

AW

APPRENTICE WRITER

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EDITOR'S NOTE

DEAR READER,

Welcome to the *Apprentice Writer*, a literary magazine from Susquehanna University dedicated to cultivating a collection of written and graphic works created by high schoolers. Before I set my roots during the 38th volume and oversaw the growth of the magazine, I was a high school writer submitting to this magazine too.

Apprentice Writer started in 1982, and since then, we have consistently been working with young writers and artists to exhibit their brilliance. For many, this might be their first time being published, and we are grateful to have that honor. This year, *Apprentice Writer* has changed directions to mature with the people who are contributing with it. It was the first time in years that we decided to make this update. This is an everchanging magazine. It relies on the visions of our submitters but also the readers from the school. For instance, the writers this year displayed our current reality in the vulnerability and candidness of their words. Therefore, we have spent months to curate the magazine to best highlight this underlying theme.

This year, we are celebrating our 40th Anniversary by not only changing the form of the physical magazine but changing our online presence and updating our website. As for me, I am celebrating my final magazine as I will be passing the torch to our current Junior Editor, Brooke Mitchell, whose work will allow *Apprentice Writer* to keep flourishing. From the people who are in this year's masthead, to the people that contributed to our beautiful table of contents, thank you to everyone who made this journey memorable (No crying though because I worked hard to convince everyone to get *Apprentice Writer* off newsprint paper!).

YOURS TRULY,
JENA LUI
SENIOR EDITOR

DEAR READER,

I am astounded at the depth of meaning these young artists work with, let alone their cunning use of craft to portray this meaning. Every piece is literary. Motifs echo subtly through the paragraphs. Imagery and sound grip the pages. Smooth commentary releases them to our understanding and enjoyment. Through these pages, you'll find some work exploring the moments before, during, and after traumatic events. You'll find other topics like romance and rebellion at the hearts of some stories. All these subjects entwine in many pieces to create a stunning image of what it means to be a high school student both in America and abroad.

When I joined the magazine in the Spring, our focus was of course on reading the thousands of submissions and editing those chosen, but we had another task at hand: reinventing *Apprentice Writer*. We shortened the name. We began constructing a website. We started the process of creating a higher quality print magazine. Our work this past year, especially, has been focused on providing the updated experience these young writers and artists deserve.

YOURS,
BROOKE MITCHELL
JUNIOR EDITOR

One Way Mirror

Mamo bought tickets to cruises docked in Florida when she hadn't left Texas in years, and we didn't know of the purchases until her subtraction-riddled bank statements rolled in weeks later. She was moving from her worn apartment in the suburbs to a retirement home off the freeway in fourth months, so weekends were spent sorting through her every hoarding pile and discarded mail with expired stamps. By the time my dad saw the bank statement and called the cruise line, the deadline for refunds passed. My dad didn't raise his voice, but there was disappointment in his diction as he told his mom. He spoke to Mamo like she was a child, and I wondered if all paternal relationships devolved like that: mother turned daughter, son turned father.

As he poured through the rest of her bank statement and other bills, I packed Mamo's possessions into cardboard boxes, a life reduced to nothing more than misshapen cubes. She sat in a lounge chair in front of a static TV, only looking at me when I tripped or dropped a pile of books. When she looked, I wondered what she saw back in my eyes: a window to her granddaughter or a one-way mirror? Did she see her reflection in my eyes, or did she see inside of me?

During decade-old Christmases, she drove herself to my house, bearing presents and a box of freshly baked peanut butter cookies to add to the growing dessert table. Now, my parents are the holiday chauffeurs, picking her up from her retirement home for every visit. Plans must be scratched into paper at least a week in advance or she will forget. For particularly important events, we coordinate with the workers at the home to ensure she will be ready, and still, half the time, she forgets.

For her seventy-fourth birthday three years ago, my parents and

I knocked on her door to pick her up for dinner after calling the previous night and morning of, but no one answered. She wasn't in her room; she wasn't in the lobby; she wasn't wandering the halls. It became a game of Where's Mamo? but sometimes, I feared we would never win. We would spend hours searching every crevice of the building, but we would never see Waldo's red and white shirt. Mamo's grey and navy sweater.

But on her birthday, we won the game. She was down in the dining hall, eating dinner at a table in the corner that stared at the crème wall. She looked surprised to see us and asked why we were visiting: clearly, she didn't remember it was her birthday. And we didn't want to be the ones to remind her, so we said we were just stopping by, and when we showed up again the next weekend to take her out for a birthday dinner, she didn't realize it was a week late. She didn't even remember the week-old encounter.

I wonder if she really saw me then. Saw her granddaughter, recalled my name. Or by then was I only a mirror, nothing she recognized through a window? Now, she looks at me like I'm a stranger, and maybe to her, I am. When I'm with my dad, her son, I can see her glassy eyes connect the dots, but it's not an instant recognition.

For the past couple years, she has lived in a retirement home. When COVID broke out, the entire building locked down, and months trickled by with no visits. I've wondered if she missed us, or if she had so little hold on time and memories that she didn't even realize we were gone.

By Christmas, the restrictions eased, and we were able to schedule a visit with her. We arrived bearing gifts: from my immediate family and from my dad's sister across the country to complete the family tree. Mamo was fifteen minutes late to our assigned table, led by a nurse with a hand on her walker, edging her along.

"Well, hello," Mamo said as she sat down, and the nurse disappeared. Mamo glanced at the presents for half a second. Unless you were studying her face (and I was), you wouldn't have noticed her flicker of surprise. Despite her waning memory, she was smart and knew how to conceal her dementia. She knew how to sound aware even when she was far from, and when having a conversation with her in passing, she almost sounded composed.

But Christmas Day was no passing conversation.

“Merry Christmas, Mom,” my dad said as he slid a carefully wrapped present across the table. The home followed a strict limited schedule, so appointments had to be rushed. As expected, she didn’t bring any presents for us, but that would require her to both remember the holiday and have the means of purchasing gifts. At least she didn’t look embarrassed to have nothing to give in return.

Unwrapping presents, she was delicate, folding the paper with the precision of making origami. She unwrapped the first box—a nightgown—and my dad slid the second across the table. As her wrinkled and spotted fingers started to run under the seam to tear the tape without damaging the wrapping paper, she paused. Looked at us, looked back at her mirror with no window of recognition through. I saw her, but she never saw me.

“Is it my birthday?” she asked.

I waited for her lips to thin into a smile and for her to say it was a joke, but I knew it wasn’t.

“No, Mom. It’s Christmas,” my dad said, keeping his voice even.

If she only asked once, it wouldn’t have been insignificant. But she asked again on the third present. Again, on the fourth. Again, on the fifth. When we said good-bye, I felt her drifting again, and I knew when she walked back through the lobby and up the elevator to her room, she would wonder why fake snow stuck to failings and why candy canes hung from walls and why holiday music rang in the back. She would look at herself in the hallway mirror and already forget the visiting family.

When we were younger, before she moved to the retirement home, we visited frequently. Her apartment was a catalog of age and life: stacked books and expired foods cluttering counter space, couch cushions stained and smelling of urine and rotten eggs. Mirrors used to line every inch of the walls, but she took them down when her skin folded into wrinkles and dark spots splotched cheeks. The mirrors collected dust in her closet instead, but she didn’t need them: my eyes were enough of a one way mirror she never saw through.

It was a small apartment—a bedroom and simple kitchenette—but enough junk and possessions crammed between the walls to house a family. But her husband died decades before, and it was just

her and two cats who spent their days hidden. We never saw them but sometimes heard their claws drag against carpet and scratch the wooden underside of the bed.

Taking the cats with her to the retirement home was a battle against staff, and though my parents helped her win, they often wonder if a loss would have been better. When she can't remember to take care of her herself, how is she supposed to remember to take care of two cats? A couple months after moving into the home, six weeks passed of weekend visits where my parents didn't see one of the cats, and they thought it was missing—must've escaped when Mamo left the door cracked open too long—and though they ended up finding the cat in the back of a closet a week later, my parents decided that if the cats were to permanently disappear, it would be easiest not to tell Mamo because she wouldn't even notice.

For years before the retirement home, she refused to move. She said she liked her independence and she liked her apartment and she liked her routine. But that routine consisted of accumulating trash, expired products lining the shelves. Missing necessary doctor's appointments she couldn't keep track of. Buying tickets to cruises states away with no way of getting there, then forgetting about the purchase until her son checked the bank statement years later.

She withered away: physically, mentally, financially. We resolved she had to move, and in the weeks of packing, she started to understand. She was a hoarder down to her bones, and it took five months of weekly packing trips to sort through all her item. If only she held onto memories with the same tenacity she held onto physical items she had no room for.

In the four years since we packed her bags and moved her, she hasn't fully adjusted. She calls my dad in the middle of the night and says her bags are packed and she is ready to go. To where, we ask, but she never gives an answer and doesn't remember asking in the morning.

Maybe she is ready to go home, to her old apartment or to the town she grew up in thousands of miles away. Or maybe she is ready to go to the other side of the one-way mirror where she can finally see beyond her reflection again. Where she can see clearly.

Monster

I liked to believe I understood myself, but the extensive record of anxious nights I spent wishing for sleep argued otherwise. The sheets burned, and so did an incessant train of unanswerable questions. ‘Did I like her? Did I want to be her? A blurry glorified image of her face flashed behind my eyelids. ‘What if I’m faking this?’” Some nights I convinced myself I had fabricated my attraction to women, and others my attraction to men was just the heteronormative pressure I had been raised with. I wasted hours analyzing the nervous excitement I felt when she looked at me, or my uncontrollable laughter when he winked at me from across the classroom.

Sweat beaded on my palms as restlessness consumed me. Anxiety had found its new fuel and internal accusations became a monster, my uncertainty its weapon.

I used to lie about my crushes. Mostly to myself, but sometimes to other people too. If she was pretty and I made an effort towards friendship, there was no ulterior motive. If I complimented her make up I simply wanted to look like her, not kiss her. Never because I was desperate for something more, because ‘more’ wasn’t an option. The line between platonic and romantic began to blur, and suddenly I couldn’t find a clear distinction. I began seeing romance before friendship as out of order, and inherently wrong. Strangers, friendship, romance. This was the regimented order, a fixed process.

It wasn’t just the thought of an arbitrary ‘her’ that consumed me, it was my inability to choose. The guilt of seeing them both romantically tore me apart. I couldn’t pick a side; I strayed helplessly, balanced on a wire, caught between confusion and raging hormones. Every time I’d thought I had finally fallen, her sickeningly sweet perfume would obliterate every thought in my mind, and his smile would send heat ripping through my cheeks. I stood steady atop my

thin wire, my feet planted firmly underneath me as my head spun in circles around my heart. And as the light faded from my eyes at night, his smile blossomed behind my eyes, and the faint fragrance of her perfume tickled my nose. The monster slithered to life in the shadows.

After years of actively denying it, I couldn't anymore. Not the unexplainable desire to hold her hand, or run my fingers through his blonde hair. They all emulsified into a confusing caldron of a brooding bisexual. The monster screamed for me to choose. I never did. It continues to cling to my ever-present doubt, but the cage restraining the demons stays closed. The unwelcomed hysteria staying imprisoned in a dark corner of my mind.

the taker in two

we are two strangers

we are two mouths
with too much to say

we are two pairs of legs
on an unimpressive couch
you probably found at some
flea market downtown

we could have gone to a motel
with more flare &
fervor that would make me feel
just as cheap

you share too many
body parts
for my comfort—

fingers in fives
both thighs against my side
& your two poring eyes burn
twin rouge rims below mine

i am two cold hands
as your telltale touch only
tramples on the best cuts of my meat

we are two smiles but

notice how mine quivers
& creases like your unironed shirt
& unlike your caracara leer,
i am dimpleless
in your dilapidated den
you turn on a movie
so we can be two movie-goers
right in your laughable
living room

am i the film now?
the coming-of-age novel you read
in text now adapted
for major motion picture?

i may be the stray dog
that somehow wandered
into your taloned grasp

& it just has dawned on me
how there are two
in tandem; in proximity too
close; in my left-profile now rakes
your demanding stubble

& you take my mouth,
my legs, my strange company,
my sorry smile & swallow—

adam's apple crunching
at my innocence, shaving
away the sterling white rind
when we become two lips enjambed
in the literature of my patchwork passion

your tongue tearing
down my throat,
biting out the raw

nerves of stem green

my esophagus becomes a landfill
of your two hundred trysts;
the pellet piles the taste
of turmoil roiling
on my tongue,
telling me:

this is too much;
there's too many you've taken
to call
this special

you use the bathroom
& i am left in black,
in the silent static shroud
of the silver screen,
sucked back out to the sky

i am the prey of bird
pathetic now roadkill-reaved, life
taken now grey
in your living room



KYEONGMIN BAEK
Jellybeam



KATE-YEONJAE JEONG

July

All Noses Bleed

My nose bleeds
 for the eighth time
this week.

Tissues pinch
 tilt back
until neck bruises.

The blood slides
 down my throat
and cracked teeth.

Tastes like meat.
 Nose swells
like a goji berry.

I break apart,
 a skeleton collapsing
withering into dust.

Blood drips down
 the sink drain, a river
that never ends.

Sleep a dream
 I cling onto
on days like this.

Mockingbird

The girl sat in the waiting room, staring out the window at gray clouds. Her eyes looked as if they didn't know whether they were blue or green, and so had decided to be both for the time being. She took no notice of me as I sat down carefully on the couch across from her. It was my first time in Dr. Taylor's office. I wondered why she was here, and why she was alone.

Our first meeting passed in silence. She sat statue-still, a book in her lap, with only the occasional blink to betray the fact that she was living. I fidgeted and checked my watch.

Dr. Taylor was two minutes and twelve seconds late when the door opened. The girl was still sitting there when I went in.

Forty-four minutes and three seconds later, I emerged to find the waiting room empty. The session had been frustrating, as most sessions with therapists were. Dr. Taylor had dodged all of my questions and asked all of the usual getting-to-know-you nonsense. She hadn't said what was going on with me. She even returned my blunt "What's wrong with me?" with "I think you have some things that you need to work on."

Then she proceeded to quiz me about my life.

I'd had to recount my struggles during my freshman year of college—how I'd spent so much time counting and organizing and being methodical that I'd barely had any time for coursework. And I couldn't bring myself to rush my coursework: everything had to be perfect, with an even number of words in each sentence and the phrasing just so. I'd known that I was plodding toward disaster, but I couldn't seem to help myself. Sure enough, I'd barely passed my classes. This year, I was back at my parents' house, taking a gap year to find someone who could fix me.

Now, I walked across the waiting room with my right foot leading: one, two; one, two; one, two. I caught sight of something that made me lose count of my steps: the girl had left her book behind.

My stomach clenched. Was I on an even step or an odd one? I reminded myself for the nth time that it didn't matter, and was annoyed and at myself and guilty for caring. Counting my steps hadn't cost me much in high school—maybe an occasional odd comment—but under the stress of college, it had expanded to the point where it was almost impossible to be on time to classes. So I'd gotten stressed at my lateness, and the more stressed I was, the more I tried to walk precisely, with even pressures on each foot. Last week in the kitchen, my mom had noticed me walking oddly and tried to talk me out of the habit, pointing out that it didn't really matter whether I had an even or odd number of steps. I completely agreed with her, but I couldn't stop. The empty sensation on the unstepped foot was unbearable.

Even though it didn't matter, even though it was illogical and unnecessary, I tapped my feet together before I resumed counting, walking toward the couch to where the girl's book lay.

I picked up the book. It was a well-worn copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The image on the cover was a silhouette of a girl looking up at a mockingbird in a tree. I went back into the office to give it to Dr. Taylor.

The next week, the girl was there, again alone, and again reading.

After two minutes and seven seconds, she spoke quietly. "Thank you for returning my book."

Her eyes remained riveted on the page. I noticed her knuckles were white around her book (it was a different one, a hardcover this time). Her hands were covering the title.

"You're welcome," I said. It was awkward to talk to a girl who wouldn't make eye contact, but I remind myself not to be annoyed. After all, she was also seeing Dr. Taylor. "It's a good book."

"Have you ever seen a mockingbird?" she asked, eyes still down.

When I first read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I'd read about actual mockingbirds to better understand the book's metaphor. In my reading, I'd learned that they were gray birds who imitated the calls

of different birds. But I'd never seen one. "No," I said. "I've never seen the real bird."

Silence. She still wasn't looking up. Was it her, or was it me—did she find me scary? Of course she'd be afraid of anyone she met in a therapist's waiting room, but it didn't feel fair. I couldn't help needing to be here. I tried to ignore my frustration, so it swelled like a child's balloon.

I tried to distract myself from my anger. "But do you mean the people who are like mockingbirds?" I asked the girl.

The book had described people who, like mockingbirds, suffered unnecessarily. Tom Robinson was a mockingbird; he was shot in prison even though he was proved innocent. He had had a shrunken left arm, from a childhood accident. Atticus was nearly blind in his left eye, but he shot a rabid dog. Was that what defined innocent mockingbirds in the book, people who had worth despite some kind of disability? Boo Radley, who saved Atticus's children, possessed no physical disability. But he hadn't seemed quite normal, psychologically...

Then again, who was I to judge Boo Radley's psychology? I thought of Tom Robinson's left arm, Atticus's left eye, and my left foot, which always, always had to follow my right.

"I've never met any people-mockingbirds like there were in the book," said the girl.

How did she think of herself, then? She was seeing Dr. Taylor, so she must have something wrong with her. Did she not acknowledge her "difference," as people called them when they were trying to be nice? Maybe she had a different set of parameters for what defined a human mockingbird.

"What makes a person a mockingbird?" I asked her.

Eyes still on her book, her brow furrowed. "Service for others. Mockingbirds make music for people to enjoy, and the people in the book help others."

Which meant, of course, that I wasn't one. My habits were the very opposite of helpful. I could see it in the way my dad looked at me and sighed as I cut my toast into two-centimeter-long squares. I heard it in my mom's voice, begging me to just try a little more.

Growing uncomfortable, I checked my watch. "Thank you for returning my book," she said again. Dr. Taylor's door opened, and

I went in.

The talk with the girl made me feel sorry for the way I'd labeled Dr. Taylor, who was only trying to help. By the girl's definition, I supposed, Dr. Taylor was a mockingbird. She was serving others. She was trying to serve me.

But she didn't feel like a mockingbird from the book. She made me angry. She acted like she was trying to mimic being my good friend, the way a real mockingbird mimicked other birds. I didn't want a friend. I wanted a therapist.

As I sat in a couch-like chair opposite Dr. Taylor, I checked my watch. The cool, gray numbers comforted me. The chair's yielding, blue fabric and the soft, green carpet had the opposite effect.

Dr. Taylor went through the usual how-are-you-doing routine, her gray eyes warm with—not pity, not sympathy—consideration. I could feel my anger swelling again. I tried to ignore it, but that only made it grow. My fists closed and my jaw clenched. Maybe my anger was part of my problem. I'd even yelled at my mom in the kitchen when she'd told me to just try to drop the habit. It wasn't that simple. Couldn't she see that? I'd yelled until we were both in tears.

“What's going on with me?” I asked Dr. Taylor.

“I think that you're very anxious and worried, and that those feelings are making their way into your everyday actions.”

“So, would that be anxiety disorder? Do I have anxiety disorder?”

She smiled with both her mouth and her gray eyes. There was a measurement there. I was sure of it. “You sound like you want to have a diagnosis.”

I grunted an affirmative.

“That's interesting. Why don't you tell me about that?”

I thought about it. “I want to define myself.” I wanted to know that there was something measurably wrong with me. That my behavior wasn't my fault.

Dr. Taylor smiled.

When I walked out of the office, the girl was still in the waiting room.

“Why are you still here?” I asked her anxiously. “Isn't someone coming to pick you up?” Of course, she was too young to drive.

She was still reading, but I could see the title on the book now: *A History of Time*. “They said they’d be a little late.”

I checked my watch. “It’s been forty-six minutes since I came in here—no, forty-seven.”

She looked at her own watch. “Mine says it’s been forty-five.”

I watched the cool, gray numbers on my wrist tick away the seconds. “Your watch must be off.”

She looked back at her book. “If noon is defined by the sun being directly overhead, then they’re both off, because time zones are standardized for the sake of convenience.”

“But there’s still a standard time for this time zone.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t really mean anything. Someone will come pick me up eventually.” She turned a page. “Good-bye.”

I left, my stomach suddenly empty. She was such a child, claiming that “time doesn’t really mean anything.” All children were like that—before they grew up. An ironic smile tugged at my lips as I remembered Jem from *To Kill a Mockingbird*: the boy would rather carry a broken watch that he found than a working one from his grandfather. This girl was the same. She was willing to let the time be as uncertain and undefined as her eyes that seemed both blue and green. Well, time had to exist, just as her eyes had to be either blue or green, and just as I had to have some sort of definable diagnosis that Dr. Taylor wouldn’t tell me!

But as I left the office, her words kept echoing in my ears “If noon is defined by the sun being directly overhead, then they’re both off... time zones are standardized for the sake of convenience.” And I couldn’t think of a way to argue that. If time only existed because we agreed on the time zones, was it real?

I watched the gray numbers on my watch move steadily, but it couldn’t comfort me now that I knew that they might be wrong. Did any measurement really exist?

I stepped into my car with my right foot. At least the concept of right and left still existed.

But no—if someone was standing facing me, then they would have thought that my right foot was my left foot, and my left foot my right foot. That meant that I might have just stepped into the car with my left foot. My stomach clenched. I’d never done that before—but of course I had, not thinking of the other perspective.

I remembered what had been my favorite line from *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Atticus told his daughter, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view.” Somehow Atticus had forgotten to mention how seeing things from another perspective made you question your own.

And now, I was seeing things from the perspective of the girl: everything was a continuous spectrum, and nothing was defined.

So what was anything? And who was I?

After I pulled into my parents’ driveway, I opened the car door and stared at my feet in the light of the setting sun. Which one should I use first? For once, they felt exactly the same: my right foot would be on another person’s left, and my left foot would be on another person’s right. Sighing, I slid down, aiming so that they both hit the asphalt at the same time.

But they didn’t. One foot was a little ahead of the other. I stood there, letting the uneven feeling fade away. Before the talk with the girl, I might have tried a little hop in place, to get the sensation equal. But now, I knew that they would never be exactly equal. My feet would never land exactly at the right time. It was all a continuous spectrum. A feeling of deep hopelessness settled in my gut. I could hop and hop for the rest of my life, and it would never be exactly even.

But did the millisecond-split timing really matter? Had it ever mattered to me? All those other times when I had felt even sensations on my feet, it had never mattered if my feet hit the ground at exactly the same time, or if they both had an equal number of steps. No, what had really mattered was that I had felt an even sensation, that I had perceived my feet hitting the ground at the same time. My definitions, my standards, my evenness—none of it had ever been exact, but as long as I perceived it to be, I was okay.

I lifted my eyes from my feet, and turned to look at the sky. For once, I ignored my annoyance at the seemingly nonsensical arrangement of the clouds. I could work on my perception of the world. My world didn’t have to be a continuous spectrum. It just needed to have broader categories, like the girl’s categories of time.

I shut my car door and walked across the driveway, making a conscious effort to keep my mind on the clouds.

“I’m sorry I said that last week. About time.”

I looked at the girl, astonished. “Why?” We were back in the waiting room again. My wrist was feeling uncomfortably bare. It was the first time in five years that I hadn’t worn a watch.

She hesitated and lifted her gaze from her book to the wall, as if the answer was written there in invisible ink. “It was rude.”

She was changing her opinions on the fly. Just like all children. Children changed quickly. Adults didn’t. Was she expecting me to have a rapid about-face every time she had a new opinion?

But no, wait. Did she really have a new opinion? She had just said that her words were rude, and she was apologizing for them. “Was what you said rude but true?”

She tilted her head to the side, as if the invisible message on the wall was particularly interesting. “It depends on how you look at it. Because rude or polite could be two categories, or they could be a spectrum.” She dropped her gaze to her shoes. “And the same with truths and lies.”

I felt a grudging admiration for her. She was willing to let two realities exist at the same time, in a way that I wasn’t. Like all children, she had not yet learned that there was only one right answer. So “right” simply didn’t exist.

Then I thought of something for which she might not have an answer. “How is a person measured?”

For the first time, she looked at me, and I could see that her eyes were centrally heterochromatic: each pupil was encircled by a ring of green, which was in turn encircled by a ring of blue. “Everyone has their own definitions, so everyone is just themselves.”

“So no one is anything?” I almost rolled my eyes. That was exactly what she had said last time. And it was the very idea that she had just tried to take back.

“No, everyone is something. It’s just up to you to interpret and define it. You decide who you are.”

An Opportunist's Broken Records

input: side i

if these tongues speak algebraically / we'd replace each of our letters with numeric precision / shouldering song though meager the chord, / perfecting a stranger's conversation to recite / in practice / tooth meets gum, / vaseline smothers my lips / or the obscene withdrawal of a cry unfurling / clawing open a mouth closed shut by its own palate / on the schoolyard i first dusted off lead / red stall and clay tile / running my irises dry from exposure / my lips remain chapped with skinned whispers / caressing the air in sorrow, evaporating / now plagued with condensation / the ones accustomed realize a sharp trill; / my voice hinders the exhausted ear, / lost in the mind's arithmetic / i am the syllable that can't be left unattended / my muse lives in the language of other / these lyrics aren't a product of song / they circulate in the grooves indentured / a protractor's unruly servant / the disc spins, reciprocates what it hears / i study each note / exhaling after asphyxiation

output: side ii

we'd seek compromise on a fire escape to hell / when this desire
eclipses blasphemy / where profanity whistles from the windows
above / do you recall the tunes they'd hum? / oxygen was their
construct, melody is our tenant / for how long will these years
linger / my diaphragm is lulled to silence, pleaded hair catches
wind of daggers, / canines that'll slit their throats / wordlessly /
we yield our beloved speech, looped / into mere artifacts / impaired
cassettes; / no longer strangers reverberating / the common vowel
/ the dialogue wanes off momentarily, / an ode to fallen heroes, /
scratched into the palm of my stylus / we have what several can't
think to fathom / we do not speak without bending our necks /
they do not approach us until we revert to them / no price will be
accepted nor offered / if we decimate, we must prove intact / there
is a voice where coercion isn't



NATE SCOTT
Pen the Hen



JANGHEYOK OH
Blur and Humid

Adoration

I doodle stemless flowers in margins,
running fingertips along spiraling blue ink,
curved like a notebook's spine.
I grow gardens framing loose leaves
after hours spent pouring over legal pads
analyzing motion of my mother's pen hovering
above its yellow plane, measuring, memorizing.
Now, mindlessly, my own pen replicates her bouquets.

I can't pronounce double 't's.
Two distinct consonants exhaled from parted lips are
melded together, transforming sounds of igniting
stove tops into a response to some unintelligent statement.
Kittens turn into jokes, button becomes movement
of blooming plants, and Latin is a fictional genie-summoning
character
proving that my father's Brooklyn-influenced language
is apparently an inherited trait.

Love moves beyond what I can see
It resides in quick thunder between extended hands.
Approval seeping through those cracks in our
palms, lines I studied in a futile attempt to learn my
future path lined with autumn's fiery embers crumbling
and crunching beneath my heel, sighing.
Air buzzing on red-coated pale canvas, exposed skin.
Humming like mint on cracked lips.
Maybe everything we adore originated in someone else.

To Those Who Shined

I knew what beauty was the moment I blazed a fistful of grass from Maura's bong, its feverish hues drooling off the glass. I watched as she gaped at the bonfire before us and the clouds that dotted the Smoky Mountain sky. Kerry was still relieving himself in the woods, consecrating yet another forest on our pre-college road trip, leaving me alone with a radically stewed Maura. I understood why she liked it so much: My vision ran runny with oily tones. Just one breath and all the scourge of the past spilled out in swelling mists. I didn't feel so dirty, knowing that grisly secret was pressing against my chest. I didn't care for the terrible thing done three days ago, in the dying heat of summer. I didn't think of the withering pain I left behind on West Locust Street. Those worries flew like leaves in the warm, smokey wind. I was pure.

Maura came and laid in my arms. I held her head like a fuzzy peach.

"How do you feel?" she asked, her eyebrow piqued with mischief.

I blew out a messy ring. "High as a kite."

We giggled like idiots, budding Neanderthals in the thralls of ecstasy.

"And you?" I followed up. "How do you like the trip so far?"

"Perfect," she said, embellishing each syllable with a heavy tongue. "I can't wait to get to Pigeon Forge. You remember those cute tourist attractions along the road? Gosh, I loved those."

I smiled. "Me too."

It had almost been three days since Kerry, Maura, and I packed ourselves into my Ford Explorer and voyaged into the depths of the Smoky Mountains. Our families used to take us out here to camp during the summer when we were still lively little things. I insisted

we do it once more, one last crusade before everything changed.

“I tell ya,” Maura remarked as she slid down to the ground, “I didn’t think you were one to just hop in a car and putter off to Timbuktu. It’s good, though; I like the change of pace.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Always a square since the day I met you. Not that it’s a bad thing, but...It’s nice to see a new side of you.”

I didn’t know what to make of the look she gave me. I’m certain she was just messing with my bottled affections for her. She was kinda sick like that, but I didn’t mind all that much.

The Smoky Mountains were nothing like the forests back in Iowa: You could find a cluster of trees here or there between its cornfields, but most of it was just cookie-cutter suburbia. It left you feeling vapid, useless. But here, blanketed in Carolina silverbells, I found the spirit I searched for so viscerally back home. If I could, I’d sleep in it forever.

That word, though: If. If I ignored the ravenous guilt eating away at my insides. If I went back to carry my heavy, lifeless burden. If, if, if. Blah! It made me sick, all this thinking.

Going back home was just a possibility, I reasoned with no one in particular. I had Maura, the promise of a new beginning. That’s all that mattered.

A few minutes later, we heard Kerry rustling out from the undergrowth, pausing to study our limp figures. He lingered on me for just a moment too long, and I felt like he could see the plastic, fake sheen of my skin. Kerry always gave me this face, like I was telling him an inside joke that wasn’t very funny.

“Had a ‘Royal Flush’ your Highness?” I spilled out drunkenly.

He looked at me and rolled his eyes. “Ah, you know, just another day of roughing it in the woods.”

His eyes flicked to the bong, the beer cans sleeping on the ground beside me. I pushed out a contrived chuckle and grinned, knowing he wouldn’t smile back. As Kerry settled close to the campfire, I nestled onto the ground and felt the earth hum with anxious life. The stars blinked dully from above, my only witnesses to the entropy cast upon my perfect little life.

I died sometime near the beginning of my senior year. Before

that, I was an apex student, dominating academia with animal glee. Debate, Speech, Model UN, French, Track; I did anything and everything. My head was stuffed with dreams of being that Pinterest-perfect, Renaissance woman, one who would be the envy of all their peers.

That was before the ivy began to grow, when I could still taste the sweetness of life. I don't know what took it away. Maybe it was the asphyxiation of failure, the possibility I'd never reach the heights of my fabricated future. Maybe it was that weightless feeling in my chest, telling me to open it up and see if anything was inside. Or maybe it was because I stopped drinking coffee. Whatever the case, everything started to taste messy. Charred. I was a husk filled with ashes, and the things I once cherished did nothing to satiate my combusting desires.

High school was ending. What should have been the peak of my years, filled with romantic exploits and idealized adolescence, quickly nosedived. I stayed close to a few friends, like Kerry and Maura, but it was hard for them not to fall to the periphery. Still, I tried my best to cling to familiar faces in this new world of chrome personalities. My parents were no different either. They had fallen to the apathy cultured by years of parenthood. I had resigned my love to them early on.

During this metamorphosis, I would escape to the roof of my house to untangle myself in a web of constellations. The stars smoked with white powder. I wanted to hold one, feel it melt into warmth, despite how heavy my hands were. There was still that drive inside of me, to push forward. Only then would I rest. I would one day, I told myself. I would.

We were in the car, driving past the attractions lining the main road of Pigeon Forge. I swung back some beer in the backseat, sloshing the raw taste between my teeth. Maura pressed her face into the glass, alight with the carnival colors of go-karts, themed restaurants, and bizarre tourist traps. I watched as little piggy kids squealed at their mothers for sustenance and thrill.

