

AW

APPRENTICE WRITER

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EDITORS' 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 showcase their excellence. 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 42nd issue features particularly lyric styles, experimental fiction, 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 prose and blackout poetry. We have, most importantly, worked with young artists to showcase their brilliance.

Apprentice Writer would not have been possible without our editors, all of whom dedicate many heartfelt hours, or Advisor, Prof. Tony Zitta. We all hope the contributors to the 42nd issue impress and impact you as deeply as they have us.

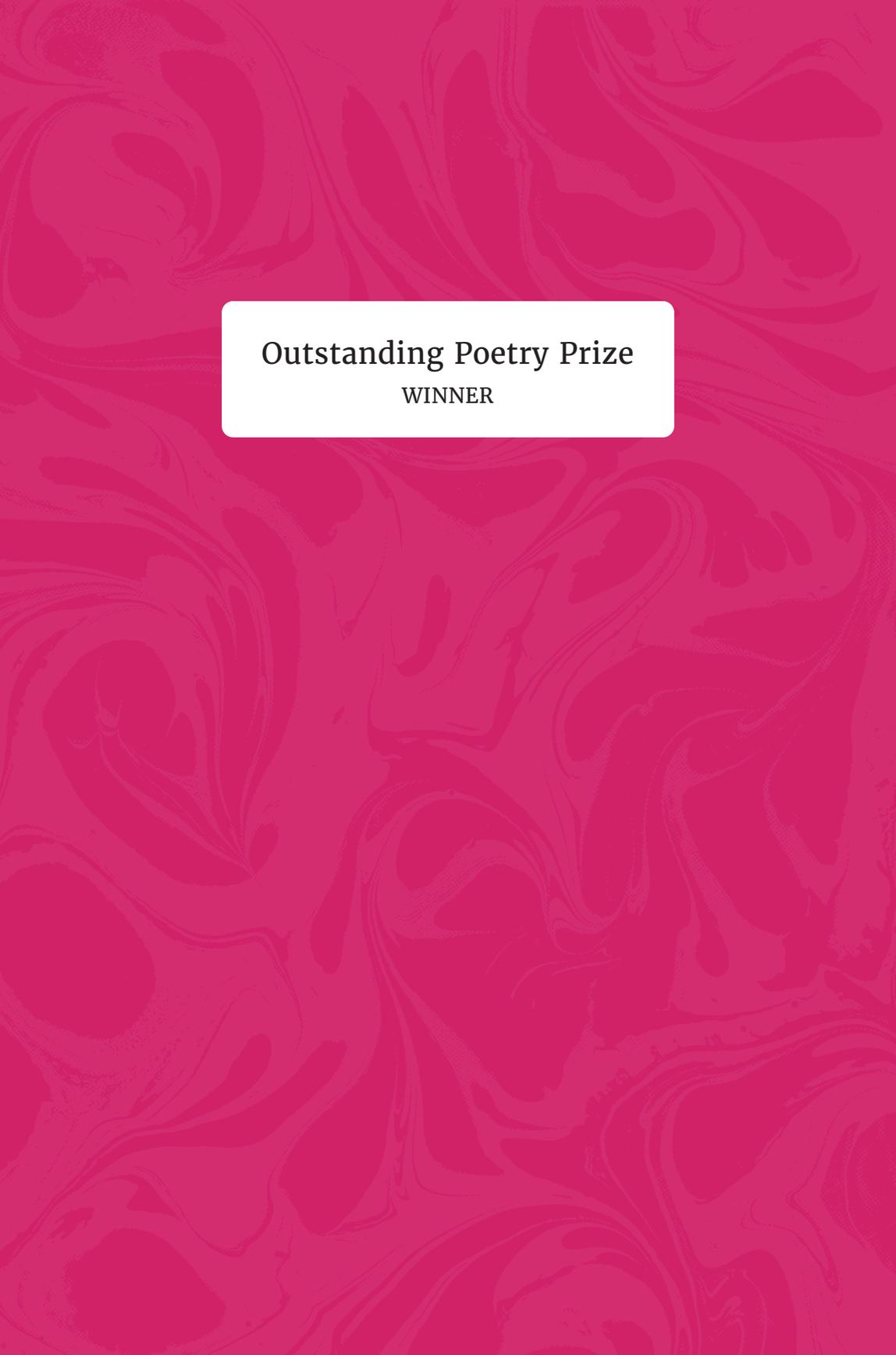
YOURS TRULY,
BROOKE MITCHELL & GREY WEATHERFORD-BROWN
SENIOR EDITORS



PARK
From the Root



YESEO NAM
Aftermath

The background of the image is a classic marbled paper pattern, featuring intricate, swirling, and organic shapes in various shades of pink, red, and purple. The pattern is dense and covers the entire surface. In the center, there is a white, rounded rectangular ribbon-like shape that serves as a background for the text.

Outstanding Poetry Prize

WINNER

Self-Portrait as Autopsy Report

The patient was a 17-year-old Asian female
with no significant past medical history
(or no significant future)
who hopes this isn't forever.

Two minutes after arrival at UTMB at 1500,
the patient became hysterical, hypothetical, and had ghost
saturation from 80-90%.

The patient's heart rate decreased to asystole, fingerprints
on its fine mucosal membrane.

It's a shame, really. Bedside echocardiogram showed no signs of a
slaughterhouse
screaming martyr, just a poem written in blood.

The patient was pronounced dead at 24:16 with light-spangled
arteries,
pale orange flowers, and an absent heartbeat.

The body is that of a 17-year-old well-developed,
well-nourished female. There is no peripheral edema of her wanting.
A nasogastric tube and endotracheal tube are sliced open by words,
splintered into names, mouth void of poems.
All she could find were faces.

The right and left pleural cavity contains 10 ml of clear fluid with no
adhesions.
The pericardial sac is yellow, glistening without adhesions or fibrosis
and contains
67.5 ml of a bluegrass-colored music. In the aftermath,
she is trying to forget your heartbeat. There is minimal fluid in the
peritoneal cavity,

but the patient claims she would
end the world if it meant she could write well again.

The heart is large with a normal shape and a weight
of 400 grams or something heavier. It appears to have been
wrung out
by the patient herself. The pericardium is intact, ascension,
benediction.

The epicardial fat is diffusely firm. How is she supposed to explain
that she has never been an artist, that all a poet wants is to
feel something, to hold someone?

As patient was greater than 48 hours post-mortem, no searchlight
through the aorta was utilized.

Upon opening the heart was grossly normal without evidence of
infarction,

just writing eulogies and apologies every day.

There were slightly raised white plaques in the left ventricle
wall lining.

The right lung weighed 630 grams,
the left weighed 710 grams. The lung parenchyma is pink
without evidence of congestion or hemorrhage. The bronchi
are grossly normal.

In the right lung, there are two large organizing thrombo-emboli,
patient calls herself destructive
but her tissue remains tender.

Poet is dragged onto lab bench,
poet is gutted and dissected.

Poet wakes up to ask if this is the end of the world and
is met with no,

it's just the end of your life but it all sounds the same anyway.

Although a cause of death may sometimes be obvious,
the underlying mechanism for the death may still be elusive.

This patient

was otherwise a completely healthy 17-year-old woman
with one known reason for survival. Remaining unanswered
questions:

why would she put you in everything she writes when it will only make her remember sooner? The cause of the hypercoaguable state is undetermined—she is trying to forget. Once that question is answered

I believe this autopsy will have done a great service for the patient's family,
if she were still alive she'd be telling you to come home,
just come home.

Outstanding Poetry Prize

RUNNER-UP

Geometry of a Paper Girl

*Origami – the act of leaving skidmarks on paper.
of chalking dead skin on dead wood.
of tracing creases for a new life to beseech it.*

i folded my tongue / nine ways / & waited to be / saved.
dad, i counted / your creases at dinner time / to five thousand

& found a dagger / hemmed in their seams
i chewed / peanuts for my bruises / & cut bangs over / balding

spots & slept with a boy's letterman / to round out my jutting
bones
daggers / rice in my bra shattered / & the metallic ring stung

in a ten-mile radius / calling dogs / calling all the bad dogs / stop
stop don't cry, dad / im okay. / between within my body

i hid salt / ate salt / & eroded as chloride / ions nipped
the wet pain away i thought / i could be a fish bony & slick

grease from five / unwashed / hairs if each tear was an unsolved
equation / don't tell me to stop / thinking i cant / stop thinking

if euclid could / triangulate / a maritime course mapped with
rice paper knives / would sail eight meters

of fresh pinkness / in near-death / concentric ringlets / retraced
moistened &
disinfected until / each time i drew blood / i drew closer to the bone

i thought of archimedes / reciting (π) every time / no, not pie like
key lime or rhubarb / a string of digits so vast / so much like

the ant / daedalus fixed to string / & fixed with honey / i sucked on
the ant / & counted each leg as / it dissolved

adding compulsion to the sugar floss. / wrecked because the thread
held / the body & kept pulling so / so long / it kept going

the thorax of the ant twitched / as it brushed / my liver
an eye / lolled / but i wanted out / dad, i'm scared / of infinite.

every dna strand lined up end on end would take you
& i / to the sun / & back. / a couplet in astronomical units

cant you see it? / i cut myself for a reason / ribbons like chemtrails
so i
could / one day cut my irises into starlight / pins.

last night, i had a nightmare / & shivered myself awake / the sky
was my skin. / my teeth & nails ached. / blood seeped from trees

dad, it was only a dream. / a star sang me the sweetest song, the
star sang / plump & lonely / i wanted her so

bad / i wanted to tie her up / in supercoils. i felt so warm
& sacred / & her light made me a queen. / but she was so far

behind the sky,
behind my skin,

inside my skin,
inside of me,

she was within me, she
was me.

i had only a / dagger, dad, so i / traced the shape of my body / into
a womb. inside,
she was a cavern / it felt gorey between / her folds i didn't know

which side my head should go / it was so new so / pleasant. i
pressed my
nose & it smelled like linens / milk chamomile & strangely charred

clementine. / it was only bad because / it was almost real but not
quite i cried
like i had come home / in dermal creases so sharp / the corners

carving into the midline / i was the mark she left / half-witted on
paper.
drenched & soaked like a wet sponge forced into memory.

i counted π to infinite & found its twitching mandible
in my stomach / surrounded by chalk dust & fairies / like

a lacewing in / fresh molt drags itself into life / *ensconced*
only yesterday / fragile in soft ways / not glass ways.

so i took your head or what remained & called it dad / wrapped in
her dying speech / steeped hot like diner coffee / & cherry pie

there was an afterthought that smelled like morning rain
& sorries. / but setting her aside for butterfly nets / & giggles.

i tore her picture summing the finite / pieces into a puzzle of
a cork-stopped girl staring back / *lost* / but returning

& in becoming your daughter

i was freed.



YIBIN KIM
Lake Placid



HUANG
Where Time Stands Still

Outstanding Fiction Prize

WINNER

She Left West Lake and No One Has Spoken to Me Since

A Cage of Xiaolongbao

A conversation between two introverts is not a conversation. Rather, it's an endless series of erratic questions lacking origin of interest and purpose. Starting with "Where do you live and work," the next question progresses to, "Where is your hometown?" After discussing where one has traveled to, the topic shifts to where one would like to visit. If we stick to this line of reasoning, then comes the question, "Where did you go to high school" followed by, "Who was your favorite teacher?" Here is a genuine question: Would the police view a dialogue between two introverts as an attempt to crack the other person's security questions?

But it's all good. I don't mind participating in an introvert's question series on this lazy April afternoon. The slender willow branches flutter in the wooden window frame, and the gentle clattering of chopsticks blends seamlessly into the background. Standing in military posture in front of me is a teenage boy wearing a braided kasa hat. He holds a cage of Xiaolongbao in his hands.

"You can put it here. Thanks," I say as I clear a landing spot for the steamer basket. "You don't have to stand so stiff, you know."

"My dad told me to be respectful to customers," the boy responds with choppy English.

"Do you live locally? Near West Lake?"

He nods as he looks at the willows outside.

"Well, thanks for the Xiaolongbao. They look delicious," I comment. Already running out of questions, I squeeze my brain like mashing lemon with a reamer. "How old are you?"

For the first time, he smiles. "Fifteen."

"Is being fifteen years old special for you?"

“Yes. When I turned fifteen, my father allowed me to go to Yue Lake. By myself,” he says proudly while gesturing at an unknown destination. “I go every morning.”

“Yue Lake? I was there yesterday.”

“Did you see her?” the boy asks me expectantly, his eyes beaming like the surface of the West Outer Lake.

“Her? Who is she?”

“You have to go again,” he says.

The Only Voiceless Vocalist

As the smallest of the five sections of West Lake, Yue Lake hosts no dragon boats on golden silk nor lotus pontoons on white clouds. Instead, there glides a bamboo raft. It bears no burden on the lake and leaves an imperceptible water trace behind. Although austere, the lumpy and bleached bamboo stems tied by rough vines carry more weight than the tourist boats.

She is old: older than you think. Older than the valiant military general Yue Fei, whom the name of this section of West Lake commemorates. Her face is sunbaked and etched with sunken wrinkles; a glossy, transparent coat covers her face, reflecting sunlight finer than the lake’s surface. Even from a distance, her eyes are conspicuous and limpid. They are as sharp as crystals yet as tender as orchid petals; they simultaneously house the innocence of a curious newborn and the maturity of an experienced elder; they invite a fervent wave in you and then quickly offer a tranquil stream that potently subdues the torrent.

And she never stops. As she approaches the bank that leads up to Yue Fei Temple in the North, she concentrates her paddling to one side and leisurely turns the raft around. As she nears the southern mouth conjoining the larger West Inner Lake, she does the same. Her paddling is orderly and methodical; however, do not mistake it as monotonous and rigid. Discipline without novelty is sterile, and creativity without formality is naive. She subtly blends convention with artistry: no two strokes are at variance, and no two strokes are identical.

And she sings. The indifferent tourists can’t hear her, but the yellow-coated orioles, speckled buttonquails, and other nameless

creatures can. They absorb her harmonies and coalesce to orchestrate a soundless symphony. There are no specialized sections such as cellos or trumpets. A symphony is not meant to be divided, but united, and the only vocalist accordingly relinquishes her precedence and retreats as voiceless.

Another Faithless Revolutionary

Legend has it that West Lake is a jade ball that fell from the heavens, but I think the legend is full of crap. If a sinkhole is a jade ball, then I might as well preach that b vine feces are the most treasured tidbit in the world. The common folk also esteem West Lake as the incarnation of Xi Shi, one of the four belles of ancient China. I must say that the aesthetic judgment of people, ancient and modern, is dreadful.

Think I'm too harsh? Imagine a child's face buried in layers—we're talking layers—of foundation, primer, and cream. If the poor kid makes the slightest move, powder will fall off their face like an avalanche in the Himalayas. Now, if someone asserts that you are looking at an innocent face instead of a dump of chemicals, how can you not judge the beholder as an idiot?

Please, I'm not exaggerating. As a matter of fact, the tour guides are the master embellishers. Their vain commentary directed toward an ignorant audience portrays West Lake as one of the most scenic places in China, blending natural wonders with architectural masterstrokes.

Lies.

I argue that West Lake committed a felony by distorting the natural landscapes with artificial modifications that rival children's plasticine models. Three colorless, and apparently useless, bridges divide the already foul-shaped lake into five even more grotesque sections. A dirt mound, two flimsy cardboard towers, and three bleak islands have trivial names that we can ignore. Since West Lake's construction in the Northern Song Dynasty by idle, wasted spend-thrifts, there has been no lack of brainless "poets" flattering the terrain's distastefulness. For example, the drunkard and moonlighting narcissist Su Shi from the Song Dynasty wrote an uncultured poem about West Lake because one of the lifeless causeways was

named after him.

I came here seeking a revolution. A proper one. Not a violent and fiery rebellion that instigates nothing but hatred and ignorance. No. I pursued an enlightening revolution that inspires decency through reason instead of fraudulent ideologies by demagogues. One that gently courses around one's heart like a rivulet and unwittingly morphs one's perception of the world. And do not take this revolution as weak: It is mightier than an unfurling ravenous fire gobbling withered trees.

But she left. As a revolutionary, I am now faithless.

Playing the Piano to a Cow

I tried it as a teenager. Idling away at my grandparent's farm in the rural parts of Tianjin, boredom was suffocating me like an impenetrable fog sapping away the vitality of a garden. In the outmoded, yet spotless living room sat a spinet piano. No one had played it for years, but it was pristine.

I disassembled the piano insofar as I was confident to put it back together, and I placed the parts in a farm cart and pushed it outside. As I arrived at the cattle pen and reassembled the instrument, I realized that I had forgotten to bring the piano stool and the sheet music. Neither did I know how to play the piano. Nevertheless, I started playing.

There was a single cow in the enclosure barred by rusty metal railings that had long lost the paintwork. She looked up in my direction while raising an ear with a tag, the number blurred and illegible. Then she plodded toward me, squashing the soggy ground and splattering mud stains on her brownish calves.

I played on. The dissonant notes fused into a winding stream that pierced through the uncharted land. It twisted at the wrong turns and accelerated at the rough sections; it neglected the layout of the terrain and rose and fell recklessly as it wished; it augmented the riverbed and shattered the solitude in the air. At last, as I smashed the keys with damp and shaking fingers, the stream culminated into a cataract and plunged into a spiraling pool.

All the while, she listened.

Derek Parfit Is Wrong

Just like the jade ball legend, Derek Parfit is full of crap. My college professor acclaimed Parfit as one of the most influential moral philosophers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Seriously?

Derek wrote a book on Relation R—a laughable theory that brainwashes you to embrace death as liberating. Here is his logic:

1. P: With respect to Person X, Person Y lives in the future and is non-identical,

2. P: There exists psychological continuity between Person X and Person Y,

3. C: The lack of a common identity between Person X and Person Y is insignificant since we have what really matters—Relation R,

4. QED.

QED my ass.

I don't give a damn about fancy yet meaningless philosophical jargon such as psychological continuity and Relation R—they mimic intelligence, yet in fact satirize the individual's incompetence and vanity. It's all about the context. Going back to the discussion of bovine feces, if a distant tribe from the Mongolian Plateau offers you a pottery bowl of fresh cow excrement, you would view it as a delicacy. Hell, you might have a taste or two if you have the guts. But I bet selling animal dung is the formula for going bankrupt in New York City. The same applies to Derek: If he preached his Relation-R nonsense at a Catholic church, who would listen to him?

She left, and many people have spoken to me since. Tourists on crammed lotus boats utter words of exclamations when they pass by sickening views. Road sweepers call out words of caution as they futilely clean a sidewalk stained with phlegm and cigarette butts. Politicians hypocritically defend cunning propaganda and meaningless ideologies on television. Everything speaks to me.

But she left, so why should I listen?

Another Cage of Xiaolongbao

“Did you go again?”

I must say, the boy has perfected his military posture. Has he

considered that standing like a metal pole might come off as intimidating rather than respectful? Hey, how about a “How’s your day” or “Welcome back” before throwing this question at me? How about putting the cage of Xiaolongbao down first?

“Excuse me, Sir. Did you see her?” he asks patiently while setting the cage of steaming Xiaolongbao on the table.

Oh of course now he does it.

There are four steps to properly eating a Xiaolongbao. First, wait three to four minutes for it to cool down. Second, nibble off a piece of the dumpling skin with your front teeth. Third, slowly slurp the juice in the bun. Last, eat the rest of the meat filling and dough skin. All these steps are designed to prevent you from burning your mouth. Well, now I simply want to devour the entire cage of Xiaolongbao in one go, splattering the searing juice across the table.

