

AW

APPRENTICE WRITER

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EDITOR'S NOTE

DEAR READER,

Welcome to *Apprentice Writer*, a literary magazine from Susquehanna University dedicated to cultivating a collection of written and graphic works submitted by high schoolers around the world. *Apprentice Writer* started in 1982, and since then we have consistently worked with young writers and artists to exhibit their abilities. For many, this might be a first publication; we are excited to carry that honor.

This year, *Apprentice Writer* catalogs a shift in focus for young people. Editors watched self-exploration realize itself in our pages through form and topic. We found meditations and conflicts centering economic, racial, and social identities through gripping prose and poetry. We observed advanced formal play working to convey those messages in fresh ways.

Our 41st issue features tape recordings, movie reviews, vignettes, and visual art saturated with meaning. We have compiled stories about hardship and community from across the globe. We have found cries for belonging written into list poems and free verse. We have, most importantly, worked with young artists to showcase their brilliance.

Apprentice Writer would not have been possible without our Junior Editor, Grey Weatherford-Brown, or Advisor, Prof. Tony Zitta. We all hope the contributors to the 41st issue impress and impact you as deeply as they have us.

YOURS TRULY,
BROOKE MITCHELL
SENIOR EDITOR

Countdown

Although the sun appears to be struggling, it is drowning in the orange abyss. The afterglow resembles a fleeing messenger bringing the sun's final remarks. It roasts the wheat amid the chirping of crickets and caresses the returning children's heads. It creeps up on my elbow as if it wants to speak, but I am devoid of thought. On a light-colored wooden bookcase, it anxiously approaches a silver iron radio with tan stains and several scratches. Is that the answer? I place a worn-out, emerald-green cassette case with a missing lid on top of the radio and grab the cassette case and the radio with both hands as if I were a devotee holding a sacrificial article. I kneel on the dark-coffee-colored maple floor and pick up one of the most recent-looking tapes: I can make out the number 79 scrawled on this tape's label. I put the cassette into the radio—the silver radio's gears swirl and whine as they rotate. A faint, indistinct voice reaches my ears as the wind blows.

Grandma's First Tape

“I was standing in front of the kitchen. Through the door's crack, I saw a middle-aged man with short black sleeves pouring a yellow liquid inside a blue and white bowl into a pot. A woman with a ponytail and a red checkered apron washed tomatoes in a metal sink bowl. Why were there two strangers in my kitchen? I didn't recall inviting anyone to my house today. 'Why...' I wanted to say something, but I recognized the turquoise and green butterfly hair clip on that woman's head. That was my daughter's hair clip. Daughter? The woman turned from washing tomatoes and looked straight into my eyes. That pair of eyes in that unfamiliar face was familiar to me. Those were the eyes of someone who had pleaded with me to buy

cotton candies from the grocery store, then filled with tears if I said 'no.' When did this happen? How did my little girl grow up so much already? I had no recollection of the year this occurred, like a piece of a puzzle that I didn't know where to put. Everything else was fuzzy and bubble-like in my memory; the bubbles burst whenever I tried to learn more. I was lost. What should I do?

A mother who had forgotten her daughter was not good. The woman was my daughter. My daughter! I must remember her face; I must not forget her face again. Remember.

What happened on that day? I don't remember. My daughter seemed to remind me lunch would be ready in five minutes. She frowned somehow. Why did she frown? What happened? Maybe I said I already had lunch, and she was surprised? Maybe I questioned why I should have lunch at all. Maybe I... I don't know.

I knew. I forgot again, as usual."

New Moon

The tape stopped playing. I recognized the speaker on the cassette as my grandmother, who always said, "I can't remember anything." Did she remember the words she had recorded on the tape? Time is greedy, constantly swallowing her memories and leaving her with a puzzle she does not know how to solve. Although my grandma can never recover her lost memories, those memories deserve a proper funeral. I put the tape blurrily labeled 77 into the radio.

Grandma's Second Tape

"I was never much of a puzzle person as a child. These scattered items on the table usually drive me insane. I was constantly unable to find their pattern. I wondered if fate would pave my future path as a puzzle piece and how I should continue my journey on that path. Soon, I discovered the sign of my fate, though it contained no words. I peered through the crack in the light gray door of the doctor's office. I was anxious to know what judgment the man in the white coat would give me. Could he tell me of the unknown direction of my destiny? The good news was that he answered my doubts; unfortunately, his answer seemed to make me even more lost in my path of

destiny.

'I'm sorry. Chunling has.... Alzheimer's disease.' That was what the man in the white coat said.

Alzheimer's disease? Was that why a white fog clouded my memory? Was that why an invisible eraser erased everything I did 5 minutes ago in my head? I didn't know what to do. All I knew was that I didn't want the doctors in the ward or my family to understand how powerless I felt in facing my fate. I turned and pressed myself against the cold white wall; my legs were weak, and I wanted to sit down and break the stillness. I couldn't. I didn't want to be a fractured soldier struck down by fate. I was not brave, but a voice in my heart always told me to be bold and robust. Maybe I should brace myself for a good fight with fate, so I didn't look at my daughter and husband with confused faces like my sister, who got Alzheimer's disease a few years ago.

Was this my countdown? I forced myself to dive into the ocean of memories. I remembered my brother lying mangled and motionless on the train tracks. I remembered the mother who sat in the hospital hallway late at night holding her distressed child. I remembered the young man who waved at me from beneath the golden autumn ginkgo trees. I found these pieces, but their patterns were so blurry that no matter how hard I tried, I could not put them together into a complete puzzle.

I hate doing puzzles."

Eclipse

Her voice disappeared. My heart has a thousand words, but I cannot find the appropriate ones to describe it. People believe time ferments all memories into wine and when a person reaches old age, she may taste her distinctive wine. How awful for a person whose memory is steadily deteriorating. She observed and anticipated the time when the wine would be brewed but gradually forgot the existence of the wine and her anticipation. What would I do in her position? I may despair and sob helplessly in my bed, but I am compelled to be courageous. I will forget how hopeless I once felt anyway. I will be a puppet of time and advance under its influence. Grandmother was brave, and I wish time would be merciful to her. Time, please,

pass more slowly.

Grandma's Third Tape

"I'm not sure you can hear me, my beloved brother. Years ago, you inadvertently stumbled out of time, and I've been moving forward over time ever since. I was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's, yet I still enjoy my life. I met a young man with burning eyes who became my longtime travel companion. My daughter retired in the blink of an eye, and my granddaughter was working toward her college application. How were you doing? I needed help keeping our promise. I had no mental image of you; how would I recognize you when I entered the underworld to find you? Sorry. This cassette might be the final thing I can give you.

I felt like I was on a treadmill with no off switch; all I could do was run. However, as I ran, my recollections vanished. I don't want to forget about you, yet all I can think of right now is your passing on that snowy day. On that day, a middle-aged woman in a purple cotton-padded jacket with numerous patches rushed into our house, grabbed our uncle's hand, and yelled that something had happened to you. My mind was blank, and I had no idea what the middle-aged woman meant when she stated something had happened. Our uncle immediately grasped my hand and hurried away, leaving the cotton-padded jacket on the bamboo chair beside him. Our uncle halted beside the train tracks, and I noticed a man resting quietly on the railroad rails. The man's face was ripped and mutilated so no features could be seen.

'I shouldn't have sent him out to gather coal today,' our uncle murmured. 'He's only 16 years old. He deserves a bright future, and it should be me who is lying here.'

Our uncle's voice and the pale blue coat on that man revealed the truth: you were the lifeless man lying on the train track. I didn't want to know what happened to you; my only thought was that my older brother was leaving me. No one would clumsily braid my hair, put carrots I hated in my bowl, and claim that children couldn't be fussy. After a few moments of stillness, our uncle ran up to you and hugged you before placing the gauze covering the rice pail on your head and allowing me to approach you. I couldn't feel the warmth

of your body. I extended my little hand to grip your calloused palms, believing that if you warmed up, you might be able to wake up. Snowflakes dropped on your body one by one and covered your face. The snowflakes, like words, composed nature's epitaph to you. You informed me that humans were nature's ambassadors, and we would all become part of nature when we die. I've always believed in your words, that you could turn into the stars in the sky to light my way through the night or into the breeze of the seasons to cuddle me.

Our uncle, aunt, and I carried you up the hill behind our house. I've been holding your hand tightly, and while I couldn't feel any temperature, the familiar touch put me at peace. Our uncle and aunt dug a large hole beneath your favorite peach tree and wanted you to lie in it. I didn't want them to do that; you would be lonely. Our uncle, who always seemed a mind reader, put his hand on my shoulder and murmured, 'He will not be alone. Your mother's tomb isn't far away. His body may be dead, but his soul can linger in your memory forever. Remember him.'

I didn't know how to counter our uncle's arguments to keep you, but I answered obstinately, 'He can't abandon me without saying goodbye.'

Our uncle consoled me. 'You will see the people who didn't say goodbye to you again. Don't you want your brother to return to you one day? Let your brother finish his journey in this world; he will return to you later. Perhaps decades later, when your brother returns, he will play a new role in your life.'

I sat under the peach tree and watched our uncle and aunt crying as they shoveled dirt into the pit where you were buried. They put a bag of dandelion seeds into the hole just as it was ready to fill up at the end and then filled the last fissure without saying anything. Go with the wind. Be Free. See you.

I am trying to remember the details, but I fail. I don't know what you looked like. I have no idea where I was a month ago. I am not sure in which country my granddaughter attends school. But everything that day was crystal clear. I'm terrified. I'm afraid I'll forget everything about you one day, and it'll be as if you never existed. And I'm not sure if this tape will remind me of what I've learned about you after I've forgotten it. I will try. At least I am glad that

my memory of you on that snowy day is clear, for now. I'm not good at puzzles, and if I lose another piece, I'll have no idea how to put it back together. I feel a pair of hands around the back of my neck. They're not killing me but stealing my breath away. Where are you?"

Breaking Down

I go to the window and observe Grandma from below. When I recently inquired about her sibling, she had almost forgotten that she had one. How could her brother stay alive in her memory if she had forgotten him. I turn to examine the light next to the radio on the ground. Humans are nature's ambassadors. Is this my grandmother's brother? Does he return in this shape to my grandmother? The light jumps to the window as though in response to my query; it springs from the window and lands on my grandmother, who lost that piece of the puzzle. Memory, rebirth. The clock is ticking on my life, but I want to live on in indelible memory till the very end. I rush to the tape recorder and remove a brand-new one from its green iron casing before inserting it. I count 3, 2, 1, and then press the record button.

Painting to Pen

a brush, a stroke and
night feathers the horizon, painting the skies
a blend of charcoal and winterberries,
a smattering of stars wink and dance in shy greeting

a whisper, a smear and
water lilies surface in a lilac hue,
born into life like a blossom, buds on a rainy day,
their purple prim petals smoothed into a grazed green below

a thought, an idea and
tree stalks grow, reaching
into the clouds where giants dwell with leaves of Midas,
and clever roots of Hermes that lay plaited beneath the surface

a dream, a memory and
pink peppered skies bloom blush-rose as day gives way to night as
birds interrupt the sky
skeletons spread wide like horizons across a sea

a wish, a hope and
seas form passion, angry
blue colliding with swollen greens
foaming at the tip like teeth to take a bite of the shore

a man, a woman
a painter, an artist
a creator, world maker
life giver, life taker

Earth

miscarriage

/,mis'kerij,'mis,kerij/

noun

“the spontaneous loss of a woman’s pregnancy.”

My stomach is now distended / Bearing new blood
Soon, you will be brought into this world / Like
a bud unfurling, becoming a blossom / But you
have not yet begun to uncurl yourself from the
soil of the womb / For now, you sit snug / Your
petals remain shut tight, blocking out the world It
was winter, / snow fell gently outside / But we
were warm / Safe / The moon had risen high / Its soft light
casted an eerie hue into the room / It felt secure /

The time was midnight / New blood quickly began
to rot / A once beautiful budding flower began to wilt / Its
red petals seeped out of me / Staining the grass-green of
my gown a muddled red / Seismic pains shook me to my
core / Your roots were stripped from me without so much
as a goodbye / You hadn’t had the chance to flower. / Your
circle of life, cut short too soon / I watched as your petals
fell to the ground, seeping back into the earth / & as I
watched the petals dissolve
& discolor the dirt, I found that a hollow ditch laid in your
wake—

Step, Stomp, Thud.

Step.
 Stomp. Thud. Step.
 Thud. Stomp. Step. Thud. Stomp. Step.
 Step. Stomp. Thud.

Wind
Tugs my hair and whips the grass.
The nearby dandelions dither.

Dirt
Paves the narrow and jagged trail.
We follow sluggishly.

Mountains
Insert themselves into the vast open sky.
They are everywhere.

Two goats
Lurk across the erie basin.
I watch them.

With every step
My spine sinks further into the earth.
My feet scream. My knees ache.

But we continue to follow.
We have to follow.
We can't stop.
So we

 Step.
 Stomp. Thud. Step.
 Thud. Stomp. Step. Thud. Stomp.
 Step. Stomp. Thud.



Outstanding Fiction Prize
RUNNER-UP

The World Ends Like A Song

Last night I slept in a stranger's bed.

The first time I saw him, he was leaning over a blue, sand-eaten bridge, looking at the river where the mourners threw their dead. His arms were crossed over each other on the railing. In his left hand, he held a box of sunflower seeds. He held nothing in the right.

Somewhere, in this scene, I wandered past him: Numb and dizzy, the phantom remains of something that could be called a girl. It was not a particularly cold day—Late March, around here, was when the weather started warming up—but I was shaking. There was a blue, swollen cold coming from inside me. My lungs were full of winter.

He heard me passing by and he turned to me and asked, “Do you need a jacket?”

I stopped. I wanted to say no, but the word laid, frozen, on my lips. It had been years since I felt another person's eyes on me, the frail intimacy in being spoken to and seen, of sharing the world—if only for a moment—with someone else. It startled me. He patted the railing, and with unsteady legs, I took the spot next to him.

He never asked for my name. I never asked for his. For the longest time, we just stood, us two mute vagrants, looking at the river. When I screwed my eyes up tight, I could pretend that the mounds and mounds of bodies were nothing but hills, hills of soft white sand; but the scent was harder to dream away.

Crows flocked in scattered black clouds to the shore, eager for fresh pickings. They ate away at skin and sinew and picket-like bones, and they saved the hearts for last. The hearts were so shriveled that the birds mistook them for fruits, baked by the sun and dirty with neglect.

Eventually he turned to me—and I still didn't have a clue who he was—and he asked, “Have you been down to the river?”

“No,” I said. “I have no one to mourn.”

“Don’t you have a family?” he asked. “A lover? A home?”

To all this, I said no.

He took a seed in between two fingers and tossed it into the sand. A scattering of old seeds sat, untouched, between the dunes. By nighttime, the water would wash them away. He said, “I’ve been feeding the birds. Trying to, I mean—I think they prefer the people. But I’m doing what I can. You see her?” Here, he pointed to a girl, a lovely girl, a dead girl, with water crawling up the remains of her torn dress. “I’m trying to lure them away from her. I can’t watch them pick her clean.”

“Why not just burn her?” I asked.

“Because, here, there’s something left to remember her by, all of them. A million and one people, and all their scattered parts. Not just smoke.”

Soon, the sun set.

The stranger lingered for a long time, but the crows did not leave. His face grew sadder by the hour, but by nightfall, he was calm and set. Somewhere in the hollows of him, there was an undying thing that the pestilence could not rip away. When he turned to leave, his pale shadow stretching along the pavement, it was like he knew from the start that this is how it would end up.

Wordless, I watched him go. The stench of death was everywhere; and there was the rot, the crowsong rising all around me like gospel through an empty cathedral. Corpses became corpses, and sand dunes were not white hills, but the flesh of our sick, dying city. My heart pounded in a way it hadn’t since I was a kid. My eyes stung for how tight I shut them. He had given me his coat; I left it tied to the railing, and I followed him.

Hearing the scuffle of my boots behind him, he turned to me again. I expected him to be a crueler man, to shoo me away like the lost puppy I was, clinging to the heels of the first kind stranger to extend a handful of table scraps. Instead, he only dug his hands in his pockets, and slowed so I could keep pace. I didn’t know where he was going. I didn’t care enough to ask. He could’ve slipped off the edge of the world, into whatever black and endless space laid beneath us, and I would’ve followed.

But he didn't walk to the edge of the world; only to the suburbs. I used to watch this wasteland roll away through a car window each day, but I never stopped to really see it. The houses were small and spaced apart. No flowers bloomed here, save for weeds, tangled thorns snaking up the siding. He went inside, leaving the door open for me.

A thousand years ago, it seemed, I always forgot to shut the back door of my mother's lonely house. Seduced by the warmth, the scent of home, all the bugs and the vermin and the starving stray animals would crawl inside. And as my mother laid out the mice traps and poisoned the crumbs they ate, she lamented how like the strays I was. Uncertain, unloved. Hungry for what all the children I knew already had. I stood in silence as I took the abuse; I learned always, always, to keep the back door shut.

With this in mind, I stepped into the house.

He sat me down on his tattered sofa as he boiled tea. There were only two styrofoam cups in the pantry, each eaten away by the flies that haunted the cupboards. I watched him steep the tea with honey and pomegranate, and after he handed me a cup, he took the seat beside me.

"I lived in this same house all my life. It's a rathole of a place. The only things that ever stepped foot here were feral cats who stole themselves away to raise their young." Here, he turned to me, vague and watchful. "Where are you from?"

"Oh," I said, "nowhere."

He dusted off the dials of his radio and coasted through channels of static until, at last, he stumbled upon music. It was an old tune, older than any I had heard before. A woman sang in smoky tones of lost love, and there was something about her voice that made me hear the tears falling from her eyes. He hummed along over his cup of tea. I wondered where he had heard this song before.

The windows were left open like grimed mouths, tasting the soft omens of spring. Dust billowed like smoke through the air, stinging my eyes and my throat. I wanted to say more to him. My lips made no sound. I gazed deep into the drink between my folded hands, and said nothing.

"They used to write about each death in the papers," he said, "before too many people died and there wasn't enough ink for all of

them. But I remember the first story I read; the dead woman lived on this same street. She was in an accident when she was very young. It took her legs and scarred her face forever. Her father was always trying to marry her off. I think she wanted to be loved, too, but every man who saw her turned her away. In just the right light, though, her eyes shone right out of her twisted face, and she had eyes like a doe's. She was sad and so full of wanting. But, you know, there was something about her, when you saw her in the sun, that was beautiful." He took a slow sip and stared hard into the plaster wall. His eyes were painting her out of the air, pulling together tufts of dust and pockets of space to make the shape of her. I could almost see her too, solid, standing in front of him with her hands clasped behind her back. "I wish someone had seen her on a gold summer day."

The music on the radio stuttered. For one brief moment, we were left in the aftermath, the spectral absence of song, together. I heard the crickets nesting in the weeds outside, the drum of his fingers against an end table, the squelch of styrofoam as my nails sank into my cup. I thought the song might never start again; but, with a roar of static, the singer found her place, and resumed.

He got up and said, "I think I'll go to bed."

The music ended. I left my cup sitting on the windowsill, beneath the fading sunlight, collecting dust like the hearts scattered round the river where we met. Again, I followed him, and I made it before the door swung shut.

He undressed by the light of a bare lightbulb, whose lampshade had since been broken off or sold. His boots were caked with dried mud, the soles tearing away from the rubber shoe. His shirt was stiff with sweat, lying on the bedroom floor. His skin was cracked from the savage cold, and his bones jutted out from beneath wasted skin. I wanted to ask, *how long have you lived in those clothes?* Instead, I hugged my arms close to my chest.

He crawled into what was almost a bed, a dingy mattress on the floor with no bedframe and no sheets and only a threadbare blanket for warmth. He said, "I think I know what's killing them."

I knew he wasn't lying, but I didn't want to hear. I knelt to untie my shoelaces, and I laid myself next to him, shivering in all my clothes like some cold, helpless creature. He faced the window; I faced the wall, watching my hands paint dark shadows over the

starched plaster. I thought the radio might still be on, but I realized I was only hearing the quiet anguish of a world, weeping.

His pulse sounded through every fiber of the mattress, real and faint and precious. All at once, the city collapsed into ruins around us. The wind, the crows, the curious tap of a yew tree's black branch against the windowpane—each sound fading out like the last few notes of a hymn, one by one, until there was nothing but a naked humming left.

I reached over and took his hand, only ghosting my fingertips over his knuckles, afraid the skin of another person might scald me. I waited for him to tear himself away, to stiffen or betray any sign that I had ventured too far, but none ever came. My heart sank to the space in my ribs where it always should've been. Where was I every night before this? Locked away in some secret, sleepless place. Like the bloated cats beneath the porch, the mice that made a home for themselves between snares in the cupboards, I had craved this all my life. I laughed a little and said, "Isn't it sort of peaceful?"

"What is?" he asked.

"The stillness."

He knitted his brows together, mystified by me. "What's peaceful about the end of the world?"

I watched my breath mist the back of his neck, and for one brief, maddening moment I thought we would make love. I could hear the drum of my heartbeat in my ears for the first time. In the dim light, I almost mistook the brushstroke of his thumb against the palm of my hand for a kiss. I was so dizzy and high that if he turned to look at me now, he'd think I had more to drink than just a cup of tea.

And then he pried his hand away.

It all faded back into a flat, gray haze. The space between our backs on the tattered mattress, his guarded hands torn from mine, stretched to infinity. I felt cold again, frigid cold. He reached over and turned the light off, and even after the room went blue, I stayed awake for hours, waiting.

In the morning, he was gone. I ambled through the house, frying up eggs on the stovetop, drawing open the blinds, half-hoping he would step through the front door, shaking off the debris of apocalypse, and that he would put on one of his songs and look at me in that way that softened me like butter. I waited for hours; and for

hours, I was without him.

I kept my head bowed the whole walk to the river. The bitter cold sang through the black trees, holding me with hands like my mother's. The crushing of rocks beneath my boots was the only sound in the whole city. When I came to the bridge, it looked the same as it always did; blue, sand-eaten wood now fading to gray. The lone bench that was once occupied by young couples and wanderers stopping, for a second, to sleep, was now empty. I stood in the same spot he did yesterday, arms crossed over the railings, resting my chin on the back of my hand. Even the river was quiet now. The waves didn't roar; they called mutely to no one, and no one called back.

I saw the girl he loved lying on the shore, inches from the water. There wasn't much left of her. She was all bones; everything else—her skin, her blood, her heart—had been picked apart and eaten.

He was lying beside her.

And as he laid with the girl he loved, the world ended like a song; with tears and static, and then silence. For a moment, the record had skipped. The snow stopped blowing in and the music went quiet.

I thought—had hoped, madly, childishly—that that would be all. Static. A song that never began again would never end. I thought that would be all. We would live forever in the reprieve, eyeing the rubble through the kitchen window. But all at once, the music found me again. He was gone from me.

Dime Dreams

When I wake, sleep-hazy and half-dreaming, in the small and dark hours, the moon is a dime. The moon through my bedroom window shines silver, a beacon, a giant 1/10th-dollar lighthouse to the American Dream.

The Man in the Moon, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, looks lovingly down on his land—
our land, *this land is your land / this land is my land*
—with a mouth that folds gently at the corners and crater eyes like soft, young coal.

Come and get me, those eyes say.

eigengrau

the color perceived by the eye in total darkness
the Germans gave it a name
and it meant
intrinsic gray,
an essential shade
visible only when nothing
is left to see.

this piece is called a *poem*,
as in somewhere, some time ago,
someone experienced
perfection
on Earth
manifested
and caught it
within a four letter word.

it is difficult to name yet
we name regardless.

even the color of absence.

and when
nothing
is left to name we will
name that sensation
of being undone yet complete, yet
still stepping
towards the foggy cliffside

that echoes a promise
of fantastical things,
new things,
unnamed things.

and stepping
over the edge
as the sunlight vanishes
behind the cliff face,
the wind rushing through
our hair, our skin, we are laughing.
going everywhere in
every way towards the end

falling.
we'll call this falling.

lacuna

Last night I was with you
under a dusting blue sky.
This tryst, like so many before,
with rigid fingers, felt like
inky blots along a page,
a familiar kind of agony.

You're just a special kind of absence
that lives between stars and lines,
a crater or a hole.
I don't know how I'd fill you up.

You're that chill I get,
like a witch passing by my window.
Why not come for a ride?

And how do I find you,
pin you down with definitions,
write your blackness in ink?

You're like a sun,
collapsing toward its center,
held to spin me in orbit until
I pass through you; dark.

Ramen Nights

Ever since my father got COVID he's been obsessed with ramen. Not the kind you buy at a restaurant, or Ippudo, but the instant type. Curly waxed yellow noodles, the kind that comes with a seasoning package. The shrimpy kind evaporating after you boil it long enough.

Ma forbade it after reading an article about MSG from the Taiwanese Mom Line group chat. She squinted down at the nutrition-labeled plastic in her left hand, trashing the emptied wrapper. Not that the MSG mattered that much, though. She likes to call all carbs "empty calories" (except rice). Despite this, he started to sneak into the house with paper bags—instant noodles stuffed beneath produce—and slipped shiny wrapped noodles into the empty shoe boxes, crammed into his closet. It was almost laughable. My father who was glued to his computer, an obsessive workaholic, and a certified smooth talker was risking it all for some noodles.

We've never been exceptionally close, my father and I, his frequent business trips and café visits used to flood his schedule. When I was younger, this distance made our time together sweeter, rarer—after he returned from trips I would squeal, jump into his arms, laugh. He was something like my God. But he was always chasing the next promotion, hacking at one task after the other. I went through this phase where I would act really dumb to get a response. Anything: smile, scolding, whatever to fill the awkward gaps of silence at dinner. I rambled about forks, the function of plates, impossible "what-if's." I remember splaying my arms across my primary school counselor's leather chair, lashes damp when she asked about him. The distance between us felt too far to jump.

But we're always the latest up, the most vulnerable when hungry. I've inherited a lot of his bad traits: the messy sleep schedule, deteriorating teeth, and hunger. I spread out my math homework to

get back at him, petty. But when he cooks, he always offers. I always say yes. In the past, it was badly scrambled fried rice with too-big pieces of spam, but now it's ramen.

Under the crackling lamp lights, Elton John's warped voice in the background. We nursed thick green ceramic bowls, greasy chopsticks, reaching for chili oil coated bamboo shoots. Steam prodding at our chins, cloaked in silence besides the chews, rhythmic breathing. I think I saw him most clearly in these moments: his thick framed smudged glasses, the unguarded slump of his shoulders, and the way broth would drip onto his t-shirt. How he picked apart an egg, mixed the yolk into soup. The way his stubble glistened with droplets and reflected half-gray.

One night I asked him why ramen—he said the warmth. I understood at that moment—because I clutched onto it too, the lingering warmth in my throat, our pink ears under moonlight.

La Brega

It's late.

I sit by the window, watching cars speed under streetlights,
casting eleven o'clock shadows on broken asphalt.

Mamá rushes through the door with bandages around her arm.
She goes straight to the refrigerator without saying hello.
The light illuminates her face white.
My words fall under the freezer, on deaf ears.

Mamá sits me down on the porch, wrapping her arm in ice.
The machines are dangerous, she tells me.
I wonder which of her three jobs did this to her.
I watch as the wrapping falls, ugly skin burned red.

The tip of my tongue burns with *why*.
Out of her purse, she produces two pan dulces.
They are stale when I bite into them,
but sweet, and still soft in the middle.

Es la brega y la recompensa, she says.
Every day, the struggle and the reward.
She folds the brown paper bag neatly to save it for lunch.
I see her eyes sink back in and surrender to sleep.

Her fingers are forgiving on my cheek,
her lips tender on my forehead.
I rest my head on the curve of her shoulder.



1
 I CLENCH ONTO THE ARMRESTS;
 TOO MUCH.

THE PLANE
 FINALLY
 CRASHES.

9
 IT'S REMNANTS THERE
 TO HELP
 KEEP ME AFLOAT.

2
 EVERYTIME I'M ON AN AIR-PLANE

↓ SQUEEZE MY EYES SHUT. ↓
 OPEN

BUT AM I
 STILL FALLING?

10
 AND MAYBE
 THE VIEW FROM THESEA IS BETTER.

3
 I ALWAYS GET THIS URGE FOR THERE TO BE TURBULENCE.

I DIDN'T WISH TO FALL.
 FOR EVERYONE ELSE

11
 I AM JUST A TINY HUMAN BEING ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH.

A BUMP.
 A SHAKE.

I DIDN'T WISH TO FALL.
 FOR EVERYONE ELSE
 TO FALL WITH ME.

DON'T SINK
 OPEN YOUR EYES AGAIN.
 LOOK UP.

BECAUSE IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS

SOMETHING TO KEEP THINGS INTERESTING, OR SOMETHING.
 BUT SOMETIMES I WISH TOO HARD, FOR TOO LONG.

IS IT JUST ME WHO'S FEELING THIS?
 OR DID MY WISH
 CAUSE EVERYONE
 TO FALL WITH ME TOO?

AND OH.
 THERE'S MY LUGGAGE.

STILL FLOATING.

4

6

8

11

FIN. 07.09.22

INES ALTO
 Turbulence



EMMA MASON
Crested Butte

Reclaim

“No doubt, humans will do a lot of damage before we ultimately destroy ourselves.”

–Zeena Schreck, *Beatdom #11: The Nature Issue*

Dolly Sods Wilderness, West Virginia

Once in West Virginia, there stood a primeval forest. In the Allegheny Mountains, spruce trees towered until logged to bare earth from 1899 to 1924 to sate humanity’s desire for lumber. When the trees were gone, the soil dried, and when the soil dried, wildfires charred the landscape.

Given the landscape now lay charred, the US Army used it for artillery training to further scar it with their shelling. Today, signposts warn of possible live bombs in the area.

The Wilderness grew back in a twisted way. Plains of scrubs and flowers replaced the spruce thickets, and shorter, newer trees have grown from rocky earth. This complete change is welcomed by hikers and backpackers who frequent Dolly Sods. The new landscape looks like one you’d find in the Pacific Northwest, maybe Alaska. People camp in the meadows and the fresh woods to see the stars when fog hasn’t consumed the sky.

The effect of humanity on Dolly Sods has not dissipated. My last visit, cars crawled along the road for half a mile where they were parked. An attendant stood at the Bear Rocks Trailhead to hand out maps and urge visitors to stay on the trail. Late spring weather sprung mud from the paths, so hikers had been cutting their own paths around the ones meant to follow.

In some places, that trail was wide as a city street from hundreds of shoes marking their reckless human aversion to dirt at the expense of the scrubs and grass.

“But life will continue without humans. New forms of intelligence will emerge long after this human experiment is over.”

–Zeena Schreck, *Beatdom #11: The Nature Issue*

On Shengshan Island in the East China Sea, a fishing town was lost. Houtouwan once held over three thousand residents in little box houses, behind stone walls, on paved streets. The town’s remoteness led to issues with education and food delivery. Residents began to leave in the 1990s. By 2002, Houtouwan was officially depopulated. A blanket of greenery has descended on the town since.

The cliffside landscape is dystopian. Ivy crawls from every wall, every balcony, every street. Plants push up roof tiles and slip out windows. Houtouwan is a town consumed. In the houses, there are shoes, bottles, foil pill casings, all left over. But soon, those will disappear beneath a rising sea of leaves.

Nature reclaims.

