

Café Shapiro Anthology

19th Annual

2016

Selected Poems
& Short Stories





19th Annual

Café Shapiro

Shapiro Undergraduate Library

February 8, 9, 15, & 16, 2016

Anthology of Selected Poems
& Short Stories

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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 nineteen 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. It is exciting to see our mission being realized in this year's printing of the 19th Annual Café Shapiro Anthology.

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

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Alex Bernard



Senior

Major: English and Political Science

Alex Bernard is a frequent consumer of books, plays, and movies like *There Will Be Blood* (2007), a systematic, oft-chaotic deconstruction of capitalistic institutions as manifested in oilman Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis, *Lincoln*, *Gangs of New York*). Plainview begins as a man with nothing and ends as a man with nothing. As the gap between the lower and upper class grows, what could be more poignant, more relevant, than the self-debilitation of the self-made man? Indeed, Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* is an achievement from the same school as *Citizen Kane*, *The Godfather Part II*, and, of course, von Stroheim's *Greed*. 3.5/4.

My Weekend with Hepburn

Here's what kind of happened.

It was a Wednesday night. I was doing what I always do on Wednesday nights: sitting on my couch, sucking the skin on the back of my hand, thinking about the banking crisis, when –

“How do you do, Mister Beh-nard?”

I gasped!

Who had materialized in my room, but none other than Hollywood starlet and Four-Time Oscar Winner Katharine Hepburn! She was perched in my desk chair, legs crossed, head thrown back, a martini dangling from her

fingernails real seductive like a snake teething a yo-yo.

"What are you doing here, Katharine Hepburn?" I un-sucked my hand. "Shouldn't you be in the Golden Age of Hollywood?"

"Oh, Mister Beh-nard," Katharine Hepburn said. "Who could ever be as astute as you? You're hallucinating ... simple as that, Professor."

"Yeah ... "

"Besides, a girl can enjoy the view, can't she?"

"Hee-hee-hee ... "

For the next week, my hallucination of Katharine Hepburn and I did everything together. She showed me *Citizen Kane* and *The Philadelphia Story*. I showed her *Space Jam*.

In the evenings, we ate at Chophouse (on her) and South Quad (on me). Except, the thing is, no matter where we went, no matter how many times I told our waiter I'd be dining with a redheaded, sharp-tongued, film-icon-legend-lady, they never brought Katharine Hepburn any food! So I gave her some of my chicken tenders.

At night, we waltzed on rooftops. I'd say she looked "really hot" and she'd tell me I was "incorrigible," then I'd say that word was "really hot" and she'd say "thanks, doll" and I'd say "wel-come!" and she'd smirk and double back-flip off the roof, onto a horse, and I'd take the stairs.

And yet despite it all, if you can believe it, Katharine Hepburn was super insecure, always calling herself a "damn fool," a "silly little thing," insisting she was unlovable, unfeeling, made of "bronze."

And I was all like, "What? You? Bronze? Aren't pennies made from bronze? Wait, nah, that's copper. Nevermind."

And then Katharine Hepburn would be all like, "I don't expect you to understand."

And then I'd be all like, "Maybe, I don't. Maybe I don't understand. But, wow, look at you. I mean, Jesus. I'm so lucky. Your eyes are so real, I never saw eyes so real. I'd touch 'em if it wouldn't be so uncomfortable for you."

And then, she'd start crying, and I'd ask, "what is it?" and she'd say, "Shut up, keep talking," so I would:

"I'm no good with words. I'm no good *ever*, really. But you, you don't make me feel like a bad person ... I love you. I knew it the minute I met you. I'm sorry it took so long for me to catch up. I just got stuck."

That last part was from *Silver Linings Playbook*, but Katharine Hepburn never saw it 'cause she died in 2003 and everything, so she thought I was real romantic and would kiss me hard and drop her champagne on the carpet, and I'd go to clean it up but she'd be all like, "Leave it, dah-ling. We're wonderful. Hold me ... mmm." And I would, tight and all that. And we'd sleep together, but never have sex because the sex was only implied.

And then, one day, well ... how are the mighty fallen.

One day, after buying Katharine Hepburn a frock (whatever that is) and after eating snow by the Union, I walked home, put my key in the door and heard something – "Oh, Cary, put me in your pocket." I burst in and what I saw ... what I saw was ...

In my bed, under my new comforter, was Katharine Hepburn kissing my hallucination of Hollywood star and Honorary Oscar Winner Cary Grant!

"Cary Grant!" I said, dropping my package and such. "What are you doing! Shouldn't you be in the Golden Age of Hollywood?"

Cary Grant tightened his tie, clasped my shoulder, and said, "Easy-old-fellow-just-passing-through-on-my-way-to-New-York. Don't-be-alarmed. Katharine-and-I-were-just-trading-secrets ... with ... our ... tongues."

I socked him in the nose. But then Cary Grant said he deserved it, which made me feel bad for socking him because I didn't want him to think he deserved it. I wanted him to hit me back. But he didn't. Katharine Hepburn socked me in the nose.

"Terribly-sorry, Al-ex," Cary Grant said. "The-thing-is-I-drunk-to-ex-cess. Or-no, life ... drank ... me." He was gone before I could ask him what the shit that meant.

And then it was just me and Katharine Hepburn.

Me: "Did you have to make out with somebody my mom thinks is hot?"

She: "I'm sorry, but I have no sympathy for you. Not everyone is lucky enough to understand how delicious it is to suffer. I've made you lucky. Do you understand?"

Me: "I understand, but that doesn't help or matter. That never matters, Katharine."

She: "Yeah ... "

Me: "God, you were Katharine Hepburn and now you're just Katharine and I wish you were still Katharine Hepburn. Or, at least 'Madam Heppo.'"

I wiped my nose and adjusted myself. She sucked on one of those long

cigarette holders, but there wasn't a cigarette inside 'cause my building doesn't allow smoking so she just sucked on the plastic. God, it was hot.

"I love what I thought we were," I said.

"Thank you," she said. "I regret very little. And I've enjoyed myself immensely."

"Good," I said, "I'm ... I'm glad, really." I smiled real small, and she was gone.

I miss Katharine. I even miss Cary Grant. My hallucinations, what I thought they were for so long, what they still might be. And I keep asking myself and only myself – because other people might understand but understanding isn't enough – I keep asking: How do I get my hallucinations back? And how do I forget that's what they are?

And I always tell myself the same thing: Enough with the movies, shmuck. Eat snow.

So I do, I do. I get my coat, I grab my keys, and I make a big show of it.

Jordyn Bernstein



Junior

Major: Psychology

Minor: Business

Jordyn Bernstein is a junior at the University of Michigan majoring in Psychology and minoring in Business. She is spending this semester studying abroad in Australia. In her free time she enjoys tutoring elementary school students and writing short stories.

Hourglass

The summer I started swearing was the same summer I realized I was chubby. It had gotten to the point that it wasn't cute anymore. I was 15 and it was no longer considered baby fat. It was just fat. I stood in front of the mirror with my hands on my waist, pushing on my hips, trying to make them smaller. I stared at the dimples in my legs and on my stomach as I turned sideways. My stomach protruded out and for the first time, I noticed my arms changed shape as they laid flat against my side.

My mom always tells me that everyone is beautiful. But I disagree. To me, it's a fact: some people are lucky. I don't think it's fair, but it's true. I think I am lucky when it comes to my face. My nose slopes perfectly, my lips are plump, and my cheeks possess the perfect curvature, making my smile look genuine. My eyes are green, the color of grass, with little specs of blue. My mom always tells me I have hungry eyes filled with passion. I agree.

* * *

Before that summer, I always liked my body. My mom said it was cute

and called it hourglass. She always told me that everyone should love their bodies because God made you. If you didn't like your body, you were sinning against God. So I liked my body. Not because of God, but because my mom told me to. I always listened to her. I always trusted my mom and believed her words. *I have a perfect body*, I thought, because my mom told me so.

My mom helped me pack for camp that summer. She gathered all of my bathing suits, shorts, and t-shirts, and shoved them in a duffel bag. She dropped me off at the bus and hugged me tight.

"I love you the most," she said, her hot cheek against mine. She looked me in the face, "I'm gonna miss those beautiful eyes and smile."

"I love you, too," I said, holding back my tears.

I was 15. I was way too old to cry at the bus stop. I ran up the steps of the bus and found Sara, my best friend. As soon as I saw her, the lump in my throat went away and my excitement came back. Sara's from Toronto, so summer was our time. We had to make up for the 10 months of the year that we didn't see each other. We laughed for three hours until we made it to the landing.

This summer was going to be the best summer. I was finally in the oldest age group, I was on the top bunk, and I had my favorite counselors, Jessie and Katie.

A week into camp, I was woken up at 3 AM. Jessie was shaking me and telling me to put on black clothing. I was excited. I grabbed the first black sweatshirt I could find and threw it over my oversize t-shirt. My counselors lined us up and walked us down to the swim docks.

"No talking!" They said, over and over again, "this is not a joke."

I knew that they weren't serious, but I was still scared of them. They were all in college and pulled off the chill look. The one that made it seem like they just threw something on, but in reality they put effort into matching the perfect vintage sweatpants with the right ripped t-shirt. I tried to pull off that look, but failed every time.

Once we got to the docks, they told us, one by one, our initials. Mine were TFC. Katie was reading the list of names and initials from a brown, leather notebook. They explained that we would never find out what they meant. From that moment on, Sara and I made it our mission to learn what ours stood for.

I'll never forget the day after I got my initials because it was the last day I liked myself. Dinner had just ended. It was chicken wings. I had four servings of rice and my counselors told me if I ate eight of the chicken wings I wouldn't have to clean that week. *That's easy*, I thought. I finished them in

under two minutes.

Sara and I ran to the front of flag lowering, waiting anxiously for the last note on the bugle to be played. As soon as it was, we raced toward our cabin. We were surrounded by the dust from our shoes kicking up the dirt ground. The sun was low but high enough that it was still bright outside. It was twilight. That's what that weird time was called. That weird time between dinner and evening activity when everyone was free to do whatever they wanted.

We opened the wooden door and walked to the back of the cabin. We pulled back the makeshift door of the counselors quarters, a ripped towel hanging by two nails. No one was there. Sara sat on Jessie's bed and I sat on Katie's. It didn't take long to find the notebook of initials. They were sitting on Jessie's shelf under a pile of sweatshirts. Sara and I giggled with excitement as we opened up the sacred, leather notebook, full of secrets that were not meant for our eyes.

Sara pulled back the cover and started reading the initials out loud. I pretended to listen to all of them but was really only focusing on hearing my own name. Sara stopped talking before she got to mine.

"What's mine?" I said.

"I don't want to say," she said, her eyes avoiding contact with mine.

"Just tell me," I said, my heart beating a little faster.

"No, it's really not a big deal, Olive, just forget about it."

I grabbed the notebook from Sara's grasp and found my name amongst the 22 others on the list.

"TFC," it read, "Token Fat Camper."

I gulped hard and shut the notebook. Sara put her hand on my back. I shuffled it off and walked slowly out of the makeshift towel door. My mind was flooded with my mother's words— "You have a cute body."

What a liar, I thought.

* * *

That night, I sat silent in my sheets. The dim lights were still on. Girls in training bras stomped on the floor and giggled loudly as I pulled the covers over my head and tried to block out the noise. Sara came and sat on my bed.

"Are you ok?" she said.

I didn't answer. We sat silent.

She waited for a response until she realized she wasn't going to get one. Then she laid down next to me. I turned away from her, but she didn't leave my side.

* * *

It was August when camp ended.

Summer dragged on longer than I wanted it to and school came too quickly. I was ready to leave Sara's constant surveillance and concerns but I knew the beginning of sophomore year was going to be bland. I was right. Each day was the same as the last. I told my mom I was dieting. She told me I was crazy, but she just didn't get it. She had no body fat. When my friends would come over they would all comment on it, "your mom is so little and cute," they'd all say, as if on cue.

This was the first time I didn't listen to my mom. She told me I needed to eat more. I didn't. I would take the lunch she made me to school and sit at the lockers with my friends. Thankfully it was a big group of us so no one noticed that I didn't eat my sandwich. I would only eat the celery and apple.

"Ugh, I'm so full," I would say, "does anyone want my chips?"

* * *

Each morning I would wake up with a text from Sara. I would swipe it open and delete it before I could read her paragraphs of advice. I didn't have a problem, so I didn't need her help. I just wanted to lose a few pounds. *It's completely normal to diet*, I thought.

* * *

It was December when people started complimenting me.

"Wow, you look amazing Olive," they would say, "did you lose weight?" I would smile a small smile and change the subject quickly.

In March, my crush Jonah asked me out. He came up behind me at my locker and touched my hip. I hesitated and quickly turned around—forcing his hand off of my fat-coated waist.

"Hey Olive," he said as he stood behind me, "wanna go to Homer's tonight?"

"Sure," I said shyly as I turned around and smiled at him.

I still remember the first time I met Jonah freshman year. I was fat then, but he told me I had beautiful eyes.

After he walked away, my phone vibrated. I looked down at the dim screen. Sara Cohen was flashing back at me. I pressed the mute button and shut my locker.

* * *

It was April when my mom made me go to a therapist.

I told her that was stupid. She told me I was crazy. I locked myself in my room and she knocked on my door. I didn't let her in. As I sat on my bed, I could hear the plea in her voice, her want for me to be happy. In reality, it wasn't that I was sad. I really didn't feel anything. My body and mind were just numb. I laid on my bed hearing her speak to me but not listening to her words.

"Olive, honey. Please. Please let me in."

I stared at my ceiling, counting the blades on my fan, waiting for the moment to pass so I could leave my room and step on my scale in the bathroom.

* * *

The next week, my mom drove me to the therapist. She learned in a self-help book that routine was important, so visits to Jan became part of mine. Being thin was worth that weekly hour of mindless interrogations. She would ask me questions about my childhood and my relationship with my parents. I would give her one word answers. *I'm fine*, I thought.

When my mom picked me up that day, I told her she was right.

"Jan was so helpful," I said.

"Honey," my mom said, tears forming in her eyes, "you don't know how happy that makes me."

I didn't like lying, but I needed to. I needed to lie so my mom would think I liked the way I looked. I needed to lie in order to be beautiful and thin.

I took my phone out of the center console, where my mom made me leave it for my hour visits with Jan. I had three missed calls from Sara. My mom looked over and saw my screen.

"Hey, how's Sara doing?" she said.

"Please don't look at my phone."

"I'm not. I'm just curious."

"I don't know," I said, "I'm sure she's fine."

* * *

That day was cloudy—the sky a white cloth painted gray with big brushstrokes. I sat down in physics next to Jonah. The desks were in imperfect rows from students moving them throughout the day, so my chair was a few inches in front of his.

"Hey," he said as he looked at me and smiled.

"Hi," I said as I turned my head to meet his gaze.

After I got my fix of Jonah's perfect face, I turned my head back to the front of the room. As I did this, I saw the attendance sheet on Mr. Dew's desk and realized I forgot to sign in. I stood up from my desk to walk to the front of the room. My head started spinning and my knees locked. I reached my hands out in front of me to stop myself from hitting the ground. And then it went dark.

* * *

It was June when I had fainted 2 more times.

No one knew. I always stood up slowly when I was around people. When I knew I hadn't eaten in a while, I braced myself on a wall or desk before I started walking.

I was in my room blankly staring at my math homework—the numbers and symbols all meshing into one—when my mom knocked on my door.

"Olive, honey, can I come in?"

"I'm busy," I said.

She turned the handle of the door—I had forgotten to lock it—and sat down on my bed. I couldn't talk about my weight anymore. It was getting annoying and repetitive.

"Have you heard from Sara?" she said.

"She called a few times, but I haven't gotten back to her yet."

"Ok, well I just want to let you know that Mrs. Cohen called," she said.

"Why?" I said, my shoulders tense. I thought of the reasons she would be calling my mom. Why would Sara get her mom involved in my weight?

"She told me that her and Mr. Cohen separated back in March," she said, her eyes sympathetic, "Sara really needs you right now, honey. Maybe call her some time tonight."

I couldn't look up from the piece of paper that sat in front of me. I couldn't look my mother in the eye. I was focusing on the two that sat on the page and hoped that if I looked at it long enough, I could reverse time. I could unthink my selfish thoughts. I could go back to when I was standing at my locker with Jonah and answer Sara's call. I could read her daily texts and realize that they weren't her giving me advice, but asking me for guidance.

When my mom left my room, I picked up my phone. I scrolled through my contacts and landed on Sara Cohen. I listened while it rang, each ring lasting longer than the last.

And then she answered.

"Hello," she said.

"Are you ok?" I said.

And then I sat silent and listened.

* * *

I was in my bathroom after my shower. I hung my towel up and wiped the fog off the mirror. I stared at my reflection and really saw myself for the first time in a long time. My hourglass figure had diminished into a stick frame. The fat on my hips was gone. I turned sideways and my stomach was inverted. As my arm laid flat against the side of my body, I could see my shoulder blade pop out of my back. I turned forward and looked at my face. My plump cheeks were no longer plump, but instead were hollowed out and my nose looked big against my small body. My once so lively eyes were sunken into my head—the passion gone from them. The blue streaks in my grassy eyes were gray against the purple bags that circled them. While I was trying to fix what I hated about myself, I changed everything I loved.

Staring at myself, I couldn't see the girl who held the initials of TFC. Not only was the fat gone off of my body, but the joy and hunger for life was gone from my eyes. The compassion and empathy gone from my being. I sunk to the floor and felt tears start to form. The coating of numbness fell from my mind and I felt for the first time since the last day I liked myself.

It had been three months since Sara's parents had gotten divorced, three weeks and two days since I fainted in front of Jonah, and less than three hours since I realized how long it had been since I focused on anything but a number that showed up on a scale.

Ashley Bishel



Junior

Major: Political Science and RC Creative Writing

Ashley was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She stuck around for the next twenty years, and is now a junior at the University of Michigan studying creative writing and political science. Her other passions include offering unsolicited opinions about comic book characters, watching cat videos, and putting caffeine in her body. She wants you to know that Hawkeye is not a useless Avenger and the movies did not do him justice.

September

It's your lipstick that does it.

"Most girls can't pull off the classic red-lip thing," he said with a smile, catching you after your first composition class. You were more gratified to hear that than he could possibly know – make-up is a new venture for you, and red lipstick more of a capital-S- Statement than you'd usually be comfortable with. But you figured that if there's any good time to change your personal aesthetic, it's the first week of college. He asked if you wanted to be partners for the next assignment, and then he asks for your number.

Your first date (?) was success in your book. Neither of you actually used that word, but you're pretty sure that's what it was. He met you downtown, listened and actually made eye contact while you talked, laughed at the right times. You had a charming moment where you both ran out of the library giggling together after accidentally setting off the fire alarm while trying to get into the reading garden. He took you to his new favorite coffee shop, and you both got lost on the way back because he'd gotten so absorbed in talking about the book he wants to write. Then it even *rained*, like it would

in a proper rom-com. So *maybe* your feet were sore and you were cold and damp. *Maybe* it was the kind of perfect that sounds much better on paper. But he kissed your cheek shyly when you got back to your dorm that night and you thought you'd give this thing another shot.