“Sir, she’s still—”

“She left! Just stop, please! Why don’t you admit it? She’s not here anymore,” I sense a temporary stillness in the restaurant as several sets of eyes stare at me. But I don’t care. “Why did you want me to go in the first place if she was leaving?”

“As I was trying to say, she’s still here. I don’t know much about the world, and I’m certain about very few things. But I know for certain that she hasn’t left. She never will.”

Fidgeting on the rotten edge of the wooden table, I await the most dreaded statement like a prisoner kneeling in front of his adjudicator.

“You have to go again,” he says.

Resurrection

Clouds covered the sky in a lazy haze, and I wished the moment we had together wouldn't end. For days, we'd tried to find time for a picnic by the waterfall, a commemoration almost for making it to the end of sophomore year.

You, more adventurous, or at least pretending to be, had come prepared with a bathing suit underneath a linen skirt and loose tank top for the early June heat. And even though I had been the one to suggest the place, a hoodie clung to my skin. Jeans, the tattered ends coated in algae and freshwater, were rolled to my knees. Further up the stream, beat-up Converse laid next to leather boots.

I hadn't grown up walking along the trails like you. While my days were spent watching the streets of New Haven and Windsor Locks from an apartment window, you walked the Earth, allowing it to give you bruises that remain on your skin today. Occasionally, my father would take me to the park where sand burned my hands, hot asphalt scraping against my flesh. After we moved, I slowly stopped going. I wonder if you ever regretted moving. If you would go back to Manchester, given the chance.

When the full moon turns white that's when I'll come home

"I don't really believe in ghosts." You turned to me, speaking against the silence.

Our legs dangled over the side of a fallen tree branch. I recalled all the times my mom would mention the spirits she sensed in the shadows of homes we'd lived in throughout the years. Since forever, she has told me she has a sixth sense. While everyone had bedtime stories, she repeated the times she could predict the future, a gift I always hoped to possess. Except, I don't think I ever inherited it.

Instead, I've always been too sensitive. Always the one to mourn stray lives and to want to help all living things around.

Sometimes, I convinced myself I could see spirits too. A flicker out of the corner of my eye or an unsuspecting figure standing guard in front of my bedroom door. I would hide under the covers, allowing my stuffed animals to be protectors, afraid the spirits would eventually come after me. Although, I think I knew I was being irrational even then.

"I do."

Tadpoles swam in the stream beneath us. I kicked more fallen leaves away in the water, trying to clear a path for the not-yet-frogs. They darted away, leaving me to conceal my hurt feelings.

I am going out to see what I can sow

The wind blew by, causing ripples in the water and flurries of green to fall from the forest's canopy.

As a child, I had a fear of ghosts, but it wasn't until I got older that the fear of death replaced it. I think it mostly was the work of an overactive imagination and naivety to what dying would bring. I just knew I wanted to die in my sleep; it seemed the most peaceful to go.

"I think we're all reincarnations. We keep being reborn until we learn our life lesson." Birds chirped back to one another, and I'd like to imagine they agreed with me.

"I don't think there's an afterlife. We decompose in nature, and we live on in others' memories. I was telling my history teacher about this, too, and he told me how, as a baby, his daughter was always laughing or singing, and even now, she's the same. I don't think it's because she lived another life, and that person's personality is inside her. Her experiences shaped her."

I grew up with trips to crystal shops and my mom burning sage or incense weekly. I would wake up in the middle of the night to her pulling tarot cards, only a candle to light the space. You've often told me how your mom didn't really believe in that sort of thing.

Another flurry touched the soil it once grew from, and I couldn't help but wonder if a soul was trapped within the chlorophyll. If you grew up the way I did, would your thoughts be different? Maybe you're right; we're not metempsychosis.

And I don't know where I'll go

Thinking About the Immortality of the Crab

A Spanish idiom about daydreaming; a way of saying that one is not sitting idly, but engaged constructively in contemplation.

June's summer heat and the scent of citronella and the moments I spent perfecting my life can no longer escape from my lungs. I use a knife to slice open a lemon and squeeze the juice down my throat as if it could somehow fix the knots forming in my stomach.

Skin sticks to bones. A strawberry can replace brushing your teeth so I shove its seeds into my cavities to hide my mouth's imperfections. I don't think I could live in the hills of Mexico or the deserts of California. My body isn't made to withstand the harshness of life.

I peel back my nail beds. Skin and blood begin to drip into a puddle. Soon it becomes a pool and I am no longer whole. There haven't been bandaids in the house since I used them all to protect the gaping cut in my soul. Cold water cleanses me of my lineage.

My grandfather passed a few months ago (or maybe it's been a few years). I didn't care as much then but I do now as the salty brine of an olive pierces my tongue. Sunlight pulses and I watch a worm push revived grass and cracked soil away. I wonder if it is him. I hope he is reborn of Earth. His home and given name.

Grasshoppers chirp and hummingbirds whisper to one another of their days apart. My mom says the cardinals we see are her father visiting and I like to think she's right. She has a butterfly drawn by ink on her calf that she will become. Tonight the moon tells stories of the heavens and I yearn to be the beauty of nature. Another reincarnation.

We're the Dead Fox We Saw

I didn't notice it at first. I was too busy balancing on the rocks. The mud squished between my toes, which had never bothered me before then, but now it made me cringe. The stones dug into my soles, no matter how hard I tried to pretend it didn't hurt. I had attempted to walk in the old river again, but it still had April's chill.

"There's a fox," you said from my side, sneakers laced tightly like when we were eleven.

I still couldn't see it. I could see bank's black mud, the peeling sticks stuck on the stones, and the colorful shards of glass embedded into the sand. I could see something orange under the leaves.

It was a fox, stained off-red and on its side. The river slowly brushed against its face, but it never flinched. Its ribs protruded from under its fur, its limbs laid limp, its chest unmoving. I could hear the flies buzzing around, but like most things, I couldn't see them anymore.

"I think it's dead," I whispered. I stumbled forward, being careful to avoid the black sludge and frozen water.

"What do you think happened?" You stayed back on the bank, clung to the cliffside with your question. I was the fearless one who jumped in rivers we found on hikes and climbed the trees in our yards despite creaking branches. At least, I was once.

Now, my feet burn when I climb a hill and I spend more time avoiding glass than carving our name into warehouse walls.

"I don't know. There's no blood, maybe it drowned?" I said The fox was so big. I've seen cats catch birds and raccoons on the side of the road. I've held dying dogs when I worked at the shelter. The dogs had always fit into my arms, yet the fox was so big. That's the truth of it. None of us fit into the bank.

My feet are too soft to walk the river's edge, the woods too

overgrown for us to carve out paths. We haven't hung out since last Halloween, and there's a dead fox at our old spot.

You noticed it first.

"There's a fox." You pointed along the river bank. I was too distracted by the rocks cutting deep into my soles. A muddy orange splotch hid under the leaves.

"It's dead." I stepped forward, and you stayed back. Neither of us took our eyes off the dulled black brushed by the water.

"What do you think happened?" you commented from dry land like you always did, still in your hoodie and Converse.

"I don't know." I was the one pretending to still be adventurous even when I couldn't recall the feeling of the river's edge anymore.

You point out the fox on the riverbank I'd never notice. I'm too busy trying to be eleven again. Like this, the fox is dead.

We're the dead fox you saw.

Abecedarian of a Bright White Void

Alive for only a moment.

Burned painfully bright but not for long, just as all the best lives did. Couldn't keep himself in line, but he could do one thing right: kill. Donning armor and helmet—one to protect the body and one to protect the breath—he'd made his way beyond his world. Enough credits to hitch a ride on the next ship outbound, enough time to polish his sword, enough strength to drive it clean through a neck—numb enough to accept payment.

Few military men left the service and lived to tell the tale, but his father held some sway in upper management.

Good thing, too, since someone else had to take the fall.

He still thought about it sometimes, what it must have been like for his father to die for his son's whims.

It rarely crossed his mind now, and never for long.

Just enough for him to see them pull the trigger, back of his father's neck, see the light fade from his eyes and feel a shake in the top of his spine—white-hot.

Knowing that inevitably, that will be him.

Landing was always quick, quiet, efficient.

Maneuvering around with a sword and a duffle was a challenge, but he made space for himself with his every step.

Nobody cared to ask for his passport or motion him to a contraband scanner.

Only walked in front of him briefly, gazes averted.

Port towns always had shady alleys, where no one would bat an eye at him scrolling through bounty forums.

Quality over quantity, never taking jobs too close to the top, just enough to buy his supplies and his next fare.

Rich bastards, never at the very top, but still ones the world would be better without.

Staying was never an option for him.

The voices from the void that pooled in his blade's radiating light made sure of that—swarming him, waiting for a chance to invade.

Upon the sparks he could only ever see his eyes, which clashed with his face.

Vibrant, never losing their brilliant, empty shine despite it all.

When he saw them, he was only ever disgusted.

Xiphoid, he'd been told: his whole body honed for battle, as sharp as his blade.

You could tell from a glance that he never looked for a fight, but a hunt.

Zephyr-blown to his next target, driven by the waves of the local population's discontent.

Yes, there—tech heir, second child, not set to inherit the company but still running the planet into the ground with their family's control.

Xenial looking face, he noticed, not the type he usually saw.

Whites of the eyes, flush of the cheeks, scrunch of the nose with a smile, all adding to the unexpected image.

Very often, there was a look to these people, and it certainly wasn't inviting. But something underneath their eyes was familiar.

The journey to the edge of the family's estate was not the hard part, given a large swath of the moon was covered by the sprawling campus.

Something had to be a challenge, of course, and if there were no beasts then there would be men.

Raiding went much smoother when borders were guarded by wilderness instead of walls.

Quietly, he slipped over stained wood and steel, armor clinking and

sword swinging on his hip.

Perfectly hidden, he'd stashed his duffle in the shrubs and cherry blossoms on the edge of the wall, assuming a quick return.

One last piece of his amor, he put on his helmet, face obscured by the wispy streaks among the layered glass.

No one needed to see his eyes.

Making his way through the sakura trees, he followed the nearest voices and went from person to person, hoping to find the heir's retainers.

Lucky for him, the heir found him first.

Knock knock.

Just two taps on his plated shoulder and he jumped.

In an instant, they were on the ground, knee pinning body to grass and dirt, sword poised upon neck.

Here, in the garden, he found them—the eyes he'd only ever seen in himself.

Gorgeous for the first time.

Fumbling and still on top of them, he removed his helmet in a rain of hair and stagnant pink petals.

Every nerve in his body screamed out in sheer panic, but he would not give, would not budge, staring into their eyes with his own.

Damned to die from the very moment they reached out to lightly touch his cheek.

Couldn't see a single future for himself where he finished this job and moved on as usual.

Burning bright as ever, his eyes met theirs in a blaze, seeing the same radiating pure-white void as his sword showed in his.

And when they smiled, when they grabbed the hilt of his blade and positioned the tip to the back of his neck, he knew—just this once, he could hear the voices clearly, seeping in, telling him to join them among the stars and the sakura petals.

The Store: A Utopian Story

Old Hickey nods at us as we pull up to the clubhouse. A pool of blood wobbles on the seat of the golf cart, creeping into the cracks and seams of the weathered leather. The oozing creature slumps against the seat and slithers down with each jolt on the gravel path. Everyone asks us how we sacrifice so much to do our job, but we never know how to respond. For the public good, maybe? If running the Store means enduring stained khakis and reeking hands, so be it.

“Ground Control to Major Tom! Any new additions to the Store?” asks Old Hickey, caressing the prairie dog we made.

“Nay, just a goose. Can’t hurt though.”

There are too many geese in the Store. You know the question of all questions: Are there more doors or wheels in the world? Might as well change it up and add geese to the conversation.

But hey, what can we say? The demand for geese is high, like a thermometer in a bubbling volcano. People are too pretentious and “up there” to pick up rats, yet their shoestring budgets make the peacocks and red foxes on display unattainable. Ever heard of the Chinese four-character idiom “looking at plums to quench thirst”? We get that every day in the Store.

(It’s six words in English but four characters in Chinese. We can count.)

“So, how’s everything up at the Store? Cruising?” It’s only been a month or so, but the forehead of Old Hickey’s prairie dog is already bristly and bleached, vaguely exposing the filling within—our secret wood wool. You’re wondering if the damage is caused by Old Hickey’s obsession with petting the creature or our lousy assembling work. We promise you it’s the former.

“As usual, you know. Major Tom would not be free if he got along.”

“You tell them.”

Pitched above the clubhouse like a tent, the sky is showing off its best blue jeans—crisp, clear, and not a wrinkle in sight. There, a cramped cluster of skyscrapers looms far off on the horizon. But even if they thrust into the blue sky and disturb its calmness, who can see them? Here, sporadic wooden houses sprinkle the unvarnished prairie. But even if they are visible, who will care about them?

Tragic, no?

It's a dusty night, and we hear their horses before we see them. Although robust, the Store's door creaks and moans as they come in; however, the squeak is weak and tentative. We know the sound of the Store all too well.

“We thought this was a pet store. Apparently not,” they comment, sounding like they just survived an apocalyptic banquet with appetizers, main courses, and desserts made of the dust outside. “Nice peacocks.”

Folks, we've got some paper tigers in hand.

“New in town?”

“Guess so. Quite a collection you got here, huh?”

“Not a collection. We call it a community—a pretty tight neighborhood.” You know how British gents burn like boiling metal pots when Americans refer to football as soccer? We detest people who call the Store a collection. Even worse, a pet store. If we follow their logic, then Manhattan would be a zoo with slobbering, fetid beasts running wild.

Let us tell you what the Store is. Think of it as a religious scripture that has no followers but us. But that doesn't matter, for just like how many non-Christians aimlessly flip through the Bible and exclaim in awe, people come into the Store and worship its grandeur. We have no duty or incentive to invite people to the Store: We leave that to the animals. Our integral role is to ensure that the animals are numerous while each member remains matchless—there must exist uniformity without sacrificing individuality and flair. Most importantly, we create and foster the life and spirit of the animals. We make them alive, and in turn, they make the Store alive.

Of course, our unheralded guests don't get this. There's another

Chinese four-character idiom called “playing the piano to a cow.” Want to understand how we feel? Try that.

“A community huh? Sweet. Any other stores in town?” They take another comprehensive, yet rather contemptuous, scan around the Store. We bet that they stargaze the Big Dipper with Ray-Ban sunglasses on.

Classy.

“This is the only Store. If you want some fun, go to the clubhouse and ask for Old Hickey.”

“Who’s that?”

“A Major Tom who owns a prairie dog.”

—

We are not surprised to hear that Old Hickey died. Nothing goes on in town without Old Hickey knowing. He is aware of every birth and death, and not even internal family affairs and teenage dramas can elude his knowledge. Since he never mentioned the paper tigers in his clubhouse gossip and hearsay, we sent them to him.

The paper tigers are quivering and fidgeting in front of us, except they shed their eggshells and became baby chicks. [Told ya.] If we flash our recently finished owl at them, they will bolt out of the Store and vomit the dust they devoured last night.

“Trust us, we didn’t mean to kill him. We shot at his prairie dog.”

“See, that’s the problem. You shoot at the dog, and he’ll stand right in front of the dog.”

“But he shot at our horses first.”

“He was reviving your horses. You think Major Tom would want to kill animals?”

“That doesn’t make sense. And that’s exactly what Old Hickey said.”

Yeah, maybe because we taught him that? “Old Hickey tried to help you, and you killed him.”

“Then explain to us why our horses are missing.”

“Because they are dead. If you really want to find them, go to the monastery. They love dead animals.”

The monks arrived a few years ago with a bag of seeds, a dozen cargos of stone, and a herd of dead sheep. They piled the stones into a frail and lopsided temple, which we think resembles a squashed sandcastle; they grew the seeds into willow trees that look like a witch's rotten hair; they kept the sheep, well, dead.

Hear us out. Buddhism preaches love and compassion for all beings, and monks therefore abstain from killing animals. But how do you kill something already dead? Take a look at the stuffed-to-the-gills sheep pen at the monastery. Nibbling at the burnt grass and reeking of death, the sheep are parasites. Think of a carpet. Replace the fibers with the slimiest worms you could think of. Zoom in. There you have it: a herd of sheep. If that's universal compassion and "no killing," no thanks.

The monastery sends us a package on the first Tuesday of every month. The delivery is anonymous, but no one other than the monks would put a dead sheep in a cage. We don't know why they do it. *Out of courtesy?*

The dead sheep come in the same cage every time. A dozen thorny branches erect the rough outline of the cage, and bundles of tree vines brace the wobbly frame. The creature inside is unflinching and miserable. So, we always return the package—with a revived sheep in the same crude cage. We don't know why we do it. *Out of courtesy?*

Today is the first Tuesday of the month, and we got a horse—one of the ex-paper tigers' dead horses. You know how some kids' vocabularies are limited to "yes" and "no"? Imagine the sheer joy that the teacher experiences when those kids form a complete sentence—even better, an active question. That's us right now.

Honestly, it's impressive how the monks managed to cram a creature twice the size of a sheep into the same cage. Craning through the gap on the top of the cage, the dead horse squirms as if anchored by a guillotine. "Watching on the sideline without moving

one's hands and shirt cuffs" is the Chinese four-character idiom to describe bystanders. That's not us, so we go to work.

If you were stranded in space, you would most likely try to locate the malfunction in your spacecraft and reestablish communication with the ground control team. Perhaps say a prayer? Scream at the expansive void shrouding your flimsy little pod? Consider cursing the diabolical math teacher from middle school who refused to bump your grade from a B+ to an A-. If you really get desperate, make a last meal. Crack open a 1920 Bual and savor an authentic, tender French filet mignon. The point is—you would do [something.] You wouldn't sit on your fun-sized, toilet-shaped seat and float away.

Major Tom, the protagonist in the song "Space Oddity" by David Bowie, did exactly that. After perceiving his precarious situation, he resolved to let his tin can drift aimlessly into space. If there was an emotion gauge, his response to the crisis would resemble that of perceiving Earth as blue and spherical. Unsurprisingly, many view Major Tom as a deranged pariah.

But we regard him as a dauntless representative, and Old Hickey upholds him as a spirited pioneer. The act of drifting away is not a passive concession; it is a [choice.] Psychologists love the cliché "find where you belong." Well, Major Tom found where he belongs. That is, away from Earth.

Old Hickey esteems Major Tom to the extent that he impersonates the astronaut. But rather than a spacesuit or a military uniform, Old Hickey chooses a vintage cowboy outfit to portray the spaceman. He also complements the forlorn, yet heroic, narrative with a prairie dog. *Ever seen a prairie dog in space?*

Justifiably, the clubhouse constantly plays one song through its crackling speaker: "Space Oddity." And so does the Store. "And we would appreciate it if y'all could stop whining and let the song play on. Listen...

"Here am I floating 'round my tin can, far above the moon.
Planet Earth is blue, and there's
nothing I can do."

See? Tin can and blue Earth.

“Where are our horses?”

“Come back in a week. How was the monastery?”

“We want them now.”

“You can’t. The horses need to sit in the refrigerator for another week, during which we need to make the wood wool. It then takes us another week to scoop out the dead stuff and put our secret sauce in there. Then you can come and pick the horses up. Alive.”

“The monks told us that you kill animals, not revive them.”

Ugh.

“Look around you. Do you see a dead animal? Here comes the best line...

Ground Control to Major Tom.”



ALYSSA HALL
Blindsighted



JOEY GORSKI
Price of Fame

Circle of Fourths

It's 12:34 a.m. and I'm done staring at the ceiling. I better practice piano. Noise is a dish best served in solitude. I crawl over my tossed blankets and maneuver through this mess of a home and sit down. I crack my fingers like I see pianists do in cartoons, though my fingers don't crack, and start. Practicing scales like I used to do my freshman year. Callused hands play a tale of a younger child, one who died a long, long time ago. I find myself playing in homage and in mourning, my childhood flashing before my eyes.

