime, their English is barely sufficient to greet a stranger, a collection of incorrect verb tenses and misplaced idioms.

I can remember about the age when I first cringed at their mangled R's and S's, realized they could barely read the menus or follow the street signs, and understood that it was I who was there to look after them, as much as they were there to watch over me.

As a kid, I could not understand my father's insistence on their appearance on that fateful day every year, much less the offense he took when I would confess my embarrassment. Did he not feel the blood rise to his cheeks at the little giggles from strangers at their mispronunciations? Did his pulse not quicken at the incredulous looks flashed as they struggled to dredge up a coherent phrase?

I could feel a little punch to the chest every time their heavy accent seemed to signal a lack of intelligence to these strangers, the way they would speak louder and louder, as though that would help demystify the words. I realized the incredible privilege we shared in that this designation of foreignness was not an identity we wore on our face. It could operate in a twilight sort of space, invisible and insignificant until my relatives spoke in front of others.

One year, the event started halfway through our first period, and the grandparents were supposed to follow little signs we had decorated in crude crayon drawings to our respective classrooms. Our courtyard was packed with seniors hurrying along to their destinations, and before long, they had found their way into my class. Each of my peers had a lap to sit on and two people to bestow their handmade

name tags onto. Everyone did except for me. The minutes ticked by with no sign of them, prompting my well-meaning history teacher to ask me whether I was sure they should be expecting two more guests. On a hunch, I walked to the back of the classroom and peered out the window in the drywall, only to find exactly what I feared. There was my Baba and Dedo, small and alone in the middle of the concrete oval, transfixed by the many colorful signs scattered around them like sprinkles on a very gray cupcake.

I was sure they couldn't understand much that was written, especially in the swirling pink calligraphy insisted on by the crafty girls in my class who had gotten sets of brush pens over the summer. Heat rose to my cheeks. There was the shame, but even more biting was the shame about the shame. To feel embarrassed by the people who had raised you, taught you to use the monkey bars, and rocked you to sleep, as they stood there confused, infantilized by a language barrier, was like swallowing a stone. Feeling that way, knowing how hard they tried and how much you loved them, was like gulping down another.

It didn't happen in a day or even a year, but as I got older, I began to see their courage. I saw their bravery in moving in with their son to a strange place when already past sixty. I found gratitude for their desire to pass on their culture and stand fast in their identity after the country they knew split into pieces, a jigsaw thrown off a table. I saw the act of defiance it took to drastically widen their scope as they were reaching an age when everything pushes them to-

mother may i

Navyaa Jain / Edison, NJ

mother may i
eat the ice cream
that you bought
last year the day

i'd been robbed
because my piggy
bank was missing
the five dollars that
you used to buy

rocky road from
last year so now
it's been sitting in
the back of the fridge

waiting for
some love from

you and ever
since i took
a bite from
the warm and
tender frozen treat
i've been saving it
because i didn't know
when you'd buy me
more and i need to

save me from
the bad days but
i'm all out and

now you can't buy me more

p.s. there are
sprinkles in the
round yellow box
next to the band aids

wards a narrower and narrower life. I saw the importance of their determination to read those stupid little signs and find a way to stand with their granddaughter in her fourth-grade class, their courage drawn up around them like a thin coat, even if they tripped over their words, even if they elicited giggles. They had to, if only to say: *this, this, is who we are. Globetrotters, shapeshifters, survivors of war in our home, lifelong learners by necessity.*

It took time for me to see my misplaced shame for what it was, to hold my head a little higher knowing the strength that carries itself over in my blood. I had known the victory of getting a license in

a new nation, the sleepless nights caused by green cards, Orthodox Christmas celebrated a week after the twenty-fifth, hearing two languages all my life. What a joy to glimpse the faces of my uncles and aunts when I heard the accents thick as molasses, and what a gift to see my cousins in the shape of their nose and cheekbones even as they grow up half-way across the world.

I often wished I could claw my way back through time, to the version of myself who was smaller in more than one way. I wished I could tell her to banish the red from her cheeks, lift her chin, and know there is more than one way to do Grandparents Day.

screen savior

Alea Auyeung / San Diego, CA

my darling's my screen saver
he glowers at me in blue when i eat my breakfast
mmm, on my tongue—the delicate burst of
caviar
his eyes follow me into the bathroom
oops—i almost cut myself on the electric
razor

his words honeyed meat & deadly sweet
a Kool Aid to my pressing headache, a real
lifesaver
his flickering smile greets me when i fall asleep
when i go out with my friends to get a bite to
eat

they say i'm an addict
i say i'm afflicted
by the disease called love
my cellular levels breached by the barrages of
likes
and comments
and texts
and calls
and tweets
of L-O-V-E !

they couldn't possibly understand
bores with chores and their dear married
snores

like foxes with their tails curled up in their
Snowdens
it's a glittering world out here
deafening grassy fields, beautiful hazy skies,
lighted by the adoration of millions
i'm periodically, paradiscally drunk on
Apple juice

and Apple sauce
and Apple pie
and Apple cider
and Apple vinegar

my sweetheart's my screen savior
plucked me from obscurity, the mundanity
of standing around

waiting
for my real life to

begin
he dried my fading eyes
and said darling that's the perks of being
with a clever man like me

we marry by firelight, a bond for life
nearly burning our hands on the torches
of flaming tar and dying stars
he slips my ring of yesteryore from the mall store
(Pandora)

a 5 doigt figure
sold!
with our souls taxed to even out the number

all these worthless physicians trying to pinpoint
him like a gasping butterfly on the dms5
my baby's off the chart smart
his father read him the *Book of Jobs* from

the start

saturated with intelligence, sugar,
there is so much to savoir

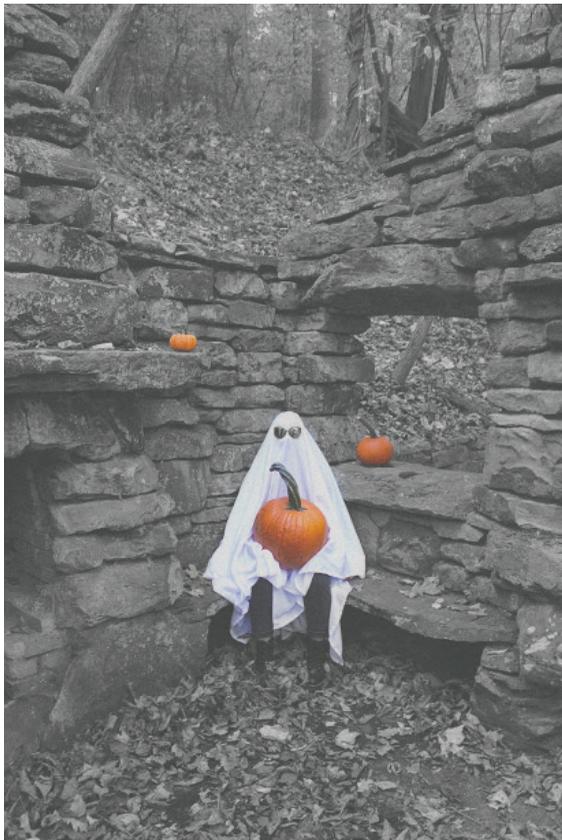
to savor, all of the tiny words and numbers and
symbols that make up

1-0-1-0-1-0-1-0-1-

0-V-E

and now he's here to save you *from a store near
you!*

(coming soon)



Untitled / Leah Haller / Wexford, PA

Dermatophagia

Payton Dosdor / Pittsburgh, PA

A man perches on the curb
of Giant Eagle, scrounging me for bills.
My strides become longer,
heart pummels faster. Bruised flesh
is called to chiseled teeth,
marking its territory,
pulling at indentations of ruffled
overlapping skin. The smooth flesh
that was once untouched is now desolated
before realigning with one another.

When I stack groceries, my mother rustles
in her purse. As she looks for her wallet,
her lips move side to side, cheeks suction.
\$53.88 the cashier says. When no wallet
is in her hand's, it is uncomfortable for us both.

Once gnawing on my cheeks for an
awkward amount of time,
the specks of skin begin to settle
on my finger. The resemblance
from my mother is shown
as specks of skin now rest on her fingers,
taking away the barrier
from the inside and outside.

Meter 1333

Jacob S. Shaw / *New York, NY*

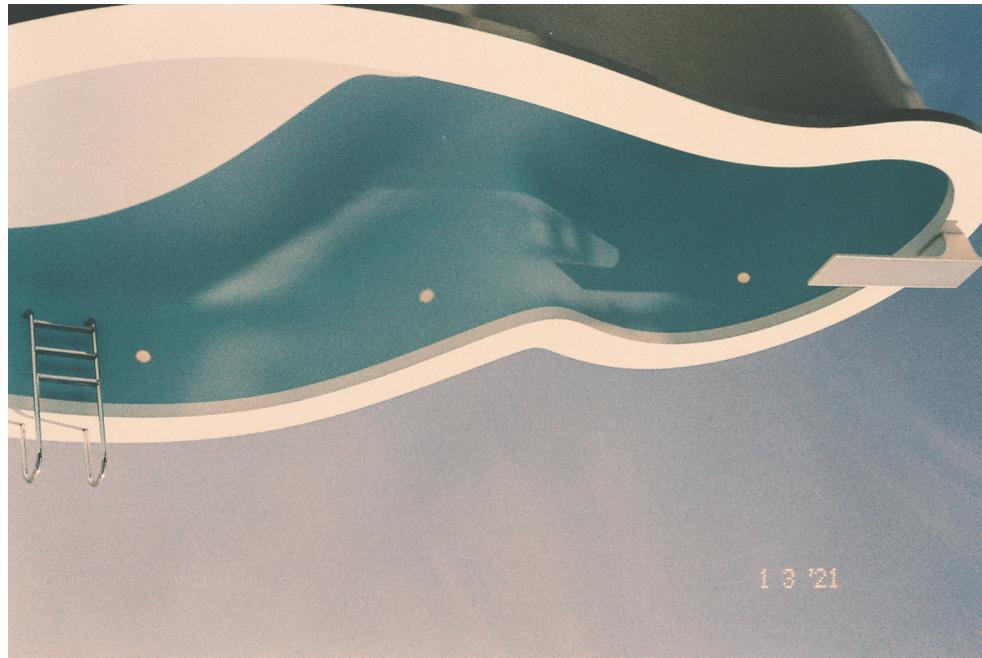
Saying that, in spite of the pain, I compelled myself to push on—that would be a complete lie. If I had been in any control of my body, I would have stopped rowing there.

I lied to myself 1325 meters in, promising my body that I only had ten strokes left, winning my first 2000-meter race. Each stroke I took redefined agony; at 1330, my muscles snapped at the price of victory.

As a kid, my shelf always had an unignorable spot empty of brass trophies and dusty medals. In that race, before 1333, I became a boat, and that boat was in first—after months of training, anything less would mean failure: for the team, coach, but most of all, myself.

But from 1333, I could no longer think; I was a machine, unable to give in until I broke. Somebody on dry land screamed to stay strong, that victory was in sight—but I blacked out. From then on, I lost my sense of self; there was no race, no boat below me, no prize to win or opponents to conquer, no pain, no ambition. There was only an oar and an undying heartbeat.

If meter 1333 had gone another way, if I had not blacked out, I would have never stayed in first—faster than I had ever rowed before, than they told me was possible. For at 1333, the fire in my muscles set my soul ablaze, ambition charred in that trial by fire, kindling glory.



Out of Context / Carter Bedford / Pak Tam Chung, HK

A Strange Encounter

Tristan Upton / *San Diego, CA*

The peacock stands emotionless and motionless, seemingly frozen in time. More than anything, its feathers want to be radiant and angelic, to glisten in the rays of the European sun. But its feathers can barely be seen. Its dark presence in the already dim photograph is characterized by an arced blur of feathers in motion. The peacock quivers as it stands alone in a cool shadow only speckled with sunlight. The sun pierces through the peacock's delicate frame, striking through to its emotions as it stands there innocently. What it truly feels, it seems no one will ever know. At a first glance, the peacock appears frail, in a place it does not belong. But it portrays a kind of defiance in the way it stands its ground next to a human. How it got here is the ultimate question. Perhaps the peacock was searching for attention, in hopes of filling the void of not having a supportive family. Perhaps it ran away from home, looking to build a life as a rogue peacock wandering the touristy streets of Europe. Whatever good life she may have had seems buried under a life of shame, loneliness, and contempt as she wanders the streets of a quiet town. She became used to people staring at her but not people caring for her. Ever since she started roaming the streets of Europe, everyone touched and petted her like she mattered.

The worn, stone building in the background looks ancient. It has likely stood on the same ground for centuries, testing time itself. The columns sink into the slab of weathered concrete behind them and accent the building's layered facade. The stone steps in front stand wide and unrevealing, infinitely plainer than the building or statues. Finally, the rail lining the roof is unprecedented. Its squiggly middle portions appear as hourglass figures that line up symmetrically.

A visitor could see the whole city and surrounding area from this view, but can only admire the building from the front, for the sole entrance to the building is concealed and off limits. The building's classical, antique marble features are marvels to look at and will be forever reminiscent of a once-prosperous civilization. Would the Roman architects be proud that their works, or replicas, at the least, still stand today? Until the end, the Romans never expected their demise. But their art and ideals are timeless. The remnants of their golden age will always be inspirational and significant, remembered and prized.

In the instance of the building depicted, two sole statues remain protectors of the complex. Their marble skin looks soft but feels coarse to the touch. The muscular athlete holds a discus in his hand and looks down, following his own footsteps lightheartedly. The politician, which we only see half of, stands on the corner of the roof and could not be more different. His clothed body mirrors his serious nature and contemplative stance. I can imagine that as he strokes his mustache, his eyes probe the sky, looking for

gods he can turn to for advice.

Only the flowers, trees, and the woman remain. They are much younger than the marble features they juxtapose and energize the scene significantly. The red flowers dot the photograph's foreground with a pop of color while the trees rustle quietly in the distance. The woman's face exaggerates her excitement and surprise. She points at the peacock but does not fail to notice the beauty of the works behind her. Her sky blue jacket and rippling dress present comfortable assets as she strolls through cool summer streets.

The leather sandals she wears are sturdy and strapping, and will allow her to walk far.

From afar, the peacock, building, and woman blend together in one photograph in seeming harmony. Whatever circumstance that brought all three together is remarkable. Their interconnected crossing of paths is characteristic of every relationship. Every couple has their own story, and may wonder if they would have known each other had it not been for a fateful, strange occasion. A month, and the woman might get a boyfriend.

A year, and the peacock might find stability. A hundred, and the building will be the same as it was for thousands. Yet in a single moment, all three of these things stood together. Human existence is so often characterized by the arbitrary, odd confluence of history, nature, and society, and yet we fail to appreciate the things in our world that do not include us. That moment in time may never recur, but that's why a photograph is so valuable. It captures things as they may never be again, for us to encounter.

neurosis: the three-act play

Caden Heiser-Cerrato / *Linthicum, MD*

act I

making eggs; salmonella,
the bacteria on the yolk; brain
demands hands washed red & raw.
inside the bathroom, not careful—foul
fingers touch bristles of toothbrushes.

act II

clean toothbrushes off; wash hands
now dirty, now battered & bloody & burning.
in kitchen, pour yolks into a pan, gather wheat
bread to toast, drop slices to the floor.

act III

throw them away; more bread looks old—
might have mold, toss them into the trashcan.
two pieces left: survivors. overcooked
the eggs, hear them burning black on the stove.
forgot to flip them; cooking both sides, see shell
bits in yellow egg; is there more bacteria? pick them
apart, brush most of the eggs into a garbage bag,
sit here and eat the remnants of lunch—finally have a
break.

As It's Supposed to Be

Kiera Zager / *Livonia, MI*

**Previously published in Route 7 Review.*

Meredith wandered through the empty subway tunnel, looking for a sign. She had taken the subway at night before, and she had gone the same way she always had: take a left after the turnstile, go down a flight of stairs. And yet there was no familiar orange circle, adorned with the white letter B. She couldn't have gone the wrong way, and yet there was no sign for the B train or even the A or the Q train to indicate that she had made a wrong turn. The tunnel was dark and empty with no sound but the clicking of Meredith's own heels.

She must've done something wrong: gone on autopilot, accidentally gone down a second flight of stairs or turned right instead of left. She tried to retrace her steps, but she couldn't remember anything. It had been too much of a routine for her to take note. Regardless of whether she understood why or not, she was clearly in the wrong place. With a sigh, Meredith turned around and started to walk back towards the stairs.

She immediately noticed the man on the bench—he hadn't been there earlier. When had he come down? Meredith certainly hadn't heard any footsteps, though she figured she must've been too lost in her own thoughts to notice. If he was sitting on the bench, he must be waiting for a train, too. Meredith began walking faster, her strides lengthening with purpose. "Excuse me," she said. The man turned around. He was old—maybe seventy or so, dressed in a dark suit. He had pale blue eyes that Meredith immediately averted her gaze from. They were too light, too empty. If eyes were the windows to the soul, then this man had none. "Excuse me, sir, are you waiting for the B train?"

The man looked away from her, fixing his gaze on the wall directly in front of him. "Your train will be here soon," he said.

Meredith walked around the bench and stood next to it. "The B train? It's coming then?"

"Your train will be here soon."

Meredith shrugged, not seeing the point in interrogating the man any further. Maybe he did mean the B train, or maybe he just didn't understand what to tell her—he looked old enough for senility to be creeping in. She sighed and sat down at the other end of the bench. Bored, she started tapping out the rhythm of a song with her fingernails on the side of the bench.

"There's no need to be nervous."

Meredith jumped at the sound of his voice; she had forgotten the old man was there. "I'm not nervous."

“You don’t have to pretend. I see people like you all the time. They’re usually either scared or confused. Everyone wants to believe that they’ll be brave, but no one ever really is.”

Meredith nodded though she didn’t understand what he was talking about at all. She was starting to feel very uncomfortable: lost in a dark subway tunnel, sitting next to a strange old man who didn’t seem to have a solid grasp on reality. She decided she had better go back like she had been planning to earlier. She would return to the turnstile, and this time, she would make sure she went the right way. She stood up and started walking towards the stairs.

“Where are you going?”

She had only gone a few steps when the man called out to her, stopping her old in her tracks. She turned around slowly; he still wasn’t looking at her but was staring straight ahead at the wall. “I—I think I’m in the wrong place,” she said.

“Your train will be here soon.”

“No—no, I don’t think it will. I think I made a wrong turn somewhere.”

“You didn’t make a wrong turn. You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be. Just wait. Your train will be here soon.”

With small, quiet steps, Meredith started walking back towards the bench. “What kind of train is it, exactly, that I’m waiting for?”

“It’s a train that will take you where

you need to be. It will take you somewhere far away, and it’s not going to bring you back. But there’s no need to be nervous. The train ride is fast, smooth, and painless. Waiting for it to come is the hardest part.”

“You’re sure? This is the hardest part?”

“I’m sure. I’ve watched millions of people board this train. They always get scared right before it comes, but after-



To the Lighthouse / Akanksha Basil / Chappaqua, NY

wards, it all works out just fine. Exactly the way it’s supposed to.”

“Is it true? What they say, about it being like falling asleep. I’ve heard that the sound of the train going down the tracks is soothing, and the train rocks gently like a cradle. You fall into a sleep so deep that there’s nothing else—no dreams, no waking. Just closed eyes and a calm, quiet train.”

“You’re right,” the man said. “That’s exactly what it’s like.”

Meredith nodded. She, too, was staring straight ahead at the wall; there wasn’t anywhere else to look. She didn’t have a choice. All that was left was to sit and wait. The tunnel was silent; Meredith didn’t much mind the silence. She could get used to the silence.

But the silence didn’t last forever; it was broken by a vibration that shook that floor, a low, grumbling sound that filled the air around her. This wasn’t quiet or calming. Lights flashed through the tunnel, so blinding and bright that no one could ever hope to fall asleep as long as they were on. She turned on the old man, indignant. “You told me it was quiet. You said it was soothing, and you could sleep, and—and you lied!”

“I didn’t lie. I told you this was the worst part. It gets better once you board the train. The train will be here soon, and then all will be as it’s supposed to be.”

“No. No! I’m not getting on that train. I won’t get on that train!” She stood up and started sprinting down the tunnel.

“You can’t get away,” the old man said. She could only hear him faintly; he wasn’t struggling to yell over the growl of the approaching train. She didn’t care. He was just a senile old man. He didn’t know what he was talking about.