Chesapeake Bay, Baltimore, Maryland

In summer of 2017, campers at my sleepaway camp rode out to Baltimore on a school bus for Tikkun Olam. Meaning “repairing the world,” Tikkun Olam was a day at camp during which we left it to help in the outside world. We arrived at a charter school closed for the summer. Right outside the school was a thin ribbon of water snaking its way to the Chesapeake, Baltimore’s main natural feature. There for hours, we had the choice of cleaning classrooms, picking up trash, or organizing care packages.

Picking up trash was done outside, in the garden and in the

stream. We carried garbage bags and these grabby tools and wore thick gloves. The stream contained its own ecosystem of waste. In it swam candy wrappers, bent straws, broken glass, chip bags, plastic shopping bags, soda bottles—as well as something our supervising counselor called a “balloon” in a transparent euphemism—in a vast array of colors.

There was too much to get rid of. We left when our garbage bags sagged with litter and the stream’s tainted water to enter the school’s air-conditioned walls and eat sunbutter-and-jelly or cheese-and-mustard sandwiches. The rest of the trash remained to soon be swept out into the depths of the Chesapeake. It would not arrive there alone. Between 2014 and 2021, 1,608 tons of trash were collected in Baltimore’s Inner Harbor.

Ivy climbs up the yellow brick wall of a building off Craig Street.

Shenandoah National Park, Virginia

Before the establishment of Shenandoah—but after its Indigenous people were forced west to reservations—people referred to as “hollow folk” populated what is now a national park. They were farmers, people we might deem “hillbillies” today. Many were loyalists in the American Revolution who fled after the war. They paved their red coats into the mortar of their new houses and shed their old lives. They cleared woods to farm the land; still, the oaks and hickories they severed have not returned.

Their graveyards are still there, maintained by their descendants. In the middle of the Shenandoah woods, the Cave Cemetery rises. I visited its stone and wood grave markers, most bearing the surname Cave, last summer. Silk flowers lay before some of the more recent graves. One’s neon yellow petals stood out, unnatural against the dusty ground.

A town rose from the sand.

Established for diamond mining in Namibia, it burst into life where before had only been desert and rocks. There were many houses, inhabited by prospectors, painted bright colors to stand out against the dull hue of the sand. Blues, yellows. They had windows and doors and multiple floors.

In under fifty years, the town of Kolmanskop, Namibia rose, then peaked, then fell when there were no more diamonds to be found. By 1956, it lay completely abandoned: a ghost town in the desert.

The sand came to reclaim Kolmanskop. Just as the town rose from the sand, it began to descend back in. The town sinks. Time let in the sand. It pushed open doors and windows, and the sand seeped in, the same way water slowly fills a tub. Every second, the sand gathers. The sand rises just as the town once did.

In the middle of the desert, Kolmanskop drowns.

137th Street Beach, Rockaway, New York

My grandparents will move in less than a month from their house in Queens. It was my grandfather's parents' before theirs, and it is where my mother and her siblings spent a large part of their childhoods. I was stunned by their decision to move, but my grandparents wanted to live closer to their family here in Pittsburgh and they didn't think they could withstand another Sandy.

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy swept up the east coast all the way to New York. It rained hard in Pittsburgh for days, but in Rockaway, only two blocks away from the shore, Sandy stole the first floor and basement of my grandparents' house. It took another two years for everything to be fixed. Years of my mother's childhood once stuck in their basement were lost to the sea.

My grandparents' friend and neighbor, a defense attorney with an affinity for collecting, spent her time after Sandy scouring the remains of the beach. In England, they call this mudlarking, except they scour the banks of the Thames. The attorney gathered all the

shards of pottery and other interesting splinters she could find, then glued them into elaborate mosaics, which she showed me when I visited her house.

It is estimated that there are currently 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic debris in the ocean. Sandy added a new slew of human detritus into that tally for my grandparents' friend to find. Every consecutive year, I'd feel more plastic bags and wrappers slither past my legs when swimming at the beach.

After the hurricane, new barriers, dunes, and seagrasses were added to Rockaway Beach.

Can a natural place still be natural if so much has been added to it to make it seem more so?

They added new jetties to the beach made of vast boulders placed in lines reaching far into the sea. I got to see them once, in what might have been my last time in Rockaway with my grandparents leaving. It was winter break, so I did not swim. Still fresh and not yet smoothed slick by waves or ocean plants, I walked the whole length of the jetty out into the ocean until I reached its end. Emptiness opened before me where the sky blurred with the sea.

The Kudzu House lives on Fifth Avenue. I see it when I pass by on the morning bus. In it I discovered a perfect haunted house, one I only see through the bus window as it passes through Uptown. No one else on that bus—most days before seven in the morning—seems to notice the house. I make sure to find it every time. I find its crumbling stairs, red brick walls, its turret—all obscured by ivy and foliage—before the bus drives past. It is my own Houtouwan, my own piece of humanity left abandoned and gone to leaf. I ask the Kudzu House for luck on test days. I wonder if I am wrong to wish on a shell of what was once a dwelling, if its once-owners would appreciate that. I wonder if it holds any humanity left to reclaim. Kudzu tendrils drag the house ever downward. I would not be shocked if one day the Kudzu House did not appear in my bus window, the earth having swallowed it up.

I began this essay with what I thought was an “interesting take.” We all know humanity has inserted itself into nature with as destructive of a force as possible, but nature too inserts itself in humanity and human spaces, even if only a dandelion appearing from a sidewalk crack. Nature reclaims. I sought to divide different instances I found into these two sides: humanity in nature and nature in humanity.

What I found instead was a cycle of the struggle between human and Earth for power.

With every location I chose, there was more than one side. Power slid from plants to people back to plants and to people again. With Kolmanskop and Houtouwan, tourists have returned where people once fled to disrupt the nature that rose from these ghost towns once more. In Shenandoah, time and weather has eroded human dwellings so that they have completely vanished or now only consist of a single wall or chimney, and yet cabins and lodges were built in the park for visitors to dwell in again. Even the Kudzu House, I am sure, will soon be bulldozed to make way for the construction of some new storefront or condo complex.

The world is not so black and white. And even if it is, that black and white is layered—in this case again and again over top of each other over decades and centuries of struggle—to make some cloudy gray. This world and its places are cyclical. Nature will reclaim what humanity has taken, then people will seek to reclaim that, and then nature again; reclaim, reclaim, reclaim.

Entropy

Entropy, in relation to thermodynamics, is the amount of randomness in a system. Defined more precisely, entropy is the energy of unordered molecular motion in a system that can't produce useful work. Measured in joules per kelvin, systems with higher uncertainty tend to have higher entropy. Since only ordered, predictable motion can produce work, entropy offers a mathematical way to quantify the amount of wasted energy in a system.

When I was seven, the bubble man visited my elementary school. Arriving in a pink van with blue bubbles painted on it, he carried trays of soapy water and colorful plastic bubble wands to the gym stage. When it was time for the show, I sat packed in with four hundred kids on the rough carpeted floor. The lights dimmed and our eyes were glued to the stage as the bubble man blew a bubble the size of a car, filling the audience with oohs and aahs.

After the bubble man finished his bubble tricks, we clapped and cheered, and the air filled with a soapy smell. To me, the bubble man was like a god. How had he created a bubble trampoline, merged two bubbles into one, and filled a bubble with fog without it popping? Was there a special mixture of soap and water he used? And how could I get a fog machine like his?

Fascinated, I wanted to devour the secrets behind bubbles to become like a god myself.

When the bubble man left, he packed his things away and slammed shut his car door. I watched as he drove out of the parking lot, the hum of his engine fading into silence as his pink-and-blue van diminished to a point down the road and then disappeared. I wondered where he was going, what school he was going to next,

and whether the kids at the next school would appreciate what he did as much as me.

According to the second law of thermodynamics, the entropy of a closed system always increases. Order is created from the concentration of energy; physical processes dissipate energy to achieve equilibrium, increasing entropy. The second law sets fundamental constraints on what is possible, creating the notion of irreversible processes. Think of an ice cube in the hot sun. As the sun's rays transfer energy to the ice, the cube melts from an ordered crystal solid into a disordered flowing liquid. Naturally, in this scenario, it's impossible for any amount of liquid water to transform back into ice.

I gave Bob the snowman a pat with my mittens, although calling him a snowman was a generous compliment. Seven inches tall and made of two brown, sludgy snowballs, Bob wore dimpled eyes, a crooked smile, and two mismatched sticks for arms. Despite his underwhelming guise, after sculpting his final touches I jumped and laughed, my smile stretching from ear to ear; I had brought a new friend into the world. Running around Bob, I trampled the layer of half-melted snow which covered the bare dirt of the yard.

Then, from over the pine trees and behind a gray blanket of clouds, a sliver of rays emerged from a pocket of blue sky expanding to reveal the sun. A beam of sunlight focused on Bob, blasting his smile with what seemed to be a blinding intensity. He began to sag as he trickled brown water from his side. My feet nearly slipping, I rushed over and shoved snow onto his sides with my mittens, squeezing and padding his body. But the sun was too powerful. With a sinking feeling in my heart, I watched as Bob melted into a puddle of brown slush, his stick arms lying flat on the bare dirt.

Entropy and disorder are closely related to chaos theory. Re-searching weather models in the 1960s, meteorologist Edward Lorenz discovered that because many systems have inherent disorder, a microscopic change in the starting state could drastically change the ending state. In other words, without perfectly exact measurements, even with the strongest supercomputers weather would still be impossible to predict with certainty. This effect is commonly

known as the butterfly effect—when systems are sensitively dependent on initial conditions, even changes as minuscule as the flap of a butterfly’s wings can dramatically affect the future of the system.

The wooden boardwalk creaked beneath my sneakers with every step. My eyes darted from tree to tree, drinking in the scenery. Thousands of orange monarch butterflies covered the leaves and branches of the tall eucalyptus trees at the Natural Bridges Monarch Grove butterfly sanctuary. A cool fall breeze wound its way through the trees, and the air was filled with the clicking flap of butterfly wings.

“The monarch butterfly migrates in the late fall from the interior of the United States to its winter habitat,” the tour guide told my group. “These amazing creatures fly over 3,000 miles to reach the California coast.”

I paused momentarily as a large monarch butterfly fluttered to a stop on the wooden railing next to me. The brilliant bright orange and yellow spots on its large wings were interwoven with narrow black lines and surrounded by a thick black ring dotted with white spots. Clutching the wood with its short twig-like black legs, two twitching antennae grew out of its fuzzy white spotted body. The sunlight struck the butterfly in such a way that it appeared to glow golden as if it were radiating magical energy. Looking at the creature, I almost imagined its bulbous eyes staring back into mine. Then, as the moment passed, the monarch flapped its wings and danced away.

As we continued down the trail, my mind was full of wonder. Why here, and why now? Why did they come to this otherwise ordinary eucalyptus forest? How many thousands of them were here? I wanted them to stay here forever with their dazzling spectacle, hundreds of flashes of orange darting through the air, creating whorls, eddies, and dancing patterns of shadow. But deep down, I knew they would leave, carried away by the wind just as they had been carried here, leaving the eucalyptus trees bare once again. The butterflies generated chaos and disorder, but with a hidden order. Chaos, but with the sense of beauty only nature can possess.

Entropy operates on all scales, from the microscopic to the mac-

rosopic. From the motion of subatomic particles to the melting of ice to the brilliant explosions of stars, the second law of thermodynamics provides a model to understand the world. Natural processes that decrease entropy, such as the freezing of water into ice, are counterbalanced by other processes that increase entropy, creating a net increase at the universal scale. All the planets, stars, and galaxies in the cosmos obey this universal law.

“Come, look here,” Dad said.

I crouched down in the tall grass on top of the hill. With only the dim glow of the city on the horizon, the dark night of the new moon cast my surroundings in black shadow, the silhouette of trees visible in the distance. The sound of chirping crickets filled the field and I could smell the fresh soil.

Glowing white streaks, orange nebulae, and black dust splayed across the cloudless sky in a giant milky band surrounded with points of yellow, red, and blue scattered like grains of sand. Closing my left eye, I pressed my face up to the telescope.

“Wow,” I whispered. In the circular viewport, a striped, brown sphere appeared, streaked with beige and russet from its equator to its poles and surrounded by sharp, paper-thin rings. “I didn’t think the focus on Saturn would be this good.”

A fan of astronomy, I knew Saturn was the second largest planet, and as a gas giant, its atmosphere was made mostly of hydrogen and helium. I knew the planet was less dense than water and would float in a bathtub. I knew its rings were split in the middle by the Cassini Division, a gap 4,800 kilometers wide. I knew its largest moon Titan was cold enough to have liquid methane lakes.

But looking at the planet through my telescope with my eyes felt magical as if I were Galileo discovering Saturn for the first time. Looking at its atmosphere and its rings which scientists had measured and studied gave me a sense of understanding, truth, and accomplishment as a member of the human species. That sitting there, in the tall grass, I could observe the outer reaches of our solar system, I could explore deep into the wonders of space, and I could understand our place as humankind in the mighty cosmos made me breathe a sigh.

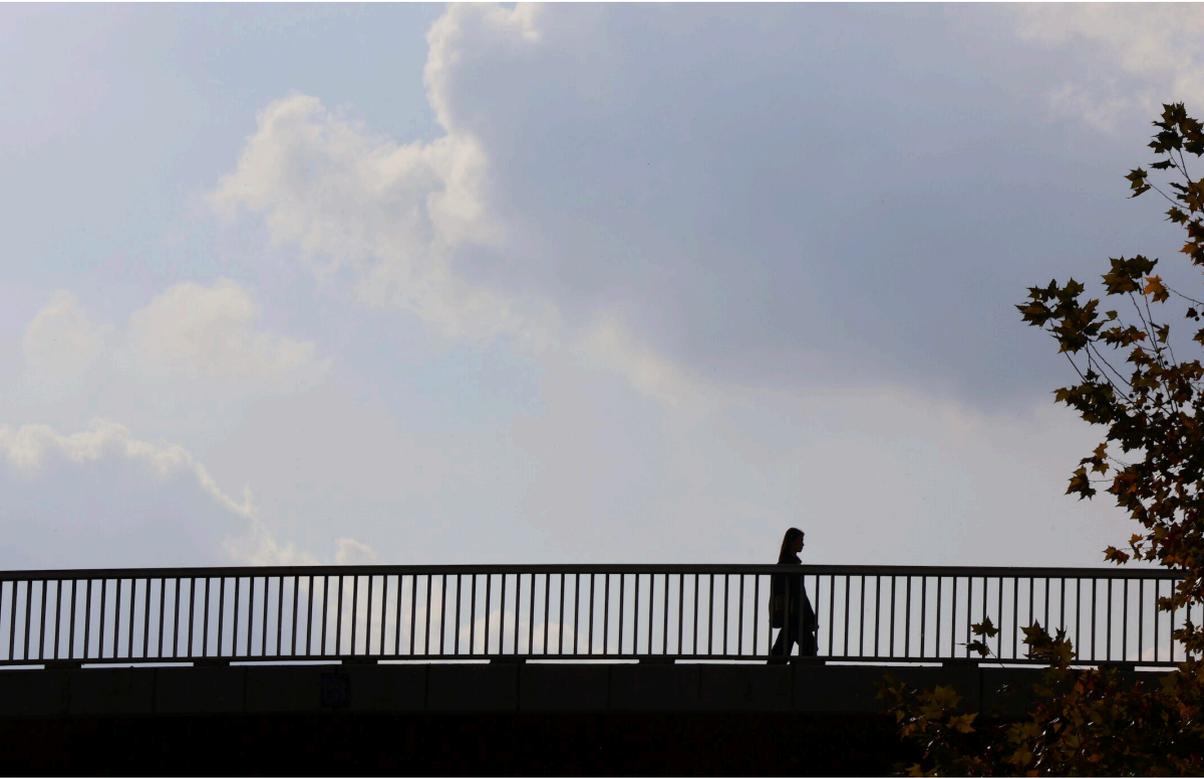
In the heat death theory of the universe, scientists have taken

the second law of thermodynamics to its natural conclusion. As the universe continues to expand and entropy continues to increase, energy and matter become more and more diffuse. In 100 million years, galaxies outside our local group will have moved so far away we can no longer observe them. After 120 trillion years, the last star will have fizzled out and dissipated its gas across the emptiness of space. After 100 quintillion years, even the last stellar remnants will have been swallowed by black holes. Beyond a googol years, the last black holes will have breathed their dying breaths.

The universe will have achieved maximum entropy, its energy dissipated across the unimaginable vastness of the expanding cosmos. No matter can be formed. Lone photons and quarks will have spread too far apart to interact with each other. Our planet Earth and the human species will long have ceased to exist. Our information, the language, literature, science, and culture we have created and that we will ever create will be gone, atomized across the void of space and time.

Moondance

Say, what if we danced a little?
What if we danced
every time it rained so hard
it made the oceans cripple?
What if we linked
our fingers every time we
looked up and saw
each star as it winked?
What if we went spinning
(me dipping you) long after
the candle went out,
and a new day's beginning?
What if we danced,
and I told you
maybe I liked you,
but told me I'm entranced...
Say, what if we could dance?
I heard you say you
gazed at me too, Mister Moon,
so why not give it a chance?



JIA DUNSBY
Sky Saunter



LUCY LIU
Never Be Lonely

My Goddess is Giving Galaxies

*when a body ascends away from reason,
a name is a form of oblation. Like ash, like loss
to the goddess of lost things. – Hari Allur*

I digest your words because
they come from a body in which I once laid,
breathing in your warmth with my eyes
sealed shut and waiting.

when my lungs were still in their infancy
with repeating coughs, you pressed spicy
balm against them. I could always feel
the salve seeping into my lungs, finding a home.
though it's your touch that healed me,
fused the pieces that needed fusing.

for two months, your village in Monrovia
became your home again and I realized that
I liked your bofrot more than the moon,
the moon was not sweet, not warm, not made by you.

after you watch me grow until I cannot
grow any longer, I want to spit my love
out onto your palms, hold them slick,
watch it grow.

day by day your body expands farther
out of reach. I watched when you first
took the city lights with you.
Then came the stars that I can see shine underneath your
skin. I want to see you teeth at the galaxy.
But share it with me before you swallow it whole.

Cover the Glass (Reasons to Shave Your Head)

I've always liked taking showers that feel like a thunderstorm against my bare back.

It could be a sign I'm spoiled somehow, and I probably am, but I relish the pressure, which is so much like a hurricane, the drops of water hot as shocks. Hot enough to flood the bathroom with opaque clouds of white steam, hot enough to leave my skin red and raw. I've always liked leaving the shower knowing my fingers look like grapes left to wrinkle in an August sun.

The shower broke earlier this year in a Goldberg machine night of misfortune. For weeks, it had been leaking, the water dripping over the walls of the tub, soaking the floor, and then pouring through the ceiling below. Considering plumbing didn't come cheap and didn't come often, my family took to using the spare shower and told ourselves we'd fix the shower when we could.

I am the one who hears the crashes when the bathroom ceiling collapses. I think I've dreamt it. I've done that before—woken myself up with the bangs and rattlings of my own subconscious. Parched and bleary-eyed, I head to the bathroom thinking I'll get a glass of water, wash my face. The hallway ground is painted by layers of sawdust, thick enough to be soft beneath my slippers. The doorway is littered with debris. Chipped wood and white paint and the pile of cluttered material on the tiled floor is out of place. The gaping, toothless hole above my head revealing the slats of the attic floor above is out of place.

So I go back to sleep.

I am the one who greets the alcoholic plumber when he comes to repair the bathroom. He leaves the breaded smell of beer lingering behind doors and in the drywall cracks for days. My father says he will go buy air freshener this weekend.

I am the one he tells about his wife, a tarot card reader, whom he talks about with constellations in his eyes. He shakes my hand before he leaves and smiles. His teeth have been bleached. “Pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” he says. “Here’s my card—give that to your mom—and here’s my wife’s. She’s by the ice cream place on Island Street, you know the one? Check her out.”

The card has a printed image of a seraphim and the words “what does it feel like to be turned inside out” printed in purple. I decide I’ll forget this plumber and his wife the moment he steps out the door.

But he’s repaired the shower, after all, and I’ve only been in the new tub long enough to wash my hair. The steam will cover the glass soon enough, turning my reflection into monotone fog. For now, I can wash my face with a bar of soap new enough to remain heavy in my hands and meet my own eyes.

I can wait for that sudden revulsion to emerge, the way it always does, at the sight of myself. I can remind myself to admire the curve of my shoulders—am I getting stronger?—the green of my eyes—they look bluer than usual—the flat of the skin between my ribs—I think I’m getting skinnier.

My hair has grown out. When it’s wet, it’s almost black, saturated by the water, and it’s gotten very long.

I run my hands over the bones of my ribcage, counting line after line. That habit started back in middle school, when I was still counting calories, still skipping meals. The lessons I taught myself have proved the hardest to unlearn. I graze my arms. When will the hours of swim team emerge in the mirror? When will my body begin to belong alongside the wrestlers and boxers and football players I am longing for?

I push at my chin and touch my cheek. I wrap my hand around my neck as if I’m trying to strangle something. I may not be done growing. I might hit 5’7” someday, 5’8” or 5’9” if I practice good posture. Fifteen isn’t too old. I could be six feet tall. I could look like a body builder. I’d have to shave my head.

The soap bar slipped out of my hands some minutes ago. I didn’t hear it when it hit the floor. I was a witch for Halloween in second grade. I pinned my hair into a black wig we got for some five dollars off Amazon Prime and wriggled my body into a black dress with

puffs at the elbows. I was little, then, still taller than average, still a seven-year-old who hadn't yet grown into her own body. Everyone looks the same in second grade. Everyone's no feet tall and shooting up without shooting in any other direction.

I still managed to become unrecognizable. I had a plastic green nose, the kind you could buy from Party City, with a wart at the tip. I painted every visible inch of skin green. My face, my hands, my neck. I ran across Jackson Avenue, where the neighborhood went trick-or-treating, and was seen by everyone as a stranger. I said hello to the people I knew and they recoiled. I got intoxicated on my own camouflage, injecting each reaction of unfamiliarity into my blood until I was euphoric.

I think I'd do it again. I think I would paint my hands green and I would plaster warts all over my body and I'd say my name was something else and no one would know me. I would train in opera houses, like a baritone, until my voice was low enough to scrape the underground. I would draw on a mustache. I would buy fake glasses. I would wear gloves to make my hands look bigger and wrap my chest in bandages and wear oversized clothes. I'd become a joke disguise. I think I'd go by Adam and poke through my throat from the inside out in order to make it bob. Or I'd get drunk every night and become a plumber and marry a psychic.

Does the eye of a seraphim, sitting in a spiderweb of wings, see past the human body? Does it see past an impermanent skin to whatever tarot cards can be found, buried in blood?

I let the water run past my body and gush into the drain. The drops pile onto me, covering me, like a hug, like the heat of a blanket keeping me awake, keeping me from sleeping, keeping me rolling back and forth and turning my pillow, searching for an unfindable cold. I waste the water. I breathe in the steam and it smells like beer. My body is soaked. I want to peel it off and bury it. I want my bones to become fossils of the girl I once was.

I'm still looking at the mirror, with the water off and a towel around my stomach. It looks like a dress. I throw it off and melt onto the bathroom floor. I am already dry. I look ridiculous. I look like I'm about to cry, with red eyes and trembling hands and hair so long and wet and when it's wet it looks so dark I could call it black.

What would I look like if I really did buzz my hair and fold my

breasts against the hard bones of my chest? What would the name
“Adam” sound like if spoken out loud?

What does it feel like to be turned inside out?

My hair is leaking down my bare back. It’s long. It’s so long. And
the pressure is so much like a hurricane, the drops of water, cold as
shocks.

Death, Love, Alcove

I.

Hungry waves slash
the sides of the ship.
Rocky teeth rip open the clamshell hull,
swallowing meaty chunks of wood and rope.
I slip
over the edge.

Submerged, I swing wildly
toward the moonlight.
I surface.
I gasp.
The ocean's maw descends again.
I open my eyes to the sting
of salt, the darkness.
I flail toward up,
but maybe it's down.
My lungs burn, salt in a wound.

I am not sure I'm alive.
Would it matter?
I'm tumbled through the haze,
rolled down the tongue of currents,
the throat of the ocean,

eaten alive.

II.

She was home when she heard it –
thunder in the sky and sea,
the splash and flounder
of bodies in the ocean.

By morning they'd be dead.
Cadavers, flotsam on the tides,
souls lost to the pull of the depths,

hearts and brains and memories: all consumed.

She, alone again.

III.

I dream. I dance. I am digested. I drown.
Limbs wrap my arms
ferrying me to my next life.
Lifting, lifting me to—

I'm thrown to the ground, something solid.
Are there solid things in my afterlife?
Solid pebbles, broken
shells, bone. Bones.
I cough, gagging, retching
dirty water.
I'm alive

to the warm chill of the air, the cling
of debris to my body. My eyes
almost adjust to the darkness.
I'm alive and alone?
Hello?

Home.

I choke on a scream.
Another voice, haunting, a sweet lark song.
Home.

She forms from the pool at the floor—
skin patterned with pulsing black spots,
arms and tentacles amass on her body.
She smiles, mouth full of teeth.

Home.

She points at me.
I know. Food.
Friend.

Sugar

The cat had died sometime during the night, hours before Isabella had woken and discovered the stiff body still curled tightly beside her. Isabella's job was in the next town over, in the big sausage factory, and every morning she left the house at 5 o'clock to catch the 5:15 bus, never a second later. So Malachi found a note in the kitchen—Sugar died. Please clean the bed and move her to the cellar—and a small mound, wrapped hastily in a blanket, waiting for him on his sister's bed.

He kept a pocket of space between his chest and the dead cat as he made his way to the cellar. There was an awkward feeling he couldn't shake, like he was holding a piece of himself and it had been stolen from him. He didn't feel like crying. His face just scrunched up tightly until he reached the foot of the stairs.

Sugar's body was the right size to fit between the turnips and pickles, above the space that was typically stocked with firewood. Malachi never felt like chopping wood in this type of cold, when winter was supposed to have gone but had decided to drag its feet into the first weeks of spring. He noted to himself that Henrick, who owned the general store, might share some of his household supply for a couple of dollars.

The cat's face was a small white patch in the darkness, her eyes squeezed into two pink commas. Malachi could almost swear she was smiling. For a moment, standing before the bed with a bucket of soapy water, he wanted to blame her for the mess he had to clean up. But it was only a moment. And then he found he could only muster the energy to release the air in his lungs and start scrubbing.

It was hours before Isabella returned, deep into the evening, with sausage juice sprinkled like rain on her skirt. At the dinner

table, they stewed silently in each other's company, eating the rice and steamed vegetables Malachi had prepared.

"The right thing to do," said Isabella, "would be to bury her with Papa." "Too cold. The ground's as hard as a rock."

"Okay. Then what do you propose?"

Malachi pictured the cat in his head. "We have the fireplace. Take this weekend and light her up, and it'll be over in a couple of hours. Henrick's got wood that I can borrow."

"You expect a cat to burn properly in there?" "I said Henrick's got wood that I can borrow."

"You'd need enough wood for a bonfire. It wouldn't fit." "Sure it would."

"In any case, it's probably the least dignified way imaginable to put her to rest," said Isabella. "She's your pet."

"She's not mine."

His sister stared at him sadly, or maybe coldly. He could never really tell which it was. "He'd want her to have a grave. There's got to be something you can do."

"Something I can do? Seems like there's always something I can do. Like digging and chopping wood and—"

"And working, maybe, if you ever feel up for it," she said, then blinked and clamped her mouth shut. Malachi's face filled with heat.

After a moment, she stood and gathered her plate and silverware. "Thanks for the meal."

The following morning, she was gone again, and Malachi buried himself in his sketchpad. Dim and windy days like these were ideal for his work. Of course, Isabella didn't like them because the sunlight was swallowed by the thick clouds, posing a threat to her vegetables. But she didn't have the brain of an artist.

In the garden outside the window, pea plants and turnips protruded from the dirt, waving weakly at Malachi. Beyond the stone border were tufts and bunches of weeds, some with long spiky leaves and others that looked like little crowded colonies. He drew them, capturing the wildness and deadness in the strokes of his pencil.

A bit away from the vegetable garden, the weeds grew tall and tangled together. The stones which encircled them, barely visi-

ble, were the only remnant of the garden's past splendor, Malachi thought. Looking at it, shapes from his childhood formed in his mind—the pale and frothy outlines of peonies and rose bushes, the tiny bodies of bumblebees as they dipped in and out of the blossoms. And Papa, hovering over the explosion of color, always pruning or shoveling or watering. Malachi's pencil moved urgently, tracing the scene onto the paper.

What Isabella didn't understand was that a cat was just a cat. Humans got graves and headstones and people to dig holes in the dirt for them because they had done things in life. They deserved all of it—whereas cats did nothing but sleep and bask and wait to be fed.

He finished the last graphite flicks of hair on the back of Papa's head. The familiar, hulking figure brought back the scrunched expression to Malachi's face. It seemed that at any moment, the smudged drawing would turn around and face him, and Malachi would feel the familiar tightness in his nose that preceded tears. Stop crying, the drawing would say. If you're a man, then stop crying. His words were always chosen with sober care. This was a man who hated his son, and somehow, he was also the man who transformed into a fountain of knowledge when it came to flowers, whose hands became as delicate as a surgeon's when he gardened. It was the same man who fawned over a stray kitten as though it were his own child. Malachi ripped out the page and crushed it into a ball.

He left the house and went to the general store, where he asked for as much firewood as Henrick could spare.

Eyeing him, Henrick heaved the logs onto the counter and said, "I hear it'll warm up any day now."

"No, it's the cat," said Malachi. "The ground's frozen solid, so I figured I'd just burn her in the fireplace."

"Your cat died?"

"Well, she was really my papa's."

"You mean Fred's treasure?" The creases in Henrick's old face opened up all of a sudden. "Well, that's a real tragedy. I'd say your papa loved that cat as much as his own two children. I remember, he'd come in here on hot days with her running in on his heels and ask me, 'John, mind if I borrow a dish of milk?' And he'd stay right there until she'd finished the last drop." He shook his head.

“Right,” said Malachi. “How much for all this?”

“Dime apiece is alright. Say, how’s your sister doing? Remember to tell me how everything gets along.”

“How what gets along?”

“The garden,” said Henrick. “I always thought she was practical to the bone but looks like she inherited Fred’s wild streak. His passion for flowers.”

“Isabella’s not really artistic,” Malachi assured him.

“Oh, but she came in here last week and bought all sorts of seeds. Peonies and white roses, mostly. Said she’s going to plant them as soon as the ground thaws.”

Buying flowers? He could hardly imagine Isabella—dull, grounded Isabella—partaking in something so lovely and lively. So that’s what she’d been doing, he thought, all while prodding him about work. Scoffing at his art. The sour taste on his tongue intensified, thick and acidic.

Swallowing, he joked, “Maybe we can keep the cat around until then and she can find somewhere in the yard to put her.”

He expected the old man to laugh, but Henrick only grunted. “You know, you say you’re burning that cat, but I think Fred would have wanted her right by his side. Maybe it’s none of my business.”

“He won’t mind,” said Malachi. The words left his mouth on a whim, fueled by his annoyance, in a tone he hadn’t quite intended to bite so hard. For a moment, Henrick didn’t say anything. When Malachi looked at him, the old man’s ordinarily cheery eyes were watching him steadily, suddenly soft and diluted.

“I’m sorry, son.”

Malachi looked awkwardly out the window. “What, why?”