The crease above Kerry's brow had grown since last night as his eyes followed the foam trickling down my lips. Sometimes, I thought he only stuck around to make sure I didn't kill myself. I retreated to

my phone, appeasing the voice in my head telling me to check the news and see if people were saying anything. I almost choked when I read the first article.

The Warner Post, our town's local newspaper, was usually filled with little stories about good Samaritans or high school sports heroes. But today's headline was different, marked by the vernacular of tragedy:

"...victim...highway hit-and-run...investigation underway..."

The photograph of our neighborhood policemen gathered around a beat-up fire hydrant summoned a faint nausea in me. The figure on the ground lay mangled and broken. The black and white picture didn't do much justice to the real thing.

We stopped near a busy plaza, where Maura bought us tickets for go-karts inside. I followed her in a daze. Kerry popped out a book and watched us strap in from afar. On the track, Maura kept grating her car into mine, metal inverting metal. Nausea gripped me once more, and I drove back into the pit to find a place I could vomit with dignity. Kerry's kind hand fell on my back as he tried to calm my jerking body, reminding me of how I didn't deserve him.

Maura came rushing back, her typical smile replaced with something else. Was it pity? I didn't want that. I wanted love. Simple and overpowering, the kind to numb you. Anything better than this.

I was in the bath when it finally hit me. Early March, right after college decisions were made. Upon the counter beside me, my letter from Amherst: Accepted. I was in. Now what? After all these years of labor, tears, anticipation. Could I stop running?

No, I thought.

No.

I was still a vessel filled with holes, splintering under the weight of indifferent tempests despite my efforts to be smarter, stronger, wiser, to be better for the sake of it. I wasn't sure if anything could fix that.

My nails began digging into the skin on my thighs. I kept doing it and doing it, watching the red tendrils smoke to the surface. I stopped when my throat began protesting with small, inhumane cries.

I got out, bandaged my legs, and lay on the floor thinking about

nothing. My mother walked by, looked at my sad thighs crying red, and said nothing.

Outside, the frigid touch of early spring crawled up my limbs as I sat on the roof. I recognized the Hunter, Orion, shining down from above. The Hunter's will is never satiated, never satisfied. He burns and burns until the last vestiges of the universe fade away. I traced the all-too-familiar constellation with my finger. Tears pinched my cheeks as they crystallized in the cold. The stars used to shine so much brighter.

Maura and Kerry carried me back to the car and drove us back to the campsite. I spent the rest of the day getting over my nervous breakdown and filling my mouth with sweet, dulling steam. That's it, I thought. I'm not going back. All I had to do was stay here and sprout wings to carry me to high heaven.

The night fell swiftly, and Maura with it. She retired to her tent early after a monologue about her love of the Winter Olympics. She bent over and kissed my forehead on her way. My cheeks glowed red, flushing away most of my worries.

Kerry plucked his calloused fingers against guitar strings, tones folding into the snaps and pops of the dying fire. But as soon as Maura zipped up her tent, the tune ceased, and I heard the thud of the guitar hitting the wet ground. I looked up into Kerry's intense gaze.

"What?" I said, breaking the thick silence.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he mumbled.

"Excuse me?"

"Cut the crap, Cameron. You're a mess. I don't know if Maura cares as much, but I'm worried. I've barely seen you sober this whole trip, and now you're puking your guts out. Not to mention, the whole year you've been acting like a completely different person."

I felt the tension in his words. He was holding something back, so I prodded a bit more. "Maybe I want to be different. Reinvent myself, you know?"

"No, I don't." His tone turned tender. "What happened? I'm your friend. You can tell me anything. Are you even going to go to Amherst anymore? Do you know how angry it makes me feel, to see you throw yourself away like this?"

A fire simmered awake in my belly. “How the hell do you think I feel? I’ve been running around like a chicken with my head cut off for months! Why do I even hang around you if you’re just going to make me feel shitty?”

A sigh. “Has it crossed your mind that I might care about you? That you don’t have to bury yourself in pot and booze? I’m not just going to sit here and smile while you slowly kill yourself.”

He paused and gave another heavy sigh before speaking again. “I know what you did, Cameron. I know you were in the car.”

There it was. The punchline.

My pulse quickened. I tried concealing my expression, but there was no use hiding from Kerry.

“The Warner Post. You’re not the only one who reads the news. I don’t know how, or why, but these past few days have said enough.”

Was that fear in his tone? God, he thought I was crazy. Maybe I was.

We said nothing to each other for some time, just feeling the weight of those words press into us.

“What are you going to do?” I finally asked.

He pondered this for a bit. “Nothing yet. We’ll finish up here, then go home. But you’ve got to decide on what kind of person you’re going to be, and I’m not sticking around to see you choose the wrong one.”

“Things are different now,” I objected. “Everything’s changing.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But that doesn’t mean you have to stay the same.”

It was four or five days ago by then, I can’t remember when anymore. My inhibitions were waning as I swam through distortions of the starry night sky. Trap music and the secret conversations of drunk teenagers surrounded me. A snicker escaped my lips, followed by an embarrassing hiccup. A few disgusted looks were cast my way and just as quickly removed. Funny how lonely your world becomes when surrounded by so many bodies. At least I didn’t have to be sober.

My reasoning was simple: If I couldn’t feel good naturally, I’d find something else to do the trick. Today had been the latest in a

series of alcohol-fueled escapades with a good chunk of the graduated senior class. We were on the outskirts of our sleepy town, shedding our daylight skins for something more freeing in the night. I tried not to think of college, Maura, or Kerry, how we would leave each other soon. I should drive home, I thought, call and ask them to do something with me before the summer ends. Before I knew it, I was stumbling toward my Ford Explorer like an inebriated baby. I didn't bother thinking about what might happen once I started driving. Thought was demanding, superfluous in all this rain of emotion.

What came over me I could not define clearly, something that didn't fill me with a fury of uselessness. I pressed every ounce of anguish into the thick grooves of the accelerator and reveled in how it gushed out through the squealing tires. The gasoline tasted sweet like honey. It was a beautiful, terrifying rush.

I tore down the highway, swerving between the thick yellow lines of West Locust Street. I stuck my head out the window and gave a joyous whoop as the wind kissed my face. Why waste away in the gloom of monotony when you could be bucking and screaming into the night? Thinking back, I would have thrown everything away to stay and hold that perfectly sublime moment.

It was then that I hit the man.

His limp body curved along the road's edge. I got out of the car and walked to where he lay by the fire hydrant, all bent and red. I just stood there, untouched by the weight of what had just happened. I could have mustered up some kind of reaction, at least to fool myself. But I didn't. What's worse, I laughed. I laughed at the sickness of it all, how any lick of joy I found ended without warning. I knew nothing about the man except that he was once another body fighting to swim upstream, only to succumb to the torrents of fate pounding down from above. He was already rotting before I hit him. That was the scary part.

I had to go. Before it set in my mind that I was beyond redemption. I drove away and thought of how easy it had been to push that pedal.

The stars had shifted. Scorpius, Orion's compliment, had replaced him in the heavens. The starlight burned with a new, hellish flame.

During those last few days, Kerry and I embraced a conditional

sort of normality. For what, I don't know—he could've just called the cops on me if he wanted. Maybe he really did want to give me a chance. We drove out to Pigeon Forge once more with Maura and played the games of our youth. We punched the buttons Dig Dug at a vintage arcade as and balanced cherry sodas on our knees. We wove our way through ancient hiking trails and let our voices bounce through the woods into the breaking morning. We broke bread over a rack of BBQ ribs at an Americana grill and toasted to our final moments together.

Maura, ever the thrill-seeker, had purchased us a ski lift ride that hung over one of the widest gaps of the mountains. I watched as our feet rose further and further off the safe, steady ground. I turned to Maura, who had a softness in her face that had not been there a few nights ago. She reached for my clenched fist, and my fingers melted into hers. In the same spirit, I held out my hand for Kerry's. His palm was coarse but firm. I nodded as we exchanged a knowing look. We held each other in this intimacy as I fed my broken soul with smoky visions of mist clinging to the mountain domes. At last, I was among the stars, if only for a moment.

I looked again at Maura. I smiled, and she smiled back. I knew she would never love me the way I loved her, but that wasn't important anymore. I didn't need the sweet passions of romance or a perfect, rapturous world. In impermanence, you cling to anything that sticks around, even if only for a little bit. So I held them tight before I had to let go.

Can Six Saints Converse?

I'm standing next to Suren, our tour guide, ogling the landscape at the Noravank Monastery. Tourists wearing brightly colored clothing crowd Burtelashen, the two-story monastery behind us. They make the dune-colored stone walls and dusty, dead-grass ground seem dull. We haven't made it up to Burtelashen yet. We're perched by a railing at the top of a staircase. Below us, old cars tease the cliffside on cracked asphalt while vendors try selling tourists Chinese-manufactured souvenirs from underneath their cloth-roofed stations. In front of us is a gorge. Suren squints under his curved sunglasses and wipes sweat pellets off his bald head. His narrow, seagull-in-the-distance shaped lips are a cigarette-width apart. The dry summer heat hugs my chest and skin. I position my body to become parallel with his.

My brother and father, both armed with cameras, have already walked off to explore the complex. There must have been a hundred people dispersed across this rural site, two hours away from the capital of Armenia, Yerevan. But, Suren and I are alone, perched by our railing.

I stare at the landscape. I squint hard, trying to burn the view into my head so I can write about it later in a story. Trees dot the plateaus across the gorge. Above the plateau, evergreen bushes ride reddish-orange dirt up teeth-like mountains. I don't know what to watch for. There's nothing to watch for. Still, Suren holds his hands clasped behind his back, his neck slanted forward from (presumably) decades of craning, watching the landscape with a slight smirk on his face. I turn around to find my family. My dad is a dot by Burtelashen, my brother is a speck by some run-down wall in the back of the complex. I turn back around to the view. The foliage accents what nature carved into the mountains: the trees and bushes' sticks

and barks were like thin strokes dividing sweeps of geologic paintbrush. It was new life partitioning the old. Eventually, the new life would rot and die, and in its place, the next generation would keep company of the old. I clasp my hands behind my back. Together, we watch the history.

Ten seconds pass. My phone bulges out of my right pocket. My hand edges towards it, like an asteroid caught in the gravitational pull of a planet. I pull my hand away, then turn to Suren. I open my mouth. It takes a second for the words to come out.

“Shat lav,” I say to Suren. *Very good.*

Suren turns to me and nods. “Ha akhper, ha,” he replies, *Yes brother, yes*, then turns back to the nature.

My brother, father and I are in the Rossia Mall. It’s our first time back since 2018 when, three years ago, we were exposed to the underworld of counterfeit goods. We’re on the bottom floor. Dim lighting hangs from twelve feet above. There are endless shops: squarish boxes nested between walls and coated in luxury goods. Every brand name is present in these shops—Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Armani Exchange—and every store owner waits in their shops for customers. They stare at us as we shuffle across the dirty tile floors, trying to find a unique product or friendly face to entice us.

My brother stops at a shop selling luxury jeans, and as my father coaches him through his timid Armenian, I wander off down a row of stores. Eventually, I find a store selling shirts and jackets with two ladies occupying each other with conversation. I sneak inside their space. One of the ladies, blonde, turns to me, and I smile at her. She approaches me and asks me something in Armenian.

“Yes chem khosum hayeren,” I say. *I don’t speak Armenian.*

“Oh,” she responds.

“Engleren khosum es.”

The blonde lady smiles and responds to me in English. She knows enough to tell me about her store’s special deals—6,000 dram for a shirt (the same deal at every other store), and 10,000 dram for a jacket and pant combo. I scan the wall of clothing in front of me and pull out a black Balenciaga shirt. I hand it to her and ask if she has a size small.

“Yes,” she responds. “One minute.” I watch her as she scurries away.

I rack my brain for another word. Suren turns his head to the

right. His ears eye me.

“Shat geghetsik,” I say. *Very beautiful.*

Suren turns back to me. “Ha akhper. Shat siroun-uh.” *Yes brother. It is very beautiful.*

I’m now alone with the other lady, brunette, who was watching us from a distance the whole time. We’re ten feet apart. I clasp my hands and scan the walls of clothes over and over as if they were new every time. She adjusts the rack of clothes separating us until every shirt hangs perfectly even with one another. We keep looking at each other. We smile at each other sheepishly. Then, we laugh.

“Yes chem khosum hayeren,” I say.

“Yes chem khosum engleren,” she replies.

We wade in the silence.

Then she asks me something. I don’t know what it is she asks exactly, but I hear the word “oor,” where. It takes a moment of clarifying, and hand gestures, but I eventually answer, “America.”

She ‘ahhs.’ Silence. We look at each other, smile sheepishly, then laugh.

We spend the next five minutes like this, communicating through hand gestures and through Armenian words I recognize. I communicate what state I live in, and that my dad is half-Armenian but my mom is full, but not much else. I excuse myself to find my family. A minute later, I return with my brother and father to find the blonde lady holding a black Balenciaga shirt. As I try it on in the ladies’ makeshift dressing room, my father talks to the women in Armenian. They speak rapidly, laughing as they fill the holes left from our language barrier. After I buy the shirt and we leave, my dad translates their interaction into English for me.

We’re silent. I focus on the foliage; it’s a barrier, dividing the mountain in half. I wonder if the mountains can still converse.

Out of all the people I met in Armenia, and out of all the experiences I had, my language-dance with the brunette shopkeeper is amongst my most memorable moments. All I can think about is our sheepish smiles, our inability to communicate, yet our connection despite that. I’ve realized something: my fondest memories are with the people I’m most separated from.

Suren covers his squint with sunglasses, then swings his hand

Mary Jane's Perfume

It's raining by the time we quietly roll the sliding backdoor aside and sneak onto the back-porch of her house, slipping our shoes on just as our feet cross the threshold. The chilly, autumn air of northeastern suburbia hits my face as I step boot-first onto the wooden patio outside in the most over-dramatic "sneaky" way possible so that no one in the house hears us. She shakes her head at me in exasperation, a small smile on her face. My hood is drawn tight around my head.

"Stupid California-ass lookin' bitch," she mutters to no one in particular. "Can't handle fuckin' seasons oh my God—" she closes the door, leaving the cats inside and tip toes out behind me. She then moves a flowerpot out of the way of a small wooden gate as if she's done it a million times before—which she definitely has—and gestures for me to follow her down the stairs and into the yard.

Her hood is also pulled tight around her head, because you don't have to be from "sunny California" to understand that it gets cold when it rains in the fall in New Jersey.

The trees stretch around the backyard of the group of townhouses, framing a long grassy yard that slopes upward and has become home to a temporary swimming pool of muddy water and the occasional piece of floating trash. The grass squishes under our feet as we trek out silently to the street. I giggle and she shushes me.

"Shut up. My mom can still hear you." The air smells fresh and cold.

She leads me across the cul de sac to a gap in an old wooden fence surrounding the condominium properties. "This way."

I push aside the creaking plank and squeeze through the gap, the wood damp with rainwater and age. I struggle to get to the other side while she does it gracefully as ever. Mud streaks across the back

of my brother's windbreaker and the plank slaps me once I let it go. She laughs at me. I smile wide and stick my tongue out at her.

We find ourselves in an abandoned parking lot. She turns left and of course I follow. In front of us lies an alleyway, the old wooden fence on one side, buildings and trees on the other, the mist floating down from the clouds, illuminated by the soft yellow glow of the streetlamps above. We walk together through the puddles down the alley. It was beautiful. Romantic, even.

"So, this is where the crack and heroin addicts hang out, huh?" I ask her as we turn right out of the alleyway. The Atrium, an abandoned wedding hall and event venue next to her house, now overrun by broken glass, eerie shadows, and long-lost memories of love. And drugs, of course.

"Yup!" I could see her lopsided smile peeking out from beneath her hood and the single dark curl threatening to escape it. "This is it." She gestures around her dramatically, arms splayed out as if she were showing me around a new home for sale. We head for shelter under the outdoor roof next to what seems to have been the front door. We pass an old, little wooden gazebo on the right, the white paint slowly peeling and chipping away from neglect, two matching white benches in similar condition placed neatly underneath it. There's a dark patch on the concrete under my feet.

"And that's where me and Josh burned the socks that he stashed his home-made alcohol in at camp," she tells me happily. She leans her back against the stone wall running left of the door. I lean on my left shoulder to face her. She pulls out a blunt and a lighter and flicks her hood off. I copy her and take mine off, too.

She hands me the lighter wordlessly and I give her a look. "I don't light on Shabbos, you know that," she says, gesturing to me with the green plastic. She holds the tight roll of white ex-gum wrapper as if she's done it a million times before—which she definitely has—expertly and nonchalantly balancing it between the second and middle finger of her right hand.

"Right. Now watch and learn," she tells me with a smirk and places the end of the joint to her lips, leaning in closer to me. I get the hint and flick the lighter on, watching the tip of the paper fizzle and turn into red embers and black ash, the soft sound of it lighting a whisper barely heard under the pitter-patter of the rain that's

begun to fall a little harder around us. We're safe under the stone awning, but the air is damp.

She takes two puffs, her face hosting a relaxed expression, almost as if she's finally breathing in fresh air, then hands it to me. I grab it the same way she does (though a bit clumsier) and stare at it for a bit in awe as the tip continues to smoke and hiss quietly.

She laughs at me gently. "Now hold it up to your mouth—yeah, just like that. Now take a deep breath in through your mouth—not your nose—and hold it in for a bit. Then let out a nice, long breath right back out through your mouth—yeah, that's it."

The burn of the smoke in my lungs felt almost therapeutic. I didn't cough either, which was nice. I also felt damn cool. I take another puff.

"I bet you think you look so cool," she says. I roll my eyes, give her a smile and hand her back the joint.

We take turns passing it back and forth, the rain and passing cars a soundtrack to our little movie scene. We talk a bit here and there about things that I won't remember later, and then we take turns just not talking and simply taking in each other and the rain and the weed. We get halfway through the joint and I look over at her, her hair and face a soft frizz and her eyes peacefully glazed as they stare into the alleyway we came from.

"Yup," she says to the rain. "I feel it." I feel it too, but clearly not in the same way if that's the reaction I'm supposed to be having. I laugh at her, and a small smile settles on her face, one that I can't help but reciprocate as her eyes lazily turn to the right to meet mine, our grins growing wider. She takes the tiny nub of paper, puts it out on the stone wall, and pockets it next to her little green lighter.

"Come here," she tells me as she almost sleepily grabs my hips and pulls me in close. I wrap her in a hug around her neck and push myself as close to her as I can possibly get, breathing her in, feeling her warmth. I feel like I'm finally breathing in fresh air, like I could only get oxygen in my lungs once we started swaying together to the sound of the rain falling around us while we stayed dry and warm and safe. I step up on my tippy-toes and hug her tighter, pull her closer even though I'm taller than her anyways, my thoughts growing a bit fuzzy around everything except for her. I stick my nose into her cold curls and smile.

“I want to look at you,” I hear her say into my right shoulder. I pull back just enough to fall back to my heels and look her in the eyes, their dark brown shining in the nighttime. I tuck a curl behind her ear and leave my cold hand pressed to her smooth, warm cheek, swiping across it softly with my thumb.

“I love you,” I whisper.

She smiles. “I love you, too.”

“Only you could take me to an abandoned wedding hall full of heroin needles and crack addicts to smoke weed and make it romantic.”

She lets out a bark of a laugh, her growing, lazy smile an indicator of how elated she is.

Also that she’s definitely high.

I keep my arms draped around her neck, her thumb rubbing gentle circles into my hip through my sweater beneath my windbreaker. We sway in the light breeze as cars rush past and rain continues to fall, as if we are two of the many pine-like trees circling the Atrium, holding onto each other as the seasons continue to change.

I start humming the bassline to “Stand By Me” by Ben E. King and she laughs quietly, swinging us to the beat, smiles etched permanently onto our faces.

“When the night. Has come—” She fills in the bassline as I sing the words softly into the space between us.

“No I won’t. Be afraid. No I-I-I won’t. Be afraid. Just as lo-o-ong. As you stand, stand by me. So darling, darling! Sta-a-and. By me-e...”

And we stay there for God knows how long, dancing and swaying to Ben E. King and the rain, smiling like two giddy idiots that have all the time in the world and have nothing better to do.

I don’t think I’ve ever been happier.

She kisses me soundly and sweetly, her lips cold.

The air smells like autumn and fresh rain and Mary Jane’s faint, fading perfume.

Ode to the Kitchen God

Zhao Shen,
I smear your lips with lotus cake
Not so that only sweet honey may pour from your tongue
But so you may spare some time to listen
To a girl whose hearth burns not as strong
And whose family's flame too weak to make you proud,
In hopes that you will open her eyes
As did your lover when she casted aside Heaven's curse
And so,
Great God of Hearth and all that I desire,
Listen,
And let me be consumed by your fire

婚姻

Eight years ago,
I witnessed my first marriage.
One of two cities,
Two lives,
Two cultures,
One family.
My grandma left the bustling streets of Shanghai
For the quiet Milpitas and suburban skies—
Not out of choice
And like love,
Unyielding and infinitely stubborn,
That day marked the back end barrage
Of things out of my control
Like, turning our living room into a gallery for newspaper scraps,

With nothing but a thin veil separating us from her
Like, watching her spill deep black ink onto herself,
You can still spot the stain if you look hard enough

It was during this time I learned that,
In China, the person in the passenger seat does not need a seatbelt

And that,

In China, dinner tables are a place for lobster shells and fish bones

And that,

In China...

In China...

In China...

There are no equals in this marriage.

There is a difference between like and love

“Like” is splitting a bite of ya li with her at night¹

“Love” is allowing the act of sharing to guise how much
of a sin it is to split something so whole and perfect and
fragile

“Like” is when my grandma is diagnosed with deficient Yin

“Love” is wanting to tell her that Western medicine calls it
cancer

“Like” is knowing, sweet, and harmonious

“Love” is bitter, binding, and autonomous

“Like” is what I wish I had for her,

But, “love”, if you can even call it that, is all I can give.

失明

Zhao Shen, tell me, what is it like to be blind?

My tongue is clumsy
And cannot navigate between four tones,
And my grandma says “Arigatō
More than she does “Thank You”

Was I blind,
When pride swelled in my chest
At the sight of two crescent moons on my eyelids
Instead of one?
Only to have it deflate as my finger drew in midair

Pointed
Greek
Nose

Or when
For two whole weeks
My grandma,
So eager to return to her mother city,
And I,
Eager to explore postcard skylines,
Could have asked her what the Shanghai Tower was like,
All along?
And never in my life has
Xu Tianyu
A name that my seven-year-old hand took nearly a month to master,
Looked so much like
Ink stain on carpet
Than in Italy,
Where Chinese was not what the David is used to hearing
But the dinner table silence,
Or cacophony,
Is
Was my grandma blind,
After time had fossilized her limbs
So that they were as unbending as her red and gold soul?

Perhaps, she would like to
Twist time, like the metal knot in her knee,
And feel it squelching into a puddle of past
Underneath her fingertips
Then, she could finally take back what was rightfully hers

Was...

The word traces its nail along the ridges of her aged gyri
Like it has been for a while
But, my mother would remind her that
We are the present
We are all she has
Whether she likes it or not
And that she should feel lucky,
For people her age don't often get to see the David

Is this what blindness is?

觴

On Chinese New Year,
Our table is littered with white take out boxes
On Thanksgiving,
My mother takes out candles, squashes, and our finest plates

I know you are not happy to hear this.

But when there is no holiday
We are a table of four,
My father scarfs down rice,
My sister picks apart beef with her fork,
My mother arranges dumplings, cola, and chopsticks on a tray—

Five.

We are a table of five if you count the guest room

In a moment,
My mother's footsteps will trudge up from
The abode for newspaper clippings,
With the weight of numbing irritation
And beads of sweat sinking
Into lines stretched out across her forehead
A slam of a cane—
An indignant cry—
All of this
Over a drink,
Medicine,
My mother's stooping eyelids say it all:
Pity to fill in the fissure between generations,
Pride to scoop it out

When my grandma's legs hadn't failed her
And when the room downstairs did not scream
Permanence
She'd sit across from me
Bones and shells strewn out in overseas constellations
In front of her,
I look down
I prefer my fish bones in bowls

家

Zhao Shen
I wish to title this forgiveness,
But I cannot
My hands are empty and undeserving,
They know the weight of losing oneself to someone
They do not know what it is like when that someone
Is gone

When will I learn, Zhao Shen?
Will it strike me across the head one day
And watch me burn until,
Like mother like daughter's daughter,

All that is left of me
Is no different then all I see her as,
Charred limb with metal tendon

And what if,
This marriage was never meant to be?
And when I open my eyes
I was never blind
And “love” along “like” were not merely illusions
But impossible

What use will burning be then?

Zhao Shen,
Eight years ago
I witnessed my first marriage

Eight years ago
I saw “like” slip through my fingertips

Eight years ago
I learned what it meant to be blind

Eight years ago
I learned that feast and fight are no different

Eight years ago
I learned what family is,

And love,

If you can even call it that,

Is all I can give.

Life in Amber

You told me, when I first met you, that when you were young you could hear the sound of dog whistles. You lived in Chantilly in a blue-shuttered house and wrote to me in beautiful handwriting. You had yet to become a photographer of the conditional.

Your eyes were amber, life captured like bugs in their rays. I could have surrounded you in the labyrinth of my love, reading your letters from France about the clouds and how you liked the smell of cigars because it reminded you of the father you never knew. It was so quiet there, you said, that you woke up from the silence at night.

At first, I found it bizarre that you almost never signed off, but rather ended your letters abruptly halfway through a sentence. On occasion, you couldn't even make it through a syllable: "Je suis agitée depuis des heu--" Only later did you explain to me how you kept a legal pad on your night table so at three in the morning you could tell me how you'd spent the past four hours pondering what color a snore was until you got fed up and decided it was a sort of beige mystery. Sleep descended upon your scrawl and your mother would rouse you the following morning, shaking her head reproachfully at the ink stains on the blanket where your pen had rolled as your hand sunk reluctantly into slumber. Sitting at breakfast smoking a cigarette in her red velour bathrobe, she threatened to confiscate the par avion stickers if you didn't expunge the Nepal-shaped spots by tomorrow.

When I came home from school I'd find your life in my mailbox, the yellow paper redolent of cardamom and rain, the smell of your insomnia. And although I did not realize it then, the idea of you had become like a lung to me. I would wander through glistening nights of after-rain until the only sound was the cars whispering down the block, letting out a long, wet hissing as they passed. I would wait to

breathe until the red taillights melted into the rain, and my whole mind became that sound.

I lost my keys the night the snow descended, leaving only a ghostly glow of identical offices suspended in soft darkness. I was in tenth grade, and still had the habit of enclosing pressed eucalyptus leaves in my envelopes to you. Across the street from my apartment, in a building which turned out to be ICP, I found myself in Hockney's Pearblossom Highway. In the grey nebula of New York, the photo collage seemed to layer tenses until they broke beyond our hollow architecture for time, grazing the abyss between one perspective and endless understanding. Bud Light cans sprawling by the side of the road, desolate shards of a world stretching in 700 ways towards the horizon. It was the kind of place, I felt, which was livable. A picture I could inhabit for the rest of my life.

I had been staring at Pearblossom Highway for over two hours when they offered me the compromise of a postcard print of it; they had to close, but I could take this world with me, if I held it carefully enough. Walking swiftly down the block with the highway cradled in my arms, immediately I decided to send it to you.

In Chantilly, you walked, and pigeons flew away with a sound like clothes flapping on a line. Your cat would follow you in her umber coat, slinking behind your footsteps to the superette. Upon receiving the postcard I had sent of Pearblossom Highway, it was not you who was enamored, but your sister Agnes. Although we never met, I felt like I had known her for a long time when you told me about the little forest she had in her left eye. Encircled by hazel rays, dark green pines lay blurred beneath her pupil, visible only after close examination.

We were lying in bed the morning you told me you thought you heard the sound of the two ash trees outside our window collapsing, their slender limbs creaking before a hollowness settled within, then gradually crept out and around the wild undergrowth behind our dorm. I walked to the window and drew the curtains to show you the trees standing unchanged in the tall, withered grasses, marcescent leaves clinging to their branches, but you wouldn't meet my eyes, avoiding the details of my face as you left the room to find the car keys. I heard your voice from underwater, reminding me we should leave soon if we wanted to be home by that evening for Christmas

vacation.

My ears ringing, I felt you sink into the grey leatherette beside me (7:03 PM, December 21, a bomb smuggled into a yellow samsonite suitcase), amber eyes glazed over the ice at 75mph. Kept driving somehow (259 people), tightening my grip on the wheel (detonated over Lockerbie, Scotland). Watching you go limp, unable to see me and only able to see the reflected world of your red fingernails, I realized I needed gills. Trees whipped by in the red as I drove faster, clouds becoming icebergs from below. When your sister died that night, in the pocket of her plaid-lined coat she had a print of Pearblossom Highway.

When you peeled off the red, nail polish was replaced by dark dots that gathered at the peripheral fringe of your left eye's top lashes, their silhouette gradually drifting down, to coalesce beneath your pupil where they dissolved. You began to see the butterflies she had loved everywhere; your life becoming a double exposure. (At least, you thought the butterflies were the ones she had loved, but you could never truly know.)

Now you could only feel. Now the essence of life seemed slowly to reveal itself, days increasingly concentrated into light and shadow, all else eschewed as superfluous. When I first saw your photographs, I thought they were taken at night, but you softly explained (moonlike fingers eliding emotion, eyes swimming with distance) how in fact you shot during the day, then printed them in a grey scale so deep and nuanced that their subjects are difficult to see.

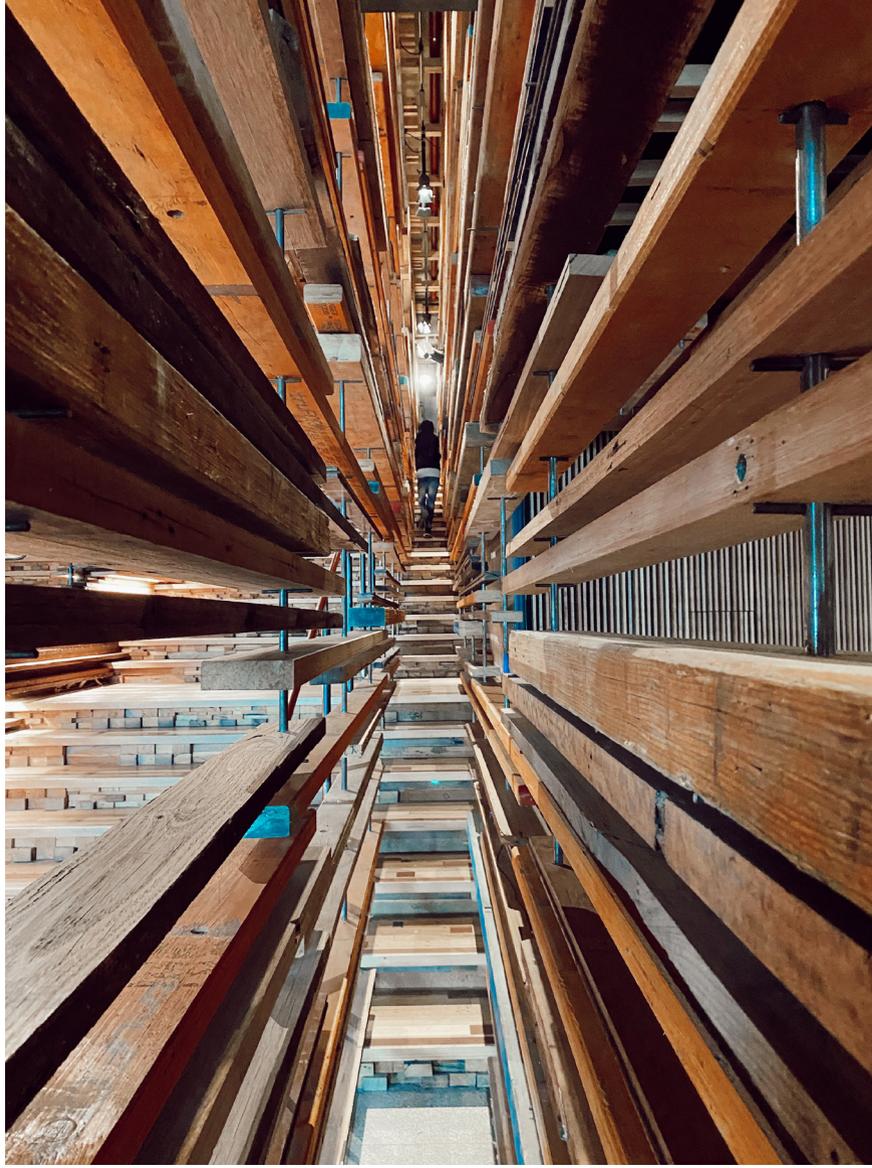
In the years that followed, you got married to your husband, had two children who know nothing of your past. Your life in amber winds its way up my ribs, folding around my heart like a shroud, Zinnia.