The next week he came up to you after class and asked if you wanted to go on an adventure. His exact words were actually "Do you want to see if we can climb to the top of the bell tower before dinner?" and your brain translated that into "Let's make out as the sun sets over an incredible view of Ann Arbor." You were a little disgusted by how quickly your brain jumped to the cheap-paperback-romance-novel scenario, but – you said yes.

This date (?) was less of a success, if it was a date. The bell tower was 212 feet tall, and at 50 feet you were already sweaty and winded and not feeling very amorous at all. He gave you a weird look when you complained (good-naturedly) about it, like it hadn't occurred to him that some people might not enjoy climbing up stairs. You discovered two things when those stairs finally ended: the door outside at the top of the tower was locked, and there was a *goddamn elevator* the whole time. You asked if he knew about that. He shrugged, like it didn't particularly matter either way. He asked if you had a hairpin so he could try to pick the lock. You told him you didn't, after you realized he wasn't joking about that. You took the elevator down.

So here you are now, on date (?) number three. You're sitting outside at a sidewalk table at his favorite coffee shop, working on homework for that composition class you share. There's some sort of Oktoberfest celebration happening right now that neither of you knew about, and the whole block has been closed off. Plastic tables and chairs have been set up in the middle of the street, there are large white tents with food and beer inside, and there's a live band playing what you're guessing is German folk music.

It's charming, you think. The Christmas lights strung up along the edges of the tents and the light spilling from the restaurants that line the street create a warm amber glow in the dusk. Pedestrians clutch at light jackets and bury their hands in pockets, but it's not the barren, bone-chilling cold of late autumn yet. It's still September, when that sharp bite in the air is thrilling instead of just something to be endured.

The men in the band are not professionals, you can tell immediately. Each of them are wearing knee-high socks paired with tennis shoes. The trumpet is a little wobbly, the trombone is out of tune, and the singer is not particularly gifted. This doesn't matter. What the band lacks in musical ability, they compensate for with pure enthusiasm.

The sheer happiness of the band is almost a physical phenomenon, an aural assault of cheer and Germanic rhythm. It's infectious. A middle-aged couple set their beers down on a table and rise. The man extends a hand and the woman, smiling, takes it. They begin to dance. Their steps are

confident and synchronized; they have done this before, many times. You're mesmerized, your homework forgotten; more passersby slow down to watch. A girl in a blue coat tugs her mother's hand to stop, watching the couple with wide eyes. The mother complies, smiling a little sadly. The couple doesn't acknowledge any of them. They don't look away from each other until the song ends and they finally step away from one another, grinning shyly at their audience.

You've forgotten about your companion. "We should move inside," he says suddenly, closing his notebook with a snap. "It's too loud here." You can tell from the stiff way he's holding himself that he's annoyed, and you realize that you're surprised.

"I think they're almost done," you offer. "It's getting dark."

And you don't want to go inside yet. The band is kind of awful, but the music is boisterous and comforting, insulating the whole block from the encroaching night. It reminds you of a campfire, humanity crowding around light and chasing away the darkness with songs and laughter.

His mouth tightens and he lets out a long-suffering sigh. And you see it, then. It's barely been a month since *whatever* this is began, and you can clearly see the whole story stretched out in front of you right now. You are always going to be enchanted by the bad German folk music. He's always going to notice the noise. You have more of a romantic streak than you'll ever admit, and he probably enjoyed walking up all those stairs in the bell tower (or at least appreciated the value of the exercise). He's not going to notice the opportunities that being lost in the rain presents, so you're just going to have to figure out how to get both of you home while he keeps talking about his book. You're going to fade away from each other – in a week, in a month, it doesn't matter. There's nothing wrong with either of you. It's just like you're both looking at your lives through opposite ends of a telescope.

You wipe the scarlet lipstick smudge from the rim of your coffee cup absently. The band finishes their last song and wishes their listeners a safe trip home. The evening seems suddenly darker and emptier. The girl in the blue coat and her mother stare silently at the sky for a few moments. They haven't moved from their spot on the sidewalk since they stopped to watch the couple dance.

"Do you see the stars?" the mother asks the girl in a hushed voice. "They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"It feels like you can touch them," the girl replies solemnly.

You look across the table to where he's sitting, watching the band pack up with a put-upon expression on his face.

"Let's go inside," you say.

Grace Bydalek



Sophomore
Major: Musical Theatre

Grace Bydalek is a sophomore Musical Theatre major from Omaha, Nebraska. This is her first published work!

In October

Twenty Two Days Before

He is the only one. One, one, one. It is 11:12, and he has stayed with me for over seven hours. Seven, seven, seven. I am counting. He is the only boy to ever stay with me for this long.

I wait, and try to move as little as possible, for fear of scaring him away. After thirty minutes, though, I succumb to shivers induced by the late October air. Thirty, thirty, thirty. He shrugs off his army jacket and places it over my shoulders. I bury my nose in the collar, and his smell is the first thing I've ever been drunk on. I continue to shift my gaze from him to the lunar eclipse above me, not sure which is more miraculous.

My mother used to say that I should not trust boys that stay; that they would never stay for the right reasons. They would know that there was something wrong with me. My mother told me that I am too vulnerable for time spent this way, but this is because she has never met Everett.

I see him dig the pads of his feet into the rooftop of my new house, as if to subconscious-ly reassure me that he will not leave. Eight, eight, eight.

I used to love space when I was younger; he says to the moon. It is as if he is explaining to a friend why they have grown apart.

I nod. *It scares me.*

I didn't think anything scared you, he says. I want to tell him that he scares me most of all, but his grin stops the words in my throat before they reach my lips. The words are stuck, like they almost always are. This time, though, I want to talk. I want to talk to him. There are so many things that I want him to know, so many things I want to show him; I want to tell him that I am different and tempt him into running from me but something tells me he already knows, and it is why he stays.

I reach into the pockets of his jacket to warm my hands, and feel something fragile and cold and vaguely wet. It is a flower, wilted but still the color of the cardinals you can see from my window in Birmingham.

Oh, I saw that and thought of you. It's so cold, it was the last one alive, he says.

Ten and a half, ten and a half, ten and a half.

When he leaves, I press the flower into the pages of my textbook. I hold it to my chest, and can't help but feel that he is near me.

One Day After

I open my eyes. My mother packs my things. She looks at me with pity and deep concern, and I cannot stomach it. I close my eyes. I remind myself to breathe. I remind myself that this is how life has always been. I tell remind myself that there should be no hole in me. I remind myself to breathe.

An hour, and we'll have you home. I nod without hearing her, drifting, one, one, one.

I open my eyes and I am in Birmingham.

Eight Days Before

My mother comes every Sunday. She says it is part of the deal. *I have decided that you may live on your own since you are almost a sophomore,* she says, but she has given her number to my housemates and has a copy of my key and it feels as if I am never alone. I hear the door open on Sunday morning, and I hold my breath. It is at times like these where I wish my father had stayed.

She has nervous laughter that is an invader. My mother lines up my pills on the kitchen windowsill. *One, two, three*, she drops them into their containers. One, one, one. I clutch the edge of the counter. Two, two, two. She shoots through me in pain under my fingernails. Three three, three. She tapes Dr. Mel's number to my refrigerator, and circles my sessions in red pen on the community calendar. I heave an embarrassed sigh; she seems to forget that I share it with four other girls. Before she makes her visit every week, they whip through the kitchen and take their alcohol and weed to their rooms.

I want to tell her about Everett, and about the eclipse, and about my found desire for so many things, but she leans into me and adjusts my clothing like a child, and I find the strength to be silent.

Three Days After

They call my house and ask me to speak at his funeral. They tell my mother that he loved me. I hear her say *thank you, but no*. She is explaining me. *She is...she whispers, she has a form of...she is very high functioning, obviously, but I don't think she could do it. She can barely communicate her own needs to me.*

She does not know that I have heard this.

I do not bring it up. I have no words for anyone but him.

One Day Before

I wake up to Everett looking at me, his head on my pillow. I think of my mother, and wonder if she was ever content like this.

This week, my mother stays away for the first time.

Twenty Two Days After

I go and sit with Dr. Mel in her office. It is so large and cold that her voice echoes. I look at her, and at her graying hair that is chopped and spiked like the boys I knew in middle school. She has deep lines like scars around her eyes and lips. I watch her pencil weave itself through the fingers of her left hand; it occasionally clicks against her silver wedding band. If she is a garden, then it is fall and the plants have died.

I do not want to talk today. I pretend that Dr. Mel is talking to someone else and that we are not the only two in the office, but she points her ques-

tions at my heart and I cannot ignore them. I dodge conversations about the boy in the blue hoodie, and about my classmates and teachers, and about him. I put my chin in my hands and press my head down so that no words will escape. I do not want to talk today.

We can sit for as long as you like, she says.

I'd like to go back to school, I say. She ignores this.

You're safe. It's okay to talk here. I meet her assault with a glare and a locked jaw. There is another long silence, and I can tell she is changing her angle and loading a larger weapon.

Lets talk about Everett, she says. His name hangs in the air like a brick suspended by a fishing line. Hearing it sends shockwaves through my body and leaves my ribcage sore. *Tell me his favorite color.* I shake my head. Seeing olive green is a hand around my neck.

He has come up a lot in our conversations. She contemplates whether or not to push me.

Did you love him? she asks. I didn't think she was allowed to ask that type of question. Sadness pushes itself against the walls of my throat. I touch the place on my chest where he had often placed his head before falling asleep. It was not empty, despite physical vacancy. I could still feel him there. The memory was a throbbing void.

It had been twenty-two days since he was taken, and twenty-seven days since we sat face to face on top of my bed spread. Twenty seven, twenty seven, twenty seven. We were cross legged, and perfectly still. The sun had been gentle that day, I remember, as it illuminated the white duvet cover and curtains. It may have been the first time I'd ever truly looked at someone; the dark skin stretched over his cheek was soft and malleable under my fingertips. He clashed with the sheets like the irises with the whites of his eyes. I thought of all of the things that his irises looked like to calm my deafening heartbeat as he brushed my hair over my shoulder with his hot fingertip.

Brown M&Ms, I thought.

He shifted closer.

Black holes.

He curled his hand around my waist.

Old pennies left in the rain.

I felt his breath on my neck, and then cheek and nose as he brushed his lips against them. And then, his lips were on mine, and it was different than

before. It was full of expectation and anticipation.

He lowered me slowly onto the bed with a hand on the back of my neck. I began to un-button his shirt with pulsing fingers. He looked down, surprised, and then back up at me. I nodded, and felt him smile against my mouth as he kissed me again.

When it was over, we laid smiling and shaking and bare. He had taken a piece of me, and I of him.

Why are you shaking? Dr. Mel asks. My eyes snap open and I am in her office again. I am as cavernous and cold as the room where I sit. As I watch the clock relinquish the last three minutes of this session, I wonder where Everett's piece of me is now, and if it is as irrecoverable as I imagine it to be.

The Day Of

Everett and I sit outside our classroom on Monday morning, and listen as the bellow echoes through campus like a universal heartbeat. The hallways are thick with noise and life, as they are every day. It is early, and people are just beginning to wipe sleep from their eyes. We are touched by the familiar scents of coffee and cold weather in passing. We watch as people oscillate; thirsty bell curves breathing each other's air.

Mrs. Redson, our economics teacher, emerges from the bathroom and smiles to Everett and me. I think about her screensaver, accidentally projected onto the whiteboard at the end of last class; a picture of her and another woman, and a small child with three teeth. Three, three.

A boy from microbiology walks down the hallway toward the girl that sits in front of me. He is working up the courage to talk to her; I have caught him looking at her before. On the other end of the hallway, there is a large group of girls in long sleeved shirts commanding a majority of the attention. They are all beautiful, and have foreign letters written on their backs. There is so much to know about these people; sometimes I wonder how we can live so close to each other and never speak. I wonder how we can stand together at crowded bus stops and in busy hallways in silence. I look at Everett and then back out at the hallway.

Suddenly, a noise like I have never heard echoes through the tight walls. It cuts; some fall to the floor and cover their heads, some freeze where they are. Everett throws his arms around me and holds me so tightly that it hurts. My spine is tense and my stomach is in my feet.

I search for the sound's source. A boy in a blue hoodie with frantic eyes stands near the stairs and holds a gun into the air. This is his warning shot.

I see him aim at the ceiling again; he is steadying himself, working up the nerve to do to us what he has done to the asbestos. In the time between gunshots, I imagine him as a robber, indiscriminately stealing lives from us to put in his black satchel.

People begin to run, tripping over each other and leaving backpacks in the hallway. Ev-erett releases me and clasps my wrist. I can see him look over his shoulder at the boy. I shake my head. He meets my eyes, as the loud sound continues like the repeated breaking of bones.

Go, he says, as he shoves me into the crowd. I am lost in the current. Among the faces is the boy from microbiology. I wonder where the girl is; I wonder if she wet, tracked upon the floor like the tears on his face. I wonder if they will ever get the chance to fall in love and have children and buy a house. I wonder where Mrs. Redson is. I wonder if the woman in the picture is her wife and I wonder if she is thinking of her child. I wonder if her child has lost a tooth yet. I wonder if she's ever been able to play tooth fairy.

I wonder what the hallway looks like, not looking back. I wonder how they'll fix that ceiling. I wonder if people will walk this hallway years after today, and feel what has hap-pened here.

I wonder where Everett has gone. I wonder if people have stayed behind like him and I wonder if I will see them again.

I wonder about the boy in the blue hoodie. I wonder about his mother.

I see a girl being carried out by her friend. A vermilion flower has bloomed and wilted in the center of her shirt. They shove past me. Everything is spinning.

And then, there is static.

I don't see Everett after that.

*

Three Hundred and Fifty Two Days Later

I have picked the red buds from my front yard and put them in a vase. I place them in the center of my dining room table and think of him, with his mind like a flower.

There are nine buds, always. One for each.

That night, I sit on my roof and speak to the moon. We have grown close. He dims and brightens like a heartbeat seen through skin.

His presence within me is loud. It has never stopped speaking.

Julia Byers



Senior

Major: Honors Creative Writing and Literature

Minor: Global Media Studies

Julia Byers is a senior in the Residential College, majoring in Honors Creative Writing & Literature with a minor in Global Media Studies. Her work has appeared in *Teen Ink* magazine, the *RC Review*, *White Ash Literary Magazine*, the *82nd Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition Collection* and the *17th* and *18th Annual Café Shapiro Anthologies*. Recently she won the Children's/Young Adult category of the *82nd Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition*, a 2014 Hopwood Underclassmen Fiction Award, the 2014 Arthur Miller Award, and an honorable mention in the *84th Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition*, among other honors. She writes for several blogs, including the college section of *The Huffington Post* and the Arts at Michigan program's *[art]seen*. Currently she runs the Chapter One Young Writers Conference, interns for the Elizabeth Kaplan Literary Agency, co-chairs U of M's Publishing Career Forum, and does the social media for Dawn Treader Book Shop. Her hobbies include Netflix and drinking too much tea.

The Things I Leave Behind

She finds me on the back porch, looking out over the scrub-grass yard and the thick, dehydrated pine trees along the edge of our property that separate us from the wilderness. Their needles rustle and crackle with every shift of the breeze, churning smoke through the air, heavy and choking. I sit at the top of the long, narrow staircase leading down into the yard with my butt planted on the porch and my feet pressed firmly against the warped wood two steps below it, my chin in my hands and my hair tickling against

the back of my neck as a line of sweat trails down my spine.

"You knew this was coming," is all she says as she walks towards me. Her sandals click against the porch and the wood creaks and shudders beneath her like the whole thing is ready to come down right this very moment, our combined weight too much for it. Mom looks at the stairs in worry as she settles herself into the spot to my right. She braces her hands against the lip of the porch rather than touch me, but her voice is smooth and soft as she repeats, "You knew this was coming, Hailey."

I don't meet her eye, instead preferring to keep my sight on the haze of fiery red and crimson stone formations jutting into the sky in the distance, just behind the cloud of smoke rising from what must be old Ms. Barlow's broken-down cabin on the other side of this stretch of forest, and I can't help but think, *No, I didn't.*

Of course I've heard the reports for ages, and Mom and Dad warned me about it when we first moved out here. Several of my schoolmates were even displaced by the burning and smoke last August, back when we were still unloading crumpled cardboard boxes into the living room and the only two people I knew in town were my parents. But this—this was unexpected. I never thought it would actually happen to our neighborhood, to us. To me.

Not when I didn't want to move to Colorado in the first place.

There's an unspoken question in the air as Mom drums her fingers once against the porch—am I angry, am I sad?—and then she stands again and, without saying another word, clicks and creaks her way back to the house. A flake of rust red paint pulls free from somewhere behind me and goes floating past on the breeze, drawing with it the mingling smells of smoke and car exhaust, barely distinguishable in this heat. They are reminders that our entire neighborhood has to evacuate; reminders that since Mom sold her minivan back in New Jersey and Dad's SUV is currently in the shop, we have to share the Andersons' Jeep; reminders that there is only enough space for me to bring one too-small duffel-bag of my things to hold on my lap as I squeeze between my parents in the Jeep's back bench-seat.

When Mom gave me the news last night at dinner, she told me I was lucky I could bring even that.

I hear the glass door slide open and close behind me, and then I am alone again here on the porch, with the sounds of my neighbors loading their cars and the smell of burning so strong all around me, coming up the mountain, that I want to gag. The edge of the first step bites into the backs of my knees, and my palms ache from holding the weight of my head for so long, but I do not move. I keep my eyes trained on the red rocks, just barely visible now behind all the smoke, and think about how they have been here for years and years and years.

It would be sunny out, if it weren't for all the smoke.

The fire will never reach us up here, anyway. We shouldn't even have to evacuate.

But still I cannot stop thinking about statistics and wind direction, and, as if to assure my fears that they truly are founded, just then the warm, dry breeze disappears behind a gust of wind coming up the mountain that makes my eyes burn from ash and heat. I can hear sirens blaring in the distance as the fire trucks weave up and down the steep mountain roads, but here they are so far away and so soft behind the sounds of my neighbors that they might as well be the family of larks that sing in the tree outside my bedroom window every morning.

The larks left last night, when the smoke started drifting up to us.

With one last glance at the brittle yellow grass of the yard far below the porch, I grab onto the painted red railing and pull myself to my feet. The railing shakes beneath my weight, the way everything shakes and creaks and cries out at you here, and then I pad loudly across the porch to the house, leaving these things behind.

In the kitchen Mom is busy making peanut butter sandwiches and filling thermoses with ice cubes and water, like wherever we're going has never heard of fast food and grocery stores, but I give her a tightlipped smile as I pass on the way to the stairs and she nods in appreciation. Up in my room, the duffel-bag lies small and empty on my unmade bed, its dark navy fabric standing out in contrast against my floral comforter—a swirl of yellows and reds and greens.