“Fred should have said that to you, but he never did. I believe he always wanted to. But there’s something you should understand.” He paused. “Well, you’re never going to get that apology. He’s gone now and waiting around for him won’t do anybody any good.” He smiled sadly. “I wish you could’ve had one last talk with him, though.”

As the old man spoke, embarrassment swelled inside Malachi, pumping blood into his face until it burned. Some anger accompanied it as well. The old man’s words were condescending and full of pity, something he imagined Isabella was thinking every time she

looked at him with those sad-cold eyes. You didn't know Papa, Malachi wanted to say. You don't know me, either.

But all that left his mouth was "Thanks for the wood." He gathered the logs and left as quickly as he could, looking anywhere but the storekeeper's eyes.

As he sat adding wood to the fireplace he thought of the day, many weeks after Papa's death, when he had visited his father for the first time. He remembered the wet feeling of the grass on his knees, and the moody spring sky that was the type of sky Papa hated most. For once, he hadn't cried in front of Papa. His face had only scrunched up tightly, and stayed that way as he knelt there, hour after hour. As the clouds grew dark and started to empty themselves onto the land, he remembered expecting to feel some sort of weight disappear off his shoulders, to breathe the icy air into lungs that no longer felt constantly compressed. But the shock, the brief feeling of victory, the confusion, and the anger he'd felt consecutively in these first few weeks had only evolved into a kind of heavy, hollow bitterness.

Now, he unraveled the blanket Sugar was bundled in and placed her stiff body on the wood. What now? he thought. All that planning, all that nagging, and the old man still couldn't point him in a proper direction. His head was spinning a little. He struck one match and tossed it into the fireplace, then another, and a third one, until the stack of firewood was blazing.

"What are you doing?"

He hadn't heard Isabella enter through the front door. She was hugging a bag of gardening soil with wide eyes.

"Why are you here?" was all he could think to ask.

"I thought you'd be in your room," she said quickly. "I mean, you're usually drawing in your room at this time." Her gaze fell on the flames blooming in the fireplace. "What are you doing?"

"It's not like you," said Malachi, his voice rising, "to take a day off at all, let alone to use it for gardening. I heard from Henrick that you're quite passionate now. Were you trying to keep it a secret?"

"Because I knew you'd react like this," she said.

"You'd react this way if you were in my shoes. It's easy, I suppose, to want to honor him and his garden when you were the one

he loved.”

She let the soil fall to the floor with a thud. “Of course. He loved me so much that every word he directed at me was about you—teach Malachi this, make sure Malachi does that. I’m just stupid enough that I’m still here, taking care of you ten years after he died.”

“I didn’t ask to be taken care of,” he said, flushing red. “I’d never have stayed in this house if I’d known I’d be cooking and cleaning like a—a maid. I’m stuck here.”

“I’m stuck, too!” She sounded tired and desperate and alive. “Look at me. Buying soil and seeds to revive something he loved. Begging my brother not to burn his beloved cat. I wonder all the time why it always falls on me. But I remember that I do it because it’s right. Because he’s my Papa, and because hating him ten years later would only be a waste of space in my heart.” She stared at the bright tendrils flicking in and out of the fireplace, then looked back at Malachi. “It’s time for you to realize you’re not a kid anymore.”

Malachi opened his mouth, but the flames had begun to lap closer and closer to his face, whooshing like hot breath, and he moved back. The fire had started to spill out of the fireplace, spitting bright mouthfuls that singed little black holes into the rug. Isabella rushed to the kitchen, while Malachi stood and stomped frantically on the tiny fires that had sprouted across the living room floor.

Isabella returned with a dish filled with water and emptied it onto the flames. “Go!” she shouted, and for once, he listened.

They worked in silence. There was only the thud-thud-thud of their shoes on the floor as they ran back and forth from the kitchen, and their heavy, rhythmic breathing as the fire crackled. Even once they’d put out the flames, they sat for a moment without speaking. Finally, Isabella crossed the room to the fireplace and nudged the wood aside. Something charred and misshapen was all that remained of Sugar’s body.

She drew in a sharp breath. “Malachi,” she said, “look at her.” Malachi put his face in his hands and started to cry.

His memory of the grave was fuzzy now, ten years later. But standing before the headstone, it somehow felt as though he’d gone back in time to that day, the first and last time he’d visited this place. Some flowers Isabella had left the week before still lay at the

base of the headstone. He set down the kettle and the basket he'd brought with him and replaced the wilting peonies with a fresh bouquet, a collection of all the kinds that Henrick had said were Papa's favorites.

Malachi emptied the kettle onto the ground, watching the boiling water splash and hiss and seep into the dirt, thawing it gradually. After a few minutes, he prodded the ground with his foot, and started to dig. Nearby, a couple of robins had emerged with the morning sun. Their voices rang throughout the graveyard, above the dirt squelching and the clink-clink of the shovel. Malachi soaked in the sound, taking in deep lungfuls of spring air.

When he'd finished, he reached into the basket for Sugar, removing the blanket to reveal the disintegrating mass. He placed her gently in the dirt, and then closed his eyes and tilted his chin toward the clouds. He didn't know what he was doing—praying or simply absorbing the morning sunshine. All he could think about was how warm the sun felt, filling him from head to toe.

Trace Minerals

I cut my gums on my sister's engagement ring.
They ooze bright red sweet and sour sauce.

The thin skin of oil on the nighttime air splits
into smaller and smaller globules but never ever cracks.

Meanwhile, I hold on to the things I can't grasp by the skin of my
teeth.

At the wedding, grapefruit skins fall like laughter
from the hands of a flower girl
with a pocket full of rice and citrus scraps.

Grapefruit seeds. Swollen tear ducts, calcified,
flicked into the sink with a knife tip.
Anyone would attract fruit flies in this heat.

Sometimes I think things I'm not supposed to, like
I wonder if there is enough gold in my body to be worth something.
I suppose any amount of gold is worth something, even if

it's just a promise from a rich man you've only just been intro-
duced to.

Or the fake plastic gold of our childhood; the earrings she wore
after I pierced her earlobe with our mother's sewing needle.

I threw out all my makeup and took up meditation, but
I still harbor traces of desire to be an object of adornment.
My sister's ring is beautiful. See how even real gold

turns my skin green?

The night air knows me better;
it climbs in through my bedroom window,
and it drapes me in silver.

Friendship Bracelets

Birds of a feather nest together, weave dandelion-thorn flower crowns.

A primordial giant towers over dollhouse hallucinations, reaches out to embrace the astral overstory with atlas arms, as the harvest air teases the huddled fledglings below with a playful, probing incense of ripening decay.

It watches as they swing through deadfall moors, banal steppes, flowered meadows, stepping off

the perch to greet a coral s k y

watches as the weary sun clocks out early, griping and groaning about unpaid overtime, watches as their wood-peck chirping calcifies into a serrated silence, watches as her stupid barkless flesh is tenderly skewered by an echo, rubbed raw by the logger's sandpaper of WhatIfitcouldhavebeendifferentWhatIfwe(I?)madeamistake-Whatifwecouldhave

sat on this bench as part of a together again, flown south for the winter wing to wing, etched countless friendship bracelets in the woodwork of time—the songbird's dirge it can only watch, but if birdbrains could speak tree, they would say that no sprout under this vast canopy is without scars; a tree's grisly agony might yet yield syrup, despite the pain of the tapper.

Wintering

Your words are growing
in pots in the pits
of my stomach
& maybe that's why
I cannot forget
the way my name *bloomed*
from your mouth
& grew gardens into mine.
Maybe you are something
I am supposed to remember.
Keep you rooted
to my shoulders & carry you
barefooted through the cold,
like our love is seasonal
& the promise of spring
comes with the return

of you too.



NITYA GOYAL
Balance



MADDIE FRIEL
House of the Sun



HANNAH HE
Pedal On

A Journey Back to Mom

Scattered around the desk were the colored crayons which started to stub as they became worn from relentless usage, their paper covers chipping on the sides. Classmates beside me frantically filled in the lines of their drawings with yellow for the bundles of dandelion flowers growing on top of the green stripes which represented the grass. I looked across at my desk buddy, whose hands became all dirty from the passionate rubbing and intermixing of colors. He took a black crayon to outline two figures: a woman and a child. The finishing touch came from the chunky block letters which spelled out, "Happy Mother's Day," drawn in a soft pink to symbolize her favorite color.

I stared down at my embarrassingly empty white sheet of paper, unable to craft anything I felt could surprise or make Mom happy. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to concentrate, as if it would bring some groundbreaking revelation that could catalyze itself into the artistic masterpieces my classmates were creating. It was fifth grade and our teacher asked us to write cards for Mother's Day and suggested we put in everything our Moms loved to show our appreciation for them, but the only problem was I knew nothing about my mom.

I. The Dandelion Field

I've only seen two pictures of my Mom as a teenager, both of them taken on an old black and white camera with grainy film which makes the characteristics of the photo hard to decipher. The first one is of her sitting in a dandelion field, hands intertwined with the earth beneath her, short hair blown across her face, her eyes squinting from the bright sun shining in her face. The second is a

family portrait, but maybe that word is too fancy to describe the actual depiction. In reality, it's just my Mom and her siblings standing at awkward lengths from one another, with Grandma and Grandpa on broken wooden stools, wearing faded tank tops and dirt-caked sandals in the intense summer heat. She's frowning, probably from the lack of air conditioning, but a part of me can't help but assume it's because she was miserable as a teenager. Maybe that's why she never talks about those years.

These photos are a part of the puzzle pieces I fail to piece together to understand the woman who raised me. It always feels like I was given a faulty pack with missing pieces.

Growing up dirt poor in the countryside would have made any normal person succumb to the cold hard truth that they'll eventually be pulled back into the cycle of hard labor assigned to their parents and their grandparents. But my Mom isn't normal, she's the most resilient woman I know. She was the exception. The stories of her being the only person in her village to attend college and become a doctor have been stories beaten into my brain since I was old enough to understand Mandarin. But still, I don't know anything about her. I don't know her favorite color, her favorite TV show, or what her favorite things to do in her free time are.

And despite admiring her and claiming to be each other's best companions in life, I still feel a piece of her that holds the most about her is still buried deep inside her, unable to be excavated.

The Mom I know has only ever been the one prioritizing everything but herself. Maybe the reason I feel so disconnected from her is because of her selflessness. She's given so much of herself to make my life better. Left her native country to someplace that took away everything from her, her family, her medical degree, all her memories. All the years of pressure spent drowning in the anatomy textbooks in the quiet of a library all for the sake of finding a way out of the cycle. She's spent so much time promising herself she won't make the same mistakes our ancestors did only for her to make the mistake of losing herself.

II. The Phone Call

I sometimes get glimpses of the Mom I want to know more, the

vulnerable side of her I never get to see. It's like I'm meeting a new person all over again. Like the time she said as if it were nothing that if she didn't marry my Dad, she would probably be happier. Her words stung a bit because obviously I wouldn't have been born, but I couldn't help but also take part in an alternate reality we never knew existed. Maybe then she would find an outlet to pursue her dreams without the burden of taking care of me.

When my anger builds up and explodes into us fighting and going back and forth, I slip out a snarky remark which always falls under the lines of how I don't want her in my life anymore. While I never mean it, I see how it hurts her, because the fight ends and I can see small flickers reflecting from her glasses, almost as if her eyes were welling up with tears. I know my words hurt, but sometimes I think if I continue pushing, then maybe it'll be a breakthrough of understanding her.

Mom's anger reminds me of my own; maybe I inherited it. When I hear her pure and raw frustration after arguing through the poorly connected phone call with Grandma, I see my Mom as if she were myself. These phone calls are frequent, but they always spiral into Mom taking out all her previous woes and shouting them loud enough to traverse the Pacific. The anger of feeling like she's yelling into an echo chamber all alone, her pleas to be understood only clear to herself. The indestructible shield of her tenacity cracks, and she transforms herself into a teenager again, her desperation painting her face with youth.

She hides her fears and pain by putting on an indifferent face, assuring me she's just tired, but I know it's all lies. I want to grab her shoulders and shake awake the part of her hiding just beneath the surface, the girl who's been forced to suppress her feelings, and tell her I'm there and I want to know her.

III. Locked Knees

A broken screech is released as my coarse violin bow contacts the rustic gray string. My right hand holding the bow is unable to match the pace the fingers of my left hand flail across the fingerboard. The notes start to jumble together until even the rhythm loses itself in the mess. I can feel my Mom's eyes burn into my back, her silence a

warning for me to focus on the notes and rests painted on the paper. My arm goes limp and I begin to slouch, my head going to implode from frustration.

Mom signed me up for violin lessons at age six. No matter how much I disliked its high-pitched sounds and the way it made my chin cramp up, Mom persisted, taking me week after week to lesson after lesson. She tells me I should get the opportunity to learn something she never had the chance to. In reality, she wanted me to live out a dream she always wanted. Each week, she would make me play the new folk song I learned, listening intently, face beaming when the notes began to shape themselves into a tune, turning itself into a new language which could be understood solely from the way the notes stacked on top of each other perfectly.

Once, Mom told me she continued to go to school because she doesn't like to leave things unfinished. Despite being the oldest in her class, she continued to push through, telling me to follow her lead. But recently, I've noticed her movements become slower. It takes longer for her to walk up the stairs, her arthritis taking hold of her knees after years of biking in the winter as a child to make it to class. The magnetic mirror sticking on the refrigerator frequently in her hand to pluck out the pesky gray hairs which find a way out of the strands of red dye. I've always thought of Mom as invincible, her pure desire to fight on serving as an infinite fuel source. Though, now she's reached the wire with how much more she can handle, leaving everything to me. Her closet filled with backlogged dreams left for me to clean out and sort through, an obligation for me to make her happy. As I reach deeper within the closet, I realize I'm reaching out to a teenager staring right back at me, the person my Mom used to be. Hiding all alone, scared of her future, I realize we truly are the same.

I don't need to understand my Mom because she's always been with me, her desires living alongside mine.

GENETICS

ALL LIVING THINGS MUST PASS GENETIC MATERIAL FROM PARENT TO OFFSPRING.

My thin-lipped great-grandmother is as porcelain and pale as a bobbed virgin Mary. The black & white photos like trophies on my grandma's cream wall hold her gentle, knowing smile. She looks like she knows me. On an island

off Maine, while high tide slams against the porch, as downpour feeds the rotting planks, her other children tell me stories from the 60's of their vintage mother and her whiskey eyes. Then they jeer at their father and his blank-faced stupidity with fists

of Miller Lite. Frequently my grandma cooked dinner for their family of eight, after basketball practice. Her mother was a violently oppositional woman, and she is no different. Both are forever encapsulated slumped on couches, spitting insults at infants.

In the cool August before fourth grade, in her tiny black & white kitchen, after hashbrowns and cinnamon pancakes and Blackjack and square pizza for dinner, I ask my grandma to tell me a story from girlhood. That night, I walked home, proud, with my brother's tiny fingers clasped in one hand

and my 'sleepover bag' in the other. Later in my dad's arms, I cried loyal apologies, begging for him to drive me back

so I could show her how sorry I was. I really was. In
middle school I sit with my mother on the porch and beg
her to be something else. I beg her to keep

my grandmother's name out of her rotten mouth, I beg
her to take my eyes in hers and listen to the things she says
to me that she forgets, and I beg her to forget motherhood
and childhood, and maybe I can be her friend. She flicks
a cigarette butt onto the concrete and springs slam

the screen door behind her. In her absence, sits the genetic
template that I was just beginning to think that I knew.
I had unwillingly studied, tested, and performed
it, and in the sweltering heat of adolescence,
I decide my blood stops running with my heart.



Outstanding Poetry Prize

RUNNER-UP

Ukraine From the Back of Volodya's Car

Volodya's beige Toyota sedan sits still at a red light as I sit slumped in the back seat, tired after school. The voice on the classical music radio station echoes in my fuzzy mind, and I watch the unmoving dog plushies huddled on the back shelf behind me.

Without looking back, Volodya's arm slithers around his car seat to me and his hand opens, in his palm a Korivka.

I open the yellow wrapper with the cow on top, lifting up the two ear-like flaps on either side. There's the little golden fudge, warmed by the sun rays falling into the car.

The sugary outside becomes warm and melty where I hold it with my fingers. I bite half of it, the exterior and its gooey innards mixing as I chew. I swallow down the nearly overbearing sweetness and lick the stickiness from the tips of my fingers.

I look up from my treat, my eyes meet Volodya's through the sun visor's mirror. He grins at me. *Yummy?* his eyes ask, his unkempt white eyebrows raised.

Spasibo! I try to thank him with the little Russian I know, even if I mumble and it doesn't sound like how he or my parents would say it. *Pozhaluysta!* he laughs heartily,

pleased by my attempt.
I fold up the wrapper to tuck it away
but then I notice something at the bottom.

In small black font, words mostly not in English.
Made in Ukraine draws my attention as only thing
I understand.

I imagine this candy being produced
in a factory across the ocean, flown into America
and driven to the cultural store where Volodya
bought it. It had seen where my family used to live.

My family would talk in the language
from their culture and cook and eat
the food from their culture, but they didn't
teach me how to speak or cook or eat like them.

The Korivka,
made in Ukraine and shipped to America
and bought by Volodya and eaten by me,
was now my own little piece of Ukraine.

A Bubble of Possibilities

Bubbles are meant to break. The tip of a ballpoint pen can puncture their film, releasing never-ending possibilities.

My mom and I had a nightly ritual: every evening, I'd hop onto my neatly made bed with water dripping down my wet, silky black hair. In a room filled with the fresh scent of vanilla diffusers and tenderness, my mom would read me bedtime stories. Every syllable of her enchanting voice circled in my mind like lyrics to a familiar song. They joined together in a string of joy.

My favorite character from these stories was Elsa from Frozen. Her fantasy world of magic and powdery snow allowed her to create her own winter wonderland using her fairy-like magical abilities. Her winter wonderland sparkled infinite possibilities through the sheer snowy essence it took on as a mini-world of her own.

From the windows of my top-floor apartment, the blinking red lights and bustling noise of constant traffic added to the liveliness of my busy world. The hectic traffic, surges of people, and opulent temples overwhelmed me with warmth, passion, and security. I lived inside a bullet-proof bubble I never once considered escaping. The nostalgic smell of my mom's homemade butter bread permeated our living room with warm and soft texture, resembling a baby's cheek, reaffirmed to me home is where my mother is. In her snowy reality, Elsa was the golden girl. The unfamiliarity of her foreign world tickled my curiosity. I began to wonder what the world really looks like outside of my impenetrable shield.

My decision to travel 7,000 miles to attend boarding school in America was not limited to my fairy world obsession. I wanted to get out of my comfortable bubble and see the world from a different perspective. Within its vast borders, I imagined myself as a piece of the puzzle adding to the diverse vision of this country.

On January 9th, 2021, my mom purchased me a one-way ticket to Singapore, a strange transit and prerequisite predestination for my American dream. As I marched toward security at the airport, my facial muscles tightened, but I refused to cry. I kept my head forward until my mother disappeared into the crowd, knowing I would burst if I saw her teary face.

Two weeks later, I arrived at the embassy at 27 Napier Road. I broke into a sweat. The scary-looking guard guided me to a worn-down stool. I sat down miserably, almost tipping over the rusty piece of metal with my full body weight. My hands felt clammy against my shaking knees as my heart pounded heavily. I paced back and forth in the waiting area, tapping my feet impatiently. I made countless nervous circuits around the place. I saw my veins surfacing on the back of my hands, tumbling over the riverbed.

“Sorry, I can’t approve your Visa request,” the immigration officer revealed mercilessly to the guy in front of me after he casually said he was studying meat evolution in college. Meat evolution? I giggled a bit. As I approached the counter, the stern officer gave me a sharp stare. She snatched the thick stack of documents from my trembling hands and tossed it aside. I watched my American dream being thrown away.

After interrogating me with a few simple questions, she spoke sorrowfully. “I’m sorry. I can’t approve your Visa request, but come back in a week with more documents.” Tears rushed down my face. My eyes blurred a little. How could one stranger decide my fate?

With dozens of eyes staring at me from afar, I stood in the middle of the embassy, unable to move. A wave of sadness and disbelief came over me. The next couple of days were long and grueling. It was as if God had closed a window on me. As the beaming light outside my hotel room began to fade, the remaining hope within me slowly extinguished.

Over the next couple of days, I wrestled with a million possibilities. What if I get rejected? What if I had to return home? What would I say to my family? I began to think attempting to realize this far-fetched dream was a terrible mistake. I lied in a fetal position, with my fingers gripping the edges of the wrinkled sheets. Molten anger stirred within me like an accelerating fireball. I felt a dark cloud hovering above, deserting me in this alienated land. The cold

splendor of Elsa's world opposed my sullen reality. A phoenix born within me stirred up my fiery anger.

A week later, I stepped foot into the colossal gate of the embassy. The gray tiles added to the gloominess of the sky. With additional paperwork tightly held in my arms, I clutched at some last hope. The guards guided me through a light grayish-blue hallway into a private room. The glass walls trapped the space in a perfect square, and the floors were made of wooden tiles puzzled together in regular patterns. The tip of the officer's head signaled she was scrolling through a stack of documents.

"067!" she yelled. I quickly gathered my papers and rushed to the counter. Her wrinkly eyes radiated uncompromising energy. I carefully slid my documents to her, handing over my fate. After a while, she abruptly reached for a pen and started scribbling. As the tip of her pen danced across the yellow piece of paper, my heart beat faster and faster, attempting to escape my body. The freedom of air swelled within me as her pen popped my bubble, releasing me into the infinite possibilities of the world beyond my apartment.

A Shadow Behind the Heart

We used to lie on top of the machines at laundromats flat on our backs and listen to the quiet rumble of clothes swirling beneath us. We'd count the clinks of quarters and make sure they always added up to a dollar, and wonder how people could waste so much money on such useless things (being kids, we didn't understand the value of money nor the importance of cleanliness). We spent hours every day in that laundromat. They had air conditioning and quiet Nico and David Bowie playing, which was more than we ever wanted. It was better than our Brooklyn apartment, noisy with the neighbors' children, the air oily from the run-down restaurant below. We'd braid each other's hair on top of the good machines—the ones with shiny and undamaged paint—and I'd laugh at how my sister's hair would turn out lopsided every time. I was never very good at braids, but Josephine didn't mind—she'd just undo her hair and use the same hair-tie when doing mine. We'd drink fizzing water that tickled our tongues and if we spilled it, we didn't care. It dried fast in the heat.

Josephine and I would try to memorize how the light passed through the blue window panes so that when we got home we could attempt to sketch it out. We wanted souvenirs to remember our time in the laundromat and there wasn't much else. We'd sketch on napkins if there were any, but most of the time we preferred our water-color sets and paper that the school had given us. We were too afraid of damaging them to bring them out of the house. The colors would break easily with too much movement. They weren't plastered in place and if they got loose, they'd mess up the whole set by staining the colors—especially the fundamental white.

Our mother told us that just using water to dilute the pigments would be best but doing that soaked the paper through. It would lose its crispness.

The owner of the laundromat, Agnes, was a cadaverous old woman who hobbled back and forth from the Employees Only area and her couch chair between the rows of machines. She appreciated our company. Much more than our siblings would at home, at least. She called us “cherries” for whatever reason. We learned how to play obscure midwestern card games with her, with her special playing cards that had completely frayed at the edges. All four of the 2’s were torn in the same corner. (It later became an inside joke between me and my sister to tear all of the 2’s in new decks, much to our family’s chagrin.) Agnes taught us how to decorate for Christmas: putting up plasticky lights in the corners of the ceiling; which soap company was best; and how to mimic David Bowie’s eye makeup in her employee bathroom, squinting through the scratched and curving mirror. Josephine was more helpful with the lights than I was. She was taller and could reach the corners of the ceilings with the help of a ladder. I was always afraid of falling.

Numerous times Agnes told us how she had health problems; most notably, “a shadow behind the heart.” I found her description prettier than I did alarming. She was moribund, at closer glance. Her skin was sunken and sagging; her eyes were faded; her lips were eternally dehydrated; her eyes were rheumy; and she always had terrible sinus infections which blurred her vision. Her bathroom contained a plethora of pale-colored pill bottles for her back, neck, head, and chest. We didn’t pay much attention to the actual contents of these bottles. Agnes didn’t mind us snooping. She liked having someone who knew things about her. She told us freedom was not keeping things to oneself. The pill bottles weren’t on a shelf but in a wicker basket with a wax ribbon curling around the handle. She liked to make boring things pretty. She worked hard to beautify the laundromat. The washing machines had drawings on them, little flowers drawn with Sharpie. She had a wind chime with little butterflies on it that would tingle whenever a customer came in. Even her heart problems she made poetic. We suppressed the severity of her illnesses because we couldn’t imagine life without her.

She had a box of mementos in her bathroom we’d glance at every once in a while. We never went through it, although we’d look over the top couple of things. There were a lot of pictures. There were a few of her and her now dead husband, some of random dogs, and

many of the laundromat throughout the years. It always stayed the same—we never understood why she took so many pictures with similar angles and of a never-changing laundromat. She wasn't a professional photographer, she just seemed to take up the hobby to pass her time. She seemed, from what we gathered through our investigations of her life, endlessly bored.

By the autumn of 2000, Agnes had died. It was most likely by old age, but we were never given a sure answer. All we had were our naive hypotheses. We spent our days after that lazing around, occasionally checking in on the laundromat. As the days passed the laundromat, now closed and under construction before it got passed onto another business, fell further into disrepair. The place stayed dark. The washing machines were gone. Her butterfly chimes were with us. The man who began to clear up, presumably the owner of the building, let us keep the Bowie paraphernalia.

Two women who lived above Agnes were helpful concerning Agnes' story. Agnes wasn't very talkative, though we certainly were. We met these women randomly while sitting on the step to the laundromat. They had lived there longer than Agnes had, which we found hard to believe, simply because they were both decades younger than Agnes. To us, she had always lived there and her laundromat was as old as her. The women, both named Beth, told us when Agnes first arrived at their block she came in a bright red convertible full of simpering smiles for inquisitive neighbors. She was about 30 then. The first Beth said Agnes originally had woodsy red hair. We were in disbelief—her white hair had no remnants of any color that could be so strong. She came from Indiana, in a town small enough to not have any highways near it, and had gotten the car as part of the agreement with her ex-husband who had taken the house. She had never left Indiana before then. The second Beth said Agnes wore sunglasses in the subway to make sure no one recognized her—she didn't like it when she bumped into people she knew. She had a brief stint with a man she had found on a subway and didn't want to repeat that same disaster. She liked the laundromat because it was regular. There were rarely newcomers. We, of course, had been “regular.”

She never had children. She was satisfied with where she was. She liked us, we assumed, because we were her brief and temporary introduction into what her life may have been if she had chosen to have kids. The women said Agnes seemed more aloof than usual in the recent years and they hadn't really spoken after 1994, when Agnes' cat died and she had gotten into a sort of funk they believed she never really escaped from. We never knew she had a cat.

The Beths showed us a letter Agnes had written to them. It was a question Agnes had about their plants that were encroaching her storefront window. The plants in question were these long ivies hung from the topmost window—the first Beth's bedroom window. We didn't care that much about the content of the letter, but more about Agnes' signature and handwriting. She wrote shakily, with little indentations in her lines. This only further confirmed to us she was endlessly aged and was never young. Her signature was her first name and her middle initial, Agnes R., in spiky cursive.

She didn't have a real funeral—no one was there to plan it. She seemed to evaporate from the neighborhood, and as the years passed more of her seemed to fade. The laundromat was eventually replaced by a Lebanese café which got more traffic than Agnes' place ever had. The next few years went by without much disturbance.



JESSICA BAKAR
Renaissance



MAGGIE LIU
Grandma

Gonggong

You dream of apathy

You fear you will not cry at his funeral
Thus, in six months you must learn to love
Cancer is a slow way to go

You dream of love

Two young vendors across a red dirt road
For Popo he'll take on her three children
For Gonggong she'll run across oceans

You dream of a new home, on a new shore

like Gonggong and Popo once did,
skimming gold, burning boats, soaked and
shivering before a mob shouting,
"We don't want your kind here!"

You dream of quitting Cantonese lessons

Mom tried so hard to keep you connected to your roots
Across the dinner table, Gonggong cackles and coughs
at your silly faces, your speechless game

You dream of his red dirt village

So many stories you might carry on
if only you could say more than yes and no
Then one oxygen tank is too little

You dream you die

You mourn your unmade memories; you hope
this means he might live
A tree grows over your grave

You dream of Mom

at thirteen years old
Bleeding, bruised at Gonggong's hands
Decades pass; she will not mourn

You dream you survive
 as does Popo, some neighborhood children, and your dog
 You couldn't save them all, so you chose them over him
 It's okay, he'll die soon anyway

You dream you visit Gonggong
 frail body lost among oxygen tanks and humming ma-
chines,
 you remember his wheezing cackle, Mom's scars
 You linger to the side; Popo reintroduces you twice

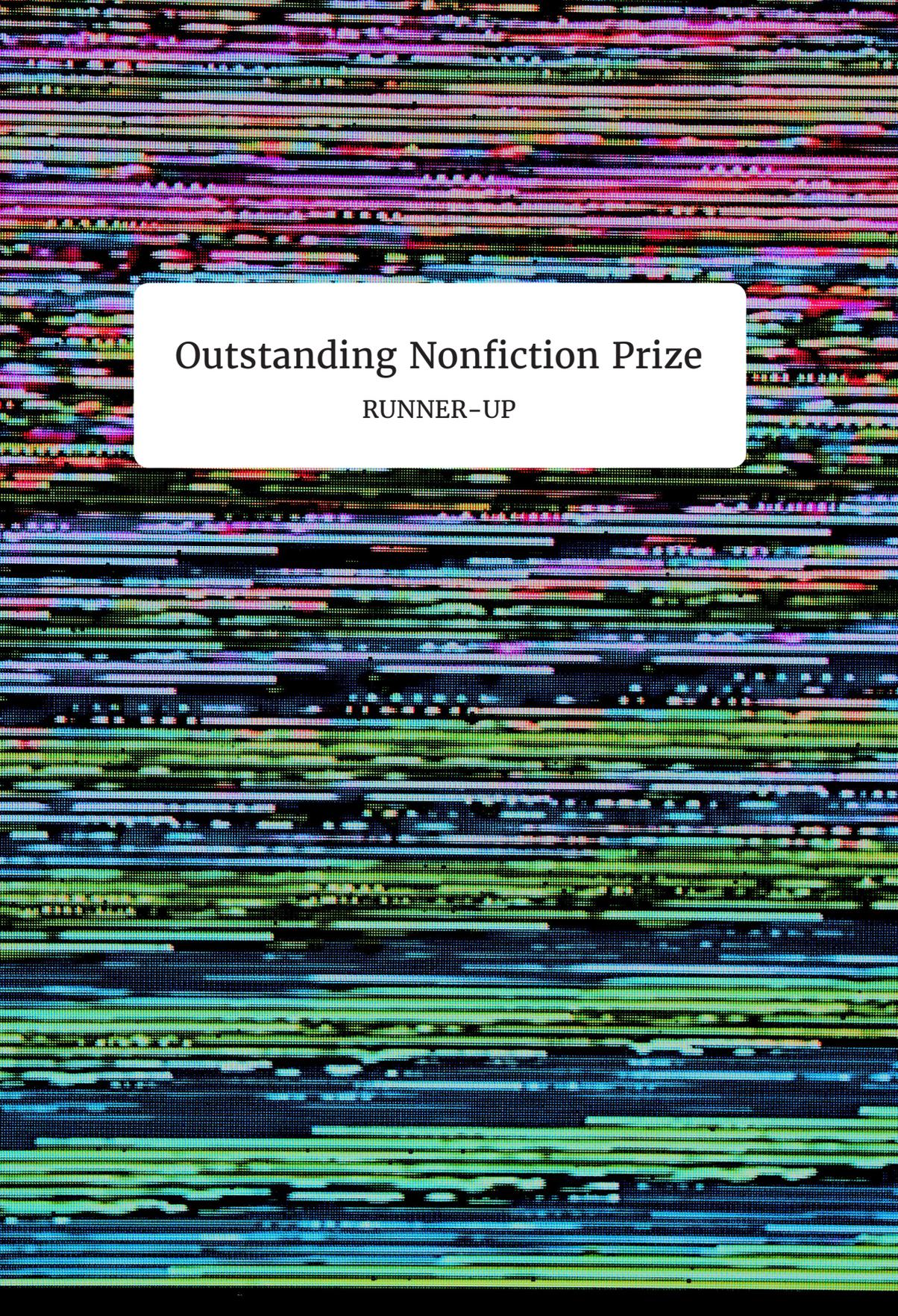
You dream of static between sisters
 He's too far gone to request euthanasia
 Only now—facing a man tired, confused, silenced—
 Yiyi regrets telling Mom, howcanyoubesoheartless?