So when you showed me your most recent project--would-have-been pictures (a woman receding down the long, gleaming linoleum at JFK, a runway strip lightly cloaked in fresh snow)--I gazed hard at you with a question that I didn't need to ask out loud. Quietly, you nodded.



DANA SEREA

My Grandmother's Hands



KAIA THAM
Behind The Walls

in the mood for love

it's humid here like the city to the west,
underwater and drenched, a sweaty
city of fantasy.

take me there, take me there is the song of the restless.
game tiles and door locks click, and regretfully, the half-moon
rises to its throne.

red calligraphy scrawled on the wall in the alley,
spelling out a poem very carefully,
delicately.
he stands under the dripping blanket of the night
and reads it, head tilted, backwards.

everything is backwards, he says.

i hope he never dies.

he looks at me.
a mind-reader. a heart-whisperer.
he has a camera.

i want him to take a picture of me.
save me in his memory!
he smiles, lips chapped, and
flips me a coin.

heads.
he takes me in his arms.
he smells of

cigarettes and saltwater and the tiny bakery
next to the bayside mall.
everything is backwards, he says,
but he must be wrong.
tails.
i kiss him.

i hope the sky falls from its perch
and crushes us together,
one burial mound for two,
four living hands
living no more.

he frowns and begins
to recite the poem on the wall.

under the great arch of sky,
i close my eyes
and fall into darkness.

two foreign roses,
aging in the cigarette air,
crumpling in the puddled street,
waiting to be crushed by feet and fate.

bedtime calls.

i fit in here.

A Hearing Soul

The depression on the couch matches my dede's figure,
wispy grey hair hiding his bare noggin, pipe attached to his
puckering lips.
he releases a puff of white air, cloudy and swirling in my vision
and breathes shallowly.

I'm reminded of my youth sitting next to him,
my features less wrinkly and creased,
more blank than his expressive canvas.

But he warns me that it comes at a cost;
the branching veins that stretch across his skin appear knotted
and faint,
his limbs stir begrudgingly,
and the alluring wrinkles that draw me closer
forge a scar into his trembling heart.

I listen to the carousel of stories he wishes to share
to relieve his misery onto a poor soul,
as the mirage of scarlet revives his faded eyes
into fervid coals of passion and regret.

He recounts the pain he felt...

When his first wife miscarried
on the sticky bathroom floor,
hands forever stained.

Or the stubborn brother he left behind,
in pursuit of a pretty penny.

Even the angry outbursts and drunken nights he claims
to have forgotten,
i believe he remembers them, yet remains steadfast on stubbornly
wishing them away
like a child experiencing a bad dream does.

The pain chokes him at times,
his intonation cracking
and creaking over the archived grievances.

He carries his lifetime of pain and expects me to endure it
for my lifetime
and at first his sins appear conquerable to my full belly,
yet seem unconquerable once the illusion wears off.

His suffering won't have been for nothing, but I won't dare
make it my own.
instead, I will carry his ruh in tow,
an opportunity to show my dede that my canvas, too,
will be messy,
but no blood will have been spilt.

But in that moment, I listen to his stories and
remain a giddy child once more before the carousel ride is over

Storm Poem

Moments trickle by like rain on the car dash
I used to watch as the droplets raced
But eventually they all blended
And I lost focus

I know what it's like to be depressed
To be so inexplicably sad that all you want is for the sky to open up
and fill your lungs with
water until your mouth dribbles over
Sending small cascades onto the sodden concrete
I want to be a waterfall

When the lightning strikes it leaves no man standing
Trembling thunder in its wake
"You are mad," it tells me
I cackle at the sky, bare feet on warm cement, hair soaked through
and plastered to my scarlet cheeks
"The world is mad," I shout back
"But you forget," the rumble responds
"Thunder does not speak"

Everywhere I turn is water
Flooding the streets
Swamping the yards
Drowning the greenery
Soaking my skin

My eyes fill with water
I cry for all I am

For all I am is human
No match for the storm

Is that the wind or is that screaming?

“That is screaming”

Who is screaming?

“I am screaming”

Why?

“For I am afraid”

Of what?

Thunder and I cackle in unison

“Of myself”

I want to be the storm

I want thunder’s rage to be at my beck and call

The booming loud enough to drown out the rain

Drown out my tears

I want lightning’s danger

Dreadful, dazzling, deadly

I want its power, its terror, its beauty

To feel the heat sizzle through me

Bare feet on warm cement, hair soaked through
and plastered to my scarlet cheeks

And yet, despite my power,

I still seem so human

The rain beats down and I am now a waterfall

Droplets pouring forth from blue-tainted lips

Cascading onto the concrete

Why won’t it stop raining?

The Past Perfect World

Withered, rooted heart

starved of the fresh clear elixir
Sunset drained of color
Red, pink, blue leached out of a vast sky

Within reach, an empty void

No compass
No astrolabe
to reveal a winding road
in the dark

Where did it all go?

Innocent optimism
that we can pull free of the vines
that gravity bends itself for us
that the world is our snow globe
ours to break at will

Reunite the shards

in a plethora of hues
A sea of lavender in a childhood bedroom
Pure silver of the moon within grasp
for this perfect instant

Fallen by a second glance,

enough to have a surreal glow in empty palms

A step here a step there

Lost in the featureless horizon

Gray and blue indistinguishable—a shade too dark for hope

look within the depths swirl your fingers in the sand

This world still has perfection

The perfection of a sand dollar
of unfettered laughter
of woven tales told in
stretching thread

Roots buried in deep earth—dig it out of misery
repaint the canvas in blooming glory

A garden of small beginnings

full of fallen trees and stubborn shoots
persisting through the fog

Growing as we dance, unfurl the veil
in every step of bittersweet joy

Just for now

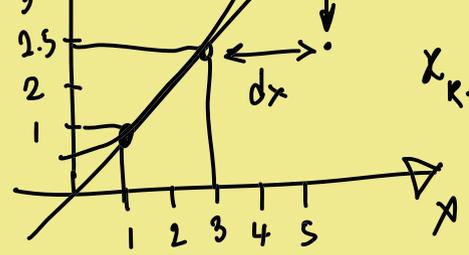
All the now we need

till time ticks down to memory

$$\frac{\Delta x}{x} \approx \frac{dx}{x} \cdot \frac{1}{y}$$

$$S_y = \frac{21.5}{4} = 0.6$$

$$y = f(x)$$

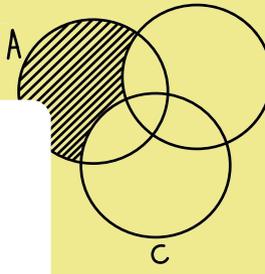


$$S/N = \frac{x}{G}; \frac{X}{G} = 1 \sim 70\%$$

x_{k-1}



$$sdif(x_0) = \left(\frac{d(f)}{dx}\right); \textcircled{1} \text{ tangent line}$$

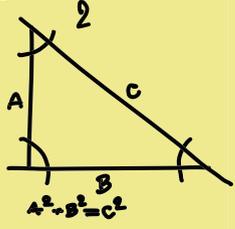


Outstanding Poetry Prize

WINNER

$$w = \frac{1}{s} = \frac{k}{y}$$

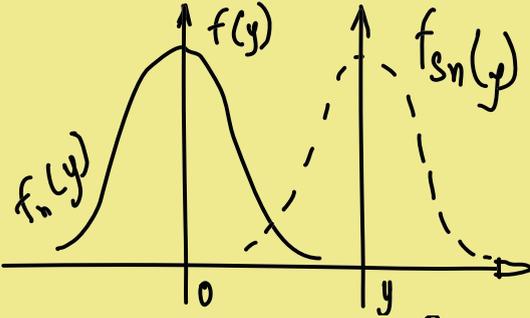
$$S_0(x_0) = \left(\frac{df(x)}{dx}\right)_{x=x_0}$$



$$\begin{aligned} 2x + y - 4 &= x - 2 \\ 2x + y &= x + 2 \\ 2x &= x + 2 - y \\ x &= 2 - y \end{aligned}$$

$$S_y = \frac{21.5}{4} = 0.6$$

$$sdif(x_0) = \left(\frac{d(f)}{dx}\right); \quad w = \frac{NB}{CM}$$

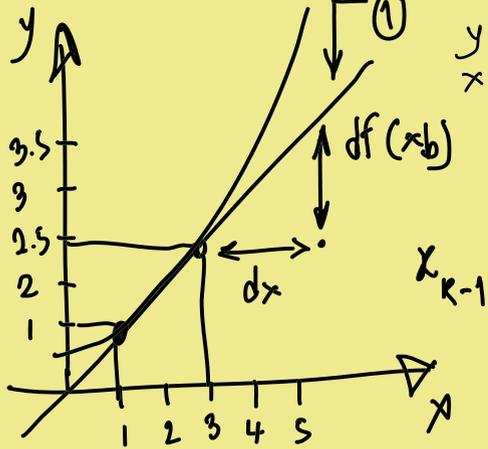


$$\begin{aligned} &= b^x \\ &= \log_b y \end{aligned}$$

$$S_y^y = \frac{\Delta y/y}{\Delta x/x} = \frac{df(x)}{dx} \cdot \frac{x}{y}$$

$$S_y = \frac{21.5}{4} = 0.6$$

$$y = f(x)$$

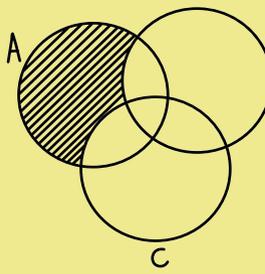


$$S/N = \frac{x}{G}; \frac{X}{G} = 1 \sim 70\%$$

x_{k-1}



$$sdif(x_0) = \left(\frac{d(f)}{dx}\right); \textcircled{1} \text{ tangent line}$$



$$w = \frac{NB}{CM}$$

$$w = \frac{1}{s} = \frac{k}{y}$$

$$w = 1 = \frac{k}{y}$$

algorithm

numbers to numbers to darling faces—
the union of i and μ .
as if a term could rouse its whisper
and whittle a heart to binary.
I know you're not a button, hun,
because pushing won't bring you back to life.
let me evaluate your function:
 $f(x) =$ a soul meant to die at 15, surrounded by no one,
where x is our laughter
and believe me, babe, it's undefined.
a gun isn't a gun until you ferment it
and chug the trigger to a gag.
it's all math. just numbers.
but we ain't hyperbolic.
on Monday, I foiled the pews as they
sectored your body
padded with caramel puddy,
transforming my ziskeit to a system of vectors.
I did my homework at the funeral.
crisp, creased paper curled in your palm,
an algebraic water lily damp with tearing deluge
drew my mind from discordant addendum
back to your factors:
 $(x - \text{drinking})(x + \text{me})$
if you showed me how you worked,
maybe I could've solved you.
if I didn't yell,
maybe you wouldn't've done it.
I'm the variable.

logically, a face can't be ubiquitous.
it can't reflect on every plane,
every intercept of redwood abutting soil,
those barking titans you adored
almost as much as me. until you didn't.
I don't see your eyes in exponents,
a beautiful brain in a bell curve,
what happens when you divide death by 0.
it just don't compute.

 you were my only constant—
 now, you're desargue's worst fears
 baked into an infinite casket
 where our parallel lines converge.
 you're unprovable. I'm left in two dimensions.
show me what it all means, duckie:
 (imaginary martyrdom + empty bottles) over (hopeless hope)
 outputs a tsebrokhn quotient
 that fills notebook after notebook,
 thrown against memory-spattered stucco walls
last month, your coefficients coincided
and I'm left to compose an impossible inverse.
 this month, I burned our problems.
 their cinders ascended like noether, descartes,
 mirzakhani, euler, kovalevskaya, ramanujan,
 every nerdlet that tried to make sense
 of a senseless world.
 it was beautiful
 and I still saw rasters in your face.
 the angles aflame.
next month, I try to measure your circumference
and find there's less and more of you left
than before. you're quantitative.
I eat under your redwoods and
see a forest waltz between faeries and phantoms.
I dance a little. a lot.
in a copse of fading echoes,
you eclipse digits,
and like a waning gibbous,

your face is blurring.

numbers are static.

things aren't meant to last.

faces to faces to darling numbers and back.



Sean Lee
Breathtaking



Victoria Capitano
Rooftop

Flickering Feelings

I would like to trace your veins,
see them connect all over your body from
beginning to end.

I wonder if I touch you,
will your nerves tense up?

Will you shrug off my fingerprints,
or will you let them stain you like
frosted windows on foggy mornings?

Will I watch you lean toward my touch?

Ease into the little flames that dance across your skin.

You will call them goosebumps,

but I will call them tea lights of the surface.

Candles reserved for only the most intimate of nights.

I stare for as long as you will allow me
for I know that when tomorrow comes,
the frost on my fingertips will be gone,
the windows will be clear,
and your skin will be spotless.

Monstrosities

They say that I am a monster. They say that I am a cruel, merciless creature. They are scared of me, terrified, they always have been. I have never understood why. I'm only doing my job.

I watch the scene as it unfolds before me. I watch as the man, stumbling through the door with the smell of liquor fresh on his breath, switches on the light, illuminating the darkened apartment. Outside, dark clouds blanket an even darker sky. There is no moon. There are no stars. Inside, a young girl, eight years old, with brown hair shoved messily into pigtails and a line of freckles sprinkled across her nose crouches behind the couch, just out of sight. The man comes to a stop in the center of the room, swaying slightly. The liquid in the bottle sways with him.

"Maura..." he whispers, wiping a hand across a forehead that's shining with sweat.

The girl behind the couch curls in on herself even further, squeezing her round, blue eyes shut. The man straightens himself, although it takes effort, and tries again. Louder this time.

"Maura come out. I know you're in here just—" he takes a breath. "Come out."

The girl, Maura, takes a breath of her own. I wonder what she's thinking, and hope that she stays put. I know that she won't, I know that I wouldn't be here if she did, but it is always nice to hope. Sure enough, Maura pokes her head up from behind the couch, just barely visible. But it is enough. The man, angry now, steps towards Maura with renewed vigor.

"What are you doing out here? You should be in bed, why—why the hell aren't you in bed?!" He's screaming now, and the girl flinches. He doesn't seem to notice. Or maybe, simply, doesn't care. Silence now. I wait patiently for what I knew was going to happen

the moment I stepped through the doorway.

“Well! Aren’t you going to answer me? God, Maura you always—” another deep breath. “What’s your excuse this time? Huh? What could possibly be your excuse as to why you aren’t in bed right now? Like you should’ve been. Three hours ago.” His voice is like a whip. Her voice is small. Barely audible. “Sorry, Daddy, I—”

“Sorry is not an excuse.”

Maura nods and pads across the floor, taking care to leave as much distance as possible between herself and her father.

“Wait!” The man calls to her back, voice much kinder now. “Aren’t you going to tell your father you love him before you go to sleep?”

She turns, hesitates, for just a moment.

“Well, aren’t you?” He says, stepping closer. “I—” her small voice catches. “I love you.”

“You don’t mean that. I can tell. Say it like you mean it.”

“I love you.” Even as the words leave her mouth, she knows it’s not enough. I know it’s not enough. The man, well, he seems to agree. Strongly. Grabbing her tiny arm with one of his large hands, he drags her close. So close that I can tell Maura smells the liquor, just as her nose scrunches up in disgust. The fear in her eyes is devastating. I shut mine.

“I do! I do!” Maura screeches. Her voice cracks. Wavers.

“Say it like you mean it! Mean it Maura! I am your father for god’s sake!”

“I love you!” Tears begin to fall. He lets go of her arm to slap her. Her tears fall harder. “Stop crying. Crying is for children Maura, are you a child?” He rasps, right hand still

clutching the bottle, left now fastened on her arm once again. Her only response is her gasping sobs, so he repeats himself.

“I said, are you a child Maura?” Yelling again. She still doesn’t reply, can’t, her throat is full of tears.

“You answer when you’re being spoken to, you hear? Why can’t you follow simple directions, my god, just answer me! Just give me a goddamn answer!” His final words are punctuated by a swing of his arm. This time, his right one, the one clutching the bottle. And I turn away, because even though I knew, I know every time, it doesn’t make watching it any easier. I hear the bottle shatter, liquid splash.

Maura's scream, then a soft thump. And then, I hear quiet cursing as the man realizes that tonight, he has taken it too far. I turn back just in time to see him drop what remains of the bottle on the floor as he crouches to touch Maura's hair, still stuffed into pigtails. Those round, blue eyes stare up at him. They are lifeless.

"What have you done Maura, love?" He whispers, delicately caressing her bloodied forehead. Suddenly, he stands. Sways. Steadies himself, then steps over his daughter's dead body and down the hall. I hear him mutter,

"What have I done?"

I watch his retreating form until he turns into another room and I can't see him anymore.

Then I turn my attention to the crumpled body at the foot of the hallway. I stare, stare at the pieces of glass that sparkle in her hair. At the dark blood that's splattered across her face and neck, staining her yellow shirt, seeping across the floor like heavy, black ink.

"Is that me?"

When I turn around, I am faced with pigtails, blue eyes, and a light dusting of freckles. No sign of blood. No trace of glass. Up close, I notice that her yellow shirt is covered in tiny, printed daisies.

"Yes. Yes, it is." I say, because it's the truth.

Maura nods bravely. "Where will you take me?" She asks, as if she already knows who I am. And maybe she does know. But I don't press the matter.

"Somewhere safe." Somewhere safer than here, but I don't say that part out loud.

Another nod. I offer her my hand. And although it must feel cold to her, much too cold, she slips her small palm into mine without hesitation.

"Are you ready?" I ask. I take care to make sure my voice is quiet and soothing. I'm not sure that it helps at all.

"No, I don't think I was. But I'll go with you now anyways."

I look down at her curiously. I feel the sudden urge to apologize. But it wouldn't matter, she and I both know this.

So instead, I say, "Alright Maura. Let's go."

She smiles sadly up at me as we turn away from the blood and the glass, the liquor on the walls and the tiny, broken body on the floor. And I know, in this moment, that impressively, astoundingly,

she has accepted her fate. Perhaps she had already accepted it, long before this night, long before I ever arrived here. Finally, she nods one last time. Pigtails bobbing and eyes shining, she steels herself.

“Let’s go.”

I reach for the doorknob, dull and rusted. As we stand on the brink, looking out into the complete and utter darkness of what lays beyond, I can’t help but think of what lays behind. I think of the yellow shirt, printed with small daisies, that is now stained with quickly drying, darkening blood, and I ask myself: Who was truly the monster? The cruel, merciless one?

Certainly, not me, I answer. No. No, I was just doing my job.

The Moon

A pendant
swinging low
from dark folds
of mid-autumn night,
like the burnished temple
jewelry that bowed down
the spine of a woman shrouded
in her *saas ki* sunset silks.

A bowl
silver steel
filled with milk
and rice sweetened
by ceremony; sindoor
spilling from her fingertips
that press over-boiled devotion,
delusion, to her husband's brow but

A mirror
catching light
could reflect only
the rot behind ritual
that swallowed a wife's
sacrificial self, starved softly
a theft of youth that even her futile
prayers couldn't disguise as love.

cigarette box

from down here,
you look about the same
as you did up there,
which is not what you expected me to say,
but what did you really
expect from me
when you peeled off the warning label
like a bandaid that doesn't stick anymore.
go on and step on me again,
but that relief is temporary
just like the head rush
you get every time you
inhale the sweetness of
the full-bodied me.
and the damp ground may
put out my fire,
but i know you;
you'll just light another.
you'll take another piece of me
hoping for some sort of temporary pleasure,
but when the ashes fall
and the base dwindles, you'll
feel the ache in your chest
that i warned you about.
i warned you.
i warned you
for a split second,
but that fire is gone,
and the smell left on your jacket

is not the same.
the chemicals in your veins
remain,
and they're no good for you,
but i'm pretty sure you knew.
i cringe everytime the rain drops hit
my fragile skin,
and at least
you can't burn me
when it rains,
but he can,
and i warned you he could,
but you didn't listen.
so take one;
i'm just like you
anyway.
we'll always be
in the back pocket of his jeans.

how to play god: a step-by-step guide

i. *the nagpur orange*

pluck the mottled sun
drooping low from overgrown orchards
and shed his rind,
a waxed riddle of oedipal green
weaved with cadmium hubris.
shed until pulp rays dribble down,
making the blistered burn.
let sour verbiage lick writhing flesh,
and while she hemorrhages in the street,
claim to her father the wounds are clean.

ii. *opium song*

and so it begins!
fields of flaming poppies,
with pupils shriveled like my brethren's bodies,
often finds themselves susceptible to nervous failure;
jar the milk tears spilling forth
and cure them dry.
smoke for blackened lung valleys
and nosebleed rivers,
both of which prelude
the cacophony of pale blues rolling back in their heads.

iii. *death by drainage*

to bear witness to lakeside kingfishers
is a travesty in itself.
laws of nature dictated by the self-serving state
forbid their guttural songs

from melding with the mellow burbles of oars
gliding atop the waters.
but the remedy to such an ailment is undemanding:
one must swallow the lake whole,
taking with them every tender lotus pad and trout.
once the womb is barren,
offering no fruits of labor but gum wrapper miscarriages,
witness the kingfishers' songs become strains.

Rush Hour

“Stocks were slaughtered all week, and more bloodshed is expected to come.” – New York Post, 9/10/2001

As rush hour consumes borough blacktops,
her high-rise window captures a sight:
cars singing at every corner and stop signs
beaming red from every headlight.

She walks past that familiar foul scent of taxis
that she rode with her brothers to Yankees
games. Now she's left alone in this city's axes,
a city very soon to erupt in flames.

She notices the gum stuck on each sidewalk
like the forearm tattoo she wishes to remove.
The quick-tapping footsteps are the city's sweet-talk,
this city with nothing—soon everything—to prove.

Each awning's droplets confirm a quick Manhattan cry
as she strolls through the park, soon flower's deathbed.
Past the smoking stars, she makes out the dark blue sky.
Night still can't stop this traffic ahead.

No street in her world seems on high alert;
she sees a blend of world bazaars.
Like an endless mountain range, skyline inserts
twin buildings with no scars.

She will never expect to know these people
who are stapled to a routine.
So until the next day's takeoff,
rush hour is their mind's only scene.

Maybe In Nebraska

When people ask me about my childhood, I always lie. They want it—they listen with slack-jawed awe at my stories of a boxy white house with a picket fence and a pool, of our wraparound porch and my unruly younger siblings, of our golden retriever Dolly (yes, I give my lies names), and mornings drenched in maple syrup, pancakes cooked by dear old Dad. 12 Birch Way, I tell them (because when you name it, it's believable). A real address in Maryland—I found it on google maps.

I even know how to answer questions that they ask, always polite, never prodding. Empty, nothing-questions like Why'd you name her Dolly? and What was your mom like? I imagine the questions they'd ask if I told them the truth. Their eyebrows would knit together, eyes searching my face for some evidence of what I'm telling them. Did he hurt you? Everyone who I've told has asked that. Everyone.

This is the truth: I grew up in a truck, in a string of gas stations and mildewy motel rooms, in Nevada dust and in my father's arms, under dim light bulbs and bathed in the kiss of the sun rising over the endless horizon. It's all hazy. That's what they don't understand when they ask their questions, pricking and sharp. I don't remember the clinical details they want—just the shapes and colors, the aching feelings I had in my chest. The pattern of a plasticky bedspread; the mold spot on the spackled ceiling.

My father and I had nothing but each other, untethered to the world that rolled past the foggy truck windows. Cowboys, he'd told me. We were like cowboys. On a television once, maybe in Nebraska, I'd watched a western film. I was glued to the screen. The men dressed in leather and wrapped in steel, their squinting blue eyes and hearts of gold. The way the spurs of their boots clicked as they

walked, the sound their guns made when being snapped out of their holsters. The faraway sadness in their voices, as if they knew that they lived in a little box, not really in the wild west. I wanted to be a cowboy, and my father said we were.

I believed him.

How do I say this to them when they ask? When they expect pearly white smiles and suntanned trips to the beach, fourth of July barbecues in the backyard and lemonade in a glass full of ice, how can I tell them the truth?

The sky was always purple before the sun rose, and I sat outside every morning, chin resting on my knobby knees, watching the dawn explode into color. For a moment, as I sat beside a buzzing fluorescent motel sign, I could swear I was the only person in the world who saw the sky like this—a yearning, dusty lilac. I've never again seen a sky like that, not once, and sometimes I miss it so much my heart bleeds.

How could they ever understand?

(be)coming

The distance between before and after is the length of the kitchen table. It is the motionless air between my mouth and my mother's ears, the void between who I am and who she knows, all under the gentle golden glow of the lingering kitchen light. The space between truth and lie is the exact volume of my lungs. It is the molecules of oxygen trembling to voice an unutterable love. It is the fatal power of a few forbidden words suffocating under the safety of silence.

At the kitchen table sit at once the girl I was and the girl I am. The girl I will be begs silently for my mother's permission to be, to exist, to breathe. My mother begs for the truth as she sits across from me. She asks politely before extracting it from me with her own words. We are worlds apart, my mother and I, separated by an ocean in which truth is lie, an ocean of shameful secrets deep enough to drown me.

He sits to the right of me. He sits to the left. He sits beside me, behind me, across from me, next to my mother. He is the oxygen in my lungs, he is the silent shame, he is the truth turned lie with time. The half life of a lie is forever when young love is a lie, so he sits in the corner of my mind, begging me to remember what I've long forgotten. He is in my hands, he is in my hair, he is in my body. My body remembers what I have long forgotten. He is everywhere and nowhere at once, whispering in my ear to remember him, whispering to remember the girl he knew, whispering that I am wrong.

She sits there too, in the tenebrous air I dare not disturb. She is faceless, ageless, angelic. She holds the girl I will be in a way that the girl I was had never known. I call her wife, lover, mother of my children. She holds my hands, she braids my hair, yet my body does not know her. I do not know her. She begs me to know her. She whispers in my ear to pry truth from lie with the strength of my words. She

begs me to speak the possibility of her, the possibility of her and I, into existence.

My mother cannot see her. She does not see the arms of the woman I will love wrapped around me as I stare across the kitchen table. My mother has not given the woman I will love permission to exist, so she exists with the boy I loved in my mind as the shameful truth to compliment his shameful lie.

“So, are you going to tell me?” My mother is the first to speak at this funeral I call a birth. They are all watching—the boy I loved, the woman I will love, the girl I was, the girl I will be—they are all listening for the liberation or death sentence to come from the words that do not come from my open mouth. I inhale. The boy I loved occupies my body, my thoughts, the air I breathe. He is everywhere and nowhere. He is in my lungs, grabbing my words by their tails, dragging them back down my throat. He dismembers the truth, swallowing the words I fail to speak, and so the lie of falsified young love between boy and girl grows. The words do not come.

He whispers in my ear how he loved me, and he begs me to remember how I loved him. I pry his hands from my body, I take his hands in mine, and I hold him, as if to say that he never knew my love in the ways she will know my love. My hands cannot apologize for not knowing how I was not supposed to love him, for not knowing how I could never love him. My words cannot apologize for misconstruing love as lust for his attention, but my hands try.

“What is it?” My mother is growing impatient. She is hungry for the words that the boy swallowed. “You can’t just expect me to know. Come on, you have to tell me.” I offer her tears instead of words as my silence feeds the ocean of lies between us that I struggle to stay afloat in.

I inhale, exhale, and force myself to laugh out of fear. My pained laughter shatters the sacred silence like the shrill of breaking glass.

“Just tell me.” I inhale and exhale again. “I’m your mom. I should know.” I inhale lie to exhale truth.

My words deliver the verdict from my mouth to my mother’s ears. Slowly, then all at once, the distance between who I am and who she knows shrinks. The space between truth and lie dwindles, ceasing to exist altogether. The girl she knew drowns in the ocean of lies, she dies in the boy’s arms, leaving the girl I am to speak.

I inhale truth. I exhale truth. I begin to become the girl I will be. “You know how I said I am going to marry a woman? That wasn’t a joke.”

Her face is motionless, as if the words from my mouth were drowned in the sea of lies before reaching her ears. So I use large words like *heteronormative* and *compulsory heterosexuality* and *woman* and *wife* and *love*. And she uses small words like *So?* and *Did you think I would care?* and *happiness*. She uses words like *tolerance* that do not mean acceptance, but I allow her to see the arms of the woman I will love around me, and I believe that as she watches the fingers of this woman materialize, she reconciles a reality in which she has two daughters and grandchildren with two mothers. Her contemplation speaks what her words cannot. Perhaps this is all I could ask for.



WINTER BAIGENT

untitled



KEEGAN STEWART
Coming of Age

A Brief History of Chinese New Year Rituals

Over a filmy tablecloth pooling with takeout grease, my mother confesses her nostalgia. January of '86, Guangzhou stirred like a doe burrowed in a womb, & from every loose mouth on the street you could pluck gung hay fat choy. Year of the 虎 meant my mother must be protected not unlike a concubine in a temple. The Beast, she was told, would level landscapes & little girls with its jaws. Holding her breath in dark rooms, she redefined herself as red—underwear, socks, & hair bands—to scare it off. When the sun gauzily dipped over the skyline, she watched boys try on manhood for size, crushing corner-store firecrackers between their fingers & rolling them like cigars. Sparks scattering across scuffed skin, they'd blink & laugh—ha, ha!—out tears. Street vendors canvassed honey into edible sculptures, & my mother swore it was liquid gold congealing her teeth. In apartment 451 she grew intimate with the furniture, scrubbing them like a martyr's pristine body. The morning of, she kneeled in front of her parents & noticed a single graying hair, another line around the cheek. Her hands accepted what her heart could not: 紅包, a week's worth of wages. Outside, dizzying dragons danced against gravity & a dim sum feast. Was it possible to flatten a memory's edges, its creases & corners, if not to relive it, but at least to preserve it? The telephone groaned off its hook: another cousin soliciting money. The last day, my mother lit the last stick of incense in secret, smoke softening her shoulders & permeating her innocence. When I lean in now I can almost smell it, the ghost of a city flickering within her like 燈籠.

Eyelashes

—after Tiana Clark’s “A Louder Thing”

1.

growing on the riverbank of my eyes:
several wispy reeds, extending

until they tape off in blinking fervor.
these reeds, they grew on my ancestors’

bodies, on my grandfather’s, on my mother’s, and now mine.
these reeds, they bend to my will, they scream with a terror—

or so i imagine. before the sun toes the horizon’s tightrope,
i take metal to them, squeezing out life until they surrender.

thumb pulsing for ten seconds—
hold. release. hold. release.

my body demands up up up. some days they don’t listen,
wilting weeds parched of sustenance, but God, i don’t care;

i hold until my fingers match the small storm swelling in my cor-
neas.
mistake this for satisfaction. mistake this for self-love.

i wash and dry the metal. rinse and repeat.

2.

two white men made the eyelash curler. when i clean mine (which
is to say, often), i see dioramas—generations of Asian-American
women,

eyes tight as a wire, strung with birds of hope,
pressing the metal flush against their crease until it kills them.

