

18th Annual

Café Shapiro

Shapiro Undergraduate Library

February 9, 2015

February 10, 2015

February 16, 2015

February 17, 2015

Anthology of Selected Poems
& Short Stories

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About the cover photo:

"All of the walls had so much character and texture. It was interesting to try to capture these textures into the two-dimensional space of a photograph almost as if it were a painting." - Bekah Malover

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Introduction

Café Shapiro

Welcome to Café Shapiro! Café Shapiro began in February 1998 as part of the University's "Year of the Humanities and Arts" (YoHA). Originally conceived as a student coffee break, Café Shapiro takes place in the Shapiro Undergraduate Library during winter evenings in February. It features undergraduate student writers nominated by their professors, many of whom have also been nominated for various writing prizes within the University and beyond.

Students are invited to perform a live reading for a peer audience. For many student writers, Café Shapiro is a first opportunity to read publicly from their work. For others, it provides a fresh audience, and the ability to experience the work of students they may not encounter in writing classes. Through its eighteen years of existence, Café Shapiro has evolved to become several nights of sharing among some of our best undergraduate writers, their friends, families, and the wider community.

Café Shapiro has been popular, and in many years we have created an anthology to provide access to these students' works after the live performance. We are delighted that this year's anthology could be printed, once again, on the Espresso Book Machine (EBM). The University of Michigan acquired the EBM in order to help our users create and connect with content in the ways that are most useful to them, thereby supporting the research and learning needs of students, scholars and faculty. For more information about the EBM, visit <http://www.lib.umich.edu/ebm>. It is exciting to see our mission being realized in this year's printing of the 18th Annual Café Shapiro Anthology.

We hope you enjoy reading the work of these talented writers.

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Shapiro Undergraduate Library
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Alex Bernard



Junior

Major: English and Political Science

If you were to cut together a montage of Alex Bernard's life, every clip would just be him saying, "Did you take it? Did you take the picture?...Huh? Oh my gosh! Are you recording this?! Stop! *laughter* Stop it! Why are you recording this?...You're so weird, Mom...Okay, can we take a real picture now? Je--sus...What?...Hit the red button at the bottom...No, not the home button, the red button. It should be right above the home button...No the home button brings you home. The red button shuts off the recording...Here, just give it to me...Wait, where's the red button?" Alex is a writer, actor, *Michigan Daily* editor, and intern at 826michigan. He is followed on Twitter by @SororityGirl-Problems.

Florence

Florence's hair was dark red in the exact way that blood is not. Her body was her body and her fingers touched things and left prints. She chewed her food and swallowed it and she went to the bathroom, where she did unspeakable things. Unspeakable in the way that none of us ever talked about it, not that it was an atrocity or something. Just unspoken, see?

One day, I asked her what she did in there.

"What do you do in there?" I pointed to the bathroom.

"I shit, Dominic."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Surprised?"

"To be honest, yeah, little bit."

"Yeah, well, me too."

I asked her out. She said yes.

No one had ever asked her if she took shits. Kids thought she absorbed the food or something and turned it into the sweat on her upper lip or the mole between her shoulder blades. Not me though. Not the gentleman.

We were fourteen so our date options were pretty limited. Restaurant, movie, or putt-putt. Maybe a baseball game if you're a rich kid or a trip to an abandoned field if you're not. I was not, but my parents mustered up enough money for a bite at Coney Island *and* a movie, but the only thing out was some bio-pic about a king who stuttered but still managed to marry Helena Bonham Carter – which I thought was pretty cool, but Florence said that Carter reminded her too much of her stepmother. So we skipped.

We spent the first half of our cash at Coney Island on breakfast for dinner – "brinner" – and Coke.

"My favorite thing in the world," Florence said, "is huge, refillable Cokes."

I paused, smoothed down an eyebrow (just in case), and tried to look post-pubescent.

"Why are big Cokes your *favorite* thing in the *world*?" I asked.

"I don't know, Dominic. I like Coke. I like a lot of it. So I guess I like that it doesn't stop."

I thought about this for a second, for only a second. Put my hand on my chin and rubbed so she knew I was thinking, like the Cokes were important, more meaningful. I scratched my smooth, unshaven (because it'd never needed to be shaved) jaw, and said, "Yeah, I get it. That's cool. Like infinite Cokes."

She smiled.

Well done, Dominic, I thought to myself. *You sly fox.*

"Yeah," she said. "Like infinite Cokes."

Florence didn't use a straw. I did.

We talked about Cokes for a bit, then the other stuff we liked, then the stuff we really hated and why we hated it, then who we hated, then who we

liked, then who we loved, then what we loved, and then the weather, which was not bad considering the time of year.

"I hate when people look at clouds," Florence said.

"We already talked about what we hated," I said. "Just the weather now."

She narrowed her eyes. "Shut up, Dominic."

"Shut up? Oh you like me so much."

"No. I despise you." She paused. "Asshat."

"I despise you too."

"Good. What was I talking about?"

"Clouds."

"Right. I just think they're bullshit. Like, that cloud's not a bunny rabbit or your fucking mother. It's a goddamn bunch of goddamn liquid drops frozen together or like goddamn chemicals hanging in the air, goddammit. Just a stupid cloud."

And in that moment, I swear: I hated clouds more than anything.

"Fuck clouds," I said, raising my huge, refillable Coke.

Florence smiled.

"Fuck clouds." We clinked glasses.

I didn't have enough money for a tip so we sped out the door as soon as the bill came, just threw down a twenty and shot into the parking lot like a couple of hummingbirds or something else small, fast, and stupid. The movie theater was right next-door, its disappointed marquee staring at us behind ads for *Toy Story 3* and *The King's Speech*. Florence turned to the box office, hoisted her middle finger, and shouted, "Helena Bonham Carter is overrated!" I didn't really agree, but I threw my bird in the air anyway and hollered, "Fuck Clouds!"

"Viva La Cokes!"

"Florence takes shits!"

"Once or twice a day!"

We held our fingers there for a few more seconds, then dropped them. Why? Why'd we drop our fingers? Why didn't we flip off Tom Hooper's Magnum Opus until the end of film itself? Because the movie theater didn't deserve the recognition. Tom Hooper didn't deserve it. The clouds didn't

deserve it. The world didn't. They weren't good enough for us, for our Cokes and our conversations and our shits. We were different, better – revolutionaries inside the system, the last line between creation and mundane. We were leading our two-person crusade through corporations and politicians and curfews and ham sandwiches. Through no parking zones and late fees and busy work at the end of class and salmon. Through drama and "I'm not ready" and "Who is she?" and the same thing over and over, again and again, until the lockers and the corner cafes eroded away into heaps of nothing, just as meaningless, just as *nothing* as they always were. But we – we would remain. We two. We happy two. We band of others. We would thrive. The world would know our names! They would sing them out atop roofs, soapboxes, and balconies! We would be *the* example of love, of youth, of how pure original thought could be. We were everything. Florence and Dominic. Me and her. That was all that existed. Nothing beyond, everything below. Dominic Calderon and Florence –

My thoughts flitted away as I realized I didn't know Florence's last name.

But it didn't matter, not really. Florence grabbed my hand and nothing else mattered again. She ran and dragged me along until my legs picked up underneath me, and I sprinted next to her, giggling and shouting and flipping off the sunset. Her hair bobbed behind her, waving at me as the wind swept it up in a glorious splash of auburn roots and secret blonde highlights. I whistled and jumped over a fire hydrant as we ran down the sidewalk, slicing through couples and past old people who couldn't tell whether we were fourteen or asylum escapees.

At the street corner, the little red "STOP" hand appeared just as we reached the intersection. We skidded to a halt. I half-expected to see sneaker streaks sizzling behind us. Florence clutched my waist – thankfully missing my flabby sides and gripping my shirt instead – and kissed me in a way that no one had ever been kissed before. And I felt like nobody'd ever felt. Relieved. Grateful. Sweaty. And oddly wondering if I'd worn mismatched socks today.

Florence's mouth was soft and parched, freshly dried from our run, I imagine. She pulled back, licked her lips in a not-unarousing way and plunged into my tonsils tongue-first. At first, she inspected the bottoms of my teeth and the edges of my lips, then adjusted course to my esophagus. Meanwhile, my tongue deflected attack after attack in an act of self-defense so fearless, so wet that I decided then and there, that I would never tell our grandchildren about our first date. If there was any doubt about my decision, all qualms were put to rest when a thin line of saliva dripped from my mouth and plopped onto my arm, which was wrapped around her waist just above her holy, unspeakable belt line.

Finally, after a few seconds of eyes-open making out, I pulled back, inhaled, and spit out a "Yeah!" because it was the coolest thing I could think

to say.

Florence laughed and kissed my chin – then my jaw, then my cheek, and then my ear, where her tongue grazed against my earlobe as she whispered, her tongue still out, “Meh pallents allen’t `ome.”

Not sure what she meant, I replied, “*Oh nice,*” unaware that what Florence had said was, “My parents aren’t home.”

She smiled, bit her lower lip, and smoothed down her blouse, which had since been wrinkled by the wind, the run, and my own sticky palms. A few leaves blew past our legs, the weather’s sign to us that we’d been *chosen*. For what? It didn’t matter. We were *chosen*.

Florence kissed my cheek and asked, “Should we?”

“Absolutely we should.” I didn’t know what we should do, so I was relieved when Florence grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the next bus. It was nice to know one of us had a plan.

The bus driver was old, fat, wedged into his seat like a beanbag chair shoved into a bathroom garbage can.

“Welcome aboard,” he said, like an old train conductor, except all gruffy and burdened by the two packs a day he smoked in his twenties, I imagine. Florence nodded and paid for both of us. I wondered where that money had been at dinner and then instantly felt ashamed for letting her pay for anything on our date. That’s not the way it was supposed to be.

As Florence skipped to a couple seats in the back, the bus driver swiveled his rotten watermelon head in my direction and heaved out a “you should’ve paid for her, son.” He coughed into his arm. When he pulled away, his jacket was covered in green mucus.

“I know,” I said.

“*Okay. Never gonna get laid like that though.*”

“You ever gotten laid?”

“Oh yeah. I got a mammoth dick. Word spreads.” He thought about something for a second, then said. “Word spreads, much like their legs huh?”

I hustled to the back and sat next to Florence, who lifted her right eyebrow, then her left, then her right again. Right, left, right, left, right, left.

“Jesus,” I said. “How do you do that?”

“What’d you and the Ernie talk about?”

"Ernie?"

"The bus driver."

"Oh not much."

"Tell me."

I hesitated, then said, "You."

"What about me?"

I didn't look at her. "Sex, I guess."

She giggled and knotted our fingers together.

The bus kicked and started. The outside sped past us, or rather, we sped past it. Past trees with too many branches and people with too few meetings at work. Past fast food places with grease on their bathroom floors and office buildings with the top three floors closed for construction. Passed a beauty salon that was just a "stepping stone until I hear back from the modeling company, Sharon" and a dirty metal warehouse that was Bill's last stop before retiring and heading down to Kentucky to play ultimate Frisbee with his buds. I imagine, at least.

Florence and I didn't talk much, just stared out the window and laughed whenever we caught each other's eye. I couldn't tell if we didn't know what to say anymore or if she was bored with me or if we'd just grown so comfortable with one another that our dynamic traversed cheap small talk and the petty musings of the typical fourteen year-old mind. Or if we were just in love. Just happy.

I liked to think it was the latter.

The bus lurched forward, and the doors opened.

"*Halliburton!*" Ernie yelled. "*Halliburton!*"

"That's us," Florence said, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the front.

As we jumped down the three bus steps, the bus driver whistled at me and spat out in a rough, broken voice, "*Parting is such sweet sorrow, my friend.*"

I stared at whatever his body was as the bus doors slid shut and he pulled away, out of life like he'd never been there to begin with.

"What the – "

"Come on!" Florence said. "I wanna show you something."

I laughed like you're supposed to and said, "Okay!"

We were outside some fancy suburb, all black steel gates and cats that didn't hiss, houses with five or six pillars, brick siding, and front yards filled with purple leaves and blue flowers. My eyes traveled from house to house, from story to story. Everything looked so put together inside, so *exceptional*. Every tree had its place and every place had its tree. I wondered when the neighborhood was built, if it'd ever been built in the first place or it'd just always *been*? Always finished.

Outside the gates, the trees limply shrugged over the barrier like they were trying to hurdle across and join their privileged friends. Brown and yellow leaves clung to their branches. Every now and then, one let go and floated to the ground. Around our feet, little suicides stacked on top of one another, the corpses piling up to our ankles. Florence kicked the leafy bodies aside and said something about how people always freak the fuck out over fall. For once, I wasn't listening. The leaves crunched under my feet. I felt bad for them.

"Let's go," Florence finally said, snapping me out of my autumn-induced stupor.

"Where are we going? In there?"

"No." She laughed. "I don't live there."

"Oh."

"Come on." We held hands and carried on about our dreams and our pasts and our favorite hobbies, but never about school because everyone talked about school and it was such a nice day and school didn't matter. Like a lot of other things that day, school didn't matter.

Florence stopped at an old brown and orange house. In the driveway was a green, paint-chipped van and a basketball hoop that'd probably seen better days in the fifties. On the hoop's pole, someone had written in Sharpie: "The ball is round, but are the players?" A stroller lay on the porch, tripped or thrown on its side. Or abandoned. I tried to imagine, but it wasn't easy. The tree in the front yard was leafless – bare and gray. Long dead, long naked.

"This is a strange place," I said.

"It's my house," she said.

"Sorry."

Florence massaged my thumb, then let go.

"Can I tell you something?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Sometimes, when I watch a movie or a show or listen to someone I like, I stack my fingers on top of one another. Like this." She bent her middle finger over her index finger and her ring over her middle and so on – on each hand. "I don't know why. I've always done it though. I bite my fingernails too, but that's not the same and besides, I *always* do this." She looked at her hands. "Sometimes, though, I bend them too far and they feel like they're going to break, and then I wonder, *huh. What would I tell people if they asked how I broke every finger on both my hands? What would I tell them?* I don't know. Never figured out that part, you know. But I guess I would just be honest. 'I was watching a really good movie,' I'd say. 'And I broke every single one of my fingers. Except my thumbs, of course.'" She wiggled her thumbs. "'What on earth were you watching?' they'd ask. 'What could possibly motivate you to break all of your fingers, Florence?' 'Nothing you'd know,' I'd say. 'Nothing you'd've ever heard of. It was something different. Something weird. Something dumb. But something mine.'"

Florence re-laced her hand in mine. Her index, my index, her middle, my middle, her ring, and so on, stacked on top of one another until the end of it all. Corner cafes and so on. Erosion and soap boxes, yes?

Well no. Not quite.

I guessed then that I didn't love Florence at all. Not then, not really.

Not yet.

And I was glad.

Lily C. Buday



Freshman

Major: Creative Writing & Literature

Lily C. Buday is a Residential College student from Harbor Springs, Michigan, who hopes to write novels for young adults. Her work has previously been published in the *Riveter Review* and the *Kenyon Review Young Writers' Anthology*.

Ilium

When you build your days like walls
your smiles become like sharp sugar,
grainy at the edges of a city
that you guard with your lipsticked teeth.
But you don't wear makeup the color of shame,
only pride, so when you cherry-lollipop your lips
like a film star, I try not to worry.
Sometimes, when the evenings grow long,
your eyes grow deeper and you clatter your lids
like rusty chains and when I said
that I loved you, what I meant was that I would wait
below your window in a taxi forever,
until you were ready to rappel down
your own fire-escape cheekbones and find me.
And every day you tell me on radio repeat
that you're not the goddess of wisdom just the queen
of hot and cold, but I remember distinctly
celestial afternoons where you took

the wasps from your tongue and the bees from my bonnet
and taught me how to build the Trojan horse.

Ode

What I meant when I said I didn't like black licorice
Is that I used to hate it-
Really hate it, the way that you hate
The pressure between your eyebrows
When you think you've made me cry.

What I meant when I said I didn't like black licorice
Is that I thought it came on too strong-
Molasses, aniseed; bitter the way
Your lip curls up to show too many teeth
When you think I've been weak.

What I meant when I said I didn't like black licorice
Is that I would have given anything
To taste chocolate again, milk-sweet
And innocent the way your laugh sounded
On that May afternoon.

I will not trade your present for your past;
I will not chase away your bitterness.
You still have flashes of dark-chocolate joy and
I will not lie, they give me comfort.
But I will not discriminate
Between aniseed and cocoa-powder.
I will live for all of your moments.
I will learn to love black licorice
If that's what it takes.

An Education

You are fourteen and they are both two years older than you.
She has dyed a single lock of her curly hair purple
and he wears faded Star Wars t-shirts,
and your wistful wishes oscillate between them like a sine wave,
a calculus problem with no solution: *the limit does not exist*.
You don't know that they will be valedictorian and salutatorian

and study Sociology and English
and that one of them will be your first real love.
All you know is that you are failing math class.
You are fourteen and you wonder briefly if this is what it feels like
to be North and South America at once,
Belize and Panama and Costa Rica
strung around your hips like a belt of stars,
but you brush them off and quiet the notion.
You know that some girls like girls
and *that's okay but you are not one of them*,
you can't be one of them because you said yes
when the boy in the gray suit asked you to dance.
You are fourteen and you have never, not once,
heard the word *bisexual*. You are foreign to yourself,
something that you can peer at with a microscope
and poke at in a dictionary, and play over and over again
in an arpeggio, but never understand.
You don't have the words to beg someone
to nail you to the Kinsey scale.
But if you did, you would scream them.

Julia Byers



Junior

Major: Creative Writing & Literature

Julia Byers is a junior in the Residential College, majoring in Creative Writing & Literature with a minor in Global Media Studies. Her work has appeared in *Teen Ink* magazine, the *RC Review*, the *White Ash Literary Magazine*, the *82nd Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition Collection*, and the *17th Annual Café Shapiro Anthology*. Recently she won the Children's/Young Adult category of the 82nd Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition, a 2014 Hopwood Underclassmen Fiction Award, and the 2014 Arthur Miller Award. Last year she worked as a remote intern for a literary agent and studied abroad at Oxford University. Currently she runs the Chapter One Young Writers Conference and is an administrator and writer for the *Teens Can Write, Too!* blog. Her hobbies include Netflix and not going outside.

All She Hears

Silence. That is the first thing Erin Wilson hears as she steps through the wide, arched doorway into the sanctuary and walks towards the front left pew with her hair pulled back in a too-tight bun and her eyes locked on the shiny bald crown of her father's head.

Silence. Rich but distant. Like her mother's chocolate cake just before Easter dinner, fresh out of the oven and waiting on the cooling rack in the kitchen, as its Siren's perfume wafted through the house and made Erin wish her Sunday-best wasn't so tight. The sound is a flavor on her tongue; its length something for her to chew. She feels the emptiness in her stomach, a distant churning that she is not entirely aware of but hasn't entirely forgotten either.

Empty. That's how the air feels, so dry and hot against her skin. Empty as the hole she watched them dig in the cemetery last night.

She reaches the front left pew and sits, squeezing into the space just to the right of her parents, where she is closest to the center aisle and the smooth chestnut casket at the head of it. She refuses to let herself think about the casket, and instead leans towards her mother to see the program clutched in her trembling fingers. Erin bites the inside of her cheek as she reads the familiar name and traces the sloping lines of the face in the photograph with her eyes. She touches a hand to her chest, right over her heart. A shudder runs through her, beginning as a shiver and turning into a sob that does not make a sound. She still does not look at the casket.

Focus on the photograph, she tells herself. Focus on the program.

She locks her eyes on the wrinkled program and tries to ignore her mother's trembling.

They've chosen her school picture from last September, the one where her dark brown hair is knotted from the wind and she has a giant pink zit in the center of her forehead. The smile is nice—no food in her teeth, just the right amount of lip gloss. But it's hard for Erin to notice those things when her favorite purple blouse is rumped and her silvery, tarnished locket rests off-center. Less than perfect.

Erin forces a smile despite the throbbing behind her eyes. "You couldn't have picked a better picture?" She poses the question to her mother, even though she knows she won't answer. Mrs. Wilson sits with her eyes closed, face composed into an expressionless mask of straight lips and measured breath. "What about that picture from Aubrey's birthday party that I liked so much? I thought you liked that picture too." Mrs. Wilson's nostrils flare, her lungs expand; the pulse ticks visibly at her throat. "There were so many better pictures you could have chosen."

But Mrs. Wilson has never been very good at listening to Erin, so why would the photograph in the funeral program be any different? Erin remembers the morning of the accident; the way the rain blew in forty five degree gusts that might as well have been rivers in the sky and she begged her mother not to make her drive Aubrey to basketball practice. She remembers the way Mrs. Wilson won the argument over breakfast, with a comment on Erin's weight chased down by an apology that irritated the burn more than it soothed—orange juice on a burnt tongue. Mrs. Wilson always won the arguments that way.

Erin moves closer to her mother. She longs to reach out—to take Mrs. Wilson's trembling hand in her own.

A sound comes from the pulpit, to the right of the casket, and Erin's

attention snaps back to the front of the church. The pastor has taken his position there, a worn red Bible in his hands and his creased cheeks sagging beneath tired eyes. Erin glances one last time at the photograph, then leans away from her mother, against the hard wood back of the pew. She smooths her skirt with sweaty palms. Her father clears his throat, and her mother stops breathing for just an instant. Out the corner of her eye, Erin can see how her eyelids fold into wrinkles as she squeezes her eyes shut more tightly. Erin's stomach turns over.

The pastor says, "We are gathered here today to honor the life of young Miss Erin Wilson, taken from this world long before her time." He says, "Erin lived seventeen years on this Earth, all of them to the fullest."

She stiffens at her name and bites her cheek so hard it hurts through the numbness. She places her hand over her heart again, to feel for the pulse, and a pang runs through her at its absence. The lip of the pew is cool and moist against the backs of her knees as she tries to burrow further into the wood. She refuses to think of the casket.

"Erin had a beautiful soul and an infectious spirit." The pastor's voice is low and gravely, and he reads in a monotone that sucks the meaning from his words. "She did well in school, and will be missed by the National Honor Society, student council, and tennis team."

Erin was co-captain of the tennis team. She wonders if the season will go on without her. She's not sure if she hopes it will or not.

"Erin is survived by her parents, Jim and Brenda Wilson, and her younger sister, Aubrey. Aubrey would now like to share a few words."

Erin watches as Aubrey stands from her place on the other side of their parents, tucks her wavy dark hair behind her ears, and stumbles her way up to the pulpit. Her knee-length black tea dress is new, the material still stiff and pressed from the store, and her favorite scuffed ballet flats don't seem to go with it. She has inherited Erin's makeup collection, which had previously been locked safely away in Erin's dresser, and now Aubrey wears dark smears of mascara and eyeliner that wash away the soft blue of her eyes in the heavy, afternoon sunlight that floods through the stained glass windows.

Aubrey. Little Aubrey. Suddenly all grown up.

Erin does not hear her sister speak as she reads from the sheet of notebook paper clutched in her hands like a life preserver. Erin is solely aware of the way Aubrey looks. Her cheeks are red with too much blood, her fingers pale around the paper. She wears Erin's locket, which looks big and clunky around her thin little neck in comparison to when Erin last saw it around her own.

Aubrey is too small. She is too skinny, too short, to stand up there in

front of the church, only barely tall enough to rest her elbows against the pulpit's worn surface.

Aubrey will have to begin high school next year without Erin there to guide her.

Aubrey screamed a second before their car spun out on the slick pavement, like she already knew what was to come, although when the flashing lights of the police cars and the wailing of the ambulances found them, she was perfectly fine. Erin looked fine too, outside of some bruises and broken fingers. No one even realized at first that her heart had stopped. By the time they did, her heart had been an object at rest for too long to become an object in motion again.

Erin would have been a senior next year, fielding scholarship applications and college acceptance letters. She wonders if the colleges will continue to mail the brochures to her house, now that she's gone. She wonders what her parents will do with all of them. She wonders if her mother will be relieved she does not need to buy bikinis and Homecoming dresses one size too small for Erin anymore, to remind her that cheese and potato chips and cookies are poison.

Mrs. Wilson is still and silent on the pew. Her eyes closed tight. The program wrinkled in her hands is damp with sweat and torn at the edges.

"Pay attention," Erin says to the mother who cannot hear her, who will never hear her again. "Pay attention, your oldest daughter only dies once."

Now Aubrey is crying. Her cheeks move from softly red to bitterly crimson and the makeup drips down her face in spider web lines of black. She didn't think to look through Erin's makeup bag for the waterproof mascara. Erin wishes she had thought to teach her sister how to properly do her makeup before it was too late, rather than always locking the bag away where Aubrey could not reach it. Erin did not think Aubrey would have to grow up so soon.

The pastor helps Aubrey down the steps from the pulpit and she finds her way back to the pew where the rest of her family waits. Mr. Wilson hands his daughter a tissue.

Erin's friend Nina stands to speak. Then her tennis coach Mrs. Rodriguez.

Every time someone goes up to the pulpit, they walk past the casket, and more and more often Erin finds her gaze upon it. Her skirt is balled in her fists. She tucks her feet beneath the pew, ankles crossed and knees clenched. The skin along her hairline grows taught, pale, pulled in one direction by the tight, low bun and pulled in the other by her clamped lips and sucked-in cheeks.

Nina says, "Erin always knew exactly what to say to make you feel better." Erin wonders how long it will take Nina to find a new confidant. She hardly ever came to her for advice, anyway.

Mrs. Rodriguez says, "Erin was a remarkable athlete." Erin wonders if her mother is thinking about those last five pounds Erin never managed to lose, no matter how many hours she practiced without food in the baking sun. Now she will be this way forever.

Imperfect. Not-quite-there.

Mrs. Wilson twists the program between her fingers.

Finally, when she cannot take it anymore, Erin untangles her legs. She stands. She walks past her teachers and schoolmates and friends to the casket and forces her eyes down.

Here is Erin Wilson, lying asleep and still, without a breath or thought, simply because one stupid muscle was too tired to continue working. They say she had a heart defect, she had had it since birth, and she was lucky it did not give out until now, especially with all the days spent with a racket in her hand and first the sun, then the moon, in her eyes. Especially with all the weeks she spent picking at limp salads and cursing the scale beneath her feet.

Erin's skin is rigid over her cheekbones, smooth and creamy under her eyes. A drop of water slides down her chin, across her neck, and lands in the plush, royal blue lining of the casket. For a second Erin stands over the body, still feeling very much alive despite being dead, and she thinks the water is sweat; that the girl she's looking at is not dead at all, but just hiding away the life within her somehow, somewhere deep beneath her skin. But then Erin realizes the drop is a tear, and it has come from Aubrey, who now stands beside her at the casket's side.

Erin turns to look at her sister, and realizes that her parents are there also, along with her grandparents and uncle. They all cry and hold one another, except for her mother, who stands apart.

Mrs. Wilson stares straight ahead, at the stained glass window depicting the death of Jesus, as if she is not aware of her own daughter's body right there before her, so close she could reach out and stroke her bloodless cheek. Maybe she does not want to admit that Erin was right—that it was too dangerous to drive Aubrey that morning—because her mother never admits defeat.

It is one of the things Erin and her mother have always had in common—it is why Mrs. Wilson has always liked Aubrey better—and Erin suddenly, desperately, wants to feel her mother's touch against her skin. She wonders if she'd be able to feel it, if her mother were to touch the body. She wants

her mother to hold her and tell her everything will be okay. She wants her mother to tell her she misses her and wants her back. She wants her mother to feel one thing—any one, single thing; she doesn't care what—since it seems all Mrs. Wilson can feel is numbness.

Erin could take anger. She could take one of her mother's stubborn bouts of screaming rage, or passive-aggressive comments at the dinner table, or reminders that nothing less than perfect would ever be good enough.

But Erin cannot take the numbness.

She shifts out of the way of her family, even though she knows they can't see or feel her there, and her father steps forward. The lights reflect off his shiny bald head. His eyes are rimmed with pink, and a tear catches right on the hooked tip of his nose. Erin wants him to comfort her after her mother's shouts, with his reminders that Mrs. Wilson just wanted to help although sometimes she did not know how. Erin wants her father to pick her up and brush her off and plant a kiss on her forehead, the way he did that time she fell out of the climbing tree in their backyard when she was seven and still thought she had a hundred years ahead of her to live.

The pastor stands behind them all, his eyes drooping and cheeks worn. Erin can tell he does not appreciate burying children. He holds the faded red Bible in the crook of his right arm the way a mother would hold a baby, and Mrs. Wilson closes her eyes. She swallows. She weaves her fingers together and does not reach out to touch the casket the way everyone else does. Aubrey's cries are louder than all the rest combined, but Mrs. Wilson does not seem to hear even her.

"Let us remember Miss Erin Wilson as she was," the pastor says. "Compassionate and warm. Lively and caring." His eyes flick over to Mrs. Wilson, who is anything but. Erin wants to scream. "She will be missed."

"I'm dead," Erin says to her mother. She strides from the casket, centers herself right before the motionless, composed woman with the closed eyes and perfect mascara—not drippy at all. She screams, "Mom, I'm dead, and you're just standing there. I'm *dead!*"

Mrs. Wilson's breaths are slow and measured. She trembles as if the windows are open, and a storm is raging outside, and the wind threatens to suck her away.

Erin wants to slap her mother across the face. She wants to make her mother feel her presence there. She wants her mother to know that she is angry and bitter and she misses her—she misses her mother so much. But she can't. She can't.

"I'm dead, Mom."

Silence.

"I'm *dead!*"

Mrs. Wilson does not say or do a thing. The funeral-goers release a timid breath, they close their eyes, as the pastor says, "Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes." He pauses. "Dust to dust."

And Mrs. Wilson is silent.

She was never silent while Erin was alive, but now she is quieter than death. Erin just wants to hear her voice.

Silence.

That is the last thing Erin Wilson hears as the lid lowers over the face that is hers but not hers, just an empty body in a smooth chestnut casket that seems far too small to house a person. And her mother finally begins to cry.

Kathryn Carethers



Freshman

Major: Undecided

Kathryn watches way too much T.V. and is a fan of sweet potatoes and "Lucky Charms."

Necropolis

"Boneyards are no place for children," Great Aunt Lessia declared. "Move the children out with me, Daniel." Salisbury was the father of two young girls, both without a mother.

"Aunt Less, don't worry about them – did you worry about me up there?" Salisbury patted Great Aunt Lessia firmly enough on the soldier to bruise her fragile skin. She winced at the force but didn't shy away from her stance on the issue.

"Your great-uncle was not right in the head for putting you guys out there. It's a fortunate thing your father was a police officer and knew how to handle tragedy. You have no such experience. I will worry about those principled girls every day." Great Aunt Lessia shook her head. "You'd better watch out for them, Daniel." The two girls rushed out the door with their brand new pink and white striped backpacks.

"Goodbye Aunt Less," said one and then the other.

"Goodbye girls. Look out for yourselves in that place. I don't want to hear of any tragedies, you hear?"

"Yes Aunt Less," said one and then the other.

The three of them walked in the dirt to the car on the other side of the road. Salisbury unlocked the car, sat in the driver's seat, and waited for the girls to get in and set their backpacks by their feet. "Girls, we are going to see Aunt Elise. You remember Aunt Elise, right?"

"Oh yes, Aunt Elise," the girls said and nodded with recognition. The rest of the car ride was silent. The girls weren't much for talking impulsively and Salisbury didn't push any conversation. This appeared to be a perfect personality match when one didn't look too closely. Under a magnifying glass, perhaps one would see the teeth marks in the girls' lips from withholding screams, or the finger sized bruise spots on their forearms. But even without the magnifying glass, it was apparent that Salisbury's muscles, highlighted by the large veins pumping blood through his hands and arms, were only maintained by daily use.

Salisbury pulled up to the log cabin Elise had lived in for the past twenty-three years. The smell of bleach smacked him in the face when he opened the car door. He scrunched his nose, rubbed his forehead, and stuck his neck back in the car to speak to the girls.

"Girls, wait here." He closed the door, turned his heel, and headed up the stone walkway to the cabin's front door. It took thirty seconds for Elise's face to manifest in front of him.

"Hello Daniel. I was wondering why you were running so late...nevermind that. Where are the girls?"

"In the car."

"Why don't you tell them to come in?"

"Oh, yes." He turned to yell out the door. "Girls, come inside."

The girls walked up the stone walkway to the cabin's front door.

"Hello girls." Elise put her hands on one of each girl's shoulders. "Your rooms are upstairs. I painted them pink, you like pink right?" The girls nodded. "Go on upstairs and unpack, we'll have dinner at seven sharp!" Elise smiled warmly and released their shoulders. The girls went upstairs to unpack.

"Well Elise, it's been a while since I've been back here." Salisbury showed a modest smile. He gazed out the window to see a dark tunnel of massive oak trees. It hadn't changed at all since Salisbury had last been there.

Elise and Salisbury had named the forest Necropolis when they were

children.

"It's like Metropolis," Salisbury had said.

"Yes, but better," Elise had replied.

Necropolis' trees curved towards the sun to the east to mimic body shapes. It looked like a dormant army of tall soldiers. Elise and Salisbury played hide and seek with the deceptive trees and crooked trails. The forest was a maze of nature, and so many travelers got lost in the puzzle. Not Elise. She knew the forest better than anyone. Salisbury was convinced Elise would cheat when playing hide and seek, so he would shove her against the trees and throw dirt at her. It took their father to stop him from attacking her. It wasn't long before Salisbury stopped going into the forest and Elise made a second home there. The truth was Elise was keen for organization – a trait of hers that caused her to be persistent in maintaining a hygienic and orderly home, and a map that maintained the layout of the forest down to the tree.

Now belonging to Elise, the cabin reeked of lemony chemical products. The creaky wooden floors were spotless and their angled layout led to an antique pump organ in the back of the dwelling. This odd gift was from their father, and was the only sign of a life outside of the woods Elise had conserved. Their father would play the organ on Saturday nights. Salisbury remembered watching his lion-tattooed wrist bounce around the keys with ease. The few years it spent in the cabin had done it well, as Elise had completely restored the piece.

Salisbury briefly recalled when Elise decided to move out here, an abandoned, lonely cabin, tended to only by the raccoons and rats searching for food scraps or a nesting area. He remembered what she said: "I need space, Daniel! I can't live like this anymore." That was the last thing she said to him before she moved out for good. Salisbury shook his head as he walked towards the organ. He didn't understand his sister. Since she was fifteen, she ostracized herself from her family, friends, and the world. She already created space for herself by being a loner. What more could she want?

In the present day, Elise offered Salisbury a drink.

"No thanks. I'll wait for dinner."

The girls ran downstairs and halted to a stop in front of the adults.

"May we explore the forest? May we please?" they rushed the words out of their mouths then gasped at their interruption. The mystique of the forest was beyond their consciousness of life-long enforced manners.

"Of course, be back by seven. Check your watches girls," said Elise. Before anything else could be said, the girls were out the door and past the first row of trees. Salisbury gritted his teeth, caught a glimpse of his sister,

and then relaxed his jaw. He thought back to Great Aunt Lessia's warning, but shook it off before it caused him to take any action.

"Remember playing in that forest – 'Necropolis' I believe we called it?" asked Salisbury.

"Of course – how could I forget? Those are some of the happiest memories I have."

"Now that dad's gone, you and this place are all I have left of my childhood and life before, well, you know."

"Uh huh. Will you help me prepare for dinner?"

Salisbury got up from his seat at the kitchen table and walked over to the pristine white counter. He pointed towards some carrots and a peeler, waited for Elise to nod, and then started to peel them.

"Remember when we first moved out here? Dad would send us out into the forest to get some quiet in the house," he laughed. "We were such rascals."

"Mmmhmm."

Salisbury picked up Elise's distance to the conversation.

"For what it's worth, he never tried to hurt us Elise. He protected us. He —"

"— was a corrupted policeman who paid no attention to his children's interests. What kind of father is that? His morals were all askew." Elise poured herself a cup of coffee. She liked it black and drank cupful after cupful throughout the day. Salisbury couldn't remember what time it was, but he knew it never mattered in Elise's cabin. She was up all night and day; Salisbury presumed she took short naps to keep herself from falling over. He never knew why she couldn't sleep. Maybe it was the consciousness of her childhood.

Salisbury and Elise had twin-like memories of the bodies; they were twins after all. Though the bodies all rotted similarly, they each had a certain scent: a hint of perfume or cologne, cigarettes and alcohol, mint, or coffee. Salisbury used to infer their life stories from their scent. He could smell it through his bedroom wall. The lady with the perfume was from Paris, France and came to America to be a commercial fashion designer, but went missing on the plane ride. The cigarette smoker/alcoholic was trying to quit his bad habits for his daughter, but in a moment of relapse at the bar, he ran out, ashamed, never to be seen again by daylight. Salisbury enjoyed creating these stories. He appreciated the scents they gave off. He told Elise some of the stories he made up but she always disapproved.