I have to leave the comforter behind. My parents got it for me as part of their compromise for moving; they made me drive away from my hometown's flat streets and their salty fresh smell of the ocean, where the humidity was almost as heavy as the beach towels, encompassing you like a hug—and in turn I got a television in my bedroom, a slightly higher allowance, and the floral comforter. It's one of those super-expensive designer comforters, straight from the fancy home decorating catalogue Mom always gets in the mail and I leaf through over breakfast. It's light as a cloud and warm as the sun.

It's the least of the things I must leave behind.

I turn away from the duffel bag, unwilling to fully acknowledge its presence yet, and find myself face to face with the thing that will be the most difficult: Grandpa's rocking chair. It's as scuffed and beaten up as the porch out back, and squeaks like fingernails against a chalkboard when you lean to the left, but it's also smooth and sturdy and well-loved. Grandpa built it for my grandmother, who died long before I was born, back when she was expect-

ing my aunt Claire. And despite how many years it's been since then, and how many years it's been since my grandfather gave in to the cancer and I somehow inherited the chair out of all my aunts and uncles and cousins, every baby in my family has still been rocked in it at one point or another, warm in a relative's arms.

It takes far too much effort to step towards the rocking chair and run my fingers over its soft, worn armrests. It takes so much effort I want to collapse—to curl up in the chair and let the whole world burn down around me, rather than leave it behind.

Instead I let myself slide back into the seat, careful to angle my weight towards the right side rather than the left, and look around my little Colorado bedroom, thinking and picking and choosing what to bring and what to give up. There are plaques from making honor roll every year since kindergarten; pictures of Kelly and Sarah and I, so many of them their frames rest right up next to each other, across the entire space above my desk—digging for hidden treasure on the beach out behind Sarah's house when we were seven, and eating ice cream on the Stevenson Park playground when we were twelve, and posing in my backyard for pictures, arms looped around one another with braces glinting in the dying rays of the sun, the evening of the homecoming dance freshman year.

All of that gets left behind. I can only bring the bare essentials: a few pairs of shorts, some t-shirts and sweaters, my running shoes and the sandals Kelly bought me at the street fair the Friday before I left New Jersey, already almost as worn out as Grandpa's rocking chair, and I've only had them for a year.

I force myself out of the chair and begin to pack, at first throwing clothes into the duffel-bag haphazard, and then going back and folding them neatly, lining the bag's corners and pushing socks and underwear into its creases. In the end, when there is absolutely no more space left in the bag and the sun is beginning to sink down below the treetops, sending trails of grapefruit-colored light through the window and across my face, my room somehow looks even fuller than before, instead of emptier.

It is all full up with everything I took so much care to choose and wrap and put gently into boxes, to carry across the country and into this new life; a life that I did not choose but chose to make the best of. It is full with everything I've already chosen once—isn't that enough?—and now those things must be left behind.

I feel the need to touch everything before I leave. The dresser, my desk, the pictures on the walls. I have to give it all at least a taste of being remembered. Just in case. Just in case.

Last but not least I sit down in the rocking chair, with its dry, hard wood

against my back and my toes just barely brushing against the carpet. I close my eyes and pray for everything to be okay. I pray that the fire doesn't reach us and the smoke doesn't get too bad. I pray that the memories I already picked and chose and held so close to me all the way from the ocean to the mountains do not get reduced to ash.

And for just a moment—just an instant—as my mind drifts to all that lies before me instead of everything that has fallen behind, it feels as if someone wraps their arms around me; like I am right beside my ocean. My lungs squeeze in on themselves as my breath shudders out of my chest, and the tears slide down my cheeks, slick and warm against my skin, making me shiver despite the temperature.

"Hailey?" Mom calls from somewhere else in the house, her voice echoing over and over and over again like I will never stop hearing it ringing in my ears. "Hailey, it's time to go!"

The same words she said this time last year, when I had to pull myself away from Sarah and Kelly's pressing hugs and hiccupping words.

I open my eyes, brush the moisture away with the back of my hand, and lean to the left for old time's sake, letting the screech of the rocking chair fill the air, louder than my neighbors' voices on the street or the sirens blaring down the mountain. I take a breath. When I stand and heave the duffel-bag onto my shoulder off the unmade bed, I walk out of my room without another glance back.

The first moment outside, as the cooler air of the house is replaced with the blindingly hot air of a Colorado summer, I do not smell the dry, dead scent of fire, but instead the living and breathing and constantly moving scent of the ocean, and it is this that allows me to take one step, and then two and then three and then four, away from my house and away from the memories.

Sabrina Deutsch



Sophomore

Major: Biopsychology, Cognition, Neuroscience

Minor: Creative Writing

I think that I began to write creatively long before I actually put pen to paper. It began as a fascination with words, fueled by a love of reading. I would find myself toying with syntax, agonizing over flow. Growing up with three sisters, and especially in being the introvert among them, I developed an appreciation for human interaction that has influenced my writing tremendously.

Glass

We are the once-deaf and her silent interpreter. The one who smiles for she is too ignorant to indulge in any other vice, and the all-too-aware, voluntary mute. We dance around the corners of a house robbed of its homely comforts by lofty ceilings and space enough to support the reclusion of all six occupants. Like unforgiving vultures, we prey on each other's flaws. As the one whose ears still ring with the deafness that once resided there speaks a garbled language of mispronunciation, her miserly companion taunts her. We are bound by blood and circumstances, forced to reconcile differences because each of us is indispensable to the other. While the young and ignorant idolizes her elder of only slight who has been prematurely embroiled with skepticism, her efforts are returned with resentment.

Our exercise-studio turned bedroom lies in the farthest reaches of the house. Mirrors still line the walls, reflecting two twin beds dressed with fairy

comforters amid a sea of Mary's little lamb wallpaper. The center of the house, like a bellowing rotunda, boasts carved wood ceilings and a chandelier so high our father, in all his impiety, prays that the lights will never burn out. Our mother, donning the garb of the widow she will soon become, in a portrait that hangs ominously above the baby grand, has an eye for antiques and the macabre. Porcelain dolls and taxidermy birds. A pair of glass eyes follows you in each room of the house as skeleton key wind-chimes rattle in the distance.

We are engrossed in our imaginations, spending days in the land of the lifeless — cold, plastic, uni-emotional representations of ourselves — or traipsing through the wooded yard. We pursue activities our hyper-cautious mother has deemed safe, concocting nature stews and scraping paper-thin skin in episodes of boyish revolt. As darkness encroaches, we toy with the duality of perspectives afforded by twice-washed windows, choosing to stare either at ourselves or the world of pine that lay beyond them. Nights are spent cocooned in blankets, to protect us from the floor that turns to molten lava when the lights are switched off, musing about the possibility of shattered mirrors, a fire that would trap us too far from the others, and the man who undoubtedly resides in our closet.

As the sound of a verbal war hums behind doors as of yet still closed, an insatiable toddler prowls about the house, sure to meet her demise at the hand of waxed wooden staircases or banisters whose beams are too far apart. Meanwhile, a slender half-wit clinging to her fading guise of childhood, charged with watching the bumbling fool, parades boys up the stairs that do not creak. The cacophony is exchanged for familiar sounds of a revving car engine and hushed sobs. We press our cheeks to the cool stucco wall, and thread knobby knees through gaps in a staircase no longer up to code, listening. As our world deteriorates around us, we take comfort in the routine of which we have been guaranteed. At five-thirty, once we have recomposed ourselves, the aroma of dinner will recoil against the rafters, a car will rumble down the winding drive, and the front door will shut softly as if in denial of the fact that it had ever been opened.

Mama lithe and lovely looks off with lifeless stare, for the life that glares back at her weighs heavy on her tender heart. We drum at the seams of our cotton dresses as we shuffle, bare feet on cool tile, through the battlegrounds of her despair. As we pile into our seats of unspoken assignment, Dad speaks in the voice of reconciliation. The one he uses between the fits — that beguiling cadence elusive of its true power. And so we sit, entranced, at the table mammoth in comparison to our small bodies. And mama watches, between the toddler's cries, hopeful, as she toys with the prospect of escape from her picture perfect facade.

May we be excused? Clash and clatter as dishes pile high, compliments to our dear chef, though we will not dare help with cleanup. Instead we tote,

like ducks in a line, behind trouble himself, as he rushes off to remove his tie. The allegiance, unsaid, like a slap to our anguished matriarch.

We reconcile fights for affection through glares received with whines. Through sideways glances and pinches at the wrist. Fairness forgone, we pull rank. The allure of strong will surpasses any inclination to sympathize with the one who cannot hear, and dad does not conceal his favoritism.

Though we bicker, we are fluid where havoc reigns. It is the heart of the science dad throws in the faces of his forefathers — oil may not mix with water, but blood does. As in all things separate but equal, one cannot suffice without the other. Where anguish clenches vocal chords into submission, the deaf cannot hear a quiver in the voice.

When mama approaches, polished toes dancing uneasily across grandpa's prized cherry wood floors, we'll retreat once more. To the land of mirrors and fairy dust, and papier-mâché clowns hanging from the ceiling vent. And mama will follow, with disavowal of our favoritism, to tickle air-bloated bellies and kiss purple eyelids. And the door will shut, in those far-reaches of the house, where the hum of a near-silent war can drum on once more.

Margot Draycott



Freshman

Major: Undecided

Margot Draycott is a freshman in the Residential College from Brooklyn, New York. She has very little idea what she will major in and has dabbled in such topics as cognitive science, history of American blues, and mandarin. Oh, and poetry.

Rain, or Ammo, or The Toast is Burned

First the milk comes down,
patters the roofs, whites the street
and pools in the gutter.

Then notebooks and pens,
xylophones, yo-yos, zebras.

The garter straps and belt buckles,
sport socks, Xanax, Advil.

The rosaries, bibles,
loquets and shrines.

The peppermints, Zippo's, and Lucky Strikes.

All of the best china, saucer sets,
sherry glasses and flutes.
The silver comes down. Ting ting clang.

Every urn breaks.

The bureau, chaise longue,
lamps, desks, drawers,
rocking chair, love seat,
and piano.

Oh, and pennies, dimes, silver dollars,
Turkish Lira and American twenties.

One inch of white checks
flutters
and rests on the city.

Untitled

Are you gone, taken flight
do you spread yourself now
between craters on Mars
are you stripped down, charred
skin peeled back to nothing
round the bend, tied up
in your clothesline
do you even know how to breathe
why won't you respond
are your eyes blown out
sockets, mind stuffed
with cotton, do you think yourself
a high priestess enrobed
can't you just empty out
your sloshing vessels and go on
don't you realize it's futile
your offense
too great and that memorycloset
too deep too cramped
do you see yourself weak
and prostrate before
The Seeping Altar of Apology?
(To apologize turn to p. 233, otherwise, read on.)

Untitled

I.

Sing to me at dawn in blue infancy.

Weave in the little ones,
washed hair and braids down backs,
egg salad, pumpernickel, slivered apple.
Kisses in the morning
red on mamas lips
red on the apple
red in the schoolyard.

Sing the time of the train, and the light.
Speckled softly in the morning,
Dana with the paper, Johnnie with his tie.
Prompt on the platform
stalk straight backed
tight laced suit and tied
to Wall Street.

Laurel wreaths round their temples,
sickly fruit falls down their shoulders.

II.

Sing to me long and sweet on the 5:30.
Leaving midtown, that golden canyonland
and oh, the light in the winter
cuts faces down sideways.

Sing to me of the holidays,
when men give pears to their wives.

Sing to me of the family,
the mother, the father, and his lover,
of bedtime stories,
Butcher, Baker, Candlestick maker.

Sing to me of the cold and the carnal
and the blood and heat
pent up indoors.

Sing to me in the fray of the party of

jewel tones with tartan and nacr .
Family is there, all is wrapped up,
gift boxes and things obscured.

Sing to me of champagne embrace in the hallway.
Children watch from the piano room to see
glass necks and black hosed calves,
velvet laughter bunch over the crowd,
the women's arched backs and uplifted chins,
and the lush, juicy sap
slipping down between their breasts.

Untitled

July vibrated in my ears, a street fiesta.
Pushed me along in the crowd,
Stuck to me in sweat, tacky,
Pulled like some stone patron saint.

July jostled my thighs on a lawn mower,
The beat of the heat wave
Ululating. Faster.

I do laps on sprawling lawns
Thereback thereback thereback.

One hand on the gas pump nozzle
Other works the handle.
Back and forth back and forth back and forth.
Like a rattlesnake, no head.
Pipe is rising up alive.

At once coming back at me like water.
Out from the pit of the machine.
Calming peppermint and cotton candy soaking clothes.
Fumes penetrating the bottom of my lungs.
Like snow. Like a Michigan winter. Like 5 am swim practice.
Waterline rising feet to knees to thighs and
hips to waist to chest to arms up

Looking up at the trees. Like towers, the tallest things in sight.
Boughs over me, protective like fathers.
I could take flight.

Karen Duan



Junior

Major: Architecture

Karen Duan is a junior in the architecture school and a creative writing minor. Her favorite things include Studio Ghibli postcards, tiny packages, and truffles. In her free time, she purchases more pens than she'll ever need.

BEFORE WE WERE TIGER WOMEN

We were all girls with black hair. We had small angled feet and ate vegetables we did not know the English names of.

We were not born in China.

We were mostly born in hospitals, screaming in skinny bundles of flesh. We were mostly born underweight, with a c-section and a swirl of wet black hair on our heads. Some of us were born jaundiced, our eyes squeezed shut for days. Our mothers cried as they held our yellow bodies. Our doctors placed us under a sun lamp, and our mothers fed us milk from a bottle, until our eyes cleared from yellow to green to white, finally squinting open to the light.

We grew up quickly. We said our first words, *ma! ba!*, and our mothers clapped and cried. And then we were talking. *Ràng wǒ! Ràng wǒ! Wǒ lái! Wǒ lái!* The mandarin poured out of us, rolling off our lips in precise, high-pitched articulations. Soon, we were toddling behind our mothers, chattering and chirping as we passed the TV whose English words we did not understand;

We did not understand *American*. We did not understand the white kids who stomped barefoot across the grass; we did not understand the starry flag or stringy cheese or jumping rope, twisting in the wind.

What we understood was this:

The wooden spoon that scooped our earwax. The square sheets of wonton skin our mothers snipped in quarters. The sizzle of green onions against oil.

On the first day of school, we did not understand the yellow bus or "*a is for apple*" or "*b is for boy*." On the first day of school, we cried and kept crying, and the white kids asked us, "*why?*" And at the end of the month, Mrs. Fulton or Ms. Copes or Mrs. Kingston pulled our mothers aside and asked, *would they consider ESL?*

They would not. *She was born here*, they said. *Here*.

So we cried and kept crying. Every morning, we boarded the yellow bus. Our mothers waved from the sidewalk, and we scrambled around in our sticky seats to watch until they faded to a dot, and then a speck, and then nothing.

We came home weary, the English dribbling from our lips. Some of us hated the alphabet. Some of us tore out all the pages of "My Little Caterpillar" and "Dinorella" until the school banned us for a week. Some of us hit the white children. Some of us repeated kindergarten, twice.

But sooner or later, we all learned the alphabet. We all recited the pledge of allegiance every morning at 8:30 AM, the words stretched our mouths in strange shapes. We were surprised at how fast we learned them.

How fast we put our hands over our hearts, how fast we learned about frosting, sloppy Joes with white buns, monkey bars, Christopher Columbus, glitter glue.

We came home, suddenly spewing our knowledge; our mandarin, rolled up and forgotten.

"*Māmā!! Wǒ yào hash browns!*"

"*Mā, why can't we mǎi ketchup?*"

"*Mā, this seaweed tastes gross.*"

"*Mom, can I just have the spaghetti?*"

At school, our teachers paused at our names. Our white friends asked us, *how do you say it? Can you say it again?* And again and again we told them; until our lips grew weary and our tempers snapped, and finally we

gave in, sighing. *Yeah*, we told them. *Close enough*. And we let our white friends rename us.

Qianchi became *Chin-chee*.

Yue became *Yoo-ee*.

Zibo became *Zee-bow*.

At first, we hated our new names and their awkward, gangly gait. But after hours and then days and then months, we were surprised at how fast we absorbed them. How natural "*zee-bow*" became. How little we thought of the roots of our names, until our mothers came calling us *Zibo! Zibo!* and only then, did we remember where we came from.

Where we came from, we ate bok choy. We ate lotus root and steamed pork buns. We ate sticky rice wrapped in boiled bamboo leaves, then pressed into triangular chunks. We mashed garlic with a pestle for our mothers. We folded dumplings into clumsy pouches.

But when we brought our bok choy to school, the leaves clung to our tupperware in slimy, shameful clumps. And even as we ate behind the wall of our lunch box, our white friends could not stop from wrinkling their noses. *Ew*, they told us. *What is that smell?* When we revealed the bok choy, with the greens puddled in a wad, they pursed their lips. *No offense*, they told us, *but that looks like barf*.

Some of us laughed in response. *Yea*, we said too loud. When the bell rang, we crossed the cafeteria to the trashcans. We slid the vegetables our mothers woke at 6 AM to stir down the gaping void. When we came back home, our stomachs empty and growling, we accused our mothers. *Why can't you pack me NORMAL food?* We jeered at them. And instead of reprimanding us; instead of rebuking our cheeky mouths, our mothers asked us, *but what do your friends bring for lunch?*

The next week, we came to school with plastic containers of wet spaghetti. Then dry wheat sandwiches with too much mustard. Then chicken soup that dried crusty on our lips. We ate slowly, in the open. But the food never seemed to reach our stomachs.

Some of us didn't respond at all. We simply sat there, eyes lowered on the bok choy, swimming in its shiny oils. The next day, we moved to the other side of the table. The next week, we moved to a different table, one with significantly more Asians. At lunch, we ate loudly, sharing often. But whenever the white boys crossed our table to the hot lunch line, they would leer at us. *Don't get too close*, they laughed, *no one wants yellow fever*. Then we fell quiet. We all fell quiet when the white boys wielded their mouths full of Cheeto dust and swear words.

Some of us snapped our heads back up from our lunch. We met the eyes of our white friends, blazing. *It's Chinese food*, we spit at them. Then we swiped our lunch box, glass container and all, and stalked outside. When we returned, we could see the fear in their eyes. *Hey*, they twittered. *Hey I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that*. We paused for a moment, high off of power. Then we gave in. *It's okay*, we told them. *Just don't make fun of my culture*.

We came home crowing to our mothers. We were triumphant; valiant nobles of the scroll paintings and lucky cats that decorated our kitchen. But when we recounted the moment to our mothers, they did not applaud us. They only scrubbed the silver pot harder, and asked us, *ai yōu hái zi, nǐ méi shuō de tài hèn? Oh honey, weren't you a little too mean?*

At school, we had the blackest hair. At school, our white friends asked us, *were you born in Japan?* three times throughout the year. At school, our teachers asked us *which part of China are you from?* And we sheepishly pointed to the class map, *here*. Even though we no longer spoke mandarin. Even though we had not visited the country in years. Even though we were born on this soil, we said, *here*.

And suddenly, all our white friends demanded us to say their names in Chinese, and all the Chinaman jokes began with *no offense*, and two of our favorite white friends asked us, *why are your eyes so small?*

We did not think our eyes were small. But when we looked in the mirror, suddenly, our eyes were small.