3.

once, the metal loved me back too much and the reeds
became dandelions, one by one, drifting on top of my pinched feet.

my mother: nightgown dancing askew on her skeleton,
sweeping the dandelions away.

i started a collection. counted every single one, named them after
my fears, hushed their cries, imagined them up up up and finally
beautiful,

reaching past my brow and chafing uncharted stars.
my face laminated—Fresh Faces for Summer!—

on a white woman's coffee table.

4.

day's end. the reeds have grown weary, clinging like old lovers.
fingers ache for the metal—the sensual song of hold. release.

tomorrow. tomorrow. my ancestors tap against the window.
they're saying, girl, look what you've done. look at you,

so complacent to this narrative. i've heard it all before.
i reminisce with the crickets. nine more hours until i'm worthy
again.

Tragedy

May only exist with a set of eyes to guarantee.
For no occurrence of evil has been ratified
By a watchman who could not see.
All of this to say
Trust not a blind man's kiss
For lips are only worth what they offer.
When their riddles play witness
Just as the time will be told only
By the fool who pursues its end
Or as a battle may only commence
When there's a poet to condemn.

So when you encounter the effect
Of my iconoclastic venture to find
Upon the steps of mortality
If and when permanency dies
There will be ink falling from the excuses born
In the break of manic fleet
Decorating the blanks in notes and postcards
Where my pen could not reach.
A convoluted collection of narratives
Only bearing commonality through plea
For validity within one's testimony
Attached now to a strain that you see.

You may consider it dramatic
A flashy exhibit of a universal affliction.
But would you believe that the sky had fallen
If a sorrowed breeze were its only valediction?

And for a courthouse jury
Would it be worth it to behold
A lone story rushing from your lips
As attestation to a world turning cold?
Or would your speech only be sustainable
When each word became host
To a fog born from the flame of your tongue
In the image of a ghost?

Still call it a desperate display if you must.
It is a visual regardless of state.
Incontestable to the fool speaking of
If only and too late
But the absence of guilt offers no disruption.
The scene remains a poetic mess
Solely unsettling at the surface
Yet in its core
An immortal distress.



Outstanding Fiction Prize

WINNER

Scenes From A Reality

Love in Jalesar sells for five rupees in 1982 money, but only costs about three: four if you are new or visiting; two if you are local and know better; one and 50 paises if you know the right people, which Urvi does. One rupee and change for a few hot samosas brought fresh from the market to the complacent uncle at the booth on Saturdays. Oil spotting the brown paper bag and a shy smile and he waves her through with the yellowing grin that a man whose wife has given him two sons to secure his name can afford to bestow upon a quiet sweet girl. With every bite of flaky pastry the image gets stuck between his teeth: a petal-soft daughter for him to smile beatifically at while complimenting on her first dal or for him to set on his lap and tell stories to or for him to dab his eyes nobly over on her wedding day.

Inside the room there is no immediate change, not in darkness nor silence nor coolness, for this house of pleasure need not provide physical comforts to its customers. The residual sunlight, the shifting and shuffling, the fruitless roar of the air conditioner; everything falls away with the appearance of whichever kohl-eyed girl is slated for this particular reverie. Today, she wears a simple kurti and a chaste smile. Today, the boy wears the same. They are lovers, and the only people in this room—in the world—who don't yet know that their souls plead for each others' the way a child bleeding out on a battlefield pleads for nothing more from life than a swallow of water. Urvi feels the weight of their tremulous desire like a pleasurable ache below her ribcage. Their hands brush, and she shivers. The boy, sincerity weighing his tongue down with rocks and sinking his wit to the bottom of the sea, fumbles in search of poetry and ends up blurting out: Now that I've seen the moon with you I don't know how I'll look at it alone again. As is customary there are elders to be

dealt with, misunderstandings to be cried over and stars to be uncrossed, but they are dancing in the arms of the summer night and the only stars that matter are the ones they see reflected in each others' eyes. They are dancing, and they are young, and for a moment every person in the audience is completely—irrevocably—incurably—in love.

The credits roll.

Outside, time is just distinguishable against the unmoving dusk. With a nod, Urvi turns and begins walking west towards her fate. It is impossible to get there in less than fifteen minutes while taking care not to get mud on her salwar, but she knows she will not be late. Time waits for no man, perhaps, but no matter how men rail time is not unjust. Time knows what it owes and will stand still outside a cinema hall for a girl, two weeks seventeen, setting off to meet an eleventh future mother-in-law. When she gets home, she will change her clothes, wash her hands and her face, make twice the usual amount of chai, and lay out biscuits on her pardadi's gleaming peacock feather serving tray. She will fold hands in greeting to the man at the door and bow to touch her fingertips to his parents' feet, and before a single cup is empty she will not need to look at the light in her mother's eyes to know: he is the last one.

She will finish her schooling and take her exams before following her husband to the States; she will specialize in pediatric GI. That night and the rest of her life, if someone speaks to her of the moon it will be a measure of her blood cycles or the roundness of her chapatis.

She will make a home of this small Texas town, and never really learn to tame a car. She will offer the apparently exotic details of her old life to new friends and pity them for the American misery of having thought fantasy meant dragons and of being raised on rom-coms classified as realistic fiction. One night she will lie awake counting weeks, and when she gets to seven she will wish for the first time in her life that she had listened to her father and become an OB-GYN. Six sleepless hours later she will be driving to work in a snow globe and in the corner of her eye she will see a car in the opposite lane skidding into her path with the inevitability of a parabolic equation in a textbook.

She will grip the steering wheel. She will not swerve.

All of life, perhaps, and everything in between, once she returns home. But for now, a girl walks unhurriedly on a winding dirt path. The dying embers of the sun on her face, the warmth of the earth pressing into her feet. Five rupees worth of dreams turning over in her mind. Somewhere in a reverie or a reality more real than the man in the auto currently moving toward her home, two lovers are dancing to the infinity of the universe and Urvi is in love. Time follows her footsteps at a distance.

Ghosts

That halloween I said goodbye to my grandmother not knowing
that I'd written it down like an inevitability,
sharpie on a drywall.
It'll pass. As though loss was a flock of geese which
flew by, fleetingly—
before we could no longer chase it with just
the simple movement of our eyes.
The syllables of her name became a bad omen. As if we bit down on
a christmas cookie and tasted metal. thinking, if only it was
soft and sweet, like in our memories.
I wonder, in the stories we told each other,
which ones were about ghosts and which ones were about us.
Buried in our fireplace,
I can hear sister playing the blues, of course,
12 bars on the piano. It didn't take much to know that we were
both counting memories, shuffling a deck
of cards
again and again, waiting
for a new one to fall out, if not as an afterthought then as some-
thing to frame up on the wall.
That december we packed up our pain and moved to the
east side of X. unbeknownst to us, mother was
jamming her last puzzle piece into
the cornerstones of her heart, thinking,
this time, this time, the grief will disappear—smoke in the air.
they say don't look back but how can we not,
after leaving behind the horizon? When dawn comes
and,
without even realising,

night crashes into us like a tidal wave
when our backs face the sea.
Truth is, every time i woke up i'd wish to see grandma in that
dust-filled chair watching tv, or knitting another sweater,
or smoothing the fur of our bulldog, but all i would
find was a ghost
of her spirit before i'd start to whimper.
That's the thing about it all. No matter how many times
you call to say
i love you or kiss them goodnight, it still runs into
us the same—
headfirst.



ADINA GERWIN
Out of the Darkness



JUNA HUME CLARK
The Gatherer

I(You)

7:26 am

From the bathroom mirror

I gaze at you in the morning

 frown at your bleary eyes, shudder

 at the tangle of your hair

as you mumble complaints

about the dread of

another school day

while I chatter on about

 deadlines

 test scores

 and the frivolity of

 joy, food, sleep

when due dates crawled around the corner

until you pick apart your still full breakfast plate

and down the third cup of coffee

pick up yet another mask

that slashes a trail of blue

across your face

which graces smiles so occasionally

that to my judgement

 a sudden upturn of your lips

 frightens more

 than comforts.

10:37 am

From the classroom's glass doors

I watch you every so often

when you look

away from the incoherent murmurs of class discussions
and get lost in
the sunshine of the outdoors
mocking you outside the windows

 I critique your slightly hunched figure
 and your hands dragging your

incoherent scribbles
and incoherent thoughts
off notebook pages
and your legs press close together
set firm onto the ground
ready to bolt out of the doors

 I turn your head upwards
 pull down your arms
 rearrange the features on your face

until you appear
calm, collected, apathetic to
the screams of the clocks
when their arms swing forward
and rouse students
like moths to flames
to fold their wings
and dive
into the grand, terrible unknown
that is ever-present
outside the classroom walls.

1:47 pm

From the metal railings

I watch you with sunken eyes
and the taste of a hurried lunch
left in my mouth
as you sit in frigid silence
in the blistering afternoon heat
and hands flutter like newborn birds
restless
across the table
 and I sing sleep into your ears

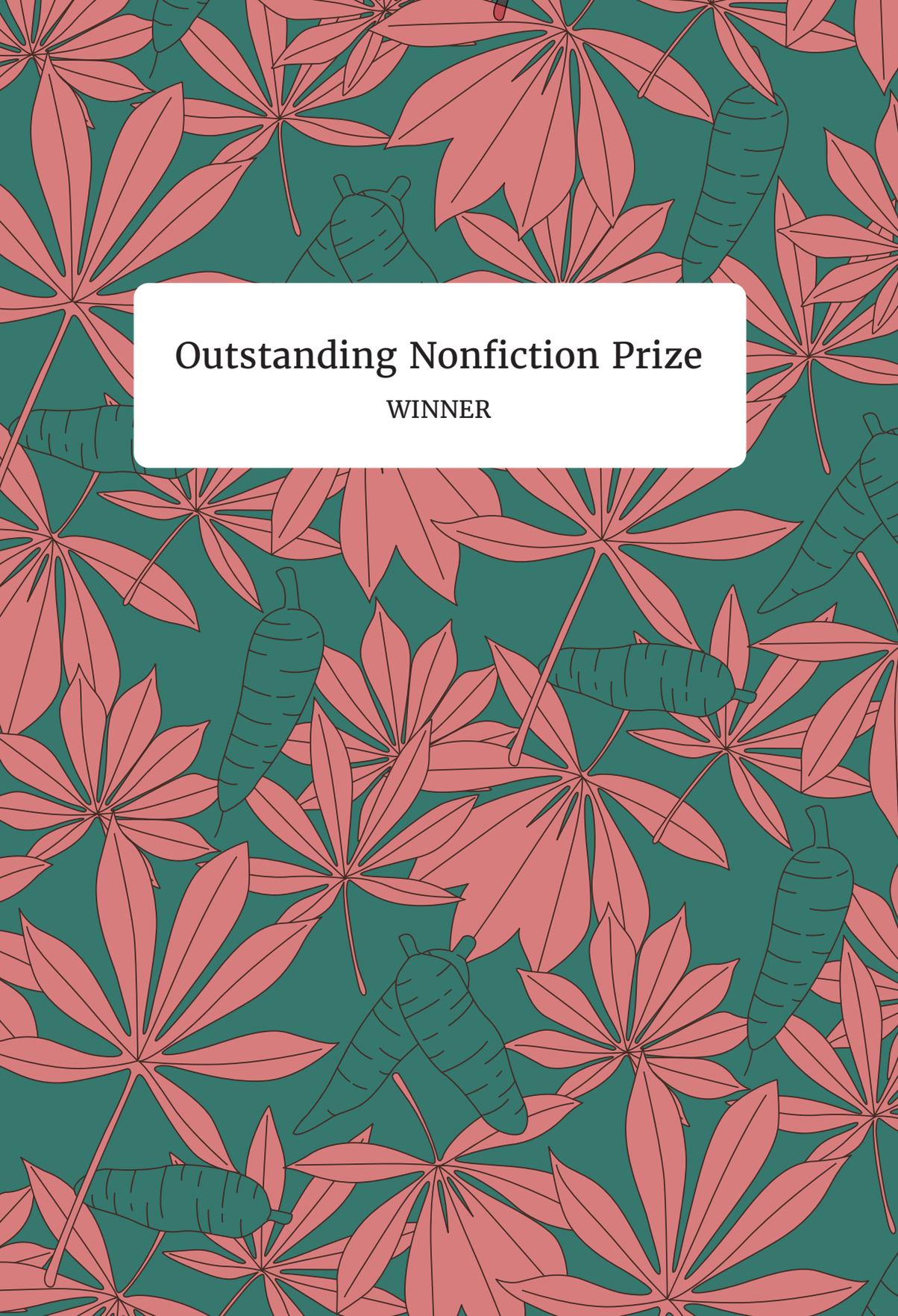
like a mother to her newborn
yet once you shut your eyes
I rip you out of the nest
and plunge you into nightmares

about your *supply* of
integral information for the upcoming test
which can never satisfy my *demand*
for total infallibility
c'est-a-dit – that is to say
your understanding is *limited*
asymptotic
to the end goal of knowledge
from which you are a breath away
yet could never reach

I know, you know
the frightened hum
of anxiety that clings
onto your ears
blunt teeth digging into the soft wall
of false security
that leans against your lips
hands that cannot
remain still
and never finds something
worthwhile to stay still for.

7:26 pm
From the bathroom mirror, once more
I watch you with dark rings
underneath bloodshot eyes
I stare at you
from the untouched porcelain bowls
on the dinner table
the shine
of a near-dead phone
I gaze at you from head to toe
from words to thoughts
skin to bones

under the pale bathroom lights
you(I) reach out
to gingerly, hesitantly b
rush your(my) palm
over my(your) cheeks
and plead for
rest, kindness,
and love for
imperfection
and I
too
reach back
to you.

The background of the entire image is a repeating pattern of stylized, pink-outlined maple leaves and carrots on a teal background. The maple leaves are scattered throughout, and several carrots are interspersed among them. The carrots are also pink-outlined and have a textured, ribbed appearance. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

Outstanding Nonfiction Prize

WINNER

Iridescence for the Soul

I.

I didn't know this at the time, but that afternoon was the beginning of our planting.

My class had just finished our Red Scarf ceremony, and I found myself a little woozy. As a first grader, I stood under a blazing sun for hours, reciting rehearsed chants until my throat parched and my temples tinged with sweat. As ceremonies go, this one didn't deviate much from the others, laden with repeated Red traditions and symbolism that dulled once the novelty wore off. I looked down, observing how the collar of my white and blue uniform clashed conspicuously with the scarlet cloth laid over my shoulders and across my heart, bonding me to the Five-Starred Flag and to China itself. I shall henceforth not only be physically identical with our country but also share its past hardships, present endeavors, and future aspirations.

At least that was what Teacher Liang hoped we'd understand. Her eyes were narrow and focused, reverential toward the ceremony. She quickly punished any giggling or distraction. I was only six, but she drilled her eyes through me and the other kids, commanding our every move as if we were pieces of machinery. A part of me knew, by rote, that I was supposed to march forward and follow whatever Teacher Liang said, but I couldn't help but steal glances at a purple flower we passed, aching to touch its velvety petals. When Teacher Liang passed by my roll, my spine, on survival reflex, immediately straightened. This seemed to satisfy her, and I was spared to continue forward in an upright posture, powered by awkward tension.

Eventually, Teacher Liang dismissed students one by one. When she called my name, I stepped out of the formation and took neat steps until I was out of eyesight. Only then did I allow my spine to

relax. I'd been a wild horse penned-up, and now I was free to roam for a moment.

I was about to run toward the flower when I saw Gwendolyn digging by the Bamboo Grove. She was easy to miss—a child kneeling in the dirt, her bent torso hidden behind the tall grass, prodding the soil with her hands. The supposedly sacred Red Scarf hung sloppily around her neck; she used it as a sweat handkerchief. The Bamboo Grove wasn't really a grove at all—it was a messy potpourri of plants, which included several bamboo trees tall enough to cast an emerald shade. Gwendolyn situated herself in an area vulnerable to the sun, and the way she dug with her bare hands was peculiarly captivating—how she paid no regard to the bees circling her head, the mud under her nails, or the dirty fingerprints on her scarf.

I stepped into the shade. “What are you doing?” I asked.

Gwendolyn didn't respond. She pulled out a bag of Rainbow Ropes and ripped open the package. She took out the candy, cradling it in her palm as if it was a rolled-up baby snake, before setting it at the bottom of the hole she had dug.

“Saving that for lunch?” We didn't always prioritize hygiene. I reached for the candy, but Gwendolyn pushed my hand away.

“Nope. I'm planting.” She looked at me for the first time, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

“Like, what?”

“A tree.”

“You can't.” I didn't need a degree in botany to know that growing trees from Rainbow Ropes was absurd.

“Yes, I can!” She turned towards me, her short ponytail flinging against her head in one quick flair. “I'm planting a special tree,” she told me. “You don't understand.”

Soon, she was immersed in her own world again. I tilted my head, trying to grasp any special qualities about the scene before me, but all I saw were sweat, soil, and a piece of dirty candy. I watched Gwendolyn cup soil in her palms and shower it over the candy, letting the dirt trickle through her fingers like raindrops until all traces of rainbow were tucked beneath the freshly churned soil. She was right: I couldn't comprehend the planting at all, but I was captivated by her actions—by her. I felt something itch inside me, something like the first drop of melted snow rolling down from the high

branches and crackling against leaves, echoing crisply throughout the forest.

Gwendolyn's unfathomable excitement convinced me that she possessed a different pair of eyes, one that allowed her to see a world that others couldn't. I wondered what life would be like if I saw the same world she saw, one discovered through rose-colored prisms and adorned with layers of iridescent glow. Wouldn't that be much more interesting than the monochromatic, everlasting red?

Before I could allow myself to ponder these questions, the shrill of Teacher Liang's whistle cut through the tranquil air. Startled and flustered, I stepped out of the emerald shade of bamboo and ran back to class. I made sure not to let my thoughts become too much of a distraction during the lecture on two-digit subtraction.

II.

I had met Gwendolyn for the first time at the new student orientation, two months before the planting. It was late August, a time still warm in Shenzhen. Teacher Liang greeted us from her lectern at the front of the classroom, elevated by one step. Formality hung in the air like incense in a temple. We sat up straight, our chins up, attentive. Teacher Liang smiled with satisfaction, concluding that, "Maturity indeed comes with growth." I wouldn't say it was natural growth that prompted maturity; weeks before school, my parents had instructed me to transform into a model student. According to them, elementary school signaled the beginning of my life-long competition with my peers, and the first victory was winning good impressions from teachers. They drilled orders into my brain, restricting my every move like a steel scaffold until I couldn't tell what their intentions were and what were my own.

The 48 students in my class lined up in a single file. I was Number 12. Teacher Liang's projector ran out of power, and this hiccup allowed us to drop the professional persona and engage in small talk. Just as I resigned myself to an empty table, Number 11 turned around and stared at me. She was slightly shorter, with tanned skin and wide-open eyes. She had talked to Numbers 10 and 9 before. My heart sped up, mind racing to evaluate my appearance as my hands

straightened the edges of my shirt.

“Hi?” I tried. She kept staring, but her gaze was nothing judgmental. The moment was just verging into awkwardness when she finally replied.

“You’re beautiful.”

Before I could say anything, she turned back and resumed her conversation. I was shocked, but the feeling was different from receiving an unexpected gift or being jump scared. It was more personal, as if something had just bloomed right beside my sternum, sending a wave of warmth throughout my body. I had never thought of myself as beautiful. My grandmother used “beautiful” to describe some of my friends or the girl next door, but never me. Could I be cute? Maybe. Pretty? Sure, when I wasn’t all sweaty from climbing trees. But beautiful? That adjective was too elegant for me to wear, and for the most part that was fine. I’d accepted that beauty wasn’t for me and didn’t yearn for it, but hearing the word roll off her tongue so effortlessly flabbergasted me. I felt like a kid who had stumbled upon the jewelry mine buried deep inside her mother’s closet, a kid who had always secretly adored the treasures it held.

Number 11 hadn’t introduced herself, disregarding the pleasant-ries of social collisions so commonplace in our world. It was like she stood in the middle of a rapid current that rushed me towards maturity, her hand outreached to offer the assurance and sincerity I craved but never received from anyone. It was strangely comforting, but that would be one of the less-strange things I’d find out about Gwendolyn Lin. In an afternoon of our eighth week of school I watched her plant in the Bamboo Grove, and henceforth we formed something like a friendship.

III.

Gwen’s Chinese name meant “crane” and “jade”—a demure, elegant name for a girl, but most people who knew her would say that she didn’t live up to it.

By the time we began third grade, she had established herself as the notorious troublemaker. She lacked whatever grace girls our age was supposed to possess. Her grades ranked among the lowest

in class, but she was more preoccupied with trading card collections with boys and fighting on ropes courses during PE, her choppy ponytail seldom tidy and her knees always decorated with scrapes.

Of course, this didn't sit well with the teachers. During classes, Gwen frequently visited the back of the classroom—or front, if the teachers decided to make the punishment extra humiliating. They confiscated her contraband and made her write apology reflections. She'd write them, declaring that she was truly sorry, before returning with a new tube of bubble gel that would stick to the floor for days.

By that time, I had become much closer with Gwen. Most of the students developed a disdain toward her, but I didn't mirror their attitudes, despite the warnings from my parents. I continued to perform diligently in class, but I relished the punchy satisfaction whenever I overheard the teachers rant about Gwen, their anger mixed with resignation.

When Gwen didn't respond to reprimands with obedience and self-guilt, the teachers took a different approach. They isolated her, moving her desk away from others, a lone island amongst an archipelago of impressionable minds. During Literature Class one day, Teacher Liang criticized a group of students who hadn't performed well on the exam. Admonishments like these were habitual; only this time, Teacher Liang utilized a proverb.

“One who nears vermilion is stained red, and one who nears ink, dark.” Her declaration was sleek but hard as steel. “You take the shade of your company.”

The classroom went silent, each of us petrified, still and upright. Teacher Liang didn't say her name, but her unspoken scrutiny for Gwen rang loud and clear. She paced around the lectern, heels clicking against the floor, eyes scanning the rows of students before her, hungry to call out a name and send us drifting backwards all the way to Gwen. I braved a glance at Gwen and noticed a drowning look in her eyes. Eventually, Teacher Liang decided that the desired effect had been achieved. “Turn to page 72.”

Something about the way she treated Gwen disturbed me. It started off small, like a grain of sand stuck in my shoes, but the feeling grew and grew. I had sympathy for Gwen, but I felt something more. That day, distracted by this unfamiliar emotion, I looked out

the window and saw the school gardeners.

Every month, they would surround the bushes that grew around campus and shape them into neat, uniform shapes. They carried pairs of large garden scissors, trimming any unwanted parts. When a branch was too stubborn to submit, they pinched the wood with their blades, waited for a few seconds as if anticipating any ploy of resistance, before twisting in one crisp motion. The branch split open with one painful crack, and I, by reflex, jerked back and banged my leg against the table. The commotion drew hissing disapproval from Teacher Liang. I waited for her to turn her gaze before I continued watching the gardeners move from bush to bush, and I grew increasingly restless.

I was being trimmed and shaped into whatever neat garden-work my teachers deemed appropriate.

I sneaked another look at Gwen, her head buried behind tall, crooked stacks of textbooks. But when she looked up and met my gaze, she waved through wiggling her eyebrows, a bold, mischievous look still defiantly present in her eyes, like always.

This time, I waved back.

IV.

The last ceremony before the end of third grade was the Field Day marches. To our disappointment, P.E. classes, usually our long-awaited catharsis after a day in classrooms, would be sacrificed for practicing.

Marching was an arduous task. Every student in every column must line up precisely with the people in front of and around them. The beauty lay in the uniformity, we were told.

Teacher Wang was in charge of instructing us. He resembled a huge square, his buff shoulders and muscled arms making him seem as wide as he was tall. At the front, Teacher Wang gave a passionate speech about the importance of a good march. Gwen, who stood in front of me, turned around and made a face.

“Question for you,” she whispered. “Do you like Green Grandpa, Purple Grandpa, Blue Grandpa, Brown Grandpa, Teal Grandpa, or Pink Grandpa?”

“What does that even mean?” I kept my gaze forward.

“Just choose one.” She grinned.

“My grandpa has normal pigmentation, thank you very much.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, just pick one!”

“I guess...green?”

“What about Pink Grandpa?”

“I don’t like pink.”

“Too bad! You just missed your chance to earn 100 yuan.” She tugged out a crumpled one-yuan bill from her pocket. On the green material was the solemn bust of Chairman Mao. The shading on the bill made him look like he was radiating emerald light. The 100-yuan bill was bright pink. This sudden idea of Chairman Mao—the Chairman Mao—as Pink Grandpa struck me as ridiculous. I chuckled hard.

In an instant, Teacher Wang was before us, his eagle eyes glaring, and snatched the bill out of Gwen’s hands.

“Numbers 11 and 12, step out. Three laps around the track.”

December was the worst time to run laps. The wind mercilessly blew into our faces, scraping against our cheeks like blades. All the other classes were tucked warmly inside; the only presence that accompanied us was our own breaths freezing in the air.

“He stops paying attention after the first lap.” Gwen had to shout to be heard. “By then we can just hang out wherever.”

I struggled to keep my eyes open. The wind was whipping me in the face. “You shouldn’t make jokes like that,” I told her.

“What’d you say?”

“You shouldn’t make jokes like that!” I tried again, this time yelling.

She went quiet for a moment. “Why?”

“It’s disrespectful.”

“Says who?”

“Don’t we need to respect Chairman Mao?”

“Did I lie, though? After all, he is a grandpa, just like any old man. Like Teacher Wang when he’s old, or the guys in our class,” she snickered. “And, he’s also green, definitely like Teacher Wang.”

Two years ago, Gwen’s irreverent tone would have troubled me. Now, I laughed along, discarding the storied, overwrought heroism we had been taught all our lives.

V.

We neared the end of the first lap. “I guess you’re right,” I told Gwen as we passed the finish line. She smiled and grabbed my arm. We began to sprint away from the track.

“We are in so much trouble if he finds out,” I reminded her, though more out of habit than intention.

“Who cares?” She accelerated. By the time we barged into the familiar emerald shade cast by the bamboo, we were panting and out of breath. Throughout these years, the Bamboo Grove remained the only spot left untouched by gardeners.

I still worried that Teacher Wang might come after us in his full wrath, but for the most part, I felt a lightness wash over me. I could faintly taste blood at the back of my throat, but I had never felt more relieved, relishing our subversive acts.

“Do you remember our plant?” It had been two years. At some point, she seemed to have forgotten all about it, but she nodded.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” she told me as we walked to the spot where she first planted the Rainbow Rope.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, growing Rainbow Ropes is a dumb idea now that I think about it. It’s probably eaten by centipedes. I don’t know why I thought—”

“What are you talking about?” The loudness of my voice surprised me. It came out as a burst: I was suddenly overtaken by a gust of energy.

“Can’t you see how tall our plant has grown?” The boldness surged through me like electricity. “You were right! It is special, and it has turned out to be beautiful!” I fervently waved my arms at the space in front of us and looked at Gwen expectantly. When she remained still, the fiery strength in me suddenly was doused as my heart dropped. My confidence now tasted rash and bitter. I felt exposed and vulnerable.

But her silence was brief. She understood me and, within seconds, she broke into a wide grin.

“I see!” She yelled, imitating me. She jumped and swung her arms around as if she was swimming. “It’s the most beautiful plant! And it’s got crystal leaves!”

“And sparkly soil!”

“And candy on its branches! Can’t you see?”

We took turns naming the magnificent characteristics of our plant as we twirled and skipped down the paths of the Bamboo Grove, not minding the dirt clouds we kicked up with our white sneakers. We pointed at plants around us like orchestra conductors, deeming each with special qualities that only we could see. Perhaps it was then when I realized I was finally ready to see through Gwen’s eyes. I didn’t care if I wasn’t acting with maturity or elegance, I wasn’t worried about Teacher Wang. I tugged off the scarlet scarf around my neck and tossed it, the red swallowed by plants. Instead, I shouted with Gwen at the top of our lungs, two kids immersed in their own universe of iridescence.

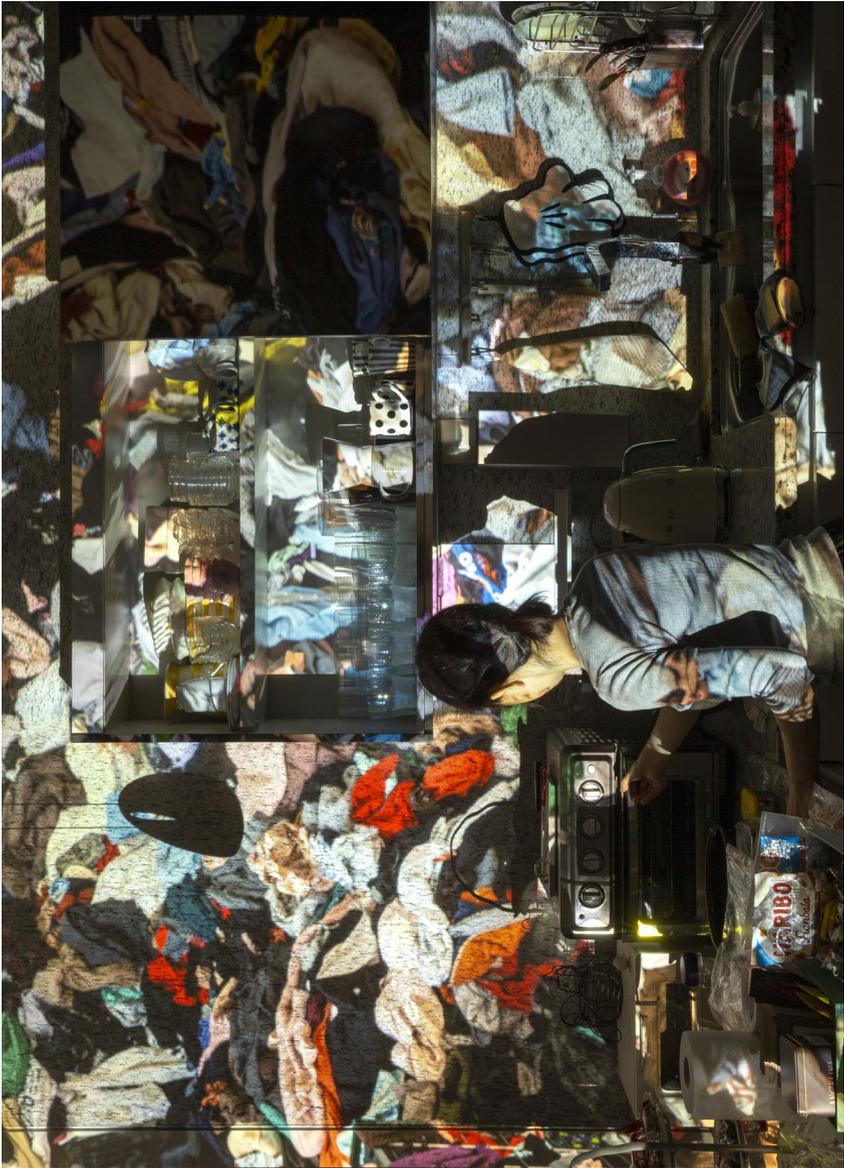


LAUREN KIM / *No Time To Waste*





LAUREN KIM
No Time to Waste



LAUREN KIM
No Time to Waste



LAUREN KIM
No Time to Waste



LAUREN KIM
No Time to Waste



Outstanding Poetry Prize

RUNNER UP

After The Seventh Voicemail, The Answering Machine Explodes

My brain doesn't work in the third dimension anymore.
Nothing happened. I was just worried about

the way my grandfather's smile curls when he calls me pretty.
The way my father has to remind him I'm his granddaughter.

Can calcium kill you? I used to be smart and now I'm lactose intolerant.

My parents take me notebook shopping so I can pick out a new therapist. I throw up in the clearance aisle and we leave without paying.

No wonder my mood ring is purple. I'm high on ultraviolet nothing. It's just a Tuesday and I can't stop laughing about how I want to steal the traffic cone on my street.

You're not here like I am.
Butterfly gardens underneath period-marked mattresses.

She is a thirteen-year-old's first bikini and I hate it when she gets like this. Tank-top-low-cut-cutting-up-skin til it shows. On purpose.

She is a lying mirror.