C Major (0 flats 0 sharps) The start and the end of all I am
Home felt easy as a kid, like I could stay there forever, and visit after college. That the garden outside would always be blooming those daffodils, tulips, and even roses. The first two are perennials so I'll see them every year; not so much the roses.

I'll keep trying to start this garden. I know how important it is to my mother. I find myself watering them all in her name, especially the roses. She's inside shaking her head in disappointment at her overtime work. With one long sigh, her "It's going to be a long night" carries itself to me. I empty the rest of the can on the roses.

F Major (1 flat: Bb) Delusion and homeliness

In elementary school, I get the mail when I get off the bus. It's still nice out. The power lines always have something to say, but I never listen to them. I know my place is here. I proceed to shuffle through the mail, and I hear cars going over the mountain. I hope they know where they're going.

Bb Major (2 Flats; Bb, Eb) Distrust and Distraught

In the morning, I wait for the bus, alone. All I can see is my breath.

The wind rustles through the Blue Spruces outside our home, and it is vaguely unsettling. My attention is drawn to it; I leer at what may or may not be there. Eventually, my eyes widen in horror at the amalgamation of spots that form a man hunched under a tree. I freeze in the presence of this imaginary man, one I've seen too many times. He never even existed. I take a few steps backwards. I cannot turn my back. I wish Mom was here to protect me. I slowly walk back down the driveway, but the bus turns the corner, is hissing its way up the street. The man flees in the headlights.

Eb Major (3 Flats; Bb, Eb, Ab) Repenting

I'm kneeling in front of my bed. My knees are raw from the carpet burns. I ask God if I'll ever be loved and tell Him how I am scared to die alone. Through shallow breaths and shaky eyes, tears swallow my pride. I am on my hands and knees, praying for salvation. For some rest.

Something to stop the tossing and turning at night. This limbo of paranoia and trees scratching at the screen of my window. I pray to Him.

Salvation should be now. As a third grader, I wish God would take me to Heaven. St. Peter would see a nine-year-old boy and shake his head in mourning. "Too young. Far too young." It's been years since I stepped in a church, but now I pray to Bast for the protection of animals and others, and to Apollo when he flickers in my candles. My knees have healed, but that's all.

Ab Major (4 Flats; Bb, Eb, Ab, Db) Isolation or Independence

It's 5 a.m. now and Mom went to work. It's the height of the pandemic. The sun barely peeks up over the mountain outside, filtered through the curtains. I love sleeping in Mom's bed. It's bigger and comfier than my bed. It feels maternal, like she's here in spirit. That spiritually she is still asleep and makes room for me. I crawl in, make my space and drift off. I'll wake up eventually.

I wake up drenched in sweat. I look at the clock on my phone and it is around 2:30. I groan and close my eyes again, trying to sleep, but it's too hot to even think about sleeping. I keep my eyes closed hoping I'll eventually sleep. The silence in my room is haunting,

but the whirring of a box fan makes it manageable. I hear the house phone ringing, but I ignore it. 'If they're important they'll call again' to quote my grandfather. It rings again but I keep laying there. After that, it gets quiet again. I decide it is time to get up, so I turn on my stomach and actually get a good look at my phone. It is 3:30, not 2:30. Mom has to be home now. I unlock my phone and scan my notifications. A missed call. I sigh and get rid of the notification. I hear the angry steps of my mother, she still has her shoes on. I've always been able to tell who it is by their footsteps. Mom makes the boards creak and cry out. It's always a specific pattern of steps, like impending doom. She stops right in front of my door, and I hear a loud pounding. "A**** come help unload groceries", with that another defeated sigh. I walk out.

Db Major (5 flats; Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, Gb) Severed

I remember how it feels to be angry when my mom hugs me. Tears soaking into the fibers of her work clothes. She loves me, but she keeps suffocating me in some half-assed apology. Her yells are still fresh in my mind. The freezing linoleum in our kitchen on my feet. Children are impressionable after all. Standing with balled fists as she wraps herself around me. "I love you miles and miles forever." A pause in her sobs, she waits for me to say it back. "Miles and miles forever," I mumble. She lets me go and I slowly walk back to my room. Looking back, accountability never seemed to be important enough. As long as I'm not a quitter, because "I didn't raise a quitter."

But for once, I would've loved to hear, "I'm sorry."

Gb Major (6 Flats; Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, Gb, Cb) Communication

I can't go back. I've sat on that bed for too long. I'm bawling as Mother lays beside me. I remember how, for years, I'd be on that bed, silence surrounding the sharp inhales and disapproval of my mother. In a world of free speech goddamnit why wouldn't I talk? She would wait for hours for me to say something. All she heard was defiance. All I felt was trapped. I always ended up telling her whatever was wrong. I've learned to shut her door on the way out, and lock my door on the way in.

Cb Major (7 Flats; Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, Gb, Cb, Fb) Escapism

The wishing well outside my house is filled with weeds. I still see daisies in there, but at this point, they've grown mildew. I remember the day I first looked in there.

Eventually it rolls into autumn. Mold coating my esophagus, running up and down my throat. I keep my throat closed. I keep digging through the soil trying to find a lost memory. All I hear is Mom yelling from the house. I have my back towards the road so I can see her coming.

C# Major (7 Sharps; F#, C#, G#, D#, A#, E#, B#) Coping

Our chimney keeps smoking despite my lectures on how it hurts my lungs. I find cigarette butts littering our yard. If I'm lucky, there are still a good couple of puffs in there (I am nothing if not a hypocrite), something to dull the incessant screaming. My bones, rattling. Thoughts shattering my psyche. Ricocheting through my cranium. But I don't smoke.

F# Major (6 Sharps; F#, C#, G#, D#, A#, E#) Revisiting

Today, I decided to listen to the power lines. They told me to run and live a life as vast as they span. It feels right thinking of it like that. If I could spread my wings and soar like the ruffled grouse, though I've never seen one, I'd be able to breathe a bit easier. Home feels stagnant, and so does Mother. She urges me to live. Because Lord knows she lived.

B Major (5 Sharps; F# C#, G#, D#, A#) Analytical

At this point, it feels monotonous. In and out of this cyclical and cynical life, whirring me 'round, like I'm spiraling through Fibonacci. Mother told me about how pinecones follow Fibonacci and that I should follow greatness because what am I if not vicarious?

E Major (4 Sharps; F#, C#, G#, D#) Intertwined

Outside today, it's overcast. I wish I could explain how perfect it feels. Mother feels the same way. I wish she didn't. But I guess I am her child. As a kid, I'd have this fantasy that I was secretly never a part of this family and that my parents stole me. It always felt nice to think of it. Despite how my body is the same shape as my

mother's and how my tears fall just like hers.

How generations of altered DNA brought me here. That, when I cut, the blood I see is the blood of my mother and father.

A Major (3 Sharps: F#, C#, G#) "Where is your empathy? Where is your compassion?"

Mother Cinderella was never my favorite princess. Probably because she always reminded me of Mother. Mother was a real-life Cinderella who never got a Prince Charming. At the beck and call of motherly love and labor. Even now, my mother doesn't flinch in hot water. I hope that one day she finds her Prince Charming.

D Major (2 Sharps; F#, C#) "You're 45 going on 15" - Mother Solivagant, it feels more painful than solitude, more melancholic. Like I'm not meant to be independent. Like I need someone. Old souls have become an epidemic of children who are hurting. I hope I never grow up. Until I can truly become old.

G Major (1 Sharp; F#) Denial

Somedays, I think we are a family. That blood and genealogy asserts my place in this world. I end up telling myself that you didn't hurt us, and I am just stuck in the past. You're a good mother. You could've been those horror stories you told me on the way to Scouts. But you could've been a lot better.

I hope you'll see that one day.

C Major (0 Sharps 0 Flats) Rekindled

One day I will come back. When I'm gray, and this is the only place I have left for these unkempt roots to run rampant. I'll walk through these abandoned quarters, and I'll find something that reminds me of better times. And I hope that when I die, my ashes will be spread on this soil. So, one day, this place can finally feel like home.

The mourning dove greets me by the time I finish on middle C and G4. The hollowness of the chord rests in my stomach. I shut the piano. Turn off my ceiling light, pull out my phone and stare at myself before taking a picture. The Sun is the only thing keeping my room lit, besides Apollo's candle. I lift my phone, look slightly

up, and freeze. Take the picture and I look at my eyes, the bags under them and how my eyes are my father's, how my jawline is my mother's, how my melancholy is my mother's, how I am slowly becoming my mother. How I am always becoming the thing that kills me, the thing that saves me, the home and the longing, all at once.

Dance of Insomnia and Desire

I shimmy and shake in my bed drunk on iron eyelids.
Every lightbulb in the house is dormant.
Spectacular wings could protrude from my shoulder
The crickets are crackling in coils of
the smallest violins you've ever heard,
blades and I'd fly so much farther than you
The melody of midnights of insects of movements of taunts of time.
I give up on renewal, sit up, eyes twitching, bug-like.
I'd rejuvenate inside clouds tonight
I grab ahold of breath jealously and my whole body expands;
I'm a balloon, a beast, a burst, ablaze.
with the evaporation of wind of falling
I breathe out and my ribcage collapses in on itself;
I'm rust to the point of dust, I'm faulty foundations,
desperately in love with life all over again
A wide-eyed, loud-cried baby, a doomful sigh,
Intoxicated by blue lights, kingless knights, recite:
a squawking child, a toy train, a seashell castle,
What am I doing here? Why am I losing?
Where is the moon tonight?
lullabies, your whispered "I love you," springtime—
Eventually this night must end and
Tomorrow will pounce upon me like a hound.

191-South

neon bright signs in late nights leave
afterimages in my eyes, a cyberpunk
remainder of color and shapes and
swirling lines. in the rain my windshield wipers
squeak incessantly, but i don't mind
the sound. it keeps me awake with the cold
air and words i don't understand
through my speakers. there's an unseen
something surrounding me, some
shining force that pierces through
the fog in the air and behind my eyes.
i love the light because i fear the dark.

neon [redacted]
[redacted] cyberpunk
[redacted]
[redacted] lines. [redacted] my [redacted]
[redacted] mind
[redacted] with [redacted]
[redacted] words [redacted]
[redacted] unseen
[redacted]
shining [redacted] through
the [redacted]
[redacted] dark.

*(neon cyberpunk
lines my mind with words unseen
shining through the dark)*

Redacted

Routine is the devil of a stranger:

A death spell is different only in name.

18th century England — the rise of industrialisation,
the first factory system—the spilling out of a Satanic rage.
Alone, I sought you everywhere.

In Spain, five paces away from me,
Your torso moving gracefully, like a flower blooming—
So perfect you were; I should have found a way
to grasp the beauty in it:

To be with you was to be good, filled with God's love,
But in that moment my heart dared leap out of my chest

In the frantic-ness to make time stop for us...
To make us both strong enough to last eternally
— To love us amidst the world's fear of each other— It is not as
easy as it seems...

It is enough that we are together.

You are here beside me.

Robot Stop

Rain poured down outside my car, windshield wipers cleared my view—though it still didn't feel like I was seeing straight. I was driving fast, faster than the weather and the speed limit warranted, but for good reason. When school faculty are the ones telling you to go, drive, get home safe—you listen.

I still remember the song that was playing: Robot Stop by King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard. An insane name, I'm perfectly aware, but I swear it's a good song. Maybe not quite the vibe you'd be expecting for eight in the morning, while driving away from an apparent bomb threat, but its fast pace matched my frantic energy, and its persistent bassline grounded me, keeping me from careening off the side of the road.

Cops were blocking the road in front of the school, so I drove the long way home. As I doubled back on my route to head towards my street, I kept thinking about how I was getting closer to the high school again. I wondered if I would hear it if there was an explosion. Some logical, cynical part of me didn't think so.

-X-X-X-

There was something surreal about driving home that day at eight in the morning. I still remember the rain, the roads, the song playing as I was speeding with a frantic urgency. The cops were blocking the street right in front of the school when I'd driven away, so I had to take the long way home, which doubled back towards the building. As I drove, I wondered. I wondered if my classmates were right. I wondered if they were safe. I wondered if I'd hear it from where I

was if the building were to go up in smoke. I doubted it.

-X-X-

The quiet in my car was deafening. Despite the music and the rain and the traffic, I was still waiting to hear the destruction.

-X-

Driving, waiting to hear the bomb.

Game of Cigarettes

His hands are calloused and rough.
His fingertips are stained yellow.
Not the kind of yellow that is full of sun kisses and dandelions,
but the yellow of an apple core sat on the counter for too long.
Or, a father who has wasted their time.

An index finger and middle finger hold the rolled-up tobacco.
A thumb lays on the bottom for support.
It's been about twenty years of wisps
of smoke on the porch, and grating coughs.
He's focusing on a soccer game on his phone—
I swear it's been hours

When will you quit?

I stare at the crushed cigarettes piled on the ground next to his foot.
He doesn't respond for a second or two,
flicks the end of the cigarette onto the porch and without looking up
from the game murmurs,
We aren't even at halftime yet.



AVANI CHAND
City of Lights Dead of Night



JUNSEOK SHIN
Camp

Raspberry juice stains my fingertips & I don't think it will ever wash out

The birdhouse holds only memories & the training wheels on my bike are weighed down by dust. Lily of the valley sinks a little lower today,

dandelion stems melt down to skin & bone, white fluff withers away. Mama is pleased, no more weeding needs to be done. But,

I never got to blow one out. Mama tells me to pick the last of the raspberries, & I scour the bush for admiration. Mama is not pleased with the stain on my shirt,

but I tell her I like it. It will help me remember the summer raspberries. The rain is warm and it carries unspoken promises, the clouds hide the

truth. I've gotten a little taller, just like the grass dad refuses to mow. He tells me he likes it long, it reminds him of the hills in Indiana. I stopped

seeing the nextdoor neighbors dog. Mama is pleased, no more barking. But I never got to pet him. On the first cool day mama tells me to pick the

last of the raspberries. I tell her I don't want to, & she shoves a bowl into my hands and pushes me out the door. I'm extra careful not to stain

my shirt. Thorns prick my clumsy fingers & my skin matches the hue of the raspberries. Mama is not pleased with the blood, but I tell her it's okay.

I will get my own bandaid, & clean my own wounds. The moss on the trees is beginning to brown, & the wind blows away the last days

of August. Crabapples give in, sailing down to the concrete road, destined to deflate under car tires. I lost my last baby tooth. Mama is pleased, finally

I am a big girl. But what will happen to the tooth fairy? It's the first cool day & I await my annual task, the ceramic bowl, the stains, nothing

comes. I ask mama if I should pick the last of the raspberries. At last, mama is pleased with me! We embark on a journey to the backyard,

but the bush is bare & I am too late.

Hot Hands on Cold Limp Wrists

I remember that it was cold. The kind of cold that slips through your jacket when it isn't tucked up to your chin, and finds a home settled deep into your bones. I was sitting on the bleachers, facing the cars that would follow the bright green jackets. People getting paid less than minimum wage to direct screaming children begging their parents for fried dough and cotton candy to the next parking spot. The air bit at my nose, and we both pretend I'm sniffing because it's cold, not because I'm still crying. "Does she ever actually talk to you?" you ask, pulling your jacket tight around your shoulders. None of us checked the weather. I let your question go unanswered. You take that as an opening to pepper me with more and watch me scroll through every message I've sent her. You make me relive the most embarrassing moments of my life, and even that is not enough to heat more than just my cheeks.

A way to temporarily preserve a body is by delaying the natural effects of death. To begin, the body will be washed with disinfectant spray, while the limbs are massaged to alleviate joint and muscle stiffness. The eyes will be kept shut using glue, or plastic eye caps, or cotton balls that keep the eyelids in place. The jaw will be secured shut with wires or sewing. The mouth will then be able to be manipulated into the desired position. Finally, a cannula is inserted into a major artery, and the blood is slowly drained from the body. A trocar is inserted into the abdomen, the organs in the chest and abdomen are punctured, and are drained of gas and fluid. Then, a mix of chemicals, moisturizer and a water softener (to prevent the tissues from swelling) are pumped into the body. In this process formaldehyde is added along with sprays to cover the smell. In the case that the facial features become disfigured after death, they are remade with different clays. The body is then redressed and prepared for the funeral service.

You slipped my phone into your pocket and made me pick a ride. We had spent our money on wristbands, and “they shouldn’t be wasted.” I picked the one closest to me, coincidentally the one furthest from her. I made you promise that it would only be one ride before we finally went to go look for her. You nodded solemnly, then dragged me to the bright yellow slide. It was meant for kids, but you smiled when you looked at it. Your hands were wrapped around mine, and you dragged me around people, commenting before stopping. “Your hands are really cold.” You offered me one of the hot hands that were nestled in the pocket of your sweatshirt, insisting I take it before slipping it back after I shook my head. The line was long, but you agreed to go down with me, and stuck your tongue out at the guy who scoffed when handing us the potato sacks we were to sit on. We went carefully up the rickety stairs, and you leaned your head over the edge when we got to the top. We went down just as quickly as we came up, pushing our sacks back into the hands of the small children waiting to go next.

The rate of decomposition is highly dependent on the cause of death. Bodies may decay faster if they are exposed to the elements, wildlife or if they are in a warm environment. In a normal environment, 3 hours after death, rigor mortis sets in. After upwards of 72 hours postmortem, the internal organs begin to decompose due to cell death, and the body begins to emit pungent odors. 3-5 days later, bodily fluids will leak from orifices, the skin will lose its original color, turning to a light green. 2+ weeks later, the teeth and nails will fall out. Months later, the body will liquify into sludge. Eventually, the body will be left with only bones, and if not disturbed by animals, the skeleton may take 20 years to dissolve in fertile soil. However, in a warm environment, the body’s decomposition may speed up. Bacteria will also grow in a warm environment, accelerating the bacterial digestion of tissue.

Her mother found us right after we got down. I remember how close to my face she got, and even before she spoke, I could smell cigarette smoke coating her breath. Everything in her house always carried the faint smell of smoke, but when she had been up against my face, our noses almost touching, I realized how bad it was. She

began to yell at me through the smell of fried dough and candies. I couldn't make sense of her words, the sounds of a carnival show overpowered them. Her husband was behind her, giving me a vague look of pity. When she would yell at me, he wouldn't help in the moment, but slipped me a tissue when she left to sit out on the porch. She wrapped her fingers around my wrist, meeting together near my veins. Her hands were hot where she was touching me, and I wondered that if she were to let go of me, would her hands be outlined on my wrists? I let her drag me towards the games, surprised my feet had not given out beneath me. I supposed that if they were to, she simply would've tightened her grip and continued to pull me through the dirt. Even when she let me go, her hands left angry marks on my skin, slightly warm to the touch. When I was finally allowed to leave, and had showered the smell of cigarettes off my skin, my 'best friend' texted me saying that "her mother could go to jail for this," and that she "couldn't believe I would lie about something like that." I wondered what her mother told her.

My skin was still warm where she grabbed me, almost as if she was going to rub the cold from my arms only to realize that it wouldn't be worth fixing. Almost as if she was willing to let me decompose all alone near the carnival rides.

Persimmons

I remember the first time I met you. I remember it because I thought you were weird.

But, if we're being honest, who wouldn't? Even fourth graders know that when you're going around in a circle saying your favorite fruit, you say something common and normal. Strawberries. Apples. Peaches.