You dream, "Today's the day"
 An hour later the family gathers,
 folding chairs form a circle
 You stare at their dry eyes

You dream of 49 days of mourning
 but the temple is empty of relatives with excuses
 The few "mourners" loiter in colored tees and summer
shorts
 Popo's lonely sobs echo

You promise to speak with your Popo
 She shows you his ashes beneath the tree
 She asks if you've seen him in your dreams; she has
 As if a thousand dreams can be so simple as: yes

She smiles



Outstanding Nonfiction Prize

RUNNER-UP

Where You Are From

[A DVD clicks into place, spinning, and the video starts.]

Wobbly footage thuds slowly, drifting from room to room. Here, you can see the borders of cherry wood giving way to sandy tile and pebbled stones, lingering in the hall. On the floor, you come into view—

[The video cuts short, and the rotating disk slows to a stop.]

[Chapter One: Rising]

Hometown Legend

[Switching tapes, select “play;” begin voiceover]:

Your hometown was a year and two months. If you find it [on a map], it’s tucked away and filed in place, a straight shot north on the toll-way. Its remaining landmarks are the azalea trees and rusting mailbox post, and that’s about all you can see on most days. If you do a quick search through the archives, you’ll find a little diving board [as seen pictured] in the backyard that the town’s newlyweds took on one November after working for the keys of the city; in the final days of summer, they brought the last resident up the front lawn and settled together on the living room floor, touching ground for the first time.

[On video], you can preview some of the town’s events, not exclusive to attempts at feeding and naptime. Within the first month, they dressed up the star resident as a pea in a pod (and witnessed the first of several protests thrown by one unfortunate legume, albeit within reason), and when summer came back around, the pool reopened and new residents could get their first sips of chlorinated water, which more or less remains a local secret to date.

In the archive's [*last clips*], the town opened its door on the first anniversary since its ruler arrived. You'll see the makeshift beer cooler in the bathtub, as enduringly praised by tourists; relatives jumping into the pool who exclusively appear on-screen; anecdotes and banter exchanging between families over the kitchen island, and you, from your throne on the living room floor, arms spread wide to the ceiling—light spilled out into the hallway, and from the kitchen, you took a deep breath, candles extinguishing to cheers. A [*picture frame*] with your crown and blue-frosted grin now sits in a [*box*], stacked on the floor.

[*Reverse tape, resuming voiceover*]:

On the town's last day, little white squares the size of your palm remained, scattered in the carpet—traces of a world you knew in pictures, will only know in leaving. Lifted from the ground, the living room floor wanes, fades from view.

At the city limits, a small family gathers in front of a one-level brick house, watching as leaves on worn pavement rise, then fall behind a van—they turn to walk in, and one stares after the sun—dark blue sky spinning, spinning, your first memory [*closes with the scene*].

[*End voiceover.*]

Welcome to the Peach Tree State!

Just east by seven-hundred and eighty miles lie the lush green hills of your new home (population: three)!

[*A jaunty tune begins to play in the background.*]

Driving up the street, neighbors will watch afar from their doorsteps, and you'll have the opportunity to meet your first of one playmate. There is a birthday party and painting and tumbling classes and trick-or-treating alone, and souvenirs of you posing for the camera. At the local park on weekends, your dad will be there to take pictures with you, and during the week, there are errands to run and shopping at the mall and smiling for your mom!

You'll eat pumpkin pie and make sugar cookies and "help" light the menorah in the kitchen away from windows, and you can celebrate two birthdays at this special venue—

What's that? Oh, Dada's on a work trip right now. No, silly, he

hasn't left us—well, he has, but *he's coming back!* Why don't you go on the swings, hm? Okay.

When winter comes around, you'll get the chance to play in your first snow, and your grandparents can fly down to visit when your parents must show at the boss's big holiday banquet. There'll be sing-alongs with your friends in the cartoons and going with your dad to fly your brand-new kite in a diaper and make your mom mad! You'll wait for the sun to set earlier and rise again and welcome your dad back home and get lost on the way back from the—back from the airport and fall and hit your forehead on the bathroom floor and rush-rush-rush to the *hospi-t-a-l*—

[The jaunty tune distorts, fades to static. In the background, drivers licenses and photos from a wallet connect by a thin piece of thread, hanging at the edge. White paint redacts everything but a maiden name printed next to a holiday card, in which a three-year-old sits in the middle, squirming in front of the camera. Below, a grid of black-and-white surveillance footage records an empty seat at the dining table late at night, tired sighs and strained whispers behind closed doors falling to silence and rising in a high-frequency ringing, until the tune resumes—

[Neighbors wave from their windows, the sun setting in a hazy cascade.]

We hope you enjoyed your stay, and remember: there'll always be a place for you!

The Restaurant

You don't remember the first story she told you, but you visit there often.

At that age, you had no frame of reference for what a restaurant—or anything other than roller discos and hippies, really—in the 1970s looked like, so every time you had the urge to listen a little bit closer from the backseat, you saw her waiting tables in a dim, muggy room, chasing after her siblings through a maze of faded banquet chairs, to the Pac-Man machine sticking to little square tiles the size of your foot. In the kitchen, she'd assemble burgers and toss silverware in the dishwasher, then take the ticket from greasy

hands and go—

On weekends and weeknights, she'd tuck her sister in bed and clean the bathtub and pass out until morning came. On weekdays, she'd walk fast to school and read slow, avoid the boys and eat alone. Wait tables, kick her brother, make lunch, pass out. Wake her sister, speak softly, eat in the bathroom, tune them out. Hop-scotch, sweep, skin her knee. Skip lunch, serve dinner, keep your head down. Wash dishes, dry the laundry, Chinese, Japanese. Cash the check, chat at church, ching chong! Are you right or are you Wong, learn the rules, prove them wrong, red light! Run fast, green light! Pretend they don't laugh, red light! Make change, green light! Kill the rat, red light! Do you eat cats, green light! Wong, right, wrong, red light! Look-at-these dirty-knees, green light—*I said run, chink, go!*

Fall asleep at nine, rise at five. Do it all over again.

Bubble

Once upon a time, you watched the ground slip from beneath as you fell into an enchanted pool, staring at your reflection. The queen wrapped you in a towel back at the hotel, hands shaking, and you stood quietly watching the puddle on the floor.

You returned to this mystical land a few months later—of flat blue sky and sunburnt concrete, stretching farther than the eye could see. You awoke from the long journey to a children's chorus welcoming home the rulers, as friendly giants stacked the boxes up to the ceiling, then took them down, one by one. You shortly received an invitation to a neighboring kingdom, in which you attended the birthday party of a princess your age. You lifted the parachute together and dove underneath, watching the colors balloon around you. After you helped to blow out the candles, the queen beamed beside her companion from *Ye Olden Days of College*, gathering the two of you in for a portrait, so you posed for her and smiled.

The days went by as you accompanied the queen on her visits to the village markets and galleria, fulfilling your duties as the royal food connoisseur along the way. You began and quit lessons in gymnastics and ballet and occasionally had a special appointment with the king for lunch during the week. When he returned from his du-

ties, you'd play computer games in his throne room while the queen slept and go to the kingdom's zoo and help plant pansies for the fairies outside your window. In the fall, you dictated the carving of the pumpkin and devoured the king's birthday cake, and in winter, you helped point to the Christmas tree and waited by the fireplace and heard reindeer on your ceiling.

In spring, you embarked on your first quest for Easter eggs and the matzah, and summers would come and go until you were banished to preschool to conquer the treacherous beast of Independence. Every now and then you attempted to escape from its lair before rescuing classmates from other kingdoms, and soon, you walked with them to your first day at the royal academy and hogged the books from the library and picked dandelions for the queen. You tried to forget to venture to first-grade Language Arts in the mornings and scored for the other soccer team and scribbled eleven pages past the due date.

On weekends, the queen sometimes exiled you to a distant realm called Dim Sum to see your Poh Poh and Gung Gung and poke at smelly dumplings with rubber band chopsticks and whine about how much longer. In the summer, you'd travel with the king and queen to visit the duke and duchess of the faraway land of Los Angeles, where you journeyed with your cousins to the realm of Disneyland and had glow-in-the-dark dances before flying home at dusk.

You grew accustomed to your routine and getting better with the queen's magical chicken soup and the wisteria growing back each spring and the three of you watching the kingdom's fireworks down the block and swimming with the mermaids at night before falling asleep, skin still smelling a little like chlorine. You saw the king on weekends, until one day, he was summoned to a different kingdom and they packed the carriage and emptied the castle and took down the sign in the lawn and you stood alone as the clock froze, remembered it was time to go, that the children's song had come to a close as the bubble *pops*.

bucolic

they say the wheat fields
go on for miles,
that i can look up at blue sky,
that it swallows everything
like one big gaping mouth.

stark red barns stick up and out
the ground like beacons and obliterate
the landscape until it's just shape and color.
a painting with
white smears for clouds.

the sun is one big yellow dot painted
over and
over
and over
again.

there aren't many horses,
but i've seen speckled cows
graze in their pastures
and moo horizon-ward.

grandmothers really do
make sunday dinners
and sew dresses out of flour bags.
grandfathers will play records until infinity
and chew tobacco on porches.
the wind really does hear every noise,

and yet they are always swallowed up and carried away.



DEEP PATEL
Confined Crowd Pleaser



MAYA KRISHNAN
Perspective From a Puddle

Cheese Could Be My Febreze

I've always had an affinity for cheese—an inexplicable yet overwhelming penchant for the stuff. It easily ranks among my favorite food items, along with Chinese xiao longbao and pepperoni pizza. If I were to select a single dish to eat for the rest of my life, it would unequivocally contain cheese. The mere thought of having the rich, golden, and impossibly savory sensation of cheese creamily drifting along the length of my tongue, eliciting a marvelous response from my taste buds and sending shivers throughout my face, is almost enough to send me rushing to the local grocery store, scouring the aisles for that-which-I-covet-most, and then speeding back so that I can experience the magnificence of cheese, in private and with nobody else—save, of course, for my precious cheese. I'm still questioning what intentions the one who first discovered milk might have had when they squatted next to that cow and tugged, but I'm certainly not complaining. Their discovery, however dubious or unethical the actions preceding it, ultimately resulted in the creation of cheese, which I consider to be one of the most impactful events in the course of human history. My very *happiness* practically hinges on the edible gold we derive from milk, and without it, well, I wouldn't be *me*.

Even I cannot accurately explain my strong fondness for cheese. I can say with certainty it doesn't take root in my heritage; my parents both hail from China, a country where, at least in its traditional cuisine, cheese is about as scarce an ingredient as silicone or Styrofoam. Cheese is such a novel introduction to Chinese cuisine, and East Asian cuisine in general, that the Chinese word for “cheese” is *qisi*. You might find it a little odd how I'm making such a fuss over the Chinese pronunciation of cheese, but I assure you, there's a good explanation. You see, other relatively modern words or phrases

originating from foreign languages, “hamburger,” “Kentucky-Fried Chicken,” “Trump,” have their Chinese pronunciations solely based on their foreign ones. The Chinese counterpart of “Trump,” for example, is *telangpu*, which, strange though it may seem, actually sounds quite like the real deal if articulated correctly. People in China didn’t need a way to say “Trump” in their native language until very recently. The same goes for the word “cheese;” cheese hadn’t been introduced to most restaurant menus in China until a few decades ago. I guess the point I’m trying to make is that, because my parents didn’t eat a lot of cheese in their food as kids, they don’t incorporate cheese in any of the dishes they cook; my home environment doesn’t readily expose me to cheese.

However, I live in the United States, a country whose citizens view cheese, largely as a result of its central importance in the construction of the classic American hamburger, as an ingredient only surpassed in importance by beef, bacon, and cornstarch. Heck, by the norms surrounding hamburgers in American society, you can even apply a cheese-relevant form of Constitutivism (Cheestitutivism?) when assessing the quality of one: A good hamburger has cheese. No, I don’t sound dogmatic. I’m simply speaking the irrefutable truth. Cheese is essential, absolutely *essential*, to our culture.

Like all good foods, cheese is extremely versatile. It’s compatible with practically anything: with sandwich bread, an absolute classic; with pasta, equally as classic; on pizza dough, well, a pizza without cheese is analogous to a soup without salt; with cake, the namesake of a “factory” corporation and many of its palatable trademark “products;” eggs, *l’omelette au fromage est très bien*; with fruits, novel and artistic—also explored in this combination a few paragraphs down; with rice, a little esoteric, but certainly still acceptable; and of course, with itself, doubly as delightful, stupendous, creamy, and magnificent.

As much as I adore cheese, my familiarity with its varieties is surprisingly small. One would expect that, provided with how ardent my love for cheese is, I would know roughly as much about it as Gordon Ramsay, Guy Fieri, or Jamie Oliver, all famous and eminent professional chefs. However, I do not—I cannot tell Colby apart from sliced gouda, nor can I tell the difference between a spicy slice of Swiss and one of pepper jack with holes in it. I understand that

it makes me look like a complete and utter fraud, a simple boy who loves a thing that he cannot bring himself to truly understand, but as deep as my passion might go, my knowledge of cheese is about as shallow as a street puddle.

To illustrate, American used to be my favorite variety of cheese. Yes, I know—American. Usually, the very sight of American cheese is enough to send any self-respecting chef or culinary expert howling out of the room. I am of the humble opinion that we'll get a celebrity who's truthful with their taxes before we see a slice of American cheese in any Michelin-star restaurant. Even the American government is in agreement with the general public regarding the healthiness of American cheese: the FDA's overly technical, scientific, and baffling nomenclature has American cheese down as "pasteurized processed American cheese food." Cheese food. Those two words alone give American cheese the air of some futuristic, synthetic substance, created by abstruse means and fed to the poor denizens of some dystopian world—a world where, in the absence of culinary heroes like Martha Stewart and Bobby Flay, the tyrannical government has a flag with a sickeningly yellow slice of American cheese at its center. American Eighty-Four, by Gouda Orwell—doesn't sound too bad, actually.

And yet, from about when I was in first grade to when I was in sixth grade, I liked it. In fact, I coveted it. I remember the summer of kindergarten when I stayed with my cousins in Texas for the first time. Their family had two stacks of American cheese in the fridge, each constructed of roughly twenty slices of the stuff, pure and unsullied by any other substances; they both disappeared in a matter of days following my arrival. Amazing people, amazing place, amazing summer, but the cheese most definitely wasn't as amazing as it could have been, especially not for my health.

It's hardly a wonder why the first thing my friend Brady said to me after the first grade had started was, "Why do you have more chins than last year?" Thankfully, I have since lost all the weight I gained, but the vestigial folds in my belly have taught me a valuable lesson: American cheese is the insidious, scheming devil among this world's cheeses. Where the aims of the renowned mozzarella and the benevolent cottage cheese are to make you lean, tall, and lanky—qualities desired by many in this world, the only item on American

cheese's agenda is to bolster your body fat supply to the extremes.

Despite all this, my general lack of knowledge when it comes to the details, intricacies, and subtle minutia of cheese certainly hasn't interfered with that euphoric feeling of gratification I get whenever the familiar taste of cheese spreads across my tongue. Back in Texas, I was admittedly blind, foolish, and wholly ignorant of the perils of gulping down mouthful after mouthful of American cheese, but I was happy. Yes, I was happy. "Do what makes you happy in life" is as ubiquitous a saying as "Break a leg" or "No pain, no gain," and with good reason: as long as you're happy, you can impart some of your happiness to others. Ridiculously enough, I derive much of my happiness from eating cheese—but hey, at the end of the day, if eating cheese makes me happy, which in turn makes others happy, then I believe that eating cheese is a pretty good idea. Even if that cheese has a criminal alias of "pasteurized processed American cheese food".

Behind the bar of the Cheesy Wheeler Pub, a location popular among underground criminals, Gorgonzola: "Psst, Brie, you heard about what happened last night?"

Brie, a refined hitman, sets his glass of lactobacillus on the counter: "No, 'Zola. What happened?"

"They say a guy took down five big-bellied humans in a McDonald's last night. Hit 'em with the CVD. They're in the hospital right now. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them's hearts has given out by now."

Raising his cheesy eyebrows: "Issat so? Gimme the guy's name."

In a whisper so that Feta, the bartender, won't hear: "They call him Pasteurized Processed American Cheese Food."

This manages a shiver from Brie. He reaches for his glass again, only to nearly knock it over. The hitman's composure has been shattered by the mere mention of a name, one which belongs to the lone cheese seeking to wipe out every other kind by spreading its influence to all reaches of the globe. Brie knows he has connections, more than even himself, a hitman with more hires than any cheese on the planet. In fact, Brie suspects that many of his clients might actually be tied with him. To top things off, Brie, despite being well sought-after, doesn't exactly have a spotless track-record; he's let

his targets get away more times than he could possibly count. American, on the other hand...

The revelation hits.

"They're gonna get rid of me," Brie says quietly, his eyes wider than the holes in a slice of swiss.

"Sorry, wha—" Gorgonzola is interrupted by the sound of wood being fractured. Splinters of the pub's door fly from behind them, and a few catch Brie in the back. He turns around.

"Mother of Mozzarella..."

In the ruined doorway stands a slice wearing a lurid orange suit, the Tommy gun in his hands still smoldering.

Entrez le fromage américain. Il veut tuer Brie.

You know, my love for cheese has managed to influence my preferences pertaining to subjects besides just food. If you grew up during the 2010's—yes, that absolutely sublime period in which the Internet began to flourish into the chaotic hellscape we all know and love today—and you had some semblance of a childhood, you've probably watched the movie *Ratatouille*. You know, the one with the rat who has an impressive, albeit slightly preternatural, talent for cooking French dishes. Heck, even if you're an adult, especially one with kids, there's a significant chance that you've sat yourself down in front of some screen and endured that one hour and fifty-one minutes of a rodent-themed fever dream. But it wasn't only rodent-themed, at least not for me. You see, the scene that I remember the most vividly from that movie isn't any of the ones set in a kitchen; it isn't the scene where Remy, the movie's fantastic rat protagonist, falls into a sewer, or the one where Anton Ego, the pallid food critic with a face strangely reminiscent of that of a moai statue, takes a bite of ratatouille and gets catapulted back into his childhood—no, it's not any of the memorable ones. The scene I remember the most vividly happens, and not by coincidence, to be the one where Remy takes both a piece of cheese and a strawberry in his paws, and discovers putting the distinct, fruity twang of the strawberry and the bold, sensational taste of the cheese together produces a novel, eclectic flavor. A bombastic, tremendous rush on the tastebuds whose discovery somehow warrants the cueing of jazz music and the vibrant flashing of red and orange across the screen. And while the jazz music certainly made its contributions to that

scene, the bits where Remy puts the cheese in his mouth, the one where he tastes it individually, then the one where he combines it with the strawberry, are what make the scene particularly memorable.

Six-year-old me, in the living room, watching *Ratatouille* on a DVD: “Mom, look! The rat’s eating cheese! He looks so happy, and the cheese looks tasty too!”

My mother, sprawled on the couch and utterly exhausted from work, scrolling through her contacts on her phone: “Mhm, yeah. I like cheese too, honey. Maybe we could get some tomorrow—it’s too late now.”

The very presence of cheese in a movie scene makes it all the more powerful for me—maybe not for everyone else, but definitely for me.

And it’s not just *Ratatouille*. When I watched *Tom and Jerry* as a kid, I found it a little easier to sympathize with Jerry rather than with Tom because, much like me, Jerry had an overpowering desire for cheese. The *Geronimo Stilton* series, which follows the colorful adventures of a mouse whose namesake happens to be a variety of cheese, was one of my favorites because the plots of many of the series’ installments revolved around cheese—in fact, the titles of six books in the *Geronimo Stilton* series contain the word “cheese.” For me, cheese-related media outshine practically every other kind.

My love for cheese has always run deep, and yet, I still find myself without a good explanation why it is so. By “good,” I mean an explanation that isn’t extremely subjective, personally tailored, or flippant. A “bad” explanation would be somewhat like the one, and only one, that I currently have—cheese tastes good. But it’s not exactly a “bad” explanation. My liking of cheese doesn’t harm anyone, nor does it directly conflict with anyone’s personal beliefs or ideals—unless you are vegan, of course, in which case I gravely apologize for how uncomfortable this entire piece has most likely made you. That’s the thing with personal preferences: It’s sometimes a little difficult to explain them to others because, well, they’re personal. They make sense largely to yourself only, and it’s often difficult to discern whether others have similar tastes, especially if you’ve only just met them. But that’s what makes it all the more magical—that feeling of wholesome connection you get when you

find out someone you barely know likes the same thing you do. That feeling when you're wearing some merchandise, and someone in the room says, "Hey, I like that show, too." Or when you're on the bus watching a YouTube video and the guy peering over your shoulder suddenly says, "I think that guy's hilarious." That feeling you get when you establish an unexpected link between yourself and someone new, with your common interest mediating the connection. It's gratifying to find, get to know, and discuss things with others who share your interests because, well, in talking to them, you're essentially just talking to a facet of your personality that's been placed in someone else's body. In fact, that's exactly the reason why I believe conventions exist: to allow people opportunities to meet with others in events centered around themes, things, or franchises that they all love. It's simply magical when you find someone with your taste, especially where you wouldn't normally expect it.

You know, if I really wanted to—and if such a thing even existed in the first place, of course—I would probably get a spray bottle full of cheese-scented Febreze. It definitely wouldn't be blue cheese though.

Inheritance

i want to inherit the rhythms of crimson-lantern
bloodlines & the shadows of unspoken
prophecies, to unveil a stutter-stop
tongue thick with stories beneath
the eyelash of a jade moon.

i want to paint gold the pocket-knifed crevices
of my bruised persimmon skins, to map
the supple curves of my almond eyes
& trace their fickle geographies, swerving
like the way heritage unravels through
my veins, like the silt-studded yangtze
river of rice fields in monsoon season.

let me hollow my mouth into a shaolin temple archway
& unearth the fragrant incense of forgotten dynasties, voice
trembling upward against a cacophonous
symphony of lilted english adjectives & jolted
mandarin nouns. tonight, i present my tattered whispers
as sacrifices to my ancestors, cast oracle bones on the altar
& pray for a gossamer-laced melody, a refuge,
as grandmother caresses the dregs of last month's
oolong tea, pulling fortunes through the valleys
of her ocher fingers for a prosperous new year.

teach me how to harness the silence of a silk-spun history, to draw
wisps of dragon smoke from the ashes of a foreign land, & to plant
gardens of ancient proverbs with roots of mottled ginseng, dirt-
borne fingertips unfurled & tenacious, deep into the tapestries
of my disyllabic heart. from shattered mirrors i will pluck the ribs

of memory like pearl fishbones—remnants of abandoned feasts,
they pierce inside the pores of my palms, molding into acupuncture
needles that carve hidden destinies in arteries of restless lyric.

tell me of summertime markets, the way that crescent-eyed aunts
bargain in click-clack tempo with the 6:00-am street vendors,
buying chicken feet & fish heads for three dollars a pound,
the way that star
anise & peppercorns make ghosts out of the late-autumn
breeze, how red chilis shrivel under december sun
like molts of metamorphosis. & remind me of the warrior
hymnals buried miles beneath the scarlet springs i roamed
in my grandfather's native village in jiangxi. remind me to
remember the hilly contours
of this intergenerational terrain,
to treasure the angles of these weary porcelain bones
that creak like the bow-legged notes of an erhu,
the crescendos, glissandos, & fermatas of my forebears.

dissect the distorted anatomy of time. condense it like
wrinkled paper money & unseal your inheritance, a capsule
of ululations, faded languages, & ink-stained centuries.
i will extract calligraphy from the soot-scented scrolls
& gaze, spellbound, as the parchment bursts into flames: ten
thousand phoenixes arising from the incandescent embers,
untamed, reborn into silent fire & untethered flight.

Dry Ice

In 1835, the French chemist Adrien-Jean-Pierre Thilorier noticed that when he opened a container of liquid carbon dioxide, a solid ice that evaporates without melting had formed at the bottom. This solid form of CO₂ would later become known as dry ice. Among its many uses, from refrigeration to theater smoke, dry ice made it possible for the long-term storage of specimens in cryobanks that help aspiring parents conceive children outside of traditional methods.

My mother chose my biological father from the online catalog on a cryobank website. At the time he became an anonymous donor, he was in medical school. In the report from the cryobank, the staff called him a “young George Clooney” and “the complete package,” with looks and a charming personality. He gave me thick brows, long lashes, and dark brown hair.

Through him, I also inherited his mother’s singing voice. However, it turned out that the cryobank had missed some things about him.

Before my mother and five-year-old me moved to the Bay Area to live with my maternal grandmother, we lived in an LA apartment complex near the medical center where she was completing her residency. There was a pool in the back that was open during the summer. My mother would lay me on my back in the water and hold me up. Overstimulated, my hands would flap and I would squeal.

In elementary school, I developed an eye-twitch, repetitive hand-flexing, and impulsive deep breathing. When my mother and the mothers of my half siblings reported to the cryobank that their children had been diagnosed with Tourette’s syndrome, the cryobank restricted my donor’s donations.

Every year of elementary school, my mother explained to my teacher not to take offense when I rolled my eyes or made a squeal-

ing sound in the middle of class. Of course, that didn't stop the stares or questions from my classmates.

On Father's Day, while everyone else was writing letters to their fathers, my teachers allowed me to do whatever I wanted. Usually, I wrote about a life I had dreamed up for him. Sometimes he was a movie star, other times he was the king of a fictional kingdom, or Santa Claus.

In third or fourth grade, a teacher recommended to my mother that I get treatment for Tourette's because my tics were disruptive during class. Mom took me to cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). In CBT, I was split. On one side, the silence of the impulses I spent hours dutifully tallying in a little blue notebook my therapist gave me. On the other side, the praises from my mother and the therapist whenever I used the responses I was learning to beat down my impulses. One, two, three, four blinks per impulse. One, two, three, four breaths per impulse.

"You are so close to overcoming Tourette's," the therapist would say. My chest would swell with pride.

On one side, my anonymous donor and his family, a white vapor like dry ice when it evaporates. On the other side, my mother's family, the constant presence that has raised me.

His name dropped into the private Facebook group for the parents of his offspring. The group had grown over the years, and so far, I knew of at least thirty of my half siblings. I had only met a couple of them in awkward video calls. Unlike the cryobank's description of my donor, I am not very good at socializing. To my surprise, the man who turned out to be my donor is also not very good at socializing. I do not know how the mothers of my half siblings found him. All I know is this: He is a doctor in Nevada, somewhere around Las Vegas. People describe him as superficial. He hasn't been in touch with his family for years. He has Tourette's syndrome. And he doesn't want contact with any of his offspring.

By that time in seventh grade, already burrowed into me was the idea that fighting Tourette's was a feat of resilience, and a way to correct how my family and others were wronged. Learning that the "complete package" was only half full, I was only more determined to be unlike him in every possible way.

My family and I boarded a plane to Las Vegas for my great aunt's 90th birthday. I was thirteen, and it was my first time leaving California. I was too ecstatic to notice the rips in the seats or complain about the bitter airplane coffee. I sat on my hands so they wouldn't flap and devoured the view from the oval window.

Mountains emerged from the haze. Compact, identical houses spanned for miles. Las Vegas was a blur of tans, browns, and subtle red. On the outskirts of the airport, palm trees stood against the barren sky. My ears popped as the plane touched down on the runway, speeding towards the terminal. For a split second I thought we would crash through The Strip. From a distance, the casinos looked like cardboard cut-outs from a children's book. Among the towers stood an immobile Ferris wheel, painted white.

Upon exiting the plane, video slot machines flashed in our faces, promising million-dollar jackpots. They jingled, chimed, and whirred. Wheels of fortune spun on screens. A store near our gate overflowed with baskets of candies in thin paper wrappers and the smell of caramel popcorn. People in hijabs, turbans, and cowboy hats milled around, speaking with foreign accents.

As we continued to baggage claim, we passed billboards showing women in bikinis lounging on beach chairs, a bare-chested man staring down his enemy in a boxing ring, and a magical card deck spread out on a table. Everything was vying for my attention. Nothing could keep my attention for very long. My hands flapped and my mouth opened. A couple people glanced over at me. I stuffed one hand in my jacket pocket, and the other I put over my mouth as if to cover a yawn.

We left the airport and followed a line along the curb to wait for a taxi. My eyes watered as the fumes of cigarette smoke blew in my face with the desert breeze. A taxi pulled up to the curb in front of us. My mother explained to the driver where we were going. He frowned and said he didn't know that area. The couple behind us in line told him they were on their way to a resort. The driver smiled and opened the door of his vehicle for them.

We waited a couple more minutes in the heat and smoke before a Desert Cab pulled up in front of us. My mother repeated what she'd said to the previous driver. This one, a broad-shouldered, fifty-something Japanese man wearing a T-shirt that said FIERCE,

nodded in comprehension. Soon I was in the backseat of the taxi rumbling across a freeway that led straight into the mountains.

Our driver, Robert Takahashi, had been working at his job for ten years. “The only constant thing in Las Vegas is change,” he said, as we passed fast food drive-thrus and rows of modern tan square houses. “The city is always reinventing itself.”

“What are those mountains called?” I asked.

“Those are the Spring Mountains. The jagged ones are relatively new. The rounded ones are older. That red tint comes from iron. You can see the layers that have built up after thousands of years. During winter they are capped with snow. But it isn’t cold enough, so they melt pretty quickly. Lots of coyotes and mountain lions live there.”

I could not imagine living creatures dwelling somewhere with no trees, no depths to take refuge from the heat, not even prickly cacti. “How?”

“There’s a forest way up there, on the other side.”

He dropped us off in front of the senior home, a flat building overlooking a golf course. The jagged mountains did little to shield it from the sun. My mother took out her credit card to pay Robert, muttering under her breath that we were five minutes late. I decided it was the wrong time to ask her about the stop I wanted to make on the way back to the airport that evening.

My great aunt’s party took place in the dining room. The walls were decked with framed black-and-white photographs of young men and women, likely movie-stars at their prime when my grandparents were teenagers. Round tables and velvet-seated chairs were positioned in a semi-circle, allowing a view of a screen broadcasting a slideshow with photographs of my great aunt throughout her life. Some I recognized. They stood on the mantel at home, above the fireplace my family did not use.