"Stop eulogizing them, Daniel. They aren't like you think they are. Stop being ridiculous." She would walk off then, and retreat to her room. She stayed away from her family most of the time. She felt different, uncomfortable with them and with most everyone.

"Dad should be put with those bodies he buried." Elise put her mug on the round breakfast table.

"Elise, stop being tempestuous. Dad was good to us in ways you probably wouldn't understand. He helped me make a new life away from the drama. He protected us – sure he did some illegal things to do so, but he cared for us better than most fathers. You have to understand. It's not like you're perfect either. Without him here, we have to protect each other now – you have to be careful. Dad never questioned me or you, he accepted us – "

"He was ashamed I wasn't like him! Doing what he did – you remember! I remember the way he looked at me when I said I never wanted to be him, have his absurd morals!" Elise's voice cracked.

"He buried those bodies for you, Elise. You know that. They would have rotted in the walls and someone would have found out. We would have been taken away."

"For me? For me! He was just so selfless wasn't he! Huh? Wasn't he? Damn you for coming into my house – where I'm letting you and the girls *live* by the way – and lecturing me on Dad. Damn you!" Elise started to blubber and wail. Salisbury grabbed a tissue and handed it to Elise. She took it and blew her nose.

"Elise –"

"Stop this Daniel, I won't have this conversation. Our father was selfish, even when he died. Still wearing that ol' panama hat I got him years ago like there was a chance I would ever forgive him," she waved her hand and placed it on her forehead.

There was a pause in the conversation.

"How did you know he was wearing that hat? Dad was investigating up north when he died. A hunter shot him and his body rotted in the woods before anyone could get to him in time. You never came to see him. He never wore that hat. He only wore it that day because after his investigation he was going to try to make amends with you – "

Elise looked up.

"You," he croaked. "You murdered him. Just like the other ones. You killed our father!" Salisbury stood still in light of this revelation.

"What I did was right. Necessary. He doesn't deserve my respect. You're a coward not to admit who he was, who we are."

"You murdered him," Salisbury repeated. He gasped. "Where? Where did you put him?" He stormed around the house and the wooded floors creaked with every stride. He punched a wall in the kitchen. "Where? Here?" he punched the wall again, "Where Elise, where?" He stopped punching and looked up in realization. "The organ room." He rushed to the back of the cabin.

"Daniel, I will not have you destroy my house!"

"Shut up Elise." Salisbury picked up a side table and started to beat at the wall. Eventually, it protruded. His hands combed through the rubble. He beat at the wall again and repeated this process, ignoring Elise's ranting voice about his "insane" reaction. Her voice motivated him to keep beating and beating at the wall. He released all of the emotions he kept boarded up inside about his father and his lunatic sister. He looked up to his father. His father shielded him and Elise from the outside world that would eat them up. His father accepted his destructive behavior and his sister's murderous personality. How could Elise not feel grateful toward him? She killed his father, the only true friend he had in this world. His reaction, he felt, was appropriate. This situation needed justice. His sister needed a punishment.

He finally came across a large hand, slightly blue in color. It was soft and moldy and muddy. He turned the hand over so the palm was facing up. A lion tattoo was on the wrist. He looked up at Elise, now standing above him. He gritted his teeth and lunged himself at Elise. He would have collapsed his body onto hers, and beat her wildly, but this did not happen. Instead, an axe was lunged into his back. It lodged itself between his shoulder blades, aligning with his spine, and Salisbury toppled onto the wooden floor, banging his head on the organ. He bled out.

"It's seven o'clock. Is it dinner time?" The girls stood behind Salisbury and patiently waited for Elise to answer whether or not they would receive their meal.

"Yes, girls. Come into the kitchen."

The girls sat down at the table opposite from Elise. She passed them each a roll and then remembered the carrots. She got up from the table to finish preparing them. Each motion she took with the knife was a second in length and she kept time as the girls spread napkins on their laps.

"It will be just a moment, girls. In the meantime, you can tell me about your adventures in the forest."

Courtney Cook



Freshman

Major: Art & Design and Creative Writing

Courtney is a freshman studying art and design and creative writing. She wrote her first novel at age fourteen, which earned her a national Scholastic Art & Writing award from David Levithan, and her work has been seen in *Crash Test*, *Isis*, *Make It Better*, *Scholastic Art and Writing*, and *Soapbox*. You can find Courtney's art and published writing at Cargocollective.com/courtneycook.

Fragments

1.

Tell me I won't be like this forever.

A constant stutter on my lips. Tell me I'll forget the beach,
the first time I felt you, sand on your scalp, under my fingernails.

An insatiable hunger. I was 13 but I'm telling you
I would have taken you right there. This body of mine
is like an animal. Tell me about your first time. Tell me *why*.

2.

Why I went back. Same waves, different fingers, different boy.

Rosacea, everything pink. *No, no.*

Everything is completely useless

This body forced to shatter.

All he heard on a beach of you and I was silence.

Please, glue me back together.
It was supposed to be you.

3.

Which was the first?

After the fucker it was a girl. In the circus, hair like a mane.
Contortionist.

Her body was malleable, everything
felt like nothing with her.

Still, the stutter of
you, you, you.

4.

This finally felt real: We drank whiskey.
Virgins. Technically, anyway
do girls count if you're one too?

I couldn't stop thinking about the time I gave you a handjob
in the back of a crowded car, everyone
that had touched me since the beach. Tainted.

5.

Tell me I won't be an animal forever. Tell me
this stutter will stop. Please, just tell me why
I didn't fuck you that night on the beach when we were 13.

Silence

He meets me and I want to kiss him, but instead
I light a cigarette. Whether I'm exhaling smoke
or I can just see my breath from the cold,
I don't know.

"Since when do you smoke?" he asks me.
I want to say your hair is still on my pillow
and I am hollow like a rotting tree. To tell him
of the dream I have each night where
anytime anyone touches me I crumble
through their fingers as if I'm made of sand.

Instead, "Sometimes, you just need to hurt."
He nods like he understands and I know he does not.

Once we kissed with lozenges that numbed
our tongues and it was like kissing a ghost,
which he always was, but who was I to know that?
Now, if anyone kissed me all they would taste
is his name before I'd crumble and fill their mouth
with sand and cigarette smoke.

Oh, the things we think of when we are hurting,
the things we dream.

Deer

It snowed the day I saw.
Her legs bowed as she
stumbled from the street.

I wanted to carry her
into the forest, to the river,
and wash those wounds.
To hold her bones together
with a language of ruin,
of 'I'm sorry'.

But I watched, opposite
side of the road,
my vision and those legs
broken
between the passing cars.

You

(lines in italics taken from Mary Oliver's *The Summer Day*)

You used to run your fingers along the tattoo
on my ribcage while we were in bed.

It asks:
*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

How unfair it was for your hands
to be giving me my answer
when you were lying there
thinking of her.

Leela Denver



Senior

Major: English and Creative Writing

Leela Denver is currently writing her senior creative writing thesis in poetry. She is a co-editor of the student-run publication, *Fortnight Literary Press*. Leela grew up in Ann Arbor and spends her free time thinking about words and what to do with them, occasionally binge-watching TV series, and day-dreaming about hiking trips.

Habitual

In the memory there is no reason.
Only the pattering of cold water
outside, a lot of snow - heavy and bright.
I sit at the kitchen table, not wearing any pants
just my cotton underwear and a long sleeved t-shirt.
My thighs touch together and their skin feels
pink and cold and I like this sensation
because my hands, by now, are warm.
Before me my mother sets a stainless steel bowl,
the one she usually pours chivda in. It is pregnant
with clean snow and bleeding sprinkles.

I am a little girl.
The snow tastes metallic and numbs my tongue.
I have a thought: that I resemble Krishna
in the poster tacked to our kitchen wall;
the way he sits on his mother's lap

and licks the butter smeared on his small fingers,
all blue and mischievous.
Leela-Krishna: playful god.
I tuck my heels beneath me, grin
at the snowflakes on my spoonful, bend my tongue up
so it touches my lip.

Desperate Love

and then that moment
when you exert your body
so deeply you are brought
back to the very acute
and very familiar flavor
of a fruit you once ate
as a child while kneeling
on the kitchen floor
beside your mother's bare
feet as she chopped
lettuce, and you flung
about your little hands
and little feet until, ah!
the knife shot to the edge
of your littlest toe and all
you know now is the fruit
dropping, its sweet blood
puddling, the knife
clattering, and your own
close and infantile wail
wrapping your mother to you.

Age 11

Yesterday I lost my hands.

Ran to the sand bank
to search the water, nothing
but expanding, iridescent objects.

I plunged my wrists deep and cold.
They hurt. Beside me

the nectarine sat, sweet, half-
eaten to the menacing core.

The sun was high
and I plunged my wrists
until my shoulders were river
and my hair swam to silt.

I don't remember
looking up at the understory,
though suddenly the leafy
light was on me.

Porch for Days of Want

At night the rain
smells like, perhaps
the moon and, perhaps
babyhood. We remain
mostly dry as it streams
down on all sides, taking
our clothes off at one a.m.

The startled moths gather
to the light. Source
of my shiver, source
of my home. We, three
adult bodies, standing
and bare, until running
from the staircase, yielding

to the Huron, sacrificing ourselves
at its weediest mouth. In the restless waters
we meet our foreign skins at rest, an uncovered
wound, and our blue limbs reaching
and gathered by the primordial ache.

The Diagnosis (Acadia, Maine)

The night lurches cold
and dark, so dark
I am pitched into walls of it.

Pines are fallen, soft
colonies of moss shiver
against wood, dirt.
I trip past tents filled
with strangers, glowing
and human and orbed.

At the payphone I feed
quarters to the slot.
We have four minutes
to scour our three weeks
of silence. You say my name
in ill shock, I say
tell me, now, and please.
It is *stage 4*, it is *chemo*, it is
1-3 years. Love, you're breaking up.

In these moments we are only
crass imitations of ourselves.
We button up *I love you*
and *your touch, your smell*
and at twelve minutes
I have no more quarters.

So the rain begins, so the sky curdles
and I am screaming, surely
I must be screaming.

In the din of the dial tone
we wet our cheeks forests apart, hot
tears, boulders of shame and by now
too many flies have gotten to the fruit.
So I told you to use red wine, so
I told you use honey, so it goes
and we open our mouths for more.

Happiness!

I know it is Friday night but I look at a photograph
glossy from my 5 buck disposable and feel my liver falling out.
This hurts it is painful I want to cry a lot.
The photograph is of an ocean, the Atlantic ocean,
and in the photograph I can hear the water roaring I can hear
my body on those rocks how I wanted to jump in

I can hear it all. I know it is Friday night
 and outside something is howling there is a tow truck
 in my back lot I hate the way the gravel crunches. There
 is a new body next to my new body and we like to talk
 about things and people we used to hate. I show this new body
 my photograph glossy from my 5 buck disposable and she begins to collapse
 from the teeth first. I reach out to hold her face
 but her cheeks cave in and then her throat and then
 her ears and shoulders. I put my thumb over where her trachea
 should be because this is my favorite part
 of a human body: near to beauty and close to death.
 And then her trachea collapses, too, and next her chest
 and with sweet suddenness I am left holding
 the glossy, rushing Atlantic between my two hands.

Specifics

after C.D. Wright's *Personals*

I am fascinated with the tone of my flesh, a muscular pulse
 blued by fat and blood. I don't get nosebleeds.
 My hair is dark, darker
 when clipped. Ultimately I tend toward misandry.
 Last night I spent fifteen minutes peering
 through the blinds. We are separated
 by a slim, gravel driveway. I can never see
 "much" by anyone's standards, which is fine by me.
 The neighbors have tops of heads and paper towel rolls.
 I only want from them
 to know if I am normal. Indulgent. Dying
 green onion shoots in a musty water glass.
 I am not a great listener but people think I am.
 Still, I don't know the meaning of "sensible shoes".
 Now I remember the second thing I noticed about the girl:
 how ugly she was. I never see
 how ugly people are. This is how I knew she was beautiful
 and this realization felt out of place
 in the context of my body. As many things do.
 After which I return my library books
 six months late. Most of my money goes to paying fines. I hate
 when, on the phone, people tell me
 "I'm going to let you go, now."

Carlina Duan



Senior

Major: English and Creative Writing

Carlina Duan enjoys the sound of lamps when they click on. She is currently a senior studying English and Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, and is the co-author of the poetry collection *Electric Bite Women* with alum Haley Patail (Red Beard Press, 2013). Carlina likes collage-making, and eating candies that turn her tongue bright colors. She also really likes hamburgers.

I Wasn't Joking

I got a collarbone. I got
an untidy mouth. I got
a scalp where rain darts,
watch my palms chase
through the head's
black gulley —
in each arm-
pit I grow and
grow the flossy
hairs. in each armpit
I sweat, sprout.
I got a yodel in
me, watch me flex
precise. watch
the pinkest muscle:
won't give up my
tongue for no one —
how it slices and

drums. in a dream
men told me I
was small and
what did I know,
woman with starry toes
and knees. when
they patted me
on the head I slashed
the dirt, I slashed
the gladolias, nipples
flowered like purple
planets, all my hair
chirped, I opened
my mouth and let my
hundred-teeth show:
saliva, gum. canines
glinted, flashed the flash
of rivers. when I bit
my bottom lip they
said *oh* and I turned
vicious, girl stroking
the earth with two
biceps, let no one take
my tongue I got
a yodel in me won't
back down without
parting my lips
wet and eager
for the fight.

Amenorrhea

that was the month when
the heart made its earnest
pelting and began to break
the dishes in the sink one
by one the month when
the car backed into the
driveway with dim
red light and mom
filed all the medical papers
into plastic bins labeled
with my name
I mispronounced the word

gynecologist and stretched
it tightly against my mouth
I haunted the
high school bathrooms
each morning with a cotton
bag of pads touched the
dried drops of other girls'
blood on toilet seats
color of roses and jam
the month when I shoved
pop tarts down my throat
in calculus class and
adam said something
about tapioca how I didn't
hear him thought about
thickness and clots clouds
of blood in the
middle of the month I
got my period and the
red on my panties sticky
like pudding I unpeeled
the pad I said girl I am
a girl again thank god
after seven months and
the boxes of white pills the
dry underwear the radiology
department the doctors
touching my abdomen
does it hurt here
when I press does
it hurt after all we carried
into the waiting room
tea leaves and mints
cysts
their thumbs
in between my
legs as if plowing for
gold I said please
please until
suddenly I
popped and
the blood

rushed in

wet, final

prize

It is Not Enough

I wrestle with plastic bottles
 and fall asleep in cars. my aunt
 touches a lemon tree, hands me
 scissors. briskly, we cut. outside, tiny
 stems roll over tiny dirt. I open my
 throat, rain falls in. clouds
 of milk fall in. late nights I brush
 my teeth and stretch. I love
 a love with muddy elbows, who
 keeps his hair oily and long. once
 he asked for a hair band,
 then nested his hands into mine
 over the cottony bed. the grass in this
 state is skinny and mean. somewhere,
 police cars flash, pollute my body
 with red and blue stars. somewhere
 brothers are tear gassed, we wear
 our bright american
 tongues. a boy is shot.
 see his purple wrists.
 see mine, outstretched beneath
 a sheen of blue water.
 in another state, my love
 raises a sign.

somebody punches
 a stopwatch.

Severed

after you left the country, there was an oil spill
 off the Louisiana coast. birds coiled their wings.
 fish strummed through the water, then died.

in the kitchen, I placed pickles on squares of
 whole grain bread. outside, puddles
 glossed their lips in rainbow grease.

somewhere, you pushed a papery hand into the
 cash register. swallowed a melatonin pill, sucked
 in scents of gasoline, grass. in another continent,

you flashed your knees. off the coastline,
a wing puckered black. we were too far away
to notice. I wished, many times, for your hand.

after you left the country, a small field of silence.
artichoke hearts locked inside a silver can. dead
amphibians, and my small chest, ghosting and fuming

after you. meanwhile, ache smoothed its fingers
on the nape of my neck. told me to keep quiet, tread
water. forget the leathery strap of your name.

Angelica Esquivel



Sophomore

Major: English

Minor: Latino Studies

I am an English Major, minoring in Latino Studies. I am from Ohio and I enjoy writing, as well as creating visual art. My favorite mediums are embroidery, acrylic paint, and oil pastels.

Black Velvet

In the beginning, we were
citric acid and sodium chloride,
melting down the gums of our ancestors.

In the beginning, the stars must have been
punched through hands
cupped over eyes
chanting
black velvet, black velvet.

In the beginning, we were right not to have
cube-shaped buildings or anything else
that shook our feet and pilled
our socks.

Primer Impacto

My uncle died diving into shallow waters, skull smashed on a rock.

Calloused feet watched by the pool as fire
ants wandered up and down their mounds.
I imagined ghosts like chocolate as I ate
salted fruit in Texas.

Dry Haven

Crocheted doilies lined the table, yet the place
was obviously decorated by men.
They were white, in leather and baseball caps,
discussing a "Higher Power" as it was
non-denominational.

After the meeting, the bald one in
red would go
to the drive-thru liquor store,
his mashed potatoes would be uneaten,
and his vomit dried to
the kitchen linoleum.

They weeded out Xanax, flushed
or tucked away, just in case.
Reading each other to sleep,
they pulled at the corners of pages
until they curled- yellow-white petals
that covered the cards
of games once played.

Splitting

Her one-way ticket to Chicago was printed with the wrong surname.
Over Indiana, her daughters' absence was
turbulence.

The red-faced man two rows back snored louder
than her ex-husband, with tiny liquor bottles before him.
Breathing recycled air, by the time they touched down at O'Hare she was
in a semi-fugue state.

Her mom picked her up in a black town car and they were off
to the suburbs.

Introduced as a second cousin,
she stayed
three months.

We Should Learn Sign Language

I slept
with earplugs in
to muffle the blow of

breath and pens
clicking and
like like like.

Glass against pane, there was
fogginess and one more hour
fogginess and one more hour.

Now I am listing my love: Frida eyebrows,
seven eight eleven teeth,
little lungs and
poker chip towers.

I leave the blinds open
and let the wind meander in-
suddenly a morning person,
suddenly a dancer.

I wake with her smiling down at me,
under flying Chinese blankets,
tigers and flowers in the attic.
We giggle our way into the earth.

Michael Flynn



Sophomore

Major: Creative Writing & Literature

Born in Los Angeles and raised near San Francisco, Michael came to Michigan because he heard Ann Arbor was one of the coolest towns in America – a suspicion that he has found to be absolutely correct. In addition to his lifelong passion for creative writing, he enjoys playing guitar, performing stand-up comedy and acting in plays. He is a writer for the *Michigan Daily* and a founding member of The Aughts, a new improv group. His vocational goals are like a person who wears a different outfit for each minute of the day: constantly changing.

Do the Write Thing

Picture, if you will, a quiet little town in Ohio called Chesterton. On the surface, Chesterton seemed just like any other quiet little town in the United States – it had a Burger King, a couple of parks, several family-owned ice cream parlors and a Dollar General. Bland but safe, it was the place parents loved and children hated in their youth but learned to appreciate as they got older. The people were friendly and talkative. In many ways, it was the classic all-American town.

It is in this humble town that our story begins.

It was almost 1 o'clock. Wendy McMillan, 41, was alone in her kitchen, making herself a sandwich when the telephone started ringing. *Who could that be?* she thought. *I wasn't expecting any calls today...*

She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Is this Mrs. McMillan speaking?"

"Yes, it is. Who is this?"

"This is Principal Walker, ma'am, from Chesterton High."

"Oh! Well, hello, Principal Walker! Um...is something the matter?"

"Um...well, yes, Mrs. McMillan. Something is the matter. It's, uh...it's your son, Billy."

"Oh dear! Is he alright? Did someone beat him up? Did HE beat someone up?!"

"Oh, he's alright, ma'am. No fights. But...well...um, I don't know how to...I think it'd be best if you came down to the school as soon as possible. This is something we should talk about face-to-face."

Oh dear, Wendy thought. This must be bad.

"I'll be right down."

Because she lived so close to the school, Wendy ran all the way there. Wendy rushed through the door of the principal's office. Principal Walker sat behind his desk, clad in a tweed suit and wearing thick-rimmed glasses. He did not look angry, but rather forlorn. Sitting across from him was Billy, hanging his head. He did not look up at his mother.

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. McMillan," said Principal Walker in the monotonous voice of a man worn down from years of working in the educational system. "Please, take a seat."

Wendy sat down in the chair next to Billy. She looked at him, but he did not look at her.

"Alright, Principal Walker," said Wendy. "What exactly is going on here?"

Principal Walker cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses and clasped his hands together. "Well, Mrs. McMillan, as you know, we have lunch from 11:45 to 12:30, and then fifth period begins at 12:35. Now, Billy here has Auto Shop for his fifth period, but he did not go to Auto Shop when lunch was over."

Wendy looked at Billy angrily. "Since when do you skip class?!"

"That's not the whole story," Principal Walker said.

"Oh," Wendy gasped. She fell back in her chair. *There's more?*

"Our custodian, Mr. O'Mara, found Billy behind a dumpster with Joey Driscoll, a new student. I had personally asked Billy to show him around, to help him transition into the new environment. But...well, looks like Joey's been a bad influence on Billy here. Mr. O'Mara found that two were in possession of...illegal substances."

"You're kidding!" Wendy exclaimed. "What was it? Marijuana? Cocaine?"

"Worse," Principal Walker said. He gestured towards Billy. "Billy, why don't you show your mother what you've got in your backpack?"

Billy looked up. "Do I have to?"

"Billy," Wendy said with all the seriousness in the world. "Show me."

Billy pulled his backpack up onto Principal Walker's desk and zipped it open. He then held it upside down. THUMP! Out of the backpack fell three hardcover books. Wendy shrieked in terror.

"I can't believe it. My son, in possession of BOOKS!" She put her hands on Billy's shoulders. "Billy, how could you?"

"That's not the worst of it," Principal Walker said.

"Seriously?!" Wendy screamed. "Alright. What else?"

Principal Walker brandished several sheets of what you and I know as paper, bound together by staples. It was a makeshift book. Walker flipped through it, and all over the pages were grotesque symbols inscribed with a mysterious black substance – words written with ink. Once again, Wendy shrieked.

"No," Wendy said. "That's not possible."

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. McMillan," Principal Walker said ruefully. "It would appear as though your son has been freebasing books."

Wendy looked at her son, but when he looked back, she did not recognize him. *This is not my son*, she thought. *My son would never do something so irresponsible, so callous, so—*

"That's not the worst of it," said Principal Walker.

"Oh, Christ!" Wendy said, slamming her fists against the desk.

"No, it gets worse. Billy, why don't you tell your mother what you just told me?"

Billy turned away from his mother. He was holding back tears of shame.

"I made a bunch of them, and I...sold them. I sold them to my friends. Made a lot of money."

Wendy couldn't even react. She was numb.

"You know," Principal Walker said ruefully, "I had an uncle named Uncle Frank. He was a lot like you, Billy. Very sweet. Very smart. But he ran with a bad crowd. He got a hold of some books. It wasn't long before all he did was read books. Soon he was making his own. He was sly about it, though. Never let on that he was...an addict."

"I'm so sorry," Wendy said.

"When the police finally caught him, he hadn't left his room in five days. My grandmother, bless her soul, had to call the police just to make sure he wasn't dead. When they knocked down his door, they found him, lying in a puddle of his own piss with a book in his hand. His eyes were bloodshot and he was speaking nonsensical phrases, such as *postmodernism* and *rising action*."

"What did they do when they found him?" Billy asked.

Principal Walker took off his glasses and looked just past Billy, as he couldn't see very well without them. "They *booked* him."

Billy sat in silence, while Wendy began shaking her head. "Huh?"

"They *booked* him, Billy."

"I don't get it."

"See, it means they took him into custody. They took him to jail, see. But another word for that is—"

"Alright, enough!" said Wendy in a tone that was harsher than she had meant to speak in. "I'm sorry about your Uncle Frank. But for my sake, please drop the pun."

"Aw, shucks," said Billy. "I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't mean to do anything harmful—"

"That's enough, Billy," Principal Walker said. "I can't have you causing trouble like this at Chesterton High. Go and clean out your things from your locker. You're expelled." He leaned close to Billy. "Look at me." Billy looked at him. "This is for your own good. I don't want you to end up a worthless bum like my uncle. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Billy said.

"Good," Principal Walker said. "Now get out of my sight."

Reading and writing had been illegal since Chesterton was founded. Nobody remained who knew why this was the case, and since there was no mention of it in history books (not that the citizens of Chesterton read those, anyway), there was no way to find out. It was one of those things people just didn't question.

As a result of this, Chesterton was something of a cultural black hole. There were no bookstores. There was no movie theater. There wasn't even a record store. They kept the high school, but managed to edit all reading and writing out of the curriculum. Because Chesterton High School students never took the ACT and couldn't write personal statements if their lives depended on it, college was out of the question for them. Their options were limited to either entering their family's business, taking up welding or selling methamphetamine (affectionately referred to as "Chesterton's favorite pastime"). A lucky few managed to pull off all three with great financial success, which was seen by the locals as the paragon of achievement.

A high achieving child as far as high achieving children in Chesterton can go, Billy was expected to grow up to be one of the lucky ones. But one bad decision had put all of that into question.

Expelled! Wendy thought angrily as she walked home with Billy through the snow. She stifled tears. *How could it have come to this? How could such a good boy have gone so bad?*

As they walked home together, Billy and Wendy did not speak. They did not look at each other.

Billy watched as Wendy cut onions furiously in the kitchen. After a while, he spoke.

"Look, Mom, it's really not as bad as it looks—"

"BILLY!" Wendy yelled, cutting Billy off. "Enough! I can't believe that you would do this to me."

"I know. I'm *sorry!* I really am—"

"No you're not. You're not! You'd do it again in a heartbeat, I know it! Dear God in Heaven. I could have taken skipping Auto Shop. I could have taken READING books. But MAKING YOUR OWN? SELLING THEM? Billy, WHAT is WRONG with your HEAD?!"

"I was just having a little fun. I mean, didn't you do stuff like that when you were young?"

"No! I didn't! I mean, it's not like I didn't have some fun back then. I fooled around, I drank a little, I did some drugs. But at least I was RESPONSIBLE about it! I knew my LIMITS! Never, and I do mean NEVER, did I play around with BOOKS! Billy, don't you know what they'll do to you? They'll give you hallucinations! They'll mess with your brain chemistry! You read books, and one day you'll jump off the top of a building because you think you can fly!"

"Mom, I think you're thinking of something completely different."

"Well, it doesn't matter what I think, now, does it?" Wendy turned away from Billy and crossed her arms. "You don't care."

"Mom, don't say that. Of course I care."

Wendy said nothing for a while. Finally, she sighed.

"What I don't understand is how a good boy such as yourself could get involved with something so dangerous! It was that Driscoll kid, huh? He got you hooked. What I struggle to understand is how a good-for-nothing LOU such as him could end up in such a wholesome town as Chesterton!"

"Well, it's actually a pretty interesting story," Billy said. "His father was actually born in Chesterton, but his family moved to some place called 'New York City' when he was really young. He got married and had Joey there, but he said there were too many signs – it was too much of a sensory overload for him. So the family moved here, and it was like heaven to him! Joey didn't like it too much though. Principal Walker asked me to show him around, and we became friends, and...he showed me his collection. And Mom, you've gotta believe me – it's wonderful! Hemingway! Kerouac! F. Scott Fitzgerald! These people have created whole worlds, all on their own, using only ink and paper!"

"Billy, stop it," Wendy pleaded.

"And then a few weeks ago, Joey taught me how to make my own. He showed me this thing called a...pen...soul. It's amazing! You press it down on this strange white substance, and it leaves a mark! And those marks combine to make words! Phrases! Sentences! Paragraphs, mom! Chapters! I didn't even know most of those words until I met Joey."

"Billy, think about what you're saying! You know, out in the real world, people who write books have a harder time getting jobs than convicted murderers. MURDERERS, Billy! Do you realize the hole you've dug yourself into? This is going on your record! It can't ever be erased! What are you going to do when you've got to get a job?!"

"You know, I've been talking about that with Joey, actually. He told me that if I really learn how to read and write good, then maybe I could go to

college!”

“Don’t say that, Billy!”

“And he also told me that once I get out of college, maybe I could go to graduate school!”

“Billy, you’re not making any sense!”

“Yeah! He says I could get something called an M.F.A. That would allow me to teach at colleges! Mom, I could teach people how to make books!”

With that, Wendy stomped her foot on the floor. “ENOUGH! Billy, I won’t have you speaking in tongues in my house. Go to your room.”

“But—”

“Go to your room! And leave your backpack here. I’m going to take these books and I’m going to throw them away. And then when your father gets home, we’re going to have a long, unpleasant discussion.”

Billy groaned and threw his backpack on the floor. “You just don’t understand!” he shouted as he stomped to his room.

Wendy took a few deep breaths, and then crouched down to pick up the backpack. She set it on the kitchen counter, zipped it open and pulled out the books. She looked at the trash can, then at the pile of books, then back at the trash can, then back at the pile of books.

Then she remembered the book that Billy had made. She reached into the backpack to find it, and pulled it out. There it was. Very crude – just a couple of white sheets of paper bounded together by staples. But it was a book nonetheless.

Look at what my son did, she thought.

Out of perverse curiosity, she opened the book.

She couldn’t read the markings that Billy had made. But something happened inside her brain when she looked at them.

A switch had flipped.

Look at what my son...made!

In each of the indecipherable markings, she could detect a little bit of Billy’s essence. Not only were some stray hairs and dandruff of his sprinkled over the paper, but he had, quite literally, poured his heart and soul into this work. He had created something from nothing. He had performed alchemy, using only a pen-soul, some paper and his imagination.

Wendy sighed wistfully.

Billy was still in big trouble. He broke the rules.

But perhaps he was onto something.

Perhaps there was something the people of Chesterton could learn from him.

Looking behind her to make sure nobody was watching, Wendy opened a drawer and stuck the makeshift book next to her husband's meth pipe.

Gina Garavalia



Junior

Major: Art & Design

Minor: Creative Writing

I am currently pursuing a BFA in Art & Design with emphasis in illustration, visual development, and graphic design. I chose to supplement my degree with a minor in creative writing, for I love illustrating my stories. Writing often intersects with my artwork, resulting in ideas I couldn't have developed otherwise. I am particularly interested in children's literature and the sense of wonder it evokes in readers. I enjoy creating imaginative landscapes and characters, whether with images, words, or both.

Chasing Midnight

An elderly couple blocked Cindra's view. They settled into the stands one row below her, the strong smell of pipe smoke clinging to their clothes. Cindra sighed. Straightening, she craned her neck to see between their greying heads. The wooden bench groaned as she shifted her weight forward and folded her arms. Even here beneath the big top tent's lofty spires, crisp autumn air penetrated. Cindra pulled her fuchsia-colored coat tighter around herself, feeling its fur lining coax warmth back into her slender frame. To an outsider, she was just another eager spectator, braving the chilly night to watch the traveling performers.

She was much more, of course.

A beam of light – cast by a system of mirrors and torches strung about the tent's rafters – illuminated the center ring below. All manner of oddities paraded around the dusty track – an elephant carrying a rider upon its back,

people in costume juggling and performing aerobatics, a trio of dogs jumping synchronously through their master's metal hoop. One man carried an absurdly-large pipe, while a fire mage walked beside him, manipulating the clouds of smoke into shapes: an eagle, a dragon, a sailing ship...

Cindra shook her head. Silly tricks. How much was he getting paid to blow smoke around like some blacksmith's apprentice? Even the most novice fire mage could manage that. Why, Cindra herself could fashion a smoke eagle so detailed and animated it could be mistaken for the real thing. She pursed her lips, hoping the show's quality would improve.

She'd never been to the circus before – nor imagined she'd ever attend. Such triviality was for children, not for people like her. She, after all, was the best fire mage in the world. She could light a candle from thirty feet away with only a flick of her wrist. She could sustain a swirling inferno four stories high for three and a half minutes without breaking a sweat. And yet, ever since her certification, she had managed to scrape by on odd jobs alone. Had it been wartime, the king himself would have been on his knees begging for her assistance. But with the kingdom in a state of tentative peace, her talents went unappreciated. Heavens forbid she join this traveling circus and command fire for others' *entertainment* – but if it meant the difference between survival and slowly starving to death, she would swallow her pride and do what needed to be done, at least until winter's end

As the parade concluded, the performers and their animals disappeared backstage through a set of curtains, leaving behind only a mustached man in a red frock coat. Cindra swallowed, feeling some of her confidence ebb – here was the ringmaster, the circus's boss. She'd need to impress him if she had any hope of attaining employment. But first, she'd need to corner him after the show. Should she wait until the crowd dispersed? Yes, that'd be best.

As her mind wandered through her repertoire, determining which fiery stunts would catch his attention, she almost missed his announcement. "Ladies and gentlemen, prepare yourselves!" he shouted, his deep voice slightly muffled by his mustache. He spread his arms and spun around, coattails billowing into the air. "What you are about to witness will astound and amaze you! I guarantee that, no matter how many winters you have lived through, you have never seen anything quite like this creature before. I now present an exquisite abnormality, all the way from the Blue Mountains – The Singing Canine!"

Amidst a shower of applause, a large shepherd dog bounded through the curtains. His midnight black coat, shined from tedious brushing, was partially covered by a red cape. A frilled collar surrounded his head like a lion's mane. He leapt atop a barrel and, at the ringmaster's prompting, stood up on his haunches.

The ringmaster gave the dog a long, extenuated bow. "Good evening, dog," he said, pronouncing each syllable with exaggerated precision.

There was a moment of expectant silence before the dog suddenly bowed in return, his pointed muzzle brushing the base of the barrel. He opened his mouth, revealing sharp teeth and a startlingly vibrant pink tongue. His lips formed words. "Good evening ringmaster," he said in reply, his voice rough and guttural.

The crowd oohed and applauded at this. Cindra, however, watched his face with closer scrutiny, trying to spy the source of the trick. Was somebody lip-syncing backstage?

"How are you today, dog?" said the ringmaster pointedly.

"Not so good," said the dog. "I ate my master's shoe, and now I have a bellyache." He toppled off the barrel and feigned death on the ground, stomach up, paws limp, tongue lolling. The crowd laughed. Cindra rolled her eyes.

But as the conversation went on, Cindra tried and failed to discern any source of mischief. The dog really *was* talking. She'd seen parrots do the same, mimicking human speech, but never a dog. She wondered how they'd trained it.

"Now, sing us a song," said the ringmaster, leaning against his cane.

There was a pause during which the dog stared at the ringmaster, perhaps in misunderstanding. The audience broke into a smattering of whispers.

The ringmaster's smile widened. Through clenched teeth, he added, "Come on, mutt. We haven't got all night."

The dog finally opened its mouth and began a mournful yet amusing song about the woes of being a dog.

Eating scraps from master's hands
Sniffing shoes and digging holes
I obey master's commands
All I'm left with are the bones

When the song ended, the audience's applause followed the dog as he trotted backstage, curtains swishing shut behind him. His act was followed by others – trapeze artists, tightrope-walkers, a trio of water mages who summoned rain down on the audience, and a lightning mage who blinded Cindra with flashes of electricity. Still, Cindra waited for the reason she'd come in the first place, the act she needed to see.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I give you a blazing-hot display of power!"

Cindra leaned forward in her seat as a tall, blonde woman entered the ring. The cuffs and collar on her white robe flickered with tongues of flame, but she didn't seem harmed by it. As she waved to the crowd, streaks of fire trailed her hand like comet's tails. The lights dimmed until only fire remained, casting flickering shadows into the tent's far corners. Then the mage began to perform, commanding ribbons of flame to flow around her in flashing patterns, dazzling the audience with light and heat.

While the crowd applauded with each trick, Cindra only smirked. It was just as she'd suspected: techniques easily achieved by any novice. Most of these onlookers had never seen the full extent of a fire mage's powers – and no wonder, too. Those mages not employed in the king's armies led mostly quiet lives working in forges or factories, away from large cities where their powers might cause destruction accidentally. Not Cindra. She wouldn't stoop to that level, letting non-practitioners order her around. Her powers were hers alone – not some manager's, or blacksmith's, and certainly not the king's. Watching the circus's mage perform, she silently analyzed each burst of flame. She, of course, could do much better. She only needed to prove herself to the ringmaster. A little flattery, a healthy dose of charm, and a whole lot of fire – and as quick as she could say "blaze," the job would be hers.