The grumbling grew louder and louder, and the brightness that filled the tunnel became increasingly more intense. Still,

Meredith ran towards the staircase. She was close; she could make it. She glanced behind her to see if the old man was following her; he wasn't. He was still sitting on the bench, staring straight ahead as if completely indifferent to her struggle. But she had dared to glance back, to take her eyes off of the path in front of her, and her shoe landed in a shallow puddle of water. She lost her footing and came crashing down to the floor of the tunnel, hitting the side of her head upon impact. She started to roll to the side, filled with pain and unable to think. She didn't struggle. The walkway between the rails was wide—at least, it should've been. It

wasn't until she rolled over the side, until gravity started dragging her down onto the tracks, that she realized she had made a fatal mistake, the same mistake she had been making all along: the thought that this was a normal subway tunnel, one on which people could come and go as they pleased, one on which choice, not fate, decided where a person would go.

The old man could barely hear Meredith's scream over the sound of the train as it barreled into the station. He could just hear the faint sound of her bones cracking over that of the train slamming on its brake and grinding to a halt. He didn't need to hear the sounds to know

what had happened; he had known what was going to happen the second he had sat down on that bench. "I told you," he said. He got up and started to walk towards the stairs, shaking his head. "I tried to tell you. All will be as it's supposed to be." He never understood why people always tried to fight it, why they panicked in their last seconds and tried to outrun the train. It never made any sense, and it made his job more difficult. With a sigh, he climbed the stairs and entered another subway tunnel. There was a middle-aged man wandering near the end of the tunnel, looking for a sign.

The Autumn Girls

Hayun Bae / *Bellevue, WA*

Girls of autumn, born in dust and sun.
Feather-light on the ground, they dance
to the wind, tethered only by the weight
of their hollow bones.

Borne of earth half-risen, the sky calls to them as
death calls to the ill. Torn between the brilliant
blooms
of summers past and the coming, aching snow
that shrivels their skin, they wait.

As autumn passes, girls drift away
unable, unwilling to face the coming winter. At
dusk, they jump,
wrapping themselves in heavy gusts, blankets of
wind,
heading to a horizon scratched golden by the fading
sun.

Some stumble to the ground, slipping off
the sky's outstretched fingers. Their bones, as fragile
as delicate porcelain,
snap and twist in the fall. Like broken dolls, they
slump to the ground,
eyes glazed over. Their blood splashes out,
dries to muddy brown on their bodies.

The sky above them transforms
from the violet hues of summer to winter's ash-
grey.
Their skin, unmoving, melded to stone and dirt,
freezes and thaws with the land,
and they unravel, blood and bone,
drained of all life.

Bhagavan's Birds

Clara Shapiro / *Brooklyn, NY*

When Bhagavan's two pet parakeets fell in love, Bhagavan decided that there was nothing to do but set them free. The two of them had been perching close together all week. Mornings began with extraordinarily loud chirping, which continued all throughout the afternoon and into the evening, when Circle and Compost finally quieted down and were seen to tuck their heads, fold their bright green wings around one another, and sleep. Bhagavan was home from school after the accident and happy about it. All this bedrest gave him lots of time to sit in front of the cage, Darth Vader comforter around his shoulders, and observe the birds.

At first, he had thought that they were only playing. There was a lot of rustling and nuzzling. Sometimes Circle, who you could tell was the boy by his blue ceres and feet, did a dance—he would hop from perch to perch with a chirp and a chirp, and then Compost would spit up some of her food on him. Then, they would tap their beaks together. But it wasn't until later into the week, when Bhagavan woke up and found Circle and Compost flapping on top of one another, that he realized that the beak-tapping looked like kissing because it was kissing.

Normally, Bhagavan wouldn't have had a problem watching birds make baby birds. Under other circumstances it would have been fascinating. But Circle and Compost were siblings.

Since Bhagavan was too scared to poke a finger into the cage and just standing there watching seemed creepy, he backed away until he hit his bed and then tipped back onto it, cocooned in his comforter. The December light was coming in thin and blue through the slats in his blinds. Bhagavan threw one arm, the one that wasn't in a sling, over his eyes and wondered how he would tell his parents what Circle and Compost were up to without letting on he knew what sex was. Bhagavan was ashamed of what his birds were doing and that he knew what it was. His parents would think that he had started it. It occurred to Bhagavan then that he could just set Circle and Compost free. Kids were always doing that in stories. Anyway, it would be fun to see his birds fly.

Because Bhagavan wasn't allowed on the roof anymore, he decided that the only option was to set Circle and Compost free through his bedroom window. This was what excited Bhagavan most about his plan: the prospect of air. Upstairs, the windows were mostly kept shut to prevent a draft. This meant that there was often a thickness to the air in Bhagavan's room that made breathing feel like churning butter. And even though Bhagavan was allowed outside once a day for an evening walk around the cul-de-sac, one arm of his anorak hanging limp, he always had the sense that somebody—perhaps a family member,

perhaps a friend—was watching him, or at least thinking of him, and their attention pinned him down and made it difficult to breathe.

Bhagavan sometimes wondered if other people knew what he knew—that if you put enough faith in the air, you could fly. The trick was to become light. The trick was to slip out of your name, to empty your pockets of all your memories of life on the ground. Then, you had to jump up and down, shaking your head like you were trying to get water out of your ear, to dislodge your brain and all the thoughts inside of it. Eventually, when everything was shaken out, you'd take one more jump and spring into the sky and stay there because your light body would naturally fly. To take flight, you had to take nothing with you.

Bhagavan knew that this was true. He also knew that on that day on the roof, had his father not turned around at the moment when he did, Bhagavan would have flown. The two of them were up on the roof because Bhagavan's father was convinced that something was wrong with the satellite dish and wanted to fiddle around with it. At first, Bhagavan tried to help his father by playing around with the feed horn, but when that became boring, Bhagavan decided to scoot his way further down the roof ridge until he reached the dormer. For a while, Bhagavan sat astride the dormer, looking up at the sky. His breath rose in little dragon puffs. Somewhere down the highway nearby, a motorcycle made a gag-gift, ripping sound, and it took Bhagavan a moment to realize that the trees in the encircling forest weren't bowing because of the sound, but because of the wind. Bhagavan stood up. He stretched his neck

back and realized that he couldn't remember ever being so close to the sky. All this white air made Bhagavan want to bellow and shake trees. Something huge was tearing through him, setting every hair on end. He wanted to grab a fistful of the sky and stuff it into his mouth.

Later, the only thing Bhagavan would remember was the bit of time between when his feet left the roof and when his father lunged to save him. He remembered thinking, as he hovered just a few feet in the air, "And all along!" But Bhagavan did not remember his father shouting his name and stumbling across the shingles, arms outstretched. Bhagavan did not remember skidding off the icy roof or his shoulder being twisted as he was hoisted back up by a pair of stronger arms.

When Bhagavan returned to earth, all he knew was that his left arm was pinned, inexplicably, in a cast and sling at his side and that he had been on the brink of experiencing something extraordinary. There was a Planets of the Solar System mobile turning over his head, and it was beautiful. An old man was listening to his heartbeat. Bhagavan watched his mouth move—buh-buh, buh-buh, buh-buh. The threads of spit in the old man's mouth were magnificently fine.

Eventually, the old man noticed that Bhagavan was awake and said in an observational tone, "A vain attempt at flight." Bhagavan didn't know what that meant. Was he saying that it was vain to want to fly? Or that wanting to fly was in vain? Bhagavan looked down at his arm. The sling was white, stiff enough to keep his arm in a perpetual cock-a-doodle-doo position. The best Bhagavan could do was flap his wrist.

Once a windless morning came along, Bhagavan let his birds go. Circle and Compost were shivering together on their perch, so Bhagavan reached a finger in to nudge them out. The window was open. Bhagavan felt how cold it was and nearly changed his mind. But more than anything, he wanted to see his birds fly. So he made clucking noises on the roof of his mouth until he had coaxed them out onto the sill. He pushed Circle's blue feet further and further off the ledge, and then, when Bhagavan was expecting him to fall, Circle dipped down and then spiraled off into the sky. But Compost, seeing her companion walk the plank, began to chirp and scream. She zipped off in a frenzy around the room, grazing the lampshade and looping around the headboard. The wind suddenly set in. A piece of half-done math homework flew off the bedside table. The row of Hot Wheels Bhagavan kept lined up on the dresser rolled into motion. *Don Quixote*, which Bhagavan had been using as a bookend, thudded to the floor. It was under these conditions that Bhagavan raced to the window to shut it, shouting "All right!" at nobody in particular. He couldn't find Compost for days, but eventually, he heard a peeping sound coming from the trashcan and found her, ruffled and bulgy-eyed, waiting for rescue. He returned her to her cage. Soon, she settled down, but she didn't chirp or eat anymore, or look at new toys.

A few weeks later, by which time Bhagavan had gone back to school and gotten his cast signed by all of his friends, he came home and found that, in spite of her sadness and all of Bhagavan's preventative measures, Compost had decided to lay eggs anyway.

Running Into Absence

Katherine Sedlock-Reiner / *Brooklyn, NY*

I lie on the top bunk, watching the gnarled knots of the wooden beams above me that seem to shift positions every time I blink. Is it the darkness, which takes on a more fluid presence here than in the city, moving silently about the room, covering and uncovering space? Or perhaps it is the fuzzy shapes that surface on the crest of sleep, floating across my vision. I cannot be sure. Because it is quiet at night here, the lake can be heard, its waters gurgling on the shore. After all the time that has passed, I am unaccustomed and cannot help thinking there is somebody lost out there, who keeps stumbling over the rocks and reeds and sand. But it is only the waves washing over the shore, I remind myself again.

On the shelf next to the window, there sits a stuffed animal loon, and by now, a bit of stuffing seeps out from its seam. It stares back at me with a deranged air. Chewed-up board books and our toddler drawings overflow from the shelves, encased in ten years' worth of dust, maybe more. In the wall, I can hear mice scuttling back and forth, and it is difficult to accept the fact that they have taken over the house. I caught a glimpse of one this evening, scurrying at the shock of seeing a human, and I could not avoid its odd, endearing quality. The little grey ears as big as its head and the way it turned a full circle the moment it met my eyes (almost touching its tail, so quickly it retreated into a hole), made me want to love it.

Over time, the mind boards up memories, burying places along with the possibility of return. Raquette Lake seemed to entirely disappear from my consciousness until my mother told me we might go back, and then in one sudden, involuntary flood, that part of my life was able to surface. When we arrived this afternoon, it was like stepping into a warped time capsule. Standing before the door, shrouded by the peeling, green paint—that particular shade, which is almost like a theme here, from the now-corroded tiles down to the silverware handles—immediately the pungent smell took over: slightly musty, with traces of the earlier version of my grandmother. When I was young, my grandmother would leave this room despite my endless pleas for her to lie with me a little longer, and I would reach for the pillow she had leaned against, pressing my face into the wrinkles that still held her scent. By morning, the vestige of her had vanished. I lie here now, folded in the blue August darkness, and in the alien bedspread I thought I would never see again. This bedspread was one of the few memories that remained unrepressed through those years, though I see now, there are not aliens on it, but planets.

No memory has gone untouched, but what remains of the past unsettles me. When we stepped inside, we called my grandmother, the four of us hovering over the telephone that rocked violently on the

dresser. Picking up, her voice creaked like trees in a forest to say not “Hello,” but “The caller-ID is still Alissa.” We fell silent, and the absence echoed like waves’ shadows, left behind on the shore.

The great pendulum clock that once struck each half-hour has ceased to be wound, I wanted to say. In its place, the black-eyed susans have bloomed up from the floor-board cracks. Beside the porch, where ten years earlier she tended her herb garden so fastidiously, things have tangled; the cilantro-mint mutations leave little evidence of how life was then.

We told her we loved her and wished she could be here. Then, we hung up. I stood in the empty bedroom for a long time after, sweeping my vision around the space. The bed was strewn with mouse-droppings, the bed that once was hers. Even as I tried to tidy the room for her, a stalactite of light escaped, melting down the wall, making the clawfoot legs of her bed appear to be broken. Lying here as tomorrow encroaches on my thoughts, still it feels almost impossible to admit that Trace is marrying a twenty-two-year-old (a child, my mother says).

In the corner of the living room was the round, wooden table. Enveloped by two vast windows, the last puzzle still resided with only the edges done, skeleton-like. I almost saw my aunt hovering over it, as she always was, my grandmother often at her side. Through the windows there lies a green ball, deflated by time, eternally suspended on the edge of the forest. Farther still, the lake, with its narrow strip of sand, initially unrecognizable to me because I recall it as a beach. The purple flowers, though rare, are in bloom now. Ten years before, under the Emeraldite reading lamp they would scrutinize the pieces late into the night, imitated in the window’s reflection.

Outside, I remember opening the screened door of the porch to crouch down in the blue grasses and find the grasshopper I had caught a glimpse of, so small, springing to and fro. I was surprised, how delicate this creature was, that I could feel its heartbeat cupped in my hands.

One final magenta shape dissolves on my eyelids, and I fall asleep.



Corner / Yifan Zhang / Wellesley, MA

Migraines

Paige K. Walker / *Santa Fe, CA*

I have an incredibly photographic memory. Typically, I have no choice in what my brain decides to store; it will suddenly decide that I should think about how I awkwardly interacted with my parent's rich friends when I went to a fancy Christmas dinner party at a mansion in Houston three years ago, or how I almost hit my head getting into the car after I got my wisdom teeth out and then proceeded to call my friends on the way home, spewing nonsense. I remember everything.

The brain tends to black out memories when humans feel pain. That's why women who give birth want more children; they don't remember the feeling of the pain that they were in, they just remember that they were in pain. I barely remember anything about the first time that I got a migraine.

I struggled to drag my body from the warm cocoon of my heavy blankets when I got up that morning, and I ate the muffins that my mom had gotten up early to make - and then I can only remember bits and pieces of the rest of the morning. The blurriness of my vision. The pounding of my head. The swirling of my thoughts as I tried to focus on my schoolwork. I know from my ninth grade attendance record that I went about my normal morning schedule: advisory, first period, second period. I believed that the slight pounding in my head was normal; convincing myself that I had felt this way before. I probably went to milk break and complained to my friends and Mira likely coaxed me into the nurse's office where I start to remember.

I walked into Nurse Fournier's small, neat office and told her that I had a pounding headache. She sat me down in the chair next to my desk and proceeded to take my temperature.

"98.2," she read back to me. "So, no fever. When did your head start to hurt?"

I thought about it before responding. When had my head started to hurt? It was hard to concentrate. I had felt a little pain in my head the night before after I finished my horseback riding lesson. My vision had become bleached and swirly. Maybe I looked at something that had reflected the sun too much and



Lia Robertson / New York, NY

my eyes were just a little overwhelmed.

My mom hosted a Bishop's School event the previous night at our house, a welcome dinner for the new Bishop's parents, and had hoped that my siblings and I would make a small appearance. I remembered getting home from my lesson and walking through the bustling kitchen straight to my room. I closed all of the windows and laid down on the bed. The darkness seemed to even out the blotches in my vision, and I decided that maybe I just needed some food. In order to do that, I had to make the journey into the bright, noisy party downstairs in acceptable attire. I slipped on a new blue dress and my black flats, smoothed my post-ride helmet-hair, and walked out of my room to find my mom. I could see, but the room began to swirl like a kaleidoscope again. My mom stood outside talking to the head of school; now I had to socialize my way into the conversation. Mentally, I cursed.

Five minutes of agonizing conversation later, she got the hint that I needed to talk to her. We excused ourselves, and I explained what was going on with my vision. She suggested that I eat some food. Maybe I was just tired after exercising? She got me a bowl of meatballs from the catering company and told me that I didn't need to be there; I could go back to my room. I had already done my homework earlier that day, so I took a shower and went to sleep, hoping that would fix the problem. My head had hurt a little bit, but it didn't seem bad.

The next morning, I got ready for school with no problems. In the car and onto the bus, my head started hurting about 30 minutes in. During the ride to

school, the sun always rose and blared directly into the left windows on the bus. I tried to sit on the right side for this reason; I really didn't like bright light. But that day, all the seats on the right side had been taken, and I was forced to sit on the left. I had no idea of the impending repercussions of the noise and the light; I just knew that was when my head started hurting.

"I think this morning on the bus?" I responded to the nurse.

"Okay, have you had any swirled, splotchy, or abnormal vision in the last twenty-four hours?" she questioned. I recalled the night before and wondered how she knew.

"Yes," I said. "When I got home from my riding lesson last night."

"Does it make your head hurt more when you look out the window?" The sun seemed to be brighter than usual, its rays piercing the window like swords jousting my eyeballs, and my head started pounding again.

"Yeah," I stated, losing a bit of focus...

"Okay, I think that you are having a migraine. Go lay down in the back room. I'll call your mom, so she can come and get you."

I stuttered an okay and shuffled to the darkest bed. I laid there for forty-five minutes, the time it takes to get from our house to school, processing my situation as much as I could. The fact that migraines are common lulled me into a false sense of security at the time. I thought that since so many people got migraines, they must have a pretty good system in place when it came to treating and dealing with them. I don't think that

I've ever been so wrong in my entire life.

At this point, the full intensity of my migraines had not been fully reached yet. When the storm of a migraine strikes me now, the pain from the migraines I get feels like my brain is being split down the middle while at the same time someone is pumping more air into my skull like a balloon, building the pressure until you think it'll explode. The first time that I went to the nurse's office, it hadn't reached that point, but it would later that day.

My mom eventually made it to school and helped me make the journey to the car. Middle school lunch had just started, the noisiest time of day on campus, and we had to walk through the bustling cafeteria and the extremely bright patio area to get to the garage where my mom parked her car. Every step made me more nauseous as the sensory input increased around me. Later that week when the headache hadn't gone away, my mom took me to the doctor's office. We had tried all the over-the-counter remedies: Advil, Motrin, caffeine and sugar, Excedrin. None of it helped. Caffeine and sugar actually made my headaches worse.

The pediatric doctor was skeptical of the fact that I was in any pain, which happens to me a lot. I am not a very dramatic person when it comes to pain, so she didn't think that it was that serious. Once during a particularly long migraine episode that lasted close to four weeks, my mom took me to the emergency room. We sat in the waiting room for two hours—the bright lights, the smell, the sounds all irritating my head even more. My mom told me to act like I was

more in pain because none of the nurses thought that my case was critical since I looked okay on the outside.

I have a hard time grasping the concept of pain. We know that everyone experiences pain, but how do we know that we all experience it the same way? How are we supposed to quantify how much pain someone has? The only answer I've ever come up with is that we don't because we only know someone's level of pain by them telling us. The doctor prescribed me the lowest dose of Sumatriptan, a commonly used migraine medication, and sent me on my way. It

did nothing. I think the entirety of my first migraine lasted about five days with no relief.

It is alarming to me that I don't remember so much of what happened during those five days; I usually have trouble forgetting. Maybe it's a good thing that I don't vividly remember every moment of my migraines; it's hard to think about being in that much pain. I've had migraines for the last two to three years, every month to two months, for about a week at a time. All that time. Time where I could've been in school. Time that I could have been riding my

horse. Time where I could've been hanging out with my friends. Time spent away from my family. Time wishing that my head would just explode because surely that would feel better than this. Time feeling utterly useless. What could I have done with this time? Maybe I could've gotten that A instead of a B+. Maybe I could have gotten more exercise. Maybe I could've spent more time with my family. But I can't get the time back, and I can't make a chronic illness go away. All I can do is continue to manage the pain.

Fear is Near

Myrabella Johnston / *Longview, TX*

Monsters in my head
Creaking on the floor beside my bed
Tuck the covers nice and tight
Deep into the dark scary night
Fear is near, yes I hear

Haunting whispers in my ear
Telling me things I don't want to hear
Bunches of clothes all around
Giving an eerie form of a clown
Fear is near, yes I hear

Spiders with their many eyes
Oh how I despise
Creeping along the silhouette of the wall
Making sure he is not seen at all
Fear is near, yes I hear

Sudden noises yet nothing to make them
Lights flicker and start to go dim
Tight spaces where I can't move
Spaces my many minds disapprove
Fear is near, yes I hear

Fire burning bright at night
Giving off a mysterious light
Cold spots in my bed
Where there is no light shed
Fear is near, yes I hear

Stray cats meowing at my window sill
Make me go completely still
I see their outline as a gauze
As they sharpen their kitty claws
Fear is near, yes I hear

The seas seethe
No air to breathe
Doesn't make me at all relieved
I gasp for air with none received
Fear is near, yes I hear

I hear a great big knock on the door
A booming voice makes me worry even more
The door opens and I run
I start to hear someone hum
I'm questioning if its father and mum

I begin to walk towards the door
My feet hit the cold icy floor
The knob twists with a creak
I open the door to a beheaded freak
Suddenly the world goes dark

Fear is Here.