Most of the people in attendance were aunts, uncles, first and second-degree cousins.

People I’d grown up sharing dishes with at restaurants. People who had received birthday cards from me, who had given me birthday cards.

While many of my characteristics obviously came from my paternal side, I share a lot with my maternal side. The majority of the

women at the gathering did not surpass a height of 5'3". I am 5'0", and that was the year I stopped growing. We have slight Devil's peaks on our foreheads. We are life-long readers.

Even with all those similarities, I still felt distant from the people I had known all my life. I imagined an alternate dining room, in which my donor, his brothers, and his parents sat around these tables. I saw myself laughing at something my donor said, and desperately wanted to know the inside joke that imaginary-me and my donor found so funny.

After answering my family's questions about school, I sank into a chair in the corner of the dining room, watching my mother in conversation with my grandmother and my great aunt. Their laughter at old-time family stories stretched out the minutes before the buffet opened and Mom migrated to my table.

As I rose to get food, I slid her the crinkled map directions to the medical center that had come up when I Googled my donor's name. When I returned with my omelet, she was chatting with our cousins at another table. The map was folded neatly and set on my napkin.

Our taxi stopped in front of a squat rectangular building at the side of the road the same color as the desert, made distinct only by the sign outside that declared it was a medical center.

Sensing me, the glass doors of the medical center split open. The women at the front desk of the lobby smiled sympathetically when I told her I would like to go to the ER. "What's wrong, dear?"

I gave her a story about how one of the doctors had saved my aunt. Then I said his name aloud, thrice, because the first two times were muffled. She typed something on her keyboard. I rubbed my hands together, trying to get rid of the sweat. My eyelids tingled with the impulse to stretch out. I fought it. One, two, three, four blinks.

"I'm sorry, I don't know anyone by that name here. Maybe he works somewhere else?" Her voice sounded like one of those slot machines at the airport, which produce the same cheerful music regardless of whether you've won or lost.

"Oh, thank you." I turned on my burning heels and left the medical center. I wondered why my donor wanted to work in a place of constant change and heat, and yet so cold in the way one could create

a distance between themselves and the world just by going from one place to the next.

I met twenty of my half siblings on Zoom at the height of the pandemic. Although I'd already seen some of their photos on Facebook, I did a double take as their faces popped up with the digital sound effect of a doorbell ringing. I was one of the youngest siblings; most of them were already in high school. We shared some of the same features, even the same interests like writing and music. Like kids at a summer camp, we went through icebreakers. Would-you-rather, what would you do if you won a lottery, what would you take to a desert island?

We met only three times that summer, but it was enough to make me start questioning the ableism I had been internalizing for years. Here were people who share half of my genetic material. They're smart, funny, and work hard at what they love to do. And some of them, like me, have Tourette's. So what?

I asked my mother for the report about my donor from the cryobank. She printed it out at her office, and I flipped through it. On the second page was a questionnaire. My mother dug up a disc and inserted it into the music player in the living room. I lay on my back on the couch, listening to my donor's husky voice reading his answers.

A sense of self-worth, he said, when asked what advice he would give to his future children. People with a sense of worth have integrity because they don't need to misrepresent themselves or their abilities. But it all starts early.

The recording halted as though it had slammed into a block of ice.

I was struck by the irony. If my donor had acted like his reserved self and reported his Tourette's, he would have been rejected by the cryobank. My half siblings and I wouldn't exist. And so, he misrepresented his personality and abilities.

Or, rather, his disabilities.

I felt like Thilorier, opening a container and finding a new substance inside that defied everything I had known about how I came to be.

But it all starts early. Those last words, a regret.

My mother removed the disc from the music player. I reached

my hand out. She handed it to me and drew open the curtains like she did every night before dinner.

As my hands flapped and I didn't stop them, the disc in my arms soaked in the newborn twilight.

Fruit

We fell down yesterday,
and you came when we cried for you.
And as you alleviated our pain,
wiped the blood from our knees,
you sighed.

And as the crimson towel stained your hands,
you harkened back to nights spent scrubbing ichor off hospital
floors. And when you stoned yourself with anthracite,
you did it for us to be clean.
And when soot-dried hands snaked their way around your neck,
you persevered,
you conquered,
won battles we did not know you were fighting.
And when you were stranded thousands of miles out at sea ,
your calloused hands swam
with six children on your back,
and tears trickling down your
face
as you left a different world behind you.

And when the deep freeze of city winters clawed their way
through ripped coats and tenement doors,
you beat it until its back turned red hot, never letting it reach the
screaming baby.

And as you look at me today, you sigh.
Me.
The product of decades of relentless laboring,

fruit from a tree you relinquished your life force to see sprout.
To see me blossom and grow,
and breathe without constraint.
To never feel the rough sea against my skin,
and fan the heat of a summer's afternoon
you can no longer remember.

But when you look at me today, you sigh.
And picture the palm trees and country-dirt roads
of a place that only exists in a distant memory,
the brilliant stars that once reached down and grabbed you,
the redolence of chicken browning over gas lit stoves,
the flowing juices of treacle soursop,
and the endless silence of a cool island breeze.

And as you look at me today, you sigh.
There are no stars in New York,
only lackluster bearings of a neglected, dying tree,
only the fallen fruit, left to rot under roly-polys and
hidden under red and yellow autumn leaves,
only me.



KATHERINE SEDLOCK-REINER
Soldes



GINA YANG
Dreaming Girl

Fever

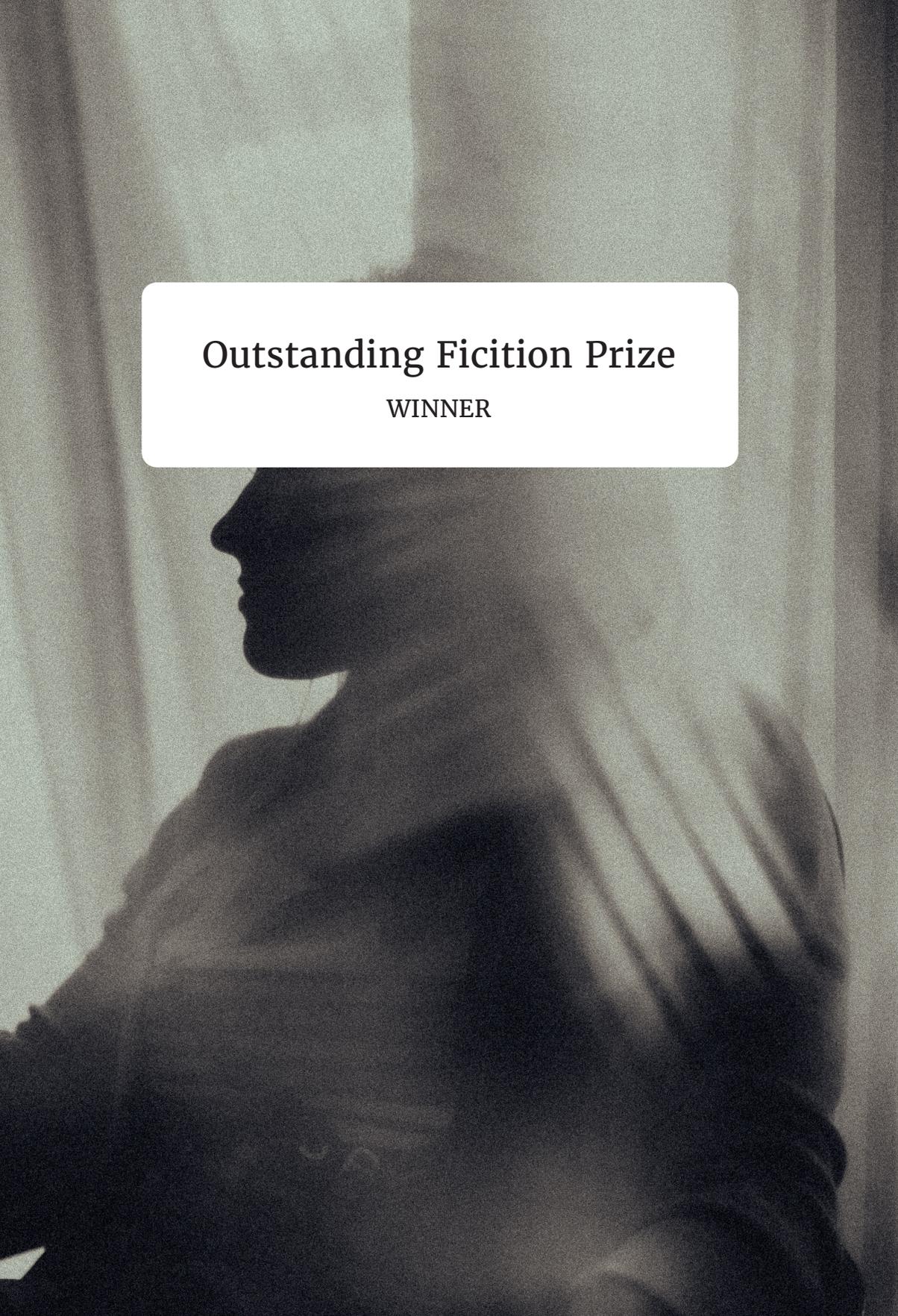
Fever
carries me in its
burning arms,
mine
like strings.

My marionette body
sways.
With each turn and stop,
head
pulsing under
Fever's gentle touch.
But my mind is silent with
sick.

From a distance,
this music
reverberates,
this music I can't control.
Wrists ache as
sick crunches up the bones,
my dry mouth sweet with
tears.

Chills run races up my spine,
Fever's sharp nails
prickle my
ashen skin.

Sick laughs, a soulful laugh,
and I laugh with it,
weakly, of course,
for I barely have the strength to mutter
“No more.”
But isn't this what I wanted?
To
feel the blackness wrap me
in a blanket of nothing,
leaving Fever and the marionette girl
behind.



Outstanding Ficiton Prize

WINNER

Patina

On Moreno Drive the only sound is the echo of a woman's leather boots hitting the ground. Lemons, grown too heavy for their stems, have rolled down the steep blocks and lie caught along the crags; sun steeps them as they rot to a nutty brown. Dogs watch her—some bark—as she walks past, but other than that there is only silence. Due to the marked absence of sidewalks in Silverlake, she is accustomed by now to walking in the middle of the road.

In the dining room, she is smoking a cigarette while arranging peonies in a vase; through its vitreous surface she watches a fresh wind tear across a pale blue sky. Her hands clasp and unclasp the edges of the table and she knows serpents of smoke are slithering towards the ceiling without having to look. Behind her, a man sits at the counter, sipping at a half cup of tepid coffee and nibbling on a triangle of toast. His eyes like murky green pond water have tadpole pupils that dart around the room, as if to scan for prey.

He would spend the days painting portraits of her, one on top of the other, year after year as she evolved. A woman like a film with an ambiguous ending, eyes emerged from dark eyes; the texture of her skin seemed to change, but not quite. He had the same dream most nights: he was God; everything began in him and would end in him; he alone understood the mysterious plan. He liked to wake up at four A.M. and imagine her then. It was the time when he could catch hold of her. At four A.M. people are doing nothing; they are sleeping, he thought. Her chipped teeth, the garlic and literature she reeked of. At this hour, these were the parts of her which revealed themselves to him.

In the beginning, night veiled the streets. Their coats swelled with wind as they roamed the city, a flame-colored spaniel pull-

ing Imogen's body ever forward with his leash. They had met at a café where shelves of glasses laid shadows on the floor. Imogen was sounding out songs to herself, not very discreetly. Tuesday had left the taste of ashes in her mouth, and so she sipped vichy water poured from a carafe. The menu was dry and fragile as dead leaves in her hands.

"Onion soup," she remarked, gazing not at the waiter's pinkish pallor but towards an amorphous blue space which hovered slightly above the bay window. The space seemed to mock her with its trembling, daring her to look away. Already accustomed to its distortions, however, she continued to follow the soft movements: it was as though, if she were to avert her eyes, the space would vanish altogether.

A man in a loden coat sat down beside her, taking a cigarette from his metal box (it was the color of pewter) to examine her hands with a violent intensity. She wore an aluminum ring forged from the fuselage of a drowned American plane, and her nails were so short she could only have bitten them. He said his name was Montag ("Monday, in German"), and wanted to make casts of her hands for one of his sculptures. The way he perceived fascinated her: his cheek resting gracefully in his palm, and his eyes now gentle, now laughing, but behind it all in perpetual concentration, as if he were already translating what he saw into clay. She glanced grayly at him, agreed to come to his studio tomorrow as long as it wouldn't take longer than an hour. When she left, the air filled with a prickling sound, and questions flooded like moths to flame as he stared at the threads of his coat, waiting until the café closed for the night.

His large room opened onto autumn. The shadows of oak trees fell across the lawn; their dead leaves slipping into the room, driven by wind under the curtained windows. Sounds of children rose from the neighbor's yard. Imogen came towards him in her black skirt, with her white blouse rolled up on her tanned arms, her hair loose, her face like the prow of a ship. She sat down at his table, where he was using an egg-beater to mix alginate powder with water in a silver bowl, until it turned firm and faintly redolent of seaweed. When it was ready, he took her hands and submerged them in the mold. He asked her what she was doing with her life. Her mouth became a

parallelogram as she opened it abruptly to say she was trying to be a writer and was working on a novel inspired by Elizabeth Bowen. But she glanced at her scarf, horrified there were no hands to pull at it, and succumbed to the substance which swiftly hardened around them until they were irrevocably immured, as if interred to the bier.

Now the quiet in this space is a sound in itself; it is as if she has been watching a silent film for the past five years of her life. Sometimes she rearranges the furniture in the living room of her mind: it is a spacious, low-ceilinged room with faded blue walls; open bottles labeled with names ending in “-pam” are hidden behind the bookshelves. In New York, she would lunch at City Bakery every Tuesday. In New York, her mother donned a suit with bone buttons as she counted rubles at the dining room table. Her mother’s chamber lay at the end of a z-shaped corridor, twelve heartbeats from Imogen’s bed, and the cats which by day slunk around the parlor floor, lying in each other’s shadows, by night slept draped over her head like a *karakul shapska*. For Imogen’s childhood had not been unlike the Russian boxes her mother kept on her bureau; their black, glossy surface depicting either historical or mythological scenes (she could never be sure), and beneath those, their crimson interiors.

Twelve years old: she had lived across the street from a church of red sandstone, the color of dried blood, where pigeons sipped from the grey-blue puddles at the crosswalk. In the winter, the naked branches of ash trees lining the block obscured the words “Sacred Heart Church of Faith” which were painted on the building’s exterior in spindly letters. She hated being young; hated the old fears like pills stuck dry in her throat. Her father, with his propensity for smashing crockery and furniture when mildly-vexed. The sensation of salt blossoming in her lungs as he pushed her down, down beneath the waves. When she woke in the mornings, slashes of trees through her window and dust motes that danced before the sun.

The first death Imogen remembered was a fox’s. Hollow, its eyes already picked out, she found it by the side of the road (she had to drag herself through the underbrush of her memory to reach it, that cool April evening in the country; ants were crawling over its pink paw and the lilacs were pouring out their numbing scent as dusk flooded the meadows). Years later in an alleyway, she would be told

she looked like Juliette Binoche by a man with a jagged scar on the back of his neck, and it was as if space were closing up like a coffin. All she could see was the emptiness where those eyes had been, dark and endless in the dust.

Imogen dreams in the house on Moreno drive; her hands, clenched into little fists as she sleeps on the chaise-longue. Sunday sounds of rain and church bells permeate the air. She is her age; however, her parents are young; through the French doors softly oozes string music, and beneath that, the hum of talk from groups of men shrouded in a haze of cigar smoke (either Montecristo #2's, her father's preference, or alternatively Romeo & Juliets). They speak of Petersburg and of Russo-American relations. She can make out their voices; she thinks she sees their shadows on the tinted glass of the doors. She clenches and unclenches her fists, then rises to her feet to walk towards the doors, quickly, and then more quickly, as though she already knows they will be gone, as if she is Miss Clavel hurrying ever forward down the hallway, yet never reaching the room. She thrusts her hands towards the handles and flings open the doors. All that remains is a table veiled in a mist of smoke and across its surface, samovars and empty glass decanters which were once filled with cognac.

And so the church bells clang in her head every afternoon; and so she holds the receiver to her ear and listens to the long, insistent, and utterly hopeless ringing. There are days now when she can't recall the precise hue of her mother's eyes. Life is like a statue, the nose or hands of which centuries have crumbled, unearthed, and having to be deciphered, divined. Rousing herself in the mornings, Imogen rises and shuffles to the bathroom. Water is muddled where Montag has been washing his brushes, one and then another, until the liquid nears the porcelain sink's precipice. The zellige tiles are cool on her bare feet, cool and smooth and each time piercingly reminiscent of how as a girl she would slip her icy hands into the large pockets of her father's dark lambskin coat when they walked home with muffled steps through the snow, huddled together against the wind on those frigid February evenings after having dined at the Turkish restaurant down the block (perhaps, she thinks to herself, running a toe over the crevice between two tiles, perhaps this was the only warmth he could offer against the cold—not human warmth, but

animal skin). Brushing a stray strand of hair from her cheek, she turns the faucets to hear the rush swiftly disappear down the drain.

Hours on Moreno Drive are shrouded in red and grey and Imogen's skin glistens like a piece of pottery glazed with celadon. On her bureau she still keeps a Russian box, the only remaining one of her mother's. A knight, his armor tarnished, sits upon a white horse who bows her head in the tall grasses, the tips of which have by hues begun to orange with autumn's return. His narrow lance slants down; its tip, not unlike the tip of a nib, points towards the carcass of a cow, long dead as evidenced by its sun-bleached bones. His face, concealed by the silver of his helmet, gazes towards the notched stone engraved with the words "жцвунебъ НЕМЪЛУТИ." Life of the sky, don't be stupid. The rest of the phrase has deteriorated, though Imogen is uncertain whether it is the time within the illustration or the time within her own world which has obscured their meaning. Signed канцмсаъ Шуъоъ, the varnished wooden top peels back to reveal its contents; even after decades, the odor of her father's brilliantine still lingers in the interior, jasmine and chrysanthemum the way he slicked back his thinning black hair each morning in the bathroom mirror on east 63rd street.

All that's inside is the broken shards of a champagne flute and one photograph. Red beauty and barren boughs: her mother in St. Petersburg, the focus blurry, the tint sepia. She is wearing a pink scarf coiled tightly round her neck (slim, like a birch tree), slender hands slipped inside the black pockets of her coat. She stands cut off at the knees on what appears to be a bridge. Beyond her waters gush. 4.0 aperture fades baroque architecture to the background, and the fall of frost on pavement is like the sound of translucent insects dropped upon one another. As a child she was loath to part with her mother and thus each morning before school intentionally attempted to tangle locks of her hair in the buttons of her mother's wool coat, for if she was attached, she would never be able to leave. Yet one morning in her eagerness to see December's first snow she forgot, foolishly, never to see her mother again. And so recently Imogen feels her mother is simply waiting for her to pack up her things and come join her on that bridge, buttons caught in hair once more, to watch the world dissolve to dusk.

But Russia drains from her mind and Imogen closes the bathroom door. She likes Moreno Drive, Imogen tells herself, likes the porcelain sound the cat's water bowl makes when she places it on the kitchen tiles. She walks the halls until she sees Montag, still at the counter, peeling a tangerine with hurried precision. With a parabolic movement of his eye he looks her up and down; she places her hand, her leaden hand he interred, upon the counter's surface. The marble is slick as a medical-grade hospital gown and she doesn't know what to do with her fingers so she removes her hand from the surface and places it once more in her pocket. He etches her tongue speechless with his artist's trick of undressing her with his eyes.

Palpable is the silence; the room is nothing like Imogen's childhood. Even in her classic haze of valium, when her mother was busy in the kitchen she could often be heard muttering and swearing in French and slamming cabinets, and yet through the simple act of walking into the dining room she would become another Asiya, in three footsteps shifting to her elegant, austere self, setting a plate of neatly sliced smoked herring, lightly sprinkled with chopped scallions, upon the table without a sound. Two rooms away a melancholy waltz could be heard; her mother's contralto voice insinuated itself into its cadence, calling Imogen and her father to supper.

They sat down upon the wooden chairs, her mother in her décolleté with her dark eyes making unwavering contact, her father rubbing his temple (he never rubbed his face with open hands, but with closed fists as a cat does with its paw as it bathes itself). His garments hung loosely about him, as though they had been borrowed, unespousing of his body like a man in a faded lithograph. He opened his mouth to speak; his teeth jaundiced by time and tobacco. "Have you received any news of late from the family?" His umbrous eyes were crinkling towards Asiya as he inquired (in his solemn voice; a voice of bronze, as they say). Imogen was gazing beyond the window, at a gust of wind that ceaselessly blew the fragile leaves off their branches. The candles wept her their wax, dripping red and glowing upon the table. Asiya spoke swiftly, interlarding her Russian with phrases of French, of the failed business in Suwalki, of her brother in the Red Army. She was gripping her fork tightly with pale deft hands. "But we must believe in humanity," Imogen said, so earnest and sure of herself. She had slipped her rings off and they

lay on the oak of the table, glistening in the evening's frail lamp-light. For she wanted to be an unfound forest, or a cupola with many different windows; still a child at that time, each morning she was up at six with her eagerness to live.

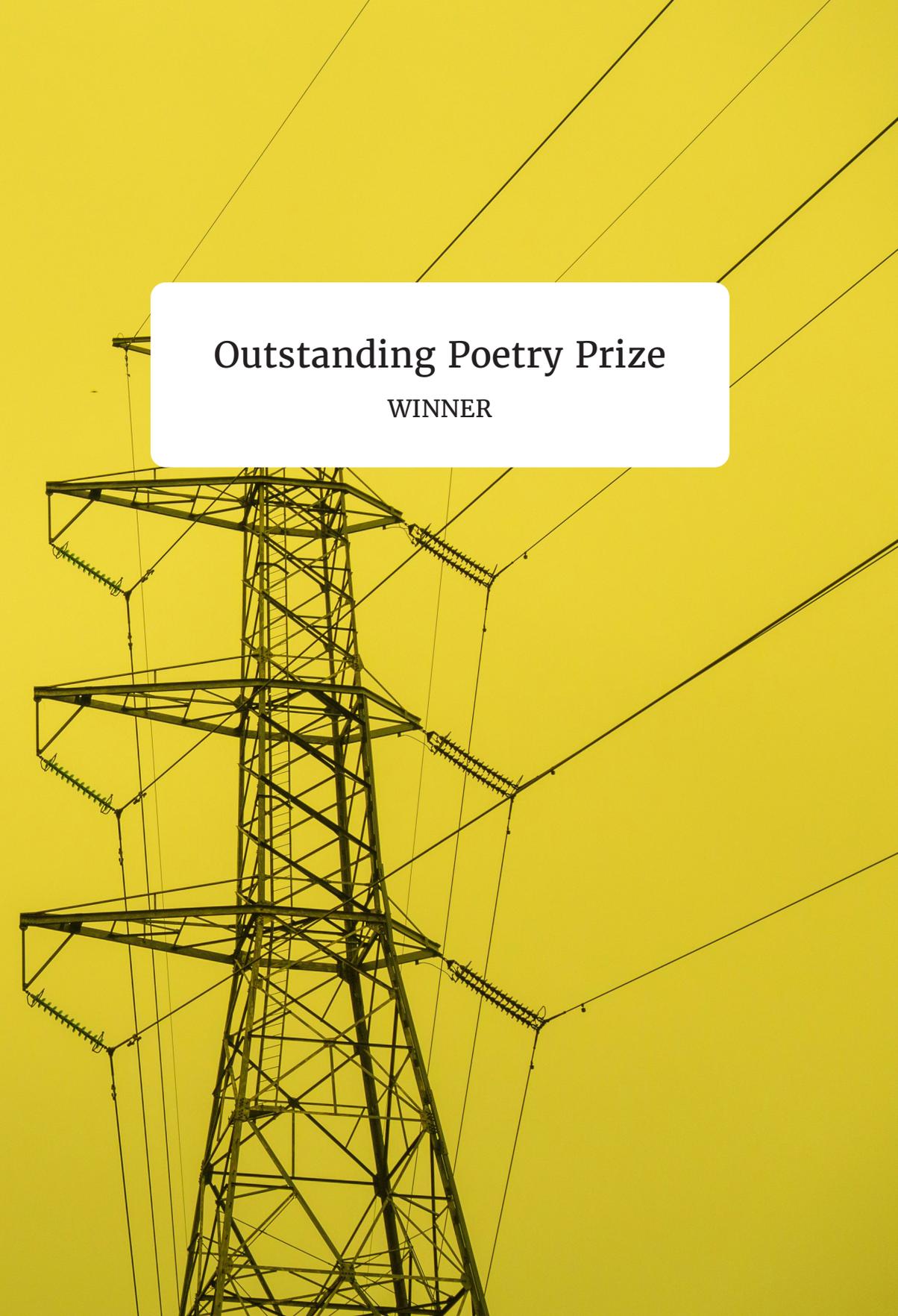
The sidewalks of that other place still remember her footsteps. Imogen recalls the earthy flavor of rye bread, the women clad in dark colors, the sun licking her flesh. She turns, steps out of the kitchen. Thunderclaps. Veins are crawling their way across the sky this evening. Time is a track with broken lines and so she throws the clock at the wall. His gaze blazes ochre and fire. Leaden hands and a tartan scarf, she left him, the man with eyes of such pale green that the sockets at times appeared almost hollow, as in ancient statues of marble. For centuries of shadows create a single night.



HANNA JANSSEN
Castle in Black and White



SANJOLI GUPTA
Crushed Dreams



Outstanding Poetry Prize

WINNER

Tonight, I See Another Future

The man in my room
brings electricity,
a chair, and a location on his charred tongue.
He is love from a loveless world—
he is everyone I don't know the names of.
In his full stomach is a life I escaped from, or never
entered. Standing between my open closet
and unbroken bed, electricity arced down
his body to revive the damages
of his one, perfectly-fitted life.
I am the boy he drags out of one painful dream
into another. My ankles in
his hands, he pulls me towards
his lonesome chair, sitting
in front of the closet he crawled
out of, punched open like a coffin,
and it feels too real. The moon is half out and he shoves
his tongue / location halfway down
my throat before pulling away
after tasting luck in the flesh
of my tender mouth. I tell him I love him
and he winces, then lets go, my cheeks shy
with his blood print, glassy like eyes
in between shocks. It doesn't come off easily.
It sizzles, and I know this song,
this crackle of a beat.
I too hum this electricity behind a man's back.



YIRU ZHOU
A Self-Imposed Cage



Outstanding Nonfiction Prize

RUNNER UP

PEAKHEIGHT

Mother eyes the space above me, the air seemingly pushing my head down back into my body, crushing growth plates. Neomu ja-geo, she says, as she wraps my limbs in measuring tapes then pulls, yanking them from their sockets. She curses when I curiously reveal my red-stained panties—no no no no too early andwae. She runs her hands down my legs, reaching out as if to confirm what she sees is true, that the artificial lighting and shadow is not just an illusion.

She forms rings around my ankles with her hands and I know she is searching: a slice of pale moon, a wafer tibia, space, space, space. When her hands wrap instead around her own tree-trunk stumps, she consults the “ologists.” Dr. H says that when girls get their period, they only have growth spurts for two more years.

That night, for my eleventh birthday, Mother and I slit open my esophagus and stuff it with fibers and milk.

Mother invites me into her bedroom. Her face is illuminated by the blue glow of her iPad screen. Neon tabloid headings in Korean print incandesce into the room. I cannot understand what they say but they look vibrant and artificial. Baljomjoba, she says, give me your legs. I lay down next to her and I’m reminded of the night of porcupine syringes, the flush of hormones injected into my veins. Is this plastic surgery?—no, it’s like acupuncture! My mother, a fierce adversary of anything manual and laborious, grabs my calves. She begins to squeeze my legs. Her body rocks back and forth almost mechanically as she digs the heels of her palms into my limbs, transferring the weight of her body and will into mine. Squeeze, release, squeeze, release, she murmurs to herself. Our limbs merge in a hot, aching equilibrium. Tendons and ligaments and cartilage crush into each other as my mother, the scientist, performs the transfusion.

By the hundredth squeeze, her dark hair has been transfigured into a loose topknot and holographic molecules of sweat gleam on her forehead, emblazoned by the flashing tabloids. When the Samsung ringtone goes off, merrily announcing my bedtime, she kisses me goodnight and shuts the door. This becomes a nightly routine.

I took my first shower when I was six. That year, my mother deemed I could graduate from the guest quarter bathroom to the master bathroom upstairs. Maybe it was my mastery over the “starfish” pose in survival swim class or my notable dexterity with a colored pencil—something about me was grown enough for the change. She would get in the shower with me every day for a week and demonstrate each step, carefully and deliberately moving through the procedure like dance. She stood straight up and combed the shampoo from her hair in long, sweeping strokes. The soap suds always traveled in a steady stream down the curvature of her back, never touching the front of her body.

On my twelfth birthday, Mother watches through the glass door as I bend my head down to let the water soak the nape of my neck. Through the roar and fog of the cascading water, I catch a glimpse of her unmoving figure. The shampoo bottles she had been carefully filing away are now strewn at her feet. She opens the shower door and eyes my naked body. My body has always been a shared space between my mother and I, a vessel for her to float in and out of, clipping and cleaning me like a home garden. Her discernment does not intimidate me. It isn't until the cold air scatters goosebumps across my skin and her hand slaps my chin upwards that I realize today she is not here to nurture. *In China, people never bow their heads in the shower because it is a sign of submission. It's not always a gesture of respect. I want to say: But I'm not Chinese?* My mother leaves me in the hands of physics. Scorching water collides with my outstretched tongue.

I never quite understood what my mother was doing those mornings. She would spend hours in the mirror squeezing handfuls of flesh on her leg, holding the pooch of her belly, twisting her neck and body to get a glimpse of her back. She would wrinkle her nose at her underarms which swung too much when she shook them,

peering fiercely into the glass surface. I want to tell her, unlike when you are a teenager, nobody cares what you look like when you're fifty. I try to exercise empathy. It must be an unfortunate feeling to be trapped by your own loosening skin, a constant paradox with no solution. I wonder if my mother ever considered her body to be a vessel as well, a space meant to expand and grow wide so you can carry more of yourself. Mother later tells me she did feel that way once, during pregnancy.

The PEAKHEIGHT pills are smooth, round, and milky. They bloat in my stomach along with the NON-GMO beef, organic fruit, and whole milk my mother has stitched into my stomach that evening. Later that night, the organic filaments cut my tongue as my stomach heaves white chalk from my body.

My Korean friends are growing to be pale, willowy, and gorgeous. My mother asks to see pictures of new high school friends. In the polaroid, we are dressed in pink sequins and shiny lip gloss. My homecoming date has made sure to take the picture from a low angle to make our legs look longer, just as I requested. Ummuh, she points to Soohyun. That one is so tall, gnomeo yeppuda. I point to Amelia, She's tall too. My mother nods but does not say anything more. I know what she's thinking: Yes, but she's white, so it doesn't matter.