The show continued with more mages and performing animals, but Cindra was growing restless. She leaned back, allowing the ring to disappear behind the elderly couple. Reaching beneath her coat, she pulled a pocket watch from her belt and laid it in her palm. The din of the crowd drowned out the its ticking, but she knew the sound by memory. After all, for almost seven years, the quiet click, click, click had lulled her to sleep, a friendly whisper in the often-empty stillness of night. Scratches and dents riddled the watch's metal surface like scars, but each imperfection cemented its perpetual place in her pocket. It'd been her brother's once, back before the war. Pressing a button on the top, she flicked it open. The black hands informed her that it was nearly eight o'clock. The performance should be ending soon.

And, sure enough, as her mind wandered back to the present, she heard the ringmaster bidding the audience farewell. As he disappeared backstage and the applause died away, the crowd began to disperse. Remaining in her seat, Cindra watched them wander outside, chattering excitedly in small groups – probably off to tell their friends about the miracles they'd witnessed tonight. The tent darkened and the whispers of speech faded, leaving Cindra alone. With the ringmaster's booming voice still lingering in her ears, the silence felt strange and wrong.

Finally, she rose from her seat and brushed her dark, curly hair back from her face. She snapped her fingers – like a rock striking flint – and a fireball fizzled to life in her palm. The light illuminated the ring and empty stands descending toward it, the crimson fabric of the tent and its three towering

support poles. At her unspoken order, the fireball left her hand and whizzed through the cavernous darkness, coming to rest outside the closed curtains at the tent's rear. Cindra followed, careful not to trip as she crept down the steps. The ring's gravelly floor crunched beneath her boots as she crossed it, pausing outside the curtains. Babbling voices and laughter rang from somewhere beyond.

She swept the curtains aside and stepped through. The fireball, floating above her head as she walked, shed orange light upon the backstage area. Wooden shelves towered high above her head, packed from end to end with crates of props, costumes, and baubles. The ringmaster's platform leaned up against a stack of boxes, having been wheeled off the stage by one of the performers a few minutes prior. It was joined by a small chariot, which had been pulled around by a pony, and a wardrobe whose door stood slightly ajar. Cindra wondered how a traveling circus had managed to haul such large items here, but it occurred to her that they probably employed heightened-thought mages to do the heavy lifting. She thought with a pang of her brother – Ty had sometimes used his powers to levitate her, floating her from place to place, just to hear her laugh. She skirted the graveyard of shelves and boxes, spotting dolls and hats, a snare drum and an empty birdcage and – a face! She recoiled in shock, clutching her heart, until she recognized her own shadowy reflection, blue eyes blinking back at her from the surface of a gilded mirror.

In the back of the room, moonlight trickled in through a second set of curtains. Returning the fireball to her palm, she slipped through and found herself outside amidst an encampment of tents. A thin, passing cloud haloed the waxing moon's yellow glow. Torches illuminated the site, so Cindra closed her fist around the fireball, extinguishing it. Plumes of smoke curled between her fingers.

This area of the camp seemed empty, but boisterous voices sounded from up ahead. Surely, the ringmaster could be found in the thick of the action, so Cindra started forward, following the voices towards the source of the noise. As she shoved her fingers into the pockets of her coat, she rehearsed her introductory speech under her breath: how she was a competent fire mage – emphasis on "competent" – and was delighted to contribute her talents to his esteemed circus; how she was sure he could see the benefits employing her, since he was so smart; how she was willing to work seven days a week, with the exception of holidays and an occasional bout of sickness.

A loud bark halted her train of thought. The tents on either side of her reeked of hay and manure – likely home to the performing animals. She didn't envy whoever had the unfortunate task of caring for them. That elephant was sure to produce nearly her weight in –

"Looking for something, stranger?"

Cindra jumped. The voice had come from somewhere within the tent on her left. One of the workers? Perhaps he knew where the ringmaster had gone. She paused, then peeked through the tent's curtain. "Yes, I..."

She trailed off. The room beyond was dark, save for two pinpricks of yellow light. They blinked. She felt a sudden chill and looked away. "How did you know I was here?"

"I can smell you," said the voice.

Cindra pursed her lips. What a thing to say! She threw the curtains open and stepped inside, preparing to deliver a scathing retort concerning her diligent regard for personal hygiene. A dog wagged its tail in greeting, while two more disregarded her, slumbering nearby on the hay-covered ground. The yellow eyes belonged to the largest – a black shepherd dog who sat a short distance from the others. His thick, metal collar was tethered to the ground by a heavy chain.

As the curtains fell closed behind her, Cindra summoned another fireball and flung it up near the ceiling. She glanced around, certain that the animals' caretaker was the one who had spoken – but she saw no one. "Where are you?" she asked, taking another step forward.

"I'm right here."

It was the black dog, the one trained to speak. He was lacking the costume he'd worn earlier in the ring, but she'd seen his lips move. As she looked at him, he straightened up and gave his head a shake. The chain jingled.

"Ah, of course." Cindra sighed. "That's why I thought – oh never mind."

"Never mind what?" said the dog.

She frowned. Something about his voice seemed different now than it had on stage – softer, less gravely, more...human. But that was silly. Perhaps the acoustics of the giant tent had distorted the sounds before. She turned to leave.

"Wait, don't g-arf!"

The latter part of the phrase turned into a bark as the dog sprang from his haunches. He leapt forward, but the chain caught and jerked back on his neck, stopping him. Had she been a normal person, Cindra might have been scared. She'd watched dogs that size bring down even wolves threatening farmers' livestock. But this dog showed no sign of aggression – his tail drooped between his legs as he whined and clawed at the ground. The other dogs, disturbed from their sleep, eyed him distastefully and retreated even further away.

Despite herself, Cindra felt sorry for the poor thing. She'd heard dogs sometimes felt more at home amongst humans than others of their kind, and apparently this one hadn't received enough attention. Making a mental note to visit him often if she got the job, she reached beneath her coat to her leather bag and withdrew a palm-sized biscuit. "Settle down, okay?" she grumbled. "I don't have enough food to feed myself with, let alone to share with mutts, but..."

The dog stopped whining. Sitting back, he looked down at the treat, then up at Cindra. His eyes glistened like gold coins, and as she looked harder, Cindra had an odd feeling that something more was written on their flip sides.

"You're from Cardaway, aren't you?" said the dog.

Cindra stiffened. Up above, the fireball flared brighter. "What did you say?"

The dog lowered his shaggy head and nudged her bag with his big, wet nose. "The emblem on the leather," he noted. "The firebird and the serpent. It's the emblem of the city of Cardaway, which lies fifty leagues to the west of here, if I'm not mistaken."

Cindra's mouth hung open for a moment. "But how did you know? How could you —" She slapped her forehead, and the fireball flickered. "I'm talking to a dog."

"And I'm talking to a human," said the dog. "What difference does it make? We're talking."

Cindra thought it made quite a lot of difference, but she didn't say this out loud.

The dog looked up at the fireball floating above their heads like a disembodied streetlamp. "That flame reacts to your emotions," he observed. "You're quite skilled."

Cindra said nothing. The dog took advantage of her silence to finally snap up the biscuit. She watched him chew it between pointed teeth, wondering how this was possible. Sure, the wandering bards told stories about plenty of inhuman creatures: goblins and dragons and trolls with webbed feet and gills that lived at the bottom of lakes. But never had she heard a single tale or ballad concerning talking dogs. What was he — some kind of magic experiment?

The dog swallowed the last of the biscuit and looked her in the eye. "Now," he said, before she had the chance to speak. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"Help you?" Cindra blinked. "Help you how?"

"Help me escape, of course." He gave the chain another yank. "Cutting through this metal collar should be easy for someone like you."

Something cold and hard like a stone settled in Cindra's stomach. His words reminded her of someone else: her father, the day she'd nearly burnt down the house. She'd been playing with Ty, running in circles around the kitchen – and when she tripped over a loose floorboard, fire escaped unbidden from her palms. She remembered her father's face, blazing beet red as he'd thrown her outside. "Build a fire, then," he'd retorted when she complained of the cold. "That should be *easy* for someone like *you*."

She rose to her feet again, brushing hay from the fringes of her coat. "I don't have time for this. I have to talk to the ringmaster about a job."

The dog cocked his head, pointed ears perking up. "*You?*" he said in disbelief. "Take a job *here?* With these low-lives? Why on earth would you do that?"

"I need the money."

"Ah, you humans and your money." He shook his head again and lowered his voice. "Listen. I'll let you in on a secret. These people, these performers, aren't at all what they seem. Sure, they might look happy under the lights, but backstage...they're ruffians, brutes, fools, all of them. They're always quarreling amongst each other. They treat their animals horribly – even those with higher intellect than they," he added pointedly. "Trust me, fire mage, you'll never be happy here. You're not like them at all – you'll free me."

A moth flew too close to the fireball – a puff of flames singed its wings. Cindra watched it spiral to the ground, smoke trailing behind. "What makes you think I'd do something like that?"

The dog thumped his great black tail against the floor. "Canine intuition."

Cindra crossed her arms. "If you're so smart, why don't you just free yourself?"

"Have you noticed the chain?" He gave it another yank, burying the metal collar in his thick fur. "The end is embedded in the ground by magic. And if I tried to run off during a performance, I'd have the whole lot of them after me before I left the tent. They're really quite determined to keep me here. They need me. Everyone loves a singing dog – keeps the crowds coming, you know."

The slightest amount of pity nagged Cindra's brain, but she shook her head. "Look, I'm sorry, but it's not my problem you got yourself chained up."

I'm here for a job, not a jailbreak. I don't want to *starve* this winter."

A gust of wind rippled the fabric of the tent. The dog sneezed, crinkling his nose. "Fine," he sighed. "If it's money you want...I can offer incentive. Before I was taken captive, I was a wanderer. Not long ago, I was traveling in the nearby mountains when I stumbled across a dragon's treasure trove. The dragon itself was dead. I saw its skeleton amongst the gold. But if you help free me...I'll take you to it."

Cindra's shoulders slackened. She'd heard legends of dragons plundering the wealth of entire cities, hoarding it in their lairs. But stealing from a dragon was suicidal – a living dragon, that was.

"How big a treasure trove?"

"Big."

"Lots of gold? Jewels?"

"All sorts."

Cindra considered this. A whole dragon's horde, all to herself! If the dog's words were true, she'd never go hungry again. She'd never have to fret over finding work, never labor under the orders of an ungracious master – and if the king's recruiters ever came calling, she'd easily be able to bribe them away. Heart beating faster, she weighed the odds: a job with the circus, performing under the direction of the ringmaster and rewarded with a small yet definite pay, or a chance at the treasure of a lifetime?

She took a deep breath. "All right. It's a deal."

"Good." The dog nodded to the chain. "Now, can you get this off me?"

Beckoning the fireball closer so it hung over her shoulder, Cindra extended two fingers. A flame sprouted from their tips, and she encouraged it to burn brighter until flecks of blue were visible. Holding up the chain with her free hand, she brought the flame against its surface. The metal glowed red and sparks popped, dancing away as the flame ate through the chain, little by little – like warm fingers melting through ice.

Suddenly, the dog's ears perked up. His back straightened, and his tail stopped moving. "Hurry," he murmured. "Someone's coming."

Cindra couldn't hear anything, but she didn't doubt the dog's keen senses. She ordered the flame to burn hotter and squinted her eyes against the light. Finally, the link gave way and the chain clattered to the ground. Drawing warmth from the glowing links to cool them, she extinguished her flame. "All right, lets –"

The curtain swept open. A tall, broad-shouldered man entered the tent,

carrying a bucket of feed in each hand. His bearded jaw opened when he saw Cindra. The buckets dropped to the ground, spilling kibbles everywhere and causing the sleeping dogs to jerk awake in alarm. "Who are you?" he hollered. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Run!" barked the dog. Spinning on his haunches, he bounded toward the tent's opposite entrance. As Cindra followed, she heard heavy footsteps crunching through the hay behind her, accompanied by an angry, "Stop, thief!" She ducked through the threshold and waved her hand in a circle; her fireball dispersed in a wide arc, flames crawling around the edges of curtains. A roar of surprise indicated that her trap was successful. As she retreated, she glanced back and saw the man give up the chase, attempting to extinguish the flames.

But his yell hadn't gone unheeded. Already, performers were stumbling out of their tents, confused heads swiveling around to discern the source of the commotion. The dog didn't slow, darting around their legs, eliciting yells of surprise. Cindra collided with and knocked over a woman with short brown hair. As she stumbled forward, trying to regain her balance, she felt a tight fist close around her wrist. A tall, thin man with dark eyes scowled down at her. "Think you can steal from us, do you?"

Fire sprang up from Cindra fingertips, and the man yelled in pain. He released her at once, clutching his arm where a several round welts had appeared. As he employed a string of choice swear words, Cindra sprinted away, struggling to keep the dog's dark coat in view.

The encampment receded into open fields. Tall grass slashed about Cindra's legs as the wind carried her hair into waves around her shoulders. It had been forever since she'd felt this way – the excitement of the chase, fear like fire itself in her veins, the sound of her own heartbeat thudding in her ears. She remembered when she'd finally run away, leaving her father standing on the porch of the empty house, his angry curses receding to silence behind her. She'd forgotten how much she'd loved it.

Something whistled past her head like a meteor, and suddenly a patch of grass in front of her erupted into flames. Cindra spun around – three figures were fast approaching from the encampment, one of whom wore a robe with fiery cuffs. Through the shifting shadows, she recognized the face of the blonde fire mage whose performance she'd watched with amusement only an hour ago.

The dog, silhouetted black against the glowing fire, yipped and sank beneath the grass. After a moment, he reappeared, hobbling forward with a limp. "Tripped over a hole," he grunted as Cindra caught up to him. His voice was laced with pain.

Another plot of grass ignited. The blond fire mage was sending fireballs

shooting in their direction, each attack punctuated with a word: "Bring – that – dog – back – you – thief!"

One of the fireballs caught the hem of Cindra's coat. Hastily smothering the flame, she ducked to avoid another burning missile as it passed over her head. She sighed. This woman was really getting on her nerves – and she couldn't forgive her for singeing her coat. She reached out, plucked the next fireball from the air, and clenched her fist, dissolving it into smoke.

Before the woman had recovered from her surprise, Cindra lifted one leg and brushed the tips of the grass with her boot. Flames followed in its wake like ripples on a pond, its momentum building into a single wave, which her pursuers narrowly avoided.

Shaking in anger, the woman shouted something to her accomplices, who spread their hands and cast a wall of fire before her. When she raised her arm, the flames mimicked the movement, solidifying into a pillar that she prepared to swing like a hammer.

Too easy. Cindra raised a hand and like bits of metal drawn to a magnet, the fire whistled over to aid her, dancing around her fingers, swirling in her palm. Pressing both hands side by side, she willed it back toward the pursuers. "How about a *real* show?" she shouted.

The fireball took off. Its edges became wings, and as it soared into the air, it assumed the likeness of a giant firebird. Flapping its wings, it circled the pursuers once before slamming into the ground in front of them. A ring of fire erupted around them, blocking their path. Cindra turned her back, smirking as she felt the other fire mage trying to extinguish her work – but Cindra willed it to keep burning hot and bright.

The dog had stopped to watch, his golden eyes wide like moons. His tail drooped between his legs.

"Let's go," Cindra said.

The dog took a few steps forward, wincing – but too slow. They would never make it far at this speed, not once those mages called for reinforcements. Cindra could deal with fire well enough – but she didn't fancy taking on that lightning mage. Resigning herself, she bent down and lifted the dog into her arms. Her muscles screamed in protest – he was heavy, and she was a mage, not a weightlifter. Nevertheless, she struggled forward and began to run again. As the open field receded into woodland, the ground littered with red and gold leaves, the dog went limp as a sack in her arms.

"There," she chortled, listening to the baffled mages still shouting in frustration. "That should keep them occupied for a while."

She ran until the dog's weight became too much to bear. Finally, she

skidded down the steep bank of a secluded ravine, lowering him to the ground. The dog, who hadn't spoken a word since their escape, gave his head a shake and stumbled over to the creek at the ravine's basin, where he lapped up a long drink of water. Cindra sunk to the ground, arms shaking.

"We can't stay here long," said she when she had caught her breath. "Let me see your paw. Is it broken?"

"I don't think so," said the dog quietly. Shaking water droplets from his chin, he limped back to Cindra's side. "It already feels better, I think."

"Good." She rubbed her throbbing arms. "I'm not carrying you any further, so you'll just have to manage."

The dog studied the ground, silent, as Cindra snapped her fingers and three more fireballs fizzled to life above them. They formed the corners of a triangle, illuminating Cindra as she pulled a canteen from her belt and took a long drink.

"You saved my life," the dog said suddenly. "Thank you, fire mage."

Cindra snorted, stooping to refill her canteen with water from the creek. "Oh, don't be so dramatic. That other mage was so undisciplined, she'd have barely been able to singe you."

"I see."

"And my name isn't 'fire mage,'" she went on. "It's Cindra. Cindra of Cardaway."

"Thank you, Cindra of Cardaway," said the dog. "I am Chasing Midnight."

Cindra blinked. "You're what at midnight?"

"No, that's my name. Chasing Midnight."

"Your name is Chasing Midnight?"

"Yes."

Cindra shrugged. "Okay then, Chasing Midnight it is."

As Chasing Midnight hobbled back and forth along the creek's basin, gingerly testing his injured paw's weight, Cindra took a moment to consider the absurdity of the situation. She had come in search of a steady job – a perfectly simple task. But now here she was in the middle of the woods, holding a conversation with a big, black shepherd dog named Chasing Midnight.

"How is it you can talk, anyway?" she asked, leaning back. "Dogs aren't supposed to talk."

Chasing Midnight shrugged his shoulders. "And humans aren't supposed to shoot fire from their fingertips."

"Point taken." Reaching into her bag, Cindra retrieved two more biscuits. Tossing one to Chasing Midnight, she tore a chunk from the other. "This had better be a big treasure trove," she muttered between bites. "I'll have nothing left to eat before long."

She looked up; Chasing Midnight hadn't touched the food. His gold eyes, partially closed, studied his paws.

Cindra stopped chewing. "It's not too far, right? Only a few days' walk?"

The dog said nothing.

"Chasing Midnight?"

His ears flattened, and he seemed to shrink back from the glow of her fireballs. "I...I was lying," he whispered. "There is no treasure. There never was."

Cindra stood up at once, the three fireballs combining into one larger flame between them. Before she could speak, Chasing Midnight hurried on.

"I only said it because I knew you wouldn't help me otherwise."

"What makes you say that?"

"Canine intuition."

Cindra gritted her teeth, anger fueling the flame into a bigger blaze. "You – you were using me!" She prepared to throw the fire – then stopped. The dog was cowering, tail pressed between his legs, his injured paw shaking. Cindra saw the fire reflected in his fearful eyes. How he looked at her! Like she was some kind of monster...

The fireball shrank. It twisted and fizzled and was gone in a puff of smoke, leaving them in the dark. The chilly air snapped unrestrained around her neck, and she shivered – but somehow she couldn't bring herself to move. Her arms dangled like sacks of flour at her side. How long had she been this way? The last few years, she'd worked her hardest to master her skills, to train, to grow, to become stronger. She was strong. She could light a thousand lanterns at once, reduce an entire house to ashes. She could probably walk through a volcano without so much as a burn to remember it by. But *why*? What was it all for? When her powers had first manifested, she'd been scared – everyone around her, even her father, began to look at her like a fiery explosion waiting to happen. Everyone except Ty. He alone had encouraged her to hone her powers, to study magic further if she ever got the chance. She'd agreed. She'd make him proud. When had that

changed? When had she become so consumed in her power that its flames blinded her to her own apathy? When had she stopped caring enough to leave this extraordinary creature bound to servitude when he'd asked – no, begged even – for her help?

Her knees locked up, and she sank to the ground. The soggy riverbank pressed wet earth against her carefully-kept coat. Looking up, she saw Chasing Midnight's quivering frame silhouetted against the starlit gap between barren branches, moonlight dusting the tips of his fur. She didn't know how he came to speak – and honestly, it didn't matter. For the first time, she wondered what horrors they'd put him through in that circus ring. He'd been captured and subjugated – and for what? To be used like a tool for others' benefit?

She remembered the day the recruiters came for Ty. She'd been sitting on the roof, watching the clouds pass by like a fluffy white parade, and Ty was next to her, enchanting pebbles to fly in circles around her head. She'd been crying – once again, her father had forced her to sleep outside for fear of her powers. Ty had stroked her hair and told her he would never let anything bad happen to her. Well, he'd lied, hadn't he? From that height, they'd seen the recruiters coming from far off. Ty had just sat in silent resignation as though he'd been expecting this moment for a long time. Cindra had known about the war, about how the king had sent recruiters all across his lands, drafting mages to fight for him – but somehow she'd never imagined they'd take Ty away. Not until it was happening. Later, they'd said their goodbyes in the doorway of the house, one of the recruiters' hands tightening around Ty's shoulder. Biding for more time, he'd retrieved a watch from his belt and pressed it into her hand. Then, leaning in, he'd whispered quietly enough that only she could hear, "Don't let anyone push you around while I'm gone, promise?"

She nodded. He waved and turned his back.

She never saw his face again.

And even now, as she sat in a heap on the forest floor, his features had become blurred in her mind's eye. She clung to the image of his face, trying desperately to keep him alive, at least in her memories. The image began to swim as her eyes flooded with tears. She balled her hands into fists, feeling them begin to smoke. Well, at least she'd kept her promise – never again would she allow herself to be bullied into submission. But she shivered still, wondering what Ty would say if he could see her now. She was acting just like the monsters who'd taken him away.

"Cindra?"

Drumming hooves punctured the silence like raindrops on a still pool. Cindra was vaguely aware of faint shouts and barking dogs as the soft glow

of torchlight eroded the darkness.

Something soft brushed against her hand. "Cindra?"

Cindra could not bring herself to look at Chasing Midnight. Feeling as though all the energy had been expelled from her body, she forced air through her lips. "Go. They'll find you here."

"But what about you?"

She shook her head numbly.

"Cindra –"

"Just *go*," she snapped. Why couldn't he see it was for the better? Whether or not she escaped, the damage had been done. She had no job, no coin, and unless she went crawling on her hands and knees to the higher-ups, begging for a position, she'd likely not last the winter...

"Don't be silly!"

The force of his bark startled her so much that she finally looked up at him. Though his ears still pressed low against his head, he had stopped shaking, and his bright eyes regarded her with concern. "Come on, get up. You can't just stay here – they'll imprison you too!"

As he tugged at the hem of her coat, pulling it away from her body, moonlight glinted off the surface of something round underneath, dangling from her belt: her watch. She could hear it now, the quiet click, click, click – her lullaby, filling the silence where Ty's heartbeat should have been. Cindra shook her head, feeling her thoughts clarify. Chasing Midnight was right – what was she thinking? She couldn't just lie down and accept defeat. This dog, at least, wouldn't get far without her help. Slowly, shakily, she staggered to her feet and took a deep breath. "C-Can you walk?"

"I think so."

"Then come on – we've got to stay ahead of them."

Chasing Midnight lowered his head. "But the treasure – "

"Forget the treasure. You'll just have to help me hunt instead. That's something dogs do, right?"

As she splashed across the creek and ran up the ravine's slope, Chasing Midnight came bounding along beside her.

"But Cindra," he panted. "Where are we going?"

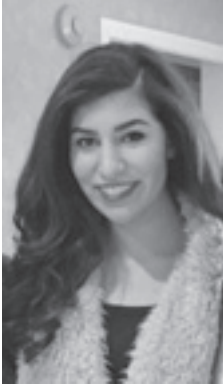
Cindra laughed. Where indeed? She had no home to return to, no claim

to property, no possessions save for those on her back – and that left the rest of the world: the wide, wide world and all its forests and mountains, oceans and caverns, people and creatures and secrets. Dogs could talk – what a thought! Ty would have laughed at its absurdity. But it was true! The world was keeping secrets from her, but not for long. She was free to uncover them all, one by one.

And for the first time, winter’s sorcery no longer scared her. She, after all, was the best fire mage in the world.

She reached down, stroking the crown of Chasing Midnight’s head. “Onward.”

Melina Glusac



Freshman

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Melina Glusac hails from Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan. She is currently a freshman in LSA, a music writer for the *Michigan Daily*, and incredibly geeked to be a part of Café Shapiro, where she gets to share the love of her life (writing, in all its guises) with the general public. She hopes to be a music journalist writing for a major publication someday. In her free time, she enjoys reading things by Truman Capote, playing the cello and piano, watching films from the '40s, the Oxford comma, and writing. She would like to thank her friends, the witty ladies of 4th Butler Hall, and family for their endless support and always-open ears. Oh, and tea lattes. She couldn't have done it without you.

For the Single Girl

I'm struggling to remember.

I remember the carpet felt like bumpy burlap poking at my tiny shoulders.

I also remember being underneath a blanket, holding it as high up as my mini-arms would allow—a reverse plank position—and jiggling my legs in place in one of those giddy, clandestine efforts to release excitement.

His name was Joe, and he was my husband. We wed young—a mere six years had passed in our lives before the intimate ceremony in Ms. Bristol's kindergarten class took place. It was a lovely wedding. The year was 2001, and the future looked bright.

We were playing house with our children when we decided it was

bedtime. We tucked the kids in, and the two of us collapsed onto the rough carpeting, blanket sheltering us from the unnaturally cold elementary school air conditioning, the unfeeling fluorescent lights. It was nice to relax with my husband; making a pretend three meals a day takes a lot out of you.

So we tucked in, raising the blankets over our heads to mull over the day's events and say our goodnights in private.

And he kissed me.

It was rapid—on the lips, of course—but so rapid. A blissful albeit brief second and a half of true harmony, true this-is-what-married-couples-and-people-in-general-are-supposed-to-do love. Until college, this was the only kiss I'd ever had.

I'm 18 now. A worldly girl, to be sure—I like people and the things they have to tell me. I'm interested in learning, in living, and in love. But I'm single, and I have been for 18 years.

Someone call Guinness, right? There's something wrong with her. She's a good girl, a respectable girl. Why doesn't she have a boyfriend?

If that's what you're thinking, you're delightfully unoriginal—I've thought all of it and more, perused every aspect of my personality, body, face, and body, wondering why that magical relationship thing just hasn't happened. I don't have an answer for you. But I can tell you why I wear a ring on my right-hand ring finger.

Elementary school proceeded with sporadic splashes of flirtations. The boys were just too young for me. So I've decided to start my essay with a list of all significant men who have sashayed through the romantic sphere of my life thus far:

Joe Jonas—the Sharpie-eyebrowed, roughly voiced, absolutely irresistible lead singer of the Jonas Brothers. (I hope people remember the JoBros.) For 12-year-old me, he was more than just a cool dude crooning lyrics that nourished my pre-teen angst and budding desire for love, more than a chart-topping single. He was gorgeous, funny, and sweet. All that nauseatingly perfect stuff. But he was, I soon realized, not real. He was a crush. I was the chart-topping *single* in the situation.

Then there was a real, live rock star who popped up, as they always do, later that year—a skateboarder in my middle school Foods and Life Skills class. Krystian was this one's name. (And how rebelliously amazing it was to see the name "Christian" reinvented like that. That's like the American dream to any sixth grader experimenting with punk rock, striving for any kind of Sex Pistols-esque anarchy in their suburban life. Rock on, naming gods. Rock on.) He was a big one—played guitar in his band, wore skinny jeans blacker than Ozzy Osbourne's sunglasses, and completely dominated my heart for a

solid two months, notebook doodles and all. But even though I had face-to-face interaction with this stud, he fell into the same category as Joe. Crush-crushcrush.

The rest of my middle school love phase was uneventful. A hunk here, a looker there—I had learned the game at that point and was ready for anything.

Sophomore year came. High school was going well—grades were good, classes were great. I walked into my first Honors American Literature class ready to be dazzled—English was my bag, the most fascinating subject to me. I couldn't wait to get into the thick of *Huck Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crucible*. I'd heard all about this marvelous teacher—we'll call him Mr. S—who was remarkably passionate about his subject, and all his past students adored him. I couldn't wait.

He hit me like that vicious soccer ball did in freshman year gym class, except he was motionless, standing there with his hair and his cool dress shirt and his eyes. How dare he? Mr. S was confident and smart, kind and wickedly hilarious. So naturally I crushed. Hard. Poems and all.

And he liked my writing. So naturally I crushed even harder. I didn't know at the time that he actually just liked my writing and did not want to engage in any sort of courtship when I graduated. I should've seen it coming.

I don't know what it was that made me feel so strongly for Mr. S. I dreamt about us traveling the world together, writing about our adventures and publishing them in venerated magazines—livin' la vida intellectual. And I also dreamt of him kissing me, like Kindergarten Joe did. Completely inappropriate thoughts, completely unrequited love, yes. But show me the logic in emotion, or the brain's capability of functioning properly when it's inebriated with that troublesome four-letter word, and I'll tell you you're full of it. In these times, we live off the sparks that fly about our brains and our stomachs and our hearts. It's a damn good way to live, but there's nothing steady about it.

That little earth-shattering truth hit me when I started to shake Mr. S's spell after the school year finished. Who was I? What did I have to say? What did my thoughts, now that they were no longer conquered by an improbable dream man, have to offer to the world and to myself?

And so I struggled. For quite a bit of time, a sort of existential fog settled over my head, hanging out there, its daily haunt, day after day, night after lonely night. Cue the violins and the Sylvia Plath.

Around this time I started listening to a lot of music. I didn't realize, but one of the few things I looked forward to every day was coming home and

listening to whatever jams were, at the time, the perfect cathartic distraction. It felt soothing and fun. “Undone (The Sweater Song)” by Weezer blew my mind. Those cryptic, wrong-sounding first strums on the guitar seemed to capture the aura of my mental labyrinth—and when the song’s chorus hit, pleasantly slamming and hard, I would just rock it out like a dork and forget the world. This song started it all for me.

Then I started to look at beauty. The hypnotic sirens Sarah Vaughan emitted (try on “Misty (live in 1964)” for size), forced me to sit and listen and appreciate for the first time in a long time. *Slow down*, she said to me. *Slow down and listen to what my voice is doing—listen and see the beauty of not only my music, but life itself. You’re too misty, too much in love—you have a family, a beautiful life, beautiful friends.*

Thanks, Sarah. You’ve always been right.

Life was all around me—characters were all around me. I was single. And because of that I had the luxury of sitting with myself, an innocent yet weathered bystander, and learning about people who inspired me—all while working on bettering and being truer to my core. I bought a couple band t-shirts and started wearing red lipstick. Enough with the Polos—it was time for me to dress happy.

One day I turned on the TV, and *Sex and the City* was on. I thought I’d give it a go, seeing as it was “iconic” and all. Back then, to my virgin eyes, the show resurrected a certain family member’s traumatizing remarks from a few years back; my prim and proper aunt despised the harlotry it promoted. But after a few episodes, her words became murkier to me. Yes, these women were sexually adventurous, but they were also single, intelligent, successful, financially stable, and more than aptly dressed. I looked up to Miranda’s acidic wit. I admired Charlotte’s optimism and Samantha’s freedom. And I just adored Carrie Bradshaw—what high school girl with a curly mop and a deep-rooted love for grammar wouldn’t? This show not only defined an era of liberated women; it made it acceptable and “cool” to be single. And I’m forever grateful for the confidence it gave me in that regard.

That’s not to say all forms of media help us along our road of singledom. We’re constantly having romantic comedies hurled at us from all directions. I think it’s safe to say we know Matthew McConaughey and Katherine Heigl better than our neighbors, even some members of our family. As much as I enjoy a night of binge-rom-com-watching, it can’t be denied that these movies foster and promote unrealistic ideals.

Katherine Heigl is skinny and blonde—perfect skin, great lips. Kate Hudson is skinny and blonde—perfect skin, charming smile. Meg Ryan is skinny and blonde—cute lips, great plastic surgeon. In the end, they always get the guys. Do you see what I’m getting at? At early ages, we implant these ideas—these standards—of beauty into men’s heads, and when they’re faced

with anything different (not less) in person, they don't know how to feel. They're intimidated, startled, maybe even attracted to the alien creature, but, in most of my experiences, they just don't know how to act.

Remember skater boy Krystian? He offers the prime example of this theory. In sixth grade, believe it or not, our feelings for each other were somewhat mutual. I remember his pimply, surfer-dude friend whispering to me one day, "Dude. He's gonna like ask you *out*."

Nothing ever happened, though. Nothing ever became of whatever raw emotions he expressed to his friend in those couple of weeks. Roughly a month later, he was "dating" a perky, Hollister-hoodie-donning chick from California. She was thin and small, suitable for a sixth grader. I was tall and had barely just started plucking my Armenian-Greek-Montenegrin crossover eyebrows. No contest.

This happens all the time. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty, or the skinny, fair brunette beauty—they get the guys. We see it in movies; we see it in books; we see it in those staged photographs on Tumblr with 100K notes. But, most sickeningly, we see it in life. I don't want to get preachy. All I want is a curvaceous, healthy girl with an unorthodox ethnic background (and maybe an odd sprinkling of freckles or some other realistic imperfection) getting the man of her dreams on the silver screen. I'm looking at you, Nancy Meyers. Let's make it happen.

So to those ladies out in the world who are still single: rejoice. This could be, and many times is, the reason boys haven't been nipping at our noses all these years.

Then again, maybe it's not. Maybe it's us. Maybe it's we chronically single girls, pining over cute guys in the streets and being exasperatingly, unceasingly untouched. It's *hard*. It's hard to be us.

But let's talk about us for a minute.

I'm 5 ft. 8 inches, with curly dark brown hair that I sometimes enjoy torturing with a straightener. I'm beautiful. I have full eyebrows, big eyes, a generous nose, and heart-shaped lips. I'm not super skinny, not super heavyset—healthy, womanly, some might say. I have long fingers and some miniscule scars on my back from acne. My big toes tower over my other, normal-sized ones. I like my legs more than my arms. I listen to Nirvana and the Pixies and Led Zeppelin and Marvin Gaye and I'm a firm believer in fashion therapy. I'm single.

The key word in that conglomeration isn't single. It's found in the second sentence, the second word: beautiful. I think I'm beautiful.

To some that may seem arrogant—to me, arrogance would be saying that aloud, to other people, and projecting that vain belief in every action

taken. That's not what I go for—beauty is something I tell myself I am every day, secretly. Writing it down in paper just then was actually pretty embarrassing, but I don't think we should be ashamed of it. I want us to walk around radiating our various forms of beauty, letting our little secret motivation get us through the day with straight backs and hopeful outlooks, especially when it comes to relationships. Us—we are beautiful.

It goes beyond physical appearance, beyond relationship status, beyond all the excess of our bodies and our likes and dislikes. It goes down to our soul. (Though some of the other stuff has to do with our soul, too.) When we nurture our souls with that thought—I am beautiful—we can tackle singleness and, you know, that tiny thing called life.

I—me, alone, not lonely, me. I care about myself and am content and confident with identifying myself with this one letter: I. It's not "you and I" or "he and I," though someday it might be. Right now it's I. The he's and she's will drift in and out, some sticking longer than others, but at the end of the day it's I. So fall in love with I first.

am—a daily reminder I'm alive and will live everyday as fully *present* as possible, accepting my I-ness.

beautiful—the espousal of myself and my soul; letting the beauty of what's around me in and eliciting the beauty of I simultaneously.

During my Mr. S days I would wear this vintage ring on my left-hand ring finger. It was intricate, an ornate swirling of vines that wrapped itself twice around my finger, taking up the entire lower half. I wore it every day, thinking of how great it would be to be married someday and have this amazing, real ring in its place. It split in half on the last day of sophomore year.

So I went a long time without a ring, until I found one in my grandma's junk jewelry box. This one was simple—it was a band, gold and silver infused, but a simple band. Stately, elegant—and it goes with every fashion statement. I picked it out and have worn it every day since. On my right-hand ring finger. It reminds me. I no longer struggle to remember—I am married to myself first.

Now it's night. Morning will come soon enough.

On my shoulders, I'm feeling my University of Michigan sweatshirt, comfy as ever. I'm climbing into bed—the room is dimly lit, perfectly chilled with the pre-fall air visiting from time to time through the main window. (We have an open-door policy, so it's fine.)

I tuck myself in under my plush blanket. I think of what it's like to kiss and really be kissed. I think of love, and I look at my ring.

It's okay.