Six months ago I thought I was a lesbian.
Now I have a boyfriend and I'm selling my boobs back to God.
I've hit the deep end and I'm breathing fine,

chiropracting book spines and learning to smoke from movies.

I used to be a copycat and now I'm a phoenix wishing on angel numbers.

Let's have a college conversation and lower my expectations about if or how and when or if I will ever see my grandfather remember to smile for a photo again.

I strike again against the matchbox.

Can you feel the pen in your back when I write about you?

Because I think if my chest/I think if my heart grows another size,

I'm going to implode.

Radio Waves

Sweet powder tickles my cheeks in bruising peach lips and tattered soles of shoes. Brushing fried dough from mama's crackling oven and classic-jazz radio station, I wonder who will play next. Ears drink in the rumble of voice and sound. "Mama," I ask. "Why Ella?" She'll just brush her calloused hands on gingham apron and tap her foot in a pitter-patter, never impatience, daring to wiggle olive fingers sway muggy August air. "Because," she huffs, swatting a hand to ambush mosquito, combat with a newly found broom in her left hand. "Ms. Fitzgerald is grace and husk. Her voice is a crooning cardinal, the river that runs between the clerk's office and the diner, light hum of neon signs. A row of parked cars. Easy flow of bees and bends."

In the Teeth of the Witch Doctor

Only in the teeth of the witch doctor
did I learn that
survival is far richer than paradise.

I have shared tables
with those who have kissed the clouds,
and I breathed in their silvery aroma.
But I also built homes

with those who share
coordinates with coffins,

and, upon acquaintance,
my gut could register gold.

I have crawled out of quicksand
and fell from the promised land,
and I promised myself I would return to both soon.

But for now,
In the teeth of the witch doctor,
I'll accept her diagnosis
and take death row's anecdote served in her silver spoon.

Fossils

Our house alone stands without a flag—
it's at half-mast somewhere else.
I keep the dead roses alive for another day.

The sun's 5 o'clock shadow lengthens;
it smiles at me, but there is only shade here,
chilling our bones even as we stare into bleak

light, solar yet mechanical. My teeth clenched
in shifting yellow silence; I smell the blood
on my breath as Mom passes the potatoes—

who else is dining with us in spirit?
She tries to drive her out with fire, burn
the spirit out of the room.

Inside: light—quantized in slats, streaming
through the window, shards of glass shattering
the room. A new rainbow of shadows can't

be covered, only touched—are they warm?
Sickly, one flower purpled before the others.
More shadows, roaming the stairs at night.

Bruises spread everywhere, not just skin
or produce in parking lots. Juice rolls off our chins,
stains the tablecloth. We forget our whole world often.

On and Of Hyphens

Like stomps on concrete,
I follow the plunges and pushes of English,
how it arches, pierces through words,
my tongue-tied touch stammering
the skims and hugs of Urdu,
its careful footfalls on thawing dirt.

The curve of consonants sour
like a vibrant candy staling,
potential left in a gleaming wrapper,
lost in the swirling Atlantic
of my hybrid, hyphenated existence.

In graphology, it's said
a crossed-out signature
is desire to cross out one's life,
distance between names
is distance between identities,
how high the slash of a t
or far out the dot of an i is —
it means something.

The uptick or downturn
of Pakistani-American,
what does that mean?
Is the hyphen pointing to true north,
an arrow on the compass of latitudes
of the borders I claim as home?
How can such a small space hold

so much subconscious meaning?
Or is this the overanalyzing
of the non-native, non-tourist,
forever foreigner, desperate cartographer
mapping the intangibility of belonging?
If I mapped my own body,
I feel I'd find a "Made in Pakistan" label
sewn onto an American soul.
I'm an emigrant and immigrant,
export and import easily
exhaled and inhaled,
breathed into assimilation,
into newness that never wears off.

Dog-eared novels and creased sneakers
become dreams when your skin speaks
stuttered syllables in one country,
your tongue is washed white in the other.

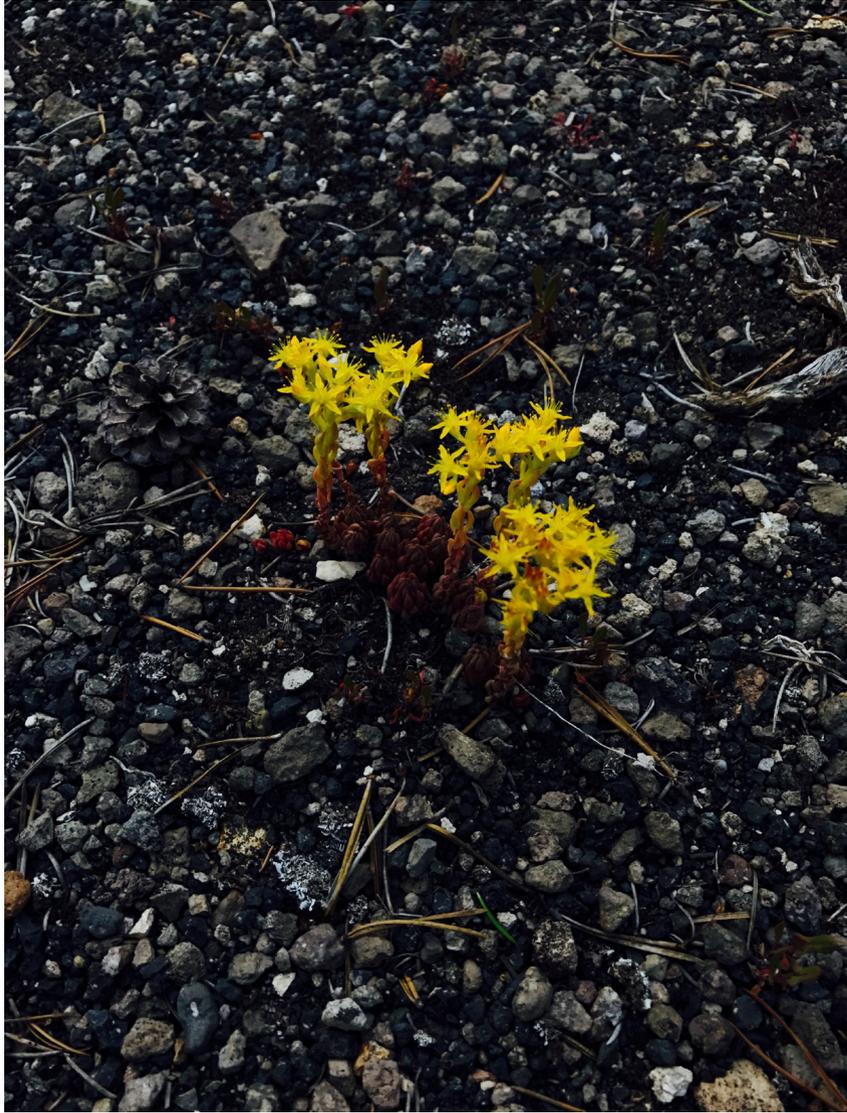
How many hyphens am I of?
How many will come after?
Fractions and dashes of beginnings,
counted even in Spanish before the Urdu
I can recall but twenty-two numbers of.

If you do ever count my starts,
count them with the ends of dulled pencils
and the ink drops of a pen
homogenized into a stroke
of diasporic intent.

And, for once,
count me in.



TRAVIS XUE
Small View, Big World

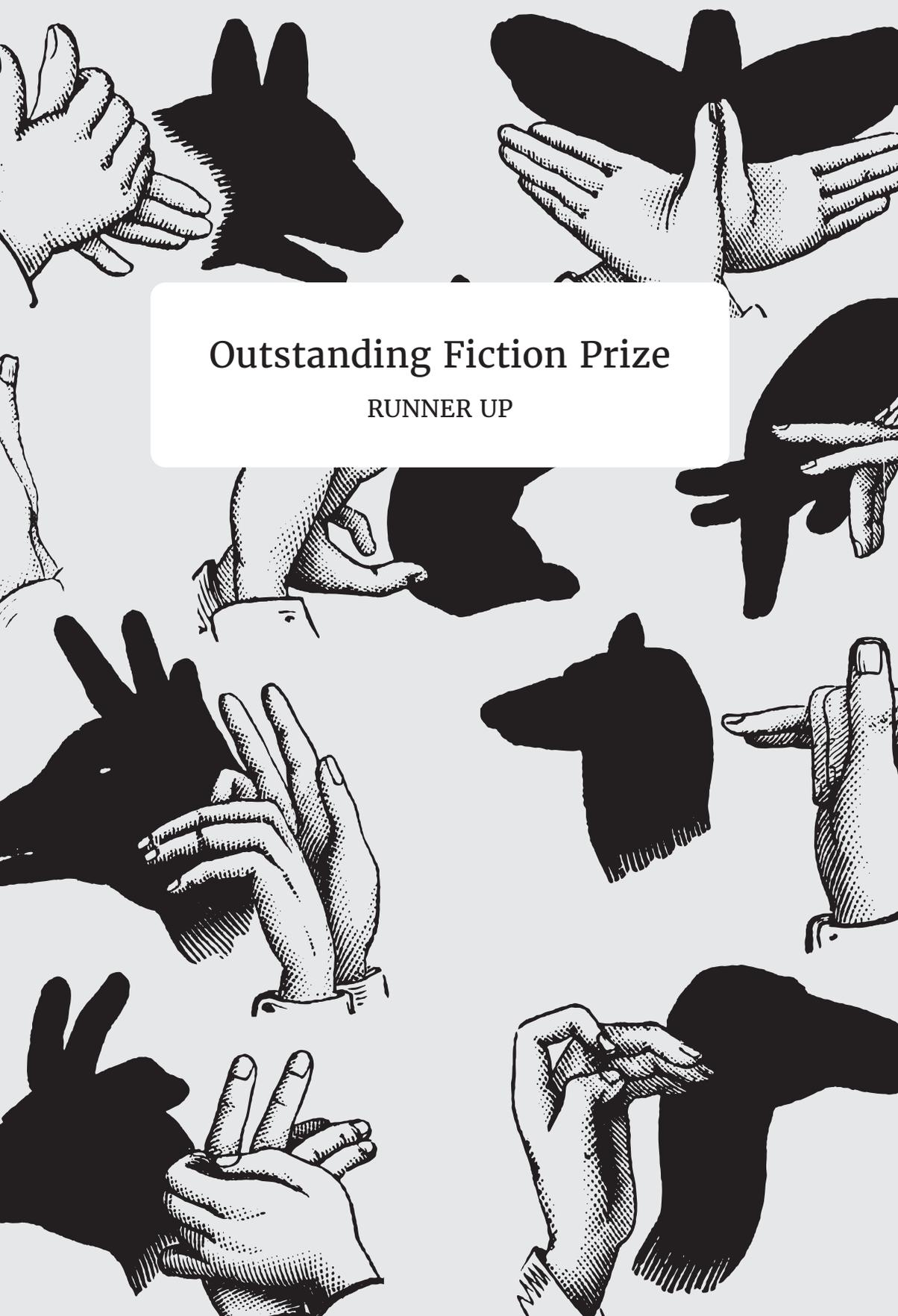


JENNA JIANG
Out of the Darkness

Condensation; Acrimony

The need to be clean,
The solace in the shower,
The close we cannot be.
 Steam heavier than smoke,
 Blood to water,
 Fingers when you cannot choke.
Water falling where you cannot go.
Down the skin, the drain,
Down and out, soot to the stain.
 Sweat to steam,
 Forehead to glass.
 Dirtied to cleaned.
A Palm's venture
To the very place
I habitually keep the same.
 Left with wilted rags and puddles,
 Growing cold of the last thing to touch,
 Effects like mold, an emotional crutch.
Left with few stray hairs,
Here—a palm print,
There—remnants of a thought, bare.
 Haze,
 The liquid
 Of a glassy eyed stare.
Drop,
To your knees,
And fall to feel.
 Drink from the tap,
 The touch has gone,

And something can be found in saliva.
In spit, and tears,
And in the tap,
It is one and the same.
 Of a scalding shower,
 And it's cold remains,
 What is left is imagined, pain.



Outstanding Fiction Prize

RUNNER UP

The Unexplored 95%

There's an old Norwegian *spøkelseshistorie* about the crow's nest every Arctic sailor knows, and — as Cohen falls out of it to the frothing waves below — it's all he can think about. That, and the giant wall of water that had pushed him out of the ship in the first place, breaking against the hull of the bow and attempting to tip the ship on her side. It wouldn't be too terribly hard, for how long the ship is and how high her masts stretch up into the sky. Then they'd all be sunk. Every man is on deck — even the Captain — holding on to the rigging to stay on their feet as the wave swamps the boards under a layer of foamy water, and no one spares a glance for Cohen as he goes streaking past. There are no shouts of man overboard, just the cries of terror as the water threatens to pull experienced sailors' feet out from under them. No one notices. And by the time the weather calms and a head count goes by, it will be too late. Claimed by the waves or cold, whichever. In a storm like this, drowning looks all the more likely.

The ship is called the Silver Serpent, the *Sølvorm*, with a wooden carving of a sea serpent left unpainted as the masthead, coming off more like a dragon than anything else. It's based on some old Norwegian folktale from the Captain's homeland, far North where the ice pack starts and the fishing is good and the pickled herring is plentiful. Some fairytale supposed to be good luck to waves and wind and boats, but not necessarily the men on them, because sailors are collections of superstitions and stories, patchworks of beliefs. So long as the fish are caught, so long as the coal is delivered, so long as the gold is earned. It matters little what happens to the men on the way to the next port in Longyearbyen on the Svalbard archipelago so long as they pick up the waiting load of Longyearbyen coal.

The story is about falling but no impact, but it has little to do

with ghosts really. It was more a story told in the dark and cold of Oslo to scare little boys back home for dinner. The only reason Cohen is still thinking about it in his last few seconds instead of his wife or his son, is for almost the same reason he was even falling in the first place. That, and the twin waterspouts that had sprung up in seconds on the starboard side.

Cohen had seen it. The huge shadow in the shape of a hand, clawed around the Barents Sea. The skyggedyr.

In the spøkelseshistorie, an unnamed sailor is manning the crow's nest one late afternoon, just as the sun slips under the ledge of the horizon—when the light off the water gets concave and strange, throws shadows and shapes where there shouldn't be any—when he sees something. Not land, as the navigator had been tentatively suggesting was near for the past week. In the middle of trying to explain whatever it is to the closest crewmate—with big eyes and pale skin and big gestures—yelling against the breeze, the sailor fell from his perch. Everyone on deck remembers the snap of wind through his loose shirt as he went, but he never hit the water.

There was no splash, no scream, no body. He was falling and then he was gone, midair. It was like everyone on board had blinked together at just the right moment. And when they sent the next deckhand up to get a better vantage point to find the body—born on a wave—whatever he sees up there, he can't ever talk about again.

This is all to say, as Cohen plunges to likely death—likely caused by the skyggedyr in the sky and under the ocean—all he can hope is that he makes it to the water. He doesn't want to go wherever the unaccounted bodies go—consumed by sea creatures and algae, bones left behind to serve as homes for fish and coral.

Cohen rotates enough on his back to see the sky as he falls, weightless. The sky is an angry, brooding bruise, bad weather for sailing as any sailor would tell you, but above the horizon and clouds, the new moon hanging like an empty space between stars—something is changing. The Dark Spot—with its cratered surface of tunnels and caves and mountains and wheat tan color—is moving, seeming to pulse in the air. There is suddenly a great vacuum of wind as if sucked from a void, and the last thing Cohen sees before he is flipped sideways in the air from the force is the Dark Spot, limned in light.

Cohen sees the object coming from the sky at an unbelievable rate as he slips past the rail—sees the ship tilt just that last degree, irretrievable. The men on deck bracing, fates gambled away the second they stepped off the wharf and aboard. The toes of Cohen's left foot have just breached the icy surface as a large pair of tweezers snatch him from midair.

He skyrockets upward out of the surf. The tweezers reach out to lift the mast back straight right before it touches the waterline with the flat of one metal clamp. The ends, still around Cohen's waist, dip into the water to compensate, dunking his head under. He comes up sputtering and soaking wet, the clamps too tight to draw in air anyway—the strands of his beard freeze instantly, water droplets perfectly round like strands of pearls against his mouth.

The Sølvorm stabilized, the tweezers pull Cohen out of the water, dropping him too many feet above the deck. He hits with a muted cracking noise on his side and shoulder—and suddenly it's even harder to breathe. Definitely a rib—or two. He's still flat on the deck, gasping, crew running around him in panic, while the tweezers pull back to the west at a startling fast rate. Not that the whole thing isn't startling and strange.

Cohen glances up just in time to see the giant hand attached to the sky tweezers as they pull back out of the hole left behind by the Dark Spot. The Dark Spot—it's gone. Now, in its place, a giant eye, blue and bloodshot. Everything else about the giant is obscured—as if through a thick lens—but still visible in the sky. A silhouette that's always been there, shadowy and large, hunched over the ocean, blocking out the light. As soon as they'd set sail from the frozen harbor of Vardø it had been there, stretching out from the horizon, moving eerily like a human form. Even the eye, human, from the pupil size and shape to the white sclera showing around the iris. If Cohen has ever believed in anything, it is that this creature must be the skyggedyr, cradling the world.

The ocean starts to shake. Not the ship on the waves, or even an underwater earthquake, although massive walls of water are stirred up, no, the whole ocean sloshes to the left and then back, the whole world tilting on its axis. There are screams on deck and more than one man leaning over the railing, sick from the change in equilibrium. But it keeps going, like the world is rolling over itself, around

and around and around, like suddenly the rotation of the Earth can be felt and it is a terrifyingly fast, dizzying thing. There is nowhere stationary, nowhere still—not uncommon for the middle of the ocean and experienced sailors, but most men are flat on their backs, unable to even open their eyes. Cohen is pressed with force against the deck, what is left of his ribs groaning against the G-Forces—he couldn't get up if he tried.

And then, suddenly, the spinning stops and all that is left is the terrifying feeling of free drop, the swoop in the stomach, and instead of being pressed down, Cohen is now scrambling for something to grab to even stay on the ship. Many men are quite literally floating in the air, a few feet above the deck, the ocean rising to meet the sky in embrace. They fall for a horrifically long time.

Next, the impact. The world cracks open with a shattering noise, like broken glass—like a broken egg, into millions of fine pieces—nothing like Pangaea with its puzzle pieces; you couldn't put the Earth back together if you tried. There's no fixing this. The ocean empties out, like someone has removed the drain to a bath. Like someone has removed the cork of a bottle of wine... or a bottle with a ship inside. The Sølvmorm cracks in two against the ocean floor.

But as Cohen sits up to observe the wreckage of the world, he doesn't see what he expects. The ocean floor looks like white carpet, soft and sewn together with cream colored stitches—the sky has become an eggshell, popcorned with texture and encased with a crown molding, and the horizon has become a light sage green spreading up in a wall.

And sitting next to the remains of the world is the skyggedyr, the giant in the form of a little girl, thousands of times larger than Cohen is. She's sobbing, her cries booming in the still air, with bloody fingers and knees from kneeling in the glass of the shattered bottle. Despite her size, she can't be very old, her limbs still carrying themselves with baby fat and incoordination.

No one comes to check on her, and her cries eventually taper off, even if the blood doesn't, glass bleeding out and staining the carpeted ground. She reaches for the ship, hull split down the middle, masts cracked all in half, men scattered about—some still moving, groaning or crying out in fear, some long gone, stuck like pigs by the same glass that kept their world intact.

Cohen is still flat on his back—a broken rib surely having punctured a lung or some other vital organ sometime in the spinning and smashing because there is blood welling up from his throat and pooling in his mouth—when the skyggedyr’s hand closes around him, grip much too tight, shattering whatever is left undisturbed in his chest.

Cohen is suddenly flying out of the ruin of the world, the ruin in his chest splitting itself open with each rattling breath, lifted to a great red-rimmed, ocean blue eye. The skyggedyr is even more terrifying up close, freezing Cohen’s body naturally stiff in fear.

Or maybe that’s not quite it.

As the giant starts to shake Cohen around, his body only seems to grow stiffer, until his limbs have stopped flopping, stopped moving at all. There is a terrifying weight on his chest but it no longer hurts, everything has gone numb—not even the squeezing clawed hand around his middle is hurting. The blood has stopped overflowing his lungs and his breathing is not rattling; it’s then that Cohen realizes he has stopped breathing altogether. He doesn’t even need to. The girl shakes him again and he recognizes the way she is moving him—it’s as if he were a toy, a doll, for her to play with.

The last thing Cohen has enough control over his mind and body to see is a bloodshot eye, blue as the ocean Cohen grew up on. His body is born on a wave to sink below to house fish and coral in his broken, plastic ribs.

Everything else is lost.



TRAVIS XUE
Light Up the Night



YOUNGSEO SON
Hide and Seek

New Years in a Pandemic

The dim light of the screen
Reflects off my glasses
Shields my eyes from the machine
Exploding with glorified acids

My parents sit behind me
Hidden in the shadows
Drinking their nightly tea
—I sink into my wistful wallows.

The wall of colors separates
Me from those on the other side
As I sit lonely and speculate
On when the disease will die

First Summer

Amos knew, better than anyone, that his best friend was a chatter-box.

June could talk about anything and everything for as long as she wanted without getting bored. And for the most part, Amos didn't mind. He liked the silvery sound of her voice, the jingle in her giddy laugh. He liked to wait for her calls, for the familiar crackle of the phone, for her excited, "Guess what?" from the other line.

Talking to June often felt like a choose-your-own-adventure story. Sometimes, her messages were a compilation of short and random thoughts she had throughout the day. Sometimes, she called for emotional support after a failed exam. Other times, she called to tell an unfunny pun before immediately hanging up. He never knew what he was going to get.

On the days Amos couldn't come to the phone, June left messages. Many, many messages. They weren't as riveting and entertaining as their actual conversations were, but he still appreciated them. He liked the idea of June seeing something, thinking of him, and dialing his number to ramble about it. Even if her musings were entirely meaningless.

Once, Amos joked that he would block her after the hundredth message, that he was sick and tired of listening to her yapping and yammering. And she shouted at him. And he laughed.

But now, as he sat by the quiet phone, all he wanted was to hear her voice. All he wanted was to hear was a "guess what I got on my chemistry test?" or an "I found a song you might like," or a "do you know how to spell pterodactyl?" But the phone remained silent, taunting, jeering.

Amos sighed and lifted his gaze to the clock on the wall as it ticked and ticked in a sleepy, unending song. He watched the win-

dow as the autumn wind shook the shutters. He watched his own fingers as they tapped the cushion of his armchair. It was all too familiar, but he did not feel the warmth he associated with the phone.

When the days were too long and his heart hurt more than usual, he found his quiet seat by the landline and filtered through all of June's old messages. It helped him feel as if she was still here, sitting right next to him, fireflies in her eyes, mischief on her lips as she poked his shoulder in a choppy rhythm.

Amos filtered through the list of messages, reading the different dates and times on the little green screen. He selected a random voicemail, pushing away the aching in his chest. June had sent it about a year ago.

"Amos, Amos, Amos. I made a song for you!" Her voice immediately sprang through the speaker, bouncing across the walls and drowning out the sound of the clock. "Want to hear it?" She stopped. "Just kidding. Only people who answer the phone get to hear. Pick up, kid!" The line clicked. He allowed himself to smile, allowed his body to relax against the cushion.

He selected another. "I'm having an allergic reaction to strawberries," her voice sounded once more. She sighed loudly, dramatically. "Can you believe this? I'm allergic to strawberries of all things. Ugh! Please come over. You have to see how swollen I am." She paused, suddenly laughing at herself. "It's kinda funny, actually. Hurry, before my mom gets the EpiPen." The line clicked once more.

Another. "My history teacher keeps glaring at me," she muttered nonchalantly. "But I don't understand why! I always do the homework! I only slept in her class, like, twice."

By now, Amos knew each and every voicemail by heart. Still, he filed through them, listening to the ones that comforted him the most, the ones that helped him feel a little less alone.

Just as he was about to place the phone back in its stand, a final message caught his eye. The most recent one. He squinted, reading the glowing text.

He knew every voicemail. He listened to every voicemail. At least, he thought he did. It seemed, after all these months, Amos had missed one.

He brought the speaker up to his ear, his heart hammering.
And he listened.

Amos was seven years old when he met June.

It was summertime—the type of summer that called for lemonade in the afternoons, fans and open windows in the evenings.

Amos sat quietly beneath the shade of the old willow tree, listening to the cicada songs, smelling the ruddy dandelions that polka-dotted the grass. He closed his eyes, running his hands across the perfect stick he had found only moments earlier. There wasn't a single bump or extra stem or leaf that littered the stick—it was perfect, untouched, unfound. But before he could get back up to find another, a loud rustling interrupted him.

He froze, turning slowly towards the sound. Suddenly, a girl jumped out from behind one of the willow trees, teeth bared, dark hair swirling in the wind, eyes practically bugging out of her head.

He nearly jumped out of his skin.

The girl crossed her arms, taking a threatening step towards him. “Where did you get that?” she demanded, her voice sounding shrill and shrieky.

Amos jerked the stick away. “I found it first!” He backed up, almost tripping over his Velcro shoes.

“Give it to me.”

“No.” Nobody was going to snatch his perfect stick away.

The girl, dressed in daisy-stitched overalls and light-up sneakers, frowned deeply, sending unhappy creases past her dimples and freckles. “How old are you, even?”

Amos watched nervously as she dug her sneakers into the ground, as her beaded necklaces jingled against one another, as she sent him the meanest, scariest expression he had ever seen. He swallowed. “Seven. And a half.” He paused. “How old are you?”

The girl held up six fingers. “Six. But I'm turning seven next week.” Before he could respond, she knelt on the dirt and grabbed the stick from him.

He gasped. “Hey-!”

“Look,” the girl interrupted. She gripped the stick with her little fingers and began to carve letters into the dirt. “Look what I can do.”

Amos stopped himself from snatching it back and stood close, trying to decipher the characters she had etched into the ground. “Joo... nee...?”

She looked up at him. She wasn't glaring anymore. In fact, she was smiling. But just a little bit. "It says June. My name." She took a moment to sit back and admire her work. It seemed she had forgotten about her anger.

"June? Like the month?"

She ignored him. "I can write your name if ya want."

Amos nodded eagerly. "A-M-O-S," he immediately spelled aloud and joined her on the ground. She nodded and began to write with the sharp end, sending flecks of dirt onto her pants. After a few short moments, his name was carved into the ground in June's wobbly handwriting. He found himself grinning slightly. She certainly knew how to use that stick. So, despite himself, Amos sat back as well and said, "You can keep it."

June looked down at it, then back up, smiling. Actually smiling. It was a perfect stick after all. "Thanks."

For the next few days, Amos followed June around. After only a few hours, he learned that she really enjoyed stressing him out.

The two had ventured deep into the summer forest behind her neighborhood and discovered a little waterfall, hidden behind the emerald foliage. The water looked cold and clear and somehow magical, like an enchanted pool from one of his storybooks. But he could hardly focus on the scenery because June was off doing something dangerous for the hundredth time that afternoon.

"Don't do it!" He called after her.

"You sound like my mom, Amos," June yelled over the rush of water.

The two were supposed to be back at her house. They were supposed to be playing with the water guns and sprinklers her father had set up. They were supposed to be following the rules. They were even warned, stay in the backyard or I'm going to have to tell Mommy, but this rule was broken the moment the back door closed.

From afar, the rocks surrounding the waterfall didn't seem too high. But June—he shuddered—June was about to climb it. He watched anxiously as she gripped the boulder's craters with her fingers, finding a steady place to plant her feet.

"Well, you're gonna fall and crack your head!" He shouted back with a frown.

June scaled the wall in nothing but her bare feet and purple swimsuit while Amos remained with his arms crossed, his feet planted safely on the grass. “No, I’m not!” She sang from above. Her laughter drizzled down with the occasional spray of cold water, mocking him. She climbed higher. And higher. And higher.

“Okay, okay. Fine, you won’t fall!” Amos called over the rushing water. “You can come down now!”

In an instant, June reached the top of the falls. She peered down with a triumphant grin. “No. You come up.”

Amos shook his head vigorously. “No way.” He glanced around the forest nervously. “I’m gonna get in trouble.”

June groaned. “You’re afraid of everything!”

He crossed his arms. “Am not!” She frowned.

“Please, come up. It’ll be safe!” she begged. “Amos!” She dragged his name out for eternity. She was persistent. Amos had no choice.

“Fine,” he muttered. “I’m coming.” With his heart crying yes and all else crying no, he pushed away his fears and found a steady clump of rocks by the water. He inhaled, exhaled, and began to climb the side of the falls.

“Keep going!” She yelled, giddy.

“I am!” He grumbled back, jamming his sneakers into the side of the boulder.

“Hurry, hurry!”

“I am!” Grunting and straining his muscles, Amos eventually made it to the top of the waterfall. June pulled him to the center of the rock with a smile. She was saying something, but he could hardly hear her over the thunder in his chest. It somehow felt higher than before.

Amos glanced across the forest from above, saw the pockets of sunlight trapped between leaves, the grassy ground where he had discarded his water bottle. He gazed over the waterfall, listening to the rushing sound as it poured into the little lake. And though he was only a few feet above the lake, he was starting to feel a little dizzy.

“Ready?” He turned, giving his friend a look.

“For what?”

“To jump?”

His jaw nearly hit the ground. “You’re crazy! No!” He took a step

away from the ledge. “Can we just go home?”

“Home?” She groaned. “You sound just like my grandpa.”

“Stop it!”

“Amos,” June sighed, placing her hands on her hips. “You’re never going to live if you’re so scared of everything.” She paused, kneeling to graze the water with her fingertips. “If you don’t like it, that’s okay. But... try it. Just once”

Together, they peered over the side of the waterfall, watched as it captured the forest’s reflection, splashed against the rocks.

Amos finally breathed out. He peeled his shirt off and kicked his shoes over the side of the boulder. “Okay. Okay, okayokayokay-”

“On three,” June interrupted, grabbing his hand. “One...”

Amos held his breath. “Wait.”

“Two...”

“June!”

“-Three!” They launched from the rock, over the waterfall, and into the deep water with a heavy splash. The cold lake greeted him with darkness. For a moment, all he could hear was the pounding of the falls. All he could feel was icy blackness before he was dragged to the surface.

His head bobbed above the water, and he blinked, rubbing the droplets from his eyes, gulping in the fresh air. He turned June who was already climbing out, flecks of grass covering her damp arms and legs.

She was beaming. “Let’s do it again!”

And to his own surprise, he followed her.

Seven years had passed since his first leap from the waterfall. Seven years had passed since his first year with June. He glanced down at the phone in his palms, the messages he had grown so familiar with. But it had been a year since he last saw her.

The final message remained unopened, daring him. He let it play.

“Hi, Amos,” June’s voice sounded, immediately filling the silence. “Bad news. A new neighborhood is going to be built behind my house. That means the waterfall won’t be public anymore.” There was a pause. “I was wondering if you wanted to go back one last time?” She stopped again and chuckled softly. “You’re not still scared, are you?”

Click.

Amos could hear the waterfall from a distance.

The darkness of night covered the surrounding houses and what was left of the woods, leaving only the moon and the stars to illuminate his path. Hopefully, he wouldn't be seen. Holding his breath, he climbed over the shaky fence, ducked his head away from the surrounding properties, and found his way through the sleepy grounds.

At last. He was here once more. He glanced up at the falls, watched as the constellations glimmered in the reflection. He watched the rippling lake, the moon rays that covered the pool in a glowing, milky white. He watched the autumn forest, the red and orange leaves washed pale as they shivered and rattled in the cold wind.

It all looked smaller than he remembered.

For a moment, Amos expected to hear the crunching of leaves, a mischievous snicker. He expected to feel her palm on his shoulder, a finger poking the back of his head. He expected to see his best friend, her freckled cheekbones, her raven hair billowing behind her as she emerged from the forest like a woodland creature. But she didn't appear. He was alone, only the moon to keep him company.

His entire soul felt heavy.

He didn't know why he'd come. June wasn't going to show up. He shoved his fists into his pockets and turned, whispering a silent goodbye to the scenery of his past. But before he could leave, his gaze suddenly fell onto a long, thin stick that was leaned up against the boulder.