And then we were scrawling CVS eyeliner on our waterlines, trading saggy Hanes panties for hipuggers. When we bled for the first time, we washed our hipuggers in the sink, and the water clouded particle red. We hung our undies to dry until they became dry, crackable with unrinsed soap.

We'd become pubescent. Hair sprouted in clumsy patches on our bodies. It veiled us in soft plumes all over our arms, and then our legs, and then above our lips and between our legs.

Some of us grew up with hair like bristles, true black and spiky to touch. Some of us grew up with hair like down, screening our bodies in the finest grain of fur. Some of us grew up with no hairs, and how we *loathed* them. How we envied the pure nude of their legs.

All of us hated the black hairs. We detested their garish display. We couldn't stand how they rendered us feral. We begged our mothers to buy us razors. To buy us cream that would foam on our skin; we couldn't wait to put the blades to our bodies.

But when we asked our mothers, they refused.

In class, our white friends outed the hairs. And even as we sat with our

legs crossed or with our calves curled under the chair, they asked us, *why don't you shave?* And we watched them watch our hairs in amazed and palpable disgust.

We came home to our mothers, enraged. We could not bear to look at the hairs. We could not bear to carry their shame. Some of us lashed out in anger, bitter to blame. *Why are you so old-fashioned?* We screamed at our mothers. *This isn't China. Everyone else does it.* But our mothers only chopped the scallions finer, and asked us, *So? Are you everyone else?*

Some of us bought razors while with friends. We plunked the packages in our carts, and when we reached the cashier, we slid the money our mothers gave us across the counter. At home, we hid the razors at the bottom of our sock drawer. We scurried to and from the bathroom every week, and we beat the black hairs down again and again and again. We did not feel sorry.

When our mothers finally exposed us, their faces crumpled with betrayal. We seized their moment of weakness to blame them. *It's YOUR fault for not letting me do it,* we told them. *YOU forced me to hide it.*

Still some of us wore pants far into the sunny season. And some of us obeyed our mothers. We bore our black hairs all year-round. At practice, we stretched with our legs cast over the sunlit blacktop, our bristles splayed for the world to see. And whenever we stretched next to Maranda Collins, she would sigh, *I need to shave,* even though her legs were newborn smooth, even though we knew she was not talking about herself at all.

Above all, we begged our mothers again. Whenever we shopped at Kroger, whenever we opened the orthodontist's jingling door, whenever we ate dinner at our local dim sum restaurant, we pointed to the white girls and their freshly shaved legs. *See?* We told our mothers. *You're the only one who doesn't let me do it.*

At dinner, we repeated, *you're the only one who doesn't let me do it.* In the doctor's office, we repeated, In the park and in the art museum and in the farmer's market, we repeated, until finally, we broke our mothers. They gave in, murmuring, *hảo ba, hảo ba. Okay.*

And we pressed the blades to our bodies.

But the hair did not stop at our legs. And even as we tried to contain it, we could not keep it from blooming above our lips and between our legs.

It followed us to cross country practice, then to debate club, then to our orchestra's performance of the pledge of allegiance at our first football game, and then to our first dances.

On the afternoon of our first dance, we coated our lashes in \$4.97 mascara. We shaved our legs fastidiously. At night, we filed into the star-

less cafeteria, and we skirted past tables pushed against the wall. When the music came booming, we swayed our hips in polite and calculated motions. We jumped in closed-off circles with our white friends. And then we heard it. The white boys in the corner whispering, *look. There's mustache girl.*

And then we were sitting in our neighbor's house with their kids in our laps, as they turned and asked, *why do you have a mustache?* And in the Analysis AC class we were not excelling in, our white friends solved proofs beside us, only pausing to ogle our upper lips and ask, *do you ever tweeze?*

Then we were back in Meijer, suddenly scouring the beauty aisle for white chemicals that would froth on our upper lips. "EXTREME STRENGTH CREME HAIR BLEACH" read the packages that we clutched in our hands. At home, we ripped open our purchase with the bathroom door locked. Then we squeezed the white paste on the plastic plate. We poured in the clear liquid. We tapped in the white powder. And we smeared the formula on our upper lips.

But the bleach only seared our skin, drying in curdled clots across our lips. When we washed it off, our skin had burned in swollen patches, spank-red and twitching. Our hairs had mottled half-black, half-blonde, shining in unpredictable shades.

So we applied the formula again. And again. Week by week, we bleached the stubborn hairs; until finally we beat them into flaxen strands, tame and indiscernible in the light.

At home, we wore double eyelid tape. Every morning, we applied the clear strips with tweezers. Then we blinked, furiously, as our eyelids morphed into the kind we saw in the magazines in a silver basket by our toilet. We wanted the huge Western lids in the Gucci ads, so that when we laughed, our white friends would never ask us *are your eyes even open?* again.

At home, we pressed ice packs to our eyes. We choked our flimsy lashes in a curler, until the metal singed our skin. And even after the ice swelled our lids into a fat, puffy red, we remained hopeful. We were desperate for white girl eyes.

At home, we lived by our mother's rules. Every morning, we ate dried jujubes. We drank a bowl of soybean milk. We ate hardboiled eggs heated in the microwave. We drank milk simmered warm over the oven. Our mothers banned everything cold. When we grabbed yogurt from the fridge, we doused the carton in hot water before eating.

There were other rules, too; words our mothers repeated daily. *Xǐ jiǎo. Wash your feet. Chuān tuō xié. Wear slippers. Shēn tǐ zuì zhòng yào. Your body takes priority over everything.* And so every night, we doused our

feet in hot water. We soaked our toes in a plastic tub, and the residue of our socks floated off in wispy chunks. We never walked around the house barefoot. In the winter, we wore booties. In the summer, we wore bamboo slippers. By the time some of us walked barefoot from the pool to the locker, our feet had grown so soft and tender, even the tiles of the deck wounded us. And while our white neighbors screamed barefoot on the playground woodchips, we could not set foot on the sidewalk before cringing.

We'd been sheltered. Some of us would remain virgins until our late-twenties. Some of us would refrain from vulgar language long into our teens, such that when a white boy called us *that Asian girl with no tits*, we shrank back, doubly afraid and doubly wounded. Some of us swore for the first time at age fifteen in a fight with our mothers. *You BITCH*, we shrieked at them. They would learn the word instantly, with no need of definition.

For the most part, we listened to our mothers. When we bled our monthly blood, we did not eat ice cream. We did not go swimming or drink milk or exercise around the house. Instead, we ate extra jujubes. We drank brown sugar dissolved in hot water. We wore pads.

But when we approached our mothers with tampons or a tub of Breyers, we were met with refusal. *But why?* we asked them. *All the girls on the swim team use tampons. And Abbie Balmer eats ice cream for breakfast.* But our mothers simply shook their heads. *Asian people and white people are different, they told us. We're different. Our bodies are different.*

Instead, they took us overseas every three or four years. They applied for Chinese VISAs, and took photos of us unsmiling against a white wall. Then we shuttled across the ocean for thirteen hours in chafing plane seats with the AC turned too cold.

When we finally wobbled off the plane, we felt acutely foreign. And while our aunts and uncles jabbered endlessly, we could only cobble together five-word answers to their questions. We could not barter with the street vendors, who sold soup poured in a plastic bag; we could not ask them *how much is this?* or *why not cheaper?* or *can I try that?* In the markets, in the cabs, in the grocery stores, we would not speak for fear of exposing ourselves. We would not wear any of the American thin-strapped shirts we'd packed, once we'd seen all the Chinese girls with their shoulders neatly clothed. We would not hug openly, after we'd embraced the children of our mother's colleagues, and they'd tensed in sharp rejection.

We felt rejected by the country. We could not digest its water, which came in cylindrical tubs. And after we drank for two days, we had diarrhea for two weeks. The liquid bogged us nonstop, such that when we had to relieve ourselves, we could not find bathrooms. We could not find public stalls or even urinals. Rather, we ran behind dog sheds or into bushes with an umbrella to block our bladders. When we finally stumbled upon toilets,

they were at once filthy and crowded; and women with deep, inset faces demanded coins before we entered. So we paid and inched inside, only to find stalls with wire trashcans and little tubs dug into the ground, upon which we would squat over and grunt. And when we came running back to our aunts, away from the bathrooms without soap or running water or paper, they only laughed and told us, *ai ya, ni zen me mei dai zhi? oh honey, why didn't you bring your own toilet paper?*

We could not understand our mothers' city. We could not understand the crowds of pot-bellied men or women with rubber shoes and saggy pants. We could not understand the old men who played mah-jong shirtless in the street. We could not understand the buses, which our aunts pushed us onto until we stood with our noses bumping the bellies of forty-year-old men. We could not understand plates of pig hearts or pig tongues or pig feet; dishes of cow stomach seasoned in parsley or fish eyes drenched in soup; we could not understand the Chinese. How they washed their clothes in plastic tubs on the sidewalk. How they threw their trash in a filmy plastic bag. How they named their middle schools by number: 8, 56, 432.

But we saw girls with hair-veiled legs. And once, when our mothers bought a ceramic pot from the basement market, the bluest one from hundreds stacked on shelves and hung from ceilings, we saw the girl who wrapped our pot. She could not have been older than us, perhaps sixteen. And when she raised her arm to lash the string around the rim, we could not miss it: the patch of bush-black hair beneath her arms.

We flew back with our mothers after one or two-and-a-half months. Then school began again. We baked treats with our white friends. We mixed frosting in pastel orange and pale blue. We dragged spirals on our cookies with a spoon, and our white friends gave us their cookies and said, *let the Asian do it*. They gave us geisha makeovers. *Like Mulan*, they told us. We did not bother to correct them. Instead, we began to wear eyeshadow. We drew in our eyebrows with a thick and smudgy pencil. We blotted concealer on our acne-studded cheeks, and we drew in our own double lids in black eyeliner. We amassed our own monolid aesthetic. We threw away our Western magazines.

Then we ventured into our local Asian markets. We walked into Tsai Grocery. Or One Wei Super-Market. Or 9 Dragon Mart or Huang Cheng Asia City Market. Every time we passed through the automatic door, the bell would jingle and a sensor would set off a robotic *ding - dong* in two clean and evenly spaced beats. Then we were met with all the smells of our summers spent overseas with our mothers. The Chinese streets crowded with metal carts of freshly sliced fish, their bloody scraps littered around the butcher's feet. There were blankets arrayed with lychees and rubber shoes sold straight off the dusty ground. There were wagons of watermelon and baskets of dragon-fruit, and stray dogs weaving in and out of it all.

Each grocery store had a peculiar scent. We could not name it, but sometimes, we could pick out its components. There might be the musty odor of dried mushrooms. Or the stench of frogs piled in a glass tank. Or better yet, the deep aroma of a whole aisle of soy sauce bottles and the sharp whiff of curry powder in a box.

We left with bags of barbeque duck-flavored chips. Rabbit-shaped creme wafers. White chocolate, nut-dusted pocky and tomato-flavored crackers. We left with a stack of magazines in the Chinese characters we could no longer fully understand; we left with a paper box of pens with .15 mm ink and patterns of black puffy sheep.

In the meantime, we shed puberty. Our breasts filled in small and earnest. Our nipples hardened into buds. And the hair between our legs continued to fill in, full and mysteriously curly.

At school, we wore makeup everyday. We smeared our lids in oil-based eyeshadow. We tweezed our chin hairs, and the stray hair on our cheek. We bought strapless bras and thongs that cinched between our legs, which we wore despite their discomfort.

Then at school, the white boys who scorned us began to pursue us. They messaged us on our cellphones. They told us, *hey girl, I miss you*, even though we had not spoken since ninth grade art, when they asked us, *DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?* over and over, until the teacher dismissed them from class.

And yet, we could not deny the soft blush of our cheeks or the infantile joy of validation. So we played amateur blasé. We played hard-to-get, but not *too* hard-to-get. We played wait-at-least-two-hours-to-text-back, even when our fingers itched with impatience. And we swelled in soft triumph: that we had tempted the boys who had once rebuffed us.

At school, we rose in prowess. We giggled until the teachers told us, *shh*. We told our mothers to *SHUT UP* and *just stop talking to me?* more times in a month than we had in a year. And when our mothers still drove us to practice, we hurriedly left the car, waving them along. *Bye*, we said hastily. *Bye, bye*.

At school, we were drunk off attention. We were new and glowing, with all our unopened snapchats piled like presents. And in the fall, we were truly drunk, truly drinking at our first parties with our first shots of alcohol, with our white boys and white friends in one basement in a parentless house.

But when we swallowed, the liquid scorched our throats, and we only drank enough to fizzle. Still we floated from room to room, collecting compliments from white boys like coins. There were white boys who called us *beautiful*, white boys who were branded with *yellow fever* after flying through

several of us per year. There were white boys who called us *sexy* and *cute*, white boys latched onto us on our way to class. And there were white boys who called us *exotic* with their lips pressed to our ears, their breath hot and acrid. And this too, we assumed a compliment.

At school, some of us began to date them. They drove to our houses in silver cars and beeped at our front doors. We came out, flushed and jogging, with our mothers peeking through the blinds.

At dinner, our mothers fiddled with their edamame, as they asked us, *zhǐ shì péng yǒu?* *Just friends?* with their voices lowered into their food. *Yea*, we told them. *Friends.*

Some of us remained true to our words. We dated our white boys for a week, before they dumped us, claiming, *look, it's not going to work.* Some of us dated our white boys for six months, before we snapped at them for canoodling with Maranda Collins. *Are you angry?* they asked us, as we stalked past them with our sports bags. *No, I'm not angry,* we said, tight-lipped and fuming. Then we boarded the bus for our away games, the door wheezing shut in their faces. At night, we texted them haphazard apologies. But they only replied with curt words, finally admitting, *it's over.*

And then there were white boys who became our monthly hangouts. And then our weekly date nights. And then our dates to prom, in our \$120 dresses and \$59 curled buns, with their hands wrapped around our waists, our families pressed together in pre-posed photos.

These were the white boys who took our virginity. Who took us in their family study room, on the futon with the blinds drawn shoddily shut, the condom quivering in warbled light. These were the white boys who took us in Rory Norris' bathroom on the day after graduation, their breath sour and thick; these were the white boys who took us in the narrow bed of our college dorm on the first week of school; these were the white boys who took us in the community lounge, before a girl with a flat face and freckles walked in and squeaked, *oh my gosh — sorry!*

Either way, we all began to collect condoms. We all kept them buried under bundles of calculators and binders and battery packs. We grabbed them, chastised, from glass bowls in front of sex-ed groups. We bought them, pointing briskly at the yellow packages hanging high behind the cash register. *The trojans?* asked the register, brow raised. *Yes*, we said, agitated. *Yes, those.* We checked in on them, periodically, reassuring ourselves that they had not revealed themselves.

But when we moved home for summer break, or for our first Christmas after five months apart, our mothers called us to the bedrooms, their voices cloying and soft. *Honey, ni guo lai. Guo lai, mama xiang gen ni jiang jiang hua. Honey, come here. Come here, Mom wants to talk to you.*

What? We warbled. *Why?* Then we pattered into their bedrooms. And there sat our mothers on the edge of their king-sized bed, with a small packet like candy on their laps. Of course, we knew what it was. We'd known from the second they'd come beckoning us honey, honey, in that voice reserved for crises. And this was a crisis: the emptied drawer in the corner of the bedroom, the other condoms scattered across the floor like pebbles.

We could not contain our mortification. We could not keep the blood from draining down our faces, as our mothers asked us, *ni zhi dao zhe shi shen me? Do you know what this is?*

In panic, we took their lifeline immediately. *No*, we whispered. Then louder, *no. What is it?*

It was the right thing to say. The relief washed over their faces at once. Then came a soft chuckle of nervous release, as if the whole room had given in and sighed one long, unrestrained breath.

Of course, They said. *Of course, I knew. How could she — how could my honey — how could she know what this is?*

We nodded, wilting, wincing. Our mothers went on, stumbling through their first lessons about sex and love. *This is for men*, they told us, cinching the condom between their fingers. *During that time, they put this on their — thing*, they told us. *Now, this is good. This is a chance for us to talk about this. We've never talked about this before, have we? Listen: never follow a boy to his bedroom. If a boy wants to take you to his room, ask him: why don't we watch a movie? Why don't we stay in the community lounge? Anywhere is fine, as long as there are people*, they told us. *Boys and girls can't control themselves around each other*, they told us. *They can't. So promise me, before we marry, we won't do this kind of thing*. We promised. Then they released us, as they knelt to sweep the remaining condoms. *I'll take care of these*, they said.

We darted out of the room.

At dinner, we tread around them carefully. We offered to wash the dishes, and then to salt the radishes. We washed our hands compulsively. And yet, we could not shake the image of our mothers, stooped on the carpet floor, collecting tiny packets in the breadth of their arms. We could not forget the sight of them, twittering before us as they repeated, *of course, of course*.

At night, we came to find them. We hopped up the stairs two at a time. We bounded through their bedrooms, and pressed our faces up to the bathroom door, before we retracted, suddenly chastised at what we saw:

We saw our mothers, in saggy undies and cotton undershirts with the sleeves rolled up. We saw our mothers with their backs hunched and their

bottoms, resting on a child's stepping stool. We saw our mothers with their soft and aging bodies and for a moment, we saw their legs, completely naked, with all the purple veins and sparse hairs exposed. Then their feet, small and angled, submerged in a tub of water, now cloudy with the residue of socks. And for a moment, we could almost hear them repeating those words we held as our childhood mantra: *xi jiǎo. Wash your feet. Chuān tuō xié. Wear slippers. Shēn tǐ zuì zhòng yào. Your body takes priority over everything.*

Then we re-clasped the bathroom door, and padded back downstairs.

Laura Dzubay



Freshman
Major: English

Laura Dzubay is a freshman planning to major in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Her work has previously appeared in *Elan Literary Magazine*, and within the past two years has won four National Medals from the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. She loves writing, playing the guitar, and hiking, and she is from Bloomington, Indiana.

Classic Role Models

I bet even Persephone smiles on occasion. Eternity is too long to hop those meadows as a secret queen (ridiculous!), and never once crack a smile, even if it's just out of insanity. Probably she has swept ashes from so many floors, folded too many of Hades' linens. Ridiculous! Wouldn't You? Our good friend Daphne has stood for so long, solid and stern, but we must give her credit for the times she's reached up, leaves trailing, singing the wind. Even Ophelia surely sent up a giggle of bubbles, just once in her hysteria, before the water pulled her under.

The painters and scholars are kinder of course than I am. They don't make light of these figures, oh no, they obsess. In Ophelia there is nothing but madness and tragedy; in Persephone, hardness and woe. But what ever kept them sane all these years? –And what kept them alive? And where are the Portias in the hearts of men, hidden in clouds

of ill adoration? Where is the Lady Artemis with her gold-crested bow? I too am a tree decked with laurels, and sometimes I cry and I fear for my very spirit drowning. But I like to think I am also an Atalanta, even when Hamlet leaves me and Hades swallows me whole once again.