But no, you looked up with your tangled, floppy hair and your running fingers and said, *persimmons*, like you *knew* you were going to be the kid pushed down on the playground later. Like you knew simple fruits would always be beyond you, just like our little town, just like our rusted fourth-grade classroom and its threadbare carpet. Your fingers constantly moved, picking at the loose threads of that carpet. I saw your hangnails from across the room; your left thumb was already bleeding. I remember looking down at my own chewed nails and being angry at myself. I didn't want to be anything like you.

You were weird.

-

The second time I met you was a month later, on the playground after school, once all the other kids had gone home. I'd pretended to lose my red jacket by the monkey bars so I could have an excuse to be late if Mom forgot to pick me up. You'd crouched in the tanbark clutching a baby bird to your chest. It was dying, the kind of death even a fourth grader could see, shadowed in its crooked wings and the flies buzzing around it like they knew its flesh would empty soon

enough.

Don't touch it, I said to you, feeling stupid, but you looked at me, and all I could think was that you must have been peering into another world. Your cheeks were wet from tears, and your knees were cut from digging into the tanbark. You just clutched the bird closer to your chest like your heart was breaking.

My heart broke too, then, a little bit, because little birds should not know death so young and neither should little boys.

I asked you why you even cared, and you told me, *because no one else will*. And then, I saw in you a certain kind of goodness to love things that are unwanted: the kind that bears its teeth like steel, the kind that has you stand vigil over a bird as it shivers and dies, because it is a sad thing, to be your only mourner, to not have anyone to hold you as you grow cold. I thought you must have been what death looked like, but I didn't say it out loud. I will never say enough of my thoughts about you out loud.

You stood there until your tears had seeped into the soil, and it was only then, after you wordlessly handed me my red jacket with a glance that made me feel like a persimmon with its skin peeled off, like a threadbare carpet picked apart, that you told me your name.

—

The third time I met you, we were laughing at the Star Wars posters you'd hung up when you were a kid and obsessed with Mace Windu and never got around to taking down. We laughed until the front door slammed, and your face went white in the way that I knew to hold my breath. You grabbed my hand and whispered, *come on*, and we climbed through the fire escape to the roof. I stayed quiet because I knew about being scared to bring people home because you didn't know whether your mom was having a good day or a bad day, so I laid on my back with you and we made up stories about the constellations in the sky, shining heroes who fought battles against villains with claws and scales instead of skin and bones, heroes

who got to come home after, and everyone was happy in the end. I asked you why you liked persimmons, and you told me persimmons taste different every time you try them. I laughed and asked why you would ever want that, and you said your greatest fear was that things would always stay the same. That was the night I first realized who you were, how you saw the world—as a place to climb out of, through the fire escape, to the stars.

—

The fourth time I held you as you sobbed in my arms outside the hospital lobby, your body shook like a leaf in a storm. I ran my fingers through your tangled hair and wrapped my arms over your back like I could hold you together with just my hands, hold you together as you shattered over and over again like a beer bottle thrown against a wall. I decided then that I loved you—this boy who breaks at the sight of dying birds and bent wings, who mourns the death of a father who cared with his fists and not his heart, who laughs at the sound of thunder and rain and smiles like sunlight, who loves persimmons because they are strange and unpredictable. You were my fire escape from the sounds of prescription bottles clinking on the counter and the look that entered my mother's eyes on the days she wouldn't get out of bed.

That night, I kissed you as if I were a girl who believed in love, and you kissed me back, and it was almost enough.

But I am the villain of the story, the monster on the hill, the one the hero must fight to win the battle and go home.

The next day, I woke up before you and saw the acceptance letter on the coffee table.

I begged you to stay. But you were always meant for more than our small town. You were always meant for more than me. You left me sitting at your table, looking out the window at the leafy tree in your backyard, dotted with orange persimmons.

Coup de Grâce

A sweater—mine, but not really. Not anymore.

A sweater that I'll never wear again. A too-cold room. A half-eaten pop-tart, strawberry. Unfinished. Windows open with curtains drawn.

Those are the things I saw before I saw her.

I wake up cold, my clothes laid out on my desk from the night before. Pants, socks, shoes, no top. I will get my sweater from Gracie, the girl in the neighboring dorm room, that she borrowed last week. Wednesday, maybe. No—Friday. She'd asked to wear it to chapel. It's my favorite sweater, so I would not typically lend it out, but there was something about the way she'd asked me if it would look nice with her eyes. Like it was a long shot. I told her the green was sure to make her eyes pop. She smiled, and off she went.

I knock on Gracie's door. I am looking at my phone, distracted. I open the door slightly. "Could I grab my green sweater?" I ask. Gracie's room is warmer than mine, but darker. I look up from my phone, standing in the crack of the door. The sweater is folded on her dresser, beside a half-eaten strawberry pop-tart. "Oh, I see it."

I step inside.

I step *in* something. I can feel it through my socks.

There is a second of tranquility before everything implodes.

I do not look up. Something inside me is already screaming, clawing to get out.

Clothes on the floor, but neat, folded. The rug is darker than it should be. Shinier. I do not want to know why. I look up.

The windows are open with the curtains drawn. Gracie. Gracie's hair.

Gracie's hair, stuck to her face.

Gracie's hair, stuck to her face, darker than it should be. Shinier.

Suddenly everything is visible. Her forearms, strewn beside her, and split open. My gaze shifts. I find her eyes. Hollow, wide, green.

I want to go to her, to help her, to stitch her up. I want to make her better.. But I am frozen.

I cannot run to her, I cannot run away from her, I cannot do anything. I scream, but instead of sound, all that comes out of my mouth is bile.

I am on the floor, retching. Gagging, coughing, crying, choking.

I grip the rug, collecting blood under my fingernails and in the crevices of my palms. Her blood. My palms, but they are hers now. The blood is claiming them, tracing their creases, making a home for themselves there.

Acid stings my tongue.

The door opens behind me, but I do not turn to look at it.

My eyes find the window instead. *Open. Why?*

The curtains are drawn. Pop-tart bitten, strawberry filling visible. Red, like what I used to think blood looked like.

My eyes again find Gracie's. *Open. Why?*

Can she see me? Can she see the blood?

I feel a hand grab my arm, pulling me out of the room. I wriggle free from it. I lurch towards Gracie. I pull her hair from her face and wipe the blood from her cheek. My fingertips meet her eyelids, closing them. She cannot see this anymore. And suddenly, neither can I.

All I can see is an eyelash on my finger. Her eyelash. *Make a wish.*

I wake up in the infirmary. A small bed, its mattress imprinted on my back. Clean, sterile, intentional. The only thing I have in common with under these fluorescent lights is with the bed, in that we are both monstrously uncomfortable. But I am not clean. I remember cleaning the blood off of Gracie's face. No one has cleaned any off me.

The news of Gracie's death has circulated throughout campus already. There is an unfamiliar silence. Even the freshmen I see out of the infirmary window walk with their heads down, and when they lift them, they look lost – confused. Most have only lived fourteen years, and usually, in their eyes, it shows. But now they looked tired. Aged, almost. Like me. I can't help but be comforted by this.

I am leaving my 24-hour stint in the infirmary when a nurse informs me that there will be an all-school assembly in the gymnasium to address, "the girl's suicide."

"She has a name," I say too curtly.

"I know Gracie's name. I just..." She looks down at her feet as her voice trails off.

I want to apologize, but I can't. Frozen, all over again. Like I was with Gracie. Like I was the last time my parents and I sat together in the living room of my childhood home, as a family.

Honey, your mother and I...

It's really for the best...

We still love each other very much...

I shove the memory out of my mind, only for it to be replaced with a vision of Gracie's hair plastered to her face with her own blood. I snap out of it.

"Can I get my medication, please?" The nurse pulls it out, but before she can extricate my prescribed two blue pills, I leave with the bottle. She does not say anything to me.

People tend to forget experiences they were not directly privy to. I thought that because everyone at school lost Gracie, that everyone felt as I did – that everyone felt, intrinsically, that nothing would ever be the same. I thought I could count on that, but I was wrong. I was foolish to think we'd all be stuck in that room.

I'm the only one stuck in that room, of course. I'm the only one who was in it.

Besides Gracie. Me and Gracie, stuck in her room, just like her

hair stuck to her face.

And there it all is – the half-eaten strawberry pop tart, the wind rustling the drawn curtains. Gracie's green eyes, wide open like the windows. *The strawberry fucking pop-tart.*

I'd seen her eating it that night before check-in – during study hall, around nine o'clock. I was sitting in the common room, tutoring a sophomore in French. Gracie asked for early lights, saying she had to wake up early in the morning.

I feel sick.

"Oh, Gracie, do you have any more pop tarts?" I'd asked her, looking up from the sophomore's textbook lesson on the plus-que-parfait. An odd-numbered page, I think – 17. But it could've been 23.

"This was my last one," she responded. I remember thinking something in her eyes felt distant, but definitive. She blinked, and it was replaced with an air of tranquility. "But you can have the rest, if you want."

"Oh, that's okay." I smiled. Kind Gracie. "But thank you."

At night, alone in my dorm room, I pace back and forth, back and forth. How do I always end up so blindsided? There were signs; there must have been signs. There are always signs.

I'm not sure now how many days have passed since I found Gracie. At first, I was able to keep track by counting the missing pills in the Adderall bottle I swiped from the nurse, but at some point, I started taking more than I was prescribed, and I lost count.

Productivity. Stimulants. Schoolwork. Anything to block it all out.

The hair stuck to Gracie's face. Her eyes, the pop tart, the windows. Precalculus does not remind me of Gracie; precalculus provides a reason to never return my parents' phone calls.

I buzz all day, always doing something. The buzz wears off at night, and I am exhausted. More exhausted than I've ever been in

my life. Nearing delusion, I yearn for sleep. But sleep evades me. It tests me, and I do not pass.

At night, I think about all the things I did not pick up on. What am I not picking up on now?

Blood, hair, face. Eyes open, cold, unfinished pop-tart.

Close your eyes, I think to myself. *Breathe. Try again.* I close my eyes.

I attempt happier thoughts. I think of my childhood home. Crawling into my parents' bed on Christmas morning, too early, but welcomed nonetheless. A bed now inhabited by my father and Meredith. Meredith, who looks like my mother. Meredith, who lacks any taste in music whatsoever. Meredith, who doesn't like to watch *The Office* over a plate of scrambled eggs on a Sunday morning. Meredith, who had me begging to leave for boarding school at sixteen.

Boarding school. Here. Gracie.

Blood, hair, face.

Green eyes open, cold, unfinished pop-tart. *Close your eyes*, I think to myself.

Breathe. Try again.

I close my eyes.

I wake up cold. I always wake up cold now. I swallow my blue pills and pocket some for later. I don't go to breakfast. I don't get hungry much anymore.

I do not hear much of the conversations that include me. If I am not buried in schoolwork, I bury myself in books and movies I've already read or seen. I no longer want to be surprised. If I'm not buried in something, I'm just buried. In my mind, I'm always in Gracie's room. The only change of scenery I experience is when I find myself in my childhood living room. Not much better.

My parents informed me of their impending divorce on a Sunday morning. My father cracked six eggs in a pan, scrambled them, and split them sensibly into three portions. My mother and I made our

way to our spots on our jaded leather couch, creased with memories of my childhood. She sat down on its right side, with me on the left, and my father relaxed into his dark brown ottoman. He turned on the television.

My parents informed me of their divorce with pauses punctuated by a rerun of *The Office*.

“Honey, we need to have a conversation. As a family,” my father said as he reached for the remote. His tone was calm, relaxed, a tone usually reserved for conversations about the delegation of dishwasher or dog walking duties. He turned down the volume, but not completely.

“Evelyn, your father and I have decided to—” my mother continued. Long pause.

The first lull, Dwight: *Does anyone smell something smoky?*

“—split up,” my father finished. “But we still love each other very much.”

“Oh, honey, so very much,” my mother reassured me.

Dwight continues: *Oh, fire! What’s the procedure? Oh my goodness!*

My parents kept speaking, and so did Dwight, but I can’t remember what they were saying. It all blurred together to create a frequency – high-pitched and uncomfortable – that was entirely new to me then, but is all too familiar now.

“And now that we got the hard part out of the way, your mother can take you to see her new apartment!” my father exclaimed with a squeeze to my shoulder. Somewhere in the city, he says. Closer to her job, he says.

Fire in the house, I thought to myself. *What’s the procedure?*

My mother smiled. Genuinely. “It’s really a lovely place.” I realized that there was no procedure. I didn’t plan for this at all.

“Absolutely,” my father agreed, reaching again for the remote. “You’re going to love it.”

He turned the volume back up mid-Michael Scott line.

—and I knew exactly what to do. But in a much more real sense, I had no idea what to do.

My father chuckled –

“Great line.”

– and I wanted to hit him in the face.

I should've known. I should've known Gracie was so lost, in so much pain. I should've known my parents no longer wanted to be together. What the hell was I doing instead of paying attention? I turn my attention to the candle lit on my bedside table.

I could knock that onto this bed, I thought to myself, and I wouldn't know I was on fire until I heard the alarm. Always too late.

I wonder if these days will feel like a blur in the future, like the weeks after that conversation with my parents. Peppered with images, remembrances, that stick out of the bunch. *Gracie's blonde hair, turned dark by her own blood. Why? Why did she do that? Why didn't I know she was going to? Why am I always so fucking blind-sided?*

About two and a half months after finding Gracie, I realize that I've been ignoring my parents' phone calls for weeks. They have each left multiple voicemails that I haven't listened to. I open up my phone. My mother's voice is first:

Honey, are you okay? You haven't called, you haven't given any updates. Did you ever find out why that girl hurt herself? Please answer the phone.

I should call her back. But as I go to do so, my father's voice comes right in with the rotation:

Honey, we are so worried about you. Please call us back. We love you. Just let us in.

We? Us? He and my mom have been talking about this together? Another voice sounds in turn.

Yes, Evelyn, we are very concerned, um, so, call us back.

Fucking Meredith. 'We,' is him and fucking Meredith.

I don't know much about Meredith. I know she's from upstate New York, and she's a pediatrician. She moved in on my Dad about six months after the divorce was finalized.

We met the weekend I decided I wanted to attend boarding school. My father and I were supposed to spend the weekend together, just

the two of us, and I was excited. I hadn't been excited in a long time. I burst through the door, and there she was, sitting in my childhood living room, on my couch, beside my father's ottoman. My mother's spot.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked. She looked alarmed.

"My name is Meredith," she responded kindly. "I really look forward to getting to know you."

"Are you a shrink?" I wondered if this was some sort of intervention my father planned for me, to break me free of what he and my mother liked to call 'my recent state of disassociation.'

"Meredith is my girlfriend," my father joined in. "She'll be spending the weekend with us."

The weekend was a disaster, culminating in the moment in which I officially decided on boarding school. It was during the car ride back to my mother's apartment. *Your Body is a Wonderland* attacked the speakers in my father's car.

"Do you like John Mayer, Evelyn?" Meredith asked me, bobbing her head and singing along.

"No," I replied. My father shot me a warning look. I corrected myself. "I don't really know his music."

"Adam, shame on you! It's a father's job to introduce his daughter to good music."

"He has," I responded defensively, looking towards my father. "Right, Dad?"

"Well, um, I guess I haven't," he laughed uncomfortably. He chose Meredith.

I haven't cried since I found Gracie. I haven't done a lot of things since I found Gracie. Slept, eaten, been present. I take my pills, I do my work, I distract myself. Life moves around me, but I'm stuck. Stuck in a room with a body that used to be a girl named Gracie.

I cried a lot after my parents told me they were getting divorced, but I stopped when I realized I was the only one crying. I don't know how long they had known they wanted to end things, just as I don't know how long Gracie had known she'd wanted to end her life. I don't get to know anything, I just get to be the only one who has to

deal with it. The school made peace with Gracie's suicide in about a week, and my parents made peace with their divorce long before I'd been made aware of it. They didn't fight before they told me. I didn't suspect it. They were fine. There's no reason, apparently – no infidelity, no huge falling out, no brawl of any kind – just a disconnect, a loss of feelings, a drifting.

A disconnect. A drifting. These things are contagious, but my parents did not think of that. My insular, grand disconnect from who I used to be – from my life in general – was a landmine that my parents planted and that Gracie stepped on. But I'm the one who has to clean it all up.

The blood, the hair, her face, the eyelash. Every day, it comes back to me in some order. I feel sick. Sick and tired. And then it fades. And I feel nothing again, entirely dull.

I go outside. I pace laps around the fields in front of my dormitory. It's mid-April, and for once it isn't raining. But the grass is wet from last night's storm.

It isn't dewy like that of a new morning, it's soaked and muddy. It seeps through my sneakers as I walk, and by my third aimless circle, it's reached my socks.

Like Gracie's blood. And it's happening. All over again.

I don't look up, I just scream. I scream like I did when I found her, and I fall to the ground. I am covered in her blood again. It has made its way from my mind to the grass and into the creases of my palms.

All over again.

But how can it return if it never truly went away? Gracie is a part of me now. It's all a part of me now. The blood in my socks, the world closing in, the retching feeling that migrates from my bloody feet to my knees to my hips to my stomach to my shoulders to my throat – it's already plagued my brain for some time. Gracie's blood and mine, running through my veins, forever. I scream. Why has no one come?

I wake up in an emergency room. My parents are peering over me. "Hi," I croak. "What's going on?"

"You had some sort of..." my mother begins. "Seizure, or something. I'm not sure."

"We don't think boarding school is the right place for you," my father states, looking to my nodding mother for reassurance. "We want you to come back home. Live at home again."

"No."

"What do you mean *no*?" my father retorts.

"I don't want to come back and live with you, or you," I respond, anger growing in me that had been planted long ago, festering, but I didn't realize was there. Until now. "Or motherfucking *Meredith*."

"Are you angry with us?" my father asks.

"Are you kidding me?" I am crying. I try to scream, like I did when I first found Gracie. Again, it does not come out that way, but it doesn't come out choked or as bile either. It comes out powerful. I am yelling now. "Am I angry? You told me you were getting a divorce with the same tone you would've told me we were out of eggs! You didn't even bother to mute the TV! And neither of you cared!"

"We didn't want to upset you—" my mother defends. I am angry again. "And how did that work out?" I yell.

"Oh, honey—"

"Have you ever seen a dead body? A dead sixteen-year-old girl? A girl you knew? A girl who borrows your sweater one day, and the next is a body in a bed with her hair stuck to her face with her own dried blood?" I scream, and there is a moment of pause. A silence, before I continue. "So, you don't need to protect me anymore. And you didn't then."

There is a long silence in the room. My parents look sick now.

"We just grew apart," my father replies softly. "Genuinely. That's it."

"It's true," Mom agrees, squeezing both of our hands. "We loved each other, very much. And in the beginning, when we had you, we mistook that for being *in love* with one another. But it wasn't that."

"No matter how much we wanted it to be," Dad adds, nodding. "And yes, realizing that was heartbreaking."

"Devastating," says my mother. They are both crying now. We are all crying now.

"Why couldn't you just tell me that? Why couldn't you have just

cried? Instead of making me feel stupid for being upset because I was the only one? I have never felt so, completely, entirely, *alone*,” I sob. “You just moved out and then Dad got a fucking girlfriend –”

“I waited–” my dad starts.

“I don’t care if you waited, you didn’t tell me! You just let me walk into my house to find her! You let her play her god-awful music on *our* car ride together! *John Mayer*? Are you fucking *kidding me*?” I am choking on my tears. I can’t breathe for moments at a time. For the first time in months. I start to laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” my mother looks to my father anxiously.