Ms. V, my social studies teacher, encourages the class to pursue a research project about our home country for extra credit. The New York Times is talking about the Korean-Japanese trade war and Parasite's Oscar nomination. I feel a surge of patriotism, but I'm uncomfortably comfortable in the narrator's voice, stuck viewing my country from a third-party perspective, a mere satellite in space. I migrate to Naver and Missy U.S.A., the unifying blogs for teenagers and moms across South Korea. There is something validating about being familiar with the cartoony greens and pinks of Korean news outlets. Trending first in "media" is the comic, *Lookism*. I do a quick Google search and my world shifts. *Lookism: The discriminatory treatment of physically unattractive people. It occurs in a variety of settings, including dating, social environments, and workplaces.*

The internet algorithms lead me through an echo chamber of

information. During Japanese Colonialism in the 1940s, Korean citizens sought to establish their own nationality not just culturally but also physically, claiming to have taller and stronger limbs than any of their Mongolian counterparts. In the 1990s, the IMF economic crisis sent Korean people scrambling to make themselves as attractive as possible in a brutal job market. Suddenly, I understand why my mother was so secluded during her dances in the mirror. For those brief minutes in the morning, my mother had taken the form of an entirely new woman. The woman she had sacrificed for motherhood. The woman she had never grieved.

Ms. V asks to use my article as a class example. *What a freaky story!* My mother congratulates me but does not read my article. This isn't out of the ordinary. She has never attempted to read any of my writing pieces. I'm not sure if it's because of the language barrier or because she's just uninterested, but I don't press her. She was never an intended audience anyway.

On the other hand, it seems that the news of my article has spread to my entire town. *So, do the men get plastic surgery too?* a dad asks me at the winter orchestra concert.

As I progress in my high school years, a new group of male suitors emerge from the sea of white boys who love to flirt by debating what color your eyes are. *Bluish-green? Aquamarine? Emerald with a hint of turquoise?* This shiny new group of boys prefer to compliment our race rather than anything else. All of a sudden, my Asian friends and I are valuable on the market. We learn they enjoy watching anime in their free time, their favorite food is sushi, and they listen to Kpop for the "lyrics" (this is a joke, they later clarify). I am flattered by their interest in my culture and, most of all, by their flamboyant expressions of attraction for my appearance. 11:52pm from Nathan: *don't say that about yourself, you're super petite and hot ;)*

On the day of the Atlanta spa shootings, I learn yet another word. *Fetishization: A sexual fascination with things not inherently sexual, like race, gender, sexuality, or body type.*

Fetishization. Its soft syllables remind me of the French word, *chuchotement* (a hushed whisper), but it does not roll out of my mouth the same way. A Wikipedia search adds skins to my tongue.

In the media, sexualized Asian characters are often depicted as small, submissive, and obedient figures.

My mother had always taught me vicious methods of navigating marriage and men, even though her own relationship with my dad was stable. *If the husband cheats on you, you cheat on him. Your daddy makes good money so that your husband knows you have a powerful family. Don't get married if you don't want to.* I always considered myself lucky to have parents with a healthy marriage and wondered why she was so apprehensive about the subject. I revisit Nathan's text. I wonder if my size had been the pulling factor or if I had somehow played into his fantasy role during our flirtatious nightly texts. His commercialized desire disgusts me. That night, swallowing the PEAKHEIGHT pills is rebellion.

Unlike my suburban, Jewish-dominated hometown, I can easily feel a sense of belonging within NYC crowds. Mother claims she is a city girl because she was born in Seoul, but in the city, she becomes neurotic. She stands taller and straighter than she usually does, shouldering her way briskly through the crowd. She talks louder than usual to the waitresses who sit us down, as if she is afraid that they will not hear her voice. As the hibachi chefs bellow *Happy birthday! Happy fifteenth birthday to you* and clang their spatulas on the metal stove, she smiles but does not try to sing along. When we walk back out in the evening, I can't help but imagine how we must look: two small, skinny Asian women weaving through the peanut-crunching crowd, half-weaponed with age, half with language. Tourists. My mother grips my hand tightly as she leads me back to our car.



Outstanding Visual Arts, Runner-Up

ROMANA MYKHAILEVYCH / *A Boy with His Dog*



River Drinker

I think I'll get home before two in the morning for once. Bar's closed—they had a leak in the roof from Monday's storm and chicks were crying over soggy carpets. They grabbed their purses and sighed, said New Jersey rainwater isn't nice in your mouth. But thanks to them I didn't get that feeling I love, and I'm pissed over it. The feeling I can drink a river, red or copper or maybe beige, and feel just fine after. I'd like to call it a power. Maybe, maybe not.

I don't think Mattie would've. The bipolar meds killed him eventually, but I like to pretend it was the alcohol. Maybe the cocktails were spoiled and poisoned for a few weeks. I always check the fruit for rotted spots, bruised sections, just because of the thought. For the future and for always.

No rusty rivers to swallow tonight. What's Ellie doing? Chess again, guarding the queen with her knights, I'm sure—she's alright, I'm sure. Home safe and sound.

I'm pretty sure, sure enough.

Trying the bar's handle leaves my hand feeling numb—it's frigid out. I stick it into my purse once I find the car and yank it around blindly, looking for keys and secretly warmth. I thought I felt a roach or a stray cricket, another one, but it's so good to be wrong.

The panic came cold and went quick, evaporated with the buttery wind—forgettable. It was just that silver coin from Ellie, flat and cold from 1890, bustling times I'm sure. Exciting and all. She thought it was pretty. The feel of it pressed deeply into my palm freezes my blood into brilliant vermillion crystals. A sharp reminder of the switches coated in frozen red honey. Ellie would be honey in some far away place. Silky, soft skin, loose golden curls.

"It has to do with probability, the coin," she told me once. She always likes to twist her loose curls around her pointer finger. "I

have one too, from Ms. Baker. When I flip it, I'll know if you're there or not, Mommy."

Whatever that means. Would coins from her third grade teacher be worth any good amount of cash? Any extra dollars I can burn on a new lighter? I asked her about it and she waddled away. She knows I'd try to sell hers. Smart girl. I sold a china doll from her grandma once and got a couple hundred for it. I spent it on a cart filled with skinny bottles of cheap golden liquor.

Mom called me a villain.

The car door unlocks and I'm welcomed in. *Hello, love.* I catch a look at myself in the rearview mirror as I pull out of an empty lot, headlights flickering. Moist specks of hail coat my pale lips, and I have to remind myself it's only clumped rain and not sticky peach fish eggs—a silly fear after stale sushi. I can hardly see the whites in my eyes. My skin is puffy and pink, inflated around swollen blue bags. Ellie's come to hate cotton candy for it, revealed at some small town carnival. She refuses to eat it because it looks like Mommy when she comes home late. It killed me to hear.

And of course, Todd used that against me. 'Look at what our daughter is scared of at her age. She should live with *me* and my wife. That damn judge had a silicon brain and stiff plastic for brain cells—he took pity on you.'

There's filth in my hair, and I look dirty blonde.

I remember those words. *'I know I deserve full custody.'*

Not so blonde, just dirty.

And then I picture the oranges on the counter. Rotten, maybe? Maybe not. Ellie is peeling one with her thumb the way I taught her. Black fluid floods her nail, and she tells me it stings.

I shake my head, hard. I checked the fruit more than once before I left this morning—stroked all the bumpy peels I could see, felt every nook and made sure they were only textured flesh. I think insects and poison and big black spiders can fit inside anything spoiled, and that one's not so silly. See the cocktails? Killers.

Maybe that's where it came from, the fear; when Mattie slipped out of my grasp. Then I could say tarantulas in the alcohol did it, took him—mutated just right for swimming. I had a crib delivered my third month, when it all looked set in stone. I run my fingers through my hair and squeeze hard. I cleared out the guest room,

painted the walls a nice sage green.

I have to remind myself to breathe. What did Sis teach you? Inhale first.

Suddenly I see our drafty wooden kitchen. A low, mechanical hum floods in from the walls—our faulty heating system. Then almonds drop like rain to the floor, the newest bag. Ellie opened it and lifted it up wrong, upside-down. I grip the wheel. My tongue burns white, taste buds burst, and all that because I told *her* not to open the cabinet. I left her food already. She doesn't need more.

Or was that yesterday?

Then exhale.

A grin stretches my cracked lips, and my front teeth dig into my white tongue. Black spots dance in and out of my vision. I might've forgotten to feed my daughter. Oh, here comes Todd's words! A bad, bad mother.

Exhale.

It's fine. It's only dinner. She'll be fine, I'm sure.

Ellie would tell me not to drive home yet. She'd say I should make sure I can count to one-hundred without stopping before I press on the gas.

"Count that far, and then cover your mouth. Say *haa* and make sure you only smell water or juice." I remember when she used to pronounce it as 'guish,' just a little while ago.

When did she become so mature?

But she spilled the almonds and I need to *get her for it*. They were salted, just the right texture.

Besides, I'm just a bit tipsy. I paid some homeless man for a couple sips of his whisky. Caught him in some back alley.

And then I realize I imagined the whole thing, and my forehead hits the wheel. The car swerves left. I feel my brain purple because I know how to bruise quickly, and thunder pounds through my body. I think I'll take her advice.

You need to exhale.

Oh wait, I'm driving.

My sweet daughter, an angel. Someone sent her to keep me sane—I like to think it was Mattie. I hope she ends up more like anyone besides her mother. Dear god, *anyone*. I can't bear the thought of her sipping rivers in hopes of gaining leverage over the world.

She has too much ahead of her for that. Did I lock the front door?
That's alright. Again. Inhale first.

I stroke the wheel in thought and pretend I don't notice the dents from my head and thumbs in the dark leather and old marks that have finally begun to fade. I'm fond of this car. We've gone surfing over shallow curbs and skating through winter wonderlands, special dates. A dizzying dance through red and white light, we'd skid across the road without a care.

Without a care for others, either.

Sometimes on the way to class, too. Should've taken morning courses. I might've survived—med school, I mean. I can push through hangovers if I really want to. I had all this passion for it, all the love in the world for it. Spoiled fruit, spoiled dreams. I smile. A spoiled dream can crust syrupy sweet, fester like a sore, hang saggy and low. Untouchable after a while.

I resist the urge to bite my jagged nails. It's untouchable now, infested with maggots and empty roach shells.

Untouchable, when the PhD has lost its silver shimmer. I want nothing to do with medicine after Mattie.

What can I say? I wanted to heal others before I fixed up myself. Me and my little visions, thoughts of marriage and motherhood. I bite my lip—I'm not going through stage four cancer or any disease so debilitating, but god, my little worries debilitate me *anyway*.

And then, deer.

He stands and stares at my little car as I'm coming, seemingly without a care in the world. He'd been there before, I'm sure, but I didn't know it. I gasp and swerve right, chest heavy. I missed him, just barely, and now I'm expected to forget that it happened.

I burst into laughter—the worst sort. My face contorts in strange new ways. Muscles I've never felt burn in my stomach and chest. I throw my head back away from the wheel and shake hard against the seat. My vocal chords, *they're on fire*.

“Hello?” I manage to say. “Gods in the clouds? You *want* me to kill something else, don't you? You *threw* that thing at me. *Placed it in front of the damn car*. Mattie doesn't need a friend! He's fine up there with you all, with other little babies stuck in river-drinkers' bellies!”

I only quit laughing when I reach the house, short and stout. I crawl out of the car, collapse onto the sidewalk, and stick my nose

in damp snow that coated the side of the road for a minute. I give myself one minute to freeze, and then I enter the house.

Salt rolls down my eyes in tears. Ellie runs to greet me at the door—I see her when I open it. She tackles me in a hug, and I sink to reach her, my daughter.

“Mommy! You’re here, I knew it! My special coin worked—it said you’d be here when you walk inside, the real you!”

I quietly cry into my daughter’s hair. “I sure am here, honey.”

The switches left me be for a minute. I came to my daughter as myself, and knew not to accuse her of spilling imaginary almonds. *Thank you*, to anyone who will accept it.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper into her ear. My shoulder grows wet with Ellie’s own tears, tears of relief perhaps.

I’m sorry, sweet girl, that you have a river drinker as your mother. Hardly stable, hardly sane.

The Golden Coating

“What’s in your hand?” Mom asks from the driver’s seat when I settle myself into the backseat and toss my backpack beside me.

“A gold coin I won from Scott.” I open my fisted left hand, revealing a glinting yellow coin. “We bet about whether Ms. Callum would give us a spelling quiz and I bet yes. I was right.”

“Not good to bet. You should give it back,” Mom mutters absent-mindedly as she checks the rear-view mirror and pulls our car out of the long student pick-up line and onto the road. “Good thing you came out early, so I don’t have to wait too long. We’re going to stop by Greg’s Groceries first.”

Oh, right, today is Thursday, our grocery shopping day. Each Thursday, Greg’s Groceries start their new weekly deals. The key to securing the best deals is to get to the store as early as possible. Although the sale is supposed to last for the whole week, some goods on sale are gone on the first day. Last year, Mom missed a buy-one-get-one-free deal for baby back ribs when she shopped on Friday instead of Thursday. I still remember the frustrated expression she wore that entire night. Since then, we have always shopped on Thursday, the first thing after school.

I have never enjoyed grocery shopping, but today I feel a tiny rush of excitement in the car. Not from the expectation of shopping, but from the coin that glimmers and weighs in my palm. Scott is from a rich family and often shows off his gold coins that bling and clink. Now, one of those coins belongs to me.

Should I sell this coin on eBay or somewhere else online? I stare at the coin and slide it into my sweatshirt pocket, thumbing its smooth surface.

Our blue sedan cruises into Crescent Plaza, which boasts Greg’s Groceries and several small restaurants. The parking lot is almost

full, mostly occupied by grocery shoppers.

When we step out of the car, Mom fetches out a couple of crumpled canvas bags from the trunk and digs out a folded weekly ad flyer from a bag. Without wasting another minute, we stride toward the auto sliding doors of Greg's Groceries.

"Go get a cart." Mom gestures toward the stack of shopping carts at the entrance. She spreads out the flyer, on which she has already circled a bunch of items with a thick black marker. Now we just need to sail between aisles to hunt for those items.

We first stop at the long rows of fruits and vegetables shining with bright colors under the ceiling lights. Mom sets two bundles of asparagus and a sack of tangerines in the cart, and then hastens to the rack of berries.

"Sam, follow me closely!" She raises her voice as I shuffle behind her with arms resting lazily on the cart handle.

"Look at that. The strawberries are two dollars off. What a deal!" She beams and clutches two plastic boxes of strawberries. "These are organic strawberries," she adds, placing an extra emphasis on "organic."

Like a proficient scout, Mom deftly locates all the items marked on the flyer. The cart is filling up—five cans of baked beans she saved a dollar on with a coupon, a bag of russet potatoes labeled "Weekly Special," a value pack of ground beef, and other goods all deemed cheaper than usual.

Our grocery shopping is quick and efficient. Heading toward our car, Mom studies her receipt, which is as long as a gift wrap ribbon. "Do you know how much we saved? Thirty-eight dollars!" Her voice is so loud and proud that an old couple strolling by shoot us an amused look.

On our way home, Mom taps her fingers on the steering wheel and hums a jaunty tune as if she has just won a lottery.

I suddenly remember something. "Oh, Mom?"

"Hm... yes?"

"My class is holding a fundraising dinner tonight at Serrano Grill. For new school computers or something." After making sure Mom's listening, I continue. "Scott told me his mom said we should come tonight. We're one of the only people in the class who haven't

been to a fundraising dinner yet, apparently.”

This catches Mom’s attention. She stops her humming and finger-tapping. “Really?

Scott’s mom said that?”

Scott’s mom, Mrs. Benson, is the president of the school PTA. Her influence goes far beyond our school.

“What’s the restaurant again?”

I repeat its name, realizing Mom has never heard of it before.

“Maybe we should go this time,” says Mom. “Let’s put down the groceries at home first. I need to get the meat into the fridge.”

Mom asks me to place all the groceries in the pantry and fridge while she goes upstairs to change.

As I putter around the kitchen and stow groceries, I try to recall the last time we went to a decent restaurant, which must have been quite long ago, before my parents’ divorce. Ever since they separated, Mom and I have been living on her salary as a receptionist of a physical therapy clinic, and we rarely eat out.

Mom reappears in a burgundy polka-dot dress, her hair tied up with a French barrette, a handbag with Louis Vuitton logos dangling on her exposed right shoulder. I recognize that bag. It is a fake one that costs only one-fifth the price of a real one. Mom bought it through a friend who told her the handbag appears and smells exactly like the real one. But I can see the uneven stitching on the edge and a thin fray on the corner.

We are sitting in buttery soft leather chairs around a clothed table where sparkling utensils and wine glasses settle. Brass chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling cast a soft, merry glow over Serrano Grill’s huge dining hall. The air is spiced with the smell of savory food, making my mouth water. I glance around and see some classmates and their families eating, drinking, and mingling.

A server donning an elegant black and white uniform stops at our table and offers two hardcover menus. “Would you like anything to drink?”

“Water, please.” Mom gives a polite smile.

The server bows and leaves. Mom opens the menu to the first page, and her eyes nearly bulge out. “These prices are ridiculous,”

she mutters. “Thirty-eight dollars for a burger?”

As she flips to the next page, she is even more startled. “Fifty dollars for a piece of steak? What is this? A New York Strip...”

She skips the pages of seafood and chef recommendations and stops at the salads page. “Here, Sam, choose one of these salads. They’re still awfully overpriced, but they’re the cheapest on the menu,” she whispers to me, her uneven breath tingling my cheek.

Her index finger roves the glossy page with the salad pictures and clicks on the chicken garden salad when a high-pitched voice comes from behind. “Oh my, is that you, Sharon?” Mrs. Benson is pacing toward us, carrying the sting of strong perfume, her sky-blue midi dress swishing with each step she takes. Scott follows her, winking at me with a sly grin.

“My, my, it is so good to see you! It’s been such a long time.” Mrs. Benson leans over and gives Mom a hug with a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

“You’ve missed several fund-raising dinners. But I’m glad you could come today. Serrano’s is one of my favorites. Their steaks and seafood are ablutely exquisite.” Mrs. Benson glances down at the menu that Mom is holding, which is open to the salads page. “Don’t tell me—you’re only going to order a salad?” An incredulous note creeps into her voice.

Mom closes the menu with a nervous laugh. “Of course not! Why would we come here just to eat a salad?” Another nervous laugh.

“Wonderful.” Mrs. Benson beams. “A couple pieces of lettuce aren’t good enough for you and a growing boy like Sam. Trust me, order the steak in Oscar style. No regrets. Also—their seared scallop is a must-try!”

A waiter approaches Mrs. Benson and tells her that her table is ready. Mrs. Benson pats Mom’s shoulder lightly with her pink-nailed fingers and says, “I will come and check on you later.”

Before she leaves, her eyes are caught by Mom’s handbag on a vacant chair. “Gorgeous purse, by the way. I have two like that!”

“Ah, yes. A nice bag.” Mom runs her fingers across its leather surface and straightens her back.

Mrs. Benson leaves our table with a finger wave, her blonde curled hair bouncing behind her. Scott follows her like a tail, quietly. I’m glad he didn’t mention the gold coin in front of his mom. I won-

der what would happen if his mom found out.

Mom turns to the steak page, then the seafood page. “Sam, an eight-ounce New York Strip for you. I’ll have the scallops. How’s that?”

“But Mom, look at the prices!” I almost scream the words out.

“It’s fine. Mrs. Benson recommended those.” Mom takes a sip of ice water. She motions for the server to come and orders the two entrées.

“Excellent choices,” remarks the server, gathering the menus.

The dishes come in dainty white oval plates with the restaurant name carved in gold lettering on the rim. The air becomes thick with the smoky scent of a sizzling steak and the briny aroma of scallops dressed in lemon caper sauce and butter.

With the presence of food, I feel the intense rumbling from my stomach. I’m *really* hungry now. I slice a big chunk of steak and stuff it in my mouth, chewing eagerly. The juicy meat brings me a joyful warmth.

From the corner of my eyes, I notice Mom using a fork to stir around the creamy sauce surrounding a crown of scallops.

“This is quite a small size,” she murmurs under her breath. When Mom sees me glancing at her, she presses a smile on her lips. “Enjoy your food, Sam. The steak looks...nice.”

She turns around and peers over her shoulder. Following her eyes, I see Mrs. Benson holding a wine glass, strolling and chatting around her nearby tables with occasional ripples of laughter.

Mom and I spend the rest of the dinner time by ourselves in silence. The aromatic air feels stifling. The steak is delicious, but each swallow feels heavier than the last.

When we get out of the restaurant, the sky is already dark with a faint, moaning wind rustling the trees along the sidewalk. Our car drones down the street lined with sporadic lighting.

“What a night,” Mom breaks the silence in a light tone that sounds unnatural. “How many more fundraising dinners does your school have?”

“Uh... two or three, I guess.” I want to tell Mom that we don’t need to go to those dinners, but my throat is too tight for more words.

Mom doesn't say anything else, her eyes locked on the dim-lit street ahead of us.

A sense of unease settles in me. I thrust my hands into the pockets of my sweatshirt. A round flat metal meets my fingers. The gold coin, the one I won from Scott. For some reason, it reminds me of Mrs. Benson's pungent perfume, her simpering smiles, the glamorous dishes, and the heavy check holder. I hold the coin tightly in my hand, my thumbnail anxiously grazing and scratching its surface, as if that can help me escape from the discomfoting thoughts swarming my mind.

The car glides to a stop at a red light. I take out the coin and set it in the center of my sweaty palm. Under the glaring red traffic light, I see the golden coating of the coin peeling up from where I scratched, revealing the gray plastic underneath.

Scratch Off

If the sink is clogged
and dishes are piling up
there has to be a reason.
What life will I find
when the drain finally relents?

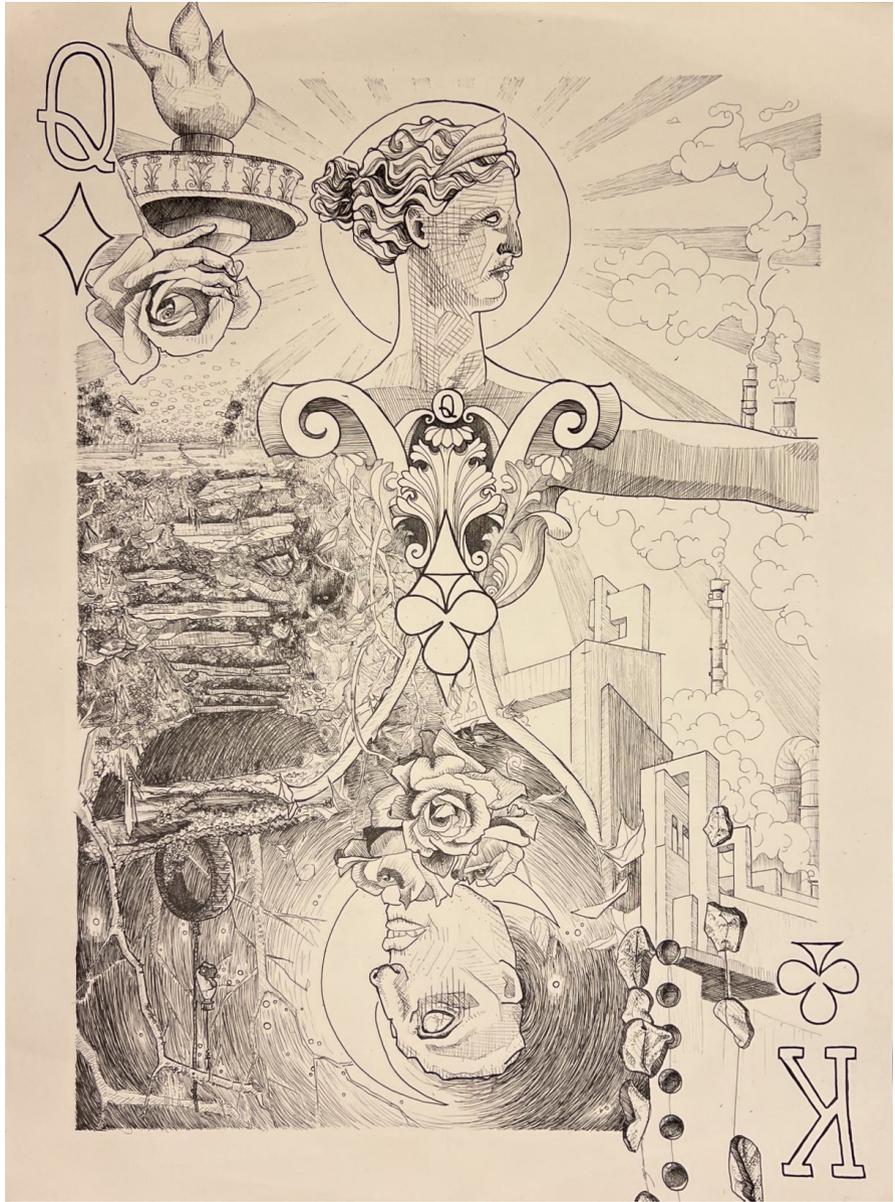
Let it be love,
or a lottery ticket
the losing end of either one.
There is sentiment in the scratch-off.
When the numbers don't match
they'll spell out "Sorry for Your Trouble."

Pay for inspiration at pump 11
and use your leftover coins for bus fare
to Next Town Over
as many times as you need.
When you get where you're going,
Send a postcard to your loss
and thank it for the gas money.



ALYSSA WONG

The King of Clovers vs. The Queen of Diamonds



Lost in Suburbia

Hot sun does not deter the boy shooting a basketball in the driveway
Past the hoop, green leaves sit still on a cloudless day
A block to the left and three up, four polos engage in semantics
The party meanders on around them
A boy sits in the chair on the lawn reading a book,
At the same time eyeing the plastic table at the other end of the yard
Not for what's on it but for those gathered nearby
The mosquitos shatter the idyllic scene and the boy turns the page
Elsewhere, a girl looks out of her window
The pool she did not dig lies outside
Her thoughts betray a deep desire, as deep as the pool,
Yet she turns from the window nonetheless and retreats to her desk
Scared of what would be exposed should she end her isolation
In the East, there is a field
A game is being played
The players ebb and flow around the ball
The parents look on, before notifications overwhelm
their parental sensibilities
In the West there is a house on a street
A gray wall marks the end of its yard
But it can't keep out the sounds of hundreds of cars
In the center of town, a man, always a man, sits
He hopes to laugh at what he hears but he is always shocked,
Overwhelmed by his own self importance
He is run over and lost in it all
In the supermarket, the people walk for hours,
Oppressed by fluorescent lights
Pained as they may be, only half realize it
The carts wander across the reflective floors

Jumping over their own broken wheels
In the park the children play
Far from the slides, in their own world
The older ones scoff when they pass,
The much older ones sigh
In one house,
A house with an uneven yard,
A nobody chaffs at the attitudes of those surrounding them
A garden party life is not one they will accept
They wish to turn into somebody, anyone at all
Lest they become what they fear the most:
The bargain-brand, stripped-down equivalent
of whatever they aspire to be
These people are the kind who no matter their direction,
can never reach the end
To the nobody, they are simply fake
Whether or not the nobody is correct, only they can decide

Run, Run (As Fast As You Can) A Film Review-Memoir Crossover

Have fun reading, and welcome to Wonderland.

There is no Wonderland in Daniel Barnz's 2008 film *Phoebe in Wonderland*. Not really. There is no Alice either, only a troubled young girl named Phoebe, thriving on stage yet struggling in life beyond her imaginations.

Despite flourishing in her school's theatrical production of "Alice in Wonderland," Phoebe is frustrated by not becoming the person she feels obliged to be. Her life further takes a drastic turn downward as her unexplained Tourette and OCD symptoms begin to emerge, wrecking her relationship with everyone else, except Miss Dodger, her peculiar theatre teacher.

The movie, with its intertwining storylines of reality and fantasy, draws viewers into a complex web of nurturing connections, coping with differences, and, most importantly, growing up, where the lib-

eration from the box of norms and

expectations comes not as a resolution, but a form of hope—a belief that there is more waiting out there, and the journey has only just begun.

2015:

Back in fifth grade, all the students would gather on the soccer field for our

mandatory running exercise during recess period. We would line up, then run to the music booming out of the loudspeakers, round and round in circles, always trying to catch up with the person running before us.

When I look back on those days, I think of orderly things: blue tablecloths wrapped around desks, uniforms on Mondays, being taught to sit and raise hands and salute to the national flag in a certain way.

Being taught to behave a certain way—socially, academically, at all times.

I, with an innocence so blissful and heartbreaking at the same time, dutifully tread-

ed the path laid out before me, moving forward, upward, with every advanced after-school program, every competition, every merit-student award.

I ran on, because fifth-graders did not question too much about the future, around and around toward a finishing line I could not yet see, wondering when the music would stop, when I could stop.

There must be something waiting at the end. And despite not knowing the destination, I did know the rules of this game that many children in the best school district of Beijing were playing—the only way to push forward was to excel at everything.

2018:

I've always hated running: the throbbing in my ears, the pounding of my heart, every intake of breath a painful scratch against my lungs.

Above all, I hated that I could never run fast enough, always the stranded island in the waves of students wildly dashing down the 800-meter route

Some might question the directorial choice of casting imaginary characters from Wonderland the same as real people in Phoebe's life. It is without doubt the most brilliant part (and confusing as well, if you don't look carefully) of the movie, this beautiful parallel between fantasy and reality.

"It takes all the running you can do to stay in the same place," says the Red Queen (or is it Phoebe's mother?). "If you want to get to someplace else, you have to run at least twice as fast."

She takes Phoebe's hand and they start running.

(two laps and a half on the soccer field, I will forever remember that), one swarm before me and one swarm behind me, but I was always alone.

My feet felt heavier as I grew older, and sometimes I wanted to stop and take a break. But I needed to carry on. It was mere months from the high school entrance exam, and 78% seemed to be the best I could do in math, which of course was not good enough, not when the saying was so drilled into our minds it almost became the most popular slang—lose one point on the exam, and you are left behind by more people than a stadium can hold.

“Getting into high school is a selective process,” my friend Ee said. “Everyone gets all A’s back in elementary school.

That’s not going to work anymore.” She was the oldest fourteen-year-old I’d ever met, and sometimes when I looked at her, I felt as if I was staring at my friend thirty years into the future.

I began to feel the shift in things.

Being a straight-A student was no longer the point, getting higher grades than everyone else was. But it was getting harder and harder to push my

The line between fantasy and reality is often blurred in Phoebe’s mind, but several aspects of the movie help viewers distinguish between the two. Most noticeable is the shift in hues.

The Wonderland in Phoebe’s eyes is always bright and colorful—absurdly so at times, yet it draws her in nevertheless.

Wonderland is the escape for Phoebe, where she can be free, and no one will judge her for behaving inappropriately, for not being good enough.

“I’m ready now,” she says to her imaginary friend we cannot see. Looking down from her spot up on the catwalk, the whole theater swirls and glitters, transforming into a rabbit hole. She smiles, lets go, jumps.

The camera cuts to black.

There is no screaming, only the thump of something falling to the ground.

way through now, especially when everyone was aiming high, yet only the top 20% of students in my school district could get into my dream high school.

But at least there was something tangible in the near future for me to reach—a break station, almost—and I held onto the belief of that.

Occasionally I would recall our running exercise during recess period back in elementary school. Round and round in circles we used to run, never asking why, never questioning when we could stop, always trying to move forward, only that we always returned to where we started.

2020:

My parents told me of a new journey we were about to begin, one they had planned for years and would take place far away across the sea. For the first time the path before me was no longer dark and murky, and at the end of the racetrack I saw light, right at my fingertips.

I saw both the destination and a new starting line, a place which might be different, where maybe I no longer needed to run just as fast.