Human Error

Clara Shapiro / Brooklyn, NY

After my neighbor punched me in the supermarket over an off-the-mark condolence card I had sent her, I decided to enroll myself in “The Online School of Ease and Charm” where I would learn skills like how to converse with my hairdresser and what to do with my arms while walking.

I first noticed ads for The Online School of Ease and Charm right around the time of the Supermarket Incident. There were the huge ones slapped onto the sides of the B41, rolling by in high gloss. They read: “ARE YOU FEMININE?” On the subway, I found lilac business cards wedged between the seats, slipped in front of liveboards on the train platform, and once, sticking up from the part of the turnstile where you swipe your MetroCard. These business cards had an Easter Egg slyness to them, popping up in random crevices, as though the subway itself were dropping me hints.

Perhaps it was complete serendipity: some weeks after The Supermarket Incident, I was riding the subway home from work and contemplating the convalescent tingle in my face when I looked down and noticed a lilac business card pasted to the sole of my left clog. I remember muttering, “Eureka!”

A week later, a (discrete-as-promised) box arrived for me at the post office. Five lesson packets and two CDs. In particular, I was excited about “Sincerely, You -- The Art of Correspondence,” a course that I had ordered in order to prevent future slip-ups. In my note to my neighbor whose husband had died, I had tried to be organic. I figured she wouldn’t want to hear all that “forever-in-our-hearts” sap that most people come up with. I wrote, instead: “Death sucks. Sorry about Seth. At least you have the dog LOL.” LOL as in “lots of love.”

From the twelve double-sided pages (with illustrations!) of “Sincerely, You...,” I learned where I had gone wrong. One major takeaway: if you have any uncertainty at all about the spelling of the departed’s name, don’t use it at all. His name turned out to be Judd.

The other courses I had signed up for were interesting, too. While I did the dishes, I slid a CD called “Reel ‘Em In -- The Formula to Capture Any Man’s Heart” into my laptop. My in-bed read was “How Long is Too Long? Eye-Contact as Communication.” Two to three seconds is enough to show platonic engagement; if you want to kick up the thermostat, don’t be afraid to lock eyes for 10+. *Locked eyes*, the packet said, *is a huge leap closer to locked lips*.

To me, it was heartening to see how numerical attraction could be, how quantitative. There were specific formulas for seducing any and every man, an optimal range of seconds to maintain eye contact. Beauty could be expressed as a ratio. Even “attraction” itself sounded like a mathematical operation:

addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and attraction. Me + You on a tree trunk, and if things end up going wrong, we will “work it out” as though romantic dysfunction is a difficult math problem. Everything can be solved. Take comfort in the order of operations.

Halfway through “Reel ‘Em In,” I decided to make a Match.com account. I figured it was time for some field work. I had memorized the formulas of seduction, but could I apply them? I would leave love to the algorithm. In my “ABOUT” section, I wrote candidly: “Thrice divorced. Knows how to work an Excel spreadsheet. Was born with extra pinky, but I don’t think it’s genetic.”

Scarcely two months later, I found myself sitting cross-legged in a bistro chair, awaiting my dinner date. I knew some things about him already: “Todd is a man who likes to do many things.” The bistro was called “Paris France Bar,” just in case anybody had thought of Paris, Wisconsin first. The black and white tiles floor tiles were hexagonal, running diagonally. Bathroom inspired. Or maybe bathrooms are bistro-inspired. Slipping in and out of hearing, some French lady, probably dead, was singing in a whispery way. I recognized the word “l’amour.”

Todd was a man—I confirmed over dinner—but what was harder to tell was if, in fact, he liked to do many things. “Todd,” I began, holding the stem of my water glass between two fingers, “I saw on your bio that you like to do many things.” Todd nodded. “And you told me when we were chatting that you like bowling.” Todd nodded. “Me too.”

Perhaps he’s the strong, silent type, I thought, and settled my chin on my

hands, looking into his eyes. Ten, nine, eight—stare him sexily down—seven, six, five...

He said something: “Please let me blink.”

Todd and I took the Q home. That is, I went to my home, and he went to his. We lived, alas, in the same neighborhood. Todd and I sat next to each other on the train, not for intimacy but to negate the possibility of direct eye contact. At Canal Street, I dug my earbuds out of my bag and shook them in his face. Todd nodded. Almost in sync, we each nestled one end into our ears.

I decided that we should listen to “Les Misérables.” Music for every occasion. *Look DOWN, look DOWN, you’ll always be a slave. Look DOWN, look*

puddles

Caden Heiser-Cerrato / *Linthicum, MD*

the sunroom ceiling drips
rainwater, and the carpet

dampens. puddles form
in the mud of my backyard

as the fence wheezes
in the storm. sitting on a stained

sofa, I stare through holes
in the fence into my neighbor’s

backyard. a tricycle rests
upturned against the rain,

paint peeling off the plastic.
on a walk, years ago, I met

DOWN, you’re standing in your grave.

When I looked sideways at Todd, I saw that he looked strained. Up, down went his knee, almost imperceptibly. He was looking for a rhythm, for the rules of the song. But it was a song about convicts, people who had broken the rules.

That night, I loaded all five packets and the two CDs back into the discrete-as-promised box from The Online School of Ease and Charm. I left it in front of my house. Might as well let the widowed lady find it on a walk tomorrow morning with her dog. On the side of the box, I taped a piece of graph paper, looking jagged and messy the way it does when you tear it out of a notebook. In shapeless capital letters of every size, I had written, “I’M FREE!”

the man and woman who lived
there together. they had a child

who drew chalk pictures
on sidewalks. every time it rained,

the pastels would wash away
into the storm drain.

the woman moved out, the grass
grew taller, the child gave up

on the tricycle and left too.
now the man lives there

alone. I would find a bucket
for the leak, but the carpet

is already ruined.

OUTSTANDING POETRY

For I.R., to whom I never said goodbye

Akanksha Basil / *Chappaqua, NY*

You have made me hate the water
under bridges; all that remains there
is every moment you gave away
to the silted clatter of rushing glass;
shards do not need your breaths—
already they are cutting from us
far too many. Always subject to the abuse
of dreams hurled at their throats
like uprooted river stones, amongst
the rot of branches and plastic bags—

I imagine you rushing, spitting out solid night;
wandering, waving at your shadow, never
knowing how easily it could slip—
how commonplace it could be for the river
to sweep up the dust you felt yourself
becoming. To toss it into little glass jars
for us to find, hidden softly away in your dress-
er—

Somewhere in the backroads of my mind,
your portrait hangs over the catwalk
of an empty theater. The stars are convinced
to quiet their flames—enough of them. Now,
there remains only a small specter, stirring
up this dust; the bones of old faces,
masks; slipping under the ghost light, stage

I Want to Play Ball



Travis Xue / Basking Ridge, NJ

OUTSTANDING FICTION

Train Track Poetry

Madison Xu / *New York, NY*

There was a boy I once loved.

I liked the way his name sounded on the muscle of my tongue. How it thrashed and struggled to untangle itself from my tonsils and slipped painfully sweet, silt in transit. But I guess I liked him so much that I said his name like a secret too, never in front of him and only to myself. I hid the letters in the hollows of my cheeks and felt them against the ridges of my teeth, smeared them flush against the condensation of the bathroom mirror so it floated ghostly above the rise and fall of my breasts, the closest I could get him to my heart.

I addressed him as “Hey-You” and “Guess-What” and “By-The-Way” and never his real name. Saying it was like sanctification and my tongue was a purgatory. So I chose to love him with my tongue curled and my lips pressed together, as if he could read through the gaps in my teeth like poetry.

On a nonspecific afternoon, Hey-You and I sat in his bedroom, my back pressed against the blue walls and his legs dangling like pale ribbons off the fire escape. He was smoking weed and I was watching him do it. I wore his sweater over mine, knowing my mother would sniff out the skunky scent on my clothes within seconds if I didn’t, and he was so skinny it didn’t fit me half bad. He took a drag from the joint as if it was his life force, his eyes shaking beneath his eyelids, and I’m



Emergency Exit / Katherine Sedlock-Reiner / Brooklyn, NY

scared he might choke. I picture the smoke doing all its collective damage at once and his body folding like origami over the fire escape. Hey-You never once asked me if I wanted a hit, and part of me wished he did, but of course I would have to refuse. Still, I let his exhalation make me dizzy.

We were sitting in nonclinical silence, and I was calculating the 9x12 frames that would fit in the empty spaces on his wall where mine were covered with embarrassing yearbook photos when he turned around. His eyes are honey gold to my dark brown cesspools.

“Norton’s a fucking coward.”

“What?”

“*Shawshank’s Redemption.*”

“Haven’t watched it.”

Guess-What turned back around and shook his head in disapproval, the freckles dancing closer to his eyes when he smiled. “He killed himself before he got arrested. We all hated him for being the bad guy, but just ended up being an applaudable liar and a coward. That’s the most substandard villainous quality you can think of. He gets one chance to make it up for himself and tell his side of the story, but he takes the easy way out. Now, he’s just some loser.”

My intestines flipped inside out, and I felt guilt for something I didn’t do. I wanted to say something about agreeing but then I’d just become more Norton-ish than I already was, so I kept quiet. He answered my question without me asking, the sunset dying his hair fifty shades of golden.

“You’d be like Ellen Ripley. Exquisite.”

When I got home it was 10 pm, three

hours after curfew, but I mouthed something to my parents about studying in the library and I’m let off. I kept my bedroom door propped open, and I heard the soft pad of my father’s slippers slowing at my door and I know he can see my pencil moving against the paper, calculating the answers to problems that had solutions. My sister came into my room, Pink Panther playing on her iPad 2 and my mother yelled at her from the kitchen to be quiet because I’m studying and it’s important, “for her future, do you understand?”

When I closed my eyes, all I could see was his boring into mine and his legs hanging precariously off the fire escape. Suddenly the numbers that I’m so versed at reading were melting off the corner of my desk and I can’t figure out the limit to infinity for the function of x. So I just put down ‘no solution’ and box it until my pencil breaks.

By-The-Way wanted to take me to his favorite place crosstown and I emailed my tutor telling him that I’m sorry that I can’t make it. We sat on the edge of the train tracks for the train that he takes back into the city when he visits his dad’s house. Compared to the smog of the city, the air there was achingly crisp. This time, I watched him inhale deeply and his chest swell, but the air is his life force so it’s understandable. Our knees are touching and I’m trying to tattoo the feeling onto my skin, and that’s when he leans back and splays himself across the train track.

I jumped up, the pebbles flying across his face, and he flinches, his freckles disappearing and reappearing in his smile lines.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Lying down.”

“Are you insane? You’re going to get run over!”

I imagine 10,000 tons of aluminum shattering his body like a Christmas ornament.

“I won’t. What’s the time?”

“5:58.”

“The train comes at 6:10. However many minutes that is—”

“Eleven. And twenty six seconds. That means eleven minutes and twenty six seconds before the train comes and your guts get splattered everywhere.”

He laughed hard and I’m convinced the trees shake.

“But what that also means is eleven minutes and twenty seconds to lie down before I have to get up.”

By-The-Way’s breath rose and fell steadily, and his honey curls fanned out, a mandala framing his angular face. I lied down next to him, close enough to smell the cottony detergent of his sweater and maybe the weed but I’m not certain. His hand was tantalizingly close, and I wanted to hold it and trace the wrinkles in his palms. Supposedly, they spell out your fate. By-The-Way speaks with his eyes closed.

“6:10, 7:25, 7:40. I’ve memorized all the arrival times.”

“I don’t understand how you can remember all of that. We’ve established you’re bad at numbers.”

Blaise grinned and rolled over onto his side. “As long as I know the time, I’ll always have a choice.”

At that moment, I wanted to tell him that I loved him. That I loved him not in the way I came to understand it, follow-

ing a preordained purpose and fulfilling a dream that wasn't mine. I wanted to tell him that I loved him so wholly and infinitely that I couldn't calculate it in numbers. And that he's nuts for lying in the path of the train and that I wished I was Ellen Ripley instead of some loser like Norton.

In the four minutes and thirty-nine seconds we had left on the tracks, I mustered the courage to grab his hand, and his fingers slipped through mine like sand. I kept my tongue hidden and tucked into my cheek, but I wondered if this was sanctification.

Blaise died a few months later. It was April and unusually warm, and I was sitting halfway through my first period class Monday morning when his name started falling around me like hail. A family member just notified the principal that Blaise Lee Finley had passed away on Sunday in a car accident somewhere on the I-95. He was pronounced dead at the scene, the impact obliterating his bones and his body unfurled into the asphalt.

I never received a text or an email, and it seemed that I, who was wholly and

infinitely in love with him, was the last one to know.

Blaise, main character of his narrative, was not supposed to go out in this way, quiet and pitiful and utterly helpless at the very end. I wanted to tell him that it was a cowardly way to leave, that even Norton of all people would be disappointed. He who should have left in a



A Dreamy Game of Catch / Jason Kraft / Parkton, MD

burst of fireworks, who held his fate tight in the wrinkles in his palms, handed it all to the wheel of some drunk driver.

I let my pencil run wild across my calculus, and I scribble until all my answers disappear beneath the graphite. My breath emanates in beats of four, lungs desperate to remember again the

feeling of crisp air hitting each cavity and the vibration of the train tracks against my back of a train that's still far enough away.

I no longer have a valid excuse to skip tutoring and college applications encroaches, an ever-burgeoning monster. Turns out, life goes back to normal even when it's turned upside down. But from

time to time, I recall his name even as his face slips more and more from my memory. I scrawl it like page numbers through my notebooks, find them lost between the cracks in my bedroom ceiling and I try to read through the letters like poetry.

OUTSTANDING NONFICTION

Us

Jessica Wang / *Barnegat Township, NJ*

Youth.

When I was young, I loved you. I loved the bristle of your black hair in my hand and the crinkle in your eyes as you twirled around for the tenth time to funky pop music blasting in the background. Back then, you had loved dancing, and I loved watching you do it. I still remember you cartwheeling and flipping across the faded Chinese carpet *māmā* had bought for twenty dollars at the thrift store. We used to give dancing performances to *lǎolao* and *lǎoyé* on it, both of us dressed in oversized boots and *māmā*'s prized velvet hats. *Lǎolao* and *lǎoyé* would always take us to the convenience store after each performance and allowed us to pick up as many candy bars and bubble gum pieces as we wanted, spoiling us in a way only grandparents can. We made sure to give a lot of performances.

I remember our trips to China and *māmā* taking us to the nearby opera one day. You had worn a red dress bedazzled with golden silk and boots with flaking Hello Kitties that day, and I thought you were the most beautiful person in the world. We had settled in our red seats, and the world itself hushed when the curtains opened. The performers dressed in shades of red and floated on the stage the same way water lilies floated on a koi pond. You had told me you wanted to float like that one day, and the woman next to us had to bite her tongue to stop herself from laughing. Later, a man performed the traditional *biàn liǎn* trick, changing his dragon mask to a tiger mask in a matter of seconds. He was so fast we only saw a swirl of black and gold. It was so startling, you dropped your plum juice onto your lap, which caused *māmā* to throw a fit afterward.

Back in America, we had vowed to discover the secret behind the man's *biàn liǎn* trick and found a YouTube video on it from *bàba*'s forbidden work computer. But the video was thirty minutes long and included a dozen advertisements with red pigtailed girls holding up sweaty hamburgers, so we never did find out.

I loved you so much.

§

First.

The first time I heard the word "chink" I was in 3rd grade. I was eating a pork pastry *māmā* bought from the Asian pastry shop downtown. A boy with buck teeth and straw hair came up to me and asked if

I was Chinese. When I said yes, he said I guess you're a chink and then asked if he could borrow my pencil. I don't remember much about that kid except that he threw tantrums often and liked picking his nose with his pinky finger. He was actually pretty nice. I think his name was Tim.

When I got home, I asked māmā what it meant to be a chink, and her face grew all sour and angry like a dried up prune. She didn't say anything and instead went to bàba's work office, slamming the door shut. There were many phones ringing that day.

Later on, I searched the word up bàba's work computer and found out that chink meant "a small cleft, slit, crack or fissure." You patted me on the back and reassured me that I did not look like a crack or a fissure, and I appreciated your support. That day we had performed a sequence of cart-wheels for our grandparents, and you slipped and fell.

You never fall.

Now that I think about it, I don't even think you knew what the word fissure meant.

§

Failure.

We used to spend Sunday mornings at the local high school learning how to write squiggly Mandarin and recite Mandarin syllables. In the afternoon, the program offered clubs centered on Chinese culture where we learned how to play "Go" and wrap dumplings. It was

basically a Sunday School for Chinese kids, a place for people like us. One Sunday, I failed a big exam. It was an easy test on numbers. Everybody else scored in the 90s or 100s, but I got a big ol' 61 written in red ink. It was my own fault. I had chosen to start playing soccer, which



Chinatown / Caroline Kuenzi / Somerville, MA

had games every other Sunday. All my American friends played soccer, so of course, I needed to play soccer too. At age twelve, I already knew the rules of fitting in.

But you didn't. You didn't even know there were rules, and if there were, you didn't care. You once told me that if everything was the same, then nothing would be fun anymore. Besides, you had long given up on fitting in, choosing to dress in big red T-shirts and ruffled red skirts and red shoes that clicked when

you tapped them together. And when I asked why you dressed in so much red, you proudly stated that red is a lucky color. You told me it's the color of soft paper lanterns and candied fruits and folded envelopes and silk dresses with yellow dragons. The color of us. Plus, it complemented your skin tone.

That day, you berated me in the hallway, saying that I should quit soccer and how Chinese school was more fun and how they even had a dance program we could sign up for. I don't even know why you wanted to continue dancing; lǎolao and lǎoyé were back in China so our flow of junk food was cut off. But then, you looked at me with stars in your eyes and said it was our culture in such a wistful way, I almost caved in. Then, I thought about the stares and whispers of my American friends, and I ignored you.

You walked home alone that day.

§

Wishes.

When I told my American friends I wanted to be Caucasian, they laughed and called me insane. I remember one of them told me that Asians were exotic, and I should be proud to be one. I didn't know whether to be offended or flattered. They didn't understand the extent to which I envied them, how much I wanted to take their skin and use it to cover up mine, as if skin could be copied and pasted. I just wanted to feel for once what it felt like to be beautiful. Just once.

That night I dyed my hair blonde in front of the mirror. The dye stung my scalp and caused my eyes to turn into watery kaleidoscopes. I didn't even think I looked pretty as a blonde. But I didn't regret it, not one bit.

And when you saw me as a blonde, you had cupped my face and kissed away my tears, your lips soft and red on my cheeks. You had kissed my skin, my eyes, and my hands, embracing the parts of me I never loved.

You told me I was already beautiful, that I didn't need to change at all, that my soft yellow skin reminded you of the sunlight and the curve of my eyes was like the moon's. You told me that my pupils held the beauty of the night and that when I danced, I stole the very breath from your lungs.

I wish I could have believed you. I wish I could have seen myself the way you saw me.

§

Realization.

I called you ugly on a Thursday night when the air was foggy, and the clouds covered up the stars. I said I hated you and how you were a stupid, slit-eyed girl with piss-colored skin. I screamed that you were the source of my problems and that I could never fit in thanks to you. I called you every single hateful name I could think of and pulled at your black hair and clawed at your face.

The worst thing was that you said nothing. You just sat there and stared back from my bedroom mirror. And when I pressed my head against the surface of the mirror, so did you. When I traced my hands down the reflecting glass, so did you. You looked strange with blonde

hair.

I kissed you that night, pressed my lips against the glass mirror and watched as you did the same. I kissed you through the mirror, eyes closed and tears dripping down my cheeks. You were my culture, my ethnicity, me. Your only crime was your existence, your only gift, love, and I had beat and shunned you. My own ethnicity.

I smashed the mirror that night. Every single bit of it. The glass pieces looked like tiny glittering stars and held the reflection of someone I didn't know. I then stepped on those starry shards, grinding them into minuscule bits and watched as my feet bled the color of us. I couldn't stand looking at you with your blonde hair and moon eyes. I couldn't stand how much I had changed myself.