Lucas Grant



Junior

Major: Music Composition

Minor: Creative Writing (Poetry)

Lucas Grant is a junior music composition major and creative writing (poetry) minor at the University of Michigan. They work within an intersectionality between different artistic mediums being a composer, poet, vocalist, performance artist, and occasional doodler. Born in North Carolina, much of Lucas' work deals with their upbringing relating to their current self as well as exploring the tradition of storytelling that remains a vibrant part of their lineage.

Sun/Fire/Flue/Air

Sun

You and your girlfriend wanted to go on a winter-spring walk because
the overcast was over, but the leg grabbing cold
that dried my virgin skin.

Next May you would see me in Ashville, you looking worried because
I looked much older, but it was the scabbing of cold
and dried sexed skin.

* * *

In August the world warmed up
and my body' weathered skin
began to peel wrinkled layers

I was ready to leave it completely
so I ripped off the organ
and the contained fat fell off leaving

only the muscle supporting bones and organs
and I rebuilt my skin so it wasn't loose, thin, and dry.

* * *

October, and the skin has begun
to age again. Weather is coming
as it always does.

Fire

I smoked my first cigarette.
It was smooth? I'm unsure.
I was afraid it was going to burn up
on me so I tried to go quickly
but I got overwhelmed halfway
through the burn. There's a half

of a cigarette in some
tin coffee cup on my
side table, waiting for you.
I know you're allergic
to the smoke, the smell,
with your weak heart,
it's irregular pulses,

so I unraveled all the
cigarettes I would have
smoked, I put the leaves,
and the paper, and the filters
in separate mason jars so they
could never have the chance
of being a cigarette. And on

my mantle this tiny sculpture
is intitled "The Cigarettes that
I didn't Smoke for You" and it
seems meaningless now.

Flue

We left the restaurant because
the smell of the chimney smoke was too much.
As your body was too much because
we left the restaurant and you

on the way back noticed shadows
of leaf souls, imprinted on the sidewalk,
leftover from the fall and footsteps
and rain preserved by the snow
that had melted and froze keeping
those shadows from fading into the cement.

Air

We were walking to the coffee
shop and could see our breaths

as we sang improvised harmonies
to distract from the cold grabbing

our legs through our pants. We got
there and got there on the wrong night

and the wrong person was playing bad jazz
there so we walked back and walked back

to the bus stop where I apologized too many
times to distract from the love that I felt

you were afraid of handing over so easily
so we talked about feelings instead of ours.

We Were a Tobacco and Textile Town Once

In a field, behind a house,
behind a hill I used to sled down if it snowed.

In the field, another house,
wooden and half burned to the ground.

In the field back home,
the house, a barn, abandoned, bruised.

Was it hooves or was it leaves
that used to age there –I can't remember.

In the city, across the tracks,
across the scarlet brick R J R smoke stacks.

In the city is a barn,
a house called home to caffeinated hipsters.

In the city, in the house,
the scent the curing the roasting of the beans.

There is a band
that likes to play there, I like to go and listen in.

I am away from this,
and wait for this, and this, and in the waiting

I become oxidized
and turn the color of crinkled melted gold.

When I return from arbored waiting I rain
and the fire goes out.

Let's Gather the Dandelions in the Field and let the
Spring Appear

I

The sun
came out as a
sick joke
to mock me.

The sun's
words burn
so that my skin
bubbles
& peeled back flesh
reveals blood.

II

The sun reflecting
off muddied sidewalk snow.

The sun looking
for its Next Big Fix waiting to melt.

The sun creates
puddles around road signs & coffee shop entrances.

The sun knocks knocks
knocks gently on the frozen-over shell atop the field protecting the weeds
and dandelions.

III

The sun & the lonely always bickering about
the other & they have only each other & what
they have is all they have & in the cold the sun
is loudest & they're left with just you the sun &
the sun is loudest in the waiting for spring to appear &
they have no one but you the sun & the sun &
the sun & the sun & the sun the sun the sun &
the sun shouldn't be out yet because snow &
inside my heart the blood is angry.

IV

And Then Rain.

V

& in my hair & down my cheeks & inside my mouth – let drops
moisten. The drops from sky clouds quiet the sun
for a small infinity of time.

The sun's shouts masked by the white noise of rain
bouncing off ice in confused frenzy & yet
my cold skin is scalding from the sun's burns.

Tears & teardrop rain mix in a sloppy wet image of
this pre-catharsis – I'm wading in brackish

waters from my newly formed

estuaries like those off the North Carolina coast where
I spent childhood summers – so let me drown
in the Grant Sound & filter the pollutants from my body.

Then the sky falls out of itself & in this moment
of infinity I stand in turgid plunging oceans
from the sky & within that ocean

drops slice miniscule circles
in snow & I smile.

Filled *for the hollow*

We pour lentils into the body
from the feet, filling it to the
upper most part of the skull

every morning as you
wake up, but you mistake
it for a heavy sadness

(why have you begun
to do this every morning?)

& you make a small hole
at the tip of your left ankle
and let the lentils leak out –

Margaret Hitch



Senior

Major: Art & Design

Hailing from the Upper Peninsula, Margaret is passionate about printmaking, poetry, and delivery biking for Jimmy John's. She is currently working on her senior thesis art project, titled "American Dreamboat," which consists of a series of prints that illustrate a selection of her poems.

Self Portraits as Late Adolescent

with a line from Adrian Blevins

First, I was a pond swimmer, and nothing was expected of me. I was a creature like the carp beneath me, who turned somersaults and gnashed gleaming white teeth violently underwater: When we came up together, it was night; A young girl was playing a violin badly.

—

All the while I was a woman of the house, and as I swept the walk of its Beech tree leaves; I started to think about how we pass time in the end. Emma, maybe now I have arrived at the beginning of the life we've waited for: the part where we gather the names of trees.

—

Then, I was a girl who delivered flowers to hospitals. Reflected in the eyes of the dead, I saw myself as I was in the rooms of elders; all pink skin, ripe for it— my blood rushing as I careened down the hill towards their silent rooms: singing just as sweetly as they imagined.

—

And for some time I was a selfish hoarder of space. And how very American of me, making messes and going out where no one else was: guarding the windows and watching the shadows on the snowfall! This soothed my hapless heart, which still won't quit bucking and spinning in circles.

—

And there was a time I rode my bike at night, though it's the one thing my mother told me not to do. Carolyn too, stood on roofs though her parents forbade it, and smoked cigarettes like it was for love, another way to lose your breath—And that's what you do, if, like us, *to get your kicks you choose to be delirious.*

Summer House

Sarah must have told us:
cover these walls with your thought:
For then we made ourselves loud
and raucous. In the lake,
we pulled ourselves
through the legs of others,
and propelled our cheeks into
the backs of those sleeping.

To one she said:
Blister yourself over yourself again.
Tie yourself in knots and
place yourself in a corner:
This is the place for a long slumber.

Still others of us found our place:
We all communed in the kitchen
at one time or another.
We all collided on the stairs:
With stars in our eyes,
we faced each other.

Now this house
has found its summer.
Twenty-one, and I am listening
for the arrival of a dog.

Yes, he takes the shape of a mongrel,
but he leads us like a Lord.
The moon comes out and so
we become spirits.
Then we are the smoke,
and we are the glow
of the fireflies and the cigarettes—
Slowly the thought arrives:
We are already dead.

Three Odes for Lithography

I

A stone can stand for many things:
For me, it was the weight
of the wood to be hauled
for the stove—
Weight that moved
my blood in winter—
forcing me under
clouds of heaven.

Then, I was learning
what my father
was teaching by example:
a love for the day and
the daily labor—
His mother sent me
piles of devotionals
that neither of us read:

Do you see the way
each practice is passed down
and transfigured?

Think of the stone, birthed in Germany,
taken from a quarry, centuries ago.
Imagine it carried up—
huge dead thing
rising through antiquity:
How small you stand beneath it.

II

If there exists something to romanticize,
You can bet I will. I know it's foolish
But I won't stop trying
to turn my love of Milwaukee
into something beautiful.

I keep returning to the ruins of the Rust Belt,
one eye on the ghosts of those
who grained the lime before me,
laid the stone with a layer of sweat
back when this really meant something—

Of course the stone may stand for love.
When I go to a party, I carry a log,
imagine it as a stone, and dance along,

as if in the myth
of the old lithographer—
who dances with a bowling ball,
and sings to the rose at its clear center.

III

It seems natural, the act of bowing
to the stone in drawing— In fact
the whole damn thing
can be seen as an act of prayer.

Some studios have an altar:
a place to turn to after we fail
to understand the acts of the ink, the air,
the water, the clink of a little metal bowl—

This vexes us.
Still, isn't it our nature
to contain
some strain of the illogical?
Yes, it is a stubborn act—
to pass the press over the paper, to pretend
xeroxing doesn't exist—

To think we were meant
for some cyclical action:

to push against the stone
as the sun reaches its zenith—
and then, again,
descends into darkness.

Loves-of-Your-Life

What I like is a little bit of sadness:
The kind that comes from a place in the sky—
Suddenly, like snowfall,
when time slows,
and then breaks forth
 as if released from a dam.

What I like is a little bit of madness—
When I think of her, I see the colors
run up and down her skin.
They vibrate, little by little
with energy
 and laughter.

And that's what I like most of all—
a little laughter. That's enough
to fill the caverns in my silly little head.

There's a parade of all the loves of my life:
 falling
out of the sky, their bodies
 somersaulting
 effortlessly,
in a way that resembles the
shape of their walk—
the way they dance across the Earth.

Ariana Hunter



Junior

Major: Biology and English

Minor: Physics

Ariana Hunter is from Lansing, Michigan, born in 1994. She started writing poetry at 11, and won a local poetry award for young authors in 5th grade. Since then she has come to the university where she will graduate with a Bachelors degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and English with a minor in Physics. She plans on joining the Peace Corps upon graduation and pursuing a post graduate degree later on.

Desert Dreamscapes

Even in the dark of night, she can feel shadows of heat rising up from black pavement, white lined and cutting through desert sands, cold beneath dark blue and star-laden skies. From beneath her, the quiet thrumming of an ancient engine invades her mind as she drifts into sleep. Its hum bringing dreams of wide, sluggish rivers.

She wakes when the car stops. The splashing of a river sounds through the open driver's side door. Heat leaks out into the night while her little sister drifts back into unconsciousness. Her father's voice cuts through -- *sit down* -- its harshness lessened by the thrum of low music and soft snoring under that blanket of stars.

Driving again, the headlights overtake cloudless starlight. The car is a boat moving west atop a two-lane river,

the cracked window a gentle sea breeze, thrumming
along to slow the clearing of the horizon and the heating
of the tar strip beneath the old sleepless motor. Behind, a cut
left in their wake, rising, twisting dirt that drifts

endlessly. Still they float forward, as she sits, drifting
further from the approaching reality of fading stars
in a flowering pink sky. Light as the sun prepares to cut
the image apart and rob the once grand riverbed
of moisture, cracking the clay with its unrelenting heat.
She is pulled from her dreams by the hacking thrum

of her fathers desert-dry cough. Humming, thrumming,
and spitting out some caked on regret, while the tires drift
over that center lane. *Are you up?* She feigns sleep in the heat,
refusing to let her dreams fade so easily as the early morning stars.
She lets it permeate the air, and linger. Hearing the river
sound in the ceaseless hum of the cars as they weave and cut

across sand and dirt. So different a way than tumble weeds cut
curled, looping paths through cacti, their dried stems thrumming
at the soft touch of desert wind, far less ravenous than the river
gushing through the lowered window. The desert breeze only drifts
over the land. And her sleep muddled mind, no longer filled by stars
and cold rivers, begins to respond to the young sun's building heat.

But through those shadeless hikes and afternoon tours, she drifts, cuts
moments from the day, keeps cool despite the heat of lonely stars,
and lets the thrumming of the engine breathe alive new rivers.

Broken Ceramics

Someone calls my name,
lingering
on all my soft vowels and
skimming
all those ugly consonants.

They cradle it in their mouth,
greedy
in their extravagance, but
it simply drifts to my ears,
lazy
in this midnight breeze.

Everyone laughs at a joke
I didn't care enough to
follow,
blowing smoke and flicking
embers
into a cracked ceramic tray.

Lightning illuminates its worn,
dirt-caked
frame, each hair-thin fracture a
memorial
of its weaknesses.

I walked away to hang my feet
off the porch and let young rain
warm
my smoke soaked skin.

I wait as the night cloaked thunder
chases
lightning from the sky, and wince
when a smile causes my lips to
crack.

Short Scenes from Long Nights

(i)
My hours get lost in a
haze
of smokey laughs, deep
inhalations
& endless conversations
punctuated by soft
coughs
& late night cigarettes.

(ii)
Someones screaming
down the hall, but
it doesn't matter
since our door is
closed
& we can always

tune
them out if we
turn our music
up.

(iii)
He finds a tube of neon
orange paint on my
floor,
uses his hand as a brush &
colors
the once white wall.
You know she'll hate it he
whispers
in my ear when
my roommate walks in
to find his smiling crooked
sun.

(iv)
Our phone keeps ringing,
but I'm ignoring the
caller. Instead, he & I sit
exhale
& watch as our forms are
mimiced
by the twisting motion
of fresh smoke in
cold air.

A Mirror for Dreamt Clouds

You slaughtered my yesterday,
allowed me to understand what
it would mean to be the ocean
made of swaying, uncut grass,
but forced me to become the
darkened forest reflected in
still water.

You flew away, but
upon returning made yesterday
come alive in my arms, his broken
frame once more bloodying my
tomorrow as he sleeps beside
me.

And you seem determined
to distract me from watching over
my present, even as he soars above
gray clouds with the sun too hot on
his wax bound wings.

Sophie Jantz



Senior

Major: Economics

Minor: Portuguese

Sophie was born and raised in Sparta, Michigan, where she spent most of her days barefoot in the family's tomato garden. She discovered her love of poetry while writing angsty poems instead of paying attention in her econometrics courses. She has a passion for foreign languages, is an avid Instagrammer, and only drinks her coffee when it's hot.

Orange Juice

She rises early each morning
and operates the crank, producing
a delicious pulp.
Bahia grows the sweetest oranges.

Minha mãe. My mother.
We are not the same color
or clan.
She calls me in her native tongue:

"*Brancinha*," I am
pale as winter's frost, a flower
etiolated elsewhere
far from Brazil.

Little white girl.
But I am here, now,

drinking juice from ten oranges.
Seventy in one week.

She never discards the peels.
She peels
the pith from the empty shell.
Separation.

Fragile rounds of skin,
limbated edges curl when sun
pours through the window.
Our morning pitcher is always full.

-Are there oranges where you live?
-Não, minha mãe.
Oranges don't grow
along Lake Michigan's shore.

Peels are petals. She assembles
roses from the remains and sets
the blossoms in the open window.
Transplanted,

drinking in the sun.

Salvador

Street vendors line the periphery
of an overrun bus station.
The rancidity of boiling oil lingers,
the barefoot cart woman smiles.

The recurring dips and divots delay
as most things do here. Broken paths,
with loose black-and-white cobblestones,
emulating luxury found elsewhere.

We step around hurdles,
navigating nuances,
learning to swim for the first time.
To commute is to crawl.

Morning light trickles through leaf blades,
decorating faces with speckled patterns.

Sunrise. Sunset. Sun-rain.
Puddles overflow,

their bodies tumble down alleyways,
washing streets of their litter, of their crimes,
of their yesterday, towards the bay, towards
the salty waters.

Her Voice

Her voice was red,
like the bindings of books she would tuck
between bibles at the church.
Grandma was immutable,

not in the way she would
coil her hair every other week into
Clorox ringlets
but in the way her words still
buzz in my bones, echoing fiery hues,

she is that August breath pushing kites
higher and higher
even after the gust is gone, we still float
all by ourselves.
(sometimes I am naive enough to believe it)
higher and higher,
even after she is gone.

She used to hold my hand in church, refusing to sing
"Amazing Grace," she could convict a choir from that mint-green pew,
Grandma was *No Wretch*,
she preferred news clippings to Sacred Text:
"One rides on wind and the other cannot."
Grandma didn't need to be found.

She wouldn't be tucked away on shelves. She used to
build bodies with her tongue,
or bury them. You couldn't hear her humming me to sleep
with lullabies of the Northern Sea
-O, *What a World This Would Be*-
You wouldn't even know her name.

But you will know the color of her voice.

Michelle Kahn



Senior

Major: English

Michelle Kahn is a senior at the University of Michigan studying English language and literature. In addition to her love of reading and creative writing, Michelle also enjoys cooking, photography, and playing the guitar. As a writer, Michelle draws from her own life and her experiences. She uses well known themes of love, loss, and the darker aspects of life to reach others on a deeper, more visceral level. Upon graduation, Michelle would like to travel before hopefully finding a job in the publishing industry and ultimately finishing her young adult style novel.

Forgotten

Sometimes all we are in life are
forgotten flowers
picked from rooted stems
placed in hair
or given to another
to show love
tossed away after use
to wither and die
alone on park benches

Trash

I remember what it was like that night
when you laid me bare
I remember what it was like that night
and the way you caressed me there

I remember what it was like that night
the way you held me near
I remember what it was like that night
and how I knew there was nothing to fear

I remember what it was like that night
my heart was racing fast
I remember what it was like that night
and how I wanted every moment to last

I remember what it was like that night
but then I think about today
I remember what it was like that night
how you drew me in, and threw me away

My Alcoholic Double

Please, I beg you
Please, not tonight
We have a midterm tomorrow morning
That is actually important
School should come first after all
Please, let's just stay in for once
We can watch a movie and relax
Like old times
We don't have to put on clothes that barely cover our body
Only to have them get ruined by a myriad of mixed drinks
And thrown across the floor of some frat boy's room
We don't have to spend the night killing our brain cells
We don't have to drown the stress of the week
For another week in a row
We can just take it easy
Maybe fall asleep before three
In our own bed
For once, let's just forget about forgetting

destruction

I've decided to stop feeling
for awhile
emotions just
get in the way
so I'm done
being in pain and
caring for people who
don't care about me
so I've decided to stop feeling and
I think it will be better this way

Just Pour me a Little More Poison, Please

Sweet lies slither out
past pillow lips that hide
your snake tongued lying mouth
too insecure to actually
tell me the truth

I believed every beautiful dream
sugary sweet to mask the
mass amounts of bullshit
poison poured into my mind and
for a time
I loved those
pretty little lies

too bad pretty little lies
once revealed
can't shield
me from this pain that
I am now forced to feel

so why don't you just
pour me a little more poison, please
those pretty little lies are burning
away my heart anyway

Slam Against Innocence

You

You had those hazel eyes with those flecks of gold

And you

You were only twelve-

Turning thirteen years old

How is it that you knew so much?

Understood so much?

Had learned so much?

To hurt me

The way that you have

The way that you would hold me

And kiss me

And stroke my messy ten-year-old hair

The way that you would say

"It's okay"

And "You care about me don't you?"

Thinking that those words

That those words

That those words would justify your actions

Justify how you used me

You abused me

You like a tumor planted yourself inside my brain and ate away at it

Ate away at my sense of reason

Ate away at my understanding of relationships

Ate away at my self-respect and

My innocence

Clouded my mind with fear

Fear at every look

Fear at every touch

Fear at the idea of someone getting close enough

Until one day when I was finally grown up enough

To face you

To face you and see

To face you and see that you were nothing

You were nothing

You were nothing and you did not control me

I

I have those dark brown eyes and now I've been told

And I

I finally understand at twenty-two years old

That which does not kill me

Can only make me stronger and

You

You don't control me any longer.

Mira Kinebuchi



Freshman

Major: undeclared

I am a freshman from San Diego, California. I have always loved writing, especially creative writing, and I have a collection of stories that I have written ever since I was in 4th grade. Writing is my way of expressing myself-- I carry around a small notebook with me to record my thoughts-- and it is definitely an art that I am still learning. It is my hobby, something that I genuinely enjoy, so I am excited to learn more extensively about it through the University of Michigan. Because I am half Japanese half Korean, language intrigues me because I also love reading, whether its classic, contemporary, autobiographical, or fantasy, and my goal is for my to-reads pile to be smaller than my have-reads. Music is my first love, Christ is my Rock and Savior, and I am honestly a sucker for any dessert with cinnamon because the taste is really as homey as it gets.

The Tulips will Whisper

Haru Kiyono exists, but does not live. When she walks, her footsteps are like the falling feathers of a *Tancho* bird as it silently scurries away. Quite often, one would question whether or not she is breathing. Her presence is neither tense nor relaxed; it simply is.

She used to be a vivacious girl. Because she was known for her artistic talents, the children at her school followed her around, asking her to paint their favorite toys, flowers, or self-portraits. Her then still childish, plump hands awkwardly grasped onto the splintered paintbrush that became a part of her flesh, and dipped the bristles into swirls of cheap, lumpy paint. Any opportunity to paint was an invitation of freedom, her pupils dilating in

absent minded creativity. No one knew what exactly went on in her mind except through the vivid colors she carefully lathered onto the canvas. When the children were seated after lunch recess, Haru was always the last one to come back in.

"Where is Haru?" the exasperated teacher would ask as her tired eyes raced around the classroom. Peeping her head out the window, she would see Haru crouched down next to the tulip garden, sketch-book in hand, whispering her secrets to the tulips.

But now, those secrets are locked up inside of her, put away along with the enjoyment of life she once had. Now, Haru Kiyono lives as the last centimeter of an eraser, or the end of a loaf of bread; she is what could make the difference but is thrown away, only to be, perhaps, a regretful afterthought.

32 years have passed, and she still hasn't picked up a paintbrush. Haru's child is as suppressed in expressiveness as her, and her husband is as controlling as her father used to be.

"*Okaasan!* Can I go play outside? Please mother, I'm done with all my homework."

Haru was on her hands and knees in the wooden floored hallway that led to the *genkan* filled with black shiny business shoes, small sneakers, and a pair of beat up sandals. She raised her head and proceeded to sit in a *seiza* position, thin shins tucked underneath her hamstrings. Her eyes were fixated on empty space, and there was a wet rag in her hand.

"No, Katsuo. Go to your room and study right now," Mr. Shimizu's voice bellowed from the other room.

"But father..."

"I said no."

As Katsuo dragged his 8-year-old feet across the wooden bamboo *tatami* mat of the small living room, Haru's eyes trailed behind. Katsuo had just been released from his 5-day room arrest by Mr. Shimizu, rewarded only with a single pat on the head and a walk around the neighborhood.

Haru often had flashbacks. She could feel the ghostly grip of her father's deteriorating hands onto her slender own, like a man desperately begging to have his life spared.

"Haru," his raspy voice shook, "I'm not going to live on this earth for very much longer." Haru could not make eye contact with him. He continued, "You haven't been a very obedient girl growing up, you know that? I have been embarrassed by you so."

She nodded her head in an automated response.

"You took up painting when I gave you a brain to study, and now it's too late to pursue anything else. My father and mother were both very successful, and all you can do is useless catharsis in color."

Her quivering lips parted slightly in protest, but she knew her inputs would be useless.

"So, Haru, you must promise me three things. This is my final wish upon my deathbed." His grasp tightened and his fading pupils solidified into two black marbles. "First, you must marry into a family with a good name. It is important that our family lives on in a successful bloodline. Secondly, I want you to take care of my grave every day, watering it and tending it with flowers. I am not going to make your brother do that, and your mother will be much too distressed after I die, but it is imperative I am comfortable in my death. And thirdly, Haru, do not leave a trace on the earth, not a single drop of paint, not even an idea of one, because you are going to leave it someday soon. It's embarrassing enough that you already have so many paintings. You understand?"

Black, white, and gray. Her heart hurt. No, it didn't just hurt, it tightened up into a small knotted ball and wrung out the very soul that she thought she once had. But she knew that she had to keep her father's orders. She would not leave her mark on this earth.

After a moment's breath, Haru got back on her hands and knees and continued to wipe the floor. Wipe, drench, wring. Then wipe again, until the farthest point of the hallway was reached.

"Haru," Mr. Shimizu said. Haru nodded. "Haru did you hear me?" Mr. Shimizu finally slid open his door and peeped his head out, glasses shifting slightly on his rigid, square face. Haru nodded once more, concentrating on the plank of wood ahead of her that was slightly discolored from the rest. She knew this was the way he saw his father treat his mother. "Why are you always so silent... to think that I married you. You got lucky to have a man like me, you know that?" Scoffing, the large boulder disappeared again behind the door.

She slowly stood up, like a ghost rising from its grave, and drifted into her room, located closest to the kitchen. She slid open her wooden door, revealing another *tatami* room that had no hints of a live occupant. There was simply a wooden table with a candle, and a pull out drawer for Mr. Shimizu's extra clothing.

Mr. Shimizu had managed to get the only antique, one story wooden house in the neighborhood of Mitaka-shi, Tokyo. Modernization had taken over this district, and all the other houses had been crushed, with cramped,

concrete apartments taking their place. Wires increasingly crowded the blue sky like electronic waves on the static display of a dysfunctional television screen. The streets were newly paved, yellow and white solid lines attempting to divide the narrow roads that only fit one car at a time. The Shimizus had bought the house before these renovations, and fought against legal authorities to keep the design as it was. They did not want to fall into modernization; they believed in honoring their ancestors. In the end, they were granted their request, as long as the traditional backyard was cut to half its size in order to fit in other condominiums. Ever since then, the house had become the Shimizu's pride and joy, known throughout the neighborhood as the house that is still standing. And now as Haru slipped on her dilapidated footwear and pushed against the heavy wooden door out onto the stone steps, she could hear the whispers of the people passing by who longingly looked at the house, as if it ran on its own time, separated from the circumstances of the rest of the world.

Closing the rusting metal gate behind her, she shifted the shopping bag strap on her angular shoulder and turned to the left towards the small market at the end of the street. It was an overcast day; winter was coming. The air was quiet and small, but bustling with the busy thoughts of the people; humility and prideful autonomy fought each other here. A stray cat cried near the trash bags, which were all set outside under nets, neatly separated into recyclables and non-recyclables. Two black crows were picking at another one of the bags, spilling banana peels and fish bones out onto the pavement.

Haru walked on the side of the road, even though she knew that no cars would pass by. None ever did on Saturdays anyway, when everyone took the train downtown where there was more life. When she got to the market, she saw that there was no salmon; there was only white fish. It would have to suffice. She could grill it the same with salt, lemon, and soy sauce, and hopefully Mr. Shimizu would still be satisfied. Since she knew that they still had left over dry rice grains back at the house, she pointed at the fish, bought three, then walked back. The gate squeaked as she pushed through it, and her sandals shuffled the sand bordered stone walkway. A thorn tugged at the flesh of her cheek as she reached the *genkan*, a thin, dark red line stretched across her skin. The plants at the entrance were going to need trimming. She would get to that later.

Soon, the fluffy rice was steaming in the stone pot, and grilled fish were each laid out on top of three kin-fired clay plates. Each one had a little pile of grated radish, with finely sliced green onion and an eighth of a lemon on the side. Haru created a perfect presentation for dinner, and she had made this without a single thought in her head.

At exactly 6:30 PM, Mr. Shimizu emerged out of his room and strode down the hall, impatiently sliding open kitchen door. The knee-high, roughly

cut wooden table was set up with the freshly made rice in white bowls, three sitting mats surrounding the table, and Haru, who was sitting down in *seiza*, staring ahead.

"Haru." She slowly and silently turned her body towards him, still in *seiza*, then set her palms on the tatami in a pyramid shape. Her forehead touched the back of her hands, resting there for a solid second, and then came back up. Mr. Shimizu nodded slightly in acknowledgement, sitting cross-legged on the mat, then called for Katsuo to come out. The 8 year old, who had been absentmindedly playing with his stationaries inside his room, somberly walked out of his room and into the kitchen, plopping himself onto the sitting mat.

A moment after Katsuo sat down, Haru got up and brought out the fish; first for Mr. Shimizu, then for Katsuo, and then for herself. There was a split second of silence.

"What the hell is this?"

Her finger twitched.

"Does this look like salmon to you?" Her eyes closed as Mr. Shimizu's spit rained down onto her face and onto her battered clothes. She bit her lip in attempt to stop herself from wiping it off. "You are good for nothing! Do you have any idea what kind of sacrifices I made for you? I could have had that pretty whore down the street as my wife, I could have a couple of them actually, but I only chose you for your promise to sell your service to me. I gave you a family, I gave you a house, I gave you a name. As useless as a pile of ashes, that's what you are!" He furiously shook his head, slamming his hand down onto the table. Katsuo's rice bowl fell onto the floor, and he quickly picked up the grains into his hands and rushed back to his room. "I refuse to eat. Clean up," he fumed, and then slammed the door shut.

Haru did not shed a tear. But her bony hands were balled up into tight fists, and her lip was bleeding consistently now, a meaty chunk imprinted by the marks of her front teeth.

Slowly, she threw away the contents from the table into a large garbage bag. She did not separate the recyclables from the non-recyclables, nor did she preserve the untouched food as she usually did. When she took the large garbage bag out to the front of the gate, she did not even cover the bag with a net. Then, something caught her eye.

It was not usual for Haru Kiyono to follow her curiosity. In fact, it had been a while since anything triggered emotion in her at all. But the familiar tube-like shape that peeked out of the garbage net from the apartment across from the house was enough to make her pause. She shuffled quickly across the road, where she picked up the object and rushed back into the

safety of her room.

She waited till the evening, and then lit a candle by her bedside for some light. It had been a while since she painted. When she was younger, Haru had been considered a genius in painting; the way she blended hues and shades were the only means for her limitless mind to find a way into the tangible. Everyone but her father had praised her for her talent; this was until her father's death, of course. He was jealous of her talent in art that he did not have, him having to work hard for the attention of even his older siblings. This had led him to his death wish.

And finally, the artist inside of her was suddenly awakened once more by the touch of the wooden body of the paintbrush against her fingertips as she picked it up. Trembling, she squeezed red and orange paint out of from the dirty tubes onto the *tatami*. The tip of the paintbrush was dipped into the colors like toes testing for dangerous waters. This is going too far, Haru knew this. This is going against her father, her ancestors, and her last few decades of her existence. But she felt it; she felt her soul scratch against the very door of her conscience, like a jailed man does against the bars of prison, and she unquestionably had to escape.

Slowly, she let her brush glide across the walls of her room. An unfamiliar expression played across her face—perhaps a smile—as the lines got thicker and bolder, definite and purposeful. Red and orange streaks of paint became more and more consistent on the surface of the wall. Her soul was erupting, much like how a star explodes before in its death, but she had never felt more alive. The small candlelight grew until it was bursting into a full-fledged fire, flames enclosing upon the furniture of the room. She slashed more red and orange on her walls, a laugh bubbling up inside of her, escaping her cracking lips. Finally. Finally she was enveloped in her own self, the prisoner breaking free and destroying the remnants of her past. She took a step back as the flames licked her calves, eating through her apron. She closed her eyes, smoke grasping her throat and crawling into her lungs. "You were right," she whispered. "I really am here for a fleeting moment. Who will remember me, come many generations?" She held up the paintbrush up against the fire. Its shadow connected to that of her own, as if part of her limbs. "I am becoming ashes once more, just like you," she whispered, "But I created my own fire. I am my own ashes. And I have secrets that only the tulips will ever know."

Matthew Locker



Senior

Major: English and Creative Writing

I grew up in Long Island, New York, about half an hour from Manhattan and I am now in my last semester here at Michigan. I believe writing is something that everyone can do, but few ever take the time to make it something they truly love. If I'm on campus and not writing or eating, I am usually found in Angell Hall where I work in the Sweetland Center for Writing as a Peer Writing Consultant.

Small People, Big Universe

Brian Levitt sat in Brandon's Pub, the only bar in the small mountain town of Rocky Springs, Colorado. Staring at the slow drops of condensation running down its sides, Brian clutched a glass of scotch awkwardly between his long fingers. The scotch swirled like a nebula – a massive pre-galactic formation made up of the left over particles of a supernova whose billions of tiny droplets would eventually condense to form a star. His thick-rimmed glasses reflected the dim shine of the soft lights that dangled above the bar. Brian didn't understand what he was doing here. This bar was far from his comfort zone, and the liquor he was drinking made him feel even more awkward and out of place. An astronomer, Brian was used to observing from far away. The universe was such an immense and wondrous place that the people around him seemed small and insignificant.

Brian hadn't been at the bar more than twenty minutes, yet he was already tipsy. Two invisible fingers pressed lightly against his temples. His first single-malt scotch had gone down smoothly, but now it churned in his stomach. He hadn't yet summoned enough courage to order a second glass.

He wondered why he ever agreed to come here. Brian stared at the cubes of ice resting at the bottom of his empty glass. His place was in the observatory working, not drinking scotch in a bar. Every second spent here was time away from his research, which had always been his true love. On the top of the mountain was his telescope; his magical portal into the deepest reaches of space. He knew that was where he belonged yet here he was. What had he been thinking, letting Clark talk him into coming here? Brian ordered another scotch to distract from his self-deprecating thoughts. He glanced at the other patrons in the bar, thankful that there weren't more than a dozen of them.

The town of Rocky Springs was ordinarily flooded with tourists and skiers during the winter months, but since it was a Wednesday night towards the end of a particularly brutal winter, any skiers were at home asleep in their beds probably dreaming about the slopes. The bar wasn't very crowded, but for Brian it was still unsettling to be around so many people. He tried not to wonder if the other patrons were staring at the scrawny, khaki-wearing nerd sitting awkwardly at the bar. Though he was originally from Colorado, Brian had never felt like he'd fit in at all. Rocky Springs' locals were either ski bums or dedicated service people, and most of the other men in the bar wore stained jeans and leather jackets. In his brown button-down shirt and Sperry's, Brian felt overdressed. Another sip of scotch helped to calm his nerves, but not enough to completely shake the feeling that he was being judged.

While he'd never been officially diagnosed, Brian could have sworn he suffered from some sort of demophobia; he'd always felt uncomfortable in crowds or public places. It could turn into an intense paranoia, too, but that was only in extreme scenarios. This was why he loved having his own observatory. A smaller research facility, the Harding Observatory was traditionally operated by one primary researcher and one research assistant. Harding Observatory had been Brian's sanctuary for almost a decade, and he'd learned to rely on its solitude to stay sane. In the quiet privacy of his own thoughts, Brian felt stable and almost invincible, but sitting in Brandon's Pub he felt like pulling his hair out and screaming.

Brian was glad that none of the people in the bar tried approaching him. He wouldn't know what to say even if someone did try to start a conversation. For as long as Brian could remember, he'd been unable to talk to people about anything but astronomy; it was all he ever thought or talked about. He'd always spent more time with his head floating in space than settled in reality. Over the past seven years in Rocky Springs, his only companionship consisted of his telescope, his computer, and the dozen or so research assistants who'd moved in for only a few months at a time. These assistants were doctoral candidates from universities around the country, and they usually spent their days either working furiously in the lab or trying to figure out what they'd done to end up in such an isolated, lonely place. Brian rarely left the observatory, but his assistants usually ventured into town several times a

week. Clark Brighton, Brian's current research assistant from Berkeley, visited the town's only bar quite often, and he'd always tried to drag Brian along no matter how many times he rejected this invitation.

The only reason Brian had agreed to go out tonight was due to a sudden ominous weather pattern that obscured his telescope's view for the night. Thick, dark clouds had dominated the sky as Brian had navigated the treacherous mountain road into town. Without clear conditions, all Brian and Clark could've done would be to study data collected earlier that week. This prospect had depressed Clark. They'd finished collating their weekly report, and it was obvious to Brian that Clark had reached his limit for the evening. Clark's immediate suggestion was to head down to Brandon's Pub for a drink.

For once, Brian gave in to Clark's appeal, and they'd set off in separate cars. He knew that he probably wouldn't have been able to get much work done in the lab tonight, anyway. Clark had always made it sound like Brandon's was a good place to relax and unwind, but when Brian had walked into the loud and boisterous bar he'd felt anything but calm. The constant buzz of conversation set his teeth on edge, and he felt more claustrophobic with each passing second. Without the night sky arched above him, Brian felt restless and fidgety. He felt a sharp tightening in his chest, either from the liquor or the confined space. He stood up abruptly with the intention of leaving, but as he turned away from the bar, Brian saw Clark enter, brushing a light dusting of snow off of his coat. Brian groaned to himself and fell back into the chair. He wasn't going to get out of this so easily. All year, Clark had been trying to turn Brian into a 'normal person.'