She and Me

she is a bowling ball shuttled toward futures
where every pin down is a victory
i am the wind that cradles a baseball
on its flying way over high fences

her dreams are unconcerned masses
cushioning in on her everygift-days
my fears are newspapers lolling limp
on surfaces, ink bleeding into dull water

her people are the moon's silent judgment
behind a mask of cloudy day, gravity-free
my people are constellations who,
rain-witnesses, wonder and turn

unlike me she for sure will never be
homeless, and she aces all her exams
but she doesn't know trees move still
when she isn't looking, and sometimes i do

Betty Hill's Dream on the Fifth Night

When you asked me where I came from, I said
folded red tablecloths, dusty windowsills and jars
made of glass in the cellar. It sounded odd
when I tried to explain farmland, the NAACP,
how the interstates worked – as though
something meaningful was lost in translation
from my tongue to yours. Something taken.
All life is a distraction from what could have been
in missing time, tucked thinner than paper
between the moments when we glance over,
one hand on the steering wheel, Twin Mountain

slipping by out the passenger window, and think
we know one another. God sat in the mountain
that night, profiled in stone, witnessing.
As for you, a map of stars, no words needed.
I never asked for explanation, or worse,
compensation for my time and trouble, a mouse
to quench your curiosity. You melted away,
your lips like sunken skies and skin like
Athena's eyes, and I, planted deep in New
Hampshire and asphalt, watched you soar
years away, and went home.

The Sickness

I, too, am infected.

It's difficult to pinpoint when the soft of the night
lapsed into television screens. toes curling at the ends
of sleeping bags, the blind blinks of children. night
sounds out of windows and that soft rush, like being
underwater. crickets. at times i still see stars, although
my dreams are sometimes the only places where light
does not pollute. body still and weightful, eyeballs warm
and still. i miss being hungry. what else is there
to do? another day waiting for another feeling.
i miss the yellow dragon kite of my friend paulita,
and her duck costume, years before we knew she
would don scrubs at princeton. the days and years,
the reckoning some people sing about. the coals. i miss
living and caring, oh god i am scared. when the galaxies
drew in, i took a break and said cheese for snapchat.
i stared and stared and stared, and told myself i
had seen the world, had witnessed and wondered, as if
it hadn't been facing away the whole time.

Four Attempts at Understanding Nature

I.

my grandfather is cubism,
tortilla yellows and magic
mountain blues. his radio

shakes dylan free, hair
pricks like cactus needles.
zapater he wrote,
night fishing at moms'.
now there is a man
who soaks in sunsets.

II.

reach inward
for a poetry-book of dna,
sinewy guitar strings in the heart.
swallow everything when fingers close
and come up grasping black cords,
screens glowing star-similar, slimy
and treacherous, lodged
in the throat.
we are our own thieves.

III.

show me the silence
of open air, spindled trees
in the hills
and thorny dust for ground.
the sounds of walking.
a gray woman
losing her way in the wild, a stallion
with a spanish name, moving
as if in a photograph, watching.

IV.

when the blood
moon rose i stared
and stared
at its slick back, speckled
with shade. but why
was it there?
and why did i care?
and why was it red?

For David Bowie

You came made of glitter and tight seventies jeans,
denim jackets, shifting hair, and the accusing eyes
from every rock star's photograph. I like to imagine
whatever small grey-skinned men dropped you off here
said remember, don't go crazy, don't make too many
changes, and you said okay, and then took to the stage
and converted us all into heroes. You told us
about the Starman who waits for us all,
and who welcomes you now into his arms. You showed us
celestial justice and injustice, fame and loud
agonized extravagance. You've done this world right,
the stars await you fondly – and there are lands
light-years away from here where foreign people
are yet ignorant of stardust and strangers to Ziggy.
This is not a death. This is Major Tom
off for deep space, known there once again.
Your time has come to set for other worlds.

Tori Essex



Sophomore

Major: Art and Design

Tori Essex is quirky and a lover of oddities. She's sentimental and gets sad on accident... all the time. She's a people-lover and often will ask too many questions about you to ensure she understands exactly who you are. These themes are often reflected in her work. As an artist and writer, Tori is constantly developing her creative work and loves to watch it grow. She's super excited to participate in Café Shapiro and finally, she'd like to thank Bill Murray for being the subject of her latest obsession. Go Bill and Go Blue!

Chicago Bound

To keep warm, the awaiting passengers on the Amtrak platform were bundled up in harvest colored scarves and long jackets that fell far past their buttocks. Taylor, an anxious young women who gripped a black hardcover journal with fingers stained from ink, was wearing a plum, hand-knit scarf her mother had made her. Boots with boot socks and leather pointed dress shoes adorned the passengers' feet. Taylor watched as silent tears fell upon her black leather boots. She cried when she was anxious; she cried when she was sad; she cried when she was faced with such great uncertainty. Some of the passengers' feet tapped along to an unheard beat, others were pressed firmly together in helpless attempts to generate more body heat. Taylor kept restlessly shifting her weight from left to right self-consciously. As the Chicago-bound train pulled into the station, warm train people filed out onto the chilled, stone platform. Their train seats were soon to be filled

with the herd of waiting people who each took one large last step from the platform as they loaded themselves into the industrious people mover.

With the back of her hand, Taylor wiped at her brimming eyes as she waited her turn.

"Go ahead," a boy told her.

"Thanks," she replied. Taylor glanced into eyes that seemed to recognize her, but she did not know this boy. Taylor looked for a seat.

The boy's name was Joe. While waiting for the train, he had tried to recall from where he thought he knew the crying girl in the knit plum scarf. Or maybe she just had one of those faces, a face that felt understood at the very first look. To have found this sense of familiarity on his trip into a city that was so vastly unknown by him struck him as odd. Who was she?

Taylor found a window seat in the second to last train car and slung her backpack off her tired shoulder and onto the seat next to her. With the corner of her scarf she wiped the breath from the inside of the foggy train car window. Through the window she noticed two embracing figures — a mother and a daughter, she assumed. They seemed to be masking sadness with cheerful goodbyes. Taylor's mother usually saw Taylor off in this fashion, too, with clumsy hugs and close farewells. Sadness crept from the depths of her stomach. Taylor had told her mom she was fine with waiting for the train alone this time, not wanting her sick mother to wait in the cold. But Taylor now felt hollowed-out from the absence of this warm goodbye. She opened her journal and grabbed the pen she kept in her pocket; she wrote.

The train would take her back into Chicago where she had an apartment with north-facing windows above the bustling city streets. The town she grew up in, where her mother still lived, was only a three hour train ride from the city. Taylor fixated on the scratchy fabric of the seat beneath her as she waited for the train to leave her hometown station; she noted that it would be the same scratchy seat fabric she would leave behind in just three short hours when the train arrived in the great blustering city of Chicago. She wouldn't see her hometown platform again until Thanksgiving, in a month and half's time. She wouldn't see her mother until Thanksgiving either, when they'd be able to sit at the fireplace together as Taylor would read Whitman's "Song of Myself" aloud as her mother listened, as they did every year near Thanksgiving. She hoped her mother would still be there; Taylor had always had this fear that when she wasn't looking, the person she cherished the most would slip away. She knew this fear was most likely a product of a damaged psyche, yet that knowledge alone didn't keep the fear from gnawing at her. Her mother would sooth her and promise not to leave her in such a drastic way; Taylor would tell her mother to never leave her at all. It was hard for her mother to make such a promise, one she couldn't guarantee she could keep, but what else is a mother to do?

Taylor's journal was sprawled across her lap, her gaze back on the platform beyond the window, and her mind completely elsewhere. Her cheeks felt tight where her tears had dried. She felt the impact of another backpack being slung onto the seat next to her. The boy who let her onto the train sat on the other side of their bags. The mother now stood alone on the platform, her daughter was the last to board the train.

"This is my first train ride I've taken alone. Are you going into the city, too?" Joe wanted to know. She didn't really care to entertain this nosy stranger's curiosity but his eyes appeared so honest. They were honest.

"Yeah, back to my apartment. I was just visiting home." Taylor felt an odd weight surrounding the word home as it fell out of her mouth; she wondered if the boy felt it, too.

He didn't. He was just enjoying the connection he felt with the familiar girl with the plum colored scarf. "I hope to live in the city. Chicago is such an active place to be." It was indeed active for Taylor, too. Within the first month of living in Chicago she had acquired a silver road bike and quickly learned to work her way through honking taxis and distracted pedestrians. In the same month and even more quickly, she learned to live on her own and to pursue a dream.

The train had pulled away from the platform and was heading towards Chicago at full speed. "Just traveling, then?" Taylor was trying to be polite. She felt unsettled as she watched her hometown fade into the distance.

"College visit. I'm looking at the University of Chicago's campus and meeting with an admissions advisor tomorrow morning," he said. He chose to explore Chicago on his own, without his parents. He was appreciative of their support but excited to figure out where he belonged. He was determined that Chicago was the place. "It is my dream to go there," he added. Taylor had applied there, too. "I think I want to study Political Science."

"It's an awesome institution. I hope it goes well for you," she said. She remembered her first visit to Chicago in search of pursuing her undergrad degree. It was only four years earlier, the summer before her last year of high school, although it could have been in another lifetime for Taylor. Her and her mother took the train into the city then, too. "I didn't end up at UChicago, but this city has still been a great place to receive an education."

"You applied there, too?"

"I did. I ended up at Columbia College majoring in poetry, though. I'm in my third year. I'm beginning to think about applying for Masters programs." This was information Taylor so readily rattled off. She didn't expect this boy to truly care about those mundane details, but what else was she supposed to say?

Joe was interested in those details, though. He imagined the poems she wrote— how they might reflect her city life, how they might reflect Chicago.

Chicago for Taylor was a constant balancing act between the anxiety she felt from being on her own away from home, her excitement surrounding the pursuit of her dream of living in the city she loved, and the dedication she had to her poetry. She drew inspiration from the im-pressions life left within her— the ambiguous waves of emotion, the train, Chicago, her hometown, her mother, her mother's diagnosis, odd interactions like this one with this boy— it was from these impressions Taylor crafted her poetry.

"What's your name?" he asked, hoping it would trigger his memory of this girl and a past encounter. She felt not only familiar to him, but comfortable.

"Taylor," she answered. He didn't know a Taylor.

"I'm Joe." He too wanted to go to school in Chicago; to live in an apartment above the busy streets; to take the train home to visit his family. "You remind me of someone. I feel like I know you from somewhere," he said. Taylor felt less reluctant now to talk to the curious boy who so kindly let her on the train.

"Isn't it funny how some people— complete strangers— can give you the feeling that you know them? I love that," she said. Joe loved it, too. As a senior in high school he hadn't yet had the opportunity to get to know very many strangers. He did it well, though. He was lucky it was Taylor he chose to sit next to on his first train ride into the city. Taylor was truly spectacular.

"Is that where you write your poetry?" He motioned at the open journal on her lap. She felt vulnerable, but she continued. Her mother taught her that people are the most beautiful and the most pure when they are vulnerable.

"Yeah, I usually have this with me to capture moments throughout the day and to pull ideas from it later when I sit down and write finished pieces." Taylor had developed this practice over the three years she'd been in school. She was now on her seventh journal. Besides her be-loved copy of Maggie Nelson's "Bluets," her journals were her most prized hardcover belongings. "It's a good way for me to look back and remember how moments felt, too. I date the pag-es. If I had the other ones here with me I could recall for you moments that happened one year ago today. Where I was, who I was with, conversations I overheard."

Joe was dumbfounded in the most cheesy way. He felt inspired and drawn to this idea. He wished he could have read about what it was like for her when she was applying to schools for the first time. Was she as excited as he was? "You write it all down on paper in pen, too? That's so outdated.

That's so refreshing." Taylor had received this subtle disbelief of her old-fashioned ways before, she appreciated it. Carrying around a thin paged black journal worked for so many poets before her— she loved the tradition of the habit. "It's like a physical record of the moments you want to remember," he said.

"And the moments that are painful to remember, but important to remember. The moments that give you the chills, you know?" Taylor was thumbing through the journal now, wafting the smell of dried ink into the space around their seats. Her mind drifted to a couple of those moments. How she failed to fight for fallen friendships, how she hung on too tightly to times that had already passed— it always saddened her to think of the toys she'd played with as a child and how she never recognized her childhood coming to an end until it was already over. She had forgotten about her childhood best friend; she no longer played with those beloved toys of her past. She often cried for the things she had lost.

"Yeah, I do know." Joe had moments like these of his own. Taylor fumbled with her pen again. "My grandpa died and my mom always had the voicemails he left her saved on our house phone. One day I accidentally cleared the entire machine. I didn't do it on purpose—" His voice carried scantily across the empty seat between them and sounded tight with regret. Taylor was silent and her eyes seemed to burn holes into the side of Joe's face. He hoped he hadn't upset her.

"Moments exactly like that, yes." Her voice was quieter.

They both peered out the window and watched part of the Midwest fly by them in streaks of color. They listened to the hum of the train car. Taylor jotted in her journal. Joe tried not to stare at her too noticeably.

Joe remembered watching tears fall onto Taylor boots on the train platform. He wondered what was on her mind. Maybe it was hard to go back to school, to leave home again and again. He noticed the ink stains on her fingers. The finger that supported her pen when she wrote was calloused and had the darkest collection of ink marks. She wrote quickly. He hoped she felt that he understood her, even if he only understood such a small part. That's all he wanted, to understand her— to be understood.

She put her pen down and began to shift in her seat. "I'll be right back," she excused her-self and made her way to the back of the train car to find the bathroom.

Joe noticed the journal still open on her seat. He wasn't someone who'd deliberately invade someone's privacy, but he found himself stealing glances at the two page spread. After all, he just wanted to understand this girl. And she did leave it there, open, he thought. He read her words; he put her journal in his lap and read. They resembled a jumbled thread of consciousness

and observations of the world in which Taylor was submersed.

Joe read about what it was like to leave home. Leaving home wasn't something that, with time, got any less emotional for Taylor. Even positive emotions can be very overwhelming. When she yearned for home she felt the yearning in her entire body, not just in her chest where she felt it the most, she wrote. Joe read about himself, how he reminded Taylor of herself four years ago. How she hadn't wished to go back to that time, but wished she would've known how fast things changed. Knowledge empowers but knowledge can also irreversibly shift precious perspectives. Knowledge can ruin innocence, she wrote. Joe read about the mother and daughter on the platform, and how Taylor had envied the daughter that day. He read how her own mother was now sick and had knit her the plum scarf and how it scared Taylor to think her mom was aging, although she knew it was inevitable. He read about her immense worry; her mother's cancer was a new development. The trip home she was returning from was the first trip home since she had learned about her mother's diagnosis. All Taylor could feel was the ubiquitous, threatening pit of dread that was welled up within her. Joe read about how she cried every time she allowed herself to face the thought that something so unstoppable could take her mother away from her. She questioned whether she was fit to face the world alone. She knew she wasn't, she wrote. Joe read how she hoped no one else felt the way she did but she wished someone would help her understand the confusion she was facing. She wrote that the most comforting, but also the most unfathomable thing for her was that through these moments of shrouded uncertainty, she'd have to keep writing. Writing didn't feel like an option for her, she wrote. Even when poetic reflection was painful, being a poet allowed her to get through life. She was grateful for that. As Joe read, her words brought pain to him— Taylor's pain. A deeper sense of clarity rung loudly through the pain, though. Life is running at full speed and it does not slow down, she wrote. And as true as it was for Taylor, it was true for Joe, too. Like Taylor, he was gaining speed and Chicago bound.

Sofia Fall



Sophomore

Major: English and Program in the Environment

Sofia is a sophomore majoring in English and PitE. She grew up in Ann Arbor with her three sisters. She likes reading, cooking, hiking, and road trips. After graduating, she'd like to work in conservation on the West Coast.

Once I Was an Octopus Fisherman

Grandfather says, *all of my heroes carried stones*. He tells the stories with his long and sun-browned fingers, shapes each shoreline with his palms. Says, *it all happened in a village by the sea*. He runs his fingers down the bridge of his crooked nose, arches white and wired eyebrows, *of course it was almost too long ago to remember*. But what he has forgotten

becomes mine. I remember every jagged rock face, swallowed sunset, the cracked azure of the water, twisted ropes burning in my palms. *They named the village for my father's father*, and I remember island mothers, fishermen with crooked fingers, even before Grandfather scoops their bodies from the air

with the arc of his hands, *it was the octopus that we were after*. *We had to kill them with our teeth*. Then I remember lifting every cushioned tentacle into the air to latch my teeth between two wide and planetary eyes, the astonishment of salt and rippled blood. *Of course, it doesn't happen*

that way anymore. And I agree with him but all the same my body

begs to differ. My palms are callused, sun-browned, raw,
spine bowed from hours hauling heavy nets, my tongue
still creeps with brackish blood. My arms hang hot
and throbbing with the weight of all the stones. I remember
my first mouthful of the sea, the way the saltwater brined
the inside of my lungs, preserved my reverence, my ancestral

devotion. Grandfather shows me a photograph, *here
is a mountaintop*, shows me a withered deck of cards,
Iva Starčević, the queen of hearts. Carefully, I trace a crease across
his busy palms: loveline, lifeline. *Grandfather*, I want to say
and do not know how, *the first time my fingers closed around a tiller
I knew already how to steer the ship into the waiting dawn.*

Horticulture

Recently, my mother has become her garden: round
and lilac eyes, hydrangea heart, rosehips for lips
and sharpened eyelashes, hands of silky milkweed wisped
away with every gust, dark hair crowned
with coiled thistles. She looks as if she sprouted
from her beds of thick and copper mud, bloomed
green and copper-bodied, bright and copper-tongued.
With grapevine eyebrows, curved and rooted jawline,
I no longer resemble her.

I am afraid of the butterflies stopping
to drink nectar from the fluted pupils of her eyes,
the aphids snaking hungry down her spine, and when
at first I saw the whirring of the hummingbird
between the branches of her slender ribs of cottonwood,
I reached inside to let it out until I realized
that its wings drove air into her chest like lungs.

Now my mother leaves behind a trail of petals
on the sidewalk, tracks dirt into the kitchen,
and the wind raps angry on her hollow, plated skin.
But I have grown accustomed to her looped and neat
fragility, her delicate seasonal blooms, and it comforts me
at night as I lie spooled beneath the stars to hear
the brown and trilling birds constructing nests
between her shoulders, all of us uneasy
as the snow begins to flake into our skin.

Minor Ghosts

At the moment when you disappear, you are only eleven or twelve
and your legs tremble too spindly beneath you because you never grew
strong or wide enough to bear even your own slight weight.

Before dissipating you pause to survey the shape
of your dead-earth valley, the skeletons of every wretched,
timbered barn and twisting trunk your mind will never
catalogue again. Your sister with her dead-earth eyes

is already vanished but you are only thankful
you will never have to see her skeleton

laid out beneath grey flesh like your only memory
of your dead and green-eyed father, whose absence cursed you last

and finally, the only daughter left to work earth stitched
through with rot and familiar bones. *A history of roots*, your father said.
A history of fractured cartilage and muscled stone.