That night I curled up into a ball and hugged myself, stroking my soft yellow skin and tracing the curve of my eyes. I memorized the tender flesh of my cheeks and the coarseness of my hair and promised that I would treat myself better.

And underneath the darkness of my blankets, I whispered a thousand apologies to myself that went unanswered.

§

Me

My name is Jessica Wang, but my Chinese name is Wang Xiāng Xiāng. I was born in America, but my parents are Chinese immigrants. The name "Jessica" comes from American soil while the name "Xiāng Xiāng" comes from a land of dancers that float like water lilies. They are both my names, two halves of one whole. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

§

You and Me.

I go outside one day, wearing a red skirt and a red tank top with thick, red balm all over my lips. My red shoes click when I tap them together. Red is a lucky color. It's the color of me, of us. I scream and holler broken Mandarin words so the world can hear.

Hear me. See me. Feel me.

I no longer play soccer; instead, I try to write Mandarin words I had long forgotten and help māmā fold and crimp meat dumplings. Lǎolao and lǎoyé Face-time occasionally, and they show me the world around them: red paper lanterns, folded envelopes, silk dresses, and all. I even play "Go" with bàba and of course am utterly defeated in a matter of minutes.

And sometimes just for the sake of childhood, I put on a pair of neon green boots and fish out one of māmā's scarves and add a floppy yellow sun hat to top it off. I switch the radio to a station that plays funky pop music and raise my hands to prepare for a cartwheel. I make sure the performance is outstanding, with twirls and handstands and all sorts of kicks and jumps. It's certainly not a Chinese dance, but it reminds me of folding dumplings and yellow lanterns and dancers that float like water lilies. It makes me feel closer to my culture, to my ethnicity, to you. Throughout my performance, I can hear you beating, pulsing, whispering, in my ear, I love you. I love you. I love you.

You are beautiful.

I am beautiful.

RUNNER-UP POETRY

Ardent Origins

Maira Faisal / *Florence, KY*

Curiosity burns in humanity's soul,
for logic and emotion, for the earth and us.
With this curiosity lit in my veins,
can I ask where I hail from?

Do I hail from sticky-sweet
blackberry-stained hands,
hoisted on my brothers' shoulders?
From seas of splintered pencils
saved for their supposed good luck?
From the blushing roses
Papa planted for me,
unfurling petals like peahens
unfanning feathers?
Or from fussing over Eid shoes?
Maybe from the dusky books
I burned through 'til sunrise?
From the acrylic coloring
my clothes as I painted rosy petals?

Perhaps I hail from
the bitter, piquant tang of
green cardamom pods;
from the saccharine grimace
greeting relatives over the phone;
from the way we were spurned, slandered
outside of our own house.
But possibly, I hail from
over-mature talks with friends
on the Ohio River's bank.
From Mama's crying face
after Khala's somber phone call,
the gilded chain I began to wear after.
From the vermilion prayer mat
with the frayed edges,
the coruscating emerald
Independence Day lights
on the fourteenth of August,
upside-down Pokémon card
trading with my brothers.

Do I hail from everything and anything,
from every and any moment enkindled in me?
The uncertainty sparks purpose in my soul—
the flame burning and burning, *wondering*.

RUNNER-UP FICTION

Residuals

Alison Cao / *Quincy, MA*

Before she cut my hair, my mother tied a blindfold around my head. “Relax,” she said, and when I wouldn’t, she drew a long strip of cotton from the back pocket of her jeans and wrapped it twice over my eyes. I sat on my hands after that, the blade of her scissors grazing my neck, the blindfold pressed against my eyelashes like the flesh of a stranger’s palm.

When she was done, my mother left the room without removing the blindfold. I reached my hands to the back of my head, picking at the knot, which she had tied so tightly that it felt like a small stone between my fingers. So I kept it on when I showered, the stray pieces of my hair strewing onto the tiled floor, eddied into the little spaces between my toes. The droplets drummed on my shoulders. I turned around and held my face up to the water, and the cotton molded itself onto the contours of my skin.

Under the blindfold, my mother’s body transformed into a blurry, flattened outline. As I began to memorize the path of the hallway leading to my room, dragging my fingertips along its surfaces in long, unbroken trails, I would hear her following me, tracing parallel lines on the wall across mine. But when I turned around, startled like a prey animal, I saw a silhouette, the color of the dusky paint behind it, a vestige of a person, anonymous against the walls. I couldn’t imagine what I must have looked like to her, if my blindness broke her heart, or if my body, unseen to my own eyes, vanished before hers, too.

But once I was going down the stairs, the railing shined between my hands, and I saw her through the blindfold, standing before the window. The sun began to fall, and it had backlit her silhouette—her old body, the one I knew, thrown into relief against the light. She looked radiant, tall as the aspens on the other side of the glass, and then she turned towards me, her gaze pinning me to where I stood, as if her scissors were still touching my throat. I tried to look back, to meet her eyes with mine, but even under the sunlight her face was veiled in shadow, hazy around the edges, the features heedless, no expression I could remember. So then I closed my eyes, sightless in a realer sense, and her true face flared before me, an afterimage of the sun, bright once before it flickered away.

RUNNER-UP NONFICTION

Recovery

Jessica Gold / *New York, NY*

I awaken with a jolt to the sharp, mundane sound of the little alarm clock that rests on my white bedside table. I sit up a bit too quickly, and my head begins to spin—a dull, aching feeling in the back of my head and the pit of my stomach causing me to see stars. When my vision returns to normal, I slowly walk to my bathroom. The water I splash on my face sends shivers down my spine, and a feeling of intense cold spreads throughout my body. I stare into my full-length mirror and see little bumps protruding down my back, stretching from the base of my neck to the beginning of where my full butt used to be. I turn around and see my protruding hip bones and the ghost of the curves I used to have. I put both hands on my waist and squeeze until my fingers touch, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I take a deep breath and step onto the little metal sheet with blue numbers, and I feel a shot of dopamine coursing through my numb body. But just as quickly as it came, it's gone, and I'm left with that same hollow coldness that is all too familiar.

I walk to the kitchen, not noticing the sound of the TV over the feeling of a dull aching in my stomach. I pour a liter of cold water into my hot pink water bottle and put it into my backpack. I take a deep breath and pull the bag over my shoulders. I feel the smooth surface of my laptop against my spine. It's heavier than I anticipated. I walk out the door.

I am soon submerged in the chatter of the crowded school bus. I listen to my friend animatedly discuss the weekend she and I shared—the same, lifeless smile on my face as I nod along to stories of laughter and fun that I seemed to have watched from someone else's eyes. But my face soon grows tired of the weight of my fake smile, which is crooked and, just like my backpack, seems to grow heavier by the minute. My stomach whispers to me. In response, I put in my earbuds, turn up the volume, and watch as my surroundings disappear.

I step out of the bus and onto the grey pavement, feeling that little ache in the back of my head as I touch the ground. I look around at the grey skies that stretch for miles around me. Letting out a sigh, I walk into the school building made of little bricks and sit down in a rolling chair. Just moments after taking my seat, I open my mouth—still dry from my lack of breakfast—and sing a raspy song, my eyes lighting up and my hands moving as I speak. I smile with satisfaction at the answer I gave and relish in

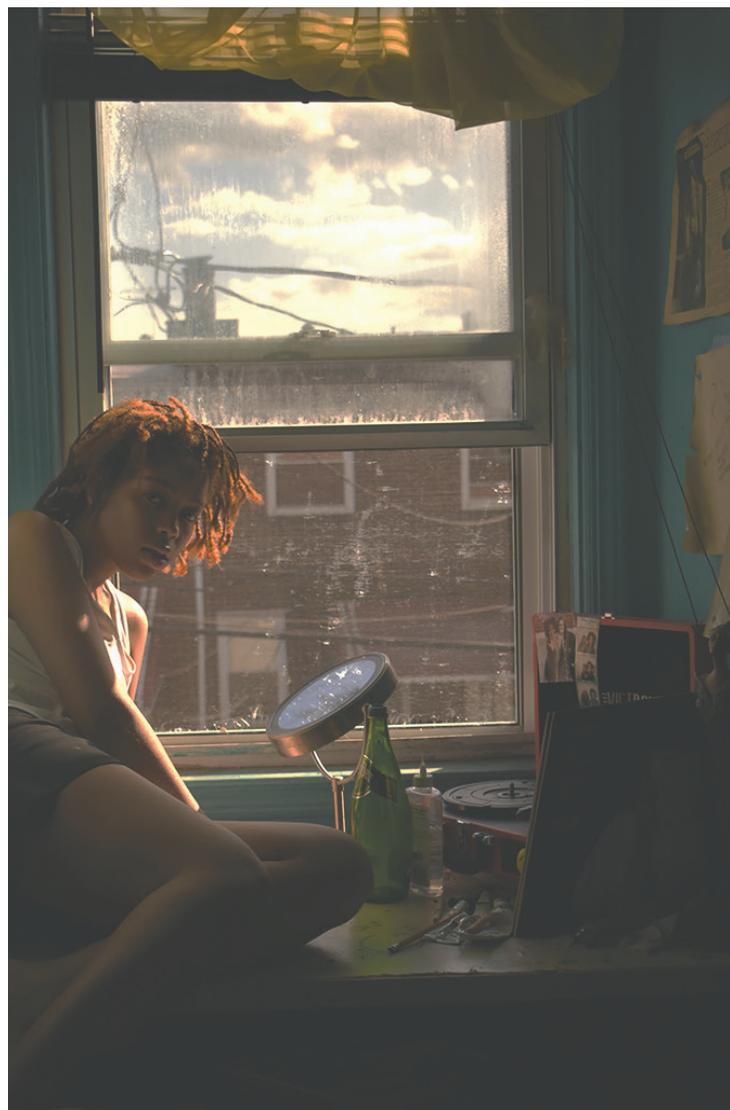
the praise of my teacher. My white teeth flash for a second but are replaced by that same, grim expression I wear when I look around the room and see the smirks. The blond boy leans towards me and spits acid in my ears. It drips down the side of my face, and it scars before I can quickly wipe it away with my shaking hands. *You're lucky you're smart.* His words hit me like a truck going 60 miles per hour on a 30 miles per hour speed limit highway even though my face is already covered in the scars they've left before. Everyone's eyes bore into me, ripping me apart. I look down and see my body—suddenly so big that I can't fit into my seat. My thighs balloon to the size of watermelons, and my stomach barely squeezes between my chair and my desk. Petrified, I stare down at myself, unable to move a muscle. I look down in horror, fear coursing through my veins. Suddenly, he's right. I put my hand around my wrist, and when my fingers touch, I exhale slowly and my heartbeat calms. I take a deep breath and look down at my pale frame that is a fraction of what it once was and exhale. I'm frozen until the clock strikes noon.

The cafeteria is busy. I chew my lettuce and cucumber slowly as my friends make plans at the lunch table, and I absently nod that I'll go. The dull, aching pain that persisted in my abdomen is replaced with a deeper, sharper one. I wear a smile that looks more like a grimace on

my face, and I try to pretend that I am wanted within this giant mass of a friend group. I pick at the pale green contents of my plate—what I've thought about all day is too daunting to face. We are all starving for something: attention, money, love, success, popularity, beauty. Anorexia is about how willing you are to give in to that hunger—that animalistic urge to do everything you can to get what you want. It's almost heroic. I am a “go-getter” who wants to be pretty. So I

starve myself. I take one last look at my pathetic, dressing-less little plate of veggies before picking up my bag and leaving. It seems heavier than it was before.

The rest of the day is silent. I stare at the colorless walls of my classrooms and dream about the girl I once was. The girl who was carefree yet thoughtful, full of both smiles and ideas. I accept that I will never be able to get through a day without being wholeheartedly consumed by thoughts of food in every waking moment. Those heavy thoughts stop me from ordering what I want at restaurants, going to dinner with friends; they stop me from *living*. All the time I once devoted to my passions is now utterly consumed by deep hunger. I think about the way I want him to love me, filling me up and making me whole again. I remember when I used to look at my reflection and smile—how I used to love the colorful shirts and dresses that hugged my curvy frame. I desperately need him to look at me and show me his perfect smile and bring everything back to what it used to be. I want him to choose me, to accept every part of me for who I am. So when I look down at my phone as my teacher talks about balancing equations and see his profile picture next to my message and those four little letters that say “read,” I break a little more. But deep down, I know that the only person who I truly need to be loved by hates me so much she can barely stand



Dreams From My Baltimore Window
Azana Wilson / Baltimore, MD

to look me in the eye anymore—even through the clear reflection of my full-length mirror.

I'm back home again. I take out my water bottle. It's still full. I feel the cold water on the inside of my mouth and spit it out into my pristine, white sink. I continue until a full liter has gone down the drain. I am comforted by the cold feeling in my mouth but even more so by the emptiness in my stomach when I'm done. I feel refreshed, though still empty enough to feel as though I've done a good job. I go to the kitchen and toast myself bread. 60. Cut the avocado into perfect quarters. 58. Take out exactly one and a half pieces of salmon. 70. After 5 minutes, it's all gone. I feel a stretch in my stomach, and my heart races. I press on it and flatten it out until my hands fit back around my waist, and I can do my homework without thinking of what I consumed and how many pounds it caused me to gain.

The homework I use to distract myself is quickly finished, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I lie down and am immediately engulfed by the pain of knowing that I have never been enough for anyone-- a thought I frequently suffer. Knowing that everyone leaves after they get what they want from me or grow tired of my nagging, annoying personality. The pain of knowing that my body—a fraction of what it once was—will never be full or whole again. That I'll always be a burden to everyone I know. That I'll never be small enough to be beautiful. I feel something wet on my cheeks. I'm surprised there's enough substance in my body to even produce tears. The pain I feel, so overwhelming, so consuming,

so unceasing—it easily overpowers the dull, aching pain in my stomach. A tiny glimmer of hope tugs at me, telling me that maybe he wants me now. Maybe he responded and maybe I'll finally be someone's first choice. But when I pick up my little aluminum rectangle, it brings me to my empty home screen—a picture of me and my friends from back when I was myself. I feel my spine digging into my hard mattress, begging for sleep to overcome me.

Recovery means being honest with myself. It means forcing me to switch this essay from the third to the second to the first person—forcing myself to realize that this is me telling *my* story, not *a* story. It means confronting the fact that I lost my period, my hair fell out, and I can no longer be a tennis player like I once wanted so badly to be. It means writing about recovery in the present tense because it's far from over yet. It means realizing that I didn't want to throw my life away to pursue an unattainable form of beauty, but I was willing to. The thing about anorexia is that it makes you feel invincible. It's exhilarating—like a high that makes you feel untouchable. You convince yourself that you're in control even when your body isn't yours anymore. I never once doubted that I was starving myself or being unhealthy or had an eating disorder, but I was fine with it because one day, I would finally be beautiful.

Anorexia is an obsession. My Instagram feed is still littered with pictures of food: meal prep, low-calorie snack ideas, “detox drinks to help you cleanse your body of harmful toxins.” I can still open my refrigerator and name the calo-

ries of every item in it without batting an eye. I threw out my measuring spoons, but I know how many of my silverware spoons are equivalent to a tablespoon, and I know how much a liter of water weighs. There are some behaviors, some parts of your life that can never be unlearned.

Being honest means admitting that I still spend hours in front of the mirror looking at the way my stomach juts out over my pants. The way my thighs seem to ripple whenever I press my finger against them and the way I can't wrap my hands around them when I try. I still cry rivers because he'll never want me like I want him to. Sometimes, I still desperately grab at my wrists, wrapping my fingers safely around them to comfort myself. I stare at my face, and I can see my big, buggy green eyes staring back at my lopsided face that is too round for my liking, and I wonder how it feels to be pretty. I want nothing more than to be beautiful. The kind of beautiful that makes people stop and stare at you on the street. The kind of beautiful that makes nothing else matter. The kind of beautiful that makes people stay. And yet, all I can see when I look in the mirror is someone who miserably failed. I failed at being anorexic, and I should be ecstatic if I'm *really being honest*; sometimes, I'm not. As I look at myself in the mirror, struggling to meet my own eyes, I realize that I'm not finished with recovery. And it's going to be a while before I truly am.

Oranges Oranges Oranges

Audrey Smith / *Elverson, PA*

She strips off sweaty clothes, steps into the motel shower. The water running over her body is lukewarm, never hot. She ignores the long, dark hair clogging the drain, allowing a puddle to form at her feet. Maybe. A thought flits through her head. *Maybe, this water will rise and I'll be too tired to do anything and I'll drown. I'll drown, I'll drown, I'll drown.*

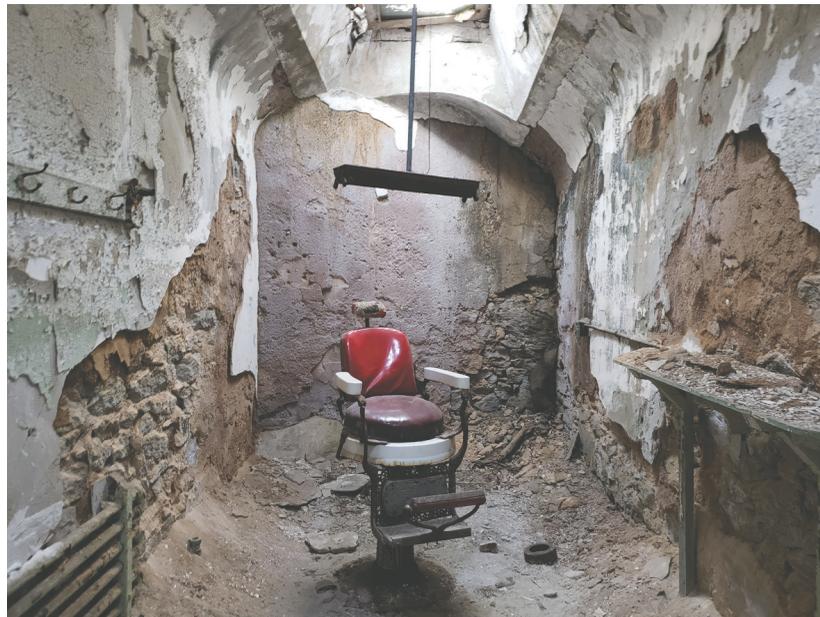
Too tired. She closes her eyes and leans against the slick linoleum, trying to remember why she was here. She was tired, she told him. Yes, she remembers she told him she needed a break. *From what?* he asked. The answer echoed in her skull: *from you, from you, from you.* But she didn't dare, so she shouldered past him, packed her bags, and halfway down the driveway answered: life.

Call me every day.

I will.

She tossed her phone out the window on the interstate, watched the semi behind her plow over it. How long had she been gone? She tries to count the days on her fingers, on her toes. The water is up to her ankles now.

She went to the grocery store yesterday and bought three oranges with the spare change in her pocket. When she got back to her room, she remembered she didn't even like oranges, her husband did. Every Sunday, when she squeezed orange juice before church, she fantasized about squeezing the acid into his eyes just to hear him scream for once. The oranges still sat on the nightstand, next to the Bible she pretended to read at night. *O heavenly Father, hallowed be thy name.* She had no respect for God, he told her years ago when she asked if



Abandoned #2 / ShaoYuan Su / Cary, NC

they could skip church. She wanted to correct him, tell him she had no respect for the god that let him walk the Earth. But she put on her Sunday best and took her bread and wine because that's what good wives do.

In the bathroom, she slides down the wall and closes her eyes, feels the water slosh around, and adjust to her shape.

She went swimming with him once in the ocean, before he tied an impossible knot around her finger, back when she worshipped the ground he walked on. She splashed him and in retaliation, he held her under. She remembers how that felt as she sinks down further, water up to her neck. She swallowed water that day in a panicked frenzy. It was so, so dark, with the water rushing into her body and weighing down her lungs.

The water is up to her nose now.

She remembers his throaty laugh when she came back up, coughing and dizzy.

With her mouth open, she pulls herself under, black hair floating on the surface and knobby knees up above the water. She lets herself go lightheaded, relishes the rush of adrenaline, the ability to keep herself under as every muscle in her body lights itself on fire to escape this. All her problems could be solved by letting the water consume her.

When her skull feels like it's being pressed between two bricks, her hands break the surface and grapple around to pull her out, gasping and choking. Her vision is fuzzy and she stumbles as she steps out. Water trails behind her, soaking the carpet of the motel bedroom. The Bible on the nightstand seems to stare at her, pursing its lips in disapproval. *God can see you standing naked in this room.* She grabs the books, storms to the bathroom, and drops it in the tub. The weight of her hands push it down to the bottom and she watches with blasphemous satisfaction as the pages bloom, the covers warps, the golden cross on the cover loses its shine. When she is satisfied, she leaves the book to drown.