After working together for nearly a year, Brian had come to appreciate Clark's quiet mannerisms and his laser-sharp focus when they were in the observatory. As Clark walked towards him, Brian wondered absentmindedly if he would still enjoy Clark's company after they both got drunk together. According to his many boastful stories, Clark thrived in any social environment, whether it was a bar, a nightclub, or a concert. Over the past year, Clark hadn't told Brian what life was like in California; he'd only told him what the nightlife was like. Brian noted that Clark loved talking about the wild adventures he'd had as a party-animal undergraduate student in Berkeley even though he'd graduated five years earlier. As Clark often joked, most of his education had come from the bars downtown.

Brian's college experience had been completely different. He'd spent pretty much all of his time at Colorado College working in the small astronomy labs or the Phipps Observatory, studying stills and data from observatories around the country. He'd often dreamed of working for one of these observatories, and would still smile whenever he thought about future astronomers eventually using his data for their own work. After his sophomore year, most of Brian's contemporaries had taken to calling him "The Brain," because although he was easily the most advanced student in his

department, he was also the most socially inept. Every time he was offered the choice between people or the wonders of outer space, without fail Brian would choose to live among the stars.

Clark smiled at Brian as he pulled out one of the chairs next to the bar. Beckoning to the bartender, Clark held up two fingers and sat down. In a matter of seconds, Clark had a pint of beer and a half-full whiskey glass in front of him. He thanked the bartender and dropped a few bills on the counter, then turned to Brian and remarked, "What service, huh?" Clark gave him a bright, isn't-everything-perfect smile, but Brian only shrugged in response. Brian hated small talk, and he'd rather sit and drink in silence than get dragged into a meaningless conversation.

Though it had taken a while, Clark had grown accustomed to Brian's turbulent moods, and Brian had stopped apologizing for them months ago. "It's a curse of the trade," Brian had explained to Clark almost a year earlier, "you start to notice that your emotions will follow the patterns of the stars you're studying." On gloomy, cloudy nights like tonight, Clark would realize that cheer and joy weren't going to make an appearance.

Brian had agreed to come down to the bar, but that didn't mean he had to enjoy himself. It also gave him a certain pleasure to rebuff Clark's attempts at amicability outside of work. Brian always kept a carefully measured distance from his assistants. It was easier this way, because they would always leave to go find new jobs in new places, never returning to the obscure corner of Colorado where Brian had established his home. He figured what's the point of getting attached to something or someone if they'd just be gone in a month or two. The stars Brian had studied his whole life were millions if not billions of years old, and they weren't going anywhere for a very long time. These stars were more reliable companions than anyone Brian had ever met, or ever would meet.

Brian's sullen contemplation was interrupted by a sudden crackle from the television set behind the bar. The screen flashed to an urgent news bulletin. A reporter was standing in front of a map of Colorado, and Brian could see a massive blue and white swirl, almost like a hurricane, approaching from the north. The reporter said that local snowfall in Hinsdale County could exceed nearly four feet, and the storm was threatening to block all roads in the county for at least a week.

Brian stood up, suddenly enraged that he might lose a week of research and work. He also had no idea what would happen to the equipment because of the storm, and if any of the equipment malfunctioned or broke it would be his fault. "How could I be so stupid as to leave the observatory?" he asked the room, not addressing anyone in particular. He picked up his coat and dug through the pockets, searching for the keys to his truck.

"What are you doing, man? You heard the news!" Clark grabbed his arm.

"You can't go out there now in this weather!"

Brian stared at Clark's hand gripping his arm as if it were an alien creature that had attacked him. He studied Clark's large stainless steel watch, which indicated it was almost eleven o'clock. Much later than he'd thought. Glancing up, Brian explained, "I have to go. I'll be okay. There'll be plenty of time for me to make it back up there."

Clark tried to reason with him, explaining that the best thing they could do was to stay at the bar for a little while longer, relax some more, then rent separate hotel rooms. "I'm sure there's plenty of rooms open this time of year. Work can wait. It's already pretty bad out there. Let's just stay here. Maybe it won't be as bad as they're saying."

Brian was barely listening to Clark. He was busy trying to figure out what he needed to do to get out of the bar as quickly as possible. Brian shoved Clark's hand away to free his arm, grabbed his glass from the bar, and downed the last remnants of scotch in one movement. He pounded the empty glass down onto the bar. Reaching into his pocket, Brian pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and slapped it down next to his glass. "Keep the change," he announced, unsure if anyone had heard him. Turning away from the bar, Brian took one shaky step, but had to grab his chair to stop himself from falling. The room swayed as if it were a boat. Brian had nearly tipped over when he'd tried walking, so he gripped the back of the chair to steady himself. He hadn't realized just how drunk he was until he'd stood up, but he knew there was no time to waste.

It was too important for him to get back to his observatory before the storm rolled in, or he'd risk everything. If any of the equipment malfunctioned while he wasn't there it might cost him his job, maybe even his entire career. It was his responsibility to conduct daily status checks on all of the sensitive detection gear, as well as the radar equipment, and if a week went by without any of Brian's fine tunings then there was a good chance that the storm could cause irreparable damage. After all he'd worked for, he couldn't let himself lose his job now, not for this. If Clark didn't want to come with him that was his problem. Brian was leaving. Right now. Despite Clark's warnings, Brian walked out the door and towards his 1987 Toyota pickup truck he'd driven for almost a decade. It was a good mountain vehicle, since it handled the unpaved roads reasonably well, but he knew it'd been a while since he'd driven in a snowstorm.

Brian opened the door of the truck and sat down. His hands shook, partly from the cold and partly from the alcohol, as he tried to get the key into the ignition. He paused for a moment, took a deep breath to steady himself, and turned the key. The engine roared as the truck came to life, heat blasting and radio on. He switched off the radio - the sudden loud noise had made his head pound. Already a light snow drifted down, accumulating on the windshield. Brian flipped the windshield wipers on as he tried to picture

the route back home. During the day, with perfect conditions, it ordinarily would take twenty minutes to drive from the town straight to the observatory. Tonight, however, the only lights around him were the twin headlights of his truck, and the light flickering off the snow that was now falling all around him even faster than when he'd left the bar.

Brian leaned forward and squinted at the sky. It was pitch black, but not like the exhilarating darkness of a clear night sky. Instead, it was the complete darkness that only a thick grouping of storm clouds could possibly produce. He huddled in his seat, trying to keep himself warm. He knew he would have to hurry if he was going to make it back to the lab. His right hand gripped the gearshift nervously as he pressed down on the brake. Brian took a deep breath and shifted the truck into drive. The heavy vehicle lurched forward, as if it had been frozen in time, waiting for him to return it to its normal speed.

Brian couldn't have been driving for more than five minutes when the snow started to come down in a solid white sheet, and he had to strain to even see the road in front of him. The snow fell even faster as he accelerated up the steep mountain path, carefully winding around the sharp curves and switchbacks leading up to the observatory. Brian briefly considered pulling over, but then remembered he'd moved his standard emergency pack and never replaced it. It was probably sitting on a countertop somewhere in the lab. With no blanket, water, or emergency rations, Brian wouldn't last the night if he got stuck out here. Since the weather report had predicted this blizzard to last for days, he wouldn't stand a chance if his truck stopped. He would get snowed in within the hour.

Brian forced himself to keep driving, even though his vision was almost entirely blocked by the heavy snow. He couldn't stop, wouldn't even think about stopping, until he reached the observatory, but every second Brian drove, it got a little harder to see, and he was starting to feel unsure of the road's actual location.

"I'm almost home. I'm almost home." Brian repeated this phrase over and over in an attempt to stay focused on the small space between his headlights and the thick curtain of snow. He knew at some point there would be a sharp curve in the road, but he'd lost all sense of direction in the storm. It was all he could do to stay focused on that tiny bit of visible space, and he knew he couldn't stop without the risk of getting snowed in. He was driving slowly, inching his way up the mountain. At this pace, it would take him forever to get back home. Brian fought the cold feeling of dread that crept up the back of his neck. He gripped the wheel tightly and clenched his jaw, trying to stay calm. He was slowly making his way, but the road was all but invisible to him at this point. Frustrated, Brian knew that instead of driving in this blizzard he should be safe and warm in his lab drinking a cup of hot tea and going over the notes from last week. Instead, here he was, battling

scotch and a snowstorm at the same time.

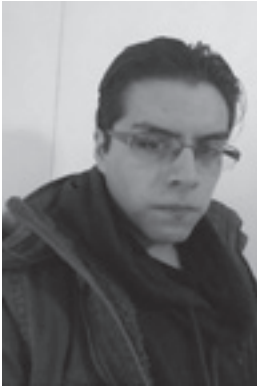
There was something funny about this thought, and Brian had to suppress a snort of laughter. He must be losing it, he thought, because there was absolutely nothing funny about this. There was no way to know how far it was to the observatory, and no way to know how long the storm would last. He knew it would be suicide to stop the truck, but Brian didn't know if he could trust himself to drive any farther.

Brian had almost given up hope when the familiar sign appeared ahead of him, nearly obscured by the snow. It read: Harding Observatory. He'd made it! Brian was so relieved to see the sign he forgot to control his acceleration, and inadvertently pressed down too hard on the gas. The truck fishtailed. Brian lost sight of the sign and the road. He couldn't see anything except the sea of endless white that was consuming the world.

The truck spun around and around, tires slipping between ice and snow. Brian's stomach churned as the world turned all around him, and he couldn't help but vomit all over the truck's interior. The stench of regurgitated scotch filled his nostrils, and Brian squeezed his eyes shut. The spinning was getting faster, and he knew that the vehicle could fall off the narrow road at any point. This is it; this is how it all ends, he thought. Brian sobbed and desperately clutched the wheel. He needed to hold something concrete, even if the steering wheel no longer served a purpose. The truck careened off the edge of the steep mountain road, and all he could do was cry.

Brian's heart caught in his throat as he felt a sensation of weightlessness, almost as if he were floating in zero gravity, but the feeling was instantly overwritten by terror. He closed his eyes and clenched his hands tightly around the steering wheel. Right before impact, Brian thought that maybe, at last, he'd get to go to space. He imagined his soul floating up through the storm, up above the clouds, over the mountain, passing through the troposphere, beyond the stratosphere and the mesosphere, through the thermosphere, and into outer space. He could see the moon glowing in all its beautiful radiance, and the immense carpet of stars glistening behind it in a glorious mosaic of light.

Alfredo Lopez



Sophomore
Major: English

First generation, Hispanic.

Adieu

Do you know? The fear of what's waiting down below? I do.
To have words stuck in your throat, you already know? I do.

Do you know, to dream of hair so real, that when you wake
your skin has turned to stone, and your insides hallow? I do.

Remember when these words sang of ancient bell chimes?
Recall the smile, of our old friend, now our jealous foe? I do.

Dante, did you predicted this, were you preparing us for it?
Do you think that we'll be ready, to visit the Inferno? I do.

Why do two words make a family, when one can break it?
I heard "I do". She never even spoke English, no. "Adieu".

Do you know that snow stains blacker than fresh blood,
when waiting knee-deep in a world so barren white? I do.

Bekah Malover



Senior

Major: Art & Design

Minor: Creative Writing

My name is Bekah Malover. I am a senior studying Art & Design with a minor in creative writing but concentrating on poetry. I am currently working on my Senior Integrative Project which explores thoughts distilled from my stream of consciousness. I adore dogs, text-based art and chocolate milk.

Aubade for a Crumbling Long Distance Relationship

Triangle windows
wake us
bearing daylight.

This morning,
I could unzip you
of your skin
and wear you
around
my bedroom.

I could dance
on the coffee table,
shatter the glass,
and keep dancing
barefoot.
You would wrap
my wounds.

We could steal rings
from goodwill
and tickle
each other's
earlobes
with an analogy
for love.

We could find
the gap between
thinking and feeling
then smother it
with a pillow
until our knuckles
grind down.

In an attempt,
to comfort you,
I would hold your hands
so tight
that your bones
would crumble
between my fingers.
I would fail
to piece you.

Here you lie with
sleepy, amorous eyes
looking at me
for an answer.

I say,
if time
was a space,
we would
always be here
and you
would not be
the shattered skeleton
swept
under my rug.

Postcards Sent from the Atlantic Ridge

X,

If you were here, I would tell you
that thumbtacks don't hurt.
I would show you the holes
in my attic walls and how I
covered them with plastic wrap
so I could still see outside.
The frigid wind shoots
into my skin, and soon
the walls may collapse,
but for now I see light years.

X,

If you were here, I would tell you
that it smells like golden oil droplets
like the time we skipped class and aimed for the sun.
Nauseated and intoxicated, we flew
for the first time through blue cotton threads
tangled in sin. You asked if I was okay.
You must have forgot what it was like to
breathe at that high of an altitude.

X,

If you were gone, I would dive into the sea.

Sumi Matsumoto



Senior

Major: Dance

Minor: Computer Science

R. Sumi Matsumoto is from Andover, Massachusetts. She is in her final year, studying dance and pursuing a minor in computer science. When she is not dancing for her major, Sumi enjoys being a part of the ballroom dance team. Reading and writing have always been a hobby for Sumi, and she is grateful to have been able to take creative writing classes in college.

In Memoriam

Good riddance thought Monty as he walked by the memorial board bearing the grinning face of a nearly-too-young-to-recognize Edwin. The words “We Remember Edwin James Clark” framed the image in frilly script. The photo depicted an Edwin whose hairline had just started to recede, though the hairs themselves were still a clear auburn. There were lines around his eyes and mouth, but the wrinkles hadn’t yet overtaken his face. His smile was more strained in the picture than Monty remembered, but it also just could have been Monty’s memory. The eyes, though, were dead on. The spark in Edwin’s clear, green eyes was the giveaway. Nothing had changed about those eyes, Monty was sure; even behind thick glasses, they still glinted with a mischievous creativity.

Fake tea candles sat on the little table in front of the portrait stand. Everything was placed like it was for a home décor magazine instead of in memoriam for a decrepit man. The over-decorated portrait rested in the assisted living home’s entryway, and Monty had to pass it in order to get to breakfast that morning.

Edwin seemed nice enough to Monty, but his time had long since come. All people, thought Monty as he sat down to breakfast, like all good foods, have an expiration date. Edwin had long since outlived his; he was the milk in the back of the refrigerator that was weeks past the 'use by' date, but still somehow smelled okay. His eyesight had been slowly on its way out for as long as Monty had known him, and with his sight went his fine motor control. Monty tried to ignore his own shaking hand as he lifted a forkful of eggs to his mouth.

Monty remembered Edwin at the small piano in the front room, playing songs that his hands still remembered even when his brain had forgotten. Edwin always smiled when he played the piano. It was almost as if Edwin was enjoying the fact that he had to rely on the memory in his fingers to be able to pass the time. Monty didn't understand how Edwin could find joy in playing the piano day after day. At first, he could do it all himself, but over time his joints started to give, and he needed help getting up and down from the piano bench. Then his strength left his body, and Edwin required aid to walk from his bedroom to the front room.

By the end, even the songs had gone from his hands. *What is the point in a life like that?* Monty wondered as he sat back in his chair to sip his morning coffee and feared that he was outliving his own expiration date. Monty never did much with his time, but at least he could do it on his own.

Monty remembered Edwin, always driven as if what he was doing was somehow valuable and relevant. *What a fool*, thought Monty. There was nothing one could do in a retirement home, let alone assisted living, that was worthwhile in life. Edwin had been foolishly happy to amuse himself. Monty shuffled back to his bedroom, denying his jealousy of Edwin's ability to be happy alone.

Monty sat in his room, passing the time with his model cars imagining that he was back in the auto shop he used to work in as a teenager. He had been so cool. There had been a future for him; it seemed like more than enough at the time. Now, the future neither seemed to exist, nor did Monty want it to. Most of the people in the assisted living corridor kept to themselves and stayed in their rooms. Edwin seemed to always have been present. It was as if, Monty decided, Edwin wanted everyone to know that they would some day be like him; he had been a walking reminder of the pointlessness of Monty's future.

Good riddance, thought Monty again as he sat down in the silent front room.

Just outside the entrance to the reception hall, Thomas lit a cigarette. He slid the box into his pocket; the plastic wrapping crinkled on its way

in. Thomas shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. He didn't know how to feel natural while holding the cigarette; the incense drooped awkwardly between his fingers. He gave up. Thomas held the cigarette as if it were a vigil candle for his old piano teacher, methodically flicking away the ashes to keep it lit. Thomas breathed in the smoke. He coughed a little. Then he breathed in again, this time more deeply. The scent was heavy, with just a hint of sweetness. It wasn't particularly smoky, but the scent was bitter like hardship. It wasn't a particularly nice scent, but it was warm and welcoming to Thomas.

Mr. Clark always smelled like cigarettes. Actually, Thomas thought to himself, cigarettes always smelled like Mr. Clark. Thomas had never actually seen Mr. Clark smoke, so at first he just thought the bitter aroma was part of the old man's fragrance. Thomas remembered the endearingly curmudgeonly piano teacher he hadn't seen in at least a dozen years.

As a twelve-year-old, the baby grand piano on the far side of the living room seemed huge. Thomas remembered how the wooden living room floor creaked. Mr. Clark was silent crossing the room, and Thomas made a game of trying to do the same. He would tiptoe across the floor or step in the same places as Mr. Clark, but Thomas's light steps always released a whine from the wooden floorboards.

It was games like these that kept piano lessons interesting. Thomas had no desire to learn piano, and his mother simply wanted to keep him busy—she had no particularity to piano. For the first few years he constantly made mistakes during his lesson due to his lack of practice, but eventually Mr. Clark's griping sunk in. Thomas never enjoyed piano, but he eventually learned not to hate it.

It was unforgettable how the edge of the piano bench would cut into the back of Thomas's thighs as he was drilled on *étude* after *étude*, and Thomas had always complained of his discomfort. Mr. Clark ignored his discomfort and focused on Thomas's fingers. Mr. Clark was always strict and never mean. The binary clock on the wall, which at the time just looked like rows of blinking lights to Thomas, would chime the hour, and Mr. Clark would relent, retreating to the kitchen. Thomas would watch the various dots light up and fade out as he waited for Mr. Clark.

Mr. Clark would return with a fogged plastic tub of homemade chocolate chunk cookies. They weren't particularly delicious cookies, but the chocolate chunks were what made them special. Instead of using chocolate chips from the bag, Mr. Clark's cookies had inconsistently-sized chocolate chunks that he cut himself from a giant bar of chocolate. Those cookies had been the best reward after a demanding lesson, and those cookies were a welcome reminder of Mr. Clark.

Thomas had never been particularly good at piano, but he was gracious

to Mr. Clark for teaching him discipline. Piano seemed so useless at the time, but throughout his higher education—and now a full time job—Thomas knew the heightened value of reward after hard work. At the time, Thomas had wanted to learn how to play songs with interesting melodies, but the few times Thomas sat down at a piano since his lessons with Mr. Clark, his fingers expertly executed études not the melodic works he had once memorized.

The cigarette was burning down more quickly than Thomas expected it would. He threw it down and stamped on the butt, but instead of letting it collect with all the other butts that already littered the entrance to the reception hall, Thomas picked up his cigarette butt. He took out the pack from his coat, the plastic twisting and ripping more as it emerged from his pocket. The top flipped open with a little resistance: the folds not worn in. Thomas dropped the cigarette butt back into its slot in the clean pack.

The scent from the cigarette clung to Thomas's clothes, and wrapped around him like a hug. Thomas had always intended to go back to visit his teacher, but by the time Thomas had maturity from retrospection, Mr. Clark had moved out of his small home and into an unknown retirement home. Thomas never bothered to try and hunt Mr. Clark down, but standing outside the reception hall he wished he had. Thomas couldn't remember giving Mr. Clark the respect he deserved when Thomas was a boy; he wished he could rectify his boyhood mistakes as a man.

Lila Carter Brown drove to Edwin Clark's memorial service with her husband. Edwin had been working at Cyber Plus for three years already when Lila Carter joined the company. Her cubicle had been next to his for the five years they worked together. On her first day, she thought he was new too since his cubicle was so unadorned: a photo of little boys with ice cream cones and a magazine cutout of a piano were pinned to one cubicle wall. She was embarrassed by the mistake, but Edwin had shrugged it off saying "work is for work," as if that explained everything.

Over the years of working side-by-side, Edwin and Lila became good friends. He was resentful to befriend her at first, but when she stopped trying to make small talk during work hours and instead just kept him company during the lunch break, the two hit it off. Sitting in their adjacent cubicles, their discussions started about food. Lila, stuck with sandwiches day in and out, was envious of Edwin's homemade packed lunches. Eventually discussions of cooking turned to stories about college life and easier times when one didn't have to think about things like cooking meals or paying bills. He had been like a hard candy with a liquid center: solemn and stern on the outside but kind on the inside.

Lila liked listening to Edwin talk, especially when he had an opinion to

share. Edwin could spend an hour talking about why one system was a better organization than another. He usually also had something to say about the company's new "know-it-all" intern, and all Lila had to do was ask. There was passion in his eyes, even throughout his complaints.

Their friendship was confined by the workplace. Lila could never get him to go out with other workmates after work or to even attend social work functions. She always offered to go, be there with him, and not stay too long, but Edwin was never interested in straying away from his regime. He seemed lonely, but also at ease with his own loneliness, and Lila respected him for it.

Lila had always wondered who kept Edwin company during lunch after she left. Her new job across town was pleasant, but none of her new workmates were quite like Edwin. He was hard to replace and harder to forget. She had never kept in touch with him outside of work, and he never offered any way to change that when she left. Lila didn't expect him to, but she had hoped he would have. Her new workmates were all too superficial compared to Edwin, except for Lou Brown.

Lila squeezed her husband's hand. Lila had imagined Edwin finding someone to relieve him of his loneliness, or perhaps share it. He deserved it. Edwin's obituary was formulaic at best, but it didn't mention anyone in particular. It made Lila sad even though she knew Edwin hadn't minded.

When she saw the obituary in the paper, Lila was determined to go to Edwin's memorial. She wished she could have stayed at Cyber Plus longer and been able to work with Edwin. She knew him far better than anyone else at the company she could think of, but there were parts of him that still remained a mystery. Lila found it hard to explain to her husband who Edwin Clark had been and why he was so special; it frustrated her, but Edwin often had had the same effect.

Connor listened to people tell stories about Ed as a man, but he had known Ed as a boy. Connor remembered lighting firecrackers in Ed's backyard when his parents weren't home. They had played pretend, fighting each other with sticks as if they were pirates; Connor couldn't remember the reserved man everyone depicted, and he longed to find an inkling of his Ed in other people's memories.

They had been carefree, unburdened by the past and the future. There was a vulnerability they'd had as children that is near impossible to achieve as an adult. In some ways, Connor's memories of Ed were the most pure. Listening to the accounts of Ed as a grown man, however, also made Connor feel like his memories of Ed were inaccurate; the boys had yet to fully develop and his memories were as foolish as their games of make believe

had been.

He remembered running across the street for 75-cent ice creams from the truck. The two boys used to think that the twenty-year-old who worked the ice cream truck had the best life ever. They both had said they wanted to be ice cream truck men when they grew up for many years. Eventually it turned into a coping mechanism. When Connor's grades weren't good or Ed hadn't practiced piano, they would discuss how they were going to run away and have an ice cream truck: eating all the free ice cream their bellies could handle.

When they were deciding where to go for college, the two used to put off by the decision by agreeing to not go to college and become ice cream truck men instead. In the end, Ed had gone off to a fancy tech school while Connor stayed behind and went to the state school. Things like that hadn't mattered or kept them apart before, but society forced the two friends to split. They kept in touch, but they couldn't be boys who want to be ice cream truck men forever.

Edwin Clark never thought much of his own life. He had a relatively normal family—a mother, a father, and an older sister in a quaint house in a suburb—and a relatively normal childhood—good friends that came and went, lessons learned in and out of school, and various forced extracurricular activities. Things like the piano and neighborhood friends like Connor seemed unimportant after the fact.

College had been a rude awakening as being the best in a small town meant little at his elite technical school, which had seemed so exciting in theory. Leaving friends and family behind had been a small price to pay for the anticipated adventures. New friends and a new idea of family were created, but Edwin Clark struggled to keep up in school. Studies were no longer easy, and studying was a skill that had to be learned. At first, poor grades stung as the feelings of incompetence crept in, but eventually his expectations changed and his grades got better. Time with new friends was valued, but scarce.

Boyhood was replaced with the stiffness of manhood and a nine to five job. It was a nice job, but it consumed him; he had little time or care for anything else. He liked the company of others, but he found it difficult to befriend many of his peers. His friends were the people who recognized him at the various places he frequented. He valued their familiarity over intimacy.

His parents died naturally—old age and illness—but after they passed, he drifted apart from his sister. He wanted to keep to his familiar friends who asked nothing of him; he hated that his sister asked him to feel the pain

and reality of his self-inflicted seclusion. He went to her wedding, and they passed pleasantries from time to time, but the intimacy of family dissipated quickly. His life seemed full enough to him as long as he didn't think too much about it.

Time passed, and retirement overcame him. The company started to hire more boys who came in knowing what Edwin had to learn. Eventually his outdated degree couldn't keep up in the growing field. After sinking twelve years into Cyber Plus, he was slowly pushed out. Edwin stayed on for another half a year, but even he, resentfully, felt his redundancy. He hated the idleness of retirement and returned to the piano in order to regain drive in his life.

One curious boy, a Chopin étude, and serendipity turned Edwin's pas-time into a job. Soon many of the neighborhood children came to his small home once a week for piano lessons. He was a strict teacher, but it was no secret that he enjoyed working with the children. He marked his own years by those of his students; somehow children with single-digit ages grew old enough to go to high school, and Edwin saw another decade pass.

His sister moved into Sunnydale Assisted Living. As his fear of loneliness overcame his fear of intimacy and loss, Edwin visited his sister more. He met his niece. He talked about his parents. As his hardness wore down, so did his body, and he moved into Sunnydale's assisted living. He played the piano for his sister when she had the strength to get to the front room. Even after her passing, Edwin would sit in the front room and play the piano.

Until the end of his life, Edwin enjoyed the temporary friendships he made at Sunnydale, played the piano as long as his stiff fingers would let him, and never thought much of his own life.

Stephanie Mezzanatto



Senior

Major: Creative Writing & Literature

Stephanie Mezzanatto is a Northern California native, who is currently a senior at the University of Michigan studying Creative Writing and Literature. Her obsessions include her two pit bull mixes, crisp pages, old architecture, and environmentalism. Stephanie lives for the click of the keys as stories flow from fingers to screen, the squish of clay in her hands as she sculpts, and the dim of photography dark rooms. After graduation, Stephanie wants to work in publishing in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she was born and raised, and hopes to publish her own novel someday.

Collapsible

You hid behind towers of documents, and peeked around their edges, maneuvering through paper cuts. I knew where to find you and I joined you in your sanctuary, crumpled baskets and forgotten tax returns. I curled up like a cat upon your lap, and you stroked me, swift like a breeze while my purr echoed in the hollow of your ear. The dim of candle light bulbs flickered on the ceiling and we slouched together into a stupor of blurred recollection.

You tilted my chin up toward your own and I saw the years hung heavy beneath your battered eyes. I told you I missed you, that the sky was still yellow, but your legs had grown into the floor, and sunken down into the crawl space. I dusted you off—cheek bones, forearms, kneecaps—as the scurrying critters nibbled at my feeble fingertips, and refilled your fluted glass with crimson.

I dug at your foundation, scraped away the climbing vines, and chipped at the rotting floorboards but you had already stained your lips and sunken

back into the whiteness, yanking the goose down, down around your shoulders. The weight of the feathers flecked away the last of your summer speckles.

Last summer, we built forts under the tiled countertops, and hibernated amongst the stainless steel and leftover food scraps. We had defended our lair with code words and woven wool gates, and together we had stockpiled Goldfish and hoarded Pepperidge Farm variety packs. I scampered through your brain, prodded you—remember? Remember, Mom, how we bounded through meteors showers like swarming snow flurries, and how our metal spaceship had fit tight inside your assured palm, right next to the earth pooled up in your wrinkles?

I wound my way through the tangles of your brain, but your mumbles got lost behind your teeth, and fell back into your waiting throat. I abandoned you there—there flailing in the dust, breathless under the rubbish—and trudged out the creaky front door. The shriveled jasmine buds crawled up the side of the fence and tickled my nose with their rancid perfume. I shuffled over the blooming rings of algae decorating the chilled cement, and shoved the flaking wood of the swollen gate. It groaned in opposition.

The dizzying blankness of my tattered mind engulfed the street in white, and the crackling air jumped out at me off of a STOP sign. Its static arms zapped. I knew I had to get home. I crouched down, tearing through weighted marshmallow fog, and scampered back over leftover twigs and undispersed pockets of seedlings; back past peeling bumper stickers and dampened clumps of leaves; back through our engorged gate and up the flowering concrete steps.

Inside, your blanket had swallowed your snores and fallen with you into a patch of exposed floorboards. I brushed aside your sticky straw bangs, wiped away the cold sweat from your creased forehead, and begged you to forgive me. You had remained tall through broken bathroom doors, and holes punched into bedroom walls, but inside you were crumbling, inside your soul was cracking—hollowed and dry. I didn't know, I was too young, I tried to explain. I could have done more if I had known that you were disappearing, if I had seen your armor abandoned in the corner of our damp garage, piled under unopened self-help books and canvases littered with your final paint strokes. But I had believed in the falseness of your feigned shield and left you to defend yourself against thrashing words and fuming fists, alone. That greyed cloth armor had lost its sheen under the weight of secret threats and barreling fury, and you were left—fabric and mother—torn to shreds.

You told me I couldn't have known, that you hadn't expected me to, that it was *your* weight to bear. But you couldn't carry it, you had never been able to, without it chipping away at you. You pressed your stained fingertips down into the feathers, and forced yourself vertical, grasping the green glass bottle as you emerged. You brought the lip to your teeth and let the red coat

your throat with tingling flames. *Why*, you asked me, *why would anyone care if you were gone? Mom, don't say that*, I pleaded with you. *I would care. I would fall apart*, I assured you.

I sunk my legs between the heaps and perched myself against a cracked, navy wicker basket, settling myself upon the floorboards. You contorted yourself into a sphere and crumpled like a discarded wad of wasted paper onto my awaiting lap. I stroked your hair, softly, delicately, like sand streaming through desert winds. *Hush*, I whispered. *Hush, everything is going to be alright*. I wedged us back into the reams of towering paper, and we disappeared for a while.

Andrew Miller



Senior

Major: English

I'm a senior studying English in the creative writing sub-concentration. I grew up in Otsego, Michigan, where I played sports, read, fished, and skied.

Searching for the Lighthouse

"What would you guys like to drink?" Dorothy asked.

Outside the screened-in porch the wind blew over Lake Michigan and up the sandy lane, whipping the dune grasses in Dorothy's yard back and forth like windshield wipers.

"Gin," my dad said.

"Gin's good," I said, "if you've got it. With some ice, please."

Dorothy walked through the door and into the cottage. She was a small and healthy old woman, only slightly older than my dad, and she moved fluidly through the house. Her hair was short and curly, and her smile seemed like a permanent fixture of her face. While she was in the kitchen getting us drinks I told my dad, "We should walk down to the lighthouse."

"I'm not sure," he said. He was sitting at a glass table with his eyes bent down, and he looked old and tired. The white walls of the porch clashed with the cloudy day.

"What'd we drive down here for if you don't even want to see anything?"

"I don't know," he said. "What else were we going to do today?"

He'd called that morning and said, "Let's go and see the old cottage." I'd been watching TV and drinking a light beer and had no excuse to say no. But he'd barely glanced at the family cottage, which neither of us had seen in twenty years, and he showed no emotion at all when we ran into Dorothy, his old friend, who invited us in for a drink.

Dorothy's porch looked out over the lake. The white sand from the beach covered everything outside in a thin uneven layer. Tall waves rumbled in and a grey layer of clouds drifted over the water. A freighter was perched on the horizon. "There's a freighter," I said. My dad had told me before that his dream as a kid was to work on a Great Lakes freighter, and how he'd run from the cottage to the pier every time he heard a horn. He'd told me about times when the fog rolled in so thick you couldn't see anything over the water, about the feeling of the mist and the roar of the ship's whistle and the coolness of the damp sand. Now he sat with his back to the lake.

Dorothy came back in and set down three drinks, and said, "I didn't know you were drinking again, George." She was a pleasant woman.

"Yes," he said. "I can't smoke anymore, so I drink."

"You quit smoking?" Dorothy asked.

"I have cancer."

"My god, George. Lung cancer?" She paused and looked at the ground and her smile wavered. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm so terribly sorry."

"Yes," my dad said. "Lung cancer."

"I'm really so sorry, George. Is it very advanced?"

"I don't know," he said.

"It's not good," I said.

"I just can't even believe it. When I think of you, George, whenever I've thought of you all these years, you're just seventeen years old, drinking beer in the dunes, running around healthy. Crazy, but healthy."

"He's still crazy, at least," I said.

"Yes," my dad said. He swirled his gin and the ice clanked against the glass. "How much gin you got left, Dorothy?"

"Not much. Maybe one more round. I won't be able to stomach more than one more myself. I have an old bottle of brandy, though, and plenty of wine. I'd be happy to get rid of it."

"Wonderful," I said.

"Bring 'em out," my dad said.

My father had been sober for almost forty years. One day, shortly after his diagnosis, he asked me to get him a beer. I happened to be hungover and didn't immediately register what he'd said. "What?" I asked.

"I can't smoke and I'm dying anyways," he said. "Give me one of your beers."

And still I said, "What? No. And you're not dying. You wouldn't have quit smoking if you thought you were dying."

He didn't respond and he didn't bring it back up. But the next day, a Sunday, I brought lunch over and found a half-pint of bourbon next to his chair. He was asleep with the TV on and the remote control in his hand. The small bottle of bourbon was half-empty.

I woke him up and he said, "I had a drink." I told him I could see that, and he said, "Why don't you run to the store and get us some more?"

"No," I said.

And he said, "Okay," as if he'd never again have another drink, as if that was possible or fine, while I was sitting there on the couch looking at his half-pint, smelling it and tasting it in my mind, thinking about him drinking again, about my mom's nightmares and stories of him as a drunk, thinking I'd be the one to take care of him now and clean up after him and save him, and I was suddenly so anxious I asked, "Dad, can I finish off the last bit of that liquor?" And he handed me the bottle, and that was it. I drank it and then went and bought more, and for a few days in the evenings after work we drank together.

Then for a while I felt guilty and quit going to see him.

Now, two months later, he was years older, years wearier, and was sitting in a beautiful home on the shore of Lake Michigan, at the site of some of his happiest memories, and instead of looking into the face of his old friend, or watching the tumble of silver waves, he was staring into a glass of gin.

We poured another round, and Dorothy, a little radiant under the liquor, told me old stories about my dad.

"He really was a heart-breaker," she said. "Didn't care about anything at all. He had no future as a stock-broker or a doctor, we all knew that, but as teenage girls we just saw a handsome, wild guy. Just so much fun. He broke my heart ten times over. When I heard he'd married your mother, I thought,

the poor woman, marrying the devil himself! But at one point I might've married him too, if I could've."

My dad listened to her with a small, fake smile, or maybe it was real, maybe he liked to remember himself as a wild kid.

"Did he ever tell you about Mary Ann?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"She was gorgeous, the beauty of the beach, millionaire family from Virginia. They had a place out here a little ways down the beach. Anyways your father and her were going together one summer, and then she went back home for the school year. Your dad called her up and said, 'It's over, Mary,' and what do you think she did? She took her dad's Cadillac and drove all the way to Kalamazoo to come banging on his door and win him back."

She watched for my reaction and I tried to laugh, but I saw him and thought of him as he was at that table, and it was impossible to look at the old man in front of me and think about him chasing girls or breaking hearts.

"That's hilarious," I said.

I finished my gin and eyed the brandy. "I never heard it," I said. "You know, the only stories he's told me about this place are from his early childhood. Never any older stories."

"He was perhaps too drunk," she said, leaning back against her chair with a smile.

I'd heard that before when I was eighteen and at my sister's wedding, listening to my dad's speech. "Don't get me wrong," he'd said, pacing back and forth behind the wedding party. "I had a lot of fun as a kid. My parents were pretty indulgent. I was pretty indulgent. But the best part of my life, the happiest part of my life, began the day Rosie was born. I had more fun raising kids than being a kid." And he raised his lemonade to Rosie and Chuck's future children, to his own future grandchildren. I snuck a shot of champagne during the toast and was worried my dad's friend Carl would smell it on my breath when he leaned into me with his crooked teeth in a wide smile. "Bullshit," Carl said, "I was with your dad as a kid. He was just too drunk to remember any of it."