Amos paused. It was the perfect stick, untouched, unfound. Slowly, he reached out and grabbed it gently, as if it would disintegrate upon his touch.

He had missed June's last message. But maybe it wasn't too late to send one back. With an aching heart, knelt to the ground, brushing a few stray pebbles and dead leaves from his new canvas.

J-U-N-E, he carved carefully, slowly, without fear.

Cherry Plums

Cherry plums silk a week's soak, then explode
into the scene of before your touch. The curtains rise
to reveal the end of our history. Pink trumpets
on vines bare to hummingbirds. Butterflies unlatch
from their couplings, light and open on the doubled
hands of euphorbia fronds. They sip
from the pistils for six generations that bear
them through another tongue as the first year of
punishing reasoning begins to tick the calendar
forward. They land like fared rocks on the
devil's decks. They take another turn
on the spiral of life, where the blossoms
flush in a day of sweaty dawn,
where the ghost of you drags
your limbs through branches
of cherries and plums, you
stay in my dreams
a rare bird with a lost
color. In rerun, the bone
of you stripping sweet-
Hearts layers
shedding petals of
my pity into a
decayed holo-
gram—my
ever
vacant
gaze.

Sapling

It was the first precious thing that was ever mine.

The story starts with the peaches my grandfather brought back from the market. Plump, soft, and pale, they were the size of two of my fists. The sight of the fruit held the magic of giving me an invisible hunger—even if I was full, my tongue immediately yearned to taste its sweet flesh.

Every so often, on a particularly languid afternoon, my grandfather and I went down to the park to enjoy the peaches. This park, a small spill of green behind the city, was tightly woven into my earliest memories. There was a small man-made forest where I used to pick wildflowers. Calluses on my palms from the monkey bars and Band-Aids on my knees from the wood chips were badges for the hours I'd spent on the playground. My grandfather had pushed my bike, free of training wheels, down the hill; I still remember bouncing forward roughly, laughing into the wind, and gripping those purple rubber handles for dear life. But the tennis court was where my favorite memories were.

On the way to the park, I walked the white path (the cement sidewalk), and my grandfather carried me over the black path (the asphalt roads). When we got there, we sat on the green benches in the court—him on the bench and me in his lap, my Crocs dangling above his legs. He took out a metal spoon and a peach, warmed by black fabric of the drawstring bag. My grandfather used the spoon to break the skin of the peach and scoop out a well-sized chunk of fruit, white in the middle and pink at the bottom. I eagerly bit down on the fruit, and a flower of sweetness blossomed between my teeth. As I ate, the bright afternoon sun dried the sticky fruit juice on my coral dress. When there was too little left of the peach for the spoon, I cleaned the pit in my mouth with strings of fruit still stuck in my

milk white baby teeth, cheeks swollen as I chewed happily.

It was on one of those afternoons when I asked where peaches came from. When my grandfather told me that they grew on large green trees like apples and oranges, I asked him if I could grow my own peach tree. I was overjoyed when he agreed. I had never had anything of “my own” before. The next day, my grandfather brought one of the pits to the park, and we went down to the manmade forest to dig a small hole. I popped the pit inside, covered it up, and stuck a spoon into the dirt nearby to mark its location like a treasure flag.

I visited the park every week since the day I planted the pit. I grew impatient when one, two, and then three months passed, and nothing had sprouted. Perhaps the pit could not grow. Perhaps it had been plowed over by small animals.

But then, one day, I saw a soft green leaf, half the length of my small thumb, peeking out shyly from a nest of dirt next to my metal spoon. The elation I felt was sweeter than any fruit. The hours I’d poured into staring at the dirt, thinking I saw something there only to realize I was imagining it, suddenly felt worth it. I reached out, my hands brushing tenderly against the single leaf, terrified I might hurt it.

It takes two years for a peach tree to start bearing fruit. Two years seemed impossibly infinite for a five-year-old, but, in that moment, I was determined to see my sprout grow up.

As the weeks passed, I watched my peach-sprout grow into a little sapling. On particularly dry days, I brought my sapling water in a water bottle meant for me. On evenings before storms, I put a plastic food container over the sapling to protect it from the wind.

Sometimes, I came to simply gaze at it, fascinated by how something was there where nothing was before. I laid on my belly on the warm sidewalk all afternoon and stared at the little leaves swaying side to side in the light breeze, wondering if I would see more of the plant slowly appear if I had a magnifying glass. These afternoons were made of clotted summer heat that swathed me like an infant and wispy grey clouds which knotted into interesting shapes in the blue sky above the city. Hours would drip away like honey. The small space between my sapling and I was unfelt time on the very short thread of my life.

Spring expired, burning into summer, which then seeped into

fall. At five years old, each new season is still a novelty, bringing new and exciting growth to my sapling.

Then, one day, when I came to bring water after a particularly dry week, everything was different. From afar, I could hear the sharp droning of large machines. When I came close, there was nothing left of the manmade forest. In its place was fresh brown dirt and yellow barricade tape that warned of construction.

“Ah, too bad,” my grandfather said at the sight. “But it would’ve been cut down eventually. The university nearby prunes the area every season.”

In my grandfather’s age, he had seen a lot of small things live and die. But I hadn’t. Still warm with innocence from the womb at five years old, my sapling was my first love and loss. I felt a strange vinegary resentment that my grandfather had let me plant my hope with that peach pit knowing it would never grow to become a tree.

“Don’t be sad, it’s just a plant,” my grandfather said. “Nature doesn’t obey anyone, it lives and dies as it wishes.”

But my sapling hadn’t died of drought, and the only animal that had cut it down was the steel beast at the corner of the scene. Construction workers dressed in neon orange buzz around the beast like flies, carrying large grey slabs of cement. They were building something, maybe an office or a hospital.

As the sun warmed away the clouds, a patch of light fell on the scrap of dirt that was all that remained of my sapling. As I stared at it, I remembered the fascinating creature that had once sprouted from that dirt. I remembered how the small hairs on its stem used to tickle the hearts of my palms. I remembered massaging its delicate leaves and lowering myself onto the warm grass to admire it.

The story ends with me, still awkwardly holding the bottle in my hand. I poured the water into the dirt anyway, turning the unmarked grave from brown to black.

how the Dead perhaps drown

in the damp dark reeds
on the cold bird banks
Of the monstrous
black
tar
styx

the Ferryman waits to take your
piece
make peace
knowing you'll not get crossage
drachma left in smudged clear case
milkystick from lingers
trapped like pomegranate juice to fingers
ground us down
d
e
e
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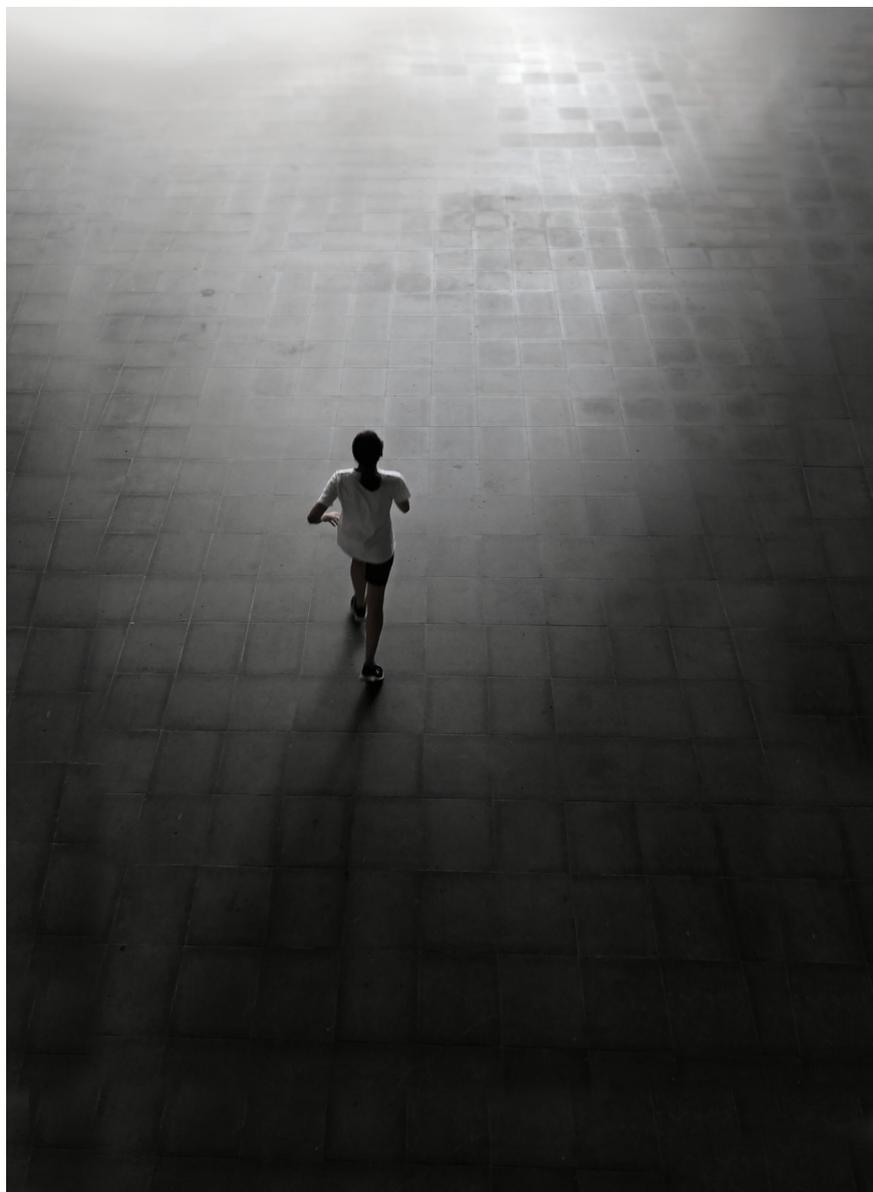
unseen

psychopomp sleeps
rich dusk dredges
devotional coffee
soot soul
sole
winged sandal
wooden weights
mercurial in nature

shakes his head at empty pockets
silken lining
lily bloom
the world still turns



JENNA KIM
On Your Mark



GRETCHEN WANG
moving on

Outstanding Nonfiction Prize

RUNNER UP



Broken Beauty

I. The outdoors was where I made a crown out of oak wood twigs & bracelets from the rope of a tire swing. I was never the kind of princess to prance around in a silky blue gown, to slip my feet into an uncomfortable pair of elegant glass shoes. But the living room loveseat was my throne as I wiped the sweat from my brow & picked out pebbles from the soles of my shoes. Grandpa & I ate chocolate popsicles together, the fudge dripping from the corners of my mouth onto my fingertips. Chocolate smudged on my cheek & thighs lovingly touching, I realized that I was messy. But I was beautiful, too.

II. When my family introduced me to the boy next door, my world changed. My pale skin was decorated with blue & violet when the beast in his belly broke out. Long summer afternoons spent outside catching fireflies & making wishes with dandelions mixed with moments of terror as I clung onto my neighbor's porch railing. The sound of a go-kart louder with every second I tried to flee. Cinderella never had bruises underneath that lacy blue dress. It made me wake up & face the reality that the life of a princess wasn't for children bathed in blood.

III. I noticed my body was beginning to transform every year. It didn't bother me, until people's reactions to me started changing too. I hid between puffy winter jackets, & the dangling straps of children's backpacks to tune out the hate being shot my way. I rehearsed sucking in my gut during the summer, when my swimsuit started not fitting me the way it used to. The tugging at the back of my ponytail, & nails digging into my skin faded from my night-

mares, but I can still taste the poison of the venomous words they spewed.

IV. In fourth grade, my classmates found a magazine with a picture of a walrus on the cover. The way my belly jugged out more than I could reel in, added with my crooked teeth, allowed them to make the connection that a child & a walrus were equivalent to one another. Told me I shouldn't sit on a chair because my fatness would break it. I knew that engraved stretch marks on my arms plus accumulating lard that was glued to my hips, equaled "not beautiful". But less calories & more trips to the school bathroom could change the sum of the equation.

V. I was nine years old, the day my doctor told me I needed to join an "obesity management" program for children, despite the fact that my problem was in my blood. While they claimed to be assisting me in controlling my glucose levels, the first thing they did during every appointment was constrict a tape measurement around my waist and legs. They shoved me onto the dreaded scale that left me gasping for relief from my own weight. I laid out on a piece of paper to represent my wide reaching body. They outlined each little hill, valley and dip of my figure. When my mom told me she loved me that same day, I was tempted to ask "why" instead of replying with "I love you too."

VI. $\frac{3}{4}$ cousins got to enjoy cookies that my grandmother bought from Stop and Shop. $\frac{1}{4}$ reached for the container, but learned to pull themselves back and grab a weight watchers bar in the cabinet. My grandfather placed a five dollar bill in my hands, rewarding me for the five digits that dropped on the scale. Began to feel guilty on the days I chose to play with my dolls instead of working out on the treadmill, felt proud when a family friend saw me in public & patted me on my stomach while saying, "You look so good now that you've lost all those extra pounds!" Eleven year old me was casually chatting with a thirty year old about the kind of bread I ate to avoid

carbohydrates. I was only a child, but I was more like an adult than a kid.

VII. Some of my cousins deemed me too fat to play with them. I tripped over one of their legs, and he described it as being crushed by an elephant. They teased me while fearing I'd shatter their bones. Kickball in the schoolyard used to be my favorite recess activity, until my size was blamed as the reason I was chosen last, if not ever. I wanted to cling to exercise yet run from it, being obsessed with burning calories but terrified of drawing attention to my imperfections. I didn't have anyone in my life who sat me down & told me I was good enough. These days, that's the hardest phrase for me to accept.

VIII. Middle school was filled with dysfunctional friendships & withering self-confidence. My two best friends at the time were much skinnier than I was. My mind began to whisper that I needed to fix that. As acquaintances snickered while calling them Anorexic, no one bothered to ask why I haven't eaten lunch in two weeks. My "best friend" saw a ceramic pig on sale during the Snowflake Fair. Turned around & said that it was me. Girls at the teen center began criticizing the size of their thighs. To make them feel better, another friend told them that mine were much larger. Those old friends still claim I am the toxic one, even though their voices replay in my mind on the days I curse my reflection.

IX. My grandpa overdosed on Tylenol in August of 2019. Survived for a month & then passed away in September. I couldn't bear to look at the breathing tube sticking out from the center of his throat. Blamed myself every damn day he sat in that hospital bed. When he held my hand as mom told me it was time to say goodbye, a bomb was placed in my heart, ready to implode. I just needed someone to hear the ticking between my ribs. I used half digested food as my tears, crying five times a day through the form of vomit. People tried to tell me I couldn't fill that grandpa shaped whole in my heart by

emptying myself. But the grip of micromanaging every little thing I consumed made me feel like he would be proud of the self control I had, just like how he felt when I was ten. There were no more chocolate popsicles after this.

X. I use my illness as a crutch for when it's hard to stand on my own. Records show I was diagnosed last December, but my memory shows that the demon has been lurking in the crepts of my mind since the first time someone decided to take a hammer & shatter a fragile self-image. I look into the mirror, & I no longer see the messiness of gunk dripping from the bottom of my shoes, or leaves tucked into chestnut colored hair. I see fragments & shards of the person my life has created.

The mirror whispers to me.
My worth has been cracked.
Skewed, I say, "Mirror, mirror..."

Death in Marigolds

Before becoming a ragdoll, I was a shirt and then a handkerchief.

When I was a shirt, I was a men's size large. I was cotton and snowy white with a yellow marigold sewn at the chest pocket. I found out that I was a tricky design—too big for the ladies but too feminine for working-class men to wear me. My first owner was a middle-aged street vendor who looked as if time had carved a lifetime of grievances onto her face; her thin lips habitually curved down like a sickle, her eyes always alert, scanning every pair of hands that grazed her market stand for the slightest ill intents. By the end of the day, her brows furrowed even further when she noticed me lying at the edge of the stand, obviously examined but not attractive enough to be bought.

In the distance, a caravan of fishermen unloaded their boat and hiked up the sandy hill by the shore. They passed by the street market every evening, sauntering down the dirt path towards their houses. The evening spring breeze blew comfortably, cutting the thick aroma of spices with the scent of sea salt they carried.

"You hear about Old Rad?" Across the street, the butcher called out.

My first owner snickered, "Damn right I did." She snatched me from the corner and crossed off the number on my tag with a black marker. She scribbled a less expensive one. Old Rad used to sell wooden carvings with his grandson. Several days ago, he had contracted a sudden illness and never returned.

"Rory got a peek of the body when they carried it out this morning," the butcher continued. "Said it was purple and lumpy and covered with pus."

My first owner scrunched her nose, her skin souring with disgust. "I told you. I heard this started in the Southern Islands weeks

ago.” She glanced towards the empty space where Old Rad’s stand used to be and spat on the ground. “It’s them. Those fishermen are bad luck.” She capped her marker and tossed it into her basket.

The butcher only chuckled. “Not your silly speculations again. You said poor Freda’s girl was cursed last time a sickness broke out. Turns out it was just something with the drinking water.”

“You don’t believe me now,” she slurred, her lips pursed into a tight frown. “But you’ll see when people start dropping dead like roaches.” The smell of marker penetrated the paper, the freshly inked characters almost staining my skin.

Soon, my first owner lost faith in my value. She stopped taking time to recalculate and reduce my value. She stopped folding me neatly. I was useless to her, my once crisp edges sagged into wrinkles. I knew no other way to feel, so I mirrored her disdain towards myself.

It was on a mid-summer’s evening when my soon-to-be second owner visited the market with his young daughter. She held her father’s hand, her brown eyes opened wide to examine every detail. I had seen many girls like her before; their glances would ultimately end up on the pink dresses adorned with shiny sequins and plastic pearls standing nobly behind me. But this girl pulled her father towards the t-shirt stand and stopped in front of me. She used her hand to trace over the marigold, her finger following the yellow thread that outlined every curve of every petal, soft as a breeze.

When she reached the stem, she looked up at her father. “Can you bend down, Papa?”

I had grown used to the impatience of adults around children. Their eyes had grown weary after working, dismissing childish wonder in one rapid shush, but this father obeyed his daughter’s command. The girl stepped closer to trace her finger on her father’s chest, positioned slightly to the left. Her eyes were focused, her other hand placed on her father’s shoulder to prevent him from swaying. It was after the third petal that I realized that she was drawing a marigold, right by her father’s heart.

“Can we buy this, Papa?” the girl asked. Her father, a tall, muscular man, looked like he was about to tear up.

“Yes, Euphradis,” he answered in a soft voice. “Of course.”

From that day on, I became my owner's most beloved shirt. He had spent most of his life with the sea, following the migration patterns of fish and crabs, skipping from one island to another. When he visited here some years ago, he met the woman who was to become the girl's mother. Native to this place, she anchored his unpredictable and adventurous spirit to this serene seaside town. Living here for years had diluted his accent, but the distinct dialect of the Southern Islands still protruded, like rocks above seawater, in his speech.

My favorite time of day was when he returned from sea and walked down the busy market road leading to his house. His skin smelled of salt and the potpourri of spices, incense, and fruits. He greeted many of the sellers—the butcher, the florist, the produce vendors—who waved back at him, the air gleeful with casual chit-chat.

His wife often complained about having to mend my various rips and tears. Every time, my owner chuckled and said, "Euphradis," as if his daughter's name was justification enough. His wife scoffed and snatched me from his hands. She sat by the dining table and laid me over her knee. She shook her head, unable to comprehend her husband's stubbornness, but the edges of her mouth unconsciously curled up when she repaired me. The silver needle pricked a little, but I grinned too.

As summer drew to an end, the illness that killed Old Rad festered like rotting plums over the fishing town. People who caught it started with symptoms that quickly escalated into a fever that lasted for days, accompanied by red and purple swells. The healers were helpless; no one had ever seen a sickness like this. It loomed. Rumors grew. The illness had reached the town from the Southern Islands, where they first detected the disease. The fishermen traveled south daily, and that meant my owner, who was native to those islands, became known as a carrier of the disease in the mouths of people like my first owner. Initially, the townspeople didn't believe how bad it was. Their words were dandelion fur, fickle and trivial. But when people began dropping like flies, day by day, the illness spreading too close to people's family circles, speculation took root.

It started off small, with people whispering and stealing glances. Soon, children began to point and needed to be shushed before their voices grew too audible. My owner continued his daily routine with dignity until the day he stopped by the butcher after fishing. Usually, he would be greeted warmly. On this day, it was different. The butcher's wife had fallen ill two days before, and anxiety snaked around his eyes in dark circles.

"What are you doing here?" The butcher's voice was hoarse like a tiger's growl. "Two servings of pork ribs, please."

The butcher scoffed, his tongue licking his upper teeth. Once readily dismissing superstition, the butcher now glared at my owner with hostility. "You're no longer welcome."

My owner refused to leave. "I said, two servings of pork ribs, please."

It was the butcher who swung the first punch, knuckles striking against bone, the crack loud and clear like a battle horn. Soon, a swarm of people surrounded my owner. They beat him, some with clubs, some with sticks, others with rotten vegetables or fish organs. Their objects struck his flesh and skin, the percussion thudding along a ghastly rhythm. This commotion attracted crowds, who lingered to watch the ceremony. These bystanders weren't strangers. I recognized past friends who now cheered on. I saw other fishermen watching in the distance with relief. I looked into the eyes of people who almost stepped in to aid my owner but ducked away when a club was swung high.

In the background, the butcher quietly slipped back to his bench. He observed the scene with satisfaction as he chopped cow gristle. The fat lagging around his neck jerked with every motion. By the time they were done, my owner was unrecognizable. I was also unrecognizable—torn, dirty, and more blood-red than white.

After that, Euphradis stopped going to school.

She and her mother sat before their kitchen window, reviewing the textbooks by themselves. For the first time, worry plagued Euphradis's brown eyes. She became restless and jumped at the slightest commotions. The fishermen ostracized my owner, and he did not attempt to reason with them. He spent hours in the backyard, staring with longing at where the sea met the shore.

My owner once attempted to scrub away the iron stench of blood

on me with rose-scented soap. Some of the stains persisted, tattooed onto the fabric. One night, when he thought his wife and daughter were asleep, he took me and walked out. He sat on the grass. Secluded by the shadow cast by the bright moon, he talked to me. About his life in the Southern Islands, about how he met his wife, and about Euphradis. His voice quivered before he started crying, his face buried in the chest pocket, where the marigold, no longer a vivid yellow and becoming threadbare, quietly accompanied him.

“I want to go home,” he whispered. “But where is home?”

I did not know the answer. I could not feel his agony, but the grass around us told me that he smelled of bitterness, like burnt coal. It was a smell of sadness and fear and defeat.

I could not comprehend such a scent. I just watched him, the remaining debris of his once strong and loving self, cry like an abandoned child.

After that night, he carefully folded me into a square, the marigold facing up, and closed the closet door. That was the last time I saw him.

I remained shrouded in darkness and the smell of mothballs for what seemed like many months, barred from the outside. The person who remembered me was the Wife. She dragged the closet door open in one swift motion, her arm plucking the neatly hung clothes like an ax chopping wood. She noticed me, a lone shirt aging in solitude. She picked me up, fingers tracing the marigold. That was when I realized that she no longer wore the indigo necklace, a gift from her husband. She no longer tidied her hair with the habitual vermilion clip. Her back remained bent, as if her heart had been bleeding for many nights and straightening her torso would cause the scab to reopen.

That day, the Wife rolled me out on the dining table. I winced at the prickly coldness of the glass surface. She took a deep breath before she picked up her sewing scissors. The metal blades danced crisply across my skin, slicing away the parts of me splattered with blood. She started with the sleeves, then worked her way down, blade unapologetically ripping through the many places she had painstakingly sewn together for her husband before. Occasionally, when a thread was too stubborn to submit, she used her fingers,

wrapping it around the piece, before plucking it off like unwanted wild grass. When she was done, I had been cut into a square piece of handkerchief clean of brown spots. I stayed there on the table, coldness piercing through my back, limbs completely ripped away, flesh ruined and bleeding, while the Wife disposed of my chopped-up ruins. There was a certain rage in her movements that later turned to agony, but I could not feel any of it.

The only thing that remained was the yellow marigold, blooming on the white cloth, front and center.

The Wife carried me everywhere. Most of the time she grasped me tightly in her hand, except for when she played with Euphradis. She became the Mother, then. She used me to tie her hair into a ponytail.

Euphradis had changed, too. The roundness of her cheeks had slimmed. Her honey-smooth voice from my memory had turned hoarse and brittle, laden with weariness uncanny for her age. Her eyes no longer curved into crescents when she smiled; she no longer laughed, her mouth no longer opening wide to show off one missing front tooth. She did not talk in anything louder than a whisper.

It seemed that only through playing could the Mother find a temporary oasis to escape the desert she lived in. In the afternoons, the Mother played tag on the grass, neglecting the neighbors who glared and cussed at her. It was during these moments when I saw the potential of her smile, one from when she was truly happy. The Mother became lighter, the wrinkles that had solidified around the corners of her eyes loosened. She straightened her back. She ran close to Euphradis before sprinting away, while Euphradis stood still, watching her mother skip around the yard.

When the Mother grew tired, they lay on the grass and watched the clouds. “Look, Euphradis,” the Mother said. “Papa is waving at us.”

I looked at Euphradis to see her reaction, but her face remained still, tranquil as an unbothered lake.

“He is eating passionfruit ice cream, just like the one he made on your birthdays.” She suddenly smiled before breaking into crackles and eventually laughter. Her shoulders were the first to shake before her whole body was infected with movement. They lay there for a

long time, the Mother shaking with laughter that sounded more like a wheeze while Euphradis calmly listened to emotions surge through her mother like electricity.

“Papa is not in pain anymore,” comforted the Mother. “He won’t be sick anymore, Euphradis.”

“Papa wasn’t sick,” corrected her daughter. “It was the town. And the people.”

Euphradis tilted her head to watch the sky. The clouds were tinged blood red as the sun skated towards the west.

I was no longer afraid when the Mother picked up her metal scissors and approached me for the second time. When she was done, I had been turned into a small ragdoll. She had sewn other pieces of fabric to form limbs and hair, all topped with a pink fabric dress with some sequins and plastic pearls. She then used hay to fill the body since she couldn’t find spare cotton. The hay was rough and smelled different from the grass, lacking their petrichor scent from dewdrops. She used charcoal to draw a crooked smiley face. She was a sloppy artist. The marigold blossomed where the eye of the doll was drawn.

She gave the doll to Euphradis. “She will sleep with you, Euphradis, so you won’t be afraid anymore.”

Euphradis looked up from her desk, her face still and controlled, spilling not a drop of emotion. “Why would I be afraid, Mama?”

The Mother pointed at Euphradis’s scrapbook. Its blank pages had become crowded with small, black figures drawn close to each other. It was as if her hand did not know how to turn to a new page, mechanically recreating the same stick man, over and over, until they piled together on the page like dust particles. Euphradis flung her scrapbook shut, rubbing away the lead marks smudged on her fingers before she looked up and smiled.

“Don’t you worry, Mama,” Euphradis said. She tossed the book inside a drawer. For a brief moment, several pages of the scrapbook flipped open, and I saw the same figures drawn on them.

“I’m not afraid.”

Day after day, Euphradis drew figures in her scrapbook. When all pages were filled, she drew on desks then walls. Soon, every empty

surface in her room was marked by her drawings. She never stopped feeling lonely, even after surrounding herself with her stick people.

At night, her fingers traced over the marigold, following the span of every flower petal. Her rough motion smeared some of the charcoal onto the yellow flower. I watched her tint the once brilliant yellow into a dirty shade, and that was when I felt something.

It started as a small zest in my left arm that crawled up like ants and before I could comprehend, tsunamis of colors and smells surged through my body, pounding like heavy pig-iron. Something shifted within. It was excruciating. To be exact, the hay inside me was no longer grass, but somehow I could detect Euphradis's emotions. All I could smell from the layer of sweat covering her body was despair, a feeling that penetrated through skin, pierced through flesh, cracked open the hard shell of bone and dug into the marrow. I could not withstand it. I would rather be burned or shredded into a thousand pieces. I watched Euphradis, whose eyes were foreign and cold, who no longer remembered me or how she used to gently admire the marigold. I no longer remembered the girl who once traced the flower over her father's heart at the street market. In front of me was only the Euphradis-shaped loneliness that was hollow and void.

I watched the marigold turn brown, and I cried.

Inner Core

When the first drill pierced the outer mantle, environmentalists and critics staged protests throughout the world, roaring, “Planet over Profit!” and “How far are you willing to go?” and “The Earth is our Mother.” When the media was forced to hush up the stories of thousands of miners dying in a tunnel collapse, and journalists were killed over access to government-funded operations, the streets could hardly hold the number of bodies futilely demanding justice. When mining operations began harvesting the liquid iron and nickel from the outer core to build the giant network of cities through the mantle, one man in sub-Shanghai, one girl in sub-Bogotá, and two teenagers in Tahlequah felt a twisting pain in their chests, shattering the last remnants of hope for the planet they live in.

The thick orange light that streamed down from the high ceiling made each face passing by look clownish, garish, much unlike the strength of the sun. The Over said that the long strips of lights hanging high on the rock ceilings provided the same amount of vitamin D and the same level of physical health that the sun would if they lived above ground, and perhaps that’s true to someone had never been above ground; but Emily had traveled to London, real London, seen the brightness of the sun and felt its warmth. The lights were laughable after that.

However, she tried not to think about it too much. She continued down the chiseled sidewalk, the high sheer edge of the heat-reflective metal that protected sub-London from the deathly heat and pressure of the outer mantle on her right and the clattering of the trains on her left. Turning on 5th street, she passed the community garden, stealing a few raspberries from neighbor Tanya’s patch before opening the trapdoor and sliding down the chute into her house.

“Hello, darling. How was school?” said her mother.

Emily noticed the lines on her face as she repeated the time-worn question asked every time Emily returned home, even though she wasn't in school anymore—but of course, her mother didn't remember that. She couldn't remember anything from the past five years. Rhythm and routine was Katherine Trella's life, the only thing keeping her from spiraling deeper into a mental void.

Emily didn't have the heart to tell her, again, that she had spent the whole day working at the computer-chip factory. "Lovely. I learned—" She searched her fading memories of school from when she was eight, the year before she dropped out. "—about lions."

Katherine smiled, patting her hand softly. "You're such a good girl. Keep this up, and you might even be sent to the surface, my darling!" Emily blinked her rapidly misting eyes, kissed the top of Katherine's hair, and hurried to her room. As soon as the door closed, a tremor shook the ground. She braced herself, waiting for it to end, but it lasted longer than normal. Her snowglobe antiques clinked and shook on the shelf, swirling a white that Emily had never seen.

"Attention, all workers!" Emily sighed, lifting the goggles off her nose and moving to join the throng around the Manager. It was the weekly listing, sending up to five workers down to the OCDP. They went to replace the miners who had died that week, and none of them ever returned, of course. It had been terrifying when she first started working there, holding her breath each time a name was called and celebrating when it wasn't her. But after hundreds of listings, she had started to feel a sort of indifference.

"Lirel, Lisa." There was movement by the exit, like someone was trying to run. Emily looked up, interested at last. Barely anyone tried to run. It was impossible to escape. And Lisa Lirel was taken after barely a minute of fight, out through the thick steel double doors to the elevators. "Donnelly, Benjamin. Kalin, Doran. Perchov, Maria. And Trella, Emily. Thank you for your service.

"Those of you not called, please continue with your work. Together we build a better society." And the little round Manager left the room.

Trella, Emily. Trella, Emily. Trella. Emily. Me. Me. Me. It couldn't be her. It had never been her. The statistical likelihood of her being called was approaching zero. And yet...her gloves were made of thick metallic fabric, which the OCDP made, the kind which repelled any

type of material, protecting what was inside. Katherine had bought them for her in one of her periods of lucidity, when Emily told her that she worked for the factory. Pressing them into her hands, her mother had said, "I'm sorry." Emily had never said that she forgave her.

"Emily Trella? Where are you?" a man called from beside the doors.