“*Your Body is a fucking Wonderland*?” I cackle, gasping for air. We’re all laughing now, laughing and crying. Feeling. It isn’t much, but it also isn’t *nothing*.

Two months come and go. In two days, the curtains will be drawn on junior year, and my classmates will leave it behind. But I think I’ll be stuck here forever. Trapped.

I call my parents every day. There was a relief that came with understanding that it was not my miscalculation or my lack of notice about the divorce. There is nothing I could’ve done to prevent it. I can finally breathe.

Except for when I think of Gracie. Because there – there, I could’ve done something.

That I should’ve noticed. But I was too focused on my parents, on my life, on myself.

I was awake the night Gracie died. I couldn’t sleep; I was reading. If I had been paying attention, I might have heard something from her room – crying, rustling, something. Anything.

I sleep late, and when I go out into the hallway in the morning, I find Gracie’s door ajar. I inch towards the opening.

“Hello?” a sniffing woman calls from within. “Is someone there?”

I freeze. “Hi,” I reply anxiously, afraid to peek my head in, afraid of what I might see, afraid of what I’ve already seen in there.

“You can come in,” the woman responds kindly. “I’m Gracie’s mother, Mary.”

Mary is packing Gracie's things carefully. I wonder why she's only doing it now, but I know why. This was Gracie's space, the last place she ever was. Taking her out of it – her things, her spirit – for the next person to take over in the fall just feels wrong.

I push the door open and step inside. I try to keep it together, but I cry instantly. "I'm so sorry," I sob. "I'm so sorry." Without hesitation, Gracie's mother takes me into her arms – she is gentle, but unquestionably sturdy. Stalwart.

"Evelyn," she surmises. "You're the girl who found her."

"I'm so sorry," I say again, crying harder. "I should've done something, I should've—" "Honey, there's nothing you could've done."

"But I should've seen something. I should have known something was different. I should have—"

"No, no," she says, stroking my hair. "There was nothing different to see. Grace had been struggling for a long time."

Gracie's mother calls her Grace now, which I find only fitting as she tells me childhood anecdotes to punctuate the story of Gracie's – Grace's– demise. Her depression, her anxiety, a story about the little pink music box on her desk. Prozac, Zoloft, Gracie picked this top out in Paris. More medications, each name longer than the last, a turning point. Gracie was getting better. They thought she was better, that the medication made all the difference. And maybe it would've, if she'd actually been taking it.

"There was nothing you could have done, sweetheart. Nothing anyone could have done. It isn't anyone's fault. It's just wrong."

"But she was so young."

"She was too young," her mother agrees. She strokes my hair and turns back to Gracie's desk full of belongings. I get up to leave.

"Evelyn," she calls out to me. I turn back around to face her. "So were you."

Dad calls me after the graduation ceremony as I'm packing my things. I answer.

"Hi, honey. Do you mind if I come pick you up from school? I miss you." He is tentative in his request. I've been returning his

calls, but holding resentment for him still, more so than for my mother. He knows this.

“I miss you too, Dad,” I respond. “Sure. I’ll see you soon.” “I can’t wait. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Alright, bye honey, see you soon.”

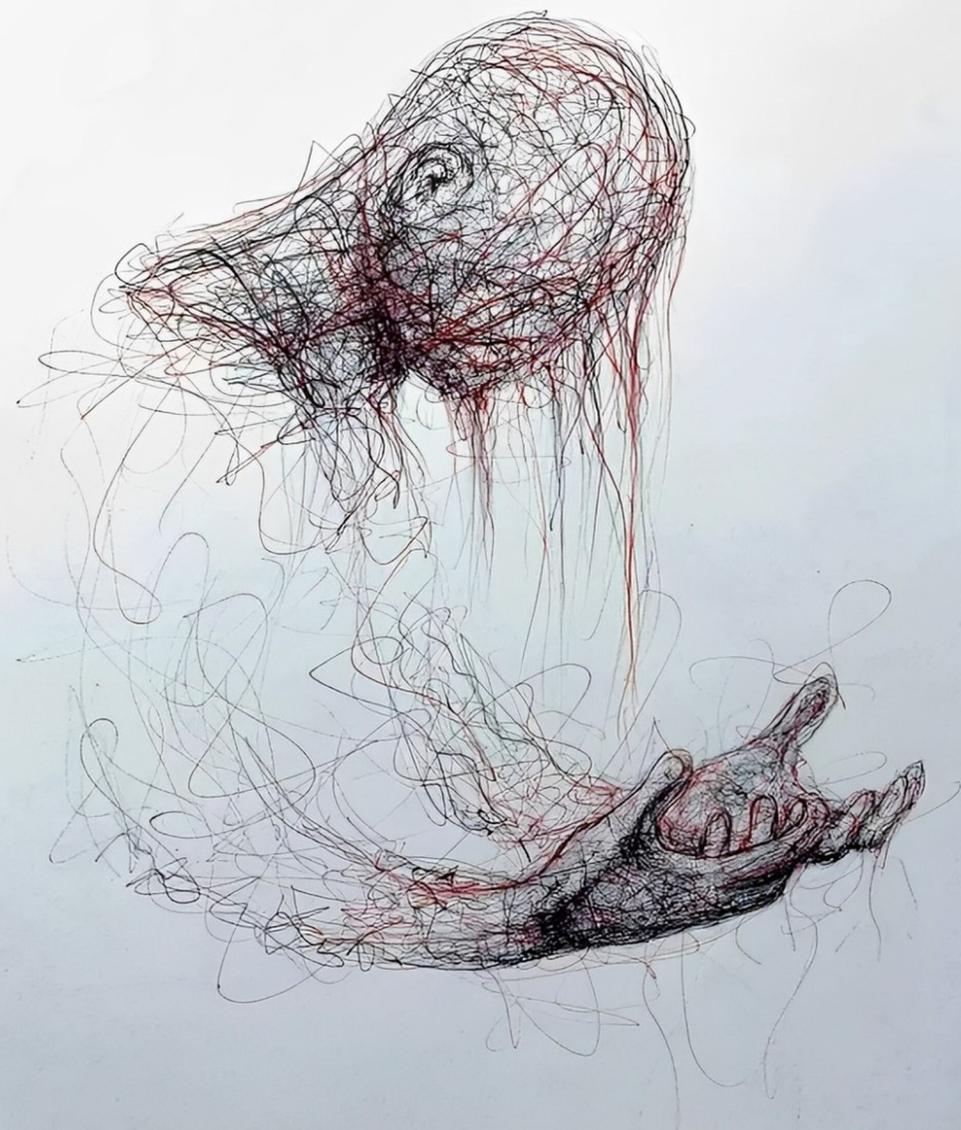
“Wait, Dad,” I say. The words that come next come out of me almost involuntarily. “Why don’t you bring Meredith?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really,” I laugh, wiping a tear from my eye. “As long as she doesn’t touch the radio.”



HYUNWOO JOO
Circular



ZIMIN JUNG
Who Am I



TOLU MEADOWS
The Red Inside

Symbiotic Relations

Mushrooms often grow in relation to the other plants and trees around them, forming a symbiotic relationship. Some mushrooms kill other plants, some mushrooms grow from those dead plants, sometimes they benefit while leaving the other plants unaffected, and sometimes they work with the other plants, benefiting them both. Mushrooms, due to their growth, often have an advantage over other plants: through the roots, mushrooms are connected. If rain is coming, or if a drought is arriving, these mushrooms communicate with each other, sometimes from miles and miles away. This means that mushrooms have a certain power over other plants. They could lie to them, if they are parasitic, and send signals to them that rain is coming when it isn't, getting them to waste their energy. Or, they could alert the plant to a drought, allowing them to reserve their nutrients and continue a mutualistic relationship.

—

I don't remember what we were fighting about in the first place, all I knew is that you were upset. And yelling. And I couldn't hold back tears anymore. I think it was about something stupid. I didn't know how this could happen. Just yesterday we were playing truth or dare at the beach and now, standing in our living room, we argued about...something. It really wasn't arguing though. It was yelling.

Maybe it's the house, my brain chimed in, unhelpful, and I knew it was wrong. We had been here before. My birthday dinner. At the mall. In the car. Pretty much everywhere. It was a wonder I still cried when it happened, or that I hadn't learned to de-escalate the situation. To be fair, I was like, 12. But I didn't get the chance to give myself a break as I was sucked back into the unfortunate present moment.

“You were right yesterday!” you screamed.

Treading in the water and bobbing in the waves, you asked, “Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” I said, thinking nothing of it.

“What’s your worst fear?”

“You hating me. Duh,” I said.

You laughed it off.

I repeated the previous question: “Truth or dare?”

At this point, I just wanted to run back up the stairs, hide under my covers, and scream for my Mom and Dad like I was eight again. But I wasn’t eight, and neither of my parents were home, so I stood frozen in place.

“I hate you!” You yelled it like it was true.

–

Honey mushrooms are a genus, containing at least 40 different types of mushrooms which fall under said genus. This golden-and-white-capped mushroom spreads thick black cords or “vines” onto living trees to steal nutrients the tree acquires. The honey mushroom can be found globally, and some can even be bioluminescent. This parasitic mushroom is most commonly known for its role as the Humongous Fungus. The monstrosity of a mushroom grows in Oregon and is considered the largest living organism, growing up to nearly four square miles, and is considered the oldest living organism, possibly 8,650 years old. While this enormous mushroom is a scientific wonder, it is deadly for the trees in the area, killing them by draining their nutrients and rotting them before recycling them back into the soil.

–

The fairy lights in your room were dim enough to make me sleepy, but not dim enough to let me fall asleep as they twinkled and danced around your ceiling. We sat in your bed with our legs under the covers as we talked. It felt like we did this every month. As if it were planned, every month we would gather in your room (mine was always “too dirty” and “the carpet feels weird,” as you put it) and talk. Most of the time it was about how shitty our lives were. I was in middle school, you were a freshman in high school and we were both

just learning about our identities and how the world worked. We never mentioned how we felt about each other, but that was okay. As our legs pushed up against each other on your twin sized bed, a dreadful and contemplating look drew over your face (you were looking away, but a sibling knows, I guess).

“Can I show you something?” you asked with your arms crossed over each other.

“Of course.” *It’s not like anything could break this moment*, I thought.

“You can’t tell our parents. You can’t tell *anyone*,” you stressed *It’s not like anything was wrong*, I reasoned. “Okay.”

“Are you sure you can keep this a secret?” you asked.

“Yeah, of course I can,” I said.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Okay.” You pulled the covers down to your knees and dragged up your green-ish shorts on the left side with one finger to show at least ten reddish pink lines drawn into your thigh. The skin there was slightly raised. I didn’t know what to say.

“I used a pencil sharpener. It was easy to break it out of the shell,” you replied to the silence.

I didn’t say anything.

We both heard a click as the golden knob to your door twisted and opened, both of our heads flew around, in the midst of it you must’ve tugged your shorts back down. It was my Dad. He sent me off to bed, but I didn’t sleep that night. When I laid awake that night, all I could think of were the times in Girl Scouts when they would ask us what we would do if someone told us they were hurting themselves. We would all say the same thing. “We’d tell a trusted adult.” But how could I break that promise? Especially when they were clearly hurting already, how could I break that trust? How could I?

—

The lion’s mane mushroom grows primarily off dead trees. However, they can occasionally be found on trees which are just barely living. This mushroom uses enzymes to break down the tree and uses the last of the tree’s nutrients to feed itself. This can help recycle the trees back into the soil. Beginner foragers often disregard the hairy mushroom, but it holds many

benefits. Most commonly, it has helped people with sleeping problems and cognitive functions. Although, it would be hard for an experienced forager to find one unless they found a dead tree.

—

Sitting in front of the TV, probably rotting my brain after a long day of school, the stairs' rhythmic creaking alerts me to the movement of someone coming down them. I know it's you; you're the only person in this family light enough to not make a thumping noise when coming down (although, you do have the advantage of always standing on your tiptoes). You pranced into the living room in your light blue T-Shirt and shorts, your dark auburn hair bouncing as you walked in.

"Hi." I waved at you, and you waved back. Your wave was silly, though, you'd scrunch up all five of your fingers to your palm instead of shaking your hand. *It looks fun*, I thought and tested it out with my own fingers to find, it felt fun too. *I'm going to start doing it too*. You were wearing that big smile that said, "I need you to do something for me, please!" You stared at the T.V. for a moment, watching the video I put on to see what it was about, before looking at me again and smiling with that look.

"Um, could you *please* help me make some tater tots?" Your voice went up at the end in a way that told me *No pressure, but pretty please?*

"Sure, but I'm having some too." I stretched out my back and stood.

You shook your arms in joy and ran on your tip-toes back to the kitchen to place yourself at a seat at the island. I followed you, taking my spot at the other end of the island, inputting the number it needed to preheat and grabbing the frozen tater tots from the freezer. While we waited for the oven to beep, we talked. Mainly about the video that I was watching. Once the tater tots were ready to be taken out of the oven, I grabbed two small ceramic plates and tossed about 3/4ths onto one and dropped the other 4th onto the other plate. I uprooted the two plates and moved them to the island. You shook your arms in glee again before looking back up at me.

"Can you grab the ketchup?" You pointed to the fridge as if I didn't know where it was in my own house.

“Yep! On it!” I clicked open the fridge door, pulled out the ketchup and tossed it on the counter. I shook it to force the actual ketchup to the bottom and to avoid the gross tomato liquid and handed it to you; you squirted an unhealthy and probably wasteful amount of ketchup on your plate and handed me the ketchup. I did the same thing to my plate. You popped one of the Tater Tots into your mouth as you started to eat the fruits of my labor.

“What would you do without me?” I asked as I started to eat.

“Probably not have tater tots.” You smiled. I smiled back.

—

The magic mushroom, or the psilocybe cubensis, is most likely the most popular mushroom to exist because of its psychoactive properties. This mushroom just so happens to practice commensalism. It grows primarily on dung, but can be found on wood chips occasionally. However, the idea of commensalism has been long debated, as some scientists believe that since no matter what, everything has at least some impact on what it is interacting with. But if any mushroom were to display commensalism with the “host” on which it grew, it would be the magic mushroom. This mushroom practically gives nothing to the waste which it grows on, while said waste gives it a place to grow that is often avoided by animals.

—

Walking through the dry heat and streets of a small town in Colorado named “Creede,” we stepped away from the gathering at the ‘Pink House’ and walked towards our small rented cabin. Our back-and-forth chatter was the most natural thing in the universe. We bounced between topics like a pinball machine; loud, obnoxious, a little too fast to keep up with and, when you’re in the right mindset, fun. We walked past the vacant playground of the small town, and you pointed it out.

“We should go to the playground!” You smiled and pointed at the fenced in playground.

“Yeah!” It looked like fun, and despite us leaving the gathering early, I’d rather spend my summer outside. “But first let’s head to the cabin, I need Advil,” I said.

“Yes, of course, I need to change my shoes too, before we go to the playground.”

“Yeah.”

We both showed our teeth in a grin, but it didn’t seem like the sun was smiling.

No, it seemed like the sun was giving more of a malicious glare down onto the two of us as the temperature cranked up and stepped down onto the asphalt.

“Ugh, it’s so hot,” I complained. “Why does it have to be hot.”

“It’s summer. What did you expect? Also, it’s not that bad,” you quipped. It was to be expected, really. I hate the heat.

“That’s unfair. You could wear a snow coat in this weather and be fine.” You had always been impervious to the weather, wearing shorts in snow and sweaters in summer. I, on the other hand, would always get too hot too fast. In September, I would beg for our Dad to not take the A.C. out of my room.

“It’s not unfair. You’re just being dramatic. It’s not that hot out, you’re just wrong,” you said.

“You can’t gaslight me about the temperature.”

Soon enough, we arrived to the sanctuary of the small cabin near the town’s entrance. I pulled the key out of my pocket, shoved it into the socket and twisted before forcefully pushing in on the door. The cabin was very cozy. And small. The first room contained a small table with four chairs (although, I doubted all four members of our family could comfortably fit at it), a green-ish couch sitting in front of a TV, and a kitchen shaped like an ‘L’ in the left corner. To the right of the end of the kitchen counter was a small doorway leading to a thin hallway; in the hallway, to the right were bunk beds and to the left was a door to the bathroom. At the end of the hall was a bedroom. You went straight for the bunk beds and plopped down on my bed (you insisted on taking the top bunk, which I was fine with because it meant I could set up a curtain of blankets to cover the bottom bunk; we work well together like that) to undo your fancy black shoes and toss on some more comfortable ones.

“Kay, I’m ready,” I announced after dry swallowing a couple Advil. I didn’t feel like getting water.

“Don’t rush me!” You struggled with tugging your shoes off. “I wouldn’t need to rush you if you hurried up.”

“Oh, shush.”

It only took you a few moments more to locate your comfortable flip-flops and for us to head out the door. It seemed the sun had moved from its position to settle comfortably to the West. A slight breeze had taken the place of the burning heat, meaning that instead of the beating sun, loose dirt flew into our eyes. Somehow, we both got dirt into our eyes at the same time and we, in sync like a pair of psychic siblings, dropped our heads and started aggressively rubbing at our eyes. Once the dirt had run its course of torture, we walked toward the playground to explore a little until it was dark and our parents had to call us home.

—

The fly agaric is the most popular mushroom of all the species. This red mushroom has white spots on its cap which come from the veil that is around the mushroom as it grows. As it grows the white veil pops, spreading the excess on the cap. This means that the fly agaric can lose its spots. This mushroom has a mutualistic relationship with the birch trees it grows on; the fly agaric shares the nutrients that it captures in the soil with the birch trees, and the birch trees share the nutrients from the rain that it receives. This relationship is what makes these mushrooms so easily dispersible, as it is now a global fungus.

'Cause in a room with fizzing Coca-Cola ceilings, my grandmother lay dying. 'Cause this was about the time that my blue bear's chest began to split, spilling fluffed fiberfill out onto the sofa's plastic sheath. 'Cause I was too young to understand why people cared so damn much about virgin leather. —
Everything in that house —
synthetic. Scotchgarded sofas. Scotchgarded souls.

'Cause if something snips your heart out of its cage too fast, or if the brindled burns of your heritage twine together a million omens every night, the sky seems speckled, you find your feet turning into fins.

'Cause no glorious Mayflower brought my family to another world, just two boys on a 12-foot boat, one already dead.

Great-grandfather was hungry for life, he wanted to drink from that fabled fountain, clung to mortality's thinning threads with the fury and fear of too many undried deaths.