"I bet," I said.

Dorothy watched me pour myself a tall glass of brandy. We were really drinking now, and she said, "You certainly are your father's little boy."

"Thanks," I said.

"Do you remember, George, when we were all drinking beer on Henry's

dad's boat, and he crashed it into the pier?"

"What?" He looked up.

"You don't remember that?"

"Remember what? I'm sorry."

He grew more distant and detached every day. His eyes would settle on certain unimportant objects, and you knew he was thinking and never listening. And there was this constant longing in that gaze, like he was missing something and searching for it, or was burdened by some desperate hope. I was tired of that look, and I was tired of being reasonable and polite in his place.

"I think I'll go for a walk," I said.

"Wonderful," Dorothy said. "Do you want to take a bottle of wine? If you head toward the beach you won't get into any trouble with it."

I took a bottle of Pinot Noir and pushed open the screen door.

I sat on a bench at the beach with the bottle between my legs and my eyes closed. I felt the alcohol warm in my stomach and felt the wind drag sand against my boots and jeans. The sand there was white and always seemed to be shifting, blowing in the wind across the sidewalks and yards or snaking back and forth across the beach. The green bathtub in our cottage had always been full of that sand, clogged with it, and I remember the sheets in my bed being coarse and rough. It covered the floor like sawdust in an old bar, and at the end of all those weekends my mom and grandma would spend an hour sweeping the place out. It was my fault mostly. I was five or six years old in those memories, always wet, always rolling around in the sand, always wrestling, always chasing the neighbor's golden retriever, always jumping off the little tufts of dune on the edges of the beach.

I opened my eyes and took a pull from the bottle of wine. The lake shifted in blues and greys, and the sky was flat and grey. Far down the beach I could see tall dunes, their tops misty in the low clouds. In the other direction I could see the lighthouse, red and square, glowing in the grey landscape. An American flag and a state flag rippled over its roof.

I held the wine in the air, measuring how much was left, and gulped some down against the lump in my throat. Then I started to cry. I could see myself floating in the waves at five years old, my dad holding on to the inner tube while I rolled, laughing, up and down. I could see my mom in the sun with a hat on and sunglasses, waving to me, and my older sister swimming off to the side. There was the golden retriever, Waggles, running down the beach. I yelled to him to come swimming, and his owner threw a Frisbee that floated out over the water and over my head, and Waggles splashed into the

waves, and tilted his head up to keep his nose out of the water, swimming with that frantic, excited dog look. I paddled towards him, my dad held onto my float, and I screamed and laughed when he grabbed the Frisbee in his jaws. But he couldn't hold it and breathe and still fight the waves, and he tried to push it back to the beach with his nose. My dad let go of me and grabbed the Frisbee and threw it back to shore, and Waggles swam after it, and I sat still on a bench and drank more of the wine, shivering in the cold wet wind.

I lit a cigarette. The house was fifty yards away, right over my shoulder, and I sat looking out at the lake, watching for boats, trying to empty myself of emotion. A seagull landed in front of me in the waves and I watched it roll over two crests and then fly away down the beach to pick at a piece of trash or a dead fish.

I finished the wine and felt cold and sufficiently empty. I shook the sand off my boots and walked back towards the cottage. My dad stepped outside the porch when he saw me. He looked unsteady. The wrinkles in his face made him look stoic and reserved. "You ready to go?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "You don't want to see the beach or nothing?"

"No."

"Fine."

Dorothy stepped outside and insisted we take the bottle of brandy. I thanked her. I believe she was drunk, and she said goodbye to my dad with tears in her eyes, undistracted by his inability to return any affection.

"See you, Dorothy," he said, and we walked up the sandy lane, past the cottage we hadn't seen in years, past Waggles's house, past the sailboats still rocking in the bay, and into the marina parking lot where our car was sitting.

I pulled the door open for my dad and then sat down in the driver's seat. It was good brandy and it had a cork instead of a screw cap. The cork popped when I opened it, and it ran smooth and warm down my throat. I handed my dad the bottle and pulled out of the parking lot. He sipped it. "Good stuff," he said, then he corked it and tucked it under the seat.

I'd had enough by then that I wasn't upset at all anymore, and I wasn't mad we'd made the trip. We were going home, and my memories and thoughts rolled with the car away from that distant past. I felt warm and passive. Every once in a while my dad would pull the bottle back out from under the seat, and we'd each take a sip. I tried to focus hard on the road. The country opened up and the trees and farms beyond the road were sprinkled with the colors of early fall.

We passed a farm that rented horses. "Do you remember going there?" my dad asked.

"No," I said. "We rode horses?"

"You and I rode on a mule together. Your mom and sister wouldn't go."

"Why a mule?"

"I don't remember," he said. "Maybe you were too little for a horse."

We rolled along past the farm and I dreamed of horses and mules and children, and thought with a vague restlessness of all the things I'd seen and done and forgotten. My father reclined in his seat and fell asleep, and I looked forward to lying down later myself.

Once when I was seventeen my dad and I were in his convertible with the top down, rolling through hills where the trees leaned into each other over the road. It was a summer Saturday, mid-morning, and we were meeting my uncle and cousins to go fishing. As we rode over the crest of a hill the forest opened onto a Christmas tree farm that faded away in the valley below, and at that moment I threw up in my mouth, swallowed it, then shut my eyes and tried to avoid leaning out and puking over the side of the car. I hadn't changed my clothes, I had barely slept, and I must have smelled like beer.

We passed the farm and were in a new tunnel of trees when he said, "How was last night?"

"It was good," I said.

"What'd you do?"

"We just had a bonfire at Gabe's," I said. "Had some girls over."

"Oh," he said. And then a moment later he asked me, "Did I ever tell you the story about how Joe Hughes died?"

"Nope," I said.

"Well, Joe got sober a little before I did, but we were going through A.A. at about the same time. I met him at my second meeting out of the treatment center, and he asked me to play golf. He owned Golf Services—you know that. Anyways he and I started playing golf every day. We played eighteen holes a day as long as the weather allowed for five years."

"That's a lot of golf," I said.

"That's a hell of a lot of golf. Probably too much golf, but it was better than drinking. Even our wives agreed with us there." He paused briefly to hit his cigarette, then continued. "But certain things happen when you make all your friends in treatment programs. It's a volatile bunch. Something like this'll probably happen to me again. It's just a part of it. Anyways it was in the winter, and we weren't golfing. Joe was a big bowler too, but I never was. He was at a bowling alley one day by himself, eating a hamburger, and he just ordered a beer. I don't know why. I suppose it just happens. And he pretty much never stopped drinking for six months. His own employees started throwing him out of the shop, his wife left him, his kids never saw him. I had to quit hanging out with him. And then one night he went into the back of the shop and hung himself."

He pitched his cigarette out of the car and continued, "Then Joe's wife asks me to talk at the funeral. And what could I say?" He lit another cigarette. "I was hitting a bucket of balls once at Golf Services, and another guy, Aaron, was tweaking my swing. I listened and tried to do whatever it was he was saying. Then I finish the bucket and walk inside, and Joe comes up to me and says, 'What the fuck, George?' I ask him what the hell he's talking about, and, only half-joking, he says, 'Are you going to learn to golf from me, or from the rest of the world?'" He stopped and looked at me. "And that's what I said at the funeral. 'Now,' I said, 'I feel like I'm stuck with the rest of the world.'"

We were getting close to the lake. I was too foggy to care about what he was saying, and it was only later, when I dove into the cold green water, that my head was clear enough to think about it.

"What do you say?" I heard him ask. "He was my best friend, and he drank himself to death. What does anybody say about that?" He looked at me again. He was always stopping to look at me. "Literally, what could I possibly have to say about that?"

Now I was driving and my dad was still asleep in the passenger seat. I was tired and drunk. I wanted a cigarette and thought it would help me drive, but I didn't light one. I turned on the radio and listened to country. I took a left onto a clay road that ran through a pine forest, and I started to think about hunting. I hadn't been hunting since I was a kid. Maybe I could take him hunting, I thought. Maybe that would breathe a little life into him. I doubted it. I couldn't imagine him sitting in the woods and doing anything but sleeping. He'd never cared for hunting much anyways and neither had I. He only took me hunting in the first place in case I'd grow up to like it, and I hadn't. We both always liked fishing though. So, I thought, we'll go fishing. We'll have to go soon.

It was getting dark early those days, and as I turned back onto a paved

road I felt the world grow suddenly darker. There was a broad marsh that ran along the edge of the road for about a half mile, and I looked out across it, thinking maybe I could see some color from the sunset, but the clouds covered the last of the sun, and the marsh and the sky were grey. A creek ran along the south side of the marsh and I'd heard it had good trout fishing.

I looked down at the radio and was twisting the tune dial when I hit something in the road. The car had bumped over it like a small log. I pulled off onto the shoulder.

"What happened?" my dad said, pushing himself upright.

"I hit something."

"What?"

I looked in the rearview. "I don't know," I said. "Something small and black."

"Let's have a look."

We got out of the car and made sure the tires were okay. I looked down the road and tried to focus on what I'd hit, and all I could see was a black smear. "I'm drunk," I said.

"I'm alright," my dad said.

"Maybe you should drive."

"Not that alright."

We stumbled along the gravel on the shoulder of the road. "It's a snapper," I said when we got close. "It's fucking huge." The car had cracked the back part of the shell and crushed its tail and back legs. It was still trying to cross the road, crawling with its front legs, dragging its broken back half, its jaws hanging open. A weed from the marsh was still draped over the front of its shell.

"Go get the gun," my dad said.

"What?"

"You got to kill it somehow. You got to shoot it."

"No. Jesus, are you that far gone?"

He stared into the woods on the other side of the road and asked if I was just going to leave it.

"What I'm not going to do," I said, "is shoot a pistol in the middle of the road, drunk as hell, and then drive off."

"I'll do it."

"That's no different."

"It's a country road," he said, "and we've got to do something."

"Not really."

"Go find a stick."

"Not a chance in hell. *You* can go find a stick."

Neither of us found a stick, and neither of us grabbed the gun. "Come on," I said. "Let's go."

The wind swept the echoing honk of migrating geese across the marsh, and the evening faded into a deeper black. My dad turned from the marsh and looked me in the eyes with that searching, desperate look. I looked away, up into the sky, and he turned towards the car and walked back along the edge of the road.

I glanced once more at the turtle and happened to see its muscles settle and its head drop down onto the road. It was dark, but I saw it breathe its last unsteady breath and relax its jaws in a motion that reminded me of comfort and resignation. And I seemed to feel then what my father had been feeling, and it was the feeling of being on the water in a thick fog, blasting your horn through the mist, searching the horizon for a white flashing beam.

Sena Moon



Senior

Major: Art & Design

I am an international student majoring in Art & Design, who loves creative fiction. I especially love fiction that involves some sort of magical reality, and I hope to embody this trait in my writing.

In Dreams We Fall

In the alleyway two blocks behind the concrete walls that surround the *YeMyung* school grounds, heavily made-up girls from the nearby lower-tier girls' school sit Indian-style on the gritty turf and smoke pencil-thin menthols. A skyscraper looms overhead, filled with competent people who lead straight, competent lives. Leaving the alley in constant gloom, mostly truants hang out in the shadows. These are kids sick of the system—so they claim. They call out to the ones walking in the sun. They ask for pocket money. Sometimes, they let the others pass in peace. Sometimes they pull them in—*join us, come join us.*

Good girls are warned: stay clear of those back alleys.

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When her homeroom teacher warns her about this backwards alley, Minji immediately thinks of Yeju, the class beauty. Yeju is gorgeous. It is a privileged beauty more credited to the extensive hair care and skin therapy she gets every month than her natural comeliness. If there ever was a good girl, Yeju would be the definition—is what Minji thinks. Good girls are supposed to be endowed with all the world's gifts; at least, this is what the world makes

Minji believe. But at the same time, Minji sees the other side of Yeju's somewhat precocious charm. It's the beauty of a girl still unsure of herself, one brandished without particular cause. Yeju doesn't yet realize the power of her looks. She merely titters, her laugh like golden bells when boys dunk the ball on the basketball court to impress her. Yeju loves school. It loves her back.

Meanwhile, school is torment for Minji.

Minji sets out early because other students take the green city bus. Minji had a bike once, but it was stolen. She walks to school thirty minutes early to avoid the gaggle of girls that ride the bus to school arm-in-arm, colorful satchels bouncing by the hems of their pressed skirts. When they see Minji's wrinkled uniform through the foggy bus window, they jeer.

The iron gates of *YeMyung* Middle school that are closed from nine to three thirty are open to receive the morning rush. The members of *Sundobu*—council of class monitors, stand right before the gates with sashes pinned on their arms, marking off students for tardiness and untidiness. One boy recognizes Minji and marks her down for having dirty clothes, no excuses. Minji doesn't say: *my mother is very busy making money; it's a miracle that I can even afford my uniform.*

Setting down her backpack in homeroom 2-6, Minji sits in her designated seat and pretends to sleep, because she knows, if she is awake, she would be at the girls' beck and call. At lunchtime, kids fling empty juice cartons at Minji's head. They drag garbage cans up to her desk, smirk and back away. There's an inside joke circulating about how Minji eats garbage, but she doesn't know that yet. Minji always drags the trashcan back to its original spot because teachers tend to notice and harp—*school property is for everyone to use; do not hog facilities.* Teachers see her as a bit of an odd problem child. They mix instant coffee and gossip in the teachers lounge: *Children these days—they don't think about others. Shame!*

It's Karma—or some screwed type of karma. Minji tries to convince herself, that this way, the balance is safe. She believes there's only so much happiness to go around. She is the scapegoat. She keeps other people happy.

But screw karma.

A year and a half ago, Minji remembers, at the opening ceremony for the newcomers of *YeMyung* Middle School, Vice Principal Yoh—a self-made intellectual and an iron lady—announces to the students: "Think of me as your mentor. We see bullying and school violence as a serious problem at this school. If there is such conduct going on, do not hesitate to tell me right away." Minji regards this lady for a while as her personal mentor and savior, but soon realizes she's betting on the wrong horse.

There's always a tiny smudge of lipstick on Vice Principal Yoh's teeth when she admonishes children for running in the hallways. Rowdiness reflects bad on the school when private high school officials deign to visit *YeMyung*. On those particular "special visitation" days, Vice Principal Yoh dresses in a two-piece burgundy suit with an extra thick layer of maroon lipstick and smiles wide enough for everyone to notice the smudge on her teeth. Minji thinks blood. There's something akin to bloodlust in the Vice Principal's profile, the way her lips curl in front of Jintae or Yeju, the richest kids in school.

To Vice Principal Yoh, Minji is invisible. Minji is a blot on her agenda to form a competitive middle school that serves as a stepping-stone to better private high schools. *Poor, and not even smart enough to boost herself out of poverty. Shame.* Last year *YeMyung* Middle School produced twelve stellar students who passed all the mandatory tests and entered private high schools. But last year was also the year that Yunho Chang committed suicide. He had been Minji's friend and yet another blot on Yoh's agenda to promote *YeMyung*. This year, Yoh has bigger plans. She forgets her promise to eradicate school violence.

So everyday remains torture for Minji.

Yet somehow it gets better on Tuesdays and Thursdays, because fourth period is music theory.

The music room is a sanctuary, resonant with the sound of Mr. Lim's grand piano. He has long willowy fingers Minji admires, fingers that produce fine-spun music and beautiful handwriting. He himself is a willowy man, swathed in silk suits that would've been form-fitting on a regular man, but hang loose on his spindly frame. His watery eyes have the mad tinge of an artistic genius. Students dub him "the praying mantis." Minji often thinks of the watercolor rendering of Beethoven on her music theory textbook, though the timid profile of her music teacher does not fare well with the direct furious gaze of Beethoven. She daydreams, superimposing Mr. Lim's face onto the illustration of the deceased genius. Despite his crazy eyes, Mr. Lim is kind.

If Minji had a father, she would like to have Mr. Lim.

Lim is a bachelor, but not out of choice. He once had a fiancée, but drove her away with his impenetrable shyness. That's what he believes. The fiancée took one look at his impeccable apartment in the lower side of urban *Shinrim-dong*, his pampered watery eyes, and his elderly crone of a mother sharpening her claws—no, knives, in the kitchen, and left, telling him gently as she left: "I'm not man enough for both of us." The fiancée leaves Mr. Lim deeply wounded, in pride and in mind, which is why he buries himself in music sheets and silk suits. They are his suit of armor that shrouds his weaker self, now more so because his mother lies six feet under in the country grave

lot purchased decades ago when the Lims were a prominent name in the confectionary business. Congenital heart defect. She passed two months ago. She always did say she had too big a heart, that she was the only woman who loved him. Mr. Lim believes this sentiment. And he recognizes his painful shyness in the girl. But Minji has no music sheets, Minji has no silk suit.

Mr. Lim is always tense. He is concerned that Minji visits him so often in the dim soundproof room. Most days the stuffy room is abandoned, the grand piano silent. He grows even tenser when she reaches out that one time, her forwardness even surprising her, and brushes her own small fingers against his larger ones, feeling the rough callouses with wistful longing. She wants to learn the piano. He refers her to a colleague of his that does private tutoring, jots down the address and phone number with his Montblanc fountain pen.

"Well I don't give lessons myself, but my friend, she's a gem. She's a very accomplished concert pianist, but she's fallen ill the past few years. Chronic cluster headaches. Terrible," he babbles on, scribbling. "Now she rests at home, conducting lessons at home at a very manageable price. I think she'd like you, Minji."

Minji nods and accepts the paper, wondering what her mother would think of manageable prices. Mr. Lim does not know what Minji does with that piece of paper but she returns to the room with the same worn-out excuse: "I love your playing. I would like to learn piano too."

Once, he suggests she go play with her peers. Gently. She stammers, cheeks aflame, tears brimming: "Please. May I stay? I love your playing."

What choice does he have but to let her stay?

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Minji often dreams of Mr. Lim. In her dreams, he's always playing his grand piano, wearing technicolor suits—but never green because green reminds her of the praying mantis. He is surrounded by tons and tons of music sheets in a chamber open to anyone who is able to listen. The chamber pulsates.

It's located in the center of her heart.

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The days go by, the same routine. Tuesdays and Thursdays help Minji get by. Nothing out of the ordinary happens. Then there's that one time, in the bathroom after school.

That one time, Minji hides in the corner stall, wolfing down the boxed

lunch she wasn't able to eat during lunchtime. Yeju suddenly bursts inside and stumbles into a stall, making furious noises, purging. She gags and spits, once, twice. Curses from chapped red lips. Regurgitated lunch spills into the porcelain bowl: marinated beef, rice balls, pinwheels, pickled cherry tomatoes, banana milk; all lovingly packed by her mother who runs the PTA, but still has time to be a supermom. Unbelieving, Minji slides down the seat and drops the lid of her lunch box. It lands with a loud *clang*. From the adjacent stall comes the sound of a fist pounding the thin plastic wall. "Who's in there?!"—Yeju's voice is cracking.

"It's me," Minji whispers hoarsely. "It's Minji."

"What? Who is this?"

Minji creeps out of the stall, eyes cast down. Her lowered eyes take in the hem of Yeju's skirt, a pair of rigid perfect legs and balled fists. She looks up once to find Yeju's stricken eyes boring into her. A sliver of fat hangs off Yeju's chin, no doubt from the beef her mom broiled earlier that morning. It's disgusting. In that sense Yeju isn't so far removed from Minji. They're both disgusting in someone else's eyes.

Minji hands Yeju a soiled napkin from her powder blue box, and Yeju takes it. Grudgingly.

They aren't friends. Yeju completely ignores Minji at school. She daintily dines with her friends from the lovingly packed boxed lunches her mother makes everyday with fresh produce, but not with Minji. Yeju fastidiously reads pastry blogs and passes out baked cookies—pistachio macarons and florentines—to her friends, but never to Minji. So Minji mustn't be her friend. The cookies are packed in individual foiled packages garnished with colored tissue paper, with little post-it notes on it that says: to my "____" friend. The blank part is different for everyone. But there's no cookie for Minji.

But they must be something, if not friends. Yeju is initially terrified of Minji's power over her. She's constantly reminded of seventh grade, when Yunsuk *sunbae*, two years her senior, took her out on a date to a room cafe that allows minors entry. In the room that costs 12,000 won an hour, they munch on complimentary popcorn and watch Tom Cruise strut around on screen to crappy subtitles. As the screen rolls, Yunsuk coaxes her into lying down beside him on the cushions. His nimble fingers slip up her cotton blouse. His other hand snakes down as she freezes. A full hour later, they emerge from the cafe, Yunsuk gloating. Yeju secretly pockets the bloody tissues, too embarrassed to leave behind any evidence of what had occurred. When she reaches home later that night, she chucks the whole mess into the toilet bowl and throws up as she watches it swirl down. Flushes again.

"Now you're a whore," Yunsuk informs her and Yeju believes him. Still believes.

Yunsuk holds this secret and lords it over her, until he moves to a high school in a different district. Yeju is keenly aware of the power of secrets. A secret makes even someone like Minji powerful. *Now you're a whore.*

But Yeju soon realizes Minji won't betray her secret. She sees it in the way Minji tails along far behind when school is over and girls spill out of the iron gates walking in pairs and threesomes. She sees it in the way Minji never approaches her at school, leaving Yeju alone when Minji passes Yeju and her friends cheering the boys running amok on the makeshift basketball court. She sees it in the way Minji does not mind when Yeju's friends chase her down the scary backwards alley until a smoky irked voice echoes from within: "You kids from *YeMyung*? Come here, I've got something to show you." Afraid, the other girls bolt. One girl shoves Minji into the darkness before she runs for it. Yeju titters nervously as she coughs away the smoke and guilt.

At first Yeju wants to explain that she has to, she has so much more to lose. But she learns over time, Minji is desperate. So Yeju throws back her mane of luscious hair and laughs her golden laugh when Taeshik the class clown sticks a broken fountain pen into Minji's back, streaking inky blots onto her shirt. Taeshik likes Yeju, so he feels like a king when she laughs. He hollers: "We struck oil, Sector 7! We're rich! Now we know she's at least good for something."

"Stop it, Taeshik—you're so bad! What if Mrs. Yoh sees you?" she asks, giggling.

The sharp tip of the metal pen leaves a prick of blood blooming on Minji's skin, unseen through the layers of her uniform. The wound remains on her back untreated because it's unreachable, riddled by a root-cause unseen. Yeju tosses in bed at night, throws out all her expensive fountain pens.

It must be this guilt that drives her to distance herself further.

The day after the pen incident, Yeju hands Minji a foiled package wrapped in pink tissue paper outside of class. A grandiose gesture a hunter makes to its prey. Red school satchel bouncing by her side, she flounces off once Minji has the package. Inside are pieces of burnt, twisted cookie crumbs, too hard and brittle to eat. No note. Yeju doesn't know, but Minji eats every crumb.

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That night, Minji dreams.

There is a castle in her dreams. The castle's a fanfare of pink tassels, bright ribbons, and spun sugar. The walls have the texture of soft candy. It's a mountainous sponge cake decorated to a tee. Macaroons and florentines trace the wafer arches. Mountains of biscotti pillars. It's a castle built for

a princess. Minji thinks Rapunzel. Minji thinks, wicked witch of Hansel and Gretel. There's candy floss grass and marshmallow bushes, creme Chantilly ponds.

The sugarplum princess of the candy castle condescends to the beggar girl and showers her with thick coins, silver and gold. But they're false coins, useless coins. Stale chocolate, crusty whites threaten to escape the fake silver and gold foil. Beggar girl raises her palms to receive the falling coins and catches every single one of those false mints, thanking the princess profusely. Beggar girl's forehead bounces off the pavement in a rhythm. *Thank you so much.*

In the dream as she palms the coins, Minji sneers.

=====

Sometimes, Minji remembers the funeral. Minji knew Yunho. He was the initial target, before "they" turned to her. Before he died, they hang out together in the corner of the courtyard, where he told her about lucid dreams.

"In lucid dreams, you can do anything, anything you want. So power to you."

In real life, Yunho has no power.

When Yunho dies in the car crash, right after the morning rush in the intersection leading up to the school gates, many students turn up to his funeral and sit in dumb silence, munching on the rice cakes a lady dressed in white passes around. The rice cakes are surprisingly good, so the kids reach over and discreetly take seconds.

"You must be Yunho's friends. Thank you so much for coming."

No one can quite meet the lady's eyes, her rustling white fabric an eyesore. A few girls sniffle, clamoring to the shrine for memories they don't have, the good times never shared. Some succeed in thinking they did some good. They will for tears to come.

Minji remembers how so many stood on the sidelines, eyes like shiny marbles, merely watching when Yunho is beaten in the back of the classroom with the broken mop. She remembers a camera phone flashing, its bearer slightly chagrined, amused—"Oh, I didn't know the flash was on." Pictures of Yunho kneeling on the floor are uploaded to a low-brow forum website with the tagline: "Phone number XXX-XXXX-XXXX; partner needed stat. Blow jobs on the house." When parents get involved, the offender claims it was all a joke. The town newspaper runs a small article condemning cyber-bullying.

At the funeral, one kid announces he saw someone push Yunho. He says the mysterious offender bolted right after the truck struck the boy. The room

comes alive with gossip. Another claims Yunho was in the occult scene, that a curse backfired on him because he was in too deep. Minji personally begs to differ.

This is what happened she thinks:

On better days, boys chuck mud crusted soccer balls at Yunho's locker, sometimes at his head. It's a game. With compasses, they scratch love notes (from " ", to Yunho) on Yunho's designated desk with sharp points, mimicking the sprawling loopy handwriting popular among girls these days. When Yunho inquires about the love notes, girls look away in disdain.

Other days, boys hand Yunho a crumpled 1,000 won bill and order him to bring them 100,000 won worth of stolen goods. When he complies by stealing cash daily from his mother's purse, boys scratch more messages on to Yunho's desk: thief, scum—*And we thought you were a mama's boy, bitch.* In an empty classroom, someone slips a pair of lace drawers in Yunho's desk, balling them up and cramming them deep between the piled textbooks. When kids return from P.E., Yeju screams that someone has gone through her locker. After an intensive search, the real thief triumphantly fishes Yeju's drawers from Yunho's desk. A few kids know Yunho spent the last period in the infirmary due to his migraine, but they remain silent while Taeshik the class clown swears Yunho stole the drawers because cross-dressing is the only way Yunho gets off.

Yunho has no defense. He knows.

So Yunho decides to take his chances. He walks and walks without looking side to side like his mama told him to until one day, he gets his wish. This is what Minji thinks.

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The night after Yunho's funeral, Minji dreams of him. He was the first one who told her about REM sleep, of lucid dreams. Much as Yunho made her the next target, he offered her escape.

In the dark road flanked by scrappy bony trees, Minji spots a dark lump on the curb. Roadkill. It moves, twitches, its mangled body squirming. She leans in closer and sees the lump that's Yunho sitting on the curb. His clothes are soaked with blood. Without hesitating, Minji walks over and plops down next to him.

"...how are you?"

She wants to talk, but Yunho isn't willing. When Minji reaches out, a huge hawk-like bird swoops down and pecks at his remains. A hawk? A vulture? Yunho's blood on its beak makes it look as if it's wearing lipstick. Minji stands up and backs away when she see the hawk turn itself into a giant hu-

manoid being with a bird's head and crooked posture. It shuffles to and fro, heading towards Minji with a determined gait, slowly but surely, arms open wide. A litany of garbled nonsense spills from the bird monster's mouth: *Let me hug you, poor child. No money, no brains. Kid under government support goes on to prestigious Daerim private high school— would have been the perfect media excursion. Too bad you have no brains for math. Or English. Poor, poor child.*

Minji wakes up screaming.

=====

It is Valentine's Day.

Girls move in groups all day, giggling and squawking like dogs in heat. Minji too, holds a parcel in her lap. When the class departs for the next period, she follows Mr. Lim down the hallways and catches up to him.

"Is this for me? Why thank you, Minji, This is very touching," he says.

Two female teachers are passing. They look at Mr. Lim and the unkempt girl with the garish parcel. A story is circulating that one of the teachers is sleeping with his girl student. No one is sure which one but the rumors are spreading like wildfire. The female teachers give Mr. Lim long glances as they walk by. One of them is the newly appointed Language teacher who's often kind to him. Lim feels chagrined, put on the spot. He doesn't think they suspect him of being that supposed teacher—they really don't—but believes this awkwardness to be his sin for being a man. His mother had often admonished him for being a boy.

He involuntarily pushes away the parcel with his long fingers, brushes off the ink blot on his page. Boys rushing past, eager to get to the cafeteria line first. Their feet goes stomp. Hours Minji spent making those chocolates. Mr. Lim picks up the crumpled parcel sheepishly and brushes off the dust.

"Minji, well, uh...I'm very sorry about this. I promise I'll save these and eat them later."

"It's nothing," she replies. "It's okay."

The fact is, he is the suspect in the rumors. Now that his mother is dead, he considers himself something of a liberated bachelor. His paramour is a girl fifteen years his junior, also very admiring of his long fingers and pretty music. She's in homeroom 3-11. They often meet in his flat. They fuck to Debussy. Minji is fine with all this. All she wants is a father to give chocolates to.

=====

On her way from school that day, Minji walks past the dark alleyway. Like the last time, a scratchy voice full of smoke is heard from within, summoning her. This time, she doesn't turn away in fear.

A girl with scraggly dyed hair and a plastic baggie inquires after the girls who chased Minji the other day. The girl draws with the menthol in her mouth, lighting up with a Zippo; she must've been the smoky voice. Minji feigns indifference. The junkie knowingly passes her the plastic baggie of glue. Minji shyly drinks in the fumes. She's happy with the result. Junkie girl says, if you work hard enough, you get a glimpse of paradise, but all Minji sees are warped alleyways, candy castles and roadkill.

In a way, it isn't so far from paradise.

Minji dreams so often now. She has nightmares and they are good to her. Now, Minji knows to wait in the darkness, wait for Yunho and the recurring hawk monster to appear, wait for it to shuffle towards her in that maddening twitching gait it assumes. Minji waits until the final moment when it catches up to her, its crooked limbs bearing down on her, arms wide open—and then she wakes up, the thrill of having been almost caught vivid in her tortured breath and apple-red cheeks, thumping heart choking up her esophagus. Alive. After the initial head-rush, reality sets in. Waking up is painful.

If she lives in her nightmare all the time, it won't be a dream.

=====

Next time she turns up in the music room, Mr. Lim is angry. He accidentally rips his sheet paper with the tip of his pen. He is never mad at anyone, so his anger confuses Minji.

"Minji, we need to talk," he begins, his silk suit rustling. "This...this cannot go on. You realize this is my personal time, my personal space?"

He speaks to her curtly, pen continuously jabbing the ruined paper. Ink blooms on the paper like blood on fabric. Minji takes this all in quietly. He continues, gesturing with his pen.

"It's not right, for a girl your age to be stuck in a room like this. It must be bad for your mind. You need to be around someone your age. You need to enjoy this part of your life—you can't run away from it! It catches up with you eventually, you see. You can't be so...timid all the time, Minji. It's not a way to live! It's a lovely day outside, you know, if you only try—"

There's a sharp knock on the door. A lithe, fresh-faced 9th grader is standing at the doorway, smiling uncertainly. Her hair is curled and she's holding music sheets. A patch of sunlight pools beside the girl, flushing her profile with light.

"Sorry, am I bothering you guys? I'm here for my piano lesson."

The girl locks eyes with Mr. Lim and smiles, teeth showing. There are braces on her straight teeth, barely noticeable. Minji pokes her crooked teeth with her tongue, cringes at her cavities.

Minji leaves.

She returns to the back alley, desperate. Junkie girl isn't there. Minji peeks into the dark alleyway and sees a balding middle-aged man smoking. Cradling his suitcase, he sucks in and turns around, content. He has 15 minutes until he has to ride the subway into his next station. He could have gotten cup noodles, but he chose his smoke. Seeing Minji, his left hand shoots up to hide his burning light, mistaking Minji for a patrolling officer out to catch lawbreaking smokers.

"What are you doing out of school? It's 10:00 am on a school day," he scolds her, coughing to mask his embarrassment.

"Mister, can I have a light?"

He starts at this question and eyes her more closely. His eyes sweep over her wrinkled long skirt, her large school jacket, her tight ponytail. A straight arrow if he ever saw one.

"You don't look the type. Go back to school, kid."

The man looks tired out, exhausted. He exhales and a cloud of smoke blurs his face. He doesn't resemble Mr. Lim at all, but there's a similar vibe going on. He is middle aged and capable of telling girls off. He could almost be her salesman father out on a break, passing by her school to say hello to his daughter. He could almost be her father who ran away with a rich woman 7 years his senior. Minji almost wants to sneer: *well she wasn't as rich as you thought wasn't she? Momma looked into it; she let you go because she knew you were making a big mistake.*

Instead, she says: "Please, mister. I can pay you. I have money. I'll do anything you say," Minji begs—anything.

At this, he momentarily pauses, ash falling from the stub of his cigarette.

"Anything. Anything, I promise."

His eyes glaze over Minji's girlish bent legs, her clasped hands, her plump childish lips. He notices her clammy skin. She has goosebumps. Here, the burning point reaches his finger, scorching him.

"Fuck," he swears as he swats ashes from his suit. "Fuck this. I could get into big trouble for this. Leave me alone kid, y'hear me? I don't need this crap." Muttering, the man flicks his stub away and rushes off.

Minji inwardly curses herself—*useless, can't even do this right.*

=====

That night, Minji dreams again.

In the twisted dark road, the lump that is Yunho shuffles comfortably on the road, beckons her. Across the extended dark roads lies the castle where the sugarplum princess flings burnt cookies and stale chocolate coins at her adoring followers. Hawks wearing maroon lipstick flutter nearby, swooping down to scoop up the chocolate coins from the creme Chantilly pond. Minji takes this all in. She walks and walks without seeing side to side.

At once she encounters an enormous chamber in the shape of a heart.

The room pulsates with warmth and music. No windows, soundproof. It's the womb. It's a tomb. In the middle of the wide circular chamber pulsating with warmth stands a thin, wiry man with beautiful fingers and a silk suit. Music sheets and silk suits adorn the room. Minji runs towards the thin man with open arms and hugs him for the first time, buries her face in the silk suit, breathes in. The pulsations echoing through the room stop at that moment and the chamber goes silent. Minji pulls away to find the man's face melting, sticky chocolate clinging to her skin, the foil coming off like a fine chrysalis. But there's no monarch, no pure gold within—only stale crusty chocolate.

Nikki Blue Page



Senior

Major: English and American Culture, Creative Writing Subconcentration

Minor: Urban Studies

Lumpy Space Princess and I have the same Myers-Briggs personality type: ENFJ.

Excerpts from "It Was a Normal Day"

Dad,

Today I had an eye exam. The doctor moved his finger around to make sure I could follow it. Left. Right. Up. Down. Touch your nose.

The whole time, his brow was furrowed. He scooted his chair closer and leaned in. "Are your eyes always droopy like that?"

Very worried, I asked, "Like what?"

"Your eyelids."

I pinched the fatty flesh above both eyes and stretched it. "You mean this?"

"Yeah."

"That's normal."

I came home and analyzed the trifold picture frame of you, Uncle Les, and Aunt Ann. They were school photographs from when you were in middle school. Even though it's in black and white, I can still tell how white your teeth were. And they were *your* teeth, before they all got knocked out in that one car accident. You're smiling so big that your flabby eyelids nearly covered your eyes.

I used to believe I had Mom's eyes. But her eyelids are saggy because she's old. Not due to genetics.

I'm not sure why I need to decide who I look like.
Sometimes I tell people I look like Yoshi, because of my nose.
Sometimes people respond, "No, you look like a Who."

Love,
Your Daughter

Dad,

Grandma's been gone for six months. Sometimes, I get really excited to take her on car rides, complete with ice cream and fall trees. Then I remember she's gone, gone, gone. I'll always remember the last time I took her because I knew it was the last but she was looking forward to the next.

You were already dead. Right when my 16th birthday rolled around, Grandma's license was revoked. She used to drive into the country and park next to some nice trees. She'd read the newspaper and take photos with a disposable camera. But she'd always leave her lights on which would drain her battery and leave her stranded. Passing cars saw a round-faced woman with a light gray perm, holding a *National Geographic* or the *Herald Palladium*. To her, she wasn't really *stranded*. She loved it. Uncle Les wasted a lot of gas and time looking for her, which pissed him off.

Grandma hated being cooped up in the house. Now that he was a little older, Grandpa didn't mind sitting still for hours. He'd flick on the reading lamp and try to figure out Einstein's *Relativity*, or sort out his ideas about Christianity by reading Bertrand Russell's *Why I am Not a Christian*. Sometimes Grandpa would save up enough energy to trim his tomato plants.