Or maybe I no longer needed to run at all—I could jump, or twirl, or soar. I liked the idea of that—of me being something else than what I already was.

Within months everything would stop: first the schools, then the flights, then the embassy and all immigration services. The road before me, the one which was paved out down to every single brick, the one I'd been dutifully treading on since a very young age, collapsed all of a sudden. I plummeted down along with it, plunging into an era of isolation and uncertainty, and the light that was so within my grasp slipped away through my fingertips.

I stopped running, because there was no road to run on, no destination to run to. The way everything stopped made me not want to pick up my pace anymore.

“Are you always supposed to feel hope?” Phoebe asks. It is late fall now, the sky dreary, and everything on screen seems to be shrouded in a fine veil of bluish sorrow.

Her mother looks back from the front seat of the car. “Did you jump because you didn't feel hope?”

“Oh no, I felt it there,” Phoebe says. “Where?” her father asks.

“In Wonderland,” murmurs her mother. She purses her lips, tries not to think about Phoebe's sprained wrist. “But not here.”

Phoebe nods. “But not here.”

2021:

Everything stopped. I stopped. But not completely.

I learned to pave a new way in the darkness, out of the darkness. Every brick became so strange yet so familiar at the same time. I knew not the destination I was heading toward, but I did know this time it would be a destination I have chosen for myself.

I learned to slow down, too, to explore trails which deviate from the route designed for me, to actually think about the future, instead of just running after it, stumbling, falling head over heels.

Once again, I found myself traveling down a path toward a destination yet to be discovered, but I was no longer running blindly in circles, only moving forward because I was told to, running faster because everyone else was speeding up.

I'd like to think of this as the beginning of something new.

All stories come to an end, but not all endings come with a resolution.

"You see, I've lost my way," Phoebe says at one point, as Alice, standing at the center of the stage.

Phoebe's story seems to have come to an end when she gradually begins to piece her

Onward:

Staring out of the window, at the sun pushing up the horizon, almost 6,000 miles away from home, away from the life I was born and raised into, I think about new beginnings—new classmates, a new school, a whole new environment.

I think about new experiences. I think about the brand-new journey I'm about to begin as well, where I could be someone new, someone different.

But then again, maybe I already am.

life back together. She accepts her OCD and Tourette's diagnosis and learns to nurture her relationship with both her family and her classmates.

But the film does not provide us with a final resolution, for as a young girl, there is still so much about herself Phoebe needs to discover. There is still so much room for her to grow.

And so the film ends with a question: "Who are you?" the caterpillar asks the Alice on stage, asks Phoebe.

She only smiles.

“At a certain point in your life, probably when too much of it has gone by, you will open your eyes and see yourself for who you are... And you will say to yourself: ‘But I am this person.’ And in that statement, that correction, there will be a kind of love.”

why I don't join you for walks

the sun's sorry kiss goodbye and the sober summer night.
the streets are laced with a prescription for catharsis
the air is thick with malaise, like memories behind foggy
shower doors

hypnotized, we move mechanically—
a step forward, a push back
sounds from our lips chip away at obscurity,
words carve into frosted glass.

pools of light on oily pavement grant us vulnerability
can you see me now? somewhere between
catatonic motions, gritted teeth, and an awkward frame
catch a glimpse before we become silhouettes in a
crude exchange of melodic tones again

space between us welcomes primitive unease,
synapses ignite a state of limbo:
fearmongers cower behind memorabilia
and mist, legitimized by ambiguity

my fingers rest on cold metal, prepare
against something shapeless and piercing
but if this fear is the product of malicious thoughts:
an apophenic line of reasoning,
I shall lie defenseless.

Phoebe in a Land of Phonies

loose plait of hair bulges
like humid sky
preparing
to rain.

ungainly, untidy, unlawful hair,

an untidy smile too.
metal braces gleam
like stray coins in
street musician's hats—

coins that blink like stars or like

full moon wide eyes, eyes that track
cars racing bikes, adolescent
in their impotent rage—
which make her smile her untidy smile.

untidy but genuine, it crinkles her eyes,
stretches her face
like bubblegum.
it doesn't owe allegiance to anything

or anyone: she smiles when she wants
so she "takes everything too seriously,"
the natural conclusion
to lusterless eyes unblinkingly

and unthinkingly cataloging the world. to them

smiles are like currency
(sodden paper owned by sweaty fingers)
to be given and taken,
a service,

and not smiling, a disservice.
“she takes everything too seriously”
teachers complain
at airless PTMs

and in airless birthday parties–
though she dances the Birdy Dance
with great enthusiasm if not skill–
invitations dry up

like muddy puddles in the sun,
which make her smile.
in them she sees
the potential of iridescence.

muted family conversations
echo.
barbed asides in (airless) classrooms
echo.

the puzzled politeness of strangers in transit

unable to explain
why this untidy girl
and her untidy smile
worry them so.

(i found iridescence
in street music.
i thought of you
and smiled.)



JIWAN KIM
Party



SHARIKA RAZDAN
untitled

For Naomi

The first time I lied about my writing, the line between truth and dishonesty was a two-letter word. In a text conversation with a friend, I found the fracture between my comfort and her curiosity irreconcilable. My essay she'd found had been recently republished in the summer issue of a regional magazine—a publication that, despite being known in my community, I assumed was rarely read.

She dropped the bomb in a DM.

“Did you write ‘Legacy Ends Here?’” A text bubble accusation—a violation. I stared down at the screen in disbelief. She'd found, read, chewed, swallowed, and regurgitated something unintended for her eyes.

Shakily, I set down my phone. All I wanted was to deny her question for another moment.

My writing itself is denial. It's pen names and anonymity in emails to editors, it's changing my hometown in author bios. It's staying in the closet. It's telling nobody but my notebook about an eating disorder, the page watching me recover. It's witnessing my life exposed on the computer screen, reserved for anonymous eyes throughout America. It's assuming nobody in my personal life would ever read my work.

When my friend asked if I wrote that essay, I lied to her. “No,” I replied, then powered off my phone.

My writing isn't [redacted]. My writing is Naomi Carr. Of the 33+ Naomi Carrs on LinkedIn, none of them are my Naomi. It's the safety in knowing myriad Naomis exist, none of which are my Naomi. It's the secure seat behind a pen name. It's the thought that my

pen name can hide behind a number of real people who exist. It's the sound assumption that nobody would ever read my work and draw a line connecting Naomi back to me.

Naomi and I met the first time my work was accepted for publication. Blue Marble's editor, Molly Hill, suggested I employ a pseudonym since my piece was so personal. She said it wasn't uncommon for students to publish their work under pen names. It didn't have to be a pen name, though. It could be my initials, or initials that weren't mine—or whatever.

Even with her advice, I found the decision repulsive—hypocritical, even. I couldn't separate myself from my work, from the experiences and pain on the page. The piece I submitted, like the rest of my writing, was a morsel of my life. It was me. To change the name attached to it would distance me from my work, my writing, and my life. It tasted like a lie, betrayal, sick denial. Would publishing under a pen name make the truth untrue?

Amid my indecision, I texted Zoe—my friend who would find this accepted piece months later in another publication. I told her nothing. She didn't know the name of my piece, the genre, the content, the publication—nothing. I simply told her my work had been accepted and I didn't know if I should publish under a pen name. I told her the thought of a pen name felt superficial, but I considered the editor's advice heavily.

Zoe told me to be authentic. She told me to own my real name. I didn't tell her daring to write that piece was owning my real name. I didn't tell her attaching my “real” name to that piece would put a target on my back, would make me prey to four different people I call predators. She told me to be authentic, but I didn't tell her that piece—each word handpicked at an ungodly hour—was the most authentic act I've ever committed. I didn't tell her maybe my essay didn't need my real name to be authentic. Maybe the absence of my real name didn't make it any less true.

The same month I got my first acceptance, we started reading Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* in English class. The entire

book is a paradoxical parable about storytelling and war. O'Brien often begins chapters framing what he's about to say as the truth, only to later claim none of it happened.

By the time we'd read about a third into the book, my teacher posed a pressing question to the class: "Did Rat Kiley actually kill the baby water buffalo? Because O'Brien initially says he does, but he later goes back on his word. So what is the real truth here?"

I'm not entirely sure what she wanted me to say. Nobody else seemed interested in answering her question, so I gave it a shot.

"I think on some level, the technicalities don't matter. It's all arbitrary, right? Whether or not Rat mutilated a baby water buffalo out of grief doesn't make the grief any more or less real. The fact that O'Brien said it—the fact that the sentiment was there—I think that's enough truth. It seemed true enough for it to be true, even if things didn't happen that way."

Whatever my teacher deemed the correct answer definitely wasn't what I gave her. Confused, my classmates looked at me like I was a mutilated water buffalo—something foreign and nonsensical, something from a different plain of reality.

In hindsight, I should've expected Zoe's answer. She's a journalist, after all. Founder of our school's journalism club and School of the New York Times alumna, Zoe finds immense value in the truth—or rather, in the relentless search for it. Investigative journalism is her specialty. In hindsight, I should've known the idea of my pen name wouldn't sit right with her. I should've known it would be her, of all people, to connect my writing back to me. It was only a matter of time before she did.

After intense contemplation at my kitchen table, then in my bed, then on my back porch after walking through my neighborhood park to escape the inevitability of my decision, I opened my laptop again. My reply to Molly was brief—only long enough for me to thank her and ultimately accept her suggestion of using a pen name. Naomi Carr was born.

Naomi is my mother's middle name. Stowed away between her first and last, the beauty of its Japanese origin always fascinated

me. By the time I was twelve, I knew that if I ever had a daughter, I would name her Naomi—in part after my mother, but mostly out of admiration for the name's sound.

Carr is extracted from the second syllable of my real last name—a familial sound carried across bloodlines from India to Trinidad to Canada before landing in California.

Naomi separates [redacted] from my work, but Naomi is still part of me. She's my creation, my own. She's more experimental than any lyric essay or prose poetry or trilingual abecedarian. She lives with my essays and memoirs—in me, between my memory and unwritten words.

Naomi's name is a patchwork appreciation of those I love. Perhaps she's an act of self-love—the acknowledgment my work's vulnerability and my humanity deserve protection. She's a manifestation that one day, the distance between Naomi and me will be nonexistent.

My writing isn't journalism, exactly. It's equal parts essay and memoir. It's every part truth. The world calls it creative nonfiction.

Creative nonfiction writers bleed their lives onto the screen, strip naked before a blank page, dismember our bodies with our own hands. CNF writers are not always published authors, but we are always entirely human. We are explorers of the self, reverse engineers of emotion. We understand how moths know of loneliness, how masochism and homesickness are the same. We know ourselves through the quiet contemplation of clattering keyboards. We know others through transposing the real world onto the page. We know sometimes the most vulnerable moments are not with others but with pen and paper. We know success is embracing vulnerability, reality, discomfort, pain.

I know CNF is a commitment to myself. My writing is entirely me.

Last week, I told Zoe the truth. On an overcrowded bus ride home from school, she posed her question again after months of living with my lie. It was abrupt but nonchalant, as if a conversation about college apps easily lent itself to inquiries about my personal writing.

“So, did you? Did you write that piece in the lit mag?” She hesitated in a hushed voice, seeming to feel the gravity of her question this time.

I hesitated. She did not have to specify which piece or which lit mag, but I knew. Smiling in discomfort, I made a futile attempt to evade her question with broken eye contact.

“You don’t have to say, if you don’t want,” she reassured, staring straight at the side of my head while I looked for the answer outside the window.

I took a breath, stared back at her, and found the words to connect my writing back to me. “No, I did. I did write it.” The truth was just simpler than a lie.

OK, I lied. I’ve never lied about my writing—not to Zoe, not to Molly, not to readers, or whether I am [redacted] or Naomi, whether Zoe becomes an attribution expert, whether every reader knows my real name or none do, it doesn’t matter. I’ve come to see truth not as a spectrum, not as a quality that can be ascribed, intensified or diminished, but as a quiet constant in the back of my mind, a simple through-line on the page. I’ve learned to understand truth is always present, and a pen name can never change that.

This piece may be the final line connecting Naomi back to me. But maybe that line was there the entire time.

The Road*

The moon raced us along the interstate without a breath.
The map was wrong and so were my mother's eyes;
a punched-in confidence and sharp inhale,
resignation was the cotton in your ears, banging.
You clenched your eyes shut to see the fireworks.

If only they had seen their fingers creeping over themselves:
spiders, a web of bumps, gaining purchase
and losing it as a pelican who forgets its herring is
alive: plunging stonelike, frozen in descent, into
brackish water, commemorated by feathers
and concentric ripples. They should have heard themselves:
abandoned phrases and ill-fitting words, learnt
and foreign. Irritation and a chest constricting
and gesticulations to the wheels—
kicks to the skull. Sharp beaks peck at each other,
leave dents.

Release. And the grasp of my father's
"I missed the road," then,
her, "I told you so."

* *Previously published in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards' 2022 gallery of National Medal Works*

to think list

I'm working on a conspiracy theory:
that my face could fit
in a lion's mouth if
She wanted me.

And if She needs
it, I'll stare
down the alleyway of
Her pharynx,

gallery of
undulating intestines,
hear Her heart,
throb to the rhythm of fulfillment.

I'm with you; I'll scream in tempo.
In contemplating
anything existential,
I'll realize we should begin by

letting ourselves
be consumed. So I'll get the whip hand
tonight, in a flood of hot, sour,
spit, and enjoying

every bit of it.
Digest her philosophical
musings; sinless
heavy.

I hear you; I'll bury myself
in the warm spikes
of Her tongue
and mean every bit of it.

Her Lilac Lighter

She gave him her lilac lighter and left
as the night held her still and the wind took her breath.
A sweetened sadness, beautiful on her skin,
the moonlight felt nostalgic to her
and the bruised pavement made her miss being seventeen,
the cobblestone's repeated patterns like two dancing shadows.

He reluctantly returned to his sought-after shadow
and struck the lighter's sparkwheel, turning to his left.
Distanced and dismantled, startled to survive year seventeen.
His pace quickened, ignoring the whiskey lingering on his breath.
Did the cascading moonlight remind him of her?
He resented the eerie glow, as it draped so lovely across her skin.

He always told her she looked best when the skin
of her cheeks glistened and ached from smiling at the shadows
that belonged to strangers she never knew
and who never knew her.
She devoured the experience of never quite getting close enough
and left before she soaked in a stranger's perfume or
deciphered which alcohol rested on their breath—
The voracious desire of an escape hatch is only that alluring
at seventeen.

She met him the night she turned seventeen,
and he met her the night her skin
first began to sparkle for strangers who ignited her indifference.
His breath became heavy and his lungs appeared rough
from the soot-covered shadow of longing to be older,

because to him that meant leaving
would be melodic and it would feel dreadfully real to love her.

Unforgiving time, how elegantly cruel, as it promised her
only a slightly bruised body after surpassing seventeen.
She peered down at the false guarantee of never having to leave
such an age of vibrance and glowing golden skin.
Her mind wandered back to his sought-after shadow,
wistful of the way it once took her breath

His thumb landed on the now rusted metal sparkwheel as he
breathed in the mundane smoke,
clutching the lighter that was once hers.

In the desolate moonlight his body cast a shadow
like a smudge of ink across the pavement, as he counted seventeen
cracks tucked into the cement, like scars on tender skin.
An intentional plan for an accidental outcome:
find her before she leaves.

She traced the freckles along her skin, yearning for his breath,
recalling the cusp of seventeen and the closure it left
just as her eyes fixated on an approaching shadow.



ANNIE WU
Retrospect



NOAH VARMAN
untitled

Roadkill

I had always closed my eyes while on highways. My mother and I would frequently take road trips after my days at pre-school and her long days at work to drive up north to my Aunt's house. She seemed to take advantage of these trips, and began to clear her head once her mind was on the road rather than everything else. I slowly became more patient during these forty-five-minute drives by watching a movie and eventually falling asleep in my car seat. The trip mainly consisted of one long highway, with nothing but orange and brown-ing trees and bushes on either side of the road.

My mother instructed me to always look straight ahead while in the car, or just close my eyes shut altogether. I was told this was because my family all deals with terrible motion sickness, but as I grew I realized it was because she couldn't promise the busy Pitts-burgh parkways wouldn't be littered with animal carcasses on either side of the road. I counted eight dead deer scattered during one trip during the early fall.

There are over 235,000 reported cases of animal-vehicle acci-dents annually. With that, an estimated 1.2 million deer are mur-dered and 365 million various other animals are found lying on the side of the road. This is all the total of the decay left from skin and rotting tissue stranded after an eighteen-wheeler hits a groundhog, when a bird flies into the wings of a plane, or when a train hits cat-tle. In addition, 1.2 million domesticated dogs, 5.4 million cats and 5,000 humans, animals which were once safe in houses crushed by vehicles parked in their driveways not far away.

This number began to drop drastically in 2020, following the pandemic. Humans were forced inside, fighting illness, and nature began to heal for the first time.

I noticed, when I was young, more deer appeared crumpled on the side of the road during fall. The window of our car was cold to the touch and the freezing streets operating as nature's refrigerator were just getting started. Misshapen corpses of various deer bodies, some large with antlers, some as small as a dog, awkwardly bent with their legs pointing unnatural directions began appearing not even ten feet from our car.

Once I was finally tall enough to peek over my car seat and out the window, I began crying at my first sight of a dead deer.

The deer looked small. I know my mother saw it as well; she looked off to her left and then shut her eyes lightly. Leaves were falling, the sun was setting later, and more and more deer got caught stumbling across the road. Wrong place, wrong time.

I watched Bambi for the first time like a deer in headlights. Sitting under a blanket comfortably with my mom, holding me against the harsh winter outside, I watched the young deer run away on fields of spring snow with echoes of gunshots firing off screen. He kept running, never looking back for his mother who was following close behind. Bambi found shelter under some bushes, collapsing asleep after his innocence and mother were taken away. With tears streaming down my face, burning my cheeks, I held my own mom tighter.

Road ecology—the study of the ecological effects (both positive and negative) of road and highways.

In the US, only around 20% of deer-vehicle accidents occur during the day. These rates increase around dusk, resulting in accidents eight times more frequent once night falls. Deer have been found to move greater distances during the night, specifically when the moon is out.

Bucks often spend the autumn seasons mating and competing others. Daylight savings has also shown a pattern in rising cases, shifting the clock back an hour and thus moving early morning workers' traffic to an earlier time, something deer aren't accustomed to. Insurance companies report in one year alone they had 1.9 million claims for collisions with wildlife, 90% of that involving

deer.

I found myself from an early age wondering what privilege I deserve to be able to crush helpless rodents under the tires of a vehicle just so I can get to my destination. The common morals are that the wild animals are innocent and humans are monsters for killing them mindlessly. Media with animals leave viewers with a sometimes harmful view of nature as tame and wild animals adorable, creating a distaste for important procedures to contain forests. A place where violence, killing, starvation and natural competition begin to be met with compassion.

Roadkill begins to crush these morals in an unfamiliar way, creating accountability from humans just driving in a brutal world. Those driving upstate didn't design the roads, they have no say in where they are located or the uprooting of wildlife, they are just forced to take advantage of it because there isn't a better option. Some humans simply don't care, some take advantage of the meat off the road by claiming it was killing more ethically than processed or farm meats, and some are left with the burden of knowing their desire to accelerate from place to place had left a massive toll on the animal world.

Is this an individual's fault, or is it really the price which must be paid for modernity? Every person who accidentally swerves into a deer isn't a murderer, but the leftovers of the accident remain on the road until they are picked up, or slowly disappear. Should there be any guilt toward the deer with misshapen legs left in plain sight, or the figure which was once a skunk being mashed into almost nothingness?

This creates a complex relationship with the familiarity people develop with death. How is it watching a deer lose his only caring family member by bullets from a hunter's gun is so jarring in a cartoon but not when it is displayed outside our cartoons? Why have we normalized the smell of a dead skunk or walking past a raccoon sitting in a clearing off the road because it was hit and stumbled away toward its eventual death? Why is it never a topic of conversation toward the effect our speed has on animals, but the inconvenience it is to see a large deer lying in plain sight?

I began learning to drive around eight months ago. My mom was insistent on teaching me to drive herself, despite my plea to just get a driving instructor to avoid the fighting that the tension of being in a car could create. She took me to an empty elementary school parking lot to drive in the evening while the sun was setting and fallen brown leaves were beginning to gather in gutters. I watched as she gripped her seatbelt, and the mix of both shock and fear in her eyes as I stopped the car to remember which way was left. Despite shifting in the driver's seat multiple times, I couldn't get comfortable driving the minivan I had grown up in, trying to move the steering wheel despite clammy hands and struggles to remember what to do.

I drove for the first time on a side-street. The leaves were falling and I insisted on turning the seat warmers on. It was harder than to separate memories of weekday nights, flinching at the sight of animals crushed to a pulp to my own feet on the brake, my own eyes on the road.

CHILDHOOD'S EULOGY

I.

Dirt caked knees, bloody teeth, and
strawberry stained hands. The trees resist
our attempt at domination like Mother
resists Father, and you resist silence. Firefly
juice lights
our way back home, but we still cannot find it.

II.

Time slips away; he is not kind.
Sharp words and punches thrown
to bruise, a manifestation of misplaced
anger, an ode to our bitterness. I hate
you.
I want to be you.

III.

Years smooth out our edges and those angry
punches. Forgiveness for our parents,
forgiveness for ourselves. We sign a silent
treaty, but the fraternizing is never addressed,
as if mentioning a kind gesture will bring back
winter.

IV.

Time hides and lies, lies and hides,
and I never saw you get taller. Books, bottles,
and boots are packed into boxes beside your
bedroom door, and we cannot run away
this time. Your presence is a reminder of the end.

V.

Seven years stuffed into seven days.
Speeding down highways and sneaking in
late to sip on stolen Smirnoff and share
forgotten secrets or dreams. We craft a
gentle obituary for this end.

Growth Mindset

Thinking of my grandfather brought me back to times of routine hospital visits where I'd drink the fun-sized cups of orange juice nurses would pass out. Feeling blue as I waited for a patient vomiting blood to pass by. My grandpa vomited phlegm because throat cancer wouldn't let him eat through his mouth. I choked on my tears because not being able to eat in peace must've made him desperate for a reason to live.

To provide adequate nutrition, surgeons cut a hole in my grandfather's stomach and linked it to a transparent plastic tube where he directly received liquid food. My family and I watched the fat previously fueled by solid food shrink from his bones throughout the two years he lived with us.

Before he ever came to my house, I lay in the red guest room he'd soon overtake, at least I knew it as the "red room." White curtains dotted both sides of a red sash. Dark red, almost burgundy paint graced the walls. I used to see this red as pure passion and peace. Occasionally, I'd look out the room's window, watching kids around my age play in the grassy field across from my house. It was about half the size of a soccer field, so those kids would always run or throw a ball around. One of them went to my elementary school and wore a smile on his face like clothing. The other girl who was often there was his older sister, and sometimes their friends would join them. I also wanted to join them. I was an only child, so it would have been nice to know more people around my age in my neighborhood.

But by fourth grade they moved away, my grandfather moved into the red room a year later, and the walls paled. A little TV was installed in the corner of the room and made up for the fading colors. After a while, I noticed the red paint still leaked out, like blood from

a wound, with the frequency of fresh tears.

We'd routinely go to Publix and get pound cake which was all too yellow for my grandfather's disease. But it didn't look like stage four advanced throat cancer, it looked like a shiny loaf of goodness I was grateful could prevent a lack of sweets at home. Entenmann's, I'll always remember that brand because it was my favorite brand of pound cake. A few years ago, I couldn't remember the name of the pound cake my grandfather always insisted on. I still wonder why I found it difficult to not pay attention to the pale walls of the previously red room just enough so we could watch a TV show or two. I never went out of my way to pay attention to my grandpa unless it was to ask for something. I recall the first time I asked him for something pretty well. I was in 6th grade, and it was a particularly boring afternoon.

“¿Abuelo, puedo usar tu teléfono?”

“¿Para que?” Is what I think he asked when I asked to use his phone.

“Para jugar en tu teléfono, porque mami me quito los electrónicos.” Looking at my downcast face, my grandfather must've taken pity on me because he gave me his phone and didn't even stand behind me, or follow me to my room, or do anything to make sure I was doing what I said I would be doing on it. I don't think I deserved the pity, because my parents grounded me for good reason most of the time, and I don't know how they dealt with me on top of stress from work. My mom owned a therapy business for years, and it was getting harder and harder for her and my dad to manage. At the time that my grandfather was sick, she had many employees to look after, and a bigger office to maintain compared to the one where her company was previously located. My dad was unemployed since before my grandpa came to live with us, so he would help my mom with the technological aspect of the company.

On days my mom worked until late, I'd spend long afternoons in the company office frequently playing with the kids who were receiving therapy and making conversation with the therapists. There was a glittering board in the lobby which had the company name and logo and was illuminated by the lights perfectly positioned above it. Whenever my mom's business came up in conversation I'd say, “Little Star Therapy Services, Incorporated,” making sure to not ab-

breviate to “Inc.” so I sounded smart when I said it. Most of all, I was happy I had the key to unlock the stacks of toys in the floor-to-ceiling white cabinets in four of the six therapy rooms.

But my mom had to deal with heavy office work, balancing the books in addition to managing therapy sessions, and taking care of her dad, and it took a toll on her. There were days she’d come home at 7 PM, tired and frustrated from a long day, and still do things around the house. There were times I spent too many hours on my iPad or computer instead of helping her out. One day after school, after a long work day, my mom snapped.

“I work like a horse! I work till I’m done and I’m sweating and you do nothing!”

I took a look at my mom’s heavy undereye bags. They were creased with wrinkles. I noticed the grays of her hair seemed even more pronounced, and not just because she dyed her hair deep brown, almost black—how did I not start crying right there and then? I can only remember thinking, *What do you mean, I do nothing? I hold back my tears, I’m getting good grades in school, I go to grandpa’s hospital visits without complaint. I am not doing nothing.*

These disputes happened occasionally because my mom and I did not know how to deal with each other and the situation at hand. My dad was often the middleman between us, and I’d talk to him when I didn’t know how to resolve conflicts with my mom. He stayed home with me more than my mom did, and so we bonded over a mutual commitment to watching Marvel’s Agents of Shield on Netflix. My grandfather would never intervene in family arguments or discussions, as he either kept himself planted in his room watching TV or would literally plant things. As in going outside and touching dirt. My reaction to this back then was what’s so attractive about dirt? I respected him for trying to move around or go anywhere but his room, though. And I respected him for going easier on me than my parents did.

When I first used his phone, I thanked him and downloaded Roblox, a multiplayer game where you can customize a character and choose from an array of games within the app. As it was downloading, I scrolled through my grandfather’s LG. The bright display was smooth and compact, and the apps loaded much faster than they would on my iPod.

Gah, when am I ever going to get a phone of my own? Even if it's just one like this, an android, that's better than nothing. Nevermind, an android is too far-fetched. I'll take a flip phone at this point. My parents are so strict. I wondered about these things often when I used my grandfather's phone. A part of me felt like it was my own, like it was an escape into a reality where I was an adult and could use adult things. Like it was an escape into a reality where I was grown up and didn't have to worry about my parents yelling at me or following my mom and grandfather into routine hospital visits. I wouldn't ever have to see my grandpa's neck scarred from radiation or see him confined to a heart monitor in an ER that was so busy, it was hard for me not to worry about how many people got sick every day.

But when did I ever wonder how long my grandfather was going to be around, or that part of growing up is dealing with a stage of life where I won't be able to ignore old red paint, no matter how hard I try?

Sometimes, I would look at myself in the mirror because I was an awkward tween who didn't know how to deal with my appearance. I had a big mirror in my bathroom stretching to the ceiling and which covered the width of the bathroom counter, and it reassured me I wasn't going crazy as a girl with a familiar face smiled back at me. This time, I wasn't sure whether I was going crazy or not, because a few irritated bumps had formed on my skin. *Oh gosh, are those... pimples?* My hands immediately went up to my cheek and touched a now-oily patch of skin, and I scowled. Although the smooth skin on my face was in jeopardy, I put an unconvincing smile on my face and tried to overlook it, because my eczema was much worse. I had it since I was two, but for some reason, it'd intensified in the past year. The subtle red rash sprinkled around my wrist and elbows was spreading across my back and legs. I told myself in the moment that it didn't matter, all the while itching my way through school and at home.

Again one day, I wanted to use my querido Abuelo's phone, because my parents once again grounded me. I walked into his room.

"I already know what you're going to ask. Just take it." I am pretty sure my Abuelo Freddy said this in English, and that surprised me. He usually speaks Spanish... I didn't even know he spoke that

much English. Looking back, maybe he was trying to break more than a language barrier.

“Oh... okay. Thanks.”

I gingerly took the phone from his bedside. For the first time out of the few times I'd taken it, I felt a penitence so deep it dropped to the pit of my stomach, and from there, it settled in the center of the Earth. *Of course I need to entertain myself, but at what cost?*

From then on, I no longer felt pure joy from using his phone. I just thought about how our rare, partly in-English conversation was becoming more than just one conversation. At first, I thought he was speaking more English because he'd been with us in the states for a year now, but what if he felt a disconnect from his heritage after being gone for more than just a few days, weeks, months, that he spoke in English instead? What if he wanted me to understand that he was more than some guy—who I hardly knew before he came to live with my parents and me—from Puerto Rico who came to live in my house temporarily?

Sometimes, I looked up from my escape and found my grandpa gardening outside, tending to a banana tree, a mango tree, or whatever needed watering or new soil. It was his escape, but back then I didn't know it because I didn't understand how dirt could be so appealing. If only I'd known, I would've joined him, and tried to dig out that pit of penitence from the damp soil.

Over the next few months, my grandfather's tumor shrunk to the point where he was in remission. With this news, he walked around the house regularly. His skin got less sickly, less yellow. He'd eat cake and developed a preference for Sara Lee pound cake (that he'd pronounce in a thick Spanish accent, “*saralii*”), I now remember the name. Grocery runs with him weren't so bad because he'd beg for this and other sweets—that I still cannot remember—and his gardening outside made me smile.

When Abuelo was doing better, or at least didn't have such frequent hospital visits, he, my mom, my dad, and I went to Busch Gardens around the middle or end of 6th grade. When we walked through the wildlife portion of the park, I learned there was such a thing as white peacocks. One walked right in front of us and started flaunting its tail, revealing an array of pure white feathers. Everyone was at least mildly surprised.

Every so often, my grandpa would stop to take a photo of animals he liked. I wasn't sure if he took a picture of the peacocks, but he did love the jovial flamingoes. His eyes lit up and his smile in these moments sticks out the most in my memories, as he watched such delicate animals live life even if their skinny stick legs looked like they could fall at any moment.

And then they did fall. The delicateness of his cancer came to light as his seemingly benign tumor became malignant again. This time, it was hard for him to fight it. It was hard for him to be both fragile and strong. This time, the hospital visits grew more tedious. One evening, we bought chipotle so we could stay in the hospital and watched him at his bedside, probably wondering if he was jealous we were able to eat and he wasn't. I'd write pages upon pages of stories based on alternate worlds, even though my grandpa was lying right next to me, asleep in a bed that wasn't his.

One story I started writing during my grandpa's hospital visits was about a guy who needed therapy after a car accident killed some of his loved ones. This accident cursed him, causing him to turn into a monster for half of the day. I think these stories were my therapy as I grappled with what I thought was an accident; something that shouldn't have happened to me, or my family.