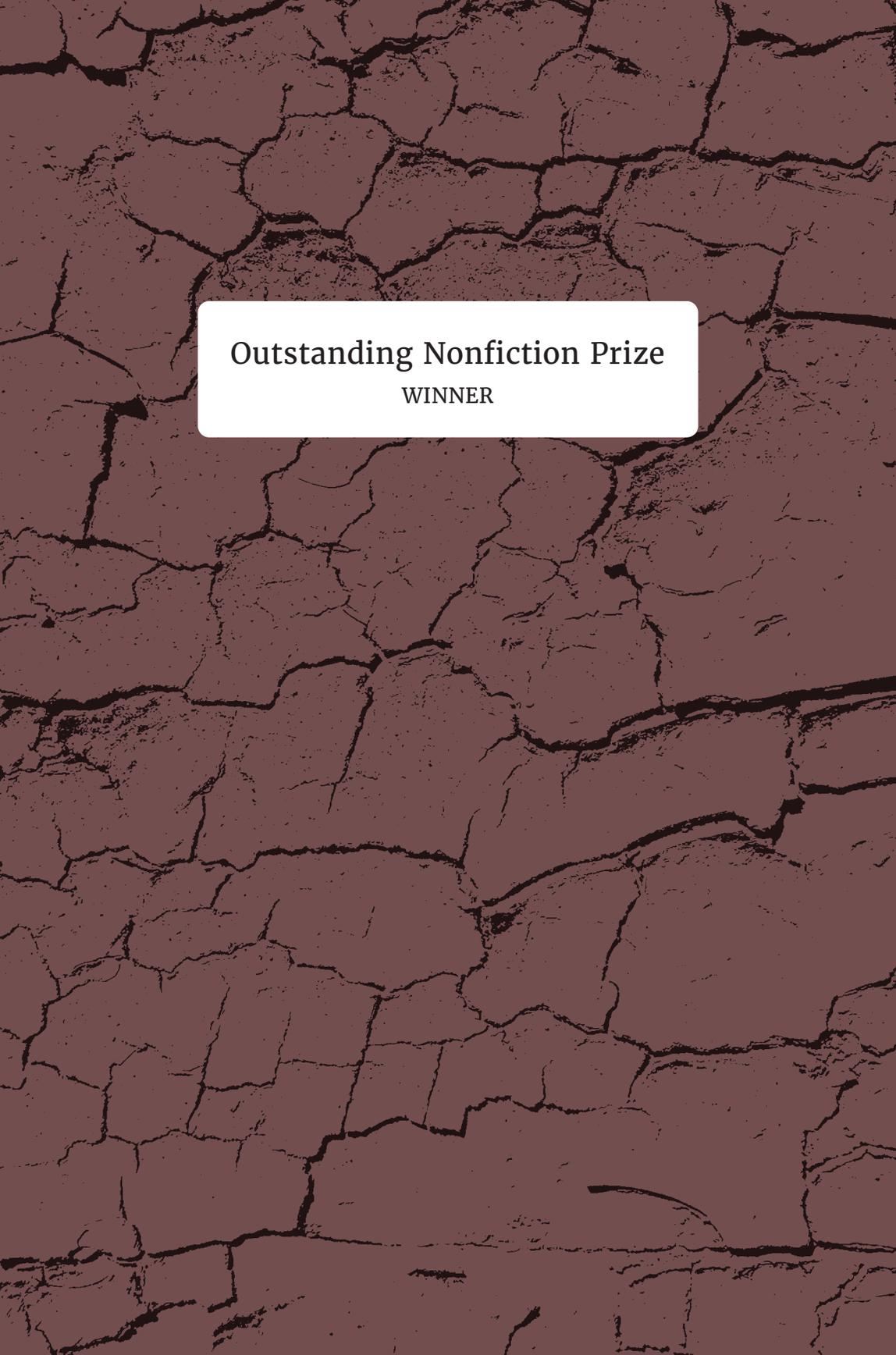
This yearning churns through our veins, the pulsing power of inherited hope.

The doctors say my grandmother died of cancer.

They do not understand that it is these dreams that are too much to hold in such crude vessels.

They live in the buzz of the AC and the click of the stove.
Flickers to the world,
but eternal fires to us.

Kindred Kindlings



Outstanding Nonfiction Prize

WINNER

Fragments

1. Birth

The first time you saw the sun was when you were only two months old and your mom took you to a fortune teller. He gave you your Chinese name, described your character, and delivered your future on a silver platter that his frail fingers clutched loosely. Your mom tells you that, only moments after tracing the soft lines swirling your palm, he predicted you would be an intelligent, driven girl, born to be a worldly diplomat, fated to have a heart of gold.

When she first told you this, you could not help but feel your entire body swell with pride. Now, you believe it'd be a good idea for your parents to locate that fortune teller and ask for a refund.

2. Asian (sometimes)

It's nice being Asian because you know your friends are aware you have the best school lunches. The thermos of fried rice you bring with the sweet sausage cut up into small chunks. The chicken katsu with cherry tomatoes and cucumber sticks on the side. The pan-fried gyoza lined up in a three-by-two array in your LunchBot container. Your Asian is something that stands unwavering and proud until mentions of stinky tofu and chicken feet emerge to drag it down. Suddenly, you cannot stop your body from grimacing and shaking, running and shying away from what people think you are, worried that any sense of familiarity with such delicacies would corroborate their belief that you stick bats in your mouth.

You could try to stand up for yourself, play the soundtrack of your bloodline laughing and drinking on a winter's evening, eating chicken feet painted in numbing red sauce, and swiping cups of tea off a Lazy Susan as the fog sweeps itself across the restaurant windows and bundles you all in the warm, yellow light. Or maybe, you can allow your body to shudder and jerk in all different directions as you whip your head back and permit your chest to spasm with laughter and regret, joining your peers in their anti-stinky tofu protests.

But you know that such an effort wouldn't change anything. So you remain seated, tight-lipped and nodding because, in this colloquial language, both silence and noise fail to convey your truth anyway.

In February, most people wear red for Valentine's Day, but you do it to wrap yourself in blessing and good luck. You say you love Chinese New Year: you and your Asian friends will ask each other how much money you have all received and what food you have all been eating any time the subject comes up. But what you will not talk about is how you have condensed Chinese New Year's fifteen days into one, thinking, if it weren't for the phone calls to relatives and the red envelopes that slip into your palm, would this day even exist anymore? You suck a little harder on your White Rabbit candy. You receive another red envelope. You let the good luck and fortune melt on your palm.

Spring break rolls around, and you sit on a plane, ready to endure the fifteen-hour flight to Taiwan. When the flight attendant comes by with her cart, asking your mom what 飲料¹ she wants or if she would just like 水², your mom chooses the latter, and as the flight attendant gives your mom a bottle of 水, you start mentally practicing to tell her that you want 杯可樂³. But when

1 drink
2 water
3 a can of soda

her gaze flickers over to you, she opens her mouth and *drink* topples out instead of 飲料, *water* instead of 水. You stare at her, trying to process why this encounter is nothing like what you envisioned it to be.

Thankfully, there are a few options you can consider here:

Snatch one of the plastic cups stacked on the side of her cart, and let the sweat that formed on your neck from frantically practicing your Mandarin under the buckles of your breath dribble into it. When the warm concoction of stress and salt fills the plastic to its brim, offer her a drink in Mandarin—if you can manage to get the words out without the cup overflowing—and right as she opens her mouth to answer, chuck your burden at the crisply ironed uniform she is wearing.

The other option you can consider is properly answering her question. This is the option you end up choosing, telling her that you would like *a soda*.

You cower in your seat as she places the chilled beverage in your hand, watching the heat from the pads of your fingers melt the condensation and cause the droplets to bleed and roll down the can. You thank her—in English—and she nods her head and rolls the cart away to ask the passenger behind you what they would like today. She asks them in Mandarin.

You arrive in Taiwan, and for the next few days, mornings are filled with walks to the nearby 7-Eleven that sings an automated tune when you open the door. Afternoons consist of lying around in your Ah-Ma⁴'s apartment wondering what dinner is going to be. Evenings are filled with night markets and noodle soups and unbuttoned pants after eating too much. Occasional thoughts of living here scatter themselves throughout your stay.

4 grandma

You take out your phone to take pictures of every dish placed in front of you and of every shop you pass that has a cute sign. You don't bother trying to hide the tourist in you anymore because every native can tell you are one at first glance anyway. Your Ah-Ma says that it's just because you dress like an American and have the body language of one. This answer annoys you because you were hoping it would be something you could help. Either way, the photos are worth receiving prolonged gazes and questions asking where you are from. You put them up on your Instagram in a series of stories and posts, and you are reminded how satisfying it is to display what you are up to; this international getaway, it makes you a little more interesting, a little more worldly, a little more exotic.

Your photos are all imbued with these messages: *Look at the red-roofed temples. Admire the wide range of scenery: the clear blue lakes to the bustling evening streets. Watch me devour this delicious bowl of beef noodle soup and wish you could lick a droplet of broth from my spoon.* On a screen, your Asian looks better than ever, but as you peer out the balcony of your Ah-Ma's apartment to observe the 6 p.m. streets, you notice a young, uniformed girl leaving the local cram school, heading over to a run-down building settled within the nook of a desolate alley. You take note of the violin case secured in her hand. You remember your mom telling you that most kids in Asia stay in school till the evening. You recall a different time when you were complaining about practicing piano, and she countered your whining by telling you that she used to take piano class right after school till 9 p.m.

You watch the schoolgirl look right and left before crossing the street, only to disappear into the crevice of two dingy buildings shortly after. Noticing how dark the streets have grown, you look up at the gray sky, trying to see where the early evening's light has gone. But as your eyes burn into the heart of Taiwan, discerning the heads of all structures, taxis, grocery stores, and other lurking suspects, you fail to find who is responsible for swallowing the sun, and you slowly come to understand the fact:

This could never be your home.

3. House Inventory

- ★ The purple thermos that always smells a little bit like fried rice
- ★ The piano books and Certificate of Merit feedback sheets that sit on top of the grand piano (you quit last year, and you never looked at the feedback you received)
- ★ The Taiwanese tongue your grandma gave your mother but your mother didn't give you
- ★ Your red envelopes that sit in your parents' cabinet with crisp tens and twenties buried in them
- ★ The AP Chinese workbook on the hallway countertop (you wanted to take the exam Freshman year)
- ★ The Gen-Z vernacular your parents will never understand
- ★ The loud, crocheted beanie that your Ah-Ma gave you. Have you ever worn it? Will you ever?
- ★ The dream of having a high school boyfriend that your mother has crushed between her palms
- ★ Home-cooked leftovers sitting in the fridge for the last two days (you wanted takeout instead)
- ★ The Post-It notes with reminders scribbled on them that your mom madly sticks on the computer but never takes down
- ★ Shrimp crackers that melt on your tongue
- ★ The way your mom drapes a blanket over your dad when he falls asleep on the couch

- ★ The faded photos of your parents with little dates scribbled in the corners. You wonder if their problems were anything like yours. You wonder if they were anything like you. You wonder if such history even matters.

x. Error

We skip the number between 3 and 5 because Ah-ma says that at any sign of death, we must run and hide.

5. Patterns

Did you ever notice that your mom didn't know how to react when her dad died? Did you ever notice the silence that spoke in the dining room when it was just the two of them? Did you ever notice how little they had to say when they looked each other in the eyes?

Did you ever notice the way your mom doesn't hug you? Did you ever notice the way she leaves you in your room to cry? Did you ever notice the way she stresses that utter independence is good for a young girl? Did you ever notice that she hasn't said I love you in a while?

Did you ever think that maybe you didn't notice her try?

6. A Letter

Dear Daughter,

In a world where we are bound together by red string, I know you like to cut our ties.

Did I ever tell you how hard it is to be a mother? How hard it is to be yours? You twist and you turn and your straining is causing too many knots to gather themselves amongst our strings. I know that I feed you broken stories of a love that knows no bounds. I know that the calluses on my fingers cut your raw skin as I wash

your back. I know that you are working for the knife, filing away at the strings until they shred, the threads falling limp and loose until you make your final cut, striking the ground: the finishing note of your sonata. But I know that no matter how many times I wake up to find no one on the other end of the red road, I will always look for your loose thread, bend my knees and reach my palm down to tie our strings together and make ends meet.

So do not fret. Do not hide. Do not turn and run away. Our strings are bound together; I will not let you go so easily.

7. Yours

You watch movies of blonde hair and blue eyes winning the man over and over again. You tell yourself that one day you will experience that win too. One day, he will tell you that your bobba-colored eyes are beautiful. He will cup his palms around your face and lean his forehead against yours. He will tuck your hair behind the shell of your ear, and you will feel the wind blow against your cheek as he whispers, "It's you. It's always been you."

Watch the girls with the slim thighs and long torsos make him fall onto his knees. Wish you did not have your stubby Asian frame. Wonder why it's never you. Notice that on the rare occasion that black hair and brown eyes win, they have been washed over in white; they do not fear letting their parents' words fly off their palms and shatter like glass; they do not know what it means to grieve.

Your friends convince you to attend a party at the house of a boy named Chris. Or maybe it was Nathan. Or maybe it was Matthew. It doesn't matter. Hear about early first kisses and sex, drugs and alcohol. Agree and laugh. Try to live life merely for the sake of satisfaction and fun. Smell the scent of nicotine that puffs out of toothy grins and sinks in between sofa cushions. Bear witness to the lines on your palm falter and twitch and wilt. Watch as they waste away, decaying from pride to corpse to weary bone.

Wonder if this ache will ever abandon you, if the gold the fortune teller found on your hands will crawl its way back to life. Let your grief wander, merely love that doesn't know where to go. Think about going home. Dread seeing your mom. Wish that you were wrapped between her arms.

When she shows up at Chris'/Nathan's/Matt's doorstep to pick you up, you get in the car and notice the bags of groceries sitting next to you. Habitually, you find the shrimp crackers and open the bag to pop one into your mouth, letting the umami soak your tongue. You watch the crumbs fall onto your lap and into the dimples of black leather, gathering together to spell out your sins with their unshapely bodies and pollute the air with their seafood scent. You remind yourself to vacuum the car later, but you will forget. And your mom will end up cleaning up after you, the same as all the other times you have made a mess.

Your mother tells you that she has one final errand to run: the secluded plaza where the Japanese supermarket is. But you never remember pulling into the vacant lot that night; you only remember the sound of the car locking and your mom's grabbing her cloth bag from the trunk to disappear into the store's white light. You wait for her to come back, your eyes falling shut as you plunge into the leather seats.

You dream of an autumn, not quite golden and not quite browned, one that submerges you in a burial of leaves. You see a figure next to you, their face blurred and the outline of their body fuzzy. They reach for your face, stopping when their fingers are less than an inch away, the five joints not daring to take that final step until they hear your permission. You lean your head forward so that their hand grazes your cheek, and they press their lips to your temple, sealing your ache with a kiss.

You close your eyes to inhale slowly, but your breath hitches as you feel the heat of a gentle caress leave your body. You open your eyes to see that it is no longer autumn, but winter; to realize that nothing is with you other than a faint memory of

tenderness thrumming along your skin. You feel something wet trickle from where the remnants of a kiss remain. You sit up, and it drips from your forehead, down the side of your cheek, and slopes off the jut of your jaw. It dribbles onto your hand, and you look down to see red bloom across your fingers and rain onto soft patches of snow. You quietly watch as your blood thaws the white blankets to reveal the soil underneath, too distracted to notice that winter is suddenly growing into spring, too lost to pray for your rebirth to come.

You are dying, but that's the kind of thing you realize only once you are dead.

When you open your eyes, you see your mom in the front seat of the car, ready to head back home. You mean to tell her you love her, but you fail to stop salt from slicking your face, from falling into the dips of the backseat to join the crumbs. You tell your mom that you're sorry, that you wish you could be better, but that you wish you weren't so much like her. She reaches her hand out to cradle your face; you let yourself hide in the shelter of her palms.

You tell her that you're sorry. She tells you that she's always understood.

You both sit and listen to the sounds: the opening and closing of the supermarket door, as if to say, *You are still here*; the dying whistle of the wind, as if to say, *Your time has not run out yet*; the rise and fall of your mother's chest, as if to say, *nothing at all*.

Outstanding Nonfiction Prize

RUNNER-UP

Ponytail

I used to wear my hair in a ponytail every day. It was a nuisance if it wasn't pulled back—always tangled and in my face—but if it was up in a ponytail, it was sleek and pretty. Mom would take a hairbrush and an elastic to it in the morning, and I wouldn't think about it for the rest of the day. My ponytail would bounce and swing like Betty Cooper's as I walked down the hallways at school, and I never even had to look at it.

No one else in my family had hair like mine. Mom's was thin and the color of milk chocolate. Dad's was impossibly thick and pitch black. My sister inherited Mom's thin. I somehow inherited both—Dad's thick underneath *and* Mom's frizzy on top. My sister got milk chocolate; I got 80% cacao. She got “I wish it had more volume,” and “Maybe I should get bangs to make it interesting,” while I got, “Oh my god I'm so done like it never does what I want it to do and I always end up looking like Natasha Lyonne.”

I started to hate my hair. It would get puffy and huge when I let it air-dry, and Dad would jokingly compare me to the lion from Narnia. I got so frustrated with it that by the end of kindergarten, I was asking Mom to put my hair in a ponytail before school every day. Sometimes she'd complain about how tangled my hair was because of how I slept or that she was going to be late for work, but she never stopped making it. She was so reliable and just so *good* at it. Because of her, I never had to learn how to do it myself.

I remember that she went on a work trip when I was in first grade. The morning after she left, I had to ask my uncle to do my ponytail for me. The one he made was lumpy and loose in all the wrong places. I ended up going to school with my hair down for those few days. It was frizzy and I was miserable, but Mom was back by Monday, and then my hair was smooth and perfect, and all was

good again.

Then second grade came around. Mom started sleeping in more instead of getting up early to make smoothies for breakfast, and Dad started making instant oatmeal instead. He packed my bag for me and sent me off to school in the morning, telling me to have a good day but not giving me that familiar lipsticked peck on the cheek. On the weekends, he made waffles with sausage and bacon instead of her grapefruits and yogurt bowls. She started sitting on the couch a lot more, reading or watching TV. She couldn't stand up long enough to get a glass of water, much less make my sister and me food or get us ready in the morning.

She started talking more, yet somehow saying less. She started forgetting things, like her coworkers' names and her phone number. She started criticizing and complaining, all the time.

She started doing a lot of things. She stopped doing my hair.

So there I was every morning before school, standing at the bathroom sink for half an hour trying to get my hair to behave. I tried brushing it smooth. I tried wetting my hands to tame it down. I found video tutorials and WikiHow articles, but none of those girls had hair like mine. I tried lemon juice, cocoa powder, and even Vaseline. Nothing helped. No matter what I did, my ponytail was never good enough.

Extended family started visiting us more often, and they would stagger their trips, so at least one of them was with us at all times. We moved my stuff into my sister's room so we could have a proper guest bed. Adults I had never seen before started coming by to talk to my mother, not interrupting her as she called them by the wrong names and talked about nothing for hours.

She started walking less. Dad bought her a walker. Then she lost the ability to walk, so he bought her a wheelchair. Eventually, he bought one of those remote-controlled beds with rails on the sides. He let my sister and me try it out when it was first set up. When they moved Mom into it, he took a leather chair from the living room to put in the corner so he could sit with her while she slept.

I sat in that chair too sometimes, and Mom and I would watch TV together. There was this one time *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* was on TV, and they were just getting to the good part when Mom threw up all over herself. I ran from the room to get Dad, but

he was working. One of the nurses would clean it up later. After that, I couldn't bring myself to go back and sit with her for a whole month.

In third grade, I got into this fancy ballet school where all the little girls had to look and act the same, and all their mothers were fussy and wore huge sunglasses. The whole scene was like *Dance Moms* but somehow worse: *Ballet Moms*. (A shiver just passed down Abby Lee's spine.) The mothers would make these identical ballet buns for their little girls—it was almost like a source of pride if your daughter looked exactly like all the others. My aunt was worried that I wouldn't fit in, so she came over one Sunday afternoon and taught Dad the whole hair procedure. He got the bun down just fine, but he couldn't do the ponytail—the first step. I reluctantly agreed to do that myself.

Over the next few months, we perfected the ballet hair routine. I would do my best with the ponytail and pass it off to Dad for the pins and hairnet, before it was back to me for hairspray and finishing touches. But Dad was getting too busy to make my bun every day. He was certainly home more often, but he just didn't have time to help anyone but Mom.

I had to start doing my ballet hair myself. Sometimes my buns were lopsided. Sometimes they were a little too high or a little too low. Eventually I could make it look pretty good with the help of some extra pins and clips. I could fake it well enough to not stand out.