Grandma would lie on the same electric green burlap couch that was around when you were a kid. She didn't mind rereading old birthday and thank-you cards, but she'd gaze out the giant picture window and admire the birds. "What a beautiful day, isn't it?"

The last time we ever ventured out, we drove deep, deep into the country. The roads were dirt and the residents were confused about who the hell these random people were. We took a turn on a seemingly vertical road, with a few twists. It took us to an orange lake. You wouldn't believe how orange the water looked.

I drove to the boat ramp until my front bumper was in the water. "My word, look at this." I looked at Grandma instead. Her bobbed hair was thick and curly. Her bright red parka was just as iconic as Twiggy's pixie cut or John Lennon's rimless glasses. Pinned to her coat was a fair-sized button, which showed a caricature of her wearing a fur coat: "I'm not fat, I'm fluffy!"

"You know, this'd be a nice place for a picnic," she said, pointing to the dock. "Maybe we could go swimming afterwards."

Trying to suck up, I said, "But we'd have to wait thirty minutes."

Splattering chocolate over the dashboard, she swiped her spoon-holding-hand through the air. "Oh phooey. Now if that isn't the dumbest thing I've ever heard." Her lips stuck together, dry from old lipstick. But she wore the red lipstick anyway, she swore she looked like ghost without it.

"Then maybe I'll just push you in," I said, laughing.

"If I don't push you first," she said confidently. And then she ate her ice cream as slowly and menacingly as possible.

On the way home, as we were pulling up the hill to her house, Grandma's face lit up. She wasn't sad I was taking her back. She was thrilled at the prospect of our next get-together. "You know, if you ever have a hankering for another adventure," she said sitting up in the seat, "I'll grab my hat and we'll..." She paused. "Well, I don't have a hat. But come and get me and we'll go everywhere."

I laughed and smiled, because I loved her so much that's all I could do. "What? Are you making fun of me?"

"No."

"I'm being serious. We could drive up and down the coast." She moved her pointer finger up and down the imaginary coast of Lake Michigan. "We might even convince Grandpa to give us some more money for ice cream."

"He's a hard guy to persuade."

"I'll beat him up if he won't," she said, throwing punches at the air.

"I can help."

"I wouldn't need it."

I wonder who misses her more, Grandpa or me.

Love,
Your Daughter

Dad,

I found one of the two photographs of Grandma and Grandpa's wedding. Arms linked, they're walking down the aisle. Smiling, smiling, smiling. The photo is poorly exposed and off center. Grandpa's black suit blends into the wall behind him. His shoes sink into the aisle runner. You know how old photos are.

A sticker's pasted to the bottom of the photo, where the pews make up most of the left side. A few of the unstickered faces are over-exposed from the camera's flash, leaving creepy white circles surrounded by dark hair. Grandma handwrote a caption in all capital letters on the sticker. It says,

"Sept. 18, 1943—War time. I was 18, Les 22. I earned my only paycheck working a 54 hour week inspecting airplane piston rings for 6 weeks after his graduation and bought this dress and a coat. I had never been to a wedding! A real handicap in planning. Wanted rubrum lilies; florist could only produce this funeral arrangement. Sisters were 15 and 9; My best friend, 17. Old guy ushered."

There are fingertips at the bottom right of the frame. I imagine a man standing next to the photographer raising his hand and saying to Grandma, "Stop. Don't walk so fast. Let everyone see how beautiful you are."

Love,
Your Daughter

Dad,

You'd be proud of your little girl. I've been teaching Jacob how to play pool the real way, like we used to. I remember one of your many "Old Sayings:" "If you don't let them win once in a while, they'll never come back to play." I've accidentally taken a couple of dumb shots, if you know what I mean.

So I've taught Jacob to get really low and aim. Take things slow. Think about where you want the ball on your next shot. He always hits the cue ball too hard and the it stays in place. I've taught him about English on the ball. If the pool cue's high on the cue ball, the cue ball will have more forward momentum. If the pool cue's low on the cue ball, it has more backward momentum. I was listening to what you were saying, after all.

We ordinarily play at a shitty bar in Ypsilanti called the *Cross Roads*. They probably called it that because it's on Cross St. I'm not a big fan of puns.

The pool tables have purple felted slate with red felted rails. It looks cool, but it's pretty distracting. I also taught Jacob pool etiquette: don't stand in the shooter's line of vision; don't move while someone's shooting. I told him about how you and I used to have a corkboard in our basement with a piece of construction paper thumbtacked to it: "First to 500." It had a column for you and a column for me. You had more tallies because you never took it easy on me. I didn't want you to. But I still believe that, if you hadn't died, that I'd be in the lead.

I tried to teach my friends how to play correctly. My friend Spencer thinks it's a lot harder than the strike-the-cue-ball-and-whatever-happens-happens method. After one of her shots, she came up to me and said, "Nikki, I love the color of your lip-gloss." I said "Thank you," too quickly, because I wasn't wearing lip-gloss, and I didn't know what else to say. Thanks for raising me as a tomboy.

Sometimes, on Tuesdays, I play guitar at their open mic night. A crazy hippie lady hosts it, but says she doesn't get paid. Tarya is a real hippie who wears white crocheted tops over long tie-dyed dresses. No shoes.

She always introduces me even though no one is in the room. She grasps the mic, closes her eyes, and says, "My friends, I have a very very special treat for you tonight. I am honored for her to be here and am happy to know that there are such beautiful and intelligent people still alive. There is hope for our future generations. Ladies and Gentlemen, Miss Nikki Blue."

On Tuesdays, I bring my friends to listen because otherwise the place is

empty. They bring the “G Pen,” an electronic joint, and go outside with Tarya as she smokes her two gram joint. Yes. It’s a fat-ass joint.

The big wooden windows stay open and when I’m done singing “Folsom Prison Blues” or “Can’t Buy Me Love,” or whatever, Jacob smiles from the back of the room and claps. And my friends peek their heads in the window and scream, “Fuck yeah, Nikki,” as smoke billows into the room.

Love,
Your Daughter

Dad,

Today was a great day. My friends and I rode our bikes to a restaurant called “Mudgie’s.” Most of Detroit’s roads are flat as can be, so the ride wasn’t hard at all. I was especially happy because today was the first day I rode the bike I’d built. His name is Reggie. He’s a single speed roadbike. That’s why everyone kept telling me to slow down. The tread on their mountain bikes are too knobby, which creates a ton of friction and air resistance. I thought you’d enjoy that information.

Mudgie’s was empty except for one table. That made sense because it was five o’clock—too late for lunch, too early for dinner. The waiter seated us in the middle of the restaurant. I thought the orange walls were a little ridiculous. But then I saw only other patron who sported multicolored sperm tattoos all down both arms. I whispered to Kelsey, “What the fuck? Do you see that?”

Cheri laughed, “I bet she regrets that decision.”

The waiter welcomed us, “Hi guys, I’m Eric, and I’ll be taking *greeeat* care of you. Can I start you off with some beverages?” Cheri and Nick both ordered beers. “Can I see your I.D.s, please?” They flashed their I.D.s and slid them back into their wallets. “And for you, miss?”

“I’ll start with a water,” I said, even though I wanted to pre-game for the concert too. I’m sure you knew the struggles of being the only not-21-year-old.

The summer solstice sun warmed my back. I taught Cheri to play extreme tic-tac-toe. You draw one giant tic-tac-toe board with one smaller board in each space. So you have a bunch of little boards inside the big one. Let’s say one person chooses to make a play in the top left space of the big board. The she places an X in the top right space of the sub-board. The next

player must place her O in the top right of the big board (but she can place her O anywhere in the sub-board). The first person to win one sub-board wins. It may be more or less complicated, depending on how much you understand it right now.

"I bet I know what you're going to order, Nikki," said Nick.

"Okay, three dollars."

"The 'Hippie Dippie Sh*T Man'." So then I owed Nick three dollars.

"You only guessed that because you think I'm some sort of hippie fuck."

"Okay, true. But also because," he changed to a sarcastic girly tone, "*Weekday Veg.*" He did know about my dietary restrictions, both prescribed and self-implemented. No oil. Not any. No squishy shit. No tomato. No meat on weekdays. Nothing I couldn't pronounce, unless Nick let me smell it first.

Right after the waiter dropped off the food, the waitress behind him sighed, "It's the Summer Solstice...we should all get shots..." She had a pixie cut and the skull of a coyote on her thigh. Everyone was weird.

"Holy shit," the waiter yelled. Leaning down, he whispered, "Oops, forget I said that." He walked to the middle of the restaurant, "That sounds like the best idea ever." Raising his hands above his head, he yelled, "Shots for everyone."

He set what looked like truncated wine glasses in front of Cheri, Nick, Sperm-Lady, and me. He didn't check my I.D. No hesitation. Everyone was smiling and the sun was setting. We raised our glasses. Sperm-Lady walked over, held her glass to ours and said, "May our cars always start, our lotto tickets always win, and our pets always return home."

And everyone yelled "Cheers."

Love,
Your Daughter

Paige Pflieger



Senior

Major: Communications and Creative Writing and Literature

Paige Pflieger is a native of Detroit. She dabbles in some creative fiction, but primarily spends her time writing about her hometown for the *Daily* or Michigan Radio. After graduation she hopes to pursue a career in journalism, preferably in a warmer climate.

Exit Signs

It was a beautiful night in late August. In the morning I would move into a new house with new roommates and begin the second half of my college career. My mom and dad and I ate dinner in Detroit and walked it off by the river. The sun was just beginning to set, staining a deep blue sky pink and orange and yellow like a kid's watercolor painting. The weather signaled the death of summer with a cool autumn breeze, but compared to the week's heat the wind was welcome and I relished the bumps raising on my arms. When I look back at photos from that day, we smiled as we rode a merry-go-round. I craned my head to meet face to face with the heron figurine that I was seated on, my father made friends with a small girl perched on a toad as the last of the light faded and we were cast in the shadow of the Renaissance Center.

I stared out the window as we left the city's arms and headed for home. We passed exits that contained more memories than the numbers on their signs:

51C was where my boyfriend took me to the top of a hill for his favorite

view of the city I now have tattooed on my ribs. It was the place of the last steps my grandmother took before she dropped dead, eyes glazing over looking out over a river she had known all her life.

52 was the number of sips of a drink it took for me to end up in the backseat of a car with a girl covered in tattoos — tattoos she hoped would protect her from the reality of a world that she only coped with through a constant string of lies. I was constantly stuck between hating her and needing her, and I kissed each ink-stained scar until she cried and let me under her skin.

53 was the temperature the night we wandered the streets to the sounds of gun shots and fireworks. It was midnight, New Years, and we stumbled from party to party with the decaying corpses of once great buildings, ignored backdrops, blurred by alcohol and drugs and teenage naivety.

54 was the number of times I drove to his house in the middle of the night in a snowstorm to seek some solace in his arms. I assumed he had taken root there waiting for me, ignoring the fact that a plant must be watered with attention and care in order to survive. I spent the night with excuses about dangerous weather conditions and poorly plowed roads, and we laid together under twinkle lights while listening to vinyl records in search of emotions that had already frozen over like the ground outside, emotions that couldn't be de-thawed merely by the friction of each other's bodies.

55 was the exit I took to get home after leaving my virginity behind on a multicolored couch covered in dog hair while heat crackled in a wood burning fireplace that we had cleaned dead birds out of in the fall. We held our breath as we fumbled with each other's belts and bodies in order not to wake his mother. It was innocence, a kind of simplicity that would be lost in dorm room beds or parking garages or against walls at frat parties.

The phone rang. My mom answered and panic quickly rose in her voice as she was given more questions than answers. Rob was missing. Although he had always stood on the sidelines of my life, I hadn't noticed how immense his presence was until it began slipping away. Missing, maybe drowned in the lake that he loved, maybe dead and sunken to the bottom with old beer cans and firecrackers left over from the Fourth of July. I imagined multiple possibilities that would explain the unexplainable — maybe it wasn't him, they're mistaken. Maybe, he went out for a swim and someone noticed the Richard Gere look alike and attempted to abduct him. Maybe he joined the secret service and had to fake his own death in order to fight crime in some middle eastern country far away, but he would come back one day, for his daughter's wedding or for his wife's retirement. I knew none of these things were true but asked them in desperation, and my father kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead of us and his hand firmly on my mother's leg. She cried as she deflected my questions with gasps for air and choked sobs.

It began to rain.

When we got home my parents went directly to their room. After making phone calls little information was gathered — he was visiting his father in the nursing home, retelling the same stories to the Alzheimer's patient and receiving the same responses in turn. He then headed back to Pleasant Ridge, a town that contained no such ridge, just a mile by half a mile of old houses and fresh concrete streets marked by brand new signs boasting the title 'Historic District'. The heat drove him to stop at the lake, to get in the boat and go to the middle of the water.

Based on facts and speculations and autopsy reports I imagine it went something like this.

Rob got in the boat and drove it to the middle of the lake. It wasn't too crowded yet, but soon Labor Day weekend would flood the place with people and boaters and swimmers. The water was calm, beautifully reflecting the bright blue sky and the branches of trees brave enough to lean close to the lake edge. He dropped anchor, put down the ladder and descended into the water. He felt instant relief as it claimed him, feet, ankles, calves, until his head went under. He soon resurfaced, wading about the boat in a lake he spent his life on, learning to swim, later teaching his daughters to swim, taking in the summer's rays and perhaps sneaking a kiss in the nearby woods with a neighboring girl. He was mischievous, a trouble maker, but handsome and smart and always kind. He then returned to the boat, pulled up the ladder and went to the anchor crank. Maybe inertia or stress or strain caused it, but the anchor remained in the water and somehow he fell in and joined it at the bottom. Someone across the lake saw him, arms waving and yelling for help, for someone to please help him. By the time anyone got there he had gone under and never reemerged. At sunset, the divers said the water was too murky to continue looking for his body; they would resume the search in the morning. I wondered at what exact point did he change from a person to a body, but I suppose that occurred when the water swallowed him whole and dragged him to the bottom, consuming its visitor so he would never leave again. And he didn't.

In their bedroom, my mom sat on the edge of the bed, head in her hands, and my father paced about the room. I looked at them, and thought about how they knew Rob so much more than me. Sure, I called him dad and he knew of me before I was even able to walk, but my parents went out to dinner with him, got drunk and watched hockey with him, yelling at the TV set to motivate sports players that didn't recognize his existence. They spent years helping the marching band move equipment together long after their kids had gone and graduated. He saw every band concert we were in, even when we were young and the only noise an instrument made was akin to the dying squawk of geese. It didn't matter to him though, he clapped just the same. My whole body ached with the knowledge that I'd never see him

again, and I couldn't imagine how much harder it was for my parents. So I ran.

I found myself at the park at the end of my street. My gray dress was sleeveless and dotted by raindrops and I'm sure I was cold, but that didn't seem to matter much. I sat on the swings staring at the Detroit Zoo tower over the brick wall of the highway. The roar of cars reverberating off the concrete walls served as the constant soundtrack to my childhood, and by the time I had to leave for college it sounded like the ocean to me. The tower itself had been through many changes, and it shed its cover throughout the years as I began to shed my clothes in the park's grass with boys I wasn't supposed to be seeing — the drug dealer or the religious quarter back who wasn't allowed to date until marriage. It began to storm, and lightning cut the sky and I was forced to face the reality of a situation that seemed unreal.

The last time I had seen him was Fourth of July. My parents picked me up from a pointless internship at a magazine that called for more fact checking than actual work. My head hurt by the end of the day from staring at the computer screen, my ass hurt from sitting in the same damn office chair. I drank four cups of coffee because it was free and something to do. On the weekends I worked as a hostess in a restaurant with a community table and small portions written off as "fine dining". Avant Guard. Chic. Hipster. Whatever you wanted to call the place, I washed windows and pretended that I wasn't bothered when a customer decided to move to a different table for whatever shit excuse they gave. I was tired of sitting, tired of standing, and exhausted by the knowledge that this would probably be the rest of my life after graduation.

We drove in the heat in a car with no air conditioning, with the windows down to catch a non-existent breeze. The back of my thighs stuck to the leather seats and sweat gathered behind my knees. We sat in traffic for hours in hoards of the masses seeking a cooler lakeside destination up north. By the time we finally arrived at his cottage the sun was setting and my stomach was growling. I choked back two beers too quickly and felt buzzed and sleepy. I crawled off and curled into a ball in a hammock by the water, falling asleep to the sounds of motorboats and the chatter of Rob and my parents by the grill, frying up dinner. We ate burgers around a large picnic table and I participated to the bare minimum, pretending I enjoyed my unpaid internship or working extensively with hungry people. I don't remember where he sat or if I even bothered to speak to him, or to thank him for the meal. The night ended with fireworks and I slept in the car on the way home, unaware that one of the people I had just said goodbye to would disappear into that lake in just a few months.

By the time I stopped walking myself through the memory, over and over again, I realized my dress was completely soaked. I picked myself off

of the swings and cowered in the opening of a covered slide. I sat there watching the rain falling, pooling, dispersing and disappearing under the ground and wished that I could vanish along with it. Water puddled under me, sliding down the slide like so many children had before it, but I ignored it. Getting soaked didn't matter and I had nowhere else to go. When the rain ebbed after a few hours, I walked home. The house was dark, and I climbed the stairs quietly. My parents' lights were out, but I could hear the sniffing of my mother, still crying. I closed my door and slipped into my bed, letting myself disintegrate in the dark.

Alia Raheem



Senior

Major: Sociology

Minor: American Culture

Hailing from Southfield MI, Alia is a senior majoring in Sociology and minoring in American Culture. She co-founded the RC's first Feminist Forum last year with three of her best friends. Alia has been a closeted writer for the past couple of years and never imagined reading one of her works aloud to strangers before today. She has a passion for listening to strange sounds and sometimes not so strange sounds through head phones. After college Alia plans on working in the music industry for very little money but a lot of concert tickets.

Nora Ephron

I know I am not the first to pay tribute to the mighty Nora Ephron, the woman I only refer to as "Nora Ephron" when gabbing about her to my friends, not Nora, not Ephron but "Nora Ephron" because her name rolls off my tongue just as easily as "Mom" and because she is so fulfilling that it would be a disservice to shorten her name. I first heard of Nora Ephron from another lady I greatly admire, Lena Dunham. Dunham, the writer, director and star of the HBO show *GIRLS* is extremely fond of Ephron and tweeted about the release of the book *The Most of Nora Ephron*, a collection of some of Ephron's greatest writings. I added the book to my reading list and a couple of months later bought it in hardcover (no paperback available) from Books o' Million. Then a couple of months later I got around to opening the 557-page book and read my first piece by her.

A little bit about Nora Ephron: she was a journalist, essayist, playwright, screenwriter, novelist, producer, director, and blogger. It's very important to mention that she was a blogger later in her life because that was what Nora did— she changed, evolved, kept growing and taking on new frontiers. Now I won't talk about how she interned for President John F. Kennedy, her career as a successful journalist or how she left journalism to become a renowned screenwriter, director and producer. Nah, I won't talk about any of that or the many hats she wore. I want to talk about something a little more cliché, maybe even trite. I want to talk about how Nora made me laugh, how she made me anxious, critical, thoughtful – all the ways she made me feel through her writing. I owe a lot of my writing to Nora.

The first piece I read by Nora Ephron was her commencement address to Wellesley College in 1996. I still go back to that speech from time to time to get some advice on how to create the life I want. That's what Nora has been for me, a life coach of sorts, giving out advice and lessons learned. "Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim." This was just some of the advice she gave to Wellesley College in 1996 and in 2012 it still rang true to me. When I read that in 2012, I was a sophomore in college trying to find the courage (and the how!) to break into the music industry. While all my friends were declaring themselves pre-med I thought myself silly and unrealistic to want to work for a record label. But Nora told me, "in case you are wondering, of course you can have it all...don't be frightened: you can always change your mind." God! What peace of mind that brought me to find out that I could work in music, change my mind, be a writer, change my mind, work in television, and change my mind. So now two years later (which is about a decade in college years) that speech still inspires me. And let me tell you, all my friends who chose the "realistic" and sure path of pre-med have since dropped it, and I have had three internships in the music industry and worked two summers in Chicago and New York City, currently managing my own band, and I'm heading to SXSW (a music festival) for my current internship in March.

So yes, Nora gives a lot of career advice, love advice (she's had three marriages), and writing advice but most importantly Nora has made me think about my life (despite its briefness) as flexible, evolving and valuable. She has made me realize that what I have to say and write is important. I have learned to examine my life so that it becomes not a passive abstract idea but a work of art that I am constantly shaping for myself. This brings me to Nora's most important piece: "What I Will Miss," written two years before she died. Only thirty-one lines long it literally makes me well up whenever I read it (which is not often for that reason).

"What I Will Miss"

My kids
Nick

Spring
Fall
Waffles
The concept of waffles
Bacon
A walk in the park
The park
Shakespeare in the Park
The bed
Reading in bed
Fireworks
Laughs
The view out the window
Twinkle lights
Butter
Dinner at home just the two of us
Dinner with friends
Dinner with friends in cities where none of us lives
Paris
Next year in Istanbul
Pride and Prejudice
The Christmas tree
Thanksgiving dinner
One for the table
The dogwood
Taking a bath
Coming over the bridge to Manhattan
Pie

After I read this and the corresponding piece "What I Won't Miss" I tried to think about everything and everyone I loved so much that on my way out I would think "man, I'll miss that." Well it was a lot harder than I thought it would be. Maybe I haven't lived enough, or appreciated enough, or thought back on my life enough or maybe I think I'm so far from death that there's nothing to miss. Despite how hard it was and how depressing it was to think about missing life I did come up with a few things.

What I (Alia) Will Miss

My mother talking to the family dog
My father telling me he is proud of me
My brother and sisters
My best friends
Listening to records in the morning
Listening to records at night

Brewing coffee
Drinking coffee alone
Making breakfast
Waking up at home
Text messages
Big fluffy comforters
Sitting on roofs in the summertime
Finding a delicious empty restaurant.

I wrote this on July 11, 2014. I wasn't sure about half of these things when I wrote it, and I'm still not sure. I hope though in a few more decades I'll be a bit surer of what I'll miss. I hope I'll appreciate a few more things and disregard the ones that don't matter. Most of all I hope when I'm writing my list in five decades or so (God willing) I will have refused to be the side character in my own life and instead will have chosen to be the heroine.

Meg Rattanni



Junior

Major: English

Meg is an English major and transfer student enjoying her first year in Michigan. Her work can be found on the refrigerator, her mom's Facebook, and in the garbage. When she isn't writing poems, she spends her free time making zines and working with Students for Choice.

Moving Backward

I go to parties where the boys
don't look like you. Because they're boys,
clean-shaven, impatient, topping off
plastic cups with something poisonous.
I want to be blond or warm so they would stop
asking me elaborate questions and *get on
with it already*. I'm not thirsty anymore.
The questions are obsolete, contrived.
I'm sitting next to a boy who asks
about Dostoyevsky. He's too close, but aren't
they all at parties like this? Your ghost sits
on the mantel. It disapproves.
You wouldn't be seen in a place like this,
even if you weren't a figment/fragment.
We should all leave this room and go
out onto the lawn, where we can be separated
into two groups: eager and unwilling. Then
this would be easy.

There's a better party

where we're both eager and nowhere
in the Midwest. And you aren't a ghost.
The cop cars go to actual crime scenes.
The boys don't put powder in my drink
and I don't loosen up. The music isn't by Lil Jon.
This party probably doesn't exist.
I am at this party, answering this boy, in hopes
he'll become interesting once the clock strikes
midnight, or something like that.
I'm bastardizing the industry of theory,
I'm the last person in America to write
in cursive. Not one of these dopes cares.
I'd like to come home now. I'd like to see you again.

Sushi with Sarah

We stood at the linoleum countertop
separated by a metal saucepan
of sticky vinegared rice. Sarah dipped
her delicate tan fingertips, the annular
one decorated with a small silver
band, into a red ceramic bowl of water
painted with ornate sakura blooms.
She coaxed each grain into shape
on a square of brittle emerald seaweed.
I cut thin strips of cucumber
on the mottled wooden cutting board
her grandmother brought from Laos
when the Viet Kong invaded and seduced her sons.
The chicken-shaped timer jolted
me from the curve of her spine,
and I fished tender bundles of pork
shu mai from the bamboo steamer
with pink chopsticks. I prepared strong
green tea in porcelain cups nestled
between silverware and soy sauce.
Her new boy Justin waited outside the warmth
of our apartment in his gaudy souped-up
Honda, headlights illuminating the humid
brick walls. He tapped the horn twice
and I felt his smug lips curl up
when she pressed her lips to mine. An apology.
She let down her jet-black bun, slid
back into her shoes and out the door.

Maddy Rombes



Junior

Major: English and Creative Writing

I am an Ann Arbor native who loves practicing yoga, eating breakfast sandwiches, and being around my strange little family.

The Fall of Winter

I walk home from the cafe at 9:25pm and the woman
without a home says hello to me, once again,

because I've given her money before and one must
gratify the hand that gives. It is a mild night -- not as windy

as before, but the air is changing still, and I know
that sadness comes slowly. It falls like a first snow on a night

like this, for it must give us proper time to dread it.
I haven't written in my journal all week. I fear

I will run out of time. I fear an end to this,
this life which is made of nothing, the persistent word

embedded in a tangible world. I wonder
if I will be alone, when I die, I wonder

about the things that will surround me.
It seems as if I am there now. And I can

describe it to you: the tide in my chest is calming;
my spirits, loosening. Before I go I realize that like life,

fear has no presence, that death, too, is nothing
but a word, perceived and incessantly flawed.

It's snowing outside.
My gaze meets the leaf-blown path.

Suddenly I find myself at home.

autumn

when I awoke in the dream
I was in a bed of leaves.
overhead, painted arches,
the silent shifting of the trees.

I knew at once of your sublimity,
but no terror, for how can I
call you anything but beauty?

I awoke in the woods
and I wasn't afraid
though I know you are the mother of death.

why do you even bother?
we both know you cannot stay,
for absence is born of
the purest of colors.

look, even the leaving is inherent in you.

it's a pitcher of beer *after Sarah Messer*

it's necessity. it's falling through each other's arms and legs. it's the color
purple, my dark purple bedsheets. it's seasons. it's unusual. it's music and
the ability and the inability to make music. it's a long walk home after the
brain won't shut off after sex after slightly raised voices and a barely raised
bed that fits one. it's haircuts and taking out the recycling. it's glib begin-
nings. it's unbelievable at times, and I think it's real love. it's venus as a

boy. sometimes it's bad poetry, karaoke. it's marijuana dreams and drunken absences of thought and light, skies blue and grey and black and blue, it's the smell of death in a boxy room, knocked-over typewriters and oysters and steak. it's the color purple. it's the color green. it keeps us alive. it's science and art. it slips through fingers like uncooked rice, and I feign your understanding so I can tell you all of this.

shut like an oblong box

white on the walls, a notion of faintness.
faint fingerprints on the white walls.
I strain my neck like a begging dog
to the high shelf of poems, and
as I sleep I can feel the coldness
of winter seeping through the corners.
at night I press my small hand to its side,
feigning moisture, an indication of cold.
I feign comfort when the day's scraps
lay across the small floor;
when I'm trapped. a previous owner
wrote on the wall: "may
all beings be well," mocking
the darkness. mocking the
faintness of breath in this room.

untitled

I am afraid
Of the oceans that seem to drown
in themselves
Of a planet gravitationally
tightened, Of our closeness
to space.

That your brain is somewhat round,
That your fingers also have rounded edges,
smooth and precise.

That the bigness of my brain
is different from
the bigness of his hands
compared to mine.

That words mean nothing at all.

Of my own backyard,
so beautiful, so green
and filled so deeply with
memories as thick as the sky itself,

That the trees behind it
shroud a field
from which
I can only see a distance of
two point nine miles
until my vision
falls off the face of the earth.

the cave

imagine a tide: moontide inexorable and
widened across drowning sand,
in a foreign land, and the moon
shines sorrowful on its back.

there's a cliff, a steep stiff rock, blocking
the flow. wind blows so the waves grow.

but when she visited alone the lonely shore
at noon, the big rock's flume lay wide
open hollowed, and the path with
her small sack she did follow

and onward went, taken by the sound
of the flow behind which made her feel
as if she were inside a large shell,
anonymous, echoed,

and with this soft song a deep and sudden
exhaustion fell through her and she slept,

and finally the sun left and the moon
rose relentlessly from beyond. colorless
water began to fill the deep canal, pushing,
reaching, rising, more than ever,

until it reached her in her stasis. and took her
body and made it lifeless, and carried it away.

poems for my dog

I.

like me, you dream
of evening sidewalks
and the falling of leaves,
though you have no words
for these things.

you are conceptionless
of smooth paw to concrete,
visions of gray leaves
and white snow,
darkness,

of the muscles
in your tongue,
of drooling,
dreaming ...

now do you understand
how we feel about god,
to whom we are imageless?

as you dream
a beam of sun
creeps toward your belly,
warming you slowly
in your sleep.

like us,
the imperfect is your paradise.

II.

you've always been a loner,
haven't you?

when you came home in the arms
of my father, your favorite,

he told me you were
the smallest on the farm,

so you sold for less.
I remember

your snout full of mosquito bites,
the old frostbite on your foot --

and we pretended
we found you in the woods,

a rodent astray from its family.
and now, in your old age,

deafness has been a blessing.
I'm pleased it makes you happy.

I will see you in this way forever:
a sighing 'O' on the rug,

dreaming a silent dream.

Mariah Smith



Freshman

Major: Anthropology

I was born and raised in Detroit, MI and began writing at the age of thirteen. In addition to writing poetry, I enjoy rapping. Rapper J. Cole is one of my primary influences. I hope that my work will touch others and speak for those who feel as though they are voiceless.

The Room was Empty

1

There were four of us – but two left, so there were two of us.

I was full with excitement. He was full
with desire. To perspire in his presence would be nothing minor.

Hold it all in; put on your brave face.

That way he couldn't see my fear
or sense what I'd been waiting for years.

Soon the nerves dissolved,
evolved into something beautiful. He admired everything about me
from my hair to my cuticles.

The room's dim light reflected elegantly off the sheets
with a view of downtown
that mirrored my disbelief.

The plush carpet felt like Heaven's clouds underneath my feet, but soon
I didn't feel anything because I was at my peak,

Of pleasure or happiness, whichever you want to call it.

We were lost in the covers;
he made me feel

flawless.

To my shoulders,
down my back and I didn't say stop.
What I imagined my whole life was precisely what I got.

Why should I resist the temptation, especially with no warnings?
I had no reason to regret it in the morning.

It felt like we were spinning,
spinning,
spinning.
The colors; so well aligned. Blurs of cream and beige wonderfully combined
with the browns of our skin.

He was perfect,
gentle,
gracious.

The white of our smiles illuminated our faces.
Not only were we full, but so was the world around us.

Ground us, it could never.

At least that's what I figured
since the high that we rode continued to grow bigger.
And bigger until it exploded.

Every hope I had unfolded revealing a truth that had gone unnoticed.

2

There were two of us, but I felt alone – so there was one.

I was lying in the bed,
trying to relive what we'd done.

He strolled across the room, turned on the lamp;
I felt embarrassed.

I felt like shit.

I knew that he could care less about what I was feeling.

At least he got his.

These thoughts sprinted through my head,
behind my smile they hid.

I was naked. He was clothed.

I was on top. Reversed roles.

I complained. He didn't.

I wept. He finished.

I fooled myself like he fooled me into thinking that
this is how making love should be.

That night was not beautiful. It was more like a nightmare.

Not one to remember; more like a night where
dreams don't come true.

I imagined he'd kiss me before we started
and hold me when we were finished.

That he would be calm and sensitive.

Those hopes were diminished.

It was back to reality.

Re-introduced to gravity.

Grounded, unlike my sanity.

Like wounds rupturing under bandages.

There were no blurs of color;

Just multiple hues of grey.

No smooth cotton sheets.

The covers were in dismay.

No view of downtown.

Dark skies were all I could see.

Absent of elegance,

The room was really bleak.

Void of everything I'd imagined;

I was too blind to see

that he wasn't in it for my pleasure.

He just aimed to seduce dreams.

Jeffrey Sun



Sophomore

Major: Mathematics

Jeffrey Sun is a sophomore in the Residential College studying mathematics. He was born and raised in Hong Kong and where he spent a lot of time daydreaming about America. At the university he spends his time vacillating between majors and daydreaming about Hong Kong.

MPDG

Thought and action have always been more or less the same to me -- difficult and always much harder to initiate than to continue. I used to do things like search for a calculator instead of work things out in my head or on paper, but if the calculator was far enough away, the action harder than the thought, I'd put my energy into the thought. There was always this equivalence. This kind of self-examination, on paper now but elsetime ever flowing, the stream of epiconsciousness, is never part of this equation. It's easy, gentle but unstoppable. Perhaps because it's the thing I have the least control over, it's the thing I most associate with myself. I am what I cannot change.

My teachers, my parents, and my friends, that is all the people in my life, thought I was lazy. I thought I was lazy. Maybe I was. Only occasionally did these barriers to thought or action come down, and I remember them fondly. In times of passion, inspiration, anger, or competition, a rare set of conditions were met, some graceful power unleashed, and I could work as hard as my body or mind would let me. Then it was the ability limiting the will. "Will" here is a word for how those magical moments felt, whatever it might mean outside.

When I got out of high school and started working for my dad, though, I was still trapped by passivity. The only thing I ever wanted to do was to escape, overwhelmed by entertainment. Even as a baby I needed the mobile with the brightest colors that played the liveliest tinkling music. As a teenager I ran IT for my dad, fooled around and played video games while I told him I was updating servers and putting up firewalls, getting the probability of cyberattack near zero. I worked for the weekend, spent my weekends getting high and sometimes going out with friends I didn't like -- the few from high school who didn't go to college and would listen to my stories because they still thought I was cool. Their presence alienated me, and when I got drunk I would tell them that, and I would ask them if it was crazy that I was still holding out hope for closer and more interesting comrades. That was my purest state of emotional honesty. I talked to Sam the most. We would sit out at the edge of the beach drinking beers. I would say these things to him and he would spoil it with an inane comment or cowishly wander into a different topic. It was like talking to a wall.

I was fat, too. Every month or so I would decide to do something about it. I would put on running shoes and run as fast as I could away from the house, start jogging after about half a mile, then walk back home. Afterward I'd call up Sam and we'd split a pizza at his house and watch a movie. This became kind of a tradition. I still think of it fondly, in spite of the cyclical despair it should represent. When I was in Sam's basement with pizza in my mouth, my mind cleared and energized by the month's run, all was right with the world.

One month I realized I was looking forward to the run. I couldn't get myself to run again before a full month had passed, but I looked forward to it. The weeks leading up to it felt smothering. I would wake up at three and the sight of a clock would bring up a panic like bile in my throat. The night before the run, I went to bed at midnight, which was early, woke up at nine and ran till noon. When I got home, the house was full of light. Panting and covered in sweat, stumbling into the bathroom to shower, I stopped to see the living room bright with sun. I imagined how my parents must have felt when young and in love, bringing a baby into the house. It brought me to tears.

The next day I ran again. I ran for three hours then walked through the city. I stopped at a bookstore and bought a book by Aldous Huxley that I was supposed to read for school once but didn't, and read it at the diner across the street. The next day I ran again. When I ran I felt like an escaping prisoner. Running gave me a clarity that hurt at first. The great paradox of the ruminant thoughts, the jealousy and self-loathing that I had always tried to put out of mind, that by trying to solve by thinking I made worse, seemed lifted. The haze of protective sadness cleared, and the ugliness underneath didn't seem unsalvageable. And I ran. The medicine in running was that in each step I had to try. I had to make myself. I was exercising less my

body than my brain, the long-atrophied circuit of will that connected desire to action, and which I made stronger every time I turned a blind eye to my pain and went forward.

I couldn't understand why I hadn't started looking at colleges, so I did. I hadn't bought new clothes for a year, so I bought some. I started calling up people from high school who I remembered fondly, and for the most part they wanted to talk. A girl called Rachel who I think had a crush on me in tenth grade invited me to a house party. It was a small sort of get-together with twenty people in a living room, but we drank a little and the music was loud enough that the room never felt quiet. I wasn't used to the company of these kinds of people, and more than once someone caught me looking quietly across the room, and asked if I was okay.

One of these was a person called Laura to whom I responded pretty well by saying I was just wondering if we should start a fire.