Back in the bedroom, she is filled with the thrill of destruction. Her hands wrap around an orange and she squeezes, letting juice drip down her arm, sticky and stinging. It falls to the ground, and she sets sight on the second orange. She tears it apart, nine slices covered in white veins dropping to her feet. The peel joins shortly after. She holds the final orange in her hand, staring at it as if it might have the ability to solve her problems, but it gives no answer so she raises it to her mouth. Teeth bared, she rips into it. Bitter leather skin falls at her feet, she devours the meat of it, pulp and juice and stringy veins spilling out of her mouth because she will not swallow this poison. Her feet move on their own accord, grinding and mashing oranges into the carpet until they are nothing but mysterious stains. She collapses on the ground, shaking and wild-eyed.

She is not going home.

Shadows of Youth

Christi Babayeju / *Chicago, IL*

When I was younger, I used to race the dark,
first to my room won.
The light switch was a starting pistol,
and with its flip, I was off.
Up the stairs, I would dash,
fear nipping at my heels.
Into my room it chased,
my sheets a sanctuary,
my cover a lantern.
It would brawl with the monsters
and fought my battles for me.
When I was younger, I was afraid of the dark.
But, you see, age tames darkness.
Now I fear shadows walking in broad daylight.
Now clocks make my heart race.
Time is a bullet train, and I can't catch a seat; it
sprints by, charging my card with responsibilities
that I can't seem to cash. You see, failure is not
an option that I want to acknowledge, but my bed
makes some excellent points.
And what's another hour on a clock that has way
too many. Days flip by as chapters of a book that
I'm just skimming.
I'm trying to tune into a TV that has cut to static
and whose antennas have bent back in
a show that falters at the weight of maturity.
Now my palms sweat because of mirrors;
reflections show truth
that even a spoonful of sugar can't keep down.

I stare and see smiles of politeness that plaster
my face,
caging words of sincerity.
Bagged eyes that hold clearance feelings
and layaway worries.
I see
clothes that took too long to pick out
in a style that I don't care about
but my jordans allow me to continue to walk on
eggshells in my life, tiptoe past the future as I
dodge in and out of closets of innocence.
I see a young black girl that was handed a knife
in a world of gunfights. A pacifist regardless
I stand up to my conflicts, armless
and topple like a loose deck of cards.
And though I'm the queen of not letting it show,
I still don't know jack.
I have not learned how to let people in;
a tough exterior is my spade.
I set up walls;
and as a result,
comfort comes to me like diamonds.
I see
a young girl that is wary about converting from
unique to just a commonality.
Conformity drips, and adolescence rusts
chains of individuality.
And while my eyes may shine away flashes of
darkness, light on the outside is not my only
concern
When I say, I will find myself, that is not a hope
but a promise.
I will live outside of colored lines
where my greens don't mix with my parent's
purples and orange's expectations, but my image

will still be beautiful.
I will become Sisyphus,
king of Corinth.
I will roll the boulder up the hill
in the depths of Hades.
I will get it to the top,
and there it will stay,
conquering strife in all its incarnations.
I will love like a novel written in my image and
catered to my whims.
People get way too caught up in the minutiae
of the climax to realize the significance of the
ending.
I hope my action shall never fall, but even in my
denouement,
I will be in control of the darkness
and dance to the tune of the butterflies in my
stomach.

Memories That Soak

Nina Baeza / *Los Angeles, CA*

What is a bath supposed to do when you dip in
it?
Because at first, it's a blanket, wrapping too tight
after ice bites
But the warmth becomes dead embers; I'm float-
ing in pitch black,
Tile under my toes, sinking into thoughts from
DNA
My reflection is sharp glass, resurfacing from sea
of ID
I see melanin, cacao eyes, and coiled curls,
Like the fertile brown earth, being beaten and
toiled
I see La Llorona, crying like the faucet, hair
oxidized blood
Her beauty akin to soggy lotuses, the children of
her womb: bloated carcasses in water
La Llorona is the ancient turquoise cenotes
where the Aztec rain god floats
Deep pools where people drop like seeds to make
maize grow
She is shame that make girls need to cover their
legs and stone cathedrals bury stucco temples
We can try to burn these memories like we did to
our codices,
But my blood mixes in water, diluted

Daffodils

Ha Trang Tran / *Lakeville, CT*

It's uncommon to say the words, "I love you," aloud in Vietnamese. Endearment, instead, is translated into action, concrete efforts of service: plucking each other's white hairs, washing the dishes, or meticulously preparing hot plates of *bánh cuốn*. These actions are never ostentatious, most of them nameless and swept away, spiraling into the humid air and, eventually, fading out, their only trace imprinted in memory.

That night, I woke into an ink-blue hour from distant shuffling. My feet pressed on cold marble one after another; I found you in the kitchen, sweeping up scattered pieces of hand-made porcelain.

"You okay, Dad?" I muttered, still foggy from sleep.

"It's alright," you answered. "Go back to sleep, Khanh."

I shuddered at the familiar resonance of my own name.

"Where's Mom?" I asked absent-mindedly.

"She's gone up to bed. You should, too." You turned around. On your left cheekbone was a carved wound, arched into the rigid wrinkle at the corner of your eye, sloppily bandaged and still dotted with half-dried blood.

"What happened?" I gestured to the trickling cut.

Silence brimmed over the edge of time.

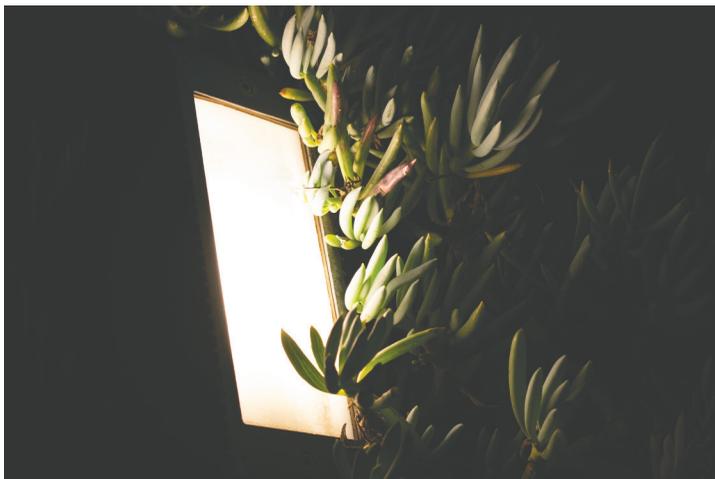
"Your mom, she's really sick. She does things she doesn't mean to... She doesn't mean it, really," you shook your head vigorously. "But she loves you a lot. And I do too." You glanced at me, searching, then at the floor.

"But does she love you?" It made sense to ask at the time.

You didn't say anything. We both stood there, the vexing stillness slowly seeping into us.

"Yes, I think so."

Dad, do you remember the cusp of dusk, on the outskirts of Quảng Trị, when you took me to pick amber-colored daffodils outside grandma's house? I recently learned that these flowers are some of the first perennials to bloom after a winter frost - elegant, humble buds that can only rise in serenity after a soak in the numbing rain.



Digital Age / Chiwoon Lee / Montrose, CA

Natalia

Maddie Raymond / *Goshen, MA*

My mother almost named me Natalia. It's Russian, so I suppose her idea was to remind me of my heritage. In the end, when my parents actually met me, they named me Madeline—my father's choice. But Natalia—that name was a part of me. So that was the first reason I named my eating disorder Nat.

The second was that the name became kind of a chant to me while I worked out every other morning. With that name, I would call up the image of the powerful Natasha Romanoff and imagined with each burpee and plank, I was becoming strong like her. Thin, like her. Even when my legs shook and my vision swam, I kept going. Burpee after burpee, sweat dribbling down my cheeks. My chest throbbing, my stomach crying for something besides bread and fruit. Nat, Nat, Nat.

Anorexia nervosa officially came into my life on a July afternoon. I went from summer camp to the doctor's office for a weight check. Then, it was straight to the ER, shoving a piece of banana bread into my mouth with shaking hands after I'd begged my doctor to just let me fix everything if she'd just give me the chance.

I came home that night in abject terror, the diagnosis hanging over my head like a guillotine blade. I ate a full dinner at 8pm and tried not to think about how much more I'd eaten than usual. When I went to shower, a glance in the mirror told me my sweatshirt and shorts hung off my frame in a way I'd never really noticed before.

The third reason came to me that night. With the hot water pouring over my head, I let myself dissolve into sobs. "Pierre and Natasha" from *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* was playing softly in the background.

I didn't cry in the shower often. The time before Nat's first appearance was in eighth grade when the delayed reaction from my school's visit to the Holocaust Museum during our Washington, D.C. trip hit me with unexpected force. The emaciated, starving bodies of my Jewish ancestors had been the reason last time. Now the starving Jewish girl was me.

I began calling Nat by her name as a joke, declaring to my best friend a few days later that "It's not anorexia, it's Natalia!"

I've always found that laughing at the things that scare me makes them seem less threatening. Since then, I've completed treatment. Natalia is at her worst a scab I pick sometimes. I'll probably never do a burpee again. It's taken a while to relearn that I'm somebody special as Madeline, no Nat attached. I'm still not quite there yet. But I've replaced my old repetitions with new ones. You're worthy. You're interesting. You're someone. Just because Nat was a part of me doesn't mean I have to let her define me forever. I'm glad my mother didn't name me Natalia.

Counting Dishes

Gabby Streinger / *New Canaan, CT*

Afternoon cars inhale deep breaths as they move like comets, urging your coattails to dance against the wind. During days like these, when the chill of winter seems to get caught in everyone's bones, everyone seems to have a place to go. Howie's voice hovers just above the singsong of the November air: "I can't believe you're always dragging that thing around." The taunt laced in his voice is enough to make you look down at the piece of magic between your arms. It's your most valued possession; back home in Buenos Aires, you've never had something like that, that only belonged to you. You hold your record player, embraced in plush felt, against your chest. It is a key to other worlds: worlds—you felt—you didn't have access to otherwise. Not to mention that the combination of a red record against the blue and white turntable looks like your own personal American flag. Howie's dad is a lawyer, American born and raised. Your dad, on the other hand, who'd brought your family to America from Argentina a year earlier, washes dishes to keep the lights in your apartment turning on when you flip the switch. As the sound of your tattered boots next to Howie's smooth shoes acts as a stable metronome battling the frantic polyrhythms that haunt the rushed streets of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, in the fall, you find yourself practicing once again. You can't help but roll syllables across your tongue as you try to emulate the perfect sounds that Howie so easily utters. If the vowels coming out of his mouth would sunbathe happily on the street, yours would writhe on the ground. *Not good enough. Not yet.*

But somehow, your battle with English seems like folderol when you enter Mr. Orwitson's record



Dinner / Jia Lin / Chesterbrook, PA

shop. The familiar jangling of bells upon his door is like a greeting from an old friend. A smile crawls across Mr. Orwitson's face as he sees you and Howie; he immediately gestures toward a stack of new vinyl at his side for you to sample. You rush eagerly to the counter as Howie shrugs to comb through the crates of records littered around the shop. Your pupils swell in excitement as you notice the first album is *Blonde on Blonde*, Bob Dylan's new record. As the needle coasts gently upon the grooves of the record on your turntable, you find yourself, once again, enraptured by the way music is able to transcend culture. The harmonica speaks no language; the strumming of his guitar does not belong to one country nor another. Bob's music is just as much yours as it is anyone's walking down the street.

You bounce up with excitement to browse alongside Howie once you've completed Mr. Orwitson's pile, but you find yourself surveying the front and back covers of each album like a determined detective. Every time you pick one up, you always seem to talk yourself out of adding it to your "to buy" pile. Every time you pick one up, you find some reason to put it back. Every time you pick one up, you find yourself thinking about how many dishes your dad would have to wash for the album in your hands to come home with you. A hundred dishes? A hundred and fifty if you wanted a mono version? The numbers chant in your head as you try to make active calculations: *if dad makes \$1.61 an hour...*

Howie's hands have grown full with a teetering stack of albums; he adds records to his pile without an afterthought; Otis Redding's *Pain in My Heart*, the Beatles' *Rubber Soul*, and Sinatra's *Come Swing with Me!* are among the top. You look at your own shallow hands, which feel heavy enough with just Bob between them. As the minutes waltz by, his eyes on the album cover seem to narrow and his lips seem to tighten with more and more judgment as you consider additional purchases. *Three hundred dishes, four hundred dishes*. When Howie asks if you're ready to go, you practically apologize to the cover as you force yourself to forget about the other albums and walk to the counter with only one piece of wax between your hands. You wonder how many dishes it would take to pay for Howie's pile before scolding your own foolish thinking. *Don't be stupid. Howie would never have to count dishes*.

When you get home, your hands are sore from gripping the album and your turntable with such intensity. Your footsteps are thunderous and impatient as you hurry into your bedroom and urge the door closed. As you slide the record player on your dresser, eyes anchored upon the checkered scarf in a knot around Bob Dylan's neck, the blue felt clashes against another surface and comes to a stop. Your irises rise, searching for the culprit. The spacing between your heartbeats opens in a chilling irony.

It's a dish you'd left that needed to be washed.

Sweet Mother

Lee Wounded Knee / Fort Thompson, SD

Good ole South Dakota, the most beautiful chaotic piece of art created by God. Her weather is unique, her earth can scorch like the sands of a sun baked desert, her tall prairie grasses can be drowned by a single night's rain, and even plunge our temperatures to that of a winter in Siberia. It's beautiful to see grasses seemingly spring out of the once frozen soil and turning to a sea of never-ending green, and it's fun to witness a mid-summer winter wonderland freezing you to your bone.

Just a few weeks ago we were sure that winter was never coming to an end, now look at us, bathing in an early summer solstice. I best shut my mouth, otherwise, she will be cruel and awake the lion above the clouds. We will hear his thunderous roars as his vicious claws dance across the sky in lightning-fast attacks. Leaving behind electricity in the air, making even the tiniest hair stand on your neck. When she feels a little sympathy for her people, she gives them a good week, and on rare occasions, two weeks. Although, her breath can sweep the lands at fierce speeds, picking up dust in its midst, and flinging it at unsuspecting residents. Sometimes her relaxed sighs can bring relief, causing any man to stop everything he's doing, and bathe in its delight.

South Dakota is many things, all but orthodox, and only the bravest men can venture into her grasps and come to embrace her for all she is. She's a tough loving mother, but her affection is like no other.



Fairytale Field / Max Mitchell / Venetia, PA

Fish Day

Erika Moll / *Overland Park, KS*

I leapt out of the backseat, landing gracefully onto a bed of overgrown weeds.

“Come on, Emily!” I shouted impatiently at my little sister.

My dad’s royal blue pickup truck reflected almost as much sunlight as the murky, green pond to its right. Dragonflies swarmed the area while thousands of frogs performed a synchronized dance on the outskirts of the water, their low-pitched croaking adding to the orchestra that is the Kansas countryside. The sky was blue; the water was high.

Fish Day was by far my favorite summertime holiday. It was never really planned ahead of time—it always just came. We would be sitting at our glass kitchen table, eating perfectly seasoned steaks that my dad had seared on his grill, the “Big Green Egg.” Someone would crack a joke, and he would randomly follow it with “I think we need to have a Fish Day soon!” Then, a week later, without fail, Emily and I would be sitting at the edge of the creaky, old dock, our rainboots hovering inches over the pond as my dad poured buckets of minnows into its emerald water.

A gust of wind accosted, pulling the bushes of grass in perfect unison, making the dock sway almost as much as the sea of trees behind us. My hair flew in a million directions, and I whipped my head around in search of the fishhook. To my relief, my dad hadn’t cast the line yet. Even a subtle breeze could cause the menacing hook to take residence in the bushes—or worse, someone’s skin.

Waiting for the gusts to calm, I turned my attention to my sister whose arm was half-deep in the bucket of minnows. Disrupting the tornadic motion of the miniature fish in their cylindrical ocean, I managed to scoop a minnow out of the bucket. I watched it struggle under my grip, then in pity, tossed it into the pond.

“Be free!” I exclaimed.

“Be free!” My sister echoed, throwing a handful of minnows into the water.

Occasionally, my dad would pull an unlucky minnow out of the bucket, piercing it with the hook to use as bait. I chose not to watch that part.

“Come on, Emily, let’s go frog-hunting!”

We slipped down along the corner where the old dock met the dry, summer earth and searched high and low for signs of amphibian friends. Anyone could hear them but *seeing* them in the clay-like mud took years of experience. Catching them was nearly impossible. Eventually, I crawled back onto the deck, proudly showcasing the little gray toad in my hand. To my surprise, it didn’t try to escape my grasp

but basked in the sunlight that touched it.

“He likes your hand ‘cause it’s warmer than the lake,” my dad explained.

I reluctantly exchanged the sleepy toad for my dad’s fishing pole, fitting the ridges handle into my small hands as well as I could. The line sat lifeless in the water for what felt like an infinity as I sat there, watching the cattails sway in the rising afternoon sun. For today—and today only—I was a country girl.

A sharp jolt ran up the line, pulling me out of my trance and nearly off the dock. I leaned back with all my might. One mistake and the fish would be gone.

“Dad, dad, dad!” I shouted, only slightly embarrassed that I was losing tug-of-war to a freshwater fish.

My dad quickly grabbed the fishing pole, enticing the creature forward. Emily and I waited in anticipation as the reel began clicking faster and faster. Suddenly, I was hit with a spray of pond water. The fish, in a wild trapeze act, flailed around on the line, sending water in every direction. Within a minute, it had surrendered, hanging limply in the air. My dad gently laid the fish down on its side and pulled out a tape measure.

“Nineteen inches? This guy’s a monster!” he shouted eagerly.

I stared down at the fish, intrigued. The sunlight cascaded off its holographic scales, causing it to transform into a rainbow of colors right before my eyes. I cautiously stroked the fish’s side, careful to avoid the razor-sharp spikes that grew on its fins. It was a magnificent creature. The hook protruding from its mouth made me uneasy. We filled a cooler with water and loaded the fish into the bed of the truck.

“Erika caught the catch of the day!”

my dad exclaimed.

“I caught the catch of the day!” I screamed, elated.

Emily and I effortlessly convinced my dad to let us accompany the fish in the bed of his truck for the next few miles. Infinite rows of corn flew past us as we laughed with delight, watching the sun edge closer and closer to the horizon behind us. The countryside was never a place for rules or regulations.

We stopped at a small bait shop where my dad bragged about how his seven-year-old daughter caught a *twenty-one-inch* fish. I stifled my urge to correct him; I was too proud. Throughout the next month, I would hear him tell his friends about the *twenty-four-inch* fish that I had hooked “all by myself.”

“Daddy, can we name the fish?” I asked as we left the shop.

“You can name it Dinner,” my dad suggested, laughing.

“Dinner!” I referred to the fish endearingly.

“Dinner-the-Fish!” my sister responded as we climbed back into the truck, heading to the gas station for slushies.

After riding back into civilization, back to reality, and back up our driveway, we transported Dinner into our garage. Emily darted inside to gabble to my mom about today’s adventure as my dad ventured to the backyard, returning moments later with a thick, black log in his hand. *What’s that for?* I asked myself, pretending I didn’t already know. My dad lifted Dinner out of its cooler and gently placed the fish on the concrete garage floor. I spun away just in time, pressing my hands to my ears. I desper-

ately willed myself to be anywhere else but the dimly lit garage, *listening*.

Boom. Flap.

The noises felt like boulders in my brain.

Boom. Flap, flap.

Boom.

Sensing it was over, I removed my trembling hands from my face. My dad explained to me that this was the quickest, most humane method. I nodded, then side-stepped into the kitchen, refusing to make eye contact with the crime scene.

I inched back into the kitchen as my dad cooked Dinner. The aromas of rosemary, thyme, and olive oil floated through the air as we once again sat at the glass table, laughing. I ate the asparagus but never touched Dinner on my plate. I despised the pungent taste of fish in general, and the flashbacks from hours ago had formed a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Rrrrrrrrat dog!” My dad affectionately proclaimed his nickname for our miniature Maltese, holding out a piece of fish as she leapt to devour it.