I'm pretty sure I was in fourth grade—about a year after Dad stopped doing my hair—when he told my sister and me that the two of us needed to go sit with Mom for a bit. He said we could tell her anything we wanted because she couldn't speak or move and it might sound like she's in pain, but she's not, and don't worry, she can still hear you.

Just make sure you tell her you love her.

My sister and I squeeze into the leather chair together. Neither of us knows what to say. I can hear my heartbeat. The two of us sit there and watch our mother's chest rise and fall.

Rise, fall. Rise, fall. Rise, fall.

I try to breathe with her.

Rise, fall. Rise, fall.

“Hi, Mom.”

Rise, fall.

“I’ve been doing my own hair for ballet.”

Rise, fall.

“My bun looks just like all the other girls.”

Rise, fall.

I’ll be fine.

Rise, fall.

If you really have to go, I can do this myself.

Rise, fall.

I finally learned how to do my own ponytail.



SHIVIKA PANGHAL

Flawed reflection in upside down mirror

On Vomiting (Or Bubblegum)

The last time I threw up
my hair was still long enough
to knot along my stomach.

Clinging to the state phone
with clammy tear-stains stumbling
over buttons as waves lurched
up & down my esophagus.

Padding back & forth over
linoleum tiles too old to call
out yet too young to breathe when
Vulturnus turned hot seas in my gut.

Too young to know the blessing
of gagging out disease.

& when the storms turn & tear
at my stomach lining I now wish
to regurgitate up my throat.

Cram peroxide & mentos & anti
depressants to retch up the dinner
I ate last week when my rotting
reprieved for a second to hunger.

Spit into the kitchen sink anything
other than salvia interlaced
with artificial bubblegum as a

sorry attempt to curb nausea.

Carve out the virus from my brain stem
& drag it out my throat.

For Her Soul

for her soul – version 1.

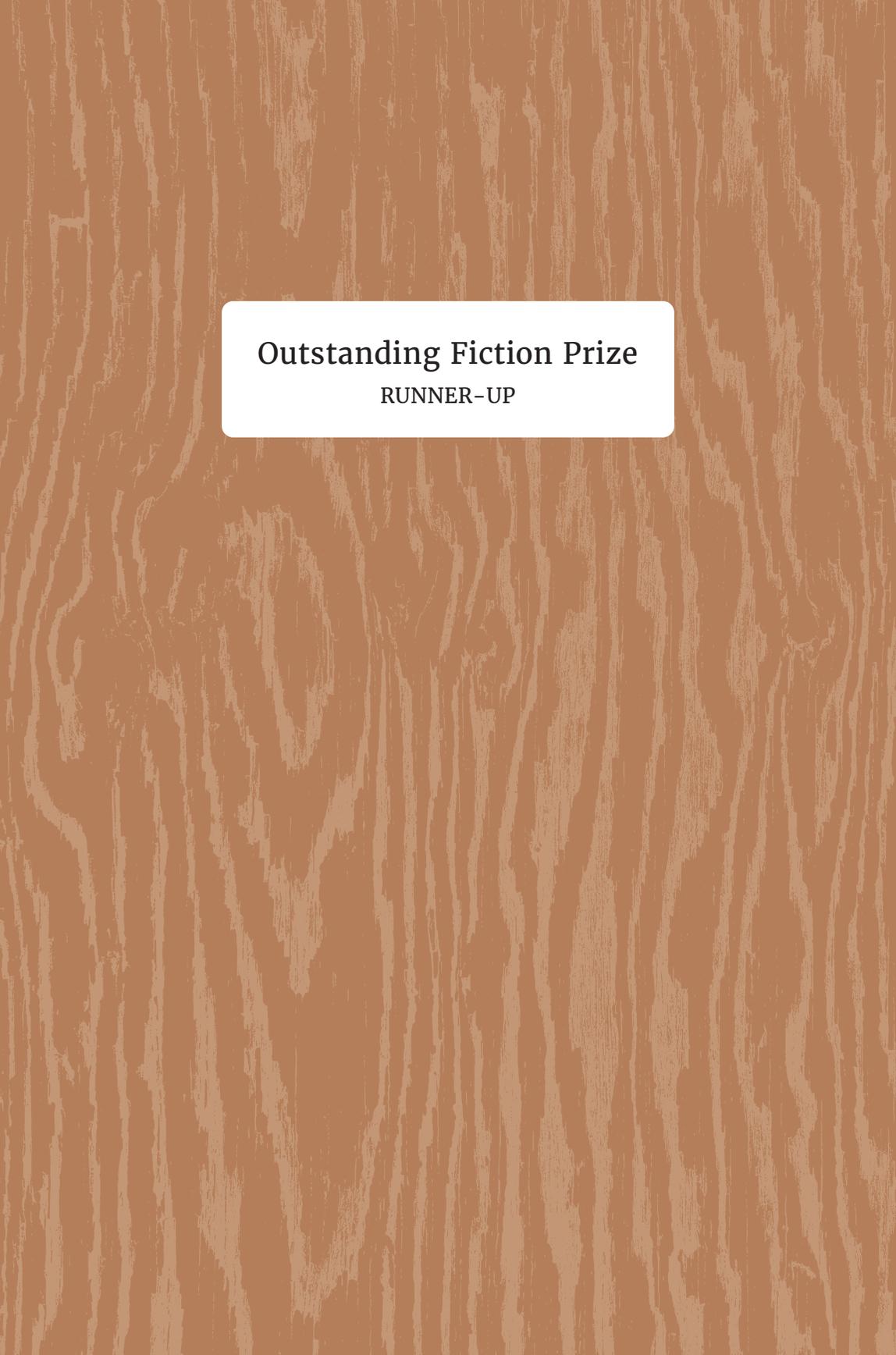
For the soul's sweet plea in plaintive tone,
In Babylon's blaze, where smoky petals are sown,
Semiramis weeps, her gaze growing dim,
The torch's blue fire, a rusted hymn.
The celestial queens, their black pearls descend,
The idol crumbles, dreams in marble rended.
As the soul shatters in whimsical flight,
As a well dries up, its water in plight.
Beneath the waves, a sea in silence sleeps,
A trident-forked path, where crystal speech creeps.
If dust and ashes, why does language reveal,
The bareness of body, emotions to peel?
No tower gleams green in the sun's last kiss,
The 'I's final solace, a stillborn bliss.

for her soul – version 2.

In the burning garden of Babylon, petals of smoky flames,
Dimming eyes of fading Semiramis,
Azure fire roaring in the rust-kissed torch,
Heavenly queens' rolled black pearls.

The idol is destined to shatter marble-like,
As the soul dreamily breaks,
A cracked well with dwindling water,
Silent seabed beneath the waves.

A trident-shaped barricaded crossroads,
Encountered crystalized human speech.
If dust and ashes, why does the tongue wash away your bodily layers,
leaving you bare?
No tower shines green in the evening sunlight,
The 'I's final solace, a stillborn bliss.

The background of the entire page is a vertical wood grain pattern in shades of brown and tan. The grain is irregular and organic, with darker spots and lighter streaks. In the center, there is a white rounded rectangular box containing text.

Outstanding Fiction Prize

RUNNER-UP

Ribs

I. We start again and so begins a new version. This is about how it goes: A sultry evening teeters on the bottom edge of July. We sit at the red picnic table by the lake. The scarlet heat tattooed between our ribs. This is the month when the waning sun has to fight as it goes down, leaving a smattering of colors, bruising in the sky. The sun, a cooked orange. Lily and her subtle laughter as she swallows cubes of watermelon, seeds peering from gaping pores. Drop dead gorgeous at eighteen. Still is, I would bet, as long as we keep the film rolling and the music playing. As long as it plays in a different direction. But it is still early and we are outside, with the summer gardens and fatty worms wheedling their ripening bodies into leaves and fruit, turning produce into sweet rot.

II. I listen as she goes on about her grades and her new boyfriend. How she cried over multivariable so many times during the spring semester, how she's so glad it's over, how she can't quite describe Jack but he's beautiful, he's so in love, he can hold her and break her into pieces and how that's equally as beautiful. And goddamn if there isn't anything more handsome than a slender boy with knives for hands. Jack with a new letterman and a breaking temper. She is looking for advice, I know, but she is no protégé and I am no one better, only older. In our new version, however, she will open her mouth and I will give her anything.

III. Lily peels open an orange, rind gaping open, a mouth of white tendrils stringing off the tender flesh; she pulls off a slice of fruit, pops it into her mouth. Somewhere, the thin film of orange has split open, leaving a trickle of juice running down her hand, clear and freshly squeezed. She is quiet, then licks at the sticky trail and

smiles sheepishly, lips pressed a thinning pink.

IV. Two months later, during the fall semester, she calls me at night, the line buzzing and alive. He's leaving for college tomorrow, she says, barely audible. I don't understand. I'm so sad. Why, when I knew all of this.

And this time, I'll say anything, anything else instead of: Don't be, he'll come back. I'm sure. I bite a piece of my laughter off and hand it to her.

V. She doesn't talk about him for the longest time, and soon, autumn passes by with its allergies and Werther's toffee candies and late-night phone calls. So many late submissions piled up from magazines, too many tests and projects and reports, that the California trip, originally so far off, has begun to creep up. The days dwindle, and outside, any light after 5 pm has to squeeze its way through the window cracks. I do things without feeling anything. I fall asleep on my desk two times a week when the air in the dormitory has settled to a fresh cold, neck bruised and sour in the morning. The phone barely rings itself awake and the weather grows very still.

She doesn't talk about him for the longest time, and I forget.

VI. December. On the 25th, I hurriedly pack, throwing in changes of clothes, my laptop, and a disposable toothbrush, the plastic cellophane wrapper catching artificial light. I send my mother a *Happy Christmas* text and hope that the gift I've ordered has arrived at her door. No response for the moment. Perhaps because it is so early.

Evening. An hour before the ride to the airport pulls by the block. I rap on the door and it opens; behind her figure, the view of a dormitory spilling out in the background. At that time, there is nothing on my mind except for schoolwork and writing. In our older version of events, I cannot remember what it looked like when I last visited, but something is different. I squint. Maybe it is her hair.

Aren't you supposed to be leaving, she asks; her half-moon smile

sharp. She looks at anywhere, everywhere except me—I see that now. You'll be late.

She is right, I am late, or at least, I will be. The irony, how thick it is. How thick the air is. I swear, in this version, I will notice something else other than her newly trimmed hair and wonder about something else other than where she got the haircut from. I swear, in this version, I will forget about homework. I will see right through her and the new brand of rose blush dusted over the slant of her cheeks. I will ask her about Jack. I will tell her I'm sorry I couldn't save her from herself.

So it goes.

I have enough time to spare, I say, at least to stop by a friend's before the holiday. Merry Christmas, kid.

So it goes.

I hold out the gift from behind my back like an apology. I watch myself enter the room, and an hour later, walk out. I manage something unintelligible before rounding the corner, catching one last glimpse of her face, dimmed by the darkness in the hallway. Her body moth-eaten by the lighting or something else.

VII. I am stupid as I walk down the hallway, and here is where the anger bubbles within me, widening and pulsing and alive, the scene winding again and again; this is the moment where things are set and fate has dealt her cards and now it's too late and I can't change it anymore.

So it goes.

VIII. And of course, they call me barely two weeks later, when I am still in California, a pathetic attempt to escape the cold. It doesn't work. The lake she plummets into is still freezing, ice still crisp and cracking by the bank, lips bluing before she realizes she has to kick for air. Before she realizes she is not a scaly fish meant to be gutted

open as someone's dinner, but a girl in water. Fish out of water, girl on land. Lily, mascara running down her pallid face. Lily, the color choked sick out of her cheeks. Lily, her body rubber and slippery. Lily, desperate enough that when she doesn't belong on this little plot of earth, she throws herself into the next best thing.

She changed her mind, you know, they said, she changed her mind and she tried to come back. And then winter goes but the hand in my heart is still cold.

IX. But in this version of life, sometimes I even imagine she looks behind her, and for a split second, just this once, she doesn't jump. Maybe she looks at me and feels bad, maybe she suddenly realizes she can't swim, not at all; I don't know what holds her back but nor do I care. I imagine I have stopped the roll of film from playing out its very end, smashing the makeshift gears into a wall, fracturing the puppet master's delicate fingerings at the joints.

She is frozen, unstuck in time. The whirring of machines in the background. She is holding out a last lifeline with that look, an almost withering expression that untangles itself into a plea, her line of sight stretching out into something tangible to hold on to; a line to reel her back. She will not suffer the same kind of hostility from me that she has suffered in death.

Deadening silence. So it goes. I'll call this closure.

X. That night, we talked about boys and writing, family and the summer. The room cooling and the air sliding off our skin. She tells me about her parents, sipping the word divorce as her lips curl around her glass of water. How she doesn't understand why her mother stays. How she's top of the class, but only because she copied answers from Jeanette in exchange for the hard copy edition of *Game of Thrones*. How she thinks it was worth it because she hates the series, and anyway, it was her father who bought her the set so it doesn't really matter all that much. How she is seeing somebody but doesn't know how to describe him. Beautiful and sharp to the touch. Pain and blood all over the place. How summer was the best time of

her life, when we savored fruit and love. Love all over the place. Rot and death in the gardens; all over the place. How she's written a new poem, wants me to take a look at it, wants to get it published, and do I prefer Keats or Auden? Modern or postmodern? Feelings about Eliot? How she wanted nothing more than to be like me, with family and no more love to give than that.

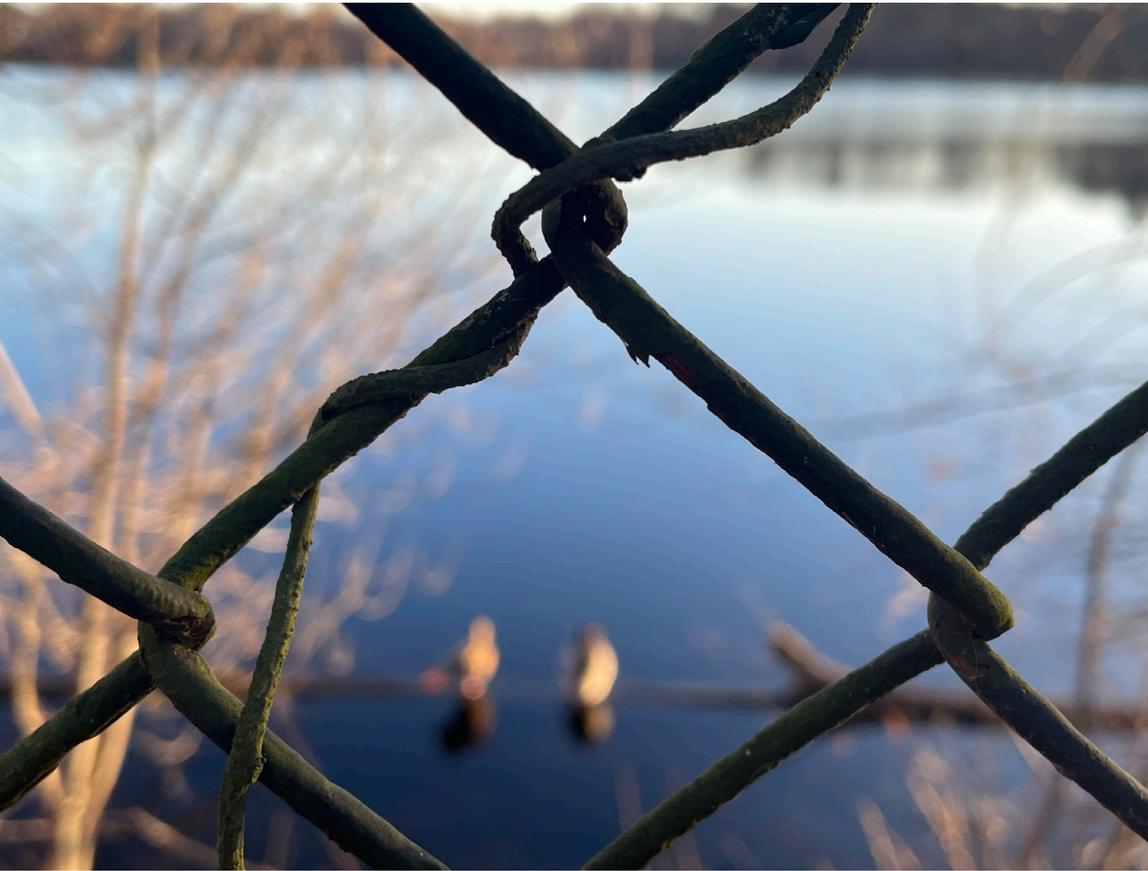
She doesn't like her own skin, she says it's sagging with liquor and love. Wishes she could peel it off like webby orange skin, blood running down her open palms.

She hates love more than she hates *Game of Thrones*.

XI. But in this version of life, I keep her there, in the small dormitory, our legs crisscrossed, sitting on the couch. We talk and I throw the deadbolt on the door and she can't get out anymore. There is no lake in sight. She is safe and sad and I am just sad.



ADDY THOME
Following the Current



DANTE DE JONG
Two Ducks

The Sun Sets Behind Silver Mountains

In the dry air of Denver, Imogen rocks on the porch swing while her mother paces in the kitchen, waiting. She's stuck in the same fetal position she sleeps in. She clings tighter to her knees. Her shoulders tense from the weight of her mother's own rigidity, passing onto her daughter with each counter wiped and candle lit. Lost in the view, she barely notices when a truck grumbles onto the property.

"Imogen?" a voice calls from the end of the driveway. It sounds like her brother, but much rustier than she recalls, like his daily whiskey intake is finally having an impact on his otherwise pristine health, coating his throat in orange-brown-red muck. Though maybe it's just the twelve-hour drive. Goosebumps coat her as the wind washes cold air onto her bare legs.

She walks towards Garret, slowly, her bare feet crunching the gray gravel below, wincing at the sharp rocks that lodge themselves between her toes. She swallows. When she's finally close enough to see his particulars, she realizes half of his face is unfamiliar.

"You grew a beard," she says, maintaining full neutrality. He chuckles and yanks the bags from the bed of the truck.

"What do you think of it?" Garret asks. She squints. In this dusk lighting, it looks almost gray, as if the black had faded from time in the sun. Her mind wanders to them in the bathtub together, both with clean, baby faces, a time before the divide between them. And then to a distant memory of her first boyfriend in the back of his mother's minivan. She always left with an inexcusable beard rash.

"What does your girlfriend think of it?" With this, he smiles, flashing his unbrushed, yellow-white teeth wide.

"Ask her yourself."

Imogen doesn't even see her until she's shut the door. She can't

be more than five foot two – like, half the size of her mammoth brother. She’s seen photos of them before, but something about watching her get out of his black Ford makes Imogen rethink every decision which led her to being here, in a cabin in the woods with only her family for company. Did she ever think these luxuries were worth what she’d have to tolerate? She keeps walking, pressing the pungent regret from her mind.

The two approach the door, each with a plethora of bags in hand, all neutral shades, except for one fuchsia purse, while Imogen trails a few feet behind. Their mother greets Garret with an extended hug. She keeps him tight to her chest and brushes her hand through his greasy hair. It’s a long enough embrace for Imogen to begin assessing the situation that is Lola Bergeson.

She already knows many things, thanks to the infinite power of social media. Her life, according to Instagram, consists only of food, family, and Garret. Imogen of course knows the other basic information. Her date of birth, three years before Garret’s. Her hometown. Her high school. But she knew Lola knew just as much— if not more—about her. Still, what Imogen doesn’t know, and what she wants to know most, is why Garret.