She asked what I meant.

I said Sara has this thing, this pit outside. And she has firewood and it's a beautiful night. Why not start a fire?

She said it sounded like a good idea.

I shouted to Sara over the music, and she came over.

I told her Laura and I thought we should start a fire. Which I said I thought was a great idea.

Sara agreed it was and we all went outside to start a fire. It was quieter outside but the crackling of the fire filled the silence better than the music did.

I talked to Laura again outside and she told me about her graphic design major that she was considering switching to classics but was worried about getting a job. She told me about her dog who was losing his eyesight, and about her plan to read everything Tolkien ever wrote, and about her having joined a group in high school petitioning the government to stop minting pennies. It was fun finding out these things about her. Every now and then she'd laugh like she knew what she was telling me was dumb or boring, but I'd tell her no I really was interested, and she'd look happier and tell me more. I went for a cup of water and found Rachel inside and talked to her about high school. By the time I was outdoors again Laura was talking to another guy and one of Rachel's friends told me to give them some space, that's her ex-boyfriend. So I talked to Rachel some more, and I waited for Laura to free up so I could continue to grow the connection that had arisen between us, but it got later, I got drunker, and eventually she left with him. She held his forearm and for a second looked back at me with a patronizing or apologetic expression. I walked the mile and a half back to my parents' house,

jacked off in anger, and slept in my own bed.

The next morning I ran, for the full three hours instead of the usual half hour run and two hour jog. I came back dehydrated and desalinated and drank two bottles of Gatorade before the nausea subsided. It was noon. I calmed down while I drank the cool sweet liquid and stared through the window at the lake. I felt fine, I told myself. I caught myself telling myself this insincerely, and so I told myself seriously. I expel the poltergeist of jealousy and show myself it comes from no authentic place. It felt good. I finished the gatorade and took a shower. I remembered how good the orderliness of school felt, and the sense it made. I thought about the friends and the math competitions and the essays that I was proud of. I remembered pens running out of ink. I hadn't written anything longer than a signature in months. I resolved to apply to colleges with late-spring deadlines and to review calculus I had forgotten. Four weeks had passed since the first run, the first real run, and I had missed only five days since.

That afternoon I biked into the city again to study in a park. Leaving the leafy suburbs to go to a park in the city might strike you as silly, but being surrounded by living, breathing Chicago relaxed me far better than the woods. For an hour I reacquainted myself with dot products and integration by parts, then I bought a diet coke from a cart and drank it and watched the park and the streets beyond it and reflected on many things; on the end of winter and the rising heat at the edge of spring, on Laura and the high hopes of the previous night; on the patterns that made up my life, like the tendency to think only while drinking cold soda as though it somehow cooled my thoughts enough to crystallize them; on a possible oral fixation; on my close-bitten nails; and on the energy of the month before. Perhaps I would wake up tomorrow and a month would just be gone, a single foolish impulse having stolen the time from me. I would go back to who I had been before, incredulous and angry that I had been possessed to forget my ruminations, that I had, for a month, been an idiot. Then I muttered, "No," and pulled myself up and walked into the city. I walked quickly but gently, clasping my hands behind my butt, holding math notes behind me like a tail. I watched the street scroll by.

As evening fell, heading back to my bike in the park, I looked into a laundromat and there was Laura. The laundromat's front door hit a chime and Laura looked over when I walked in.

I asked if she came here often. She pointed out I didn't have laundry; I said I knew I forgot something. She pulled her mouth to the side and asked how my night was; I told her I went home. She said that was alright; I asked how hers was. She made a face like she wasn't sure if I was being passive-aggressive; I told her I had enjoyed talking to her, and that I had been steeling myself to ask her out. She asked if I still wanted to; I tried to say I don't know all coy. She told me indecisiveness was unattractive; I said, I ask

you out, I do it thus. She twisted the corners of her mouth down bashfully and said she didn't think I would; I asked why not. She made the uncertain face again; I said sorry and tried to ask her conversationally when she'd like to go on this date. She said she didn't know and she hadn't even given me her number yet; I said well how long was her laundry going to take. She said about an hour and another hour to dry; I asked if she had eaten. She asked if I was serious; I told her yes I was. She told me she'd have to leave in the middle to move her stuff; I said I could live with it. She said she wanted to think about it; I waited politely.

We watched her clothes roll around for a second.

I said I'd go to the restroom; she nodded.

As I peed I thought about how the situation was amusing, in which I and a girl who I had just this morning written off as too dumb to want me might have dinner together this evening, as interested equals, as budding friends. I washed my hands and for once dried my hands with a paper towel instead of on my shirt.

When she saw me, she said okay. I repeated the word as a question and she nodded. I pointed at the restaurant across the street and said I had heard they had the best Chinese in the city. She asked if it was true. I said yes, his name was Lee and he had saved some kids from a fire.

She laughed, thank God.

As long as I was talking to her, I was having fun. When she left for the bathroom after we sat down I caught myself thinking about talking to her, and thinking about her, and hoping that Chinese food wouldn't prevent us from having sex, and chastising myself for thinking seriously about sex, and thinking about the night before, and thinking that they probably did have sex, and chastizing myself that I cared. But then she came back and we got back to talking about Norwegian energy production.

Dinner went by too fast, and after we'd finished eating she said she thought her clothes were done. I said it was a shame. I asked if she wanted help with her clothes. She said she might.

We walked over to the laundromat and I helped put her clothes in a sack.

When we were standing on the sidewalk and she had the bag over her shoulder, I asked if she could carry it. She said she could. I said I'd see her. She said she'd see me. Then I kissed her. Awkward bag and all, and she kissed me back. We drew apart and I held her by the waist. "Bye," I said.

She said, "Bye," and turned and walked away.

I went home confused. I had a crush, but for once it didn't bring jealously or disappointment. It felt healthy. I felt the flashes of anger that had accompanied infatuation since the time Natalie Jenkins had kissed Derek Pottersen. Then I remembered that Laura kissed me back, and I felt happy and sad.

The next few weeks went by fast. I kept running and studying math, and I met Laura almost every other day in the city. A week or so after our first date, she invited me to her dorm room because her roommate was out. We had sex and I spent the night. It was fuller and happier sex than the time before, which was a three-month period at the end of senior year when a girl I talked to sometimes in class came over in the afternoons to play video-games and one day took my virginity. That was a novelty that turned into an addictive habit. With Laura it felt like a natural extension of our other interactions. I felt like I knew her better every time we talked. I got to understand that she was really kind of staid, that she had read Tolkien since she was little, and when she wanted to read fantasy he was enough for her. We talked about her ex-boyfriend sometimes and I got the sense that he was the same way: predictable and familiar, just interesting enough to lure her back in a vacuum. There was a reason why she was still planning to read all of Tolkien, instead of having devoured it long ago.

One Friday in May I called her up and said we should go to Canada today. She said a disbelieving no. I asked what she was doing this weekend. I told her Canada's so close. I said come, Laura, it beckons. She told me she'd have to get affairs in order. She said she didn't know. She told me that in future if I wanted to go to Canada on Friday I should tell her on Thursday at the latest.

She called me an hour later and said that by divine magic or trick of chance, she didn't have anywhere she absolutely had to be this weekend, so, fuck it, let's go to Canada. We took a bus across Michigan and into Windsor. We got there about seven. There was a bar across the road from the bus station, and we walked in and ordered two beers. It came cold and on tap, and for half an hour the glamor of drinking in public with impunity gave the world a sparkle. After the beer we walked around the town and in and out of shops and commented on the many things that were slightly different in Canada: the milk in bags, the metric system, the signs in French. When we got hungry we went looking for poutine and found it in a diner which could have been on any street back home except for they served poutine. At the diner I realized how much Laura made me feel I knew and understood myself, how often when I was with her were there moments that made perfect sense to me, one of which was two hours ago on the bus when I confidently said, I have no idea what I'm doing. I don't know where we're going, I don't know where we're staying this evening, I don't know what I'm doing next year. I am, at all levels of time, deeply and thoroughly confused.

After the poutine we walked again and heard live music coming from a basement door. She was nervous but both of us were curious so we opened the door and found a cavernous bar with a live band in the corner playing jazz. We sat at a table and ordered martinis. The martinis came and I told her it made me feel young and childish to be drinking in a bar and she said she felt the same way. About then I realized that we still hadn't made any plans for where to sleep and we panicked a bit but we found a hostel without too much trouble that was reasonably priced and had room for two. When we got there we fell asleep without even changing our clothes.

The next morning we woke up close to noon and watched a magic show in the park, then saw a movie in a Canadian cinema that was somehow not quite like an American cinema, and hung around in a Canadian bookstore. We had a lot of fun calling things Canadian. What a lovely Canadian rock, she'd say. Heavy, I'd say, must be this Canadian gravity. Oh yes, she'd say, It's metric, you see.

We spent another night in Canada and left on Sunday afternoon. Back at the bus station in Chicago we made plans for Tuesday. I went home and assuaged my parents' concerns about Canada, then lay in bed listening to an album Laura had recommended, and thought about the things that were to come. I was going to start school in the fall, maybe in Connecticut, maybe in California, but I had the whole summer ahead of me to spend with Laura. Next Tuesday we were going to a bluegrass concert. I weighed myself just after I got back; I'd lost another pound. Soon I would know what it was like to not be fat. In a month I was going to run a half-marathon. And Laura might come to cheer me on. Right now she might be lying in bed too, thinking of me.

Maisy Sylvan



Sophomore

Major: Politics, Philosophy, and Economics

I am a sophomore intending to major in PPE (Politics, Philosophy, and Economics) from Amherst, Massachusetts. I participate in several student groups including Students for Choice and the Public Service Internship Program. My writing focuses on the power of human emotion and is often centered around love and relationships, generally of a non-romantic nature. I tend to distance my personal experiences and thoughts from those of my characters by assuming a male perspective. I am most inspired by the works of Junot Diaz and James Baldwin.

Kind of Love

My Father, Amos

It was a jaw clenching, heart swelling, spine snapping, restless kind of love. I threw words at him like stones and he used his fists but I couldn't tell you what hurt worse or who broke more bones. The first time I saw him cry was on my brother's twentieth birthday and since that day I haven't thrown as much as a pebble. My brother died in Gaza while fighting for the Israeli army just a few months after his nineteenth birthday, and it might as well have killed my father too. The bomb or bullet or blade that blew up under my brother's feet, or blew out his brains, or sliced his throat couldn't have hurt my brother more than it hurt my father. And if it did, at least the pain did not last as long. My father Amos, he loved my brother very much.

On the day he died our apartment was quiet. There was no white noise and my father's steps were soft. The dog slept and the TV broke and the

clouds outside were so heavy it felt like they wanted to tell us that something was wrong. When my father told me that he died, I didn't really believe him.

"He died this morning...In Gaza..."

It had been so long since I'd felt that kind of pain that my body sort of forgot how to.

"He died..."

Of course I heard him say it.

"He died..."

But it felt like the words got stuck in earwax or the sound waves got twisted up in the air because when they reached my brain they didn't make any sense.

"He died..."

My father Amos, he loved my brother very much. My father hated many things too, but there was nothing he hated more than he loved my brother. He loved him more than he hated the tourists that flooded in and out of Brooklyn every weekend. He loved him more than he hated the auto repairmen in Crown Heights that lied about the breaks and gears on our car and jacked up the price, because they knew my father loved our car and knew nothing about it. He loved him more than he hated fake leather, more than he hated my American accent, more than he hated movie theater popcorn or stray cats or flossing. And I think he might have loved him even more than he hated himself for letting my brother go back to Israel.

"Keep your head up Efi, when I see you back here you'll be a man."

My father said this to my brother as he stepped out of the car at JFK. Efi leaned in for a hug and my father shook his hand.

He loved him more than he loved my mother, and more than he loved me. But I didn't think I minded, because he loved my brother very much.

I Was Buying Bologna At Jay and Lloyd's When My Father Broke My Heart

On June 10th, exactly three weeks after my brother graduated high school, my father sent me to Jay and Lloyd's to pick up cabbage and kosher meats. My father handed me his worn, brown leather wallet while I tied my shoes, and a small piece of paper that had Bologna, Corned Beef and Cabbage bullet pointed along the right edge in green ink. When the cashier rang

me up I opened my father's wallet to pull out the cash, which was tucked behind a bunch of credit cards and a double sided plastic flap with space to put two pictures; one on the front and one in back. On the front side of the flap was a photograph of Efi wearing a dirty penny and white sneakers. He had one soccer ball under his right arm and another one wedged beneath his left foot against the scuffed up turf. I handed the cashier two twenty-dollar bills and flipped over the plastic flap. There was no picture on the other side. Just the backside of Efi's photograph and the date November 12th scribbled in my mother's handwriting.

"Sir, your change, sir...sir...SIR YOUR CHANGE I have your change sir."

It felt like I'd been standing and staring at the empty photo case for my whole life, although it must have been fifteen seconds at most.

"Get your change kid we've been in line for half a goddamn hour."

I collected my emotions and put them in my front pocket next to the change, my father's wallet, and half of his heart.

How Do You Convince Someone They Love You?

Efi's girlfriend broke up with him two weeks before he left base. She did it through a letter written on a card from Walgreens that had a black and white photograph of a woman hugging her daughter on the front. It didn't make any sense. He called me on the phone and asked me if I'd seen her around the city, or at temple. He didn't get a lot of time on the phone and he'd called her twice without her picking up. He said that to call her again would only have been a waste of his phone privileges. It was the last time I spoke to my brother before he died and all that we talked about was a stupid girl that couldn't even spend seventy-five cents and twenty minutes to buy a real card or a piece of construction paper before she broke my brother's heart.

"How do you convince someone they love you?" was the last thing he said to me.

I told him I didn't know.

Bloody Knuckles

The first time I saw my father cry was on Efi's twentieth birthday. On Efi's birthday we visited his grave, or the grave of whoever's body or body parts were in the coffin they gave us and told us were my brother. They wanted to bury him in Israel, in a cemetery for soldiers but my father

wouldn't let them. We buried him in the first Shearith Israel Graveyard in lower Manhattan. When we reached his gravestone, we weren't sure what to do. We didn't bring flowers or flags, so we stared at it blankly waiting for it to tell us. After about ten minutes, my father took a step closer and let out a quiet moan. He threw his body over Efi's grave like he'd been shot in the back, cursing quietly in Hebrew while biting his index finger. I moved closer and ran my fingertips over the cavities in the side of the stone with one hand, hovering the other hand over my father's spine, wanting to rub it but not so badly that I did. My father pressed the tzitzit on the ends of Efi's tallit against his palms. He'd wanted to bury it with him but there were too many steps and procedures and it felt like by the time we'd gotten it to him he was already in the ground. My father slapped one hand over my shoulder as he stood up and draped his body over my mother like an exhausted finisher of the New York Marathon.

Oak, Cherry, or Steel

It was a heart bruising, tongue biting, bone splintering, dubious kind of love. I enlisted in the IDF a week after I graduated high school. My parents were scared and my mom cried every night for a month and a half but I pretended not to notice and she painted her eyes with dark pencils and put thick powder over the parts of her face that looked tired from all the tears. People I'd never met shook my hand at temple and brought food to our house for no reason every Friday night for six weeks before I left. They treated me like I'd already done something heroic and treated my parents like I'd already died.

We drove to the airport after dinner. We stopped at my aunt's house in Queens on the way there and she asked me where I would be stationed and what the weather was like and where I would eat and sleep and probably wanted to know where I would kill and torture and sharpen my knives and if I wanted my coffin to be oak, cherry, or steel. My uncle kissed me on the cheek, dragging his coarse mustache through the left over saliva, before saying goodbye.

We pulled up to the international terminal and parked our car against the curb. I leaned in for a hug and my father shook my hand. I shoved one last regret into the smallest pocket on my backpack before entering the airport. Dry air from metal vents hit my face heavily once I got inside so I held my breath and dragged my suitcase along the carpeted floors stumbling over my own feet wishing I hadn't let my pride trick me into thinking that this was something I'd wanted. Boarding the plane made my head hurt and my throat tighten but I straightened my back and I stood tall because my father would tell me that is what soldiers do. When I took my seat I gripped the armrest and waited for my mother to call me and tell me not to go, and I imagined my father pulling the cell phone out of her hands and holding her shaking

body the way he had when my brother left. I hoped my father pulled over on the side of the road on the way home and got out of the car to tear up the dirt and pull his hair and kick the tires the way he had when my brother left. And more than anything else, I hoped I'd broken my father's heart the way my brother had when he had left for Israel.

Antonio Whitfield



Junior

Major: Psychology

Minor: Creative Writing

I am a Junior from Columbus, OH. I grew up a major fan of the University of Michigan, and in my Junior year of high school I was blessed to receive a track and field scholarship to the University. I accepted that scholarship, and during my Sophomore year made a decision to become a member of the University of Michigan football team, which I currently am.

Calvin Harris

“Do you realize what you’ve done?”

I guess I must have fucked up...or whatever. I didn’t really care; I never had. The opinions and feelings of other people had never really been something I’d bother to consider so when it came down to topics like love...it would probably end with a broken heart and a shrug. To say that I knew I was gorgeous would be...well...an understatement. I was sexy and I knew it, I was hot like the topic, I was fly like a G6, I was Calvin Harris. And, if you don’t get it then it’s probably because you’re too stupid to realize that sometimes when you read things the writer is using these neat little tools like a metaphor or a simile. Thus, when I say I’m Calvin Harris, it means that I met you in the summer, you fell in love to the sound of my heartbeat, and by the time the winter came your heart wouldn’t beat the same anymore, you’d be like humpty dumpty trying to put the pieces back together until you realized that my heart was cold. My heart was the stone that was thrown into your chest. My heart was frozen like snow in the coldest winter so when I asked if you wanted to have a snow fight I knew that it wouldn’t be a fun, wet adventure, I knew that it would be an all out war. When you finally meet

me, and instead of telling you my real name I jokingly say I'm Calvin Harris, you better run. Run away from me as fast as you can.

On the table there were only three things: A Smokey the bear mug half full of wine, the wine cork (Sonoma county), and a cracked vase of Gerber daisies with a note attached.

Dear Lukas,

I know you're just getting out of a relationship, but I think that the physical chemistry between us is simply too strong to deny. I don't want to pressure you into anything that you're not ready for, but I'm hoping that when you're finally ready you give me the chance to show you what you've been looking for in a real woman. I'm sure you probably get this all the time from all those other girls that chase you, but I can't help but feel that this time will be different. Do you realize what you've done? You've just gotten me to confess my love for you. Don't let this opportunity go to waste.

Love,

*Alexis *Insert heart eyes here**

I rolled my eyes, crumbled the letter up, and shot it into the trash can like Derrick Rose taking a game winning three pointer. It was a pretty common thing for women to confess their love for me, and it was even more common for me to ignore it. Generally, I looked at women like stock, and the dorms here at the University of Southern California were my stock market. The more guys invested into a girl, the more likely I was to swoop in, invest quickly, and sell my stock after I had received a profit. I sat on the wine vineyard couch pondering whether I'd take Alexis up on her offer. Hooking up with her would be good entertainment during the Greek life rush period because the interview process would take up valuable time that I would need to meet other girls, but then again I didn't want her to think that there was any chance for a commitment from me. Besides I couldn't stop thinking about this one girl; I'm pretty sure she was the reason I broke up with my ex. Presley...she had everything I'd never had in a girl. She was the type of girl who put hot sauce on everything. Most people would look at her eating habits and cringe, but I'd theorized that she was such a huge fan of hot sauce because it was a direct representation of her personality. She was sweet, but had just enough spice to make it clear that you were dealing with a feisty girl. When Presley made her mind up it was pretty obvious she would get her way. That's probably why she was the only girl I was too nervous to talk to; she knew how to make me just scared enough to think she might leave me once she realized how bad a person I was.

"Lukas, hi."

"Presley....hi," how ironic that the one girl I couldn't stop thinking about

would walk into this wine vineyard in LA. Must be a sign that Alexis wasn't the girl for me. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here with my friend Nikki," she pointed back towards to clerk counter, but I was too focused on her dark black hair and beautiful hazel eyes to care about the location of her friend.

"Can I sit down?"

"Huh?"

"Sit, can I?"

"Oh, yeah...yeah sure take a seat."

"So."

"So."

"So, why are you here? And, why are you alone?"

"This is where I come to think, it's like my own private man-cave," I smiled, hoping she'd take this opportunity to notice my beautiful, pearly whites.

"Except this is a public place."

"Well, normally this place is dead, I'm the top college customer here. Normally I..."

"Shut up," she interrupted me.

"What?"

"Shut up, how have your classes been going this semester?" Presley said with a smirk on her face. She must have known that she had me flustered.

"They're fine, but who really cares about school anyway. When are we going to go on our first date?" I smiled. I knew I had thrown her off, and it felt nice to regain my persona of confidence and collectedness.

"Uh, does this not count?"

"No, how about Friday? That gives you two days to prepare yourself."

"You said that like I should be honored or something, ha."

"Well...shouldn't you?" I got up and left without waiting for a response because I knew I had won this encounter between Presley and I. However, before I got fully out of the door I stopped and without looking back said to her, "I'll text you sometime to let you know the plan, bye Presley."

To say that I can barely recollect the rest of that Tuesday would be an understatement. I had finally been given the opportunity I'd sought out all along. Presley had been the girl I'd needed; she was independent, smart, beautiful, and feisty. For the first time since I'd walked onto campus at the University of Southern California nearly three full years ago I had come across a girl...no, woman, who could put me in my place and keep me entertained for longer than a few days. Wednesday was more of the same, drifting in and out of dreams of beautiful bliss, my lips pressed firmly against Presley's, my hands roaming up and down the curves of Presley's body until it found it's resting point on the peak of her ass like a heat seeking missile that had found it's target. Very little reality seems to stick out in memory, only the brief hours of class, Linguistics and Pragmatics as if I needed any context to determine the meaning of my sudden intoxication with the thought of her.

Thursday, I finally picked up my phone and texted Presley. Despite being nervous for the first time in what seemed like my entire life I told her to be ready at 7 o'clock Friday night, and not to forget to look nice because I had something very special planned out for her. I smiled at my own text because I knew I played it cool, and even when she only responded "ok" it didn't concern me because I knew there was no girl who could resist my smile and charm. I went to Al Weiss Men's Clothing on South Wall St because I needed the best possible attire for the occasion. It was perfect, I bought a black Calvin Klein wool suit with diamond encrusted cufflinks, and a new Movado watch to match with a black dial face and black leather strap. I couldn't help but smile thinking about how great I was going to look for this occasion, even though my parents would be furious that I had just spent several thousand dollars they would appreciate how good I planned to look for my date with Presley.

"Lukas, what's good bro!?" I looked back to see my friend Nelson shouting out to me.

"What's up Nelson, what are you doing here?"

"Just gotta get this suit for game day Saturday, UCLA week, doesn't get any bigger than this bro." Nelson was the star wide receiver for the USC football team, and this game was going to be the cementing of his status as a first round draft pick.

"You better kill it this weekend bro, afterwards you should stop by Theta Chi, and party with me and my brothers."

"Alright, for sure. I'll be there."

In two days I'll be at the frat house showing all the brothers how truly awesome I am with Presley on my arm, I laughed to myself. "Ahh Lukas you're a funny guy, to think you can be good friends with a top USC football

player, and have more women wanting you than him. I really am the man." I left the clothing store and noticed at the end of the boulevard, two seagulls were fighting over a Chinese takeout menu; dust completely blocked out the sun. It was the perfect time of day when the sky was a luscious shade of orange and grey, and if you paid enough attention you would notice that even the birds would stop for a few moments to admire the tranquility of the California sky as it subtly fell asleep, signaling the end of a day and the beginning of a new dream. *Tomorrow you'll finally get what you've been waiting for Lukas, tomorrow will be your day.*

Friday, my body shivers in excitement to see Presley. Friday, the day my lips will press up against hers. Friday, the day that our bodies will come together in a fusion of lust and passion. Friday, she's perfect. Friday, I'm perfect. Friday, we're perfect together. Friday...the day I confirm that I am everything I believe I am and more. Presley will be the perfect complement to the lifestyle befitting of royalty. Her beauty will make every man who sees her weep in dejection that they failed to make her their own. The beginning of Friday waned in importance. I spent most of the day looking at my outfit for the night, making sure that all my plans were perfect, and drifting into the same dream of her that I'd been having for days. I showered at 5:30 P.M., checked the mirror to make sure my skin was flawless, rubbed lotion against my skin, and made sure my breath smelled great. I put on my suit and accessories at 6:15, and couldn't help staring at my own reflection in the mirror. 6:30, I got into my 2014 Bentley Mulsanne, a gift from my parents for making it into my senior year at SC. 6:50 I arrived at Presley's off-campus home because punctuality is essential in a good date. 6:55 Presley walks out of her home in a phenomenal black dress to compliment her olive skin created from the perfect mix of black, white, and Puerto Rican.

"How are you feeling tonight?" I asked her to break the ice.

"I'm good, I'm pretty excited to see what you have planned."

"Well I hope that you love it." We drove the rest of the 35 minute drive talking about things that were pretty irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. She'd say something while I wasn't paying attention and I'd pretend to laugh, and she'd give me the courtesy laugh in response to all of my corny jokes. We arrived, she smiled then looked at me, then looked back at the view, "follow me Pres."

We got out the car and descended to my favorite spot on El Matador Beach, about 10 miles northwest of Malibu. The scene was beautiful, the orange and grey sky, the perfect dress that pressed perfectly against Presley's body, the hilltops that we stood on providing a grand view of the sand and water's below.

"This...is beautiful Lukas, thank you."

"I'm glad you like it, but I hope you don't think I brought you here to just look at the sky," I grinned as I pulled out a bottle of Domaines Barons, an expensive wine imported from France, and sandwiches of many varieties cut from the L.A. deli. "I've been told that wine is a drink of the Gods, which is fitting because you have the smile and body of a Goddess, with the personality of which man can only dream."

"Lukas...how sweet," I could see that I had her exactly where I wanted her. I went for it, I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers. A spark of electricity shot through my body. This was the feeling I'd been looking for, the feeling I had been missing my entire life.

"Lukas...this is incredible...I'm so happy you brought me here and planned all of this. But, I don't want to hurt you. I'm not ready...I'm not ready for a relationship. I think you're a great guy, but we should just take things slow, ok. Maybe if things keep progressing we can be more than friends, but for right now I want to keep it at just that."

"Do you not love me?"

"Love? This is our first date, and I like you, but I don't want to move too fast."

"But, I had this all planned out...did you not think that everything was perfect? I swear I made everything perfect for you. This was supposed to be our time."

"You didn't expect me to just jump out of my clothes did you? Lukas, I'm not like the other girls you've been with."

My face contorted, I wasn't sure if I was sad or mad, I seemed to be experiencing the full spectrum of emotions all within an instant without experiencing anything at all. I felt as if I was watching my own body from another location. "YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO LOVE ME!" My body moved on its own.

"Lukas! Let go you're hurting me!"

I held her by her bicep, and I pulled her towards me. I tried kissing her, but she pushed me away. My vision became dark, and my heart rate quickened to a pace that must of been unhealthy, I was wild like a lion let free from its cage after years of captivity. I struck her, I don't remember why, but I remember her flesh crumbling underneath my fist. "YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME!" I swung. "YOU'RE MINE FOREVER!" I struck her again. "I LOVED YOU! I NEEDED YOU! WE WERE PERFECT TOGETHER!" I struck her harder and harder with each sentence. She screamed and tried to push away from me, but none of it could pierce that haze inside my own mind. In a final attempt to get away she slapped me, and without realizing my own actions I slammed her head against the stone ground. Her body suddenly stopped moving. Blood covered her eyes so that I couldn't tell if they were open or

closed. I pressed my fingers against her neck, praying for a pulse, all I felt was clamminess, her body still warm, but clearly lifeless. I got up and ran, I ran away from Presley's body, I ran away from responsibility, I ran away from my own demons, I ran while the world faded into darkness.

"Do you realize what you've done?" I said to myself. I guess I must have fucked up...or whatever. I don't remember how I got home that night, but I awoke to police grabbing me, notifying me I was under arrest for the murder of Presley Dominguez, and wondering whether I truly cared or not. The next weeks floated by like a daydream. Initial appearance, darkness. Arraignment, not guilty by reason of insanity, darkness. Trial, *Lukas suffers from narcissistic personality disorder*, darkness. Sentencing, guilty, 25 to life, darkness.

"I don't really remember much of that night, I've been living in a fantasy ever since. This fantasy replays the same instant of my lips pressed against Presley's. I am stuck in a constant state of euphoria. I could never resist the allure of a woman with a beautiful smile; I would try to overlook the great features of women, but couldn't help but imagine that one day my lips would meet hers. I'm stuck in euphoria, but I'm also stuck in hell. I guess I got so used to breaking hearts and being Calvin Harris that I wasn't prepared for what would happen if my own heart was broken. I can't say that I feel remorse for that night because the person who committed that crime wasn't me. But, really how can I say that person wasn't me, when I've never actually known who I was."

The reporter stared back at me, blankly. I could see that she was disturbed, but I wasn't sure if it was because she had just listened to a man describe the events leading to his incarceration for murder or because she recognized that I couldn't seem to accept the blame for the tragedies that happened that night. I say tragedies because nobody understood that two tragedies took place that night, a beautiful woman passed away, and my entire life was taken away from me for an event that I had no control over. That's the reason I chose to do the tell-all interview for Dateline: NBC. I needed the entire world to realize that I was never given the help I needed mentally, my parents were too unaware to recognize my cries for help, and none of the women I'd ever been romantically involved with were interesting enough to stop me from making bad decisions. Even now I couldn't help but feel that this reporter should have been asking my friends and family how they managed not to recognize my cries for help as a young child.

"Well Lukas, is there anything else you'd like to say before we end this interview?" The reporter asked me, but it was clear that she didn't want to hear my answer. She had already categorized me as a monster.

I looked her in her eyes and saw not a reflection of myself, but the monster that hid under young children's beds at night. She had judged me just like everyone else in society. Her opinion no longer mattered and neither did this interview, "I don't ask for your forgiveness. I don't need it."

Justin Younan



Junior

Major: English

Justin Younan is a student studying English and creative writing at the University of Michigan. As a former art and design student, the materiality of sculpture and intricacies of design have translated into how he writes poetry and fiction. Language is physical. It can be held and touched—as real and part of this world as bronze castings, as sinking your fingers into wet clay. While participating in the New England Literature Program (2013), Justin struggled to pursue his secret impulse to become a poet, finding his entrance through fictional storytelling. His writing strives to be dreamlike, on the verge between real and unreal, drawing from his relationships to family, sexuality, and “the dreamscape.” His influences, to name a few, include Stevens, Berryman, Kasischke, and Neruda. Justin thoroughly enjoys blueberries, hippos, and aspires to one day own two Welsh corgis.

Coyote Man

He's Consort to kings
and Jester to queens,
though I'd say
he's Fool at best.
His tongue's awful,
smooth-moving its way
through feathers and fur
to the flesh of the matter—
yet never reaching
the bone. He swears
that time floats at night,

of its own free will, down
into his lungs and out
through his nose—
that when he takes
his next breath
he knows less thereof
but more of himself.
"Close your eyes," he'll say,
*"Go ahead, breathe in—
go see for yourself."*

I Loved You in Al-Dahna

I've dreamt of the kindergarten dunes,
the faraway oasis and basketball hoop palms.

We were desert princes from allied kingdoms,
and yet still it took all recess to cross in the heat.

I lead us on horseback, powering through the bandit hub,
and you, so cleverly, snuck us past the gypsies.

Though sometimes I wonder if we crossed at all,
or died there, thirsty on the blacktop.

Killing the Agave

Child,
did you know
this would happen?
Do you realize
you're pissing
everything
you've worked for
down the drain,
back into your roots,
for a single flurry
of days and nights—
just to flaunt
your blossoms
so the sun's spear
and the nipping lips

of moon air
can sink themselves
in your aroma?
After a hundred years
of looming
as high as the trees,
you want me
to open the glass
over your head
so that you can reach out
and feel the pollen
flood down
into your leaves.
Tell me, please,
do you sweat
underneath
this roof the way
I do now—
watching you
wilt?

Sleep Walker

I don't know where
the shadow man goes
when he's finished breathing
hot fog onto my window
and smudging ugly dreams
in the glass—whether

he paces the curb, tracing
hungry chalk dragons over
the sidewalk—or hides
away from the day in another
night, hissing, "*Hush hush...*"
Maybe English or Arabic
or Kurdish.

I'd like to go with him to see
the other houses he haunts—
to press my ear up to the brick
so that I might hear how
stranger's howl in their sleep.
I'd like to stay and see the day

burn over the sheets—for you
to spin and stray into the moon again
—and me, stranded in sand, left
there to find my own way home,
without dreams of the sun
nor dreams of my own.

Unlocking the Shed at Night

I heard his hush in my ear,
telling me to stick my pinkie in
the keyhole—twist my little finger
around in the lock, just far enough
for a click—for my tiny nail to catch
and crack out of my skin—for the padlock
to snap apart and the doors to stutter
open with me still writhing inside.
All I can do is untangle my wrist, pluck
my skin from the gash—“*There,*”
he says, “*I’ve found what I’m looking for.*”
My red glittered stub, spongey
and sharp; a centipede in the corner.

Lucy Zhao



Senior

Double Major: Business and English

A senior studying Business and Creative Writing, Lucy loves spicy food, painting, Moleskine notebooks, the sound of rain and waves and bonfires. She's a dedicated wanderer, finding herself stretching in the sunshine of Ghana, Kenya, Peru, Guatemala, India, and Ethiopia in the past 4 years. She plans to found a company to increase employment opportunities for those living below the poverty line in developing countries.

The great summer blackout of 2003

led to basins of water settling around the house, dry mouths from emptying ice cream, clothing changes in gray rooms. New discoveries were made: the temperature differential between doorknobs, the divots in bare floorboards, unexpected extra steps in stairwells. Bodies found reasons to stay still, breathe stale air, rub at the fuzzy gray matter of brain.

We came to understand the pounds in pregnant power lines, sagging along our horizon. We came to understand our magnetized poles, pulling us from the solitude of white noise. At night, we leave our beds be, gather in the center of the living room with cool sheets. We build fortresses with our bodies, tumbling together in sleep. Mothers next to grown daughters, traveling sons, estranged fathers next to mothers.

In suburban areas, the Milky Way and orbiting satellites wink at the naked eye. In the absence of particulate light pollution, we see the hurling galaxy of Andromeda come for us.

The Optometrist

Slivers of a fish's spinal cord.
Maps and spectrum graphs.
The body inside out and pulsing.

Your eyes on the other side of cold,
black metal dials, as I read the scramble
of alphabet.

The air is heavy. I hear
your breath. This morning,
blackbirds gathered
on budding stems of tall trees,
silently.

In the waiting room, my mother holds
my hand, guilty because 8 years
of girl can't choose the frames
she wants with such thick lenses.

Carpet is grains of red, white, black,
and quartz. The steady stretching
of corneas, and a blind uncle
who couldn't finish college.

Witness

after Laura Kasischke

When I saw your body
inside the cocoon of prison
for juveniles, I knew
what you were exactly.

Our eyes searched each other
unabashedly.

You were the boy
trailing behind me, the man
in the subway who scared me
with his hungry stare,
the teenagers I always crossed
the street to walk around.

I was the girl wearing
a turtleneck and loose pants
on visiting day.

We were to learn poetry.

And then

moss after wildfire.
Raspberry plants that grow in char.
Your funny peacemaker caring mom
and missing window screens and no heat.

You carry a picture of your grandma
near your heart. And I knew you
suddenly and flaming.

Science

Once, a child was born with a splash of mist above his heart.
In sleep, he gasped memories of a dead man. The post-mortem report:
a shotgun blast, the torn flesh in the chest now a birthmark.

Once, a toddler spoke the name *Leila*, a girl thousands of miles away.
The child knew Leila's relatives, her favorite food, the placement of her bed
in her room. She called herself mother and constantly asked to give Leila the
family jewels.

Dr. Stevenson found 3,000 children who longed for people
they had never met, who reported secrets of families they couldn't know.
He had impeccable credentials. He had a beautiful wife.

Song

I was trying to play piano
when I was suddenly playing you
in and out of tune, and I realized
this isn't working anymore.

5 days ago, I laughed a horse
laugh in the still air of a fancy restaurant,
the kind with flavored butter.

You pinched my arm to quiet me.

Next week, I'll fry the egg again.
I'll say to you on the phone,
be home soon after work.

By then, I'll be at the train window
watching the humming trees
and listening again, for birdsong.