The surface tension of her tears made them gather into full droplets on her gloves, like little pearls sparkling against the silvery gray. "Goodbye, mama," she whispered, kissing the tips of her gloves. Without looking up, she walked up, showed her badge to the man by the door, and left.

It was hot in the outer core. Emily supposed she could have guessed that, but what with the layers of enhanced metal heat shields, electrical force fields, and whatever else the OCDP was throwing at this project, she had expected it to be cooler. Maybe not sweater weather, but at least not sweating-buckets weather.

At least she had time to get used to it. The elevator ride took three hours, in a ten by ten foot box filled with scarred faux-wood benches in rows. With the growing heat, dozens of workers in transport to the mines, and an expanding haze of cigarette smoke, even the hundred-square foot room felt uncomfortably tight. When at last the elevator jittered to a halt and the main overseer called, "All right, everyone off!" she expected to walk into a high-ceilinged room, like sub-London's sky.

The tunnel ceiling was two meters above the obstacle-littered floor.

Hot, the heat bleeding into everything, pulsating like a nightmare on the edge of consciousness. Miners not on duty in their tents, sulfuric smell even stronger than their body odor.

Emily had never felt claustrophobia in her life, but the tunnel walls crept closer and closer, forcing her lungs to constrict, as they picked their way down the tunnel to the Manager's office.

Hard metal under their feet, blindingly bright white-nickel desks, strips of sun-light like in the sub-cities.

Chemical rose-smells manufactured thousands of kilometers away from any flower, people in tight, clean coveralls which had likely never been outside this room. The newcomers formed a wob-

bly line, having learned order and structure from factory jobs which never put a high emphasis on teaching.

The overseer cleared her throat, and a man in a pure white coverall suit strode in front of them. “Hello, and welcome to the Outer Core Drilling Project! We are the most important members of society—we are the creators of all modern conveniences, the heat shields being only one magnificent example. Here, you have a purpose: to help further the cause of mankind and bring us ever closer to piercing the depths of mystery!” He paused. One man coughed, a phlegmy sound, heralding lung cancer. “All right, then. You each will be given a job based on your physical skills and recommendations from your factory Managers.” He gestured, and a woman began handing out tablets. Emily was assigned Drill Operator of D5467 subunit 46 of quadrant 3. Keep this up, and you might even be sent to the surface, my darling! The surface, now three thousand kilometers above her. Her mother, closer to it than she would ever be again.

Shrill, grinding metal. Glowing hot, the metal forge of the Earth’s inner blood, scooped up in the melt-proof bucket of the machine, dropped into the chute that took it to processing. Inch forward a meter through the white hot ocean, anchored to the tunnel extending downward. The path, cleared of liquid metal, staked by force fields so that cooling-suited people could scurry forward, lay the metal tunnel. Always on the outside of the force field, scoop another, lay force field markers, move forward. Ten long hours, occurring every fourteen, no days off—but it’s not like there would be anything to do with a day off anyway.

Emily stepped out of the bubbled cab of D5467, relinquishing the hold to another worker, identical down to the constant red-skinned burn everyone wore. Stumbling over the newly-laid tunnel floor, she collapsed on the blanket given as a sleep roll, the one she only used for protection from the heat of the metal. A jar of imitation aloe was pushed into her hand, and not caring who was around, she slipped off her heat-protective oversuit and rubbed the cooling liquid into her blistering skin. Then to lay, half in sleep, until she was called for her next shift.

“Congratulations all workers!” The sound reverberated through the loudspeakers, which were usually only used for determining shift changes and the weekly rations distribution. She sat up, heart

pounding. “As of twenty minutes ago, the farthest of our drills has pierced the inner core! With your help, and continuing support, we shall soon reach the center of the Earth!” With a buzz, the loudspeaker quieted. Emily took a bite of her dinner rations and collapsed back into stupor.

The next shift change was faster than she wanted. With the breach of the inner core, the Managers decided that ten hours was enough rest time—rest and work in equal measures!—and why rest if you could be working?

She passed her counterpart going the opposite way, and briefly smiled—the first time she had remembered doing such a thing in weeks. “Congrats.”

The other operator looked up and nodded. “Thanks.” Their voice was rusty with heat, radiation, and disuse. They must have been here for longer than her, for the skin under their helmet was the cracking bronze that comes after months of exposure to the metals. They kept walking, and she passed them on her way to the huge machine, but the taste of that human connection caught her for a moment. Before she crawled back into the bubbled hatch of the machine, before she delved for the first time into the inner core: “Hey. What’s your name?” They turned, slowly.

“Me?”

“No, the liquid nickel behind you.” She lifted her visor for a moment, letting the heat wash over her. “I’m Emily. It’s good to meet you.”

The operator looked at her outstretched hand, then up to her eyes. “Jorge,” they said, taking her hand.

Then they gestured up at the machine. “You better get going. They’ll relegate you to tunnel building if you don’t get in soon.” She smiled, flicked her visor back down, and climbed the steps up the behemoth to the cab. Something cooling filled her insides, soft and sweet like ice cream. The first time she’d spoken to someone since she got to the OCDP; now, she supposed with a smile, the ICDP. What is with me? Practically skipping into the cab, she slid the door shut and let the radiant joy fill her. Maybe, if this was the rest of her life, it wouldn’t be so bad after all.

The inner core.

Hotter. Sweat trickling down her brow, lungs unable to take full,

deep breaths of the searing air.

Pressure. The cab protected against most of it, but she felt woozy, unable to think, unable to react, barely able to pilot the machine.

Outside, beyond the protection, lies the hard core of iron.

A new drill attached to D5467 dug into the core, spinning and catching and tossing huge chunks of iron off behind her to be caught in the new trailer, piloted by someone else. Spinning, the diamond-edged blades sinking deep, cutting, catching, pulling. Farther into the core, heat, pressure. The ice cream feeling vanished—how could it survive such a hot, hellish place?

A sudden blaze. The thick, dark, heavy metal broken by a starburst of light, cracking as an egg would hatch, letting forth new spirals of light. Inertia, movement of the drill, pushes its tip against the starburst, cracks under the weight of the machine.

Blinding light. Beneath her, shudders. And in front...radiance.

Spilling, waterfaling over the edge of the broken iron, melting red-hot. Pouring past the windows, through the tunnel like a river bursting its dams, set free. Within the flood, creatures. Golden eyes, lustrous bodies, wide mouths with ivory teeth. Wings spread wide in flight, spinning, twirling, twining, glowing.

Rushing past, up through the dark passage at the center of the Earth with the light from their bodies glancing back hundredfold. Through the metal ocean, swimming as a school, soaring through layers of rock, and out to the dark, star-dappled sky. Burning, soaring radiance.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Love Songs

February:

I think I am in love.

“It’s Wyatt,” I whisper to Clara at lunch. She squeals and shoves me, and my pretzel sticks spill and clatter across the cafeteria floor like marbles.

We share shy smiles in class, and fleeting glances across the heads of our classmates in the gym lineup. Sometimes in math, when we have to share a compass, our arms brush and we jump away as if electrocuted.

On Valentine’s Day, I get to school early. I run to my locker and throw open the door, visions of cardboard hearts and confetti clouding my vision. When the smoke clears, my heart thuds, flops, falls.

Empty.

“You shouldn’t worry so much,” Mom says when I tell her. “After all, you didn’t give him anything either.”

I don’t tell her the second reason I went to school early, or about the unopened box of chocolates at the bottom of my bag.

February/March:

After Valentine’s Day, the conversation moves from crushes to coronavirus.

Clara chews her fingernails in worry as she speaks, but Ginger snorts and rubs her hand back and forth across the floor, then licks it, as if to prove the virus is nothing, that she is invincible.

Afterwards, Clara worries, bites her nails, remembers why she’s worrying, stops. I watch her hand go from her mouth to her lap and

back again, secretly wishing we could go back to talking about love.

March 13:

On March 13, at 4:58 p.m., I am in choir rehearsal—our last one before spring break.

Mr. Hatton waves his arms up and down, cutting through the air with angry slashes. “Louder! Faster! Altos, you’re flat!”

The room swells with our sound, and my heart expands with it. I love choir more than anything, love the way our voices grow as one. We have reached the crescendo of *Fuego*, *Fuego* when Mr. Hatton’s phone begin to buzz. He waves at us to continue, but we are all watching as the color drains from his face.

All of the singers are flat now, and I have a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach when I remember Clara biting her nails. Mr. Hatton sweeps the sound into his closed fist. The silence is deafening.

“The board has just announced that school will be closed for two weeks after spring break.” This announcement is greeted by whoops and high-fives, but my gut feels like lead when Mr. Hatton doesn’t even flinch.

“Why?” I ask, and I don’t think he’ll hear me over the cheers, but he does, and he says the word I am beginning to hate most in the world—

“Coronavirus.”

Mr. Hatton sends us home. I see Clara in the hall and wave, but she shrinks away and scuttles down the corridor, hands firmly in her pockets. On the subway, people wear masks or pull scarves and coat collars up over their noses, casting terrified glances around the half-empty car.

What is happening?

March 14-17:

On March 14, I meet Ginger in the park across the street. As she speaks, she scrapes her boot back and forth across the frozen woodchips. “We’re going to Cuba. My parents think we’ll be safer there.”

I don't mention that day at lunch, but we are both thinking about it.

On March 15, we cannot see anyone anymore.

On March 16, the government announces we have to stay two metres apart from anyone we don't live with.

On March 17, a state of emergency is declared. High-risk activities are prohibited. I read the list with growing disbelief.

Sports.

Socializing.

Swimming.

Singing.

April 1:

On April 1st, it snows. Big, fat flakes fall from the sky, collect on the branches, cover the ground and the new spring flowers. After dark, Hannah, Christine and I drag our toboggans to Trinity Bellwoods Park. Hannah, who's ten, slashes at bushes and sends flurries of snow falling onto the wet, slushy sidewalk. Christine, six, holds my hand and glances around fearfully. She thinks coronavirus is a monster that sickens people after dark.

We get to the slope that leads to the dog park. Hannah whoops and throws herself onto her sled, careening down the hill. We follow, Christine holding tight and screaming all the way down. Run, slide, drag the sled back up the hill. Repeat until our gloves are frozen and our coats are soaked through.

It starts to rain—wet, icy drops that make the snow slick and slippery. Christine wants to go home, but Hannah refuses. She gets on the sled and tears down the hill, screaming, screaming, screaming for help because she's lost control, and I'm throwing myself down the hill after her because running in this rain is too dangerous, and I grab the rope and pull her away from the tree in front of her, and then we're rolling into a heap at the bottom of the hill.

And Christine is crying because there's a police officer standing next to her, telling her that sledding is dangerous, and we're breaking restrictions, and we should be at home.

We walk home in the rain. Christine cries. Hannah, for once, is silent, aware of how close she came to crashing. And I burn with

anger.

There was no one else on that hill. We stayed apart the whole way there, and we're related. Why doesn't the government arrest the protestors who gather in front of City Hall every Saturday, spewing garbage about how coronavirus is fake? Why don't they break up the parties in the AirBNB across the street?

Not fair, not fair, not fair.

April 2-30:

The snow doesn't last. Within a few days, the watery spring sun peeks out from behind the clouds, and the clean snow is replaced with dark mud that freezes in clumps and sticks to our boots like Superglue. The long, cold days drag on, turning over themselves like a worn-out dishrag: repeating, repeating, repeating.

We start online school. Our teachers are burnt-out. Our technology glitches. Our grades are suspended. Wyatt doesn't come to class anymore, and after a while, neither do I. There's no point to it, no function. Just dull hours spent with my eyes glued to my MacBook.

In drama, we take photographs and play games, pretending that this is theatre. I sing in my room every night. Sometimes I play recordings of our choir, imagining that we are all together, that I'm not actually alone.

May:

In the middle of May, the clouds break and the sun streams down on the still, frozen city. Case numbers drop. I see Clara, socially distanced, wearing masks and talking over a splintered picnic bench. She asks about Wyatt and I shrug, ignoring the sharp stab of regret in my gut.

I expect to be sad when we get the news that school is closed until September. Instead, I am not surprised. Mom shrugs, sips her coffee, and goes back to her laptop-- the office she carries with her to the bedroom, to the backyard. Hannah and Catherine and I turn off the news and go play outside.

June:

School's almost over. I send emails to all my teachers, thanking them for the small things: a good grade on an assignment I thought I'd failed; games of virtual Mafia; Google Classroom chats, when we reached out and remembered others existed, that there was life beyond our tiny family bubbles.

The government announces that we are moving forward slowly, stage by stage.

Curbside pickup starts at the library: paper bags of books, like presents, that we tear open and devour in days. I step inside a store for the very first time since March and buy a beef patty, the spicy meat filling dancing on my tongue.

July:

A quarantine summer is not so different from a regular summer. Long days at the pool; climbing out and waiting in line every forty-five minutes so the lifeguards can clean. Ice cream sandwiches that melt all over our hands. Lots of books. Hannah, Catherine, Mom, and me. A quiet, cheerful loneliness that we have all grown accustomed to.

August:

By August, the question everyone asks is, "Are you going back to school?" The government is sending us back—cramming too many kids in tiny classrooms and pretending masks will keep us all safe. People write letters, protest. But no one is listening.

I am going back. So is Ginger. Clara is not. My longing for Wyatt comes back with a vengeance. During the last week of August, I bike to his neighborhood and ride by his house two, three, four times.

September:

They push the starting date of school forward, then forward again. Two weeks after Labour Day, I wait in a long screening line with Ginger, scuffing away the social distance markers spray-painted on the woodchips. No one's following them anyway.

Ginger reaches for a twig and snaps it in half over and over, speaking as she does so. "I. Am. So. Tired. Of. This. Shit." I don't know if she means the pandemic, or the government messing everything up, but I agree.

I get to class at ten o'clock. It's math. I stare out the window, missing Wyatt. At break I meet up with Ginger, and we compare stories until our teachers holler at us to get away from each other.

Classes last four hours and end at twelve-thirty. I get up in the dark, bike to school, and bike home in time for my virtual class. There is no choir. I watch for Wyatt every day, but he's not there. I make a playlist called Love Songs and listen to it, thinking of him. I remember when we thought we would be dealing with this for two weeks, when we didn't know the meaning of the word pandemic.

October:

It's a cold, wet fall. I whiz through my homework, try not to think about Wyatt, sing sing sing. I am determined that when choir starts again, I will not have fallen behind.

On Halloween, it rains. Mom takes Catherine to the houses that are giving out candy.

Hannah decides she's too old for trick-or-treating, so we stay inside and watch Coraline, eating fun-size candy bars until we feel sick. I try not to think about what Wyatt's doing, or about all the parties that should be happening but are not.

November:

Our first quadmester is almost over. I'll miss math, miss writing long, tidy columns of numbers. I never told Wyatt that what I like best about math is the way the numbers line up on the page.

Clara messages me. *They closed registration for the Virtual School.*

Did you see Wyatt in any of your classes? I reply. I already know the answer. I ask her every week.

No, Clara answers. *Why don't you DM him on socials?*

I've tried. Wyatt's internet presence is nonexistent.

I am scrolling through Instagram when I see it. A red dot under the heart at the top of the screen. Which is odd, because I haven't posted in forever.

I read the follow request, my breath quickening. A new account. Wy=mx+b. I smile so wide my cheeks hurt. He's such a dork. I accept the request, follow him back. The next day, a message in my DM's. *Is my screen name too nerdy?*

It's perfect, I reply. Then, heart pounding, I add, *I miss you.*

The three dots appear, disappear. Miss you too.

We message every night. We talk about school at first. He's in the Virtual School, taking advanced placement classes. He tells me about his plans for university, his dog. I tell him about Hannah and Catherine, and what it's like learning both ways, one foot on either side of a precarious teeter-totter. He asks me to send him a selfie. I send him one of me with my hair mussed up, in my favorite T-shirt and jeans. He sends one of him and his dog. They are both smiling. I make it my phone wallpaper. When Mom sees it, she smiles and rolls her eyes.

December:

Clara and Ginger hit the roof when I tell them. "Oh my God! When did this happen?"

"When were you going to tell us?"

"Is he your boyfriend?" Ginger wants to know.

I shrug, tracing a pattern into my duvet. Is Wyatt my boyfriend? "I don't know," I tell them, suddenly wishing I hadn't said a word.

There are no exams, so when classes are over, I'm free. Hannah and Catherine and I spend hours playing board games or tossing a ball around in the alley behind our house.

Wyatt and I FaceTime long into the night. I let him listen to my playlist, and he sends me one of his own. Sarah Jaffe, James Blunt. Songs I've never heard of before but love.

One evening, a few days before Christmas, I ask, “Are you my boyfriend?”

He seems taken aback, pushing his glasses further up his nose. “Do you want me to be?”

I swallow hard. “I think so.”

“Then it would be my pleasure,” he says, and grins so goofily I can’t help but laugh.

COVID cases are on the rise. I have hardly noticed, but on the last day of school, everyone seems more reluctant to leave than usual. We hang out in the halls, the library, the covered circle where kids release plumes of cigarette smoke into the frosty air. We are all remembering spring break.

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, Mom lets me bike over to the Junction (after I promise to wear a mask and stay far away from Wyatt.)

He’s waiting for me outside his house. We go for a walk. I ache when I remember we can’t bump shoulders, can’t hold hands, can’t go into a coffee shop for a hot chocolate when we get cold. We stop in an empty playground and sit down on a bench.

“Here.” Wyatt pulls something from his pocket and holds it out to me. I unwrap a fragile glass bird, wings spread, beak pointing toward the sky. “It reminds me of you,” he says, “because you never stop hoping.”

We can’t kiss, but it doesn’t matter. We sit on the bench, smiling under our masks, and our hearts soar up and fly through the slate-gray winter sky, singing.

Hunger

Years ago, Jane and I spent hours baking in our humid little kitchen. When I could barely reach the top of the granite counters, she'd pass me eggs and sugar to whip in stainless steel bowls. She'd handle the oven, I'd handle the eating. We'd giggle on island stools—feet dangling, barely grazing the floor, talking about recipes and things our pious mother would never approve of.

Then Jane became too preoccupied with hockey boys and calorie counting to bake. I continued to eat and listen to her worship the toilet bowl in the early hours. She ignored me in school hallways. I ignored the burgeoning collection of her hair on the surfaces of our shared bedroom. But she'd always bring me home food she wouldn't eat when she was out—pretzel sticks in soggy cups from her mall rendezvous, hoagies in plastic baggies from her away games. And I'd pretend not to worry about her rapidly declining weight. She was routine. I was complicit.

Jane's first real date was at the Cheesecake Factory, with the junior boy who sold vape pens behind the 7-Eleven. Hunched over with my hands deep in a doughy mass, she passed me by—a haze of vanilla sugar body mist and rose blush.

“Ames, you know that's going straight to your hips.”

“Whatever.” My palms dug deeper.

From the kitchen window, I saw her leave an unadulterated madonna—swathed in white, sitting in his sedan with the Virgin Mary watching over, bouncing on a string from under the rearview mirror.

I saw Jane last as a fossil of poor decisions in the middle of Park Street, impressed onto the car dashboard, leaking berry coulis. The boy's car, now a Jackson Pollock in scarlet, reeked of cheap beer and

sin. The Virgin was gone—she probably couldn't bear the stench. Blue and red flashed indigo onto my parents' delayed faces, still deciding on how to react. I hungered.

"Hey you—you might want this," An EMT handed me a brown takeout bag, only slightly dampened by ambiguous fluids, as some sort of consolidation.

"Thanks."

"I can't imagine what you're going through."

I blinked and I was at home, sitting across the shiny bag that was moistening the cold counter—interrogation style. I was in an intense staring contest with the bag. My eyelids weighed heavy—the bag won. I demanded a rematch.

"Who the fuck gives alcohol to a sixteen-year-old?!" Mom's shrill voice punctured through the walls. I never heard her swear—she's on the phone. "I don't care if he had a fake ID, they were clearly children!"

"Honey. You have to calm down. There's nothing that we can do—" Dad interjected in his hushed negotiator voice. There's shuffling.

"I don't want your goddamned condolences, I want you in jail!" Mom began to screech but she then dwindled into interrupted sobs. Something glass shatters.

That night, I could not seem to apply enough weight on my bedroom door handle. Inside: her hairbrush chock-full of her bleached tresses, her unmade sheets that were still warm with her indent, her assigned readings remained unread, her scale still wet with a layer of her three a.m. tears; I could not comprehend that these nuisances were now artifacts, evidence of a former life. I slept to the lullabies of the running fridge, cowered over her unopened mail on the counter.

Craving.

Straight after the funeral, I walked home. I couldn't stand being the only person in the room not dripping with viscous slime, not blubbering faux-sentimental bullshit, then being bombarded by relatives I could not name for not dripping with viscous slime, for not blubbering faux-sentimental bullshit—"She was your sister, you know that? I get you guys weren't the closest but the least you could

do is pretend to be sad.” I couldn’t stand my grandmother pointing out the clutches under my eyes, clasping her hand around my wrist, and telling me I “look just like her now” as if it’s high praise.

Amid the unopened gift baskets and gaudy flower arrangements that have taken over the kitchen, the takeout bag stood tall—unmoved for weeks and now stuck to the counter, taunting me. The plastic rustled out Jane’s thinspirational caution, “You know I’ll go straight to your hips.” But the last thing I wanted was to be Jane, a girl who chose toilet bowls, boys, and booze over her sister—a girl who’d rather die in a pretty dress on Park than eat pie. I tore the bag into shreds. I shoveled in stale cream and strawberry drizzle that’s been dried into flakes, leaving no room for gasps between each spiteful bite. I scraped the styrofoam box, licked the container dry, and collected graham crumbs off of plastic with my stickied finger—yet the void in my stomach continued to grow.

I was awoken by my dad bowing at the fridge, sweeping armfuls of kale and sprouty greens into crinkly black trash bags. The hunger had manifested itself into restless nights in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting rid of all of Jane’s shit. No ones gonna eat them anyway.” He held up Jane’s almond milk before shoving it into the polyethylene abyss. “Whatever happened to good ol’ fashioned cow milk?”

“Oh.” The thought of Jane’s designated shelf in the fridge gone made my insides churn. “We really can’t keep them for a little longer?”

“Amy.”

“Cause I saw this recipe for kale cupcakes online and I thought I might try—”

“Go to sleep kid,” he sighed, hauling the Hefty bags out of the kitchen.

My eyes refused to seal, refused to break their gaze with the bags. All of Jane’s stuff was undoubtedly revolting—but it was still hers; still the salads she forced herself to stomach, still the chalky, twenty-calorie rice cakes she tried to convince herself were basically the same thing as bread.

After the roar of dad’s truck trailed off, I slithered outside. My

pink soles squelched upon the freshly rained grass, noon began to cast golden on the yard. The trashcan was chained shut.

Asshole. I tried to pry the lid off—it stayed bound. I tried again. I yanked the silver shackles hard. Harder. The metal links carved out dents on my palms. Heat boiled on the back of my neck. The trashcan was unchanged—smug motherfucker. The drum toppled over to my bare heel. Still unopened. I beat down on the hollow plastic until my hands gave out—each strike, momentary catharsis. I collapsed down on the warm concrete. I was tired. I was hungry.

“Amy?”

“Jesus Christ, Amy.”

“Hffftt. Come on. Let’s get you inside.”

“Have a good dream?” a voice peeked through my unconscious. Dad was leaning on the doorframe, I was in bed. My bed. “I can’t imagine you’ve been having the best sleeps over in the kitchen—”

I zoned out of what he was saying, his words melted into incoherent gibberish. I looked left to Jane’s bed, still unmade. My chest tightened. Her makeup was still sprawled out at her vanity. Her pictures were still tacky on the wallpaper. My stomach growled.

“—So, just let me know if you need anything. Okay?”

I nod. I had no idea what he had said.

“Go back to sleep kid.” He closed the door.

I gently pulled each leg from under my comforter, strategically placing each foot on the creaky floorboards. The room was cold, the unfamiliar familiarity made my head spin. I trodded over to her vanity, and a stranger mirrored back—my skin had paled, my eyes lost their gleam. I was her. I was empty. I was famished.

I paced around the room, walking the same path she’d walked a thousand times before. I spritzed on her unfinished body mist until the whole room stunk of warm vanilla and sugar. I dragged my finger along her bed frame, along our desks. My finger had collected layers of gunk, dust, and hair. I stared at the strands of Jane’s hair delicately coiled around my pointer, my vision began to fuzzy. She was in here. I slowly parted my lips, and brought my finger to my mouth, and cleaned my finger empty. My stomach demanded more.

I swept her vanity clean, her curls placed pretty on my palm,

then shoved down my esophagus. Salty droplets streamed down the hollows of my cheeks—but I couldn't stop. I pounced onto her mattress, seized strands from her pillowcase. I needed more. I gripped her hairbrush from her nightstand and clasped all of her blonde locks from the bristles. I thrust each strand into my trap, I did not chew. I was repulsive.

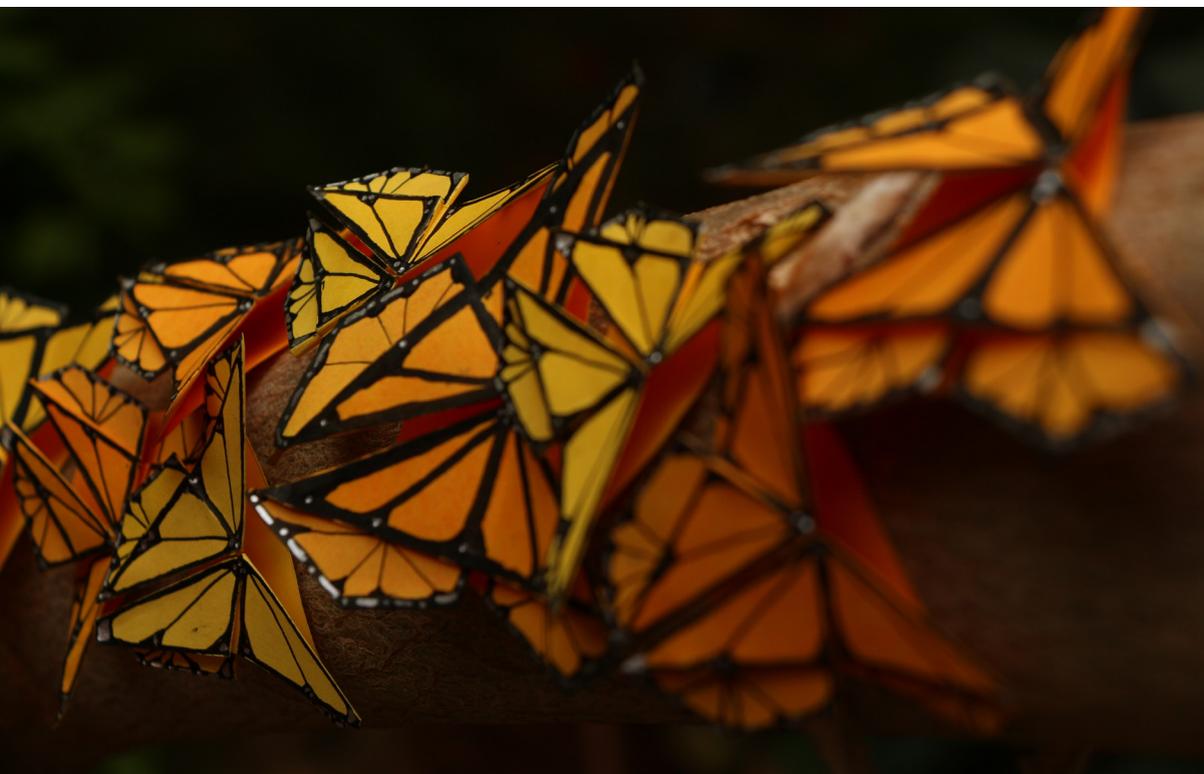
I slumped against the wall. Faltered sobs bubbled from my throat and through the ball of Jane that sat in the back of my mouth.

I was still hungry.

But it didn't seem like this hunger would ever go away.



JAQUELINE LEE
Structured Lives



TANVI IYER
Paper Monarch Butterflies

My Grandmother's Hands

The Danube River flows from her veins,
down calloused palms and ridged layers of skin,

through fingernails encrusted with soil,
her proud warrior scars.

Her knuckles are the Carpathian Mountains
that I climb to reach her beating heart.

These are the hands that gently braid my hair,
their textured wrinkles folding over my locks,

the hands that comb through spring blossoms
and whisper lullabies to slumbering lambs.

They're the hands that light the fire in the stove
and roll out pastry dough,

the fingers that brush luscious egg wash
and sprinkle pungent caraway seeds.

They guide the scissors and needle through fabrics
to make dresses the colors of zinnias.

When I leave, they're the hands that wipe my tears,
a soft touch that caresses our last embrace.

Each summer, I ask my grandmother to hold my hand
even when we're far apart.

Split Ends

“Mama, when’s your next hair appointment?” I asked.

We were in the car when I brought it up, coming home from my piano lessons, the last of a class-packed schedule on a Saturday night. The air twisted tightly following my mother’s long, gruelling lecture— my hands, my feet, and how they played the piano’s black and white keys and rusty gold pedals had long faded to a lingering silence. Red illuminates the car, the seats, and everything around me. Mama was watching me, waiting for my face to flip to green as if I were a better stoplight than anything on the street.

“Next Thursday, why? You want to come?” She asked.

“I wanted to try getting my hair done at a salon.” I pulled my cheeks up and prayed she would give in just this once.

“Cheaper to do at home.”

“Well, we’re going to that dinner thing Baba was talking about, anyway.” I tried, “Why not get my hair done before then? You know, try something new.” We both knew I couldn’t care less about that family reunion, dinner party, or whatever it was. It was too awkward, going through my slim library of Chinese vocabulary to scrap together a reply to an aunt, uncle, or some random woman who knew me from birth.

“Okay, you show me the style, I cut for you.” She said in her absolute tone, and I couldn’t help myself.

“Why can’t we go to a salon? I want to get my hair done like Leina’s. Or Anya’s. Did you know Anya dyed her hair dark brown? Maybe I could go blonde.” My thoughts were scrambled, and I was pushing dangerously close to Mama’s limit.

Mama pursed her lips, her eyes skimming about my hair, still black under the red light. I shook my head as if to flaunt the thin strands and heard them hit the puff of my vest.

“Anya’s hair was already light, so it’s easy to dye it dark. Your hair, you know how beautiful it is? I go to the salon to dye it dark. Why do you want to make it lighter?”

“Blonde looked fine on Anya, why not me?”

“Why do you want to be like Anya? Everyone always says how clean your hair looks, how easy it must be to manage, how smooth it looks.”

Snip.

“I’ll go ask the hairdresser, then. When we get there.”

“Ask what?”

“If I should do something with my hair.”

Stubbornness is a curse that passed down from mother to daughter in our little home, and she knew when it took over my heart and mind and locked me there. A language with no barriers for an American girl and her Chinese speaking mother. Mama knows first hand and is insistent I learn the same way. My face flashed a bright green as the cars before us started to live again, but my mom had long stopped watching me for the light anyway.

“He will just tell you about his fifty dollar hair treatment, and you don’t need that either,” she said, and silence draped over our ears once more.

She’s not mad anymore, at least. Not at my stalemate with musical improvement, not at the fact I want to turn the beautiful black mane she’s maintained for me into the straw I let grow outside our house. I watch her intensity now, directed to the hairstylist and how he cuts her hair into the reddish brown bob she wants it to look like.

“Can you cut more at the bottom?” She asks so often that I file each phrase away into my thin folder of Chinese grammar, feeling the library populate slightly, beneath my nails and beneath the soulless black of my hair. I’d like to think my language is enough to move to Mama’s hometown and become a hairdresser.

Even so.

Red ribbons decorate blank pink walls, counters littered with magazines advertising nothing but perms and reddish brown hair. Bobs, bangs, curls. Lucky cats and bamboo plants occupy the corners of this little shop. Music in a language I know but not really. Never in my entire life have I gone to a salon, but why did it have to be this? Why couldn’t I just go to a Great Clips store?