I knew my dad wasn’t cruel—he was simply a farmer at heart. He would argue that my grandma should turn a rude chicken of hers into a rotisserie meal while I would cry at the sight of a squashed spider. The arrival of autumn prompted the arrival of another Fish Day. This time, I sprinted from the garage, refusing to be a witness. And even though I always left the table without eating Dinner, I always dreamt in enthusiastic anticipation of the next Fish Day announcement.

fallen angel

Matt Hsu / *San Francisco, CA*

**Previously published in the Galliard International Review*

his wings were clipped on a tuesday,
a belated christmas gift. there was gold
on his hips and bamboo strapped to his back.
he could draw picasso with no hands
and best anyone at basketball. mom
carried him home on a throne of jade and cob-
webs.

buffed with seaweed; he planted a flag
at the top of the slide. middle fingers up and reign-
ing
with a double-barrelled gun. he knew how many
seconds
were in three hours (more than ten thousand),
and he sprinted faster than all the girls, even
when wearing khakis. just like harry potter, he
had black hair and round glasses,
so of course, he was the chosen one.

with sharpie, he spelled it out
he would dominate in seven different
languages, including chinese and russian
and release honeybees into the skies.
it was prophesied because it was written on cream-
colored paper, he told himself,
rubbing the asphalt off his elbows.

after eleven years, the sun stopped
shining on his shoulders. it was strange and cer-
tainly
quite uncomfortable—the rice cakes he sold
in his backyard went stale, and the stuffed mana-
tees
began jumping from his bed, and for the first time,
his knees hurt from his tumble to earth.

his billboards were ripped down by seagulls—
from the wire frames spilled blood, deemed
tasty by the gulls. they painted over his rainbow
with black tar, sewed his teeth together with gold-
en
spool, smothered him with perfume and pay-
checks,
and fastened a wristwatch around his neck.

he walks with two feet, now
burning tteok and scallions in the pan and
eating them with a soup spoon. at midnight,
his coven is lined with pearls and broken
pencils. he sings hymns and takes off his shirt
spreading citrus over the scars of
God's fallen angel.

Accident

Yanjia Zhang / *Singapore*

My name is Angel Morrison. I am a janitor in Wealth Building.

I just witnessed something awful some days ago when I was walking to work. A car—a Rolls-Royce, I believe—was running the red light in a rush. And then this boy, this poor young soul, was just walking on the street. It happened too soon... The next second the boy was lying there, unmoving, a puddle of blood oozing from his head.

Time was suddenly frozen. No one moved for a good 10 seconds before people started to gather around the boy. I think I was the first to take out my phone and call 911. Some were trying to wake the boy up and busy doing CPR; others jumped into their cars and started to chase the car.

It was too late. The car ran over him way too fast, and the boy was announced DOA.

I can't believe this has happened... I saw some other kids on the scene, about the same age as him; some were completely frightened.

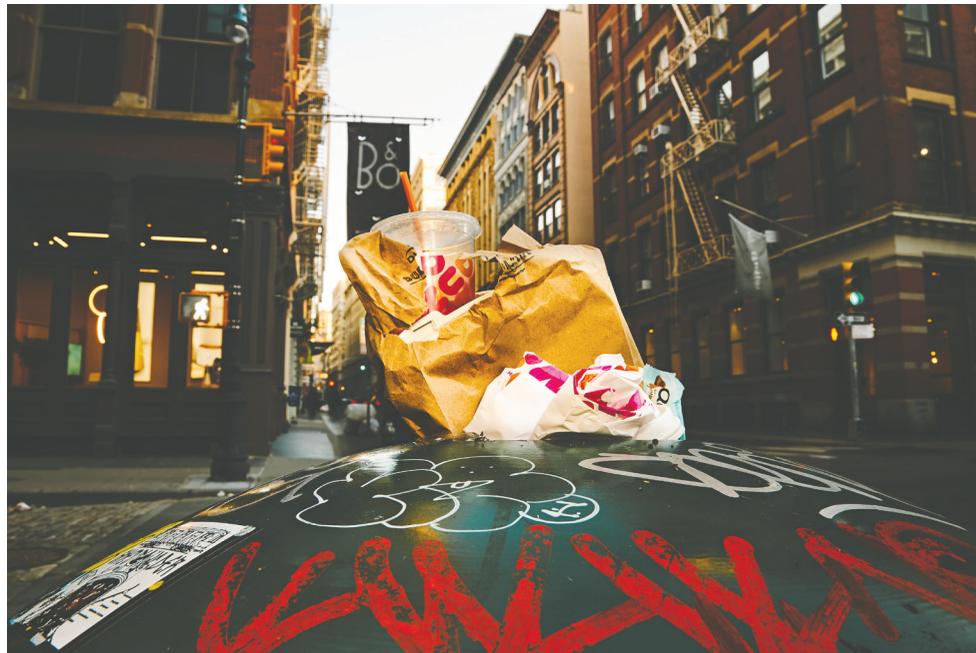
It hurts me just to tell this story again.

§

My name is Rami Willis. I am a high school student in Jennifer High.

Honestly, what the heck am I doing here? If I weren't this shocked, I would've just told those cops that I didn't see nothin'; they'd probably let me out. Sure, my eyes got me into all this trouble.

Y'all wanna know what I saw? A car hit a



Urban Pollution / HyunWoo Ro / Fort Lee, NJ

boy. Period. I was walking on the sidewalk, and then out of nowhere came this car—god curse it—and that boy got hit flatly in the face.

But honestly, doesn't this kind of thing happen all the time? Now I gotta go to some court or something like I just beat some folks hard on them streets. Plus, I bet that man in a suit on the other side of the street had a better view. Why don't they go ahead and ask him?

This court thing, I tell ya, I don't like it one bit.

§

My name is Henry Pittman. I work for O&O business, a nearby firm.

If the judge asks me what I saw, I'd just say that boy was jaywalking, and the car driver was crossing the street normally. The boy—yes, he was texting on his phone, and he didn't even look up when he walked onto the street. Then, he got hit. Too bad for him.

No, what the heck should I tell them then? That inside that car was one of my most important clients? I even put on my best suit just to see him, and his stupid driver hit a kid. Great.

But I definitely can't lose this one as well, not after Oliver had almost fired me.

§

My name is Olivier Leach. I am the owner of Oliver & Owen Business right there in Wealth Building. You ask me where Owen went? Dead, a couple of years ago.

Alas, I never expected anyone would get into trouble. I ain't want no trouble.

I would definitely skin that Henry Pittman alive when I see him. Why does every single client he handles go

absolutely wrong? At first, he lost a big client—offered us so much money, that is—and now this Ryan guy got into a car accident. This Ryan, I have to say, we're this close to making a deal. All that was left was for him to take that little fountain pen and draw his signature, and I'll have my money in my pocket. I even told everyone—except Henry Pittman—to go home and prepare for this big order!

What should I do now? Lost two clients, that's for sure; I'd be real lucky if I don't just go bankrupt.

I want a cigarette so bad.

§

My name is Ryan Leal. I was sitting in the car when Jeremy hit a kid on the street.

There was an appointment between me and Mr. Pittman. I was about to make a big order from O&O Business, that is, and we were almost late due to the heavy traffic. I ordered Jeremy to speed up, but apparently, now this accident happened, and we'll have to go to court.

Frankly speaking, I have no problem resolving that issue outside of court; we've got enough money to handle a small accident like this. Plus, I wouldn't expect them to ask for a lot as that kid had insurance covered. Or so I hope. But either way, the last thing I'd like to see is this business ruined by a child.

Jeremy was being a coward and wanted to confess to the police, but I know it's just going to bring more trouble. I don't know if we're going to win in the end, but this thing is for sure going to last a long time. And I want my business done as soon as possible.

§

My name is Jeremy Atkins. I work

for Mr. Leal as a driver.

And I just killed a child.

Yes, I just killed a child.

I didn't realise how bad the traffic was, and I was too slow for Mr. Leal to be prompt to his business appointment... And I went too fast when Mr. Leal told me to... And I was too frustrated to focus...

And I didn't see the fat, red light.

That light! Why couldn't it, for once, just be green? Why the heck did it have to be red when I crossed that street?

And that boy. If only he hadn't been there!

Probably all of this is my destiny. God says I have to become a criminal, so here I am, waiting for the shot that will come inside straight from my forehead. Or are they going to hang me? I don't know. I don't want to know. I thought it might be better to confess everything to the cops, but Mr. Leal said no. He said it's just going to make the mess more complicated.

Now I pray to God every day. I pray that, even if I die, I will die painlessly. My mama always told me that only doing good things can take me to heaven, and I ain't done nothing bad all my life. I wish that would be enough in exchange for a peaceful death...

I can't imagine what that poor boy's 'rents are going through.

§

My name is Kaira Hogan. And I am the mother of Pablo Hogan.

He was hit by a car a week ago.

He died at the age of 16.

We are not a wealthy family. I am a housewife, and David is just an office worker at O&O Business. To make thing

even more interesting, that is exactly where my boy was hit... If only David had been in his office. He could've walked with Pablo together... But Oliver, his boss, ordered him to meet another client. He finished the business rather rapidly, and he was told to have the rest of the day off. "Gonna have a big client today," Oliver murmured in excitement. "Y'all can go home and prepare for a big one."

But I knew something was wrong when Pablo didn't return home on that day. He had always been an obedient kid and had

never run away without telling David or me.

I can still clearly remember the indifferent voice of the police officer about how my child had "unfortunately passed away from a car accident" and required me to "come to the morgue to identify and collect the body."

I collapsed. David, waiting anxiously at the front door, quickly ran towards me and caught me in time.

"Any news?" he asked, voice husky.

"David... He..." Tears in my eyes, I was unable to speak.

"What? He what?" he tried, evidently without success, to control his voice.

"He... is in the morgue."

David suddenly stiffened. Dropping me in astonishment on the floor, he covered his face. "No, no, no," he cried hopelessly, "This can't be. This is a hoax, isn't it, Kaira? Tell me this is not real, please, Kaira, please, please, please..." His voice softened, and tears came down on his face.

We wept for the entire afternoon.

On the next day, eyes red and clothes black, we arrived at the hospital.

Pit

Alison Cao / *Quincy, MA*

Water slips
through a hole
in the pool. My mother
sinks in front of me. She starves
through the mornings and shuts her eyes
when I eat and pushes her skin through my teeth.
A swirl in the water tugs at my figure, a swell in my arm
slips away. The walls shine below it, water stains with white,
a haze of tiles in the space between my legs. This place below my body
opens up to me. I could fill it with how I have stopped listening to a mother
who shrinks herself before me. Once I asked why she had stopped eating and I felt her eyes
touching me, gazing at her daughter's numb body as her mouth said words she didn't mean. Once
we were both younger and she taught me to swim. Pressing my chest to hers, she kept laughing at how I kicked up
space in the water. I held the streaks of foam on her arms, her shadow in the shallow end, and the pool spilled over as though
it could never hold all the holes of our breathing. She leaks through my fingers. I watch the weight of my life recede. The
water drains through all the spaces that our bodies have never seen.

how to taxiderm(ize) a fish

Madison Xu / *New York, NY*

1. The First Incision

It is sharp, precise, parallel to the backbone, a pointed laceration that finds its home in smooth, white flesh. There is no room for hesitation, a simple dive into the unknown. Occasionally, you will hear bones breaking as the blade drags millimeters above the viscera, but with more practice, you'll learn to cut pristinely.

When he first pressed his hands against yours, you wondered how someone so utterly different could fold into you like origami.

And so begins the process of keeping the dead alive.

§

2. Skinning

Cleave the skin from the meat. It's tempting to fillet the fish quickly, but keep the skin intact. They'll notice. Press an index finger on the glass and point out the fish in the tank with an open wound and halved fin and decide they're bound for death. So piece the skin back together with care.

Wedge the scalpel under the overlapping scales and flay them apart until the fish lies undressed. The shimmering plates seem too pretty for the weak juddering mass they held together. Beneath the sterile light overhead, they shift and morph around you, and you think of the sequined dress you wore when you used to go dancing. Hold on hard to good memories: the halo of fabric around your hips, his hands on the small of your back, and the words that drip down your ear that make your cheeks burn tequila.

He keeps the sequins in his pocket as a prize of war, and you remember how he would press them like branding irons against your skin and your tongue as a reminder in the later years. The dress with the missing sequins is left behind in the back of your closet along with vanilla sugar body spray and all the other things you've outgrown.

§

3. Gutting

Improperly done brings the telltale smell of decay. Though death may be apparent, no one wants to be reminded of it. Uncoil intestines stuffed with Chinese takeout and half chewed fortune cookies. Wrench out the heart with the aorta still attached, pumping in irregular beats from the first lamp that shattered against the wall in ceramic fragments of uncontained rage. Pull out the throat and place it into the hands of a familiar stranger.

Gouge the eyes too. Glass replica beads will replace the empty sockets. Perhaps the passing children will tap on the display glass, mock “blink!” a couple of times, and remark how similar the fish looks to the way it was when it was still alive.

§

4. Preserving

There is no one way of preserving that works the best so inject the fish with the embalming fluid of your choice and make your way up from the tail to the head. Formaldehyde for the untouched dinner left on the dining table you wrap into tupperware. Ethanol for your resignation letter that you painstakingly type up on the computer, index finger hovering before hitting each key. Push the plunger until your knuckles press flat against the plastic and the blood disperses. Glycol ethers for the purple rosettes on your arms you cover with blouses in the summer. Of course there are sacrifices to be made, you think. This is love; it blooms with the flowers.

§

5. Stitching

Pull the skin until it is taut beneath your fingers and retrace your steps back to the point of the first incision. Let skin patch over the turgid flesh and empty cavities where organs should have been. Convince them that what flows through the veins is blood and not ethanol and formaldehyde. People will no longer see you as the girl in the sequined dress, but the woman in a blissful marriage.

§

6. Mounting

To the onlooker, the fish should look alive. Pry dead lips open so they’d wait for a few bubbles to escape. Prop the tail to the side as if it’s still darting through the water. You’d think that if you held onto it longer, painted it a deeper shade of blue, the thing in your hand that should have turned to dust would come back alive.

For a second, you think it might be better to just bury the fish.

But maybe a heartbeat is there.

When you press your ears against the crumbling skin, perhaps it’s the opening and closing of valves beneath the flesh instead of the shaking of your spent fingers.

Scatter the scales across the ocean backdrop, letting them peek through watercolor waves in the same way that the sun dances across the water.

Nothing Touches the Salmon

Jessica Sanchez / *Dallas, TX*

The pancake is charred black when she finally flips it over. Carlos looks at her brightly, a sly half-smile on his face.

“You don’t have to say anything now. I’ll let you think it over, but I’ll be on my way west by next month.” He takes a sip of his coffee, his glasses fogging up for a second. As he sets the mug down and dips a triangular slice of a pancake into a puddle of syrup on the side of his plate, he says, “Love you.” Then he leaves, still chewing.

Ana keeps her eyes on the front door, on the sun shining its rays through the window set into the dark wood. Soft yellow light filters through the glass and creates a warped intertwining of golden squares on the laminate floor. The smell of burning reaches her nose again, and she snaps out of her frozen state with a curse and sweeps up the charcoal circle of what should’ve been a pancake to toss into the trash.

Everything about her day feels mechanical; the familiar weight of pushing her foot against the gas pedal of her car sends her into a fit of unfamiliarity. The trees look too dull, the houses too dark, the sky too empty with its endless pale blue stretching beyond the skyline approaching her. Charles at the front desk doesn’t mutter a greeting as she passes him to get to the elevators, and Ana wonders if he knows.

The elevator seems to shake on its ascent to the fourteenth floor. No one moves, but when Ana looks in the gold-stained reflective metal of the elevator, everyone’s eyes are trained on hers as she stumbles.

§

Carlos asks her over dinner what she has decided. Ana says she hasn’t, and when Carlos asks why, she shoves a large piece of salmon into her mouth. She doesn’t look up from her plate when he repeats his question. Instead, she watches as her fork, glittering with scratches from years of use, pushes rice pilaf to one corner of the plate, taking care that each grain of rice is touching another grain of rice. The salmon touches nothing at all.

“Anastasia,” he starts, and Ana knows he’s barely-contained-upset because he hardly ever calls her that, “you know I want you with me. I won’t be happy in Albuquerque without you. You won’t be happy in Boston without me. We’ll be thousands of miles apart for no reason.” Ana nods unconsciously, and Carlos continues. “I’ve been talking to Marcy about selling the house for a while.” Carlos says this so matter-of-factly that Ana feels, for a split second, completely relieved. When she fully realizes what he has said, her skull fills with a slow buzzing, bees trickling in through her ears.

“I can get you that sewing machine you wanted when we’re in New Mexico. And the new place is

like nine minutes from a Joann's."

The salmon looks too dead. Ana glances up and sees Carlos with an expectant look on his face, and Ana realizes it's the exact face he made on their fourth date, the one where they went to see a late-night screening of *The Exorcist*. Right after the credits began rolling and the lights were being turned back on and the other people in the theater were shoving their empty packets of candy into their empty popcorn buckets, he had asked her to be his girlfriend. With her heart beating deafeningly in her chest, she had said yes.

And now she says yes again. Just like that night when it was just the two of them in the theater turned toward each other, his eyes shining with something Ana couldn't understand, her hand gripping her half-full cup of Coca-Cola, he says, "Good."

Carlos picks up his plate—the only thing on it is the skin of the salmon so perfectly picked off—and then hers, and he starts to do the dishes as Ana sits there as stunned as that night on their fourth date.

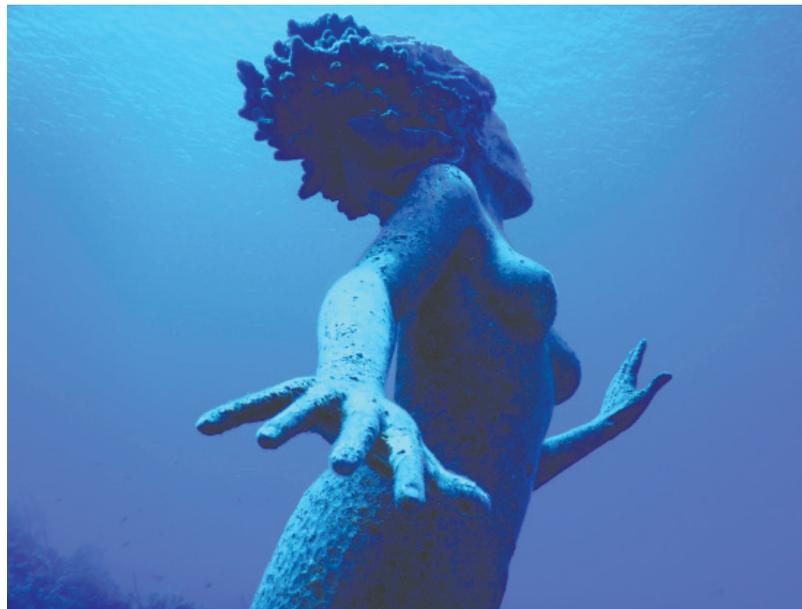
§

Ana can make out the shape of his face in the dark; she traces over his cheekbones and nose with her eyes deliberately, and although she can't see the freckles sprinkled under his eyes and across the bridge of his nose, she knows they're there. Just as she knows where his heart sits, beating calmly underneath his thin t-shirt.

Carlos doesn't shift when Ana places her palm against his heart, and the beating stays completely steady. She falls asleep like that, willing her own heart to match the pace of his. The corners of her lips pull up in a twitch that could be a fleeting smile, and then her mind is somewhere else far away.

§

There's crunching underneath my boots and cawing high above me in the trees. Most of their branches are bare, leaves layering the ground in reds, browns, and oranges. My surroundings seem so warm with their bright and hopeful colors, but there's a dry chill in the air that needles at my face as I hike



The Mermaid Statue / Anisha Sharma / Piano, TX

down the narrow path carving through the forest. All is perfectly still despite the sound of rustling, like television static, as dry, dead leaves brush against each other.

And then there's a blur of black at the

corner of my eye.

I jerk around, feeling something beside me, hovering and dark. There is nothing but the same tree trunk repeated in uneven rows stretching eternally down to the horizon. I become aware that there is no sun.

Panic rushes through my limbs in a painfully hot wave, and I will my legs to run. They refuse, and instead of reaching out to lengthen my strides, they pull up to my chest, and I fold over as I walk. I feel as flimsy as a piece of tissue paper, as easy to tear.

The black figure returns, but I am still contorted and can only see my boots disappearing into the leaf-covered ground. I can't whip my head around to face it, and my eyes feel glued in place. I feel like clawing them out, digging my nails straight into their fleshy centers. But I don't, and soon my boots begin stepping onto sand.