At eleven or twelve you cannot yet see that after your body lies carefully
beneath foreign soil, skull yearning still for skeleton sisters,
green-glassy-eyes, there will be so many unimagined daughters, sisters

with thick limbs and mother's jawline, who will take your name,
take the color of your father's eyes, and never speak
the cracked vocabulary of your dead-earth vanished home.

Still, they will tiptoe gracefully around your memories, construct
a reliquary of your hallowed sorrows, and their skeletons

will be always clothed, made decent with warm and living flesh.

Aaron Finglass



Junior

Major: English

I grew up in Baltimore, MD. I'm Jewish. I enjoyed writing and literary magazine in high school, but I didn't start taking it seriously until I was inspired last summer through the New England Literature Program.

The Taste of Texture

10:00 AM: Sitting in my car, looking at the ocean

I'm staring at this tiny piece of paper. One of Ari's friends gave it to me. Ari always has these friends. I picture them with black stringy hair, falling like waterfalls over the right sides of their faces. They have dark eye shadow and painful lip rings. I think that for them, life is not always holy, and not everyone wants to thank God for their suffering. These people are the portals to a world that I think about a lot.

An image of a red apple is printed on this tiny white piece of paper, no bigger than the size of my pinky nail. It is shaped like a square with the intention of being a square but not quite a square because someone, somewhere couldn't cut straight, or didn't care to cut straight. I wonder if this tiny piece of paper was cut from a very enormous piece of paper. I wonder if that paper had hundreds of apples on the page or if this was the only one. If this was the only one, then did all of the other squares that were cut not have apples on them? How could I be the only one who gets the apple? If they couldn't even cut straight, then why didn't I get some misshapen, fragment of an apple? Instead, I got a perfect, whole apple.

Abba would hate me for this. He and his pubic beard, crawling out of the sides of his chin like snakes. This morning, he asked me if I prayed already as I was packing up my car to leave. His hand dipped in and out of his weedy beard as he talked, shifting the strands around and leaving them in awkward chaos. I felt the motion of his hand all over my body; his unbearably light touch, stroking me with gentle fingers. Such strange pain. I wish he would lose weight, clean his beard, not look at me like that (refer to last entry to see a picture of his eyes: they were unnerving eyes, not fatherly eyes).

“What is there to pray for, Abba?” I didn’t mean to offend him, it was a serious question. I could pray for rain but why would I want it to rain, it’s a beautiful day. I could pray for hope, because I have none of that, but wouldn’t I actually need hope to pray in the first place?

Everyone in the community loves him, they tell me that he lives by the law, his deeds are good, and his sins are few. It sounds like a parable when I put it on a page. He tells me about my soul, that it merely dwells in the body for now. He wants me to wear Tzitzit, because in the third paragraph of the creed that he wants me to say every night, the words allude to this garment with blue and white strings which secures the belief (that he wants me to have) that God is all around me, and I’ve never really taken any of this seriously because he says it to me with a raised hand, his palm facing upward with his fingers reaching to meet each other at the top, like he’s holding everything that he’s saying right there at the tip of his fingers, and I just think it’s more complicated than that.

I’m just going to put the apple on my tongue, close my mouth, and wait for something to happen.

12:00 PM: On the Beach

I was running. I was flying! And now sitting down. And I can’t remember why I’m writing, but I feel soggy fragments of paper in my mouth, they are ominous snowballs, white tiny ominous snowballs because I don’t know if I was supposed to swallow that tiny piece of paper or not, no one ever instructed me how to do this.

1:30 PM: Sitting on this mountain that I found

I spent the past... I don’t know how long it has been... running, just running. I sit, now, gazing loosely towards the ocean and I can feel in my chest the consequence of running for indefinite time, but it doesn’t matter. There is a point on the horizon that divides the waters of the sky from the waters of the earth and in my search for this point, the world becomes curved in the periphery, and my hands are planted deep in the grass, wiggling like worms because I can’t contain this mad moment.

I've never seen blue look like this. It's so magnificent. I'm not quite sure of myself in this moment, and I understand that completely, but please follow what I'm saying very closely. I recognize that I am otherwise lost because now I feel unbearably true. I see something growing out of a wave in the ocean: the water ebbs, pulling together all of the elements and fabricating a complete city on the tip of the wave. More cities are forming, and they are surreal because there are no buildings, but I still know that they are cities. Each wave creates a new city, and within these cities are statues, and I recognize each and every statue because they all have something to do with me, nothing is foreign to me in these cities.

Somehow, I know that this won't make sense, but things have never seemed more real, and now that I think about it, things don't always need to make sense. Like the apple! The fucking amazing apple, made just for me, oh how unbelievably unique that was!

Anyway, the cities are riding the waves, and when they crash, they spread out in this beautiful veneer of different shades of blue, and though the shades are swirled together and swarmed by the nature of reality, I can still distinguish the most mundane nuances, because they are close to my heart.

I feel Abba in deep dark radiant blue. I see that he came from one of the cities in his early twenties, which feels like my early twenties, and once again I have to repeat that I don't know myself very well right now, but please follow what I am saying. He sits, hovered over a text. The words are made up of old letters with curly edges, and I know that these words are important. The letters themselves have curative qualities, but when they are put together, I cannot say anything about them. Abba hasn't moved at all in this city, he's just been hunched over. I've never seen his head at this angle, from the back, his hair looks clean and I can see that he has a scar on the back of his neck that I've never noticed before. It's also worth noting that his beard seems very shapely because I do not see it straying too far from the sides of his chin.

6:00 PM

My head is pounding. The world is very hazy, and things are dark. I would usually think this lighting is pleasant, but now it seems terrible. I really hope that things will be okay. I came down from the mountain and something unfortunate must have happened because I am wet and I'm lying on the beach and I feel the blue from the different cities around me and it doesn't feel good because none of them are connected to me, they are just color. I can't make sense of things anymore, and now I am truly lost. I don't remember eating or drinking anything all day, but I remember being in the water, enveloped and desperate, and I don't know why I would have done that to myself, submerged myself without my own permission, especially with all of my clothes on.

I just read the entry from this morning. I don't know what I meant by the comment about the eyes. What is wrong with the eyes? They are just eyes. I have much to tell Abba, because I saw him with shape to his beard and I want to ask him why he let his beard grow, because he must be holding on to something in his fingertips. Something must have happened before he decided to stop trimming his beard.

Gavin Gao



Senior

Major: English Literature and Creative Writing

Gavin Gao is a senior majoring in English & Creative Writing at the College of Literature, Science & Arts. His previous works have appeared in *Rainy Day* and *Spires*. He has a particular penchant for mangoes and quaint wallpapers, and hopes to become a semi-professional cat breeder while continuing to write in the future.

Stray Cat

She's been counting on me, and
I've failed her.
In the brewing dark under

the silver SUV, a single coat
of faded yellow
wrapped around her shivering bones.

Those old bones
someone must have once held
tight, nursed with care. Like all

things aged, she ends
up alone. She cries
for me from the other side

of the rain. And I call back with a voice

that isn't my own – the kind
of surprised cry

a toddler gives having
pricked his finger
on a needle for the first time.

She crawls near me, her drenched muzzle
wetting my ankle. Her neck, a soft
rug with the scent
of my hand all over.

Then I see you through
the years, a frail old woman with few
visitors, lying
next to the foggy hospital window

in your baby-blue pajamas, stuffing cold
lettuce and cherry
tomatoes in your mouth.
Your hand, cupped
like a chalice, I folded it in
mine. You'd stared into my eyes, as if
having just seen

the Pleiades in the midwinter sky
for the very first time, as if
asking, *where have you been
all this time?*

A car swishes by
with its blinding head
-light. The cat cries,
then disappears into the nettles.

Poor thing, I think.
Abandoned, not lost.
Better alone than dead.

All this time she's been counting
on me, and I've failed her.
I've let her go

into the woods alone
as though tonight's clouded sky
has any star to offer either of you.

Our Lady

How many times have I turned to the mirror, asking
that simpleton in button-down
lumberjack, "How much of all this do I get
to keep?"

As though I were my own god.
Omnipotent. All-knowing.

Look at that child
standing in the yard next to the flowers.

Mouthful of taffy and bonbons.
A freckled nose wet with
honeysuckled tears. Eyelashes
quivering in the prisms of the rosy sunrise.

One day he'll learn to suffer –

Not the loss of sweets, crushed
under the steely wheels
of a truck, or
having his plastic horse torn
from his fists, but the scheme

of something darker, more
bitter: the thinning of his
well-combed hair,

the wilting of the soft
womanly hands that
once guided a comb through that hair,

until one morning, from the
other side of the overgrown
fence, a great ship will steer

toward his shivering
frame, a ship with the calming
face of a nun, a

face with the tender mercy
of a lady, and the lady
will tell him
that the sunrise is still his.

The Hyper Love Song of a Household Android

Unable to hold the young governess in my
mechanical arms, I lock lips with her
at the kitchen table, my cold aluminum
foils on her pillows of rose
-hued lips. so this is

What they call the way
of flesh, my egregious love,
my perpendicular heart
that fails to calculate
the algorithms of my racing

thoughts, and barely picks up
the wavelength of my love's breath,
the prosody of her chest full
of irritable rabbits rubbing their
white coats on the backyard grass.

Then there comes
the dull thud of her clothbound *Jane
Eyre* hitting the floor, the elated
chatter of children already
filing out of the garage,

whose tiny talons scratch
the concrete patio, impatient
wings beating against
the front door, waiting for me
to clear their path to the refrigerator

--- human love manifested in their hunger
for popsicles on a summer's day,
while mine in malfunctioning
servitude. That is when I realize
how utterly alone I am in this world.

Blair Gould



Freshman

Major: Undecided

Blair is from Westport, Connecticut and is still getting adjusted to life at the University of Michigan. Overwhelmed but enthusiastic, she's trying to figure out what to do with her future. Although she's unsure of many things, she firmly believes in Sunday afternoons, huge mugs of black coffee, a good book, and her journal.

The Boy and the Man

On the day the man died, the boy stroked the man's soft gray hair, combing through tangles he could no longer sort out himself. The man's hair was long and thin, and it tickled the back of his knees when he walked from his cot to the bathroom. He didn't get up to do anything else anymore, not even to sweep the floors or go to the country store to get the groceries. That was his boy's job now. Every other morning, the boy would wake up when the sun emerged from behind the horizon and the light peeked through the cracks of the wooden walls. He would slip out of his nightgown and comb his wild red mane that was almost as long as the man's. The tattered nightgown was short on him, revealing chicken thighs covered with little tomato colored hairs.

As the boy gently braided the man's hair, they shared memories of the times they spent in their small home, the home the man built for the two of them when he was young and strong. It didn't have windows, but the outside world was not nearly as beautiful as the one they shared together within

the walls. The only door was small and the boy had to duck under its frame each time he came and went. He remembered when the door seemed to tower over him, back when it was locked. The lock was removed a few years ago, but he only ever left to go to the country store. They didn't like leaving their home, it was their special place.

They remembered the happy times, like when the boy went on explorations through their home. He counted the rusted nails in the unpolished oak floor and carefully plucked out splinters as evidence. He watched the way the light from the single bulb flickered around the room as he danced and played. Dancing made the boy happy so he kicked his feet and swung his arms around as he hummed an original tune. Sometimes the man would join in too, and they'd always fall over laughing hysterically. Once the boy tripped over his own awkward foot and crashed on the floor. He laid there as thick blood leaked out of his head. The man rushed over and sewed up his wounds and they both cried and expressed their love for one another until the boy felt better. The man made a promise to never let his boy get hurt again even though he knew this was unavoidable. The man knew everyone must suffer in order to thrive. Without an ache in the chest, how can one truly understand joy?

* * *

Goosebumps covered the boy's arms and the tiny red hairs stuck up as they remembered all the days they spent learning science and math. The boy multiplied and divided with ease at the age of nine. Numbers and formulas became companions to him, especially eight times eight.

"I ate and I ate and I got sick on the floor, eight times eight is sixtyfour" his squeaky voice repeated over and over. The man laughed, proud as he watched his boy get smarter and smarter. They practiced geometry and stoichiometry, but never history. This was, of course, before the door was unlocked, before the boy knew about the outside world.

* * *

The boy studied the man's features over and over in a desperate attempt to remember every detail. While they lay there, he watched the way the light from the crack in the wall illuminated the man's bony features. The boy remembered the first time he discovered that little crack. The man was off getting groceries so the boy was dancing around foolishly. While he was dancing he noticed a teeny light brighter than he'd ever seen coming from the wall. Curious and frightened, he approached the hole. He began picking away at the wood with his long curly fingernails making the source of light shine through more and more. He pressed his eye right up into the hole. It hurt him at first so he turned away, but the light's seduction called him back. He stared and stared and stared until he heard footsteps approaching the door. He jumped back away from the hole, nervous the man would be upset with him.

Every time the man left their home the boy would peek through his hole, only to be reminded of the pleasant burn that the light provided him. He saw the fuzzy green strands on the ground and imagined how soft they must be. Dreams of rolling around in those green flakes comforted him when the man was gone. The boy's favorite thing to look at were floating magical creatures. The first time he saw one took his breath away. It was an exquisite blue creature that flapped its arms and soared way up above their home. He wondered why he couldn't be that graceful.

Picking away at the wood became addictive. When his hole became too noticeably big, he began to pick away at a new hole on the adjacent wall. Soon enough his holes were all over the walls of their home and the light flooded in from every angle. The boy loved his man very much but he did not want to share this secret. He worried the man would close up his holes and his eyes would never experience that tempting sting again.

One day, the boy was so invested in looking through his hole that he didn't hear the man approaching him from behind. The man spun the boy around and struck him in the face, leaving a red imprint on his cheek. In a state of shock, the boy just stood there. He didn't know what to do or say or why his cheek hurt him so badly. The man was also in a state of shock but began to bawl. He collapsed to the floor and choked on his tears as though he was the one who was hit. The boy began to apologize immediately and laid down on the floor next to the man, their bodies pressed closely together so tightly that they were almost one.⁴

The next day the holes were sealed up with some gooeey material, and the light bulb was the only source of brightness in their home once again. The man didn't leave as often and worried more. He watched his boy every moment. He didn't want his boy to love anything except for him.

It wasn't long before the goo crusted up and cracked off bit by bit. The man knew in his heart that keeping the boy locked up would only create resentment, and that the boy's innate curiosity would eat at him. At first, the man just let the boy look through the holes. The boy peered through his holes for hours at a time, never getting bored of the unpredictability of nature.

The lock came off the door and the man and the boy explored their isolated world. With time, the man explained grass and birds and rain to his boy and he marveled at their resplendency. They rolled around together in the grass, laughing and inhaling the clean air.

* * *

They remembered sad times too, like when the boy was scolded. He ran around the room, flapping his arms, looking at dust bunnies and splinters from up above. He wanted to be like the birds outside, but the man

warned him that he could not fly. He was a boy. He was the man's boy. Boys do not fly. He shook his red hair in apology. He understood. The man patted his back and told him to be sessile like a flower. The imaginary wings took off and in place beautiful pink petals sprouted from his arms as he swayed back and forth making sure he didn't move from his spot.

* * *

The boy stared into the man's dull eyes and imagined his own eyes looked the same. There were no mirrors in their home, no way of seeing the intimate details of his face. He avoided reflections in the grocery store windows, abashed that he may come off as vain. The thought of looking into the glass and seeing something he didn't like was also too overwhelming to bear. The boy continued braiding the man's grey hair, being careful of the long strands that fell out. Ever since the man fell ill, his hair fell out more and more. The collection of locks piled up under the boy's pillow and he played with them as he fell asleep each night. He wished there was something he could do for the man other than patiently watch him die. When the man screamed in agony there was nothing to do except sit by his side wait for the pain to subside. If only he could stitch up a wound and everything would be okay. If only he could take away the man's pain. He loved the man.

* * *

When their whole backyard had been explored and rediscovered a thousand times, the boy began asking questions about what else was out there.

"What's over that hill?" he'd ask.

"Where do the birds go?"

"Where's our food come from?"

The questions pounded in on the man's head until the burden of withholding information caused him to break down. The man shook the entire walk to the store and held onto the boy's hand tighter than ever before. They trudged through the woods and over hills for miles. The boy thought his feet were going to fall off and his mind was going to overflow with new sights and smells.

"What's this?" he'd ask.

"What's that?" he'd point.

The boy came to a sudden stop when he saw a green creepy crawler contracting and expanding its way up a teeny tree trunk. He looked at the man for approval before letting the creature crawl all over his fingers. The man explained that it was a caterpillar and that someday it would germinate delicate wings and fly away, but not for a very long time. The boy giggled

at how much it tickled. The boy couldn't fantasize the caterpillar taking on wings but was jealous nonetheless.

After the hour long trek, the country store appeared from the distance like a mirage. The store was almost as desolate as their own home was. Bells chimed when they opened the door and a funky old tune spat out from retro speakers. The boy was shocked looking at all the foreign food. He wanted to reach out and touch everything like the lumpy avocados and spiky pine-apples but the man's hand restricted his own.

"You brought your boy!" a raspy voice interrupted the boy's fruit fixation. The man nodded in response and looked away from the eyes of the speaker. The little boy glanced up and took a step back. A big man no shorter than six feet tall towered above the boy and trapped him under the shadow he cast. The boy stared in horror and questioned what illness this man had. His bald head glistened and lacked the length of the boy and the man's hair. His belly was round and poked out of his tshirt making their frail bodies appear weak. His skin was covered in something the color of the dirt the boy played in. The boy thought the man might've had a giant freckle covering all his exposed skin. Whatever it was, the boy felt bad for the man and hoped he would get better soon.

As the man got sicker and the boy went to the store more and more, he became accustomed to the store owner's terminal illness and contemplated when his time would come and how he'd get food without him.

* * *

As the boy lay there, his body pressed close to the man's, he tore at the blisters covering his palms. The white liquid oozed out and slowly dribbled down his wrist like silent tears. He could feel the blisters forming as he shoveled the other day, but the searing pain didn't stop him from completing his job. The pickaxe broke the uneven earth as the boy cried, remembering when all he wanted was to be a flower. Upon completion, he crawled into the deep hole he created and laid down to prepare it for its newest resident. He thought about having to tuck the man in here, and wondered if the cold dirt would seep through his skin. Images of critters crawling over limbs and into closed eyes sent shivers through his whole body. He lay there for hours, until all his tears ran out and the pain in his heart became a bit more numb. He reached his hand out to the sky and looked at the way his pinky fingers stuck out awkwardly to the side. The scar on his left arm stretched from the meat of his thumb down to where the veins began to trail off on his forearm. He couldn't remember if it was from the time he got pushed or the time he fell. It's strange how memories fade and rearrange themselves. If the boy could remember every detail of his life he'd be a lot happier all the smiles and laughs would make the man's death that much easier.

A spider joined him and he was thankful for the company, thankful that he could share his sorrow. Eight legs tickled him as they walked all over his chest and up his neck. When the spider finally departed, the boy was lonely once again. This only made the pain worse and the boy decided he would never let the man experience this excruciating loneliness. Within seconds the boy was up and clawing away at the terrain making space for another body. He didn't know how he would close the hole with him in it but decided he'd figure it out when the time came. He breathed in the scent of dirt and accepted the fact that his lungs would be filled with this smell until they gave up. He wasn't scared the man would be there the whole time. He loved the man.