She has faith in this place, even though the red square knots and their tassels hang dubiously on the wall. The other hair place can never get it right, she used to say in an annoyed tone before she started going to the place we're at now. I tell her she looks great regardless of where she goes, because it's the truth. But I don't tell her I wouldn't get the same haircut for myself, because no matter the resemblance I bear to my mom, it wouldn't look right on my head.

Snip.

"My daughter wants to do something special with her hair. Seeing family in a few days." I hear her telling someone's grandma with bright pink curlers in her short grey hair, who looks at me and frowns. Mama has her hair slathered in a white foam, the short strands shaped into an array of spikes all over her head.

"Why? She just needs a trim."

"That's what I said!" Mama sighs, crow's feet smiling through her apparent exhaustion. "What am I supposed to do? She insisted on coming today."

The man snipping away at the base of Mama's hair steps out from behind her, flipping the shears into a safer grip. I make a mental note to learn how to do the trick before fulfilling my newfound goal to become a hairstylist. He's wearing a lavish green suit coat and deep blue suave pants, somewhat unfitting for a place where hair clips will wedge their way into the cloth. His eyes are like mine, and his hair is shorter than Mama's.

"Ruru, come here," my mom says in Mandarin, and I push past wooden tooth combs and salon chairs to the corner she's at. "I usually just give her a flat trim and no layers. Looks the cleanest."

"I think that's perfectly fine for her hair. Very smooth and simple." He agrees, and I chew on my cheek. "How come she wants something different?"

"Blonde," I say, and by the way his eyebrows raise, I think I might've misunderstood his Mandarin. "Just bleach, right? Everyone tells me you start there. I'll take good care of it."

The price to keep such a promise is out of my reach.

Mama's spikes begin to wilt, but they look sharper than ever. Even the hairdresser, who knows the cost of the treatment for my deprived hair when the bleach washes out will cost more than a simple haircut, appears as if he's grieving.

Snip.

My legs feel numb by the time my scalp stops tingling with bleach, and someone repeatedly dunks my head into a sink until I'm dizzy. I can't imagine Mama coming here every few months and going through this, but I also can't process my own thoughts as cold creams and conditioners are kneaded into my brain. Then a fancy blow dryer begins to yell noisily and blond strands fly into my face—

Well. I can't say I hate it, but it's definitely something that would take time getting used to. A long time. The hairstylist sets down the blow dryer and carries over a handful of bottles once he decides I've been shocked for long enough.

"Now you need to maintain it. This shampoo so your hair doesn't turn orange..." he begins, pulling loose strands to frame my face as he runs through a hair routine. "See how much harder it is to take care of? But there's a special treatment I have for you..."

"I think it's refreshing." I answer, running my hands through the frizzy gold thread. My hair smells like chlorine and chemicals and American. "Thank you." I add in Mandarin.

Snap.

Mama is already waiting, with her spikes brushed back into its usual bob and what can only be described as shocked amusement. My grin is sheepish in our exchange, silly and sweet like our hair.

"Ruyi is so expensive, so persistent. Who knew you'd actually do it!" She says as she hands her card to the hairdresser. Though credit is invisible, I feel strings snap for every strand of hair dipped in bleach.

"Why didn't you stop me?" I ask, diverting my eyes from the card swipe.

Outside, the sun hits my head. I feel lighter yet heavier all the same. Gold is heavy and I purchased it without understanding its valuable burden.

"Ruyi," she hums, and I dread the lecture that comes after it. "总是那么一厢情愿。"

The sky is quiet, buzzing with its highway of silent wishes. Outside, messengers run door to door to deliver them, but they just keep flowing in. A knock sounds on the windshield when I slide into the passenger seat—a box of empty gifts, blonde hair.

"Why not be comfortable as you are? I want to give you a better

chance here, a better life but you want to blend in. You know, in China, you might blend in okay. Until you speak, at least.”

“We’re in America, Mama. I’m American, but it doesn’t really feel like it.”

I carry the grocery bag when we pull up into the driveway. Inside are glass containers of noodles and chicken feet and bitter vegetables—none of which we were told to bring, but we know Mama’s stir fry is what everyone looks for first when we sit down to eat.

After trekking past a labyrinth of shoes that litter the front porch, Baba and I go to the kitchen, where I set down our brown bags of tupperware and he materializes two bottles of red wine from thin air. I don’t question it and shuffle away in my bare socks to the living room, where my cousins are playing a game on the family computer.

It’s awkward. The quiet before the storm—before the adults start pestering about grades and piano recitals, math competitions and boyfriends. Long before they take out seven decks of cards and sunflower seeds. White noise is everyone’s appetizer save for the distant sneeze of an uncle and the ring of laughter from another, all heard from a mile away.

“You forgot this, again.” A voice appears out of nowhere, and after, the slap of slippers on the wood floor. The oldest of my younger cousins was, and still is brilliant at sneaking up behind me. It’s routine at this point, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Mimi! You’ve grown so tall, I’d think you were my older sister.” I exclaim, patting the top of her head. At thirteen, Mimi is nearly as tall as me, with long hair that reaches towards the floor while she parades about proudly. Being a short two years younger and just as lonely of an only child as I am, it was hard to tell one apart from the other. Then, one of the twins went on a road trip to the hair salon.

“I wish you were my older sister, Ruru,” she says, pushing up to her toes into the palm of my hand. “It’d be nice having someone to get advice from, you know? Except my hair. You’re not going near my hair with.”

Her grin turns devilish when my hand immediately whips away from her head to tug at the dry blond strands at my scalp. I’d completely forgotten about it, that I tied it all back into a ponytail before coming. Turns out purple shampoo doesn’t do anything to prevent

my hair from turning greasy and brittle at the same time. My hair is orange in the name of neglect. It took ages to accept my hair as it was, and it will take longer to regrow.

Snap.

“Hey, what’s wrong with it?” I say with a scowl and a scoff. “You’re just jealous that I look great as a blonde.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, Ru. Let’s go ask around then.” Mimi grabs my shoulder and starts pulling us towards the kitchen, and I nearly trip over the slippers she brought me just moments earlier. My heels burn and my toes are frozen cold.

“They’re probably setting up the food and everything, we probably shouldn’t bother them..”

“Then just go help out.” She says, not unlike my would-be older sister. “I’ll take the

blame if someone ends up finding orange, I mean, blonde hair in your mom’s stir fry.” “You’re never going to let me live this down, are you? It’s blonde!”

“Nope, never, Meimei,” she teases and escapes into the kitchen. Her voice is on par with her steps, rising in pitch and sharpening in tone until she’s speaking flawless Mandarin. The duality of all— she is synonymous with pure gold, the daughter every mother wishes they had. Because what Chinese girl can’t speak her mother tongue?

I shuffle mindlessly about the kitchen because Mimi is nowhere to be found once again. Instead, I find her mother trying to manage a giant steel pot of soup half her size while oil leaps like the sun’s coronal loops in the pan next to it. Chopsticks are scattered out dangerously close to the flame, every individual waiting to be united with another of its own design. It shouldn’t be that hard to offer my help? Eight characters and an elementary collection of tones shouldn’t be hard to do. It wouldn’t be, if I were Mimi, my older sister, two years younger than myself.

One breath in, one breath out, and I speak.

我能帮忙摆桌子吗?

“Huh?” Mimi’s mother asks, shouting over the sound of frying oil. I try to repeat myself, but now it won’t be impressive, I think. I might mess up my accent this time, maybe. I might sound too American, most likely.

But isn’t that what you’ve been trying to do this whole week?

“Can I help you set the table, 女士?” I say, and every letter of the English language is armed with a needle that presses into my tongue, and she hands me the bundle of chopsticks with a wordless nod.

“Such a good child.” I hear her mutter to my mom as I’m counting twenty or so pairs.

For an American girl.

I restart my counting from zero, pairing two together, one for each cousin, auntie, uncle, Mama and Baba— a mindless task that I repeat until it’s time to eat. Mindless, until I’m left with two lone chopsticks, each without its other half. The first, a lovely cream with gold characters and a black handle. The second, dull white with an amber coat at the handle; the corner is chipped away from overuse, revealing dark, dark, inky wood.

It’s quiet when we crowd about the long table and drag our folding chairs to fit everyone.

The house returns to its silence when my cousins run off to play board games in Mimi’s room, who leaves me to attempt learning the nameless card game that all the adults somehow know how to play. By the end of the night, my teeth are numb and grey from the countless ways I’ve found to crack open sunflower seeds, but I still don’t learn how to play the card game before Mimi drags me upstairs because none of the little cousins have ever seen straw for hair except on the scarecrows in the schoolyard.

Snip.

When we finally come home, I’m carrying a brown bag with glass tupperware of leftovers, homemade pastries, and the soup I watched Mimi’s mother cook in a giant pot. Unbeknownst to my mom, Mimi, or any of my cousins, a tiny pile of blonde hair sits in Mimi’s bathroom sink, where strands of hair split to two.



JESSICA BAKAR
Triangles



ANDREW PARK
Dent

Dessert in Shimla

I feel the warm saffron / convalescing into pieces / blood, ripped
drinks / like Baba's apple cake, / only stronger, sweeter / and wetter.
/ Cold / the stretch of fingertips / no one is ever the same / I think,
peach sun / stripping below a horizon / behind the house. / Dresses
afloat / in the water. / the dust / along the staircase and / yellow
paint / peeling at the corners / just like Baba's skin, / apple cake
burning into sheets / and freezing on the fire. / Only a few years ago,
/ my shoulders heavy with his dishes / packets clinging to my chest
/ and heavy / with a pain / on my shoulders. / Dark, narrow, fold-
ed. / Today, neatly on top of cupboards, / Baba lay clothes / white,
bleak, / he will know. / His apples / will know. / sugarly they rot, /
a difference between / how long it takes to make it / and how long it
takes / to leave it behind.

Honoring the Dead

“We’re here,” Dad said, yanking open the rental car door.

As I stepped out of the Toyota, a wave of humidity hit me. Fields of sprouts surrounded the muddy road, separated by wide ditches filled with dirty water. A pair of chickens ran clucking around the car.

“Where’s the house?” I asked, stretching my legs. In the sweltering climate, my shirt clung to me, and mosquitos pecked at my neck. Even with its wide-open fields and flat green expanse, China gave me the stomach-clenching sensation of being trapped.

“This way. The house is over there.” Dad gestured toward a narrow path along the irrigation ditch. I dropped my suitcase and trudged after him, the wheels marking trenches in the mud. Grass hit my knees and the earthy scent of fertilizer rose from my shoes.

“How much farther?” I asked.

“Around that bend.”

A large mud-stained concrete structure emerged from behind the hill—a typical house in rural China. My aunt and uncle stood outside a heavy iron gate that revealed a dirt yard.

“Come inside,” Uncle said, hugging us. “We have tea and sesame candy.”

Uncle led us to the living room, where a water cooler sat next to the couch.

A table rested in the corner, displaying a black-and-white photograph of my great-great-grandfather, Gu Bing. He wore a black cap and sat on a wooden chair. Half-lit incense sticks emitted wavy lines of smoke uprising to the ceiling. A ceramic jar with blue dragons flying on the side rested on the table. It was typical in Chinese culture to display shrines of our ancestors, to align ourselves with someone noble and great.

“Your great-great-grandfather was a famous poet,” Uncle said

to me.

“I’ve read some of great-great-grandfather’s poems,” I replied.

One line I remembered read: *Bananas over the fence, and bamboo leaves outside the window*. If this was his great poetry, then I could be the next great poet of China: *Pencils on the table, and pens in my drawer*.

“He was a great man,” my aunt added. “We all try to live up to him. His works are still studied in universities in China.”

“Did you ever meet him?”

“No, he died before we were born,” Dad said. “He was your grandfather’s grandfather.”

As the adults talked, I sat on the couch and chewed my sesame candy. So far, the trip to China had been a colorless blend of meeting old relatives, visiting old buildings that dead people made in places that smelled bad, and hours trapped inside a car. The chatter died down.

“Come, we need to visit the graves,” Uncle said.

His bulky shoulders shifted as he stood up and pulled his shoes onto his large feet. Dad and Aunt also rose and began putting on their shoes.

On the way out, I stopped at Gu Bing’s altar. In his photograph, he rested his arms on the chair like a judge, and his black eyes accentuated his frown. With delicate fingers, I picked up the white-and-blue porcelain inkpot. I held it up in the light, inspecting its chipped and worn corners and black-stained belly. I imagined my great-great-grandfather dipping his quill in it to write his famous poems and stories.

As I set it back on the table, my Dad yelled, “Come on! Let’s go.” His voice shattered the silence and I jumped. The slippery porcelain pot slid out of my grip and fell to the hardwood floor with a crack. A sliver ran through the pot, and when I picked it up, the two halves fell apart. With shaking hands, I slipped both pieces into my pocket.

Outside, I found Dad, Aunt, and Uncle standing in the sun.

“What took you so long?” Uncle asked, slapping me on the back.

“I went to the bathroom.” My breathing quickened. Dad always told me to be open, and to never keep secrets. He said that hiding mistakes was shameful. But I didn’t want to be known as the kid who broke famous great-great-grandfather’s inkpot.

Uncle said, “Follow me,” and walked down the dirt path.

I followed along another muddy irrigation ditch towards a hill in the distance. The humid air felt like a blistering hot shower on my skin, and no trees blocked the sun from our faces. Strange-looking bugs the size of my thumb flew around my face, making a constant droning noise. In my pocket, the inkpot became a chunk of uranium, slowly cooking my insides with radiation until I would fall dead. When Uncle looked behind at me, I smiled.

A single scraggly tree grew on the summit, casting its shadow on a few large tombstones.

“Those are the graves of our ancestors,” Dad said.

The small graveyard looked like Mars. The big rocks were only boulders on top of a hill, inscribed with Chinese glyphs I couldn’t read. Was my family even buried here? I had to take Dad and Uncle’s word for it. I was pretty sure they wouldn’t let me dig down and check.

Uncle stepped in front of the tombstones. “This is your great-great-grandson, from America. He came all the way to see you. He writes poetry, like you. He won the best poet contest at his middle school.”

It took a second before I realized he was talking about me. Of course, Uncle didn’t know that the night before I copied a poem off the internet and submitted it. Nobody at school bothered to do a plagiarism check before they handed me the “Best Poet” plaque on stage.

My cheeks burned and I shuffled my feet. I pictured my great-great-grandfather, whom I’d never met, standing with us on the hill, like my dad, only taller than a tree and wearing a massive silk robe. He saw through everything, all the lies I ever told and all the mistakes I ever made. He knew about the time I snuck behind the altar at church and ate a piece of holy bread, and about the time I spilled acetone on the lawn in the shape of a middle finger. He said to me, *Keep it up and you’ll never win a poetry contest again.*

“Bless us with good fortune,” Uncle finished.

On the way back, rain drizzled from the dark clouds and drenched us. My shoes stuck in mud so deep that it sucked my tennis shoe right off my foot, and I had to fish it out.

Back at Uncle’s house, I stuffed the inkpot inside one of my socks in my suitcase. I showered and changed out of my muddy clothes. I knew my great-great-grandfather had a legendary reputation, but

who was he? Why was his inkpot a valued artifact?

Sitting on the bed, I scrolled through his Wikipedia page: Gu Bing. 1871–1940. A contemporary Chinese poet known for his poems about nature and life. Critics say that his poems were heavily derived or transcribed from ancient Chinese poetry and artwork. So, he plagiarized, too? I snorted.

That night, I fell asleep thinking about how my great-great-grandfather was a figure that everybody revered, but also a fraud.

The next morning, Dad threw open the blinds. “Come on, it’s eight. Get dressed. Your relatives are coming.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, sitting up in bed and rubbing my eyes. A large yellow sun sat above the mountains on the horizon, blasting its rays through my window. My room already felt like a pressure cooker, and it would become even more unbearable by afternoon. I got up and got dressed. Unzipping my suitcase, I examined the two halves of the inkpot. Could I fix it? Find some super glue and replace it before anyone noticed?

I trudged into the hallway and back into the living room where Aunt, Uncle, and Dad sat.

“Good morning,” Aunt said. “Your relatives will be here any minute.”

Sure enough, the rumbling, crunching noise of wheels on gravel announced the arrival of Uncle’s guests. In a flash, the house was filled with more relatives than I’d ever known: old men with beards, middle-aged women with husbands, and many screaming young children running between everyone’s legs. The living room was saturated with the buzz of dozens of conversations until it all blurred together into a loud hubbub.

I was shoved around the room and given a hasty introduction to Aunt Ming the interior designer, Uncle Zhu the acupuncturist, Mr. Huang the insurance salesman, Mrs. Wu the business consultant, and more names than I could ever remember. I shook peoples’ hands and forced myself to say, “Thanks for coming,” but I wasn’t even sure if these were really my aunts, uncles, and cousins. Did they even know me? I was a piece from a different jigsaw puzzle mixed in the box, disconnected from the rest. Or were we all just a big family of phonies?

Over the din, Uncle rang a bell.

“Everyone, line up in front of the altar,” he called.

The roar of conversation died down to soft whispers, and the crowd moved to form three roughly straight lines opposite Gu Bing's altar. My heart drowned in a flash flood that rose up through my legs and into my chest. My throat collapsed in on itself. My pulse was a stopwatch in my ears as my blood vessels dilated. But my hands lay limp at my sides.

"We gather here to honor the great Gu Bing," he started. "He was born 150 years ago today. Come, let us rise, and honor the dead," he finished.

At this signal, the crowd formed a single line snaking along the four walls and between couches and the coffee table heading towards the altar. Uncle beckoned the first person towards the altar. My eyes widened as he grabbed a stick of incense, lit it, muttered a prayer, "Praise our great ancestor," and placed it inside the incense pot.

Were they all pretending that my great-great-grandfather wasn't a fake? Would he notice the conspicuous dustless square on the table? Should I just admit to my crime right here and now, and tell them all that he was no poet?

One by one, each relative old and young performed the same ritual at the altar—right in front of the glaring empty spot where the inkpot used to be. The acid in my stomach churned as I shuffled forwards.

Then, I grabbed a stick of incense. Uncle stood behind me, nodding for me to continue. I touched the tip to a small candle flame on the altar, closed my eyes, copied the incoherent whispering of the other relatives: "Praise our great ancestor," and hoped I wouldn't burn the house down. Like everyone before me, I dropped my stick in the incense pot. After, I sank onto a couch and watched my relatives file through until nobody was left. Then, one by one, they waved goodbye. In twos and threes they walked out of the door, until the living room was empty except for Aunt, Uncle, Dad, and me.

When it was time for us to leave, Aunt and Uncle stood at their front gate waving goodbye.

"Come back to join our ceremony honoring Gu Bing next year," Aunt called out.

"Go win some more poetry contests!" Uncle said.

I waved back and smiled. My right hand gripped my suitcase, which felt as if it were sinking through the mud to the center of the Earth.

“They do this every year?” I whispered to Dad.

“They are very devoted,” he chuckled. “Do you want to come back next year?”

“No.”

We, The Buffaloes

Present:

The blackness finds me before I do.

I find myself in the janitor's closet, scrabbling for the inside lock and willing it in with my whole body. Practicing how to hold my lungs. Breathing. My back closing the space between moth-thick walls.

In all the books I've read, there is always something poetic about the dark. Girls with French braids fluttering their eyelashes on roofs, cheeks bitten with the glow of fireflies. This, now, must be the sole exception. The mustiness of the closet sinks its teeth into me first, week-old piss steeped in bile. It grabs my nose for its own. I find myself heaving, hurling the contents of my school lunch in the negative space between my shoes.

A voice utters itself into existence. "You must be scared of the dark."

I don't remember how loud I shriek: only that I exit my body, if only briefly.

I forget how to breathe in these moments. It's funny how quickly the human body can unlearn something, something so unequivocally vital, out of necessity.

Blindly, I grope for the door like Eve to her apple—reaching, reaching.

One Hour Before:

ATTENTION: ACTIVE SHOOTER IN AREA. LOCKDOWN. DO NOT ENGAGE.

All of our phones stirring to life in fifth period Chemistry. All of

us struggling out of our chairs, our desks, some of us slower than the others. The girls flocking into groups like moths drawn towards a lukewarm light. Some of us sobbing, lashing out; others even more uncharacteristically quiet. The boys squaring up at an imaginary offender, some of them flexing their pecs, as if pecs were any match for a gun. Still, they hold their bravado like prisoners of war. The teachers herding us into a corner of the room like buffaloes to the lip of a cliff.

In fifth grade we watched a National Geographic video on wild animals. We watched as herds upon herds of buffaloes nipped up an incline, galloped right over the edge, and didn't stop. Their bodies barreling through the air like martyrs. Being kids, we shrieked. We asked where they had gone.

I've always wondered why they never hesitated, never shied away: all those one-track-minded buffaloes, trampling over one another to reach the pinnacle of their fate. Maybe they were seeking heaven. But aren't we all?

Present:

The same voice speaks again. "Just shoot me already. Get it over with."

The darkness visibly trembles before me, tension throttling my throat. Is whoever in here—afraid

—of me? If so, I'd take this power imbalance over an active shooter threat anyday. I relax my hold on the lock.

"I'm not the shooter, either." I don't recognize my own voice, scratched with phlegm like dry paint.

The darkness ripples like a skipping stone on glass. Laughter. It's a girl, I think. In my grade?

"You aren't? Well, that's good. I mean, chances were pretty slim after all. Six-hundred-seventy-two students to one. Shooter, I mean." She chuckles again.

My therapist once told me that people laugh as a coping mechanism. I didn't get it. For what? I asked. Why can't people cry normally?

"Six-hundred-seventy-two to one," I echo, in an out-of-body

voice.

“It doesn’t feel real.” Her voice is tinny, like it was wound through a jukebox at a 50’s restaurant. “Hell—I mean—out of all places—”

The jukebox skips. I rush to fill the hole in the conversation, but I’m just as adrift. “I—yeah. It really doesn’t.”

Trauma brings people together, my therapist once told me. You should reach out more often. She offered me a Lifesaver from a receptionist bowl, and I grabbed for it like it was my one life preserver at the moment. Maybe it was.

I’m trying, I’m trying, I insisted, but it came out garbled. The peppermint dissolved on my tongue before I could remember it.

The tears rush out now like hot oil, too messy, too much. I laugh despite myself. How ironic. “I’m—I’m so sorry, it’s been a long day. I...”

“What happened?” Her voice is soft, so soft.

I can almost see the darkness, the outline of her. I don’t even know her name. But because we might very well die in here, and I don’t have much left to lose, I let my lungs fill with a beginning.

Two Hours Before:

One of the quickest ways to humble yourself, I’ve learned, is to ask a high schooler for their opinion. And even if you don’t ask—they’ll more often than not give it to you.

Today he sits at the fourth table in the cafeteria from the right. For a fleeting, foolish moment, I believe he’s alone. And then the bottle-blond girl materializes into view.

My tray wobbling underneath a mound of school Jell-O, I count the farthest away table and sit there. But it isn’t far enough.

“Yo, ain’t that the girl Jordan fucked at Megan’s last week?” One of the boys at another table stage-whispers, his voice carrying like birds toppling off a powerline. Like I’m a museum display.

The day after we watched the National Geographic video, I went home and lost myself in unhealthy amounts of Google searches, spurred on mainly by my curious prepubescent mind. What, really, are buffaloes?

Buffalo: (n.) bison that once roamed the North American plains in vast herds (see: bison athabasca).

“Yo, it is. It is.” A laugh, huffed out like a flickering candle.

“Dude, I heard she got railed.” I’m not even looking, yet I can see his pronounced gestures. “Like seriously.”

I searched another question, and the Internet unfolded at my fingertips. What do buffaloes eat?

Buffaloes mainly subsist on grass in plains or other habitual environments.

A peek. Another. They throw glances at me like knives, shattering my display case. Maybe I’m only meant to be seen.

“She looks so different now. Man, do you have it on video or something?” “Bruh, I’m no pervert. I think Andre got it though.”

The Jell-O before me wobbles precariously, blooming. His hands. His hands everywhere, in my hair, my stupidly curled hair, my tank top, my body, my mouth, my intoxication.

She asked for it. She did, I saw her.

I searched more and more that night, collecting Wikipedia answers like cicadas underneath my eyelids. I didn’t stop. Couldn’t. Suddenly, for the first time, I knew more than I wanted to.

Maybe we’re all buffaloes in this sense. Willingly hurling ourselves off an edge, a precipice, solely because of our innermost desires.

The voices trail off to a Lakers vs Trail Blazers conversation. The bell rings, and I stay at the table until the janitor comes with his Swiffer. And I do not cry.

Present:

The silence thickens under my tongue. Strangely, I feel calmer than before. If I don’t get anything out of this, at least I’ll have had free therapy.

I can almost hear her processing the whole story. Then, the darkness before me finally materializes itself into an outline. A finger brushes my shoulder. Gasping, I jerk back.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.” Her voice catches like a hook. I don’t recognize her in my grade, but in this low light, I probably couldn’t

tell my mother apart.

“It’s—it’s fine.”

She shakes her head, a mass of onyx curls moving with it. “No, no, I shouldn’t have—I mean, I heard about the assault. I’m so sorry.”

“You did?” I smile wryly before realizing she can’t see it.

“Yeah, everyone’s been talking about it.” I hear her shuffling to sit back down. “Here, have a seat. I promise I won’t—you know.” I obey, move a broom aside to welcome the numb linoleum tiles.

“So.” She laughs, another throaty chuckle. “How did you also end up in a janitor’s closet during a school shooting?”

“I got lost,” I lie. It’s easier to lie, for some reason. I don’t distrust her, and guilt thickens in my throat.

“You did?” It’s her turn to sound incredulous. “Well, I was going to the bathroom—from the art classroom on the second floor—when I got the alert on my phone. Just our luck, huh?”

She smells like the morning after a monsoon rain: petrichor and wet paint. She’s an artist after all. “Just our luck,” I murmur.

Belatedly, dread claims me for its own. She’s whispering to herself, rocking back and forth like a spring. “Do you...do you think somebody’s gonna find us?”

I reach for my phone, but she immediately shakes her head. One of her curls bounces lightly on my temple. “I can’t get a signal here. I tried when I first got in.”

I don’t know who closes the space between us first, but suddenly my head is on her shoulder and I’m shaking, shaking. I hear her audibly gasp, her hands uncertain, and then she places them on me, cradling my display case like I’m already mended.

Hey Google, do buffaloes need affection?

Yes, buffaloes (see: American bovinæ) nap and cuddle with one another throughout the season for mating purposes or simply as companions.

Half an Hour Before:

My therapist told me that people often act out when they feel as if they have no control over a situation.

The buffaloes are resting, huddled in a sweat-steeped mass that smells obnoxiously like adolescence, like the locker rooms after football season. It is quiet, too quiet. On the table nearby, our confiscated phones light up like fireworks against a smoky backdrop. Every few moments, a head or two swivels desperately towards the table, perhaps out of FOMO.

It has been half an hour since the CODE ORANGE. Time makes molasses of us, stretching us thinner than a hide. Some of us rebelled at first, fought against the notion that we could be in danger. “My parents pay taxes in this county!” the class president shrieked, before someone’s hand clapped itself over her mouth. She broke in after two seconds, her whole body a spasming sonogram. The teacher ushered her into the room first. None of us could look at each other.

Others are still processing. How could a single education system fail us, all of us, so fatally? I look around from behind my knees, catch the half-lidded faces of classmates who were joking around moments earlier. Encased in their own display cases. Some of them break eye contact with me. Too ashamed. Too vulnerable. Others defiantly hold my gaze. I study the boy who whispered about me at lunch. I study Andre, his friend. His “videographer.” I study—

Too close. Too close. His gaze inches down me, an extension of a hand. Hands like predators of their own, like teeth marks where they shouldn’t be. Just nights ago, he was a cartographer: my body a map to stake his claim.

You know you want this, you bitch. You liked me for a long time, didn’t you say that? Why don’t you want this?

He sits two bodies away from me now. Like a conveniently placed ad. Like a mockingbird. Like a boy who just can’t keep his hands to himself and takes and takes and takes.

You like this, don’t you? Huh? Why can’t you say anything now? You dumb girl. Bitch.

Present:

I tell her about the buffaloes, how we’re all simply animals at the end of the day with one-track- minds. When I’m finished, silence

permeates the musty air. My head on her shoulder registers a slight vibration—she’s laughing again.

Embarrassment mocks me with an outstretched finger. “Yeah, it sounds dumb, I know. You can say it.”

She pauses. “No, no, I don’t mean that.” A beat. “I was just thinking—it’s funny how we’re so...dumb at the end of the day. How insignificant we are as humans.”

I sit up. “Yeah. Exactly.”

“...And...and...we think we’re all that, you know? Like, how we all want to buy the newest clothes, or the Air Max 1’s, or have the most clout. Or, you know, divide ourselves because of the color of our skin.” She chuckles to herself. “But God, at the end of it all...we’re all just buffaloes. Freaking buffaloes that charge over a cliff.”

We laugh until my ribs hurt and we remember that we should’ve been quiet. We grow somber. She says, “God, it’s cold in here. D’you think the janitor gets cold at all?”

“Maybe not. He’s probably gotten used to it.” I play along with the small-talk, but the AC has started to seep into my bones as well. The fact that I can’t remember the first stages of hypothermia is probably one of them.

“Someone needs to get that fella a raise.” She chuckles weakly. Rubs her arms up and down. “Shit, I miss my mom. She’s probably worrying her balls off right now.”

“We’re gonna get out of here,” I say resolutely, more for my own sake than hers.

The buffalo cowers at the edge of the precipice, curling around itself. It doesn’t break into a million butterflies yet. Not yet. It hasn’t gathered the courage.

We shiver in silence, but rather, a companionable one. “Oh—and by the way, you’re right.”

“W-what?” Her teeth are chattering. Despite myself, I wrap my arms around her like a cocoon. I don’t even know her name, yet I feel closer to her than a past life.

I can’t bring myself to utter it, for fear that I’ll jinx it, but I’m no longer afraid of the dark.

Fifteen Minutes Before:

The first gunshot rings out somewhere in the building. Maybe from the second floor; maybe just outside our classroom. Like a herd mentality, we react in scattered bursts, like stirring from a fever dream.

A girl begins to sob. Someone—I don't know who—pinches her until she stops mid-gasp. Someone else faints, their limbs collapsing in on themselves like a wrist of leaves. We all instinctively jerk away. It is too hot in here. An echo chamber of helplessness.

I don't remember how I get up. How I untangle myself from the mass of bodies, of wet piss-stained pants and phones that won't stop ping. How I step over limbs and legs to reach the door, the teacher lunging for me, my classmates all wide-eyed and slow-mouthed in reacting, the lock giving in, the room letting in a sliver of light, letting me out, letting out a collective breath.

I do remember breaking into the hallway, into a heavy-footed run. Every inch of my skin pressing against itself. I remember the moments before the edge of the cliff: how I suddenly sprout wings, how I metamorphosize from a buffalo to a monarch butterfly. To be human is to wait in a shell of yourself, a cocoon. To be a buffalo, a butterfly, an other, is to break out of your skin.

Stupid girl. Stupid girl. I shed these skins like cicadas, like the girl I was before, but I still claim her. She is valid, she is loved, she is everything I still am. But she is still in waiting.

We are the buffaloes in this sense after all. Not all of us, but some—the ones that are able to reach the proverbial cliff.

In the moments before I reach the janitor's closet, I imagine weightlessness, my body breaking into a million sporadic butterflies. Monarchs. The split seconds before free-fall. Horns stretching into iridescent wings.

That night, I asked the last question right as I succumbed to my dreams. Hey Google, why did buffaloes ever charge off the cliff anyway?

Because they were driven off by human beings to be hunted, and they would rather be martyred than be eaten.

I turn the knob.

Nighttime

When darkness settles thickly o'er the sea
And rests upon the waves like blackened silk
When water's pulse does swirl in secrecy
Within the nighttime cover of its ilk,

When twilight sets a hush to boist'rous wood
That in the day does swarm and beat with life,
When creatures shelter under forest hood
And bide their time until the day breaks blithe,

When all the world has settled into sleep,
No eyes shall open up unto the sky,
And dreams like mist around our minds shall creep,
And heavens settle without watchful eye.

Why then, in all the barren hush of night,
Do lonely stars above still shine their light?

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