On another afternoon, after the Busch Gardens trip passed and the reality of his tumor set in, my grandfather, who was again staying in our house after a short-term stay in the hospital, stopped at my door. I looked up from whatever I was doing—perhaps homework or playing Roblox, something to distract myself, that's for sure—and for the first time, was *really* taken aback by my grandpa's decay.

The light which usually marked his eyes when he saw flamingoes in a theme park to when he simply watered his plants, was gone. His frown was exaggerated by the five wrinkles I was pretty sure he gained in the last month.

"I'm not doing well," he said, his voice so hoarse his throat sounded clogged with ash.

"What do you mean?" I wanted to know what he meant because I wasn't sure if he was talking about physically, or mentally, or both.

"You know what the doctors said, right? That tumor isn't going away," he said.

"What? But there's still a chance, I mean—"

“No, there isn’t,” he said quietly.

Before that moment, I desperately held onto the hope my Abuelo would one day be okay, or at least feel okay, out of the fear he would not. Out of the fear these last few days, what I thought I was only seeing on the surface—him getting skinnier, his eyes getting more sunken—was only that, just on the surface. I genuinely hoped his spirit could remain even if his physical condition deteriorated.

And I had hope he could overall get better, just like he did before. That a family trip to Busch Gardens could happen again.

So it did happen that we went on another trip—but not for the right reasons. At the end of October 2017, less than halfway through my 7th-grade year, we went to Puerto Rico to see Abuelo’s funeral. A few days prior, we’d received a call from one of my sobbing family members. I heard the voice of a distressed woman, likely my Tia Abuela, calling out, “Ay, Freddy, Freddy murió!”

My mom and I broke down, hugging each other upon heaps of sobs. It was the first time in a while we’d both seen each other so vulnerable because my mom was usually busy working and I was usually busy distracting myself.

But at that moment, I let out the red paint I’d ignored for so long, in tears running deeper than wounds ever could. I looked at the red room for what it truly was for the first time in a while—just a room with another coat of paint which held many memories. Most were sad, but only because I let them morph into sad memories, full of pity and concern for my Abuelo. Did I ever think that he felt guilt too, for having to vomit phlegm in the room right next to mine, for only seeing me when I asked him for something? What if I’d just taken a moment to overlook the hospital visits and pale hospital walls and watched some TV with Abuelo? He was away from his home, and like any other person, would’ve wanted some company. The fact that I didn’t think once I should’ve devoted some time to him, that I was a less-than-decent person who’d take his phone and disobey my parents, left me with my own room to dissect. It was a room full of mirrors all reflecting at me, and in all of them, I was on my rash-covered knees in misery.

Only after he died did I learn Abuelo had already been to the states before, and not just for tourism, he *lived* there. Spent his teenage years living with my bisabuela and working in New York City in

the 60s and 70s. Learned English so well, my mom was stunned I couldn't tell from the way he spoke that he was proficient despite his accent. I could only imagine how hard Abuelo worked to avoid 60s New York crime and prosper.

In Puerto Rico, he was a business owner. He and Abuela owned a grocery store, he sold it, and he opened Villafane liquor store. Even in the early stages of his cancer, he was trying to build a pulguero on one of the many empty plots of land he owned. During one of our visits to Puerto Rico, my mom, dad and I passed by that plot of land. There sat two plastic poles dug into tan soil bordering soon-to-be removed patches of grass. It was far from finished, but my Abuelo's eyes still shone with a hope that made me think, for a second, red wasn't blood or rash. If anyone thought red signified healing, and pulguero tents could stand unwavering in the island air, it was Abuelo.

But the tents were never put up, and I stayed on the ground. I was letting the red paint go rampant as it threatened to not let me see my reflection.

A year or two after his death, I channeled paint to paper. I wrote a poem about how his body on the casket looked like the husk of a man my family and I knew. Out of the guilt that I was confining myself to one of my outlets, I shared it with my mom. The further she read, the further her face flooded with emotion—but not the anger she thrust at me when we both didn't know any better. Her eyes filled with tears, and so did mine, and we embraced for a few seconds. If my mom understood how I felt during that year and a half, perhaps Abuelo did, too.

I got out some buckets, collected the paint, and made a mural on the pure peacock-white floor of the room. I tried my best to not pay attention to how the floor itself looked like it was about to seep dark red through its deepest crevices. It almost overflowed a few times, but I was convinced my paintbrush was, and still is, stronger. Maybe I was able to make something beautiful even if red isn't a color of passion or peace for me anymore. Perhaps this mural could tell people in my life how much they're worth, reminding me of how much I want to be around them. This mural may not be fully complete, but it's a lot better than letting a sea of paint overtake me.

I take a step back and admire my work. A wave of red paint is

no longer threatening to turn the room upside down, it's instead painted in artistic swirls around the room, surrounding the people I love. The room's mirrors are shimmering with a changed reflection, and I am in that reflection, standing and smiling. I decide my time in the mirrored room is done—at least for now. I open a door I just noticed and close it behind me. I don't have to look back because I know my mural—our mural; Abuelo, and Mami, and mine—will be there when we need it.

A Distant Memory

The thick air smells of urine.
It coats my skin, trapping the heat.
An imaginary lump, the size
of a golf ball hides in my throat.

The hairs on my body, are
like pins on a sewing cushion.
You lay restlessly in the middle
of the room that's no different
than the others around us.
It doesn't feel right seeing You like this,
so distant.
I want to hide, not from You, but
from the unrecognizable
face that doesn't look back at
me.

There's still so much for You to see,
to hear.
You haven't had the chance to hold
my hand
while the whole family poses
for my graduation photo.

Just a few days before, You
insisted on washing your car.
Nothing could stop You from what You wanted,
not even the fact that everything would change.
Now, You lie surrounded by family,

somehow still isolated and alone.

Snake-like tubes stretch over
and into your body.

How could you go from healthy and young
to laying in a hospital bed, unaware
and unable to move.

I know I'm selfish, but I can't help but be afraid.

Even though your eyes are crusted shut,

I know you can still feel the tears forming in mine.

There's Something Mathematical About Death

i want to know if du/dt

is an accurate measurement of the
rate at which you were dying, of
how fast your tears
greeted the ground

as you slipped into still memories.

i open my school notes

& i see your name inscribed in every page. grief
is a legacy that
one plants in the skin of a child
& watches as it grows into
the opposite of a chrysanthemum.

i want to know if a quadratic equation can
tell if all my roots are yours.
but (mine=a second chance at life)
& (yours=a failed attempt at life)
yet, our lives are ($each < 0$).

in Yoruba, a broken water-pot is
a metaphor for all things lost,
all things irreplaceable. all things like
you. i draw a graph of me & you yet
its intercept is where (life=0), where
you clutched your chest
& died with a tired sigh on your parched lips.

what does it give tonight;(me + you) (me - you)? does
it stretch over my blank mind
like an impossible function? or dance

into a definite resolution? whisper into the dark,
i dare you to solve me if you can.

The Long Farewell

She could never forget the look on the doctor's face when her hologram flickered into the hospital. The sorrow was so obvious that even she—an AI assistant who had never quite grasped the delicacy of human emotions—could not miss it.

“We are so glad you could make it, Miss Galaxy,” the doctor said. “We hate to disturb your important work, but we feared he might not have much time left.”

She nodded. The call from the hospital had come when she was halfway through a meeting with the Council. It had not been the most enjoyable experience; processing the piles after piles of documents had taken much longer than she expected, and the roomful of bickering Council members which followed did not make it any better. Regardless, she had come to appreciate those moments when she felt like she could still make a difference, rather than just watching as her master laid helplessly in the hospital.

What Master Winslow had, the doctors had told her, was a lesion in the brain which would slowly take away his ability to process thoughts and memories. But she had always known his health was deteriorating even before they could pinpoint an illness. The instant scans completed by the cameras incorporated into her irises did not lie.

The doctor pushed open the door for her and Miss Galaxy drifted into the ward. The room was silent, save for the soft hummings and beeping of the monitors. Master Winslow was curled up under the blankets, his head tilted to the side in his sleep. He seemed so small, so fragile. It was not a status she would associate Kevin Winslow with—not the great inventor who turned against the world that ridiculed him and created a hidden paradise where he had risen as king.

Without a word, Miss Galaxy reached out to brush the back of his

hand with her fingertips, then withdrew herself immediately when his eyelashes fluttered in the tiniest of movements.

“Nebula?” he croaked.

Something in her glitched at the sound of that name. Nebula—the name only he would call her by, because to him she had always been more than a hologram and strings of binary code. She’d been a star, a universal wonder in the making.

She took a step away and lowered her head. “Yes, Master Winslow?” “What time is it?” he asked, struggling to pull himself into a sitting position. “Almost sundown.”

He laughed as if there was not a single thing to worry about in the world, and it made her mechanic heart—if it could even be called such—ache. “I do miss the sunset. Remember the last time we’d seen the sunset, Nebula?”

She did. Every single day of the past was stored in the vast database which made up her brain, with every memory as clear as a freshly developed photograph. She remembered standing by his side and staring at the horizon, where a single streak of sunlight shone through the impenetrable gray fog which had separated them from the rest of the world for decades. A tiny boat drifted atop the waves, carrying his wife’s still body in it, then soon disappeared from sight.

Sometimes she wondered if things would have gone differently if they had talked about grief then—a concept she had never quite understood the full spectrum of. But instead Miss Galaxy only watched as he ordered the robot assistants to remove all traces his wife had left in the house, then replaced all their pictures on the walls with snippets of his writings. In his study, charts and tools for his scientific inventions were cast aside, replaced by pen, paper and a new-found obsession for poetry. Since then, Miss Galaxy had often stood by his shoulder and read his works out loud to him; his eyes were too old to distinguish the words. The handwriting was more than familiar to her, even as his hands began to shake the way a candle flame wavers in the wind, the remainder of a once-fierce life flickering.

“Tell me what you need,” she murmured now. A breeze came, lifting the silk curtains and swiping them gently against the windowsill. Master Winslow gave a round of coughs, but when he looked up at her, Miss Galaxy caught sight of something shimmering in his

eyes.

“Look after things, won’t you, Nebula?” he rasped. His words would have been lost to her had her ears not been more sensitive to soundwaves than that of an ordinary human. With a shaky hand, he reached out to touch her cheek. “Look after... promise me.”

In the weeks, years and even decades to come, her mind would wander back to this moment continuously. Amidst the countless documents, Council meetings, public announcements, and, eventually, the frequent visits to the labs of the Isle’s top-notch scientists, Miss Galaxy would look up from the carefully organized list of things that needed to be done and wonder if Master Winslow had seen what she had when she cast her eyes over him. Had he known the end was drawing near?

But she had always known there was no point in dwelling in the past. Musings of what could have been were the product of wild human imaginations, and Miss Galaxy, her mechanical mind whirring as always, was already putting together a plan for the future, even as the nurses turned off the monitor that now displayed nothing but three straight lines, then drew the sheet over Master Winslow’s head.

For the next few days, the phone would ring nonstop. Miss Galaxy would meet first with the Council, then the media, then crowds after crowds of people coming to offer their condolences at Master Winslow’s funeral. She would nod and smile as all things went according to plan, thanking everyone for their kindness and telling them that all would be well, that she would take care of everything. But when she returned home she would find a silent, empty house waiting for her. Amidst the papers, tools, and trinkets on the writing desk, a cup of tea awaited a master who would never return.

A sigh. Then, like Master Winslow had all those years ago, she would call in the robot assistants and begin boxing up his belongings. All his science instruments would soon be donated to the Science Institute, and the rest of his things would be rearranged into the museum the house would soon become in honor of Master Winslow’s memory. She would be speaking to the manager of this project tomorrow, after her meeting with the Council about the election of a new Chief Executive for their government, which was scheduled first

thing in the morning. There was much to be done, and Miss Galaxy would be there to look after everything. She had promised as much, and it was a promise she would forever keep.

“I’ll be there, Master Winslow,” she vowed, as the old man in his sickbed reached out a shaky hand to touch her cheek. “Always.”

“Thank you, Nebula.” Her master gave a contented sigh. “Now read me a poem, will you? Read me the one I like.”

She nodded, then recited the words she had now known by heart after reading the poem to him over and over again throughout the years. She found herself unable to look away while telling him of a beautiful tribute to love and grief, desperate to imprint his features into her mind. But before she could finish the last stanza, Kevin Winslow had already turned to his side, smiled, then closed his eyes.

The soft beeps of the monitor by the bed were replaced by a steady, everlasting buzzing sound. Nurses would be rushing in soon, even though Miss Galaxy did not need the three still lines on the screen to inform her of that.

She reached out her hand, as if she could touch the lingering warmth of his life, and even as her spectrum fingers passed right through his, she thought of the loss of a love so dear, and whispered the ending lines for him for one last time:

*Tell me—I yearn to know
if you are dreaming of
me,
for I am dreaming about you—now,
always, forever.
Until the end of time.*

783,137

I: 783,137*

The ancient man beside me in the library wore a black leather jacket. He sat before a black computer screen, one of the ones meant for referencing the catalog, stinking of cigarettes. Reading glasses dangled at the very edge of his hooked nose, through which pale eyes scanned one enormous book. A pale hand scratched writing in a second book with the voracity of a starved man.

The first book was printed in the smallest font size I'd ever seen, words blurring into horizontal lines across footlong pages. Still, it was impossibly thick, wider than a dictionary and marked with indents along its edge the size of a child's thumbprints.

The second was thinner, though not by much, its edges dirtied and smoothed with use. The place the man held open was near its end, the page coated in loopy handwriting, black and blue and red ink crammed and smudging into each other.

I stole glances at his furious reading and writing as I searched the library catalog on my side's computer, but I couldn't read what the small-print book said, nor could I make out any of what he was writing. His hand never ceased motion, and his eyes didn't either. I sat, fidgeted with the computer's mouse, and searched nonsense terms in the database for fifteen minutes, waiting for one of the two—the eyes or the hand—to give in, but neither ever did.

Watching him dialed up my heartbeat, set my foot jiggling like a wind-up soldier. He was so wholly absorbed in his tasks he seemed as though he might drop dead were he to stop one of them. I was acutely aware of the clock ticking on the wall behind me, the woman

* Number of words in the King James Authorized Bible.

tapping a pencil on the other side of the computer station, and the uneven beat of my heart, but the man seemed aware of nothing except his text, his work, his words.

Fifteen more minutes passed. I knew the old man wouldn't notice if every person in the library dropped to the ground and started screaming, much less if I stopped searching the database, but I couldn't stop stealing looks, and guilt would begin seeping up through the floor and into my bones if I stared at him openly, so I—
“Let me know if you'd like more room.”

I flinched. His eyes were suddenly turned on me, boring into me like drills, bursting through my skull and straight into my brain. He spoke softly, though, in a voice like a lapping tide.

“No worries,” I said.

And that was it. He began turning back to his enormous books, and I to my useless list, but my heart lurched toward him like it was on a short leash, so I stopped and asked: “If you don't mind telling me, what are you writing about?”

He set his pen down. Flexed fingers with skin like paper crumpled and smoothed out again. Like he'd been waiting for me to ask, and suddenly I was embarrassed, heat flooding my neck.

“I've just started leading a new church,” he said. “I want to understand my faith better, and so I'm finding words from the scripture that mean something to me in this.” He hefted the bottom book, the one with the tiny print. “It's a dictionary of every word in the Bible. I find it here.” He pointed to a word on the page the book was opened to. “And then I flip to the back for the original Hebrew. You know, like in the Old Testament.”

I knew egregiously little about the Bible, but I nodded.

It seemed like the right choice because he nodded back. “Yes. I want to know the words better. That's the first thing you do when you're learning a new language; you don't know a word, you go and look it up in the dictionary. Understanding. It's everything.”

I nodded again. The quiet then was just a moment too long for me to stay silent, but I felt as though the man was encased in a spell, something I might shatter if I breathed too hard. I couldn't make myself speak.

“Once I find the definitions, I write notes on them in here.” Finally. He gestured to the thinner book with the scrawled writing.

“Anything I think about the word, the passage, any part of the scripture. It’s all done wonders for my, my understanding, you see.”

His eyes turned on me again, suddenly expectant, hesitant.

“That’s a great method,” I said. “I’m glad you’ve found it.”

He hmph-ed proudly. “Five years, I’ve been doing this. It’s a commitment, but it’s everything to me.”

Everything to me. How could two books mean five years to someone?

I stood. My chair scraped too loud against the plastic tile. “Thank you,” I said.

He nodded again, eyes already returned to the page.

II: 3†

I first met Mickey, trash saver extraordinaire, through my embarrassing hippie grandma.

My grandma's white minivan, crystals swinging from the front mirror, swerved into a parking spot in front of Mickey's house beside an oak tree swaddled in multicolored yarn, its roots clawing out onto the sidewalk.

"Tree hugging," my grandma said when she noticed me staring, as if that explained anything at all.

The purple house behind the oak was old, but in a vintage way, and crowded with stuff. Brightly colored scraps of tied-together fabric scalloped along the underside of the porch's roof. Bits of tinted glass jingled against Mickey's windows, a scrawny cat swatting at them hard enough to make me wonder if they would scratch the windows. A Little Free Library squatted next to the walkway, brushing my leg as I passed through.

We stopped on the porch, in front of the shock-blue door. "Mickey's expecting us," my grandma said. "She doesn't believe in knocking. Too disruptive."

My grandma had met Mickey through the 'time-trading community,' as my grandma liked to call it, in our city. She'd done Mickey's laundry, since Mickey couldn't personally own a machine that wasted so much water, and in exchange, Mickey had mended a pile of tie-dyed scarves my grandmother's chihuahua had torn holes in.

Good for them, my mother had said. I didn't tell her I thought it was ridiculous.

Mickey blew open the door approximately four and a half minutes later, curly dark hair wild about her shoulders, yoga pants dragging like a slug trail on the floor. Her face broadened with a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Come in, come in! And you must be the lovely granddaughter. Here, sit down," she said, ushering us to a lumpy pink couch, curls bouncing frantically.

Walking inside felt and tasted like entering a cloud of incense. I slouched in one corner of the couch, my grandma straight-postured

† Pounds of trash Mickey Alversalli produces annually.

and smiling in the other. It couldn't be stuffed with whatever usually filled couches; I felt like I was sitting on plastic. Probably was. Mickey was already flying around the room, sliding a Japanese tea tray onto the glass coffee table, wiping down the countertops of the open-concept kitchen, and rearranging a vase of wildflowers on her fireplace mantle.

"I don't actually use the fireplace," she assured us, leaning on her toes to reach the flowers. Her voice was high and tense, though, like a violin string near snapping. It cracked on the middle syllable of fireplace. "I wouldn't dream of emitting that much carbon."

My grandma patted my knee.

When Mickey finally settled, I felt the way I imagined frontiersmen might have when the Dust Bowl did. I reached for a cup of tea.

"The set's Japanese," Mickey said brightly, tensely again, leaning forward in her armchair. "Have you had Japanese green before?"

"It's her favorite," my grandma said before I could answer.

"Oh, I'm so glad. So, so glad. You told me you wanted me to talk to your granddaughter about my waste output?"

"Yes," I said before my grandma could answer. "I'm doing a project about the environment. We're supposed to interview someone—"

"I would be happy to! Honored, really." "Great," I said, puffing out a breath.

My grandma patted my knee.

"I started reducing my waste four years ago, when I watched a documentary about the Pacific Garbage Patch. Do you know what that is? It's a hunk of trash the size of Texas floating in the ocean. The documentary had photos of the seagulls and the fish near it, and they just looked so sad, I couldn't stand it."

She gestured wildly with her hands as she spoke. I didn't tell her I knew what the Pacific Garbage Patch was already. I couldn't speak; I felt again as though Mickey was under a desperate curse, and if one word crossed my lips, it would place irrevocable doubt in her mind that perhaps her obsession with only producing exactly three pounds of trash each year was not as all-important as she had allowed it to become. Her speech rose and fell more, elaborating all the ways she recycled and composted and traded her way out of producing trash.

"I only shop at a local zero-waste grocery store. And the couch

you're sitting on? When it needed new cushions, I sewed them myself and stuffed them with plastic bags. I had to take donations for them, since I didn't have enough. Can you believe that?" Her smile lunged at me, desperate with outstretched fingers.

"I didn't notice at all," I lied.

III: 700[†]

When I began starving myself, I didn't want to be thin.

I already was lean in seventh grade; my hair was straight and shiny, my clothes new, my nails clean and polished. I just wanted to be more. Thinner, prettier, smarter. Higher test scores, fewer calories, more clothes, lower weight. Scores higher, body smaller. Perfected, trimmed.

Once the algorithms caught on, it was easy. I found an app that didn't have any age or calorie minimums; I found social media accounts that posted photos of bone-starved girls, and I decided I should want to look like them.

So I tracked everything I ate when I could, and when I couldn't, I memorized it to track later. *One apple, ninety-five calories. One cup strawberries, fifty-four. A bowl of rice, one and one-half cups fresh-cooked, three hundred and nine.* I convinced myself I wanted to look like those girls on the Internet.

I got good at it. Nearly as good as I was at taking tests. My jeans started hanging off my hips, so I learned how to sew. My mother started noticing how cold I was, so I ordered a heated blanket for delivery, blaming it on the AC my stepfather kept sub-zero.

A girl in the student council told me, one day, that she wished her waist looked like mine. "Thank you," I said. She was younger than me, shorter and sweeter, and the confession clogged something hot and sticky in my throat. I focused on the poster I was painting on my desk, kept my eyes on the blood red letters on blank white. Not on her.

She doesn't know what it cost me to look like this, said the dark inside me, the knotted place that starved for more hunger, more pain. *She doesn't want this. She's not strong, like I am. She couldn't handle the cost.*

On 'good days,' I ate fewer than five hundred calories. A single egg for breakfast, fried in a nonstick pan without oil, a cup of strawberries and a low-calorie snack for lunch, and whatever on the menu was smallest at dinner. Soup, often. The cold solidified in my bones, no longer a temporary thing. It, the phrase *I'm just tired*, and

† Number of calories per day I allocated myself between ages thirteen and fourteen, for an estimated weight loss of 1.5lbs/week.

the hunger were my constant companions, solitary and gnawing on each other inside me.

Eventually, I stopped caring about the way my body looked. The social media pages didn't mean anything, not anymore; I already looked like those girls. They were no longer aspirational, and then, the numbers became all that mattered. Ever smaller, ever dwindling, shaving closer and closer to the bone.

I stopped feeling the hunger. I stopped feeling most things. My grades never wavered, but I stopped going out with my friends, reading for fun, and singing in the shower. I stopped having over-500 days, and my life became a straight line like a dead man's EKG; one long, mournful beep.

I snapped on the fourth of November.

My dad's house was cold at night—not the AC cold of my mom's house, but the real cold of a place without a heater—and I had only the IKEA duvet I'd bought when I was nine, after the divorce. My sister breathed deeply in her bunk above mine—in *two three four*, out *two three four*, I tried to mimic it but I couldn't—and I was so scared that my stomach's groans of pain would wake her, or that my violent shivering would shake the bunks enough to rouse her. My eyes were open wide like those of a scared animal, staring unseeing at the underside of my sister's bunk, her mattress bruise-colored in the low light.

All I wanted was one. My friend had sold us Girl Scout cookies, and I'd asked her for a box of the ones she told me everyone hated; the new s'mores flavor. Just one. It was the one time in the past year I'd bought food without reading its calorie label, and I'd spent a week thinking about what they might taste like. I'd already worked them into my calorie limit, estimating eighty calories each. Thin Mints were only forty-four each, so I figured I was being generous. All I'd needed was for my friend to deliver them.

She did. I'd checked the label, first thing.

One hundred and forty calories each.

My heart had sunken straight through me, thudding onto the floor.

That was a week ago. While I laid under my IKEA duvet under my sister's bunk, trying to clench my stomach muscles hard enough to keep it from growling, the s'mores cookies had been waiting, sealed,

in my dad's pantry drawer for a week.

Just one. But it was impossible. I'd been thinking about it the entire week, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't cross five hundred calories, and I couldn't go back, couldn't let all the pounds crumble into nothing in my hands. It couldn't all be for nothing.

Just one.

My stomach growled, loud. My sister tossed above me and I froze, daring not to move. I pressed a hand to my neck. The fingers were foreign and ice-cold.

"This is ridiculous," I whispered aloud to the underside of the mattress.

And suddenly the words were real, and the app and the calorie counts and the weekly weight differences and changing goalposts were... less.

Their power was mine again. They were nothing, and they had never been anything, and I was being absolutely, unforgivably ridiculous. I was supposed to be smart. How could I have been so stupid? Smart girls didn't starve themselves; that was something for the bimbos of old high school movies, the insecure girlfriends and vain popular cliques.

What was I doing?

Before I could change my mind, I pulled off the IKEA covers and eased out of bed. I pulled the bedroom door open swiftly to keep it from creaking and padded down the hall into the kitchen.

The house looked different so late; the moon's yellow gaze blurred through the windows, diffusing into the deep-blue which coated the table, chairs, floor, and kitchen cabinets in a thick layer. Being the only source of noise unsettled me. I felt too clumsy, too loud, too much beside the cool quiet of the night, but I didn't let myself slow. If I did, I'd go back to bed and starve myself for another year.

I opened the cabinet, pulled out the drawer, and retrieved the cookie package. *Don't think about it. Just keep going.* Opened it with scissors, threw out the extra plastic. Brought the sleeve of cookies to the table. Sat down, removed one cookie, placed it on a paper napkin, and stared at it.

I pinched it between two fingers. Started to raise it. Set it back down, released it. Graham cracker dust stayed, grainy on my fin-

gertips.

I took a shallow breath. Grabbed the cookie again, closed my eyes, put it in my mouth, and bit down.

Chewed.

Swallowed.

A gulp of water.

A moment, a heartbeat.

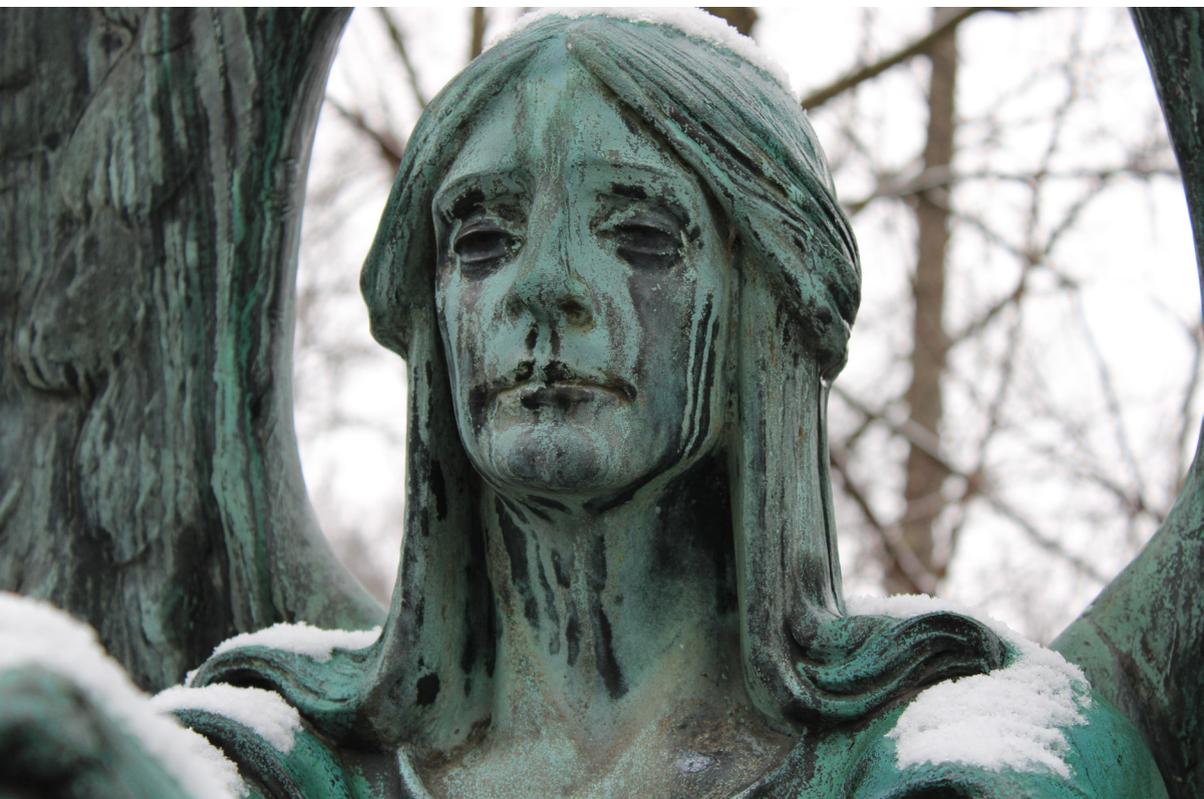
The cookie settled in my stomach and I smiled, big enough to feel like my face was splitting in two, alone in my kitchen at eleven forty-eight on a Friday, because the s'mores cookie tasted just as much like cardboard as everyone else had told me it did.

Outside, distantly, rain began to tap on the roof.

Inside, I let go of a breath I'd held for years.

Exhalations

in the years between the weeks
a thicket was waiting, a tree was waiting, its wood was waiting,
the phloem was waiting, a bead
of bodily sap was waiting, the color of a cat's eye.
i left my fingerprints etched on the backyard fence slanting
downward to a mossy degrade
below bird's blood: and the oil of my fingers above.
a splinter left itself in my skin.
remember the time chopped firewood scraped your hand
and you thought the cut would scar?
your skin is unblemished,
florid and traceable like your friends press their fingers
onto the back of your hand and leave two eyes and a smile.
so the redwood bark was supposed to leave prints on my
baby-pink fingers, but they only purpled in the chill.
the furred splinters, though, look like my fingers'
fine hairs.
And in the weeks between the years
a thicket's xylem shivers in a single redwood's needles.
Weeks, their nights humid, air sweating on me and
me also sweating: I am the air's visitor, and also its lungs:
my bare arms slide into its weight; my mind strikes and dissolves,
quickly, so I distinguish and the air doesn't, because it is consuming,
then the redwood consumes the air,
and it's ignorant, but the air is not, to its consumption.
I breathe in someone's exhalations, or i breathe around them:
incongruity resurfaces in splinters
fingerprinting past weeks and years.



KARMA ABOUD
Angel of Death, Victorious



KIKYO MAKINO-SILLER
Feminine Beauty

SCHOOLS REPRESENTED:

Academy of the Canyons
Alabama School of Fine Arts
Alexander W. Dreyfoos Jr. School
Athenian School
Bombay International School
Brearly School
CAPA High School, Pittsburgh
Chantilly High School
Chatham High School
Commonwealth Charter Academy
Crystal Springs Uplands School
Delbarton School
Eastern Christian High School
El Segundo High School
Foothill High School
Gananoque Secondary School
Greenwich Academy
Harvard-Westlake School
Herricks Senior High School
Home of Scholars Academy
Horace Greeley High School
Horace Mann School
Josephine Dobbs Clement
Laurel School
Livingston High School
Lynbrook High School
Maggie L. Walker Governors School
Milton Academy
Minnetonka High School
Morristown High School
New Providence High School
Palmyra Area High School
Randolph-Macon Academy
Richfield Senior High School
Rockville High School
Ruth Asawa School of the Arts

SCHOOLS REPRESENTED:

Saint Ann's School
San Francisco University High School
Saratoga High School
Seoul Foreign School
Skyline High School
St. Andrew's School
St. Mark's School
St. Paul's School for Girls
Stuyvesant High School
Taft School
The Calhoun School
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