* * *

On their last day together, the man admired his boy. He stared at the freckles that formed constellations on his cheekbones and dotted his nose. His own skin was wrinkled and was freckleless. It lacked the liveliness of the boy's the promise of longevity. The man could not eat or drink, and shifted in and out of consciousness. Each time his eyes drooped he fought hard to push them open, but at times he gave up. His boy would soothe him, caressing his cheeks and kissing his sweaty forehead. The quilt was flung on and off as the man's body temperature rose and fell but the boy did not mind. The boy did not care about his own discomfort; he was not even bothered when the man soiled himself. The stench of the secretions would waft through their home and slowly crawl out through the holes in the wall and the boy wondered why anything would ever escape from there.

Their eyes glistened with tears, knowing that these were their final moments. The boy loved the man. The man was almost free from the burden of emotion and pain, but even so, the man loved his boy. Every memory they shared filled their bodies with a tingling warmth. A grin crept across the man's thin lips as he soaked in that warmth, letting it soothe his weak body like a bath. Hours of reminiscing passed, but he didn't tell every story. There were some he kept to himself, some he wanted to die holding onto. It made his heart thump when he thought about sharing about the time his boy had a nightmare. When he was just two years old, shrieks filled their home and hot tears poured down his little face. The man wept too, worried that the cradle would fill with tears and his boy would drown. The following weeks, the man sat by the cradle and watched the boy sleep. His chest rose and fell, matching the way his boy's chest rose and fell.

The man also didn't mention the first time they saw each other. The moment he knew in his heart that he would be his boy. How their eyes locked for a second in the shopping mall. How the woman foolishly turned her back from the stroller. How the boy didn't cry, not even when the sirens wailed as they departed. The man loved his boy so much, and he knew his boy would love him right back.

Miranda Hency



Junior

Major: English

Miranda is a junior here at the University of Michigan (class of 2017) majoring in English. Miranda spends most of her time reading books, writing poetry, and burning candles. She is from Port Huron, Michigan and her favorite place to spend time is by the lake in her hometown.

Doppelgänger

The other day I was about to lie down in my bed when I happened to look out the window and saw something strange. I never close my blinds shut, even at night when I go to sleep, because it's such a hassle to reopen them in the morning. What's the point in closing them if I'm going to pull them up again in eight hours? Plus I like looking at the trees and in my neighbor's windows. And this way the sky can tell me if I still have time to sleep when I wake up in the middle of the night. Anyways, I was ready to go to sleep when I happened to look out the window. I noticed that the six panes were frosty around the edges, right up to the chipped paint of the muntins that separates the glass into sections, and that's when I saw her. She was floating outside my window and looking at me. She looked just like me, too. I thought, What if I'm actually the girl floating outside of my window and someone else is inside of my body on my bed? She kept staring at me, and I kept staring right back. She smiled and so did I. That's when I had an idea: I motioned for her to come inside. She shook her head no and threw her head back in laughter. Why did she think that was funny? I wanted to know who she was. I said, Who are you? She opened her mouth and darkness came out. Then it trickled up her face and over her nose and into eyes. It crept down her neck and consumed her

whole body. She was just floating darkness now. The frost on the windows turned black. I looked at my bed and it was black, too. I was floating on darkness. I smiled and let it carry me outside.

Enantiomers

Soft sleepy kisses on my shoulder: that's how I want to remember it.

The light pours through the window. It's golden, just like the leaves are.

The morning after is one of the few times I manage not to feel awkward; my mouth isn't dry. We drink water out of a mason jar.

Usually, I can't tell if it's coffee jitters or just the cloud's shadow retreating across the dunes. Sometimes the sky is so heavy-- pastel colors weigh so much, and lilac is fatter than periwinkle.

Your palm flattened to my stomach weighs a lot, too. I say it feels like pressure.

It does. I keep thinking that I'm in love with your pubic hair.

I could eat God like lemon-flavored mentos if it stopped you from being the traffic. Stay in this bed and I'll keep smiling through the,

Yeah? The word is an echo moving through the air. It sparks the wick of the mistletoe candle that reminds me of gin. I notice that your voice isn't as soft in the morning, so I pick the lint out of your belly button.

I want to curl up in the orange peel and have it reseal itself so you can keep me in your pocket.

I have a small mouth but sometimes it won't shut up.

Why are you so smiley? my friend asks. I'm only smiling so I don't have to take headache medicine. I can't bring myself to tell him about the fish lip kisses or how the fading scars on my arms remind me of dream catchers.

You don't want me anymore and my hands still smell like sex so I stake out the bleach and lavender to turn you into the mist on the water.

If you were to disappear into the fog like the car in front of me, it'd be easier to understand

than this purgatory of interactions, but I'll just accept your donut.

You're like the flickering light-- only on when you want to be.

Give me chalked wings and maybe my heart won't be full of dust. I thought I could chew your used gum but you never bought my coffee. Instead, my roommate does. I know my shedded hairs still litter your pillow. I collect more skulls and everyone is angry.

Box Fan

sitting in an open window of a rented apartment,
staring and so close to being unbarred,
but unfortunately trapped inside
that metal or plastic cage.
I spin around in that little environment,
the different settings have me spewing out more air.
I II III

They make me talk more and more with each push,
prompting me to let loose.
I'm hesitant at first, but
I talk and talk and talk and talk
faster with each touch of encouragement
except, when more comes out, it pushes people away
when they become too cold,
too incapable of empathy.
I thought they wanted me to open up,
to not be so nervous.
But they only want me when they're hot,
when they can use me to cool down,
switching spots to listen to my words
that dry their beaded sweat with my lips.
I can't change what is given to me into something else,
I can only see how it feels in my mouth,
pushing air around.
They can turn me off,
hide me away when they've had enough,
only bring me out for their own benefit.
No one cares if I get to twirl again;
they like the environment better when my presence isn't necessary
Their life would just be easier if only
they could get their hands on air conditioning.
It's funny to scream in my face, anything for me to echo back,
but they never want to hear what I actually have to say.

Lindendeary Himawan



Sophomore

Major: Psychology and RC Creative Writing and Literature

I fled from what some would consider a warm tropical paradise on the other side of the world and braced myself for Michigan's winter all for the sake of writing. As far as my parents knew when they sent me off at the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, I would study Psychology in the states to help out in the family business. Since the University of Michigan is among the country's best institutions for both Psychology and Creative Writing, I figured that it was the gateway to the American Dream for me.

Excerpt from the Truth about the Riots of '98: Tawuran, "Magic Stone", and More CIA Conspiracies

If you are reading this, my son, I imagine you are unfolding it after initially crumpling it at the sight of my name. Perhaps your Native Indonesian wife, the Pribumi, was there when you first received this package, and you made a show out of ripping this letter to pieces. Then perhaps when she's fast asleep, you snuck to the kitchen and put together this letter back piece by piece by the light of the full moon. Perhaps you wouldn't have the patience for it, son. Perhaps you didn't recognize your old man's name in the first place, and thus began reading this letter in broad daylight out of curiosity. Or perhaps – if I may be optimistic –perhaps you've forgiven me? Let me say now that I am not writing this to apologize to you. It is not for my own sake, but rather yours, that I confess to you the truth I've never been able to come to terms with for the last twenty years. Perhaps then, you'll see me more than just the Sinocentric monster you make me out to be. Perhaps

then, you'll see that all I've been saying about your dark Pribumi wife isn't a matter of skin, but of character. I'm sure you're at that point of your marriage by now. Well, the thing about infidelity, son, is that you are always powerless to stop them. You can only hold on to what you've built together and, if by chance it's firm enough, you might just learn to live with each other – the way your mother and I did.

The truth about the riots of '98, son, lies on the business trip I went on over the summer of 2001 and the affairs that transpired there. No matter how much you may want to dissociate yourself from your Chinese heritage, you cannot say that you've seriously forgotten the rapes and pillages the dark-skinned fankui savages committed against us during the riots; its omission from the history books, like to coup on Soekarno, like another murky cover-up that fuels the most ridiculous conspiracy theories that couldn't be further from the truth. Well let me tell you this: I believe I'm the most informed living person about the truth behind the riots of '98 – barring the perpetrators themselves, of course.

You were almost done with elementary school, surely you remember how we moved out of our house in Jakarta. If it weren't for my Chinese-Indonesian business associates' warnings about the oncoming tragedy, son, we would never have made it out of '98 in one piece. You were still teaching when the Jakarta International School case blew over. Surely you remember the Indonesian cops' attempt to put the two JIS teachers behind bars. Surely you've read the nonsense about how these two teachers allegedly drugged the six-year-olds with a sedative called "Magic Stone". Laugh all you want, the news did make them sound ridiculous, but if you were with me that summer on the island, you won't find it funny one bit.

About two years before the trip, a colleague of mine purchased one of the Thousand Islands that spread around the north of Jakarta. Let's call him Mr. King Arthur because frankly, I doubt you'll understand the meaning behind his Chinese name anyway. (And more than that, despite the dishonourable deeds my colleagues participated in that island, I still respect them all as the hardworking Chinese businessmen they once were, each apt at their respective fields. I never wish to soil their legacies should word ever leak out).

Mr. King Arthur had a holiday home in every typical spot a successful Chinese businessman would think of: Bali, Puncak, even a house a half kilometre away from Orchard Road in Singapore for his annual medical check-up. What he figured he still needed then was a vacation where he didn't have to put up with the traffic or deal with the rushed service of a quick first-class flight; which brings us to the island home he bought. But you see, that wasn't the only reason Mr. King Arthur had set his eyes on the particular

island. As I would come to realize during the business trip, it was by no accident that Mr. King Arthur's island was the source of the Magic Stones.

Now, the other men on the guest list didn't take as heavy a blow as I did from '98, seeing how they were all able to go back to Jakarta, or stay in Singapore by choice – as you may very well know, our business was barely enough to get you the economy class, one-way ticket to the States. Thus, I could not sail to Mr. King Arthur's island in a private yacht like the rest of the gang. (I've told you many times the importance of keeping face to others. It is precisely in situations like these that I was talking about. You can still get invited to the paradise owned by connections who merely think you're still as well off as they are). But of course, your crafty old man had a little trick up his sleeve. I set out before the sun rose with a fisherman from the port of Pulau Karang Putih. I asked three reluctant fishermen first before finding one willing to take me there. (These lazy dark fankuis don't take the opportunity for riches when it represents itself. It's no wonder they stay poor!) I gave him the directions to Mr. King Arthur's island – yes, we all knew its location down to the map coordinates, courtesy of Mr. King Arthur's constant bragging about it in all the months the transaction was pending. Typical Medaneese, I tell you.

So everything was going to be fine and dandy. I packed up my good tux from my college graduation; dry-cleaned and sealed in a waterproof plastic bag, some newer comfortable clothes I bought last Chinese New Year, and – just hold on a minute before you think I'm joking – a polished Chinese Dao I bought from the antique vendors on Jalan Surabaya.

Something you must know about my business colleagues: they have, or rather had, this expensive hobby of collecting ancient armaments. Mr. King Arthur loved the European longswords, while my two other colleagues preferred the single-edged swords like the Japanese Katanas. The three of them even owned the corresponding armours to go along with them, displayed as the centrepieces of their favourite holiday home. I myself have never really gotten into the whole thing, of course, since it was after the riots that their collections really picked up, but for the trip, I had to show up with one from my own "collection". It's all part of keeping face, son, if Mr. King Arthur knew that I couldn't afford what they could, I might as well be sent swimming off the island.

Once, as a joke, I asked the three of them about why nobody collected the Indonesian Kris. "Of course," said Mr. King Arthur. "It's too short to be of any practical use. Those silly tikos!" We all had a good laugh then, not the strained kind we sometimes pull for Mr. King Arthur. The wound those fankuis inflicted on our community was still fresh after the riots. A wise man once mentioned the wonders of comedy in times of grief.

For the trip to Mr. King Arthur's island, I wrapped my Chinese Dao first in old newspapers, then in a plastic wrap. I made sure it was waterproofed as

best as I could because I didn't want it to rust from the salty breeze. I had to maintain its condition carefully if I wish to sell it off again after the trip. It was probably a fake judging from how much lighter it felt compared to Mr. King Arthur's long swords, but it still costed us money son; money that can be used for another month's meal.

The old fisherman already looked at me funny when I asked him to take me to the island, so he didn't question me much further about the wrapped package once we agreed on the right price for his services, probably dismissing its peculiar shape as part of the quiriness that came along with the request. But you see son, what if I meant to harm him with whatever it is he thought was in that package? What then? We'd be out at sea with no witness! It would be the perfect crime if I was such a wretched man. These tikos are too lazy to think things out for themselves, and then they blame it on the Almighty when things don't go their way. Little wonder, huh?

Two hours into the trip, the whirring of the boat's turbine engine slowed to a halt. "Boss," said the old fisherman from the front of the boat. "We'll have to make a stop, Boss! We're running out of gas. We won't make it to the island without a refill."

I almost panicked then. From the boat, the closest land to us looked no bigger than my antique sword. It seemed like he had tricked me, the fankui. I was sure that after he assessed my well-maintained tux covered in its transparent plastic sheet, he figured he could milk me for more money. He probably took a number of detours in the past hour. So when he asked me to help him paddle the boat to shore, I said: "No. I paid you to get me to the island. If anything, you should be compensating me for making me tardy." He grumbled the whole way in Javanese as he paddled slowly to shore, the way our housekeepers would when I critique them for their sloppy work. Perhaps one day, they'll learn the value of hard work, these Natives.

We landed at the port of a filthy fish market as the sun finished its morning ascent. The fisherman killed the motor tied a rope to one of the wooden posts on the run-down pier. "Wait here, Boss," he said as he hopped to the wooden platform with a dirty red plastic tank in hand.

I waited until he blended into the crowd of tikos to get up. There was no way I was going to let him swindle me. I took everything with me: my plastic covered tux slung over my left shoulder, the rest of my clothes in my backpack, and the wrapped sword in my right hand. The Chinese Dao was still heavy in one hand, so I had to lay it on the mud-spotted asphalt every two minutes or so. I was glad I covered it with enough plastic to be waterproof. Thus began my journey on foot, in search of a more honest fankui fisherman

to take me to Mr. King Arthur's island. As I navigated through the packed waves of pungent Pribumis, I felt their glances drill behind my back. I heard some say: "It's a Chinese!" (Those tikos! Understand, son that we'll never truly be seen as a part of Indonesia).

The whole place stank of sweat and rotting shrimp, like bad terasi. My sweat drenched the worn white T-shirt I had on. There must have been hundreds of them out there, shouting to one another in their blunt tongues. It was horrible; my eardrums rang. The inhabitants of the fish market kept on pushing one another, so much that I was drowned in their filth. I couldn't see the old fisherman's boat anymore. Then, like a call from divine, gleaming golden rays of sunlight was reflected to my vision from a boat the other side of the port. Such a majestic sight! It must've been made in the Western countries, or perhaps Japan. I pushed my way through the crowd in order to get closer to the shining vehicle, wondering what such a beauty was doing in a dump like this. As I arrived at the front of a circle of Indonesians, I noticed the way those fankuis gawk and envy the owner of the boat. Then, I saw the two Ambonese bodyguards in identical brown and black long-sleeved batik shirts standing by the beam that connected the port's concrete and the boat's stern. The two Ambonese had their arms set across their respective chests, like the bouncers in those Hollywood movies. Behind them, a stubby man stood to the height of their shoulders. He wore a gold-laced short-sleeve batik shirt with the kind of floral patterns that would remind you of the loose-fitted shirts old American men wore to tropical getaways. The stubby man had the light khaki shorts and sunglasses to go with the look too. The moment his face was pointed to my direction, he lifted the sunglasses up and called out to me. I didn't recognize him in such a casual attire, so it took me a while to respond.

"Midas!" I said – which, of course, was not the businessman's actual Chinese name. I became increasingly concerned about the raggedy stained shirt I wore to get there. I pleaded in my mind that Mr. Midas would only pay attention to the tuxedo I had slung over my left side.

Mr. Midas stepped off of his golden boat with his two Ambonese bodyguards on his sides. As he walked towards me, the Pribumis parted and got on with their morning business, as if hearing the peculiar Chinese man talk on their port dispelled whatever illusions they had of him.

"What are you doing in this dump?" said Midas. "Wait, let me guess. Did your boat captain get lost at sea too?"

"These dumb fankuis, am I right?"

Mr. Midas chuckled.

"Is that your boat?" I said. He nodded with a big doggy grin. "Wow! It's a sight!"

Mr. Midas slung his hand over my shoulders and brought me close to him. His hand was over my tuxedo, but I didn't think it would ruin it with the plastic cover on. He laughed like a drunk. You'll meet men like Mr. Midas one day, son. These are the type of men who can live on praises. For Mr. Midas, the more so when you praise any forms of gold he has. Any forms at all, son.

"You want a tour?" said Mr. Midas. "She's called the Twenty-Two."

"As in carats?"

"And the twenty-two year old girls I take on board!"

"You dog! I can't believe you still have it in you."

He snorted and laughed. Just like I said, all it took was a praise.

"Come on," said Mr. Midas. Just then, one of the two Ambonese bodyguards tapped his shoulder and whispered something to him. I could see his childish glee revert back to his business meeting face. "Well that sucks," he said. "The boat's captain just got the directions he needed. Looks like we gotta keep moving; wouldn't want to make Mr. King Arthur wait now, do we?"

I could tell Mr. Midas' captain apart from the dwellers of the port by the pattern of his batik shirt. They were just like the Ambonese bodyguards'. Behind the captain was an old Pribumi man in a tattered white shirt and a red plastic tank in hand. A jolt of fear passed through my body with the recognition of the old fisherman.

"Boss!" said the fisherman as he arrived with Mr. Midas' captain. "Boss, what are you doing here? Never mind that, I got the gas, and – oh, these gentlemen are heading the same way we are, what a coincidence, huh?"

Mr. Midas and his crew looked at me, then the old fisherman, then me again. I felt my face burn as I saw the gears fall into place inside Mr. Midas' mind. "No," he began. "You didn't come here with *him*, did you? I thought this rag you wear is just so that your tux won't be soiled. So all these years when you showed up to our outings –why'd you keep it a secret that you haven't recovered from '98?"

I could only glance at my feet, son, the way you did when I first asked you about the dark girl you made your wife. I couldn't recall a more humiliating moment in my life.

Grace Kim



Sophomore
Major: Computer Science

Grace enjoys gardening, knitting, and crocheting, and making up stories!

Untitled

Staring at the freckled carpet, Jimmy counted the individual flecks of brown among the other flecks of a lighter brown—*is that tan...? Oh wait, people call it "taupe" I think.* Jimmy decided the lighter brown was actually beige as he refocused his vision. *Great, now I have to start over...*

"Jim-Jam, why aren't you eating your eggs? Is the carpet that interesting?" Phyllis chuckled tiredly.

"Sorry Mom. Just distracted..."