My body unfolds, joints creaking and spine popping. There's a dark green river in front of me, winding silently around a bend. I turn to my left and Carlos stands there, dripping wet with slimy river water. In his eye sockets are two frenzied masses of small beetles writhing, snapping, click-click-clicking. He

smiles with his teeth, a rare sight, and between gaps wiggle skinny pink worms.

I reach out to touch him, but just before my fingertips can meet his cold, sticky arm, something latches onto my ankle. Dozens of arms shove their way

out of the sand and claw at my legs, and with the churning of the shore, they pull me into the ground. Carlos stands there with his clicking eyes full of shiny black exoskeletons, and just over his shoulder, I see the black figure: a man made entirely of shadow, his eyes a smoky green that seem to wink as sand engulfs me.

§

She doesn't realize she's woken up until several moments after the dream is over, after the darkness stops being dream-sand crushing her on all sides and becomes something quiet hanging in front of her face. It doesn't help that there is a slight green tint to the room that sharpens as her eyes focus, the light coming from the alarm clock on her nightstand announcing 1:04 AM. It reminds her too much of the shadow figure, its eye sockets burning with an infinite green flame.

Ana feels seven years old again, seeing things move in the edges of her vision every time her eyes flicker to catch them. Her foot instinctively jerks to hit Carlos' shin in the same way it did those childhood nights when the amorphous figures in the corners of her bedroom wouldn't leave, when she lay in her mother's bed with just her big toe pressing against her mother's skin. Just one point of contact, enough to envelop her in a sheet of immunity against those dark corner things.

Instead of reassuring her, she finally realizes that Carlos is next to her, his breathing steady as ever, his right arm slung over his stomach. Ana pauses, targets his chest with her eyes, and waits for her vision to completely focus as much as it possibly can until she can see his perfectly trimmed fingernails rising

slowly up and down, up and down.

Her legs shuffle under the sheets as they slip over the side of the bed. There are two light taps when they each touch the floor. She rises, the memory foam of the mattress swelling silently behind her and starts walking toward the hall with her weight coming down on the balls of her feet, then to the kitchen.

The dishwasher has finished its cycle, it alerts Ana with its green dot announcing completion piercing through the darkness. Her hand pulls back the small silver door, releasing a wave of damp, bleached heat. She takes cups from the top rack, swinging two ceramic mugs on her index finger, one at a time, by their handles before placing them carefully onto a shelf. One is painted with sharp colorful shapes, the other with soft mint-colored spots. The colors are streaky and uneven but still look carefully applied. With love.

Ana pushes the top rack and pulls the bottom one out. Her fingertips burn as she stacks fresh plates onto the shelf below the mugs and cups. The dishwasher is empty now.

She turns back to the sink.

In the drying rack, there's a gleaming silver knife. Anastasia sees Carlos sinking the blade into the tough pink flesh of the raw salmon slab with ease. It winks in the moonlight as she picks it out of the rack, its steel scraping the pan next to it with a hardly audible *shiiiiing*.

Ana pauses. She holds out the knife directly in front of her, the blade's side facing her, and stares at her warped reflection. When she blinks, the two points of green that were her eyes vanish, and she sees how wide her dark eyes are,

how frizzy her hair is, how flushed her cheeks look. A rush of pulsing emotion beats behind her chest. She starts moving toward the bedroom.

Carlos is exactly how she left him. Ana stands at the doorway and tightens her grip on the knife, and after a pause, her feet carry her to the left side of the bed. The fingers on her right hand begin aching, but instead of loosening her hold on the handle, she raises it just above Carlos' chest. With her left hand, she reaches forward and runs the pads of her fingertips along the side of his torso, feeling for a spot just between two ribs on his left side. Carlos' fingers twitch on his stomach as she adds a slight pressure and finds what she's looking for. Ana doesn't freeze up when Carlos moves; she waits patiently, not letting her weight shift from foot to foot, until Carlos settles back and the rise and fall of his chest becomes just as stable as always.

She takes a deep, slow breath through her nose and holds it. The knife moves to where her left index and middle fingers are and takes their place. Its point sinks down to kiss Carlos' skin under his shirt, and Ana's left hand clasps over her right on the handle. She breathes out through her mouth. For a moment, she sees herself. She watches as she stands over Carlos so solidly, holding the knife firmly, in the alarm clock's acid green glow. Her muscles feel bunched up, tight, and with a final breath, she pushes herself up onto her tiptoes and lets her weight down over the knife.

It goes in an inch, and Carlos' eyes fly open. Ana can tell he can't see a thing yet, and she shoves the knife in harder, now three inches deep. Carlos yells out

incoherently, and his arms come up in a flurry of scratching and grabbing and smacking, but Ana swings her right leg over Carlos, digging her knee into his chest below and between his ribcage. She pushes down with her knee and pulls up with her hands, but the knife is stuck. Carlos jerks Ana's head back by her hair, shouting obscenities, but she pulls her hands back from the handle of the knife to grab his right arm and bite down hard enough for blood to gush like water into her mouth and down her chin. He yanks his arm back, his left hand clasped

around his forearm.

Ana spits as she grabs the knife again, driving her right knee harder into Carlos' chest and her left knee into the mattress beside him, and when it pulls free from his chest, she tips backward. Carlos tries to sit up but moans a strange, strangled sound, and Ana comes back forward, her right hand trying not to slip on the knife. It dives in an arc that shines brown in the low light, and Carlos' eyes seem impossibly wide as it carves through his throat.

She's breathing heavily as his hands come up to claw at his neck. She switch-

es the knife to her left hand and reaches over him to set it with a clatter on his nightstand. Her hair feels matted, and her shirt is wet with sweat and blood.

Carlos stops squirming in a few seconds, and Ana stares at the way his pupils expand to capture her glowing emerald silhouette in its entirety. She lets out a heavy sigh, and with the last of her energy, she rolls over. Gravity takes her down into the sheets and the memory foam mattress, then into the ground, deep down until dreams sweep her up and take her away.

Memories of the Knife

Nina Baeza / *Los Angeles, CA*

There is a dark fact that aches when I think about my heritage:

That morality is defined by Maya gods,
But they want blood.

Not the way Jesus Christ was immortalized when pinned on a wooden stick,
leaking wine and bread.

Ornate stone temples crumble dead nobility into asphalt,

Carving out hearts like eating a mango.

I trace the words of textbooks—see their etched stone words,

wondering phrases they gave to describe

The art of knifing,

The blade mining for rubies in human flesh

Spilling on earth like fertile rain,

Between the legs of Santa Muerte,

Bony grip strangling Mexico with breathes of

death.

Her face doesn't look like mine, too pale and hollow

But she smiles like the Virgin Mary, our people stuck in her teeth

Little poppy seeds embedded in lemon muffins,
fodder of parasites.

“She isn't one of us,” the Catholic priests say,
But she became ours when 1000 years of ancient history ignited into ashes,
Branding foreign words in silenced mouths,
Killing gods to give us their false hope splayed,
Leaving only burnt brown skin.

The stench of morbidity still clings to our wrists,
red stains we can never cut away.

Try as we may, in shame,

Either on the limestone blocks or white bath tiles

Our corrugated blood still remembers

The flow to the underworld through cracks

To divine lips.

The Burning Ticket

Aaron Tang / Berwyn, PA

“It was my 100 dollars! It was 50 percent of the ticket, and now I want half of whatever million dollars you won!” the woman exclaimed shrilly.

The man exhaled deeply into the dark night. Vapor creeped out of his mouth like ghosts in the frigid air. The woman’s car was pulled over on the highway, and the man shivered while pleading, “Can you please just let me back in?”

“There is no way that you win millions in one night, tell me you stole a hundred dollars from me and refuse to share any of it with me! We’ve been dating for a full year! If you step one foot into this car, so help me God, I’ll start driving and leave you stranded on the highway.”

He rubbed his hands against his arms for warmth and shook his legs.

“I’ll pay you back what I stole, and that’s that. You’re the selfish one for wanting to hoard all of my money!” he remarked. “I’ll spend one night on the highway before I let a controlling girlfriend like you take all my money.”

The girlfriend smirked, chuckled, and broke into a hysterical laugh. “You wouldn’t survive a night outside in Alaska! You’d freeze before the morning traffic starts, and I’ll see you lying on the side of the road when I drive to work tomorrow. I’ll just gladly take it then!



Life’s Palette / Elizabeth Bazhenov / Montville, NJ

The man stammered, “B-Bu-But you wouldn’t do that to me! This is just one of our stupid fights. C’mon, don’t let a little money drive us apart! We had plans—we were going to spend the rest of our lives together!”

“Oh please, you didn’t actually think that I would really want to spend the rest of my life with you, right?”

“Let’s just drive home, get some sleep, and sort this out in the morning, okay? I promise we’ll figure something out.”

“Bullshit! You’re going to dump

me as soon as I get home!” the woman shouted, spitting out flecks of saliva. The man wiped his face with the sleeve of his coat in frustration and looked down at the floor. He sucked in through his teeth and frantically searched for the right words to say. There was a pang in his heart, not because her words were hurtful, but because they were true.

The woman spat in his face again with, “Nothing to say, huh?” She stepped out of the car with all the au-

thority she can muster, walked towards the man, slapped his cheek, and quickly stripped the ticket from his hands. She ran to her car and turned the ignition. A stream of grey fumes vaporized into the night sky.

With one hand holding his cheek, the man reached his other hand into his pocket and gripped his apartment keys. Without a single moment of hesitation, he slashed the upper right tire of the beaten down Camry in one smooth motion.

He muttered under his breath, “You’re not going anywhere without me.”

The woman slammed on the gas pedal and three of the wheels rotated fiercely. The car propelled diagonally, just far enough for a blue midnight bus to collide into it with a deafening sound of squealing tires followed by the crushing of metal. Flames erupted into the air and cars swerved away from the accident. The man stopped rubbing his hands together. He wouldn’t be cold anymore.

Sex Ed

Mel Cort / *Brookeville, MD*

she squirmed underneath him—
nothing, if not a little bored.
his arms slackening next to her ears as he
tried—
lord knows he tried—
and she realized that if she
squeezed her eyes shut and ignored his rag-
gedy
breath on her neck,
she could almost
for a second
think.
And so she thought
of the woman at whole foods a week ago
in the soft yellow t-shirt
(the color of the pillow under her head)
(no don’t think of that pillow, where she is
where she has to be
think where she’d rather be)
and baggy overalls that pooled
at her ankles,

which always seemed to be moving,
flitting,
exploring.
she thought of the way she smiled at the ca-
shier
(as he whispered something detestable),
and her hand crept down her stomach,
her wrist wrestling out of his jealous grip,
finding herself where he couldn’t
and thought of her brown curls and spray of
freckles across her nose.
he tried,
for the millionth time,
but for the first—so did she
and he deflated
murmuring his pride or brags as they were
before she politely asked
him to not spend the night.

Red Thread

Eileen (Clove) Zhu / *Manhasset, NY*

Everybody had an invisible red string that led to their soulmates.

For as long as I and everybody I knew could remember, it was a pure, simple fact. Since I was a child, my parents would wrap their invisible threads around each other's fingers. My teachers in elementary school read us stories about princes and princesses finding their other half, then excitedly called on students to follow their strings for as long as the classroom restrictions would let them. Friends, family, adults, and children would all constantly ask me about my string, how I felt about it, where and when I thought I would meet my future beloved. And even as I grew older, my answer always stayed the same.

"I don't want a soulmate."

When most of them heard this answer, they laughed. "Oh, children!" they would chuckle. "You'll change your mind, you just wait!"

I waited. I grew.

I would stare at the string wrapped around my finger tied up in a neat little bow. It was impossibly bright red, and I remembered learning that although the string's physics weren't thoroughly understood, it was naturally assumed that it didn't reflect light in order to project color. It was yet another frighteningly unscientific, unobservable phenomenon about the supposed gift from the heavens that defined our entire lives.

I didn't hate it. But I never came to understand it.

People kept asking me their questions, and I answered.

"Do you want to be alone?" They were curious, well-meaning.

"A soulmate would just be another person to be alone with." I was tired.

"Aren't they your perfect half?"

"I am a whole person."

"What will your soulmate think?"

"If we are perfect for each other, they will understand."

"Can you even feel love?"

"Yes." I would look them in the eye, as if challenging them. "I can."

I knew what love was. Love was when my mother would pick daisies from the ground and wove them together, trying to make the flower crown that I asked for. Love was when my father would see me peeking around the corner to stare at his TV screen and pretend not to notice that it was past my bedtime.

It was when I presented my best friend with a carefully penned drawing of us, a written promise that we wouldn't betray each other.

Love was when my little baby brother, so small and fragile in a bundle of blankets, reached a tiny hand to my out-

stretched finger. And it was when he looked at me, not just like I had hung the stars and the moon, but as if I had built him a spaceship and took him there.

I know my soulmate exists, and they're probably wonderful. They deserve a chance, just like all the passersby

before them, to meet me and know me.

But my string and my soulmate are not a part of me, simply an attachment. Fate may have made a promise, but that didn't mean I would keep it for them.

Phoenix

Hayun Bae / *Bellevue, WA*

Mother, they have left me here to die.
Shackled my wrists in raw rope,
strung me up on an oak tree, swinging
in this forest of mine. Condemned me for my
words,
turned crimes overnight.

Mother, they have drowned me.
Soaked my clothes with
pure gasoline that drenched the dirt, poisoned the
roots
of a home I made my own. It felt like venom
on my face, hair dripping down oil.

Mother, they have lit me on fire, laughed
as I screamed, as they held a burning torch
to my feet. And now my sorrow slip
on gasoline, and I can taste the black ash
heavy on my tongue.

Mother, I am suffocating.
My lungs flutter uselessly, like the wings
of a pinned butterfly.
I take in air but it is grey,
and it scratches my throat, and
I cannot breath.

Mother, I am burning, I am scared.
Flickers of blue and red haunt my vision.
My ankles are the sun, not skin but liquid, bub-
bling
and melting, and
I cannot feel my feet anymore.

Mother, I am no phoenix turned human,
no mythical creature from the books.
There are no second chances or second lives
here.
And my eyes have turned blind from the smoke.

ergo, love.

Stella LaGuardia Connelly / *Cleveland, OH*

you talk to the sky for hours about an amorphous
war where you turned the ground red
while your granddaughter sits on a picnic blan-
ket, sharing an orange
with her girlfriend, and they're learning why the
sun is drawn in yellow
even though it turns the world green.
her girlfriend's little brother runs up to them with
hands of blue.
(he was finger painting a platypus and ran out of
purple.)

your eyelids droop heavy and purple.
it's been many days and nights since you once
turned the ground red.
only a day or two will pass until the little broth-
er's hands have lost their blue.
your granddaughter and her girlfriend have scat-
tered the seeds from their orange
in the throes of the lush green
grass at their feet. and the brother moves on to
paint something yellow.

in his kindergarten class, there's a girl with hair
of yellow.
he thinks he's in love with her. he thinks he
knows what love is. her tricycle is purple
and his is green,
and he likes the way those colors look together,

ergo love. ergo, he blushes red
when he sees her face. they too share an orange,
and he stares out the car window after kindergar-
ten watching the world turn blue.

your granddaughter sits in the bathroom for six
and a half hours dyeing her hair blue.
she thinks it'll make you notice her. next week-
end, she'll dye it yellow
like the pages of your favorite crossword book.
she leaves an orange
on your rocking chair to wake you up when your
eyelids droop purple.
but you still fall asleep missing the days when
you turned the ground red
just because you were wearing green.

your wife fell in love with you when you still
wore green,
but she liked you better out of uniform. she said
you looked best in blue.
your granddaughter buys new lipstick for her
next picnic, choosing a red
that you don't quite approve of. her girlfriend
buys lemonade. they down the sweet yellow
liquid in gulps like when they were in kindergar-
ten. they laugh until their faces turn purple.
her little brother gives the blonde-haired girl
another orange.

you sure do seem to run out of oranges quickly
around here. you prefer apple juice to orange
anyway, so you pretend not to know about the
picnics and the girl and the green
dress your granddaughter bought right before

dyeing her hair again. purple.
you start to feel blue.
your wife was always the one who knew how to
re-paint the world in yellow,
but you lost her only a few years after you turned
the ground red.

your granddaughter and her girlfriend sit between
purple sky and picnic blanket red.
the little brother outgrows his green tricycle but
never his love for the girl with hair of yellow.
you peel the last orange, say goodnight to the
sky, and maybe feel a little less blue.

Kate-Yeonjae Jeong / Houston, TX



Red Bells

I Saw a Shirtless Man Upon a Cliff

Philip Avdey / Vista, CA

I saw a shirtless man upon a cliff
The stark white rock, tall and fair
And he perched upon it
Like an eagle
He was homeless, I think
And his hair waved about
Messy and braided and brown and yellow
And he watched the sea
And the sea watched him
And there was peace between the two

But I did not watch him long
For both man and sea are solitary things
And I would not get what he was getting
By looking
I would find my own cliff and sea
And shed my shirt as well

Falling Forks

Andrea Salvador / *Houston, TX*

Ever since he came home to see the unsigned father-and-son camp reply slip tacked on the refrigerator, Micah had been wrestling with the urge to drop forks. His mother taught him and his sister a slew of superstitions when they were younger. Eating noodles on birthdays guaranteed long lives. White butterflies carried the souls of the dead. The one that stuck, though, was that a fallen fork meant a man would visit them soon. A fallen spoon, a woman. When the doorbell rang or a knock resounded, they'd envision their father appearing. A thousand forks had probably fell since that day, a mix of accidents and purposeful happenstances, but Micah's father still hadn't shown his face.

"Move."

Micah jumps. Regina usually announces her entrances like this: sweaty, panting, and the huge duffel bag extending from her broad shoulder. Micah steps away. His sister pulls the refrigerator door open, guzzling the water straight from the pitcher.

"What's up with you?" Regina asks once she's downed half of the pitcher. She closes the refrigerator and follows Micah's gaze, towards the reply slip. "Oh."

Micah sighs. "I'm going to be the last person to submit the slip. Everyone's passed it already."

Annually, Micah's school promises a father-and-son camp for its graduating seniors. The tales passed down from alumni are steeped in myth and awe: pool cannonball contests, laser tag in the gym, and joining the teachers in drinking games. It's far-fetched since it is hosted by a Catholic school that preaches 'stupid' was a curse word, but everyone hopes that the stories are real—especially now when the camp is two weeks away.

Of course, to attend the father-son camp, you need to have a father.

"Where do you think he's at?" Regina asks. She trails a fingernail through the jumble of postcards and letters on the refrigerator. They've been sent by their father over the years, sporting Cambodian temples, Russian castles, and most recently, Indonesian rice fields.

"Probably still Indonesia," Micah says.

"Nah. He's a jet setter, our father," Regina snorts. Ever since he missed her sixth-grade graduation, Regina's been lambasting him. She claimed he was a criminal on the run. Since Mom didn't react, it became the strongest theory explaining his fifteen-year disappearance. Micah spent the next two years combing crime reports to no avail, but Regina simply said he'd changed his name.

"Tell you what, let's give it another try," Regina says. She pulls two forks from the utensil cabinet,

handing one to Micah. He grips the stem like a lifeline, the four prongs piercing the air steeped with innocent hope. Regina counts to three, and they drop the forks to the tiled ground. They clatter, breaking the hum of the dying air conditioner, then stare up at Micah. *Defeatedly*, he thinks.

Mom arrives after Micah's lost track of time by sketching, perched on his deflated barstool. He startles when she barges into the kitchen with a greasy bag of takeout. Mom's arrival means that three hours have passed. The kitchen has no windows to prove it, but Micah's certain the sun has dipped past the horizon. "Did you eat dinner?" Mom asks, arranging her burger and fries into a plate.

"No," Micah says, tasting the pizza from lunchtime in the back of his throat. A while ago, Regina microwaved the leftover pasta and practically swallowed it whole, then retreated to her room.

Mom sits on the barstool opposite Micah's and drops her plate onto the table between them. "Let's share."

After five agonizing minutes of recounting his day, Micah clears his throat. "I have a mandatory camp next weekend. I need Dad to go with me." He points to the gray slip on the refrigerator.

Mom snaps two oily fingers. "Right," she says. "He can't come. Uncle Timothy will take you."

Uncle Timothy, Dad's brother, always conveniently saves the day. Micah raises an eyebrow, propelled by the possible shame of being the only kid in the camp bringing a proxy. "Why's that?"