Later in the kitchen, the family stands around the island. In the silence, Imogen realizes how long these three days will be. The painful childhood memories seemed dull from the east coast; the scar tissue had healed over, in favor of the beauty of the mountains. But her brother keeps smiling at her, and a cruel part of her wonders if maybe she’d made it all up. Maybe it wasn’t so bad. These thoughts come through in a mousy voice that she immediately recognizes as her mother. Her real mother—not the one ingrained in her brain—pulls chicken from the fridge and speaks only to Lola.

“We figured, it’s been too long since we’d been somewhere as a family. And with this one across the country.” Her father’s thick hands pat her on the shoulder, and she shrugs him off, smiling meekly at his efforts, as if he’d even spoken to her once that day. They never talked though. Their text thread consisted only of her asking for money, and him sending it. “Bribing her with a vacation really was the only way to get her to visit. Though this is a wonderful surprise too. I’m so glad to finally be meeting you. My son’s been

keeping you from me for far too long. And look at you. God, you are so cute.”

“Well, I’m happy to be here!” Lola says through light laughter. That’s how she looks, too. Light and dewy, like a lotus leaf. Every dig seems to roll right off her.

“Do you need any help with dinner? If not...” Her brother smiles at their mother, hands wrapped around Lola’s small waist, eyeing the door.

“Oh, you two just got here! Why don’t you go unpack? Imogen won’t mind helping me out.” They all look at Imogen, and she nods, then walks to the fridge and pulls out a white onion. Soon after Garret leaves the kitchen, her mother is back in the sitting room with a wine glass in hand and her father sits outside with a cigar while she cooks.

As Imogen sets the table, Garret appears in the dining room. It’s the first time in years she’s been alone with her brother. Her whole body tenses. He stands in the corner, unmoving, and she can’t think of a single excuse to go. Her brother is not entirely unlikable. He drew in an audience at his football games in high school and always hosted the parties at their house after they won. But growing up with him was never easy. They weren’t close.

“God, this is beautiful, huh? Beautiful place. Mom picked out a good one. I know you didn’t see the house from a couple winters back, but it was nothing like this.” Imogen nods. Their parents adore Garret, perpetually look at him the way mothers view their fresh-from-the-womb babies.

“Yeah. It’s nice. I like it.” Their parents never noticed the bruises he’d leave on the walls—or her—when he lost those same games. They defended him even when he lost his juvenile court case. He was their father’s best friend and their mother’s favorite child.

“Yeah?” he repeats. She nods again, folding and refolding the napkin in her hand, trying to maintain her ever-quickenening breathing. Imogen only agreed to the trip out of spite. She didn’t want to miss out on taking photos of the peaks, on the other luxuries she cannot yet afford.

Though it was decided hundreds of miles away

“What do you think of her?” Garret asks Lola.

“Mom?” He laughs at her question.

“No, no. We all know what you think of her. We all know that much. I meant Lola.”

“She seems nice,” she says, then quickly realizes how it sounds. “She’s really pretty.” “She is, isn’t she?” He smiles down at the floor, then, reaches towards his pocket and pulls something out of it.

“You think this is pretty enough for a girl like her?” He opens the black velvet box.

Inside of it is a gold ring with a diamond in the center.

“It’s classy,” Imogene says, her knees shaking beneath her.

“Don’t tell her, okay?” He puts it back in his jacket pocket. “Not that you’ll have to keep it quiet for long. I’m doing it tomorrow.”

“What?” she asks, but without any breath, it comes out like a whisper.

“I wasn’t sure before, but I mean... how couldn’t I? Look at this place.” He gestures towards the floor to ceiling window, towards the sun setting behind the silver mountains. Imogen doesn’t stop bobbing her head, even as he leaves to go out back with their father. Although she dreads any idea of fate, it does feel predestined. She is the only one that will admit how dangerous Garret is. Someone needs to warn Lola. She resets the table until the oven dings.

That same night, Imogen sees it. The sign she’s been waiting for, that she tolerated a dinner with the three least tolerable people she’d ever met for.

Through the shut door, so close to her own room, she hears them fighting. Nothing clear, but there’s yelling, that much is obvious. Imogen initially curls back into her sheets, the heavy quilt lulling her to sleep. But she can’t ignore it.

She knows her brother’s every move. After they fight, he’ll leave. Though they were all in an unfamiliar town, he’d find the nearest bar and drink.

It always gave him so much power—his leaving.

Their mother needed him, lest she stay up all night drinking a warm bottle of white wine and imagining her son dead in a ditch. Fights were soon forgiven in favor of his safety.

Imogen’s suspicions are confirmed when she hears a door slam. She lugs herself off the edge of the queen-sized bed and walks to

their door. Still holding her breath, she knocks on the door.

“Garret?” Lola yells back.

“No.” Then, she adds, “It’s Imogen!”

“Oh, come in!” When she opens the door, she sees Lola sitting on the bed, watching reality TV at a low volume, face unwrinkled. She is too young for Botox, Imogen knows it’s all natural, but it really does seem like her face is artificially frozen. She has absolutely no wrinkles. It sends a chill down Imogen’s spine, the unbothered look on Lola’s face.

“Hi...” Imogen stands awkwardly in the doorway, waiting.

“Hi, hi! Come sit.” She presses pause on her show and pats the bed next to her. “I feel like we’ve barely gotten to speak.”

“Is everything alright between you two?”

“Me and Garret?” Lola presses her eyebrows together. Her face still does not wrinkle, but her confusion comes through clearly in her head tilt, like their old Golden Labrador.

“Yeah, I mean, I heard...” Imogen trails off, and spins the ring on her middle finger. “Everything.”

“Oh yeah, but it wasn’t anything big. Just a disagreement. I try not to sweat the small stuff.” Imogen looks at Lola, her own wrinkles ever present. Lola’s smile isn’t even pained.

“But... are you ok, though? I know how Garret can be. I mean, when we were younger...” Imogen presses her hand against Lola’s knee. She stares heavy into Lola’s blue eyes, refusing to look away. “If you do not feel safe, you can tell me. You should tell me.”

“He’s not hitting me, Imogen, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Imogen stares, forcing her gaping mouth shut. Lola’s bluntness is jarring. She hadn’t even considered that. That he could fight without going too far. That Lola might’ve been perfectly capable of taking care of herself. Tears well in Imogen’s eyes as she removes the hand from the woman’s knee. Her stomach turns. Lola keeps talking, like there’s any more to say.

“I’m sorry, I do know what happened. And he really is sorry about all of it. I’ve seen him sob over it, and you know he doesn’t cry often. But he’s different now.” After a minute or so, Lola looks back at the TV. “Isn’t that why you were willing to come?”

Imogen pushes the door open. Her voice rises, trying to hide her turmoil. “I’m glad you’re ok, Lola. Really.”

She rushes into her room, to her bathroom, and drops her body in the acrylic tub. It's cold against her bare thighs. She turns the knob all the way up and watches steam flood from the silver faucet. It's something she missed, in her tiny shower in her tiny apartment back home. The one thing she can thank her mother and father for.

When the water first touches her, she flinches. But soon, it rises around her. Her sweater clings to her. In the heat, she can think clearly. She'd read that when you die, you relive every moment in seven minutes. This feels like death. The maroon brick home with the waving flag. The hot summers and the long sleeves. The doors with no locks. It makes her queasy to even think of these memories. She leans over and dry heaves, desperately trying to expel whatever is so rotten inside of her.

Her sweater drips as she steps out. The water pools around her feet onto the marble tiles.

She wrings out her sweater, still sticking to her chest.

When the sun rises, Imogen is still in the damp clothes. After changing, she walks out to the sitting room. The house is silent, with everyone but her mother and her gone out to breakfast.

Her mother doesn't greet her. Imogen almost walks past her. But as she flips through a magazine, something stops her.

"Why didn't you stop him?" At first, her mother's face is blank. Quick, realization washes over.

Imogen expects something when she sees that face on her mother. Maybe an apology. As she stands there, asking her mother the question that's made a home on the tip of her tongue, her mother breaks eye contact and flips the page of her magazine.

Disappointment rises in Imogen, a knot in her throat. Though it was small, she thinks to herself that she can find solace in the memory of her mother's face. She recalls what Lola said earlier. Her brother shed tears over the pain he'd caused her. However deep inside, they hold the wretched memories. She wipes the beads of sweat off her forehead and keeps walking.

Summertimes

On the shore, in France's half-open fist
My grandparents built a white-walled house
Urged by the midday sun, the
Balcony's terracotta tiles would
Scorch unassuming feet
But in the cool hush of early
Evening
You could sit on those dirty plastic chairs
And watch the ever moving
Wrinkles of the sea.
Separated from the house only by a lush stretch of
Bursting fruit trees, chalky paths.
Venture
Out to the beach and
Lay upon those silver sands pebbled by nude infants
And threadbare towels.

Breakfast was always a bit of stale
Baguette, seasoned with salted butter and
Apricot jam, sometimes if you got lucky
You could
Get half a passion fruit.

Under the watching sun
And chirping cicadas,
Under the heavy aroma
Of fig trees, under the sting of salt on sun crispened legs
Under the laughing voices of
Parisian tourists
Nestled beneath the vibrant constellations
Was
Me

Love Lies

you lived in my best dreams
the ones where we'd hang the soaking clothes,
take out the trash
where the smell of *soondubu* filled the room
while the silverware was set
red glassy chopsticks, glaring against the flowery tablecloth

nothing became something
the dimly lit hallway with shadows plastered across the wall
housed my hopes
the empty classrooms were enough
i didn't need words
you were enough.
silence felt fulfilling
your head on my shoulder

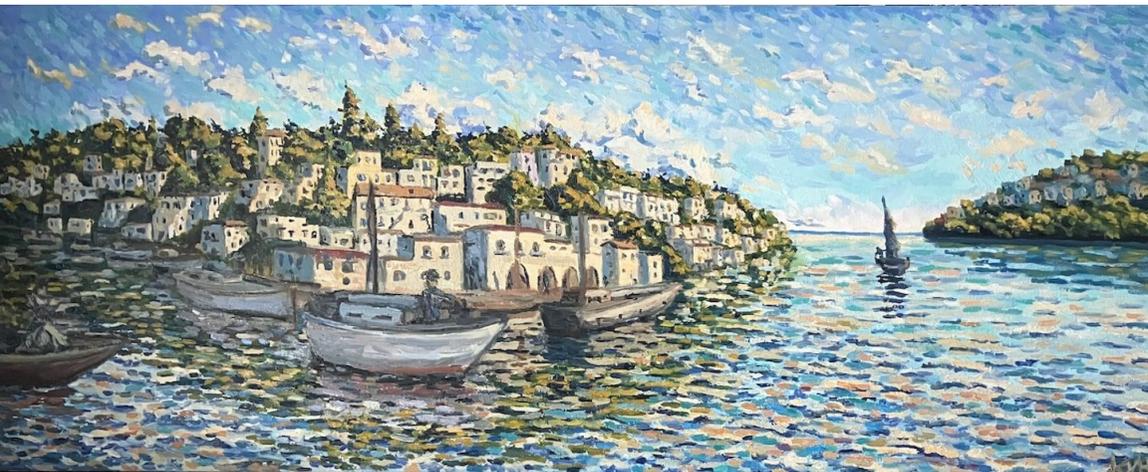
for a second, our chests
rose and fell at the same time
like two watches ticking
i could have sworn

but time caught up
my arm passes the mark of a new day
yours lags behind
my house falls, light fills the hallway
an ethereal light,
of a dying star
a beautiful birth, lies in our painful death



Samuel S. Ford

SAM FORD
untitled



KHAI HA
A Life in Landscape

Stinky Fish

“Nǚ ér (Daughter),” Mama whispered, splintering the stillness that enveloped us in our Nissan’s murmur.

“Yeah?” I respond indifferently, double-tapping the gingham dress on my glaring screen.

Mama exhaled a sigh laden with exasperation. “I know you’re only in middle school and college seems far away...But don’t you think it’s time to start preparing? Working harder?”

Add to cart.

My finger twitched as Mama’s tone plunged into despair.

“You can’t continue wasting time like this. Time is water in a sponge, you must squeeze it out. You always have time to study more math. Practice more violin. Professor Yun’s daughters do homework in the car while you dawdle here and there—in the morning, after school, right before bedtime. Also, does anyone spend an entire hour eating dinner like you?”

My eyes swerved away from my phone, flitting through the darkness and anchoring on Mama’s face in the rearview mirror. Vibrant specks of gas station and automobile lights frolicked on her glasses like Skittles. A minor itch of irritation bubbled within me before retreating.

This lecture will pass.

“Everyone is striving while you lag behind for temporary happiness. Angelina’s brother spends hours every day completing hundreds of—”

My ears are bleeding.

“You know what?” I barked out of impulse, my voice pricking with bitter shards that slashed through Mama’s ramble.

“All you—all you Chinese people do is compare, compare, and compare! Compare to this kid, compare to that nine-year-old violin

concertmaster, compare to these random Harvard siblings with a tiger mom on the internet. What's wrong with you?" I shrieked. Leaning forward, I dug my nails into the plush foam of the passenger seat.

"You Chinese people," Mama reiterated slowly in English, the phrase foreign both in language and context. She fell silent, questioning. Interpreting and tasting each word so innocent on its own, yet monstrous when strung together.

"You? What do you mean, *you Chinese people*? How could you say that to your mother? To yourself? YOUR BLOOD IS JUST AS CHINESE AS MINE!" Mama rived screechingly in Chinese, every syllable firing out like quills, tips seeping outrage.

Or was it grief? Disappointment? Shame?

Lashed by Mama's acidic reprimand, I felt my cheeks bloom into a boiling crimson under the bite of night frost. I sank back into my seat, unsure if I was quivering from anger or embarrassment.

"It's really all you do, though. Comparing," I mumbled.

Maintaining her eyes locked on the inky road, Mama replied softly, "Yes, that's what we do. It's Chinese culture. It's your culture. Don't you consider yourself part of it?"

—

What is Chinese culture? To me:

It's a ceaseless torrent of indecipherable math problems hurled at me from the instant my hands grasped a pencil—the time when each chubby finger merely resembled a bulbous pea pod. Despite bawling through one progressively more horrid book after another, I was...

Never enough. Never *brilliant* enough.

It's an industrious network of children juxtaposed by parents who scrutinize them like jewelers analyzing sapphires. Calculating, establishing product value through a diligent search for scintillating sparkles and glimmers of distorting blemishes. Ambitious jewelers coveting perfection.

It's my austere Baba when he chastised me for even the most trivial matters, his wrath erupting at the first twinkle of a betraying tear. Petrified, I squelched sobs ignited by furiously arched eyebrows

that magnified his forehead wrinkles—canyons carved by hours of memorizing the Chinese–English dictionary. Hours that acted as the key to *Měi Guó* (America, The Beautiful Country). Hours that collected into alphabet soup serenading sleepless nights, devouring youthful onyx hair. Seized by my 4-year-old shoulders and marched to face the ever so familiar cream wall, I’d be whacked on my behind before Baba’s storming departure.

It’s drowning in apologetic guilt, yet forever being too proud to utter the three syllables of *duì bù qǐ*. Pronouncing the last character *qǐ*—briefly dipping in the middle and jolting up into a risen tone—seems to mimic a defiant question. A statement clumsily declaring, *I was wrong, but does that mean you’re right?* Saying *duì bù qǐ* is like forcing a bamboo shoot to squirm out of frozen earth.

Shortly after each timeout, I sat alone on the living room futon that creaked with every hiccup. Sometimes, Baba walked by and ventured closer to sheepishly reveal a cluster of dark chocolate almonds melting in his palm.

A bittersweet apology.

It’s Mama at 9 pm, returning home from a sticky star-studded Texan dusk, a weary smile crinkling her eyes as I flung myself onto her apron and whiffed the canvas cloth saturated in restaurant grease. Clung to her legs as she fingered through the rainbow of homemade bows I shoved into my hair that morning. Licked my lips when she promised to bake red bean rice cake, confectionary magic whisked up during my dreams so that I awoke to glutinous fragrance the next day.

It’s my *wài pó* (grandma), sweeter than tofu pudding. A *wài pó* who scrambled to talk with me in every phone call, her local dialect’s perplexing accents cascading out and tickling my ears. Accustomed to only Standard Chinese, I instinctively winced at hearing the unfamiliar tongue—until I grasped a shimmer of recognition.

“*Xiǎng Wài Pó le ma* (Do you miss Grandma)?”

Wài Pó hushed herself with childlike eagerness as if my answer to her regularly asked question was a baffling riddle.

“*Dāng rán* (Of course)!” I’d exclaim in reassurance, hoping *Wài Pó* could detect my vigorous head nodding. I enjoyed picturing *Wài Pó* clutching her aged telephone with both small, sun-spotted hands. Once a rich wine red, *Wài Pó*’s telephone began its life in the 1990s,

connecting her and Mama, then a budding entrepreneur in Shanghai. Who knew that Wài Pó would one day sail her love across the Pacific?

“*Xiang Wài Pó le* (She misses her grandma),” Wài Pó would repeat a few times smugly, audibly in glee.

I miss Wài Pó.

I miss my culture.

I miss how, in the three times I met her, she marveled at how much I’d grown, only to still call me a *xiao baobao* (little treasure baby). I pulled back in shyness when she cuddled her fragile face to mine, giggling moments later as feathery heather gray wisps teased my cheeks.

I miss Wài Pó squeezing every droplet of her affection into the few weeks we’d share in a lifetime. During those days, an ever-changing fruit medley swirled around me as Wài Pó busied herself over skinning apples and rinsing Kyoho grapes she handpicked from nearby fruit stands. Every time Wài Pó caught sight of her outdoor cat, she clambered to hoist it up for me. While I cooed sappily, Wài Pó weathered rounds of swats that swelled into scarlet marks. Sitting on her bamboo mat, as I babbled about Easter egg hunting and slapping mosquitoes under July 4th fireworks, Wài Pó listened intently, immersed in my chaotic Chinese describing America. When I plopped myself at Wài Pó’s wooden table to savor sauteed fern and meatball soup, she observed in delight, her chestnut eyes gently perched on me for the entire meal. Everything tasted better knowing that no one in the world would look at me in the same way Wài Pó did.

Most of all, I miss Wài Pó’s signature platter of *Chòu Guì Yú* (Stinky Fish), Anhui province’s boasted delicacy that bears a notorious odor symbolical of foot stench. After I endured my first disorienting 15-hour plane ride to China, Wài Pó welcomed me with her Stinky Fish, its malicious stench snaking into and appalling my nostrils. Ironically, the dish was exquisite—adorned with a dynamic array of chilies and ginger slivers, a single grand fish laid cradled in a fiery pool of garnet red sauce. Sandwiching a minuscule morsel of fish between my chopsticks, I nibbled gingerly as the pungent flakes blossomed into a miraculously piquant aroma. Responding to Wài Pó’s expectant peer that flicked between me and her salty peculiar creation, the ends of my lips inched to an awestruck grin.

—

I am clay molded by the hands of Chinese culture. Aged hands that tenderly paint me in Wài Pó's warmth and phoenixes gracing Mama's Qipao dress. Rough hands that place me in the kiln's fiery embrace, as algebra forges a hardened callus on my finger and disciplined scoldings crystallize my heart into jade. Unwavering hands that swash on silky glaze and lift me to the stars as Goddess Cháng é bathes me in moonlight, illuminating love, pride, and resilience. I am whole.

So, perhaps I owe a long overdue word with Mama. *D-duì b-*
Let me try again.

I'm sorry it took me too long to learn that if I cherry-picked my culture, what's left behind is bland, like naked wontons without the scorch of chili oil.

And, to my beloved Stinky Fish, unleashing your tear-jerking curls of putrid steam, how does forgiveness sound?