Mom shakes her head, freeing the strands of her hair tied in a severe bun. "Micah, he's abroad now. It's not that

easy to book plane tickets."

"If you were a criminal," Regina says, popping into the room. She's already in her pajamas.

"He's not a—"

"You haven't given us reason to think otherwise," Micah mumbles, dusting the salt from his fingers. Regina claps him on the back.

"So, what is it?" Regina asks. "Criminal, circus freak, runaway, gang boss..." She rattles out all the suspicions she and Micah have pocketed over the years.

Micah purses his lips, meeting his mother's eyes. They're welling with tears, and one drips down her red cheek. "Mom, are you okay?"

"Dad," Mom says, her lips reduced to a wobbling curve, like a string that's been plucked. "Your Dad is dead."

The words send Micah sliding down from his barstool, falling onto his butt, then his back. His head thumps the tiled floor, but he wants it to be harder. He doesn't know how long he stays there—time becomes measured by his mother's quick succession of apologies. He doesn't know what happens to Regina but deduces that maybe she's accountable for the strangled cries that morph into furious curses. When he stands, he reaches for the forks. He pulls all twelve of them out of their plastic case, dropping them to the floor. They shudder then freeze. He picks them up again, drops them another time. Then again. Someone is screaming at Micah to stop—make that two voices, after a while—and he thinks that maybe his dead—*dead!*—Dad would want him to stop. He lets go of the last fork, studying its downward fall, its graceful slant, its sudden stillness.

"How could we do that to you?" Mom's voice breaks through his frantic trail of thought. Micah finally starts to cry.

§

Micah and Regina unanimously decide that they want Uncle Timothy to take them to see their father's remains the following week. Micah, for one, can't look at his mother without seeing two devil horns on her head. Mom leaves meals outside his bedroom door, punctuated by apologetic knocks. Micah has skipped an entire week of school, feeding off a smart classmate's notes.

On the drive to the columbarium, Uncle Timothy tells them about their father's death. He'd been an architect in a prestigious firm, visiting one of his midway projects, when the pillars of a room had broken and buried him and eleven others. Following the accident, the relatives of the deceased acted quickly, working to keep their names withheld. The architecture firm used the last of its money to pay for the media's secrecy before promptly shutting down.

"Here we are," Uncle Timothy announces. He parks the whining car in the cramped lot, then unlocks the doors. Micah slides out, his feet numb even as they hit the sizzling concrete.

They weave through the many tall, cement walls that make up the labyrinthine columbarium, dodging vendors holding out rosaries and holy water bottles. The air reeks of dying flowers, which are stuffed into silver holders that dot each squared tile. Engraved names cry out in fine script. Finally, Uncle Timothy stops right in front of a large stained-glass wall. Twelve colored tiles

make up a large rose-colored heart. At the center, their father's name sticks out along with his birth and death days.

Fifteen years ago, right under Micah's nose. He curls his hands into fists, the pressure rooting him to the ground. It keeps him from going dizzy.

His father is dead.

"I'm sorry that I didn't say anything," Uncle Timothy says, bouncing on his leather shoes. "You deserved to know sooner."

We did, Micah thinks, studying the urn tucked behind the glass. "At least you're telling the truth now," he says. "Mom has just kept feeding us with excuses."

Regina snorts. "And we haven't heard the last of them."

"I hope you'll forgive your mother," Uncle Timothy says. He crosses his lanky arms over his slim waist. "She had a difficult time, explaining it to you."

"Oh, right," Regina says. "She literally said Dad's dead."

Micah coughs uncomfortably, imagining his father reduced to mere ashes.

"I meant before," Uncle Timothy says. "She tried explaining it to you guys when you were younger. You misheard. Did you know that?"

Micah looks from the glass to his uncle. "What?" He racks his memories for any encounter with Mom that would have stuck out over the years, especially since it involved Dad. Nothing.

"She told you he was gone," Uncle Timothy says, a small smile curling over his lips. "And both of you insisted that you'd find him. I'm sure there's even a map that you drew up somewhere."

Micah digs out some spare coins

from his pocket to buy flowers from a leathery-faced vendor. She hands him a small sprig of purple flowers with trembling hands, and he slips them into his father's designated flower holder. On the walk to the car, Regina hurls questions at Uncle Timothy.

"Why didn't you tell us yourself?" she asks, her eyes fixed in a suspicious glare. "Mom didn't have to tell you what to do. He's your brother."

"She's your mother," Uncle Timothy says.

§

The father-and-son camp turned out to be the biggest bore: no cannonballs, no laser tagging, no drinks. It was a standard school-sanctioned religious retreat, complete with a welcoming Mass, a morning Mass, and a Mass to signal the end of the event. On the way out, they were handed slips from their advisers, asking them to "keep the fun a secret".

"Thanks for coming," Micah calls out to Uncle Timothy, whose figure is being swallowed by the apartment's elevator doors. He catches his uncle's nod before the doors close.

Micah shuts the front door, his stomach rumbling as he smells butter and sugar wafting from the kitchen, pulling him in.

"Micah!" Mom cries, looking up from stirring a pot.

Micah steps past her, heating a pack of cup noodles in the microwave stiffly. Mom chatters on about this reality show she's invested in, her workmate getting pregnant, and so on. Micah plunges a fork inside the steaming soup and begins to walk out of the kitchen without saying a word.

"I had a miserable time with Regina," Mom says, her voice lowering by a couple of hundred decibels. "She was hard on me."

Micah stifles a grin, trying to envision the fight his sister put up all weekend. A fantastic one, for sure. "As she should," he says, then exits the kitchen.

"Can we talk about this, Micah?" Mom's voice turns brittle, raw. "Some-time, any time?"

His bedroom is stuffy from a weekend trapped behind a closed door, so Micah pitches the long window open, welcoming the warm breeze. He leans forward, cup noodles sloshing in his grip. The plastic fork inside falls onto the floor, taking drops of soup with it.

From the open window, a white butterfly flutters into the room.

Micah swallows. "Mom," he calls out. "Any time now."

Training Wheels

Alina Randhawa / *San Ramon, CA*

The sound of metal bike pieces clashing against the chilled sidewalk filled the evening air. My bright pink Hannah Montana bike tilted as if I had given it too much to handle, forcing me to land on my hands and knees for protection.

My little brother ran up to me as fast as his five-year-old self could and exclaimed, “Are you okay, Didi? Please tell me you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Quiet down,” I said knowing his intentions were pure. I didn’t want to give the situation more attention than it already had. I squinted my eyes and caught a glimpse of a bright green sign on a long grey lamp post that read *Rose Garden Court*. It was at this very street where I remember the adrenaline coursing through my veins, halting my sense of feeling for the first few seconds. I vividly remember the sting and shock on my hands and knees coming to me all at once. After glancing at the scrapes, I immediately scanned the area to see my friends looking at me in astonishment. I recall the experience as being painful and humiliating. I fell in front of all my friends, and it felt as if they would never let me live it down. The most memorable thing that came out of the experience was that after making sure I was okay, my mom told me to get back up and “walk it off.” That bike ride was my very first try at riding a real bike without training wheels.

My family and I had lived in Modesto until I was ten years old. Life in Modesto was simple; I would get up every day and be excited to go to school. Throughout elementary school, I always tested at the top of my class. I enjoyed getting called on by my teachers and the sense of accomplishment I felt after getting the answer right made me adore school even more. I didn’t yet understand that this wasn’t much of a feat since not all children were given the same opportunities as I was. My parents put me in multiple extracurriculars, and I didn’t have to study hard for school. My understanding was that it would be this way forever. I thought to myself, *I’m going to breeze through middle school and high school without even having to try.*

I didn’t know it at the time, but the process of learning how to ride a bike was oddly similar to some of my life experiences. The way I saw it, there were three main stages to master the art of riding a bicycle. First, there was the “pre-bike confidence stage.” This was the stage in which I underestimated the difficulty of riding a bike before I even tried. My time in Modesto was analogous to my “pre-bike confidence,” and it was as if I had underestimated the difficulty of the entire rest of my life. Then, there was the “training wheel stage.” This was the stage in which I lost my “pre-bike confidence” and was the stage in which I made the most mistakes. I could never go as fast as the kids who had regular bikes, but I still got by and

managed to get from point A to point B. The very last stage was the “regular bike stage,” and by far, it was the most challenging stage to master. I had to hone all the skills I learned from the training wheel phase and put them into motion. Although I was warned many times that my training wheels would eventually come off, I neglected to prepare myself properly.

Unbeknownst to me, my family planned to move to a town called San Ramon for its distinguished school system and community. I had to leave all my friends behind as I started my new middle school life in San Ramon. A part of me was thrilled to meet new people and visit new places, but ever since I moved to San Ramon, a part of me felt lost. It was like San Ramon had stolen a fraction of my outgoing, confident, eager-to-learn self. It started to be apparent that my high grades weren’t enough, and it was difficult for me to stand out.

I experienced the contrast in the learning environments between a small school in the central valley and a well-known middle school in one of California’s most esteemed school systems. I lost my “pre-bike confidence” when I realized middle school was way more challenging than expected. I managed to keep substantial grades throughout my time in middle school, but I did make a few mistakes. For one, I had to balance a multitude of different activities and extracurriculars along with school. I was known as a “jack of all trades,” but it had never occurred that this wasn’t necessarily a good thing. I was a starting player in a competitive soccer team, played AAU basketball, took swim lessons, was an

avid piano player, participated in DECA, and the list could go on. Because I had bit off more than I could chew, I received my first C on an English exam. I told myself, *it doesn’t matter if I don’t know the proper way to balance my life because the only purpose of middle school is to prepare us for high school, and the grades don’t count for college anyway.* Up until the end of middle school, the consequences of my actions had never caught up to me. I sailed through middle school with straight A’s and training wheels, ready for the next challenge in my ever-changing life.

If middle school was a small pebble in the road, high school was a boulder. I decided to go to a private college-preparatory school known for its rigorous academics. In doing so, my training wheels were taken away from me. I was immersed in a pool of students who excelled in academics and extracurriculars with balance and ease. After my demanding morning classes, I sat with my peers for lunch. As the girls conversed, they began diving further into their extraordinary lives.

“My sister went to Stanford,” I heard from one end of the table.

“I recently won a film competition in which I gave a child with a rare disease a voice,” I heard from the other end. It wasn’t until meeting the group of girls at the lunch table that I truly felt sub-par. The girls were blossoming on their regular bikes while I felt like I was the only kid who still needed training wheels. Throughout my first semester at the school, my lack of balance and strength was put on full display as I did poorly on a few quizzes and exams. The combi-

nation of my excessive amount of extracurriculars and my arduous schoolwork ultimately led to my first official B in a class. I fell off my bike. Upon receiving my grade, the way I thought of myself changed. *Am I no longer the student I used to be?* My sense of self-worth plummeted over a simple letter, and I knew I had to spend my winter break reflecting on what type of student I wanted to be and how I would change in the coming semester. I came to the realization that I needed to get back up and “walk it off.”

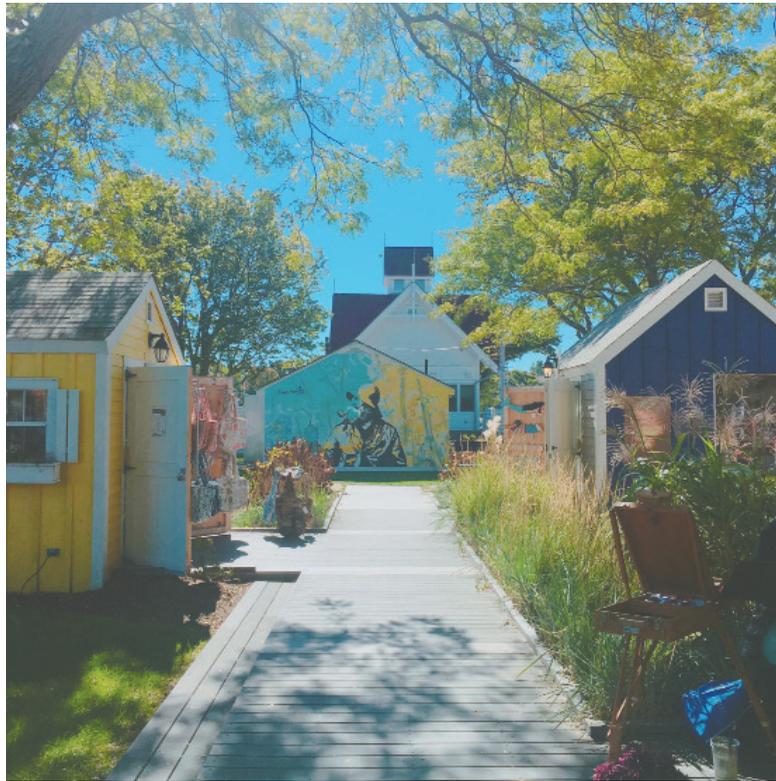
I made a choice to cut down on my extracurriculars and really focus on the few that I was passionate about. I knew that to succeed in the coming semester, I had to refocus and remind myself of my goals and aspirations. With a few passions in mind and a solid study plan, I was ready to attack the second semester with all I had. The second semester was a time of trial and error; I tested out what worked and what didn’t. I was in the final stretch of learning how to ride a regular bike. For the second semester, I received straight A’s, and with my newfound balance and grace, I flourished. Now a sophomore in high school, I look back on my previous experiences as I continue on my never-ending path to master the art of riding a bicycle.

How Chinese Soap Operas Taught Me to Love My Culture

Michaela Wang

Yang Yang, tough with or without the studded leather jacket, pulls up at his prep school gates in a red Porsche. Little does he know that this one pursuit to impress his peachy crush will result in a violent brawl with a classmate sharing a similar admiration, the denunciation of his father's government position, condemnation towards the insufficiency of his Gao Kao studies, and recognition of the personal responsibility to care for his ailing mother—all through a 49-episode season that could be binged during weeknights over #42 on the takeout menu. This saga between familial sacrifice and self-minded desire impells me to identify and appreciate ingrained cultural values.

Each country established a bastion of their culture, subtly and often artistically encapsulating their ethos. Greeks wrote epics. Latin Americans kissed and killed across telenovelas. Nordics blueprinted their minimalism through Ikea. A way for both its own people to espouse themselves in their culture and for outsiders to learn. But I could never pinpoint artistic forms that illuminated Chinese cultural values; certainly, there was the Jue Ju quatrain poetry I studied in Saturday morning Chinese school that aligned with my father's tight restrictions, as well as the horse-hair ink calligraphy that patterned our doors during Chinese New Year, suggesting our carnivorous culinary and artistic palettes. Though Chinese cultural bastions pervaded me, I could not discern century's old cultural values that grumbled beneath until I saw them played out... on the 10-inch screen of my grand-



Sunbeam / Ha Young Kim / Seoul, ROK

mother's iPad mini.

Compounded by a physical heat, dinnertime during Beijing summers brought out the metaphorical heat: Nai Nai lambasted American anarchy or attacked my cousin for purchasing moldy bok choy. In an attempt to shift the drama elsewhere and avoid discussing our own, I combined what Americans loved the most—drama—and what Chinese despised the least—themselves—culminating to Chinese dramas. Through a 40-minute pilot episode binged over #42 on the takeout menu, Yang Yang, son of a powerful government official and just weeks into Gao Kao preparation, would face condemnation towards the insufficiency of his studies, denunciation of his father's position, and the daunting responsibility to care for his ailing mother.

Recognizing these iPad mini characters behind the iPad mini, I reevaluated my perception of Chinese dramas, not as box-office hits of melodramatic proportions, but reflections of my own life. The premise of Chinese dramas was not drama but life and the inevitable events—either dramatic or subdued—that followed. The familial issues in this virtual format amplified the familial issues in my reality; thus, I could contextualize myself and my family members in fictional personas and better comprehended Chinese cultural values I once overlooked. I could appreciate instead of lament these cultural differences.

Just like how Yang Yang struggled to portray respect for his father's unrelenting labor without indignance, I too grappled with the heavy intergenerational pressures. The eventual bildungsroman of the father-son relationship taught me that this parental enmity was self-imposed, this burden disillusioned, and this disdain tough love. Though I had always viewed love as words uttered from the lips, I reconsidered love as actions crafted from the heart; the most powerful displays of love did not manifest in the conversive script but the quiet moments of silence. I comprehended the Chinese core cultural value—love through action—and began speaking it myself.

To embrace culture, I had to acknowledge the nature of its beauty, not exuded through hefty history textbooks but discreet bastions. Culture is most rich when it is unexpected, most personal when it is fictional, most saturated on the 12-inch screen of your grandma's iPad mini screen.

The Sun is Not Kind

Yunseo Chung

When summer comes, it brings a sickly-sweet yellow that sticks to the back of your tongue. It seeps through the ceiling and into the floor. The sun burns brighter and brighter every day, like she wants to make our lungs explode into flames to have just a minute of peace, like she wants to shove us down her 27-million-degree throat to keep us quiet. The ozone layer never stood a chance, not against the sun. Not against its own people, who built buildings to scrape the sky and scream when we want more. Really, I think the universe is tired of us. The Earth stopped spinning in March, hasn't budged in its orbit in months. We never stood a chance.

Maybe, when all of this is over, we can be a little more careful. We can try again, let the flowers grow back and wait for the stars to return. We can do it right this time—hold hands, speak softly. And when we pass each other strawberries in the cafeteria, I won't miss a second of your unmasked smile. But I know this is just wishful thinking. It's too late to change the past.

Still, when we die, maybe we can do it together.

Maybe we can move to Mars together, sitting too close for comfort (but close just because we can), in the spaceship that'll rip us from this life and take us to another. Your warmth will bleed into mine, thigh-

to-thigh and denim-against-denim, and I'll die happy. Maybe this was the plan all along.

When the sun rises, she opens the door to a house that hasn't breathed in months. Maybe not ever. It sees a girl, splayed awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs, choking on her maybes. It takes one look and walks out, stoic. In her defense, this is how it's always been. There is no other version of this story.

I wish life was kinder. I wish summer would have offered a



Ethan Nguyen / Las Vegas, NV

It All Started With The Comet

helping hand, smiled soft and warm instead of turning on its heel. Maybe it does, in another life. In a past life.

I hope it does. I hope it did.

There is a boy, and there is a girl. He likes her more than the summer heat, and the sun shines happily on them, kind and not jealous. He would do anything for her, I'm sure. They're high school sweethearts, had a making-out-under-the-bleachers kind of love that made everybody jealous. Then, they were college sweethearts; then, both doctors. Now, they live on Main Street with 2.5 kids and a golden retriever. When they die, it'll be within a day of each other. The sun will mourn their bodies and celebrate their souls.

A plane shakes in the sky, halfway between Seattle and Singapore. The pilot comes on the intercom and says, "The turbulence wasn't forecast, apologies from the crew. It should be smooth sailing—flying—from here on out." The passengers laugh out of kindness. No one is angry, no one is in a hurry. This flight is about the journey, not the destination.

It's summer. I press the boom mic to my ribs, live-stream my heartbeat. The neighborhood dances to it. I'm pulsing with sweet red blood, unafraid of life.

You live in a two-story house. It has a nice-sized backyard, but not the big front porch you wanted. That's okay. This life is about compromises.

But maybe you shouldn't have bought the house, excited because they sold it to you seventeen thousand dollars below market price. Maybe you shouldn't have compromised anything at all. Compromises brought us here. We were too happy in our past lives; we used up all our luck. Now, the world is diseased, on fire, flooded, corrupted, unkind. It has to be this way. That's how it works.

We lay on my childhood bed, blankets tossed to the side to make room for the heat. You tell me that we're done for. I listen wide eyed, try not to believe you too much. When the sun sets, I look away.

When the boy goes through life, he never meets the girl. He meets another boy, though. But all he ends up being is someone else to watch him die.

A plane flies off the edge of the Earth and is never heard from again. When people need a distraction from the fire, they'll trade stories of what they think happened.

I should tell someone that I'm not afraid to die.

You live in a two-story house. It has a nice-sized backyard, but not the big front porch you wanted. That's okay. There's no one to share it with anyway.

The city makes a graveyard out of the public park. The sun doesn't bat an eye at the body bags. When summer comes, it brings death. The people are used to it, so they throw parties at the beach.

I wish this life was kinder to us. I'm sorry—sorry about my awkward knees in the doorway. Sorry about the mess in my room and at the bottom of the stairs. I'm sorry there's no Diet Coke; I didn't think that far ahead. Sorry about the sun dripping down the walls. Sorry that we ruined it all.

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