"I actually think we might need to change the carpet. Y'know it used to be white before we started renting the apartment. Now I think it's gotten to a—to a brown-ish color. Geez, I mean...how did it even get to that color?! It's the same color as your tan pillowcase!"

"It's beige."

"Jim-Jam c'mon. The pillow is definitely tan. I mean, the label said "tan" when I bought it—"

"No mom, I meant the—never mind it's not important."

Jimmy hopped off of the bus and walked to the nursing home across the

street; that's where he hung out with his friends after school. A stray breeze kissed his cheek and patches of goose bumps spiked his arms, but the September heat quickly flattened them. Like the way he ties his shoe, Jimmy absentmindedly pushed the red button by the door and stated, "It's Jimmy John." The door buzzed and he stepped inside the air-conditioned building. It wasn't too cold, because old people can't hold heat in their bodies anymore. He smelled the old-people smell, but as usual, he couldn't distinguish it anymore after a few minutes.

"Hey Jimmay, how's it goin."

"Hey Phyllis. How are you."

Jimmy walked past Phyllis the receptionist, neither answering each other's usual small talk, which is weirdly normal in Parchpaunch, and I guess in America in general. The interior of the retirement home was designed to mimic old-timey stores and homes of the '80s, to make the old people feel more comfortable as if they were back in the times of their youth.

Jimmy spotted his gang of friends sitting by a table, and he walked over to their herd of wheelchairs. He greeted them with a meek "Hey guys, how's it goin."

"Joey!! You're finally visiting your old man after all!"

"No Peter, it's Jimmy, not Joey."

"What? Huh? What are you talking on about, Joey?"

"I'm Jimmy, remember? I've been coming here every day after school."

The others assured Jimmy that "Peter's just been having a hard time remembering names lately...and faces..." Another one of his friends was showing the early signs of Alzheimer's and Jimmy felt a stone drop in his stomach because he knew the mental deterioration that he would witness. When grandpaps lived here a couple years ago with the same affliction, Jimmy visited every day after school so that he could talk with his grandpaps as much as he could before August 29th. It's been a week since the anniversary, and Jimmy thought about the inevitable addition of another anniversary where his stomach will fill with stones. But he already thought about the day when all of his friends would be gone. Mike, Dan, Phyllis, Peter, Cam, Phyllis, Phyllis. They'd all be stones in his stomach and stones on a lawn.

"How's school Jimmy? Kids still treating you mean?" Phyllis asked like she always does. This Phyllis had curly white hair unlike the others.

"Not today. They're all too excited about the watermelon eating contest coming up."

"You're competing right? I think that's just what you need to gain those kids' respect."

"I can't, Phyllis. Those people eat too fast. I don't have a chance. I'm only 11!"

"The trick is practice. Practice, practice, practice...practice..pract...pr."

Phyllis's head bobbed as she napped in her wheelchair. Classic Phyllis.

Jimmy's other friends agreed that winning the annual watermelon-eating contest would for-sure get him some friends his own age. The champions always did bask in glory after their victory...*Maybe this was my chance to prove himself to those jerks at school. Maybe I would amount to something unlike my deadbeat dad.* Jimmy was so excited on his walk to the grocery store that he wasn't hearing a fuzzy radio; he was hearing the distant roar of a cheering stadium after he won the watermelon-eating contest. Jimmy wasn't feeling the warmth of the afternoon sun on his face; he was feeling glory only known to champions. The practice watermelons totaled to a lot more than Jimmy expected. With a sigh, Jimmy spent all of his birthday money along with his allowance. *It'll all be worth it.* Carrying one watermelon in his backpack and hefting the other in his flabby arms, Jimmy walked home to an empty house.

The next morning, Jimmy sat up in the pleather armchair and thought about those kids at school with those mean words and those tall athletic bodies which he thought were perfect for watermelon-eating. *Why am I the one without a dad? Why am I the one with the clothes from the thrift store?* The Saturday morning sun glued his pale thighs to the chair's seat and each time he shifted his weight, Jimmy's skin pulled in an unpleasant way, but not unpleasant enough to force him to move to another chair. *Alright if I'm gonna eat a bunch of watermelons, what's the best way to do that?* With one last pull of his skin, Jimmy escaped the pleather chair and reached in the cabinet for a pack of Saltine crackers.

He was glad that his mother worked too much to watch him practice. She asked too many questions anyway and no champion has ever won a watermelon-eating contest while answering his mom's questions. Four crackers were enough to leave Jimmy unable to talk. It was time for the watermelon to work its magic. The melon itself was already sliced thickly by Phyllis before she left for work at dawn. Jimmy took an extra thick slice by the hard rind and shoved as much of the triangle into his parched face-hole. The craving for something wet wasn't quite quenched yet, so Jimmy kept on eating slice after slice, and when he couldn't feel the cracker anymore, he restarted the process again. Cracker, cracker, cracker, dusty cough, cracker. Watermelon. There were several times when Jimmy thought about leaving the rest of the watermelon for another practice session, but he knew deep in his sloshy stomach that he needed to finish the whole thing *now*. A champion

is someone who eats the whole watermelon as fast as possible. *I'm better than my dad..no matter what the other kids say!* Jimmy reflected to what Phyllis said yesterday after the other Phyllis fell asleep. *Just...DO IT!* "JUH...DVOO IHHHH!!!!" Jimmy muffled while grabbing the last thick slice and fully engulfing the triangle until all that was left was a trapezoid rind.

The next two weeks were full of empty rinds and full stomachs. Jimmy got good. Jimmy got *real* good. When he signed up for the contest Jimmy could only think of how he'll finally have friends his own age he'll mature with instead of spending his time with friends who mentally regress while he grows. Jimmy appreciated having friends at the retirement home; Peter and Phyllis and Phyllis have been real good to him but as an 11-year-old, Jimmy was allowed to wish for acceptance. He wanted kids to acknowledge him as a peer, not as a piece of furniture to ignore or abuse, and if that meant eating watermelon until he could physically hear the watermelon slosh in his stomach, then that's what Jimmy was gonna do.

"Ay Jim..Wake up. It's closing time, man. I gotta go home."

Jimmy John Sr. didn't wake up until the bartender and owner of the pub shook Jimmy John's shoulders. This was typical on a Wednesday night and the extent of any connection between Jim and the owner. Jim sputtered out a cough and asked what was going on.

"Hey man, I'm sorry to kick you out like this, but it's 3am and I have a wedding to go to tomorrow."

How could the owner kick out *Jim John Sr., his most loyal customer?* Jim shifted his weight onto his right foot as he slid off the stool, but he quickly buckled under his sleepy foot. His palms caught the floor and were coated with grainy bits of dirt and broken dreams. Dusting his hands on his raggedy jeans, Jim eventually stood up. With a jelly neck and a heavy skull, Jim said, "Wha—what...uh..wedding for what.."

"Huh?"

"Who's uh..who's getting wedding'd?"

"My son. That's why I gotta go home now. I gotta be there for him tomorrow."

"Oh..ahahahh I see."

"Yup. It's a big day—alright Jim I really gotta leave. Let's go."

Like how he ties his shoe, Jim absentmindedly reached for his wallet and presented the owner with a credit card that of course was declined. And

again like how he ties his shoe, Jim told the owner to put everything on his tab. The owner sighed and was just glad that he could finally lock up. Usually drunk people order taxis or have a friend pick them up, but Jim didn't have the capacity to do either of those things, so he staggered with a sloshy stomach and walked home to an empty house.

At school, Jimmy told everyone who would listen about how he would win the watermelon-eating contest. At first, they ignored him or scoffed at the image of *Jimmy John actually winning something*, but Jimmy's rising confidence definitely showed. He didn't look so intently at the floor anymore. He started expecting people to respond to what he said instead of pretending he wasn't there. The hallway chatter whispered Jimmy's name and his quest every so often, and the kids took notice of Jimmy's bouncy step.

I'm gonna win. I'm gonna win. I'm gonna win. Remember to smile and remember their names. *These kids are gonna be my future friends after all.* Jimmy smiled not because he reminded himself to, but because his life was finally coming together. The gang at the retirement home pitched in some money to fund Jimmy's training and they were all rooting for him, except for Peter didn't know who Jimmy was anymore. Jimmy's mom planned on taking the shift off her second job to go and cheer for Jimmy at the contest, which was quite a big deal because Phyllis almost never took a day off. They couldn't afford it. It seemed like they were all counting on Jimmy to prove himself. Is Jimmy a real champion?

"Hey Sandwich-boy, is it true you're competing this weekend?"

"For the last time, Phyllis, my name is Jimmy not 'Sandwich-boy' and yes, yes I am competing."

"Wooowww lil' Jimmy John's gonna be the hero of Parchpaunch!" Phyllis cupped her hands around her mouth with sarcastic excitement. "Everybody! Jimmy's gonna eat watermelon until he pukes! Make sure to come and watch him embarrass himself!"

The rest of the hallway chuckled and Jimmy could see some kids who felt bad for him, but glad at the same time because rather Jimmy than them. His ears were hot and eyes watery, but after a pause, Jimmy said what was on his mind.

"Hey at least I would be puking on accident unlike you...*Phyllis.*"

Most of the hallway didn't hear Jimmy's sick burn, but the ones who did looked impressed. They quickly fixed their expression when Phyllis looked at them angrily.

"That was quite a delivery, but not as fast as you're advertised huh

Sandwich-boy? And you know what, at least I have both parents.”

Phyllis walked away with her posse leaving Jimmy to finally eat his lunch in peace. In the quiet of the moment, Jimmy replayed his conversation with Phyllis in his head. *What could I have said differently? Aw man, I should have just like walked away in the middle of her sentence. That would've been so cool. I would've looked soo cool.* Jimmy smiled to himself, proud that he had stood up Phyllis and actually didn't cry this time. Today's lunch of tuna sandwich with generic mayonnaise tasted extra good with a side of justice. He couldn't wait until he could tell the gang back at the retirement home. They would probably say that he should really tell his mom about how mean those kids are to him, but Jimmy didn't want to give her another thing to worry about. She was already stressed over the bills and if we're gonna have to move again. Jimmy saw no reason to become another gray hair on his mom's head.

Jim looked around his cubicle for the stapler. *Man maybe I left it in a drawer or something.* Opening the lower drawer containing all the junk that he accumulated, Jim found that his stapler was definitely not in there. But a photo of his son stuck out of that pile of junk and Jim looked at the baby picture with shame. It was a couple years since he felt the shame that always came after looking at this picture. *I wonder what Jimmy's doing right now... probably hanging out with his friends from school or something or maybe playing video games...*The thought of reaching out to his son unburied itself like a zombie out of a horror movie. Jim wanted to see how his son was doing, but at the same time, he didn't want Jimmy to know what a failure his father is. What a deadbeat alcoholic looks like. *I guess it couldn't hurt to look him up and maybe something will show up.* Jim searched his son's name and school and it was on Parchpaunch's parks and rec website that Jim learned that Jimmy was competing in the watermelon-eating contest. The night at the bar flashed in Jim's mind. *"It's his big day...I gotta be there for him..."* the owner said. *I should be there for my son! There's no bigger event of the year in Parchpaunch than the watermelon-eating contest and dammit if my son isn't going to have his father cheering for him.*

Jim resolved that he had to stay sober for the contest. He had to stop drinking for just one day. Jim took a quick swig out of his flask. *Maybe I should let Jimmy know that I'm coming to see him.* Jim played with that idea for a couple seconds before overthrowing it in favor of surprising his son with his presence. *He'll be so happy, he'll be even more motivated to win! It'll all work out!*

It was the morning of the contest. It was the time of day when the sun was hot and strong, but there was still morning dew scattered on the shadowed grass, so I guess it was around 10:49am on a Saturday morning. It was also the time of day when a nice corndog and a chilly smoothie would be on

everyone's mind, but not today. No, today was a day where only watermelon would be eaten. The contest itself was always held on a pasture on a farm so that way, no one would feel bad leaving the watermelon rinds and all of the fruit in the farm's compost heap. It was just an easy cleanup and the kids sure enjoyed petting the beards competing in the beard-growing contest that happened at the same place as the watermelon-eating contest. I mean, there wasn't a good reason why; that's just what ended up happening every year.

Jimmy was already working up his thirst in the field while the workers were setting up the stage and the watermelon line-up. He had brought a whole sleeve of crackers and they rested comfortably in his deep boy-pants pockets. Throughout the whole morning, Jimmy had been careful to expand his stomach with sips of water. *Some of these chumps must be starving themselves thinking they'll leave room for the watermelon, but they don't understand that you actually eat less when the stomach is compact like that.* Jimmy knew this strategy through the years of all-you-can-eat buffets on only the most special of holidays. He and Phyllis couldn't afford to eat like kings unless it was at a buffet, so Jimmy developed a strategy to get as much food as possible during one meal. Phyllis herself was still at work, but she would be coming to the contest in time to see Jimmy win it all. Taking another sip of water, Jimmy felt the sunbeams toasting his skin pleasantly and the wind tasted sweet. Even though he felt a little nervous, it was the first time he was pursuing a goal of his own volition. Taking steps to win the contest felt like an accomplishment itself—the weeks of honing his skill and finding what strategies worked and what didn't required discipline and introspection. Today was a big day indeed.

Jim had also been taking sips of water throughout the morning. It was the first time he had been completely sober in years and the withdrawal symptoms were definitely showing. "His palms were sweaty, knees weak, arms were heavy" as the great Abraham Lincoln would say. But no matter how severe the symptoms were, Jim was determined to be there for his son. For his little Jim-Jam. For now, Jim sat alone at a picnic table trying to ignore the summer heat that leaned on his body like a stranger who fell asleep on your shoulder on the airplane, whose breath manifested as wimpy wisps of breeze, uncomfortably "moist" and claustrophobic. Jim scoped the area for Jimmy, but there were too many children with dark hair and glasses. *Geez louse I don't even know what my own son looks like anymore. I guess I'll know it's him when they announce his name.* And so, Jimmy John Sr. established base camp at the picnic table hoping that the other families won't try to sit with him.

The contestants were prepped with the rules of the contest:

1. Each contestant must eat the watermelon without any assistance whatsoever.

2. Failure to abide by Rule 1 results in instant disqualification.

3. Whoever finishes two watermelons first wins, and if no one finishes within 45 minutes, then the person who has eaten the most watermelon wins.

Jimmy had already familiarized himself with the rules, so he used this time to look at his competitors. Of course Jonathan Cha was here (he never wins but he always kept on trying) and Jimmy also recognized last year's champion, Grace Kim. She was quite the beast, but Jimmy thought he could take her on. He gave them all a genuine handshake as they lined up behind the table. The line of triangles was intimidating, but Jimmy reminded himself that he only needed to focus on one rind at a time. *Just do it. Just. Do it.*

The announcer introduced the contest and its contestants and that's when Jim realized that the little pudgy kid in the middle was next to another pudgy kid who was his son. He saw Jimmy shove a few...crackers..in his mouth..? *What..is this kid doing?*

And then the airhorn screamed.

All seven contestants hoisted the watermelon up to their faces and made the red disappear. Jimmy was on a roll; he was already halfway through his first watermelon within 5 minutes. People were starting to cheer for him and the kids from school were all watching and they started chanting Jimmy's name. He could win. He could do it. Phyllis even made it in time to watch her son from the very start and she was hollering as loud as she could.

Oh. Phyllis is here. And she's cheering for Jimmy...I need to cheer for Jimmy. This is his big day and I'm here for him.

Jimmy was halfway through his *second* watermelon, eating at the same caliber as Grace, when he heard an unfamiliar familiar voice. Glancing up from his rind, Jimmy saw his father who he hadn't seen in four years whooping and waving his arms. The shock of this spontaneous reunion was enough for Jimmy to lose focus and fall behind Grace's pace. He witnessed his mother realize Jim's presence too and she ran over to his picnic table and interrogated him on why he finally showed up to their lives after all these years.

The airhorn screamed. Tears bubbled in Jimmy's eyes, because he knew that he didn't win. He wasn't a champion. It was all a bust. Jimmy wanted to yell, he wanted to scream, but he couldn't. There was still watermelon in his mouth. He realized that when you hold food in your mouth for too long, it starts tasting like disappointment. He could feel his peers watching his reaction and how they must be thinking, "Wow I knew all along that sandwich-boy couldn't do it." Jimmy spit out the watermelon and ran from the stage. He ran past his arguing parents who stopped arguing in time to see him fail

and he ran past Phyllis and the other Phyllis. There were too many damn Phyllises in this town. Jimmy ran until he couldn't see through the tears anymore, and then he walked home to an empty house. Lying in bed in silence while he still could, Jimmy dreamed. He dreamed of a world where he won. There were many congratulations and Peter still remembered his name and all the kids from school respected him and Jimmy belonged in the world. Nothing would matter as long as he belonged in the world.

When Jimmy woke up from his dream, Phyllis and his dad were sitting at the edge of his bed. "Jimmy, we're so sorry about what happened, and we don't blame you if you don't want to talk about it." His loss did happen in real life, Jimmy realized. It wasn't just a distant nightmare. The loser lost and that was that, but tears didn't wet his vision. Losing didn't feel so bad after a good cry and a good nap. *I did something for once—for myself. I tried my best and I didn't win, but at least I did it.* Jimmy craved something sweeter than victory now.

"Can we get some ice cream?"

"Sure thing, Jim-Jam."

Alex Kime



Junior

Major: Creative Writing and Literature

Alex is a junior with a double minor in Community Action and Social Change and Intergroup Relations Education. He is the program facilitator for the VOLUME Youth Poetry Project at The Neutral Zone and was a recipient of the 2014 Jeffrey L. Weisburg Memorial Prize in Poetry. His work can be found in *Uncommon Core: Contemporary Poems for Learning and Living*, *The Michigan Daily*, and others.

grinch

late at night, after he wakes me up with a face full of snow, the moment goes like this: *it would have happened anyway*, my brother justifies, everything he had ever said and done to invalidate shame or scare me hanging from his snarl as my queerness gets thrown under the bus of his reasoning. to him, I was predestined disaster, haunted floorboards before the first shoe. it is 5am on December 26th. he is a teeming chimera like he might have always been, and nothing seems like it's changed since the dysfunction of my childhood. nothing but me. I don't feel like this because my heart shrunk. quite the opposite in fact.

when I was consecrated

insomnia was a wanton god knocking
and thus the guest of honor the moment he walked in,

hands running over everything. he declined my offer
to hang his jacket but accepted the drink & the glass
it came with, and even the pitcher too.
already he said he loved me, and thus
already he demanded my throat
as an offering.

I say already. I mean
five lifetimes. I mean he was vapor
and thus everywhere around me, and now
I'm singing colors into my hair at all hours
until it is a crown, creation ritual
barely satiating the divine hunger
to destroy.

accretion

noun

the coming together and cohesion of matter under the influence of gravitation to form larger bodies; the process of growth or enlargement by a gradual buildup

if life began as a single-celled organism then so too did my conscience. I don't remember the specific day it started or the twinge that must have happened, infinite distance between one and zero, but how quickly did I cease to see it, that first lie to my parents and the half negative of an image of a computer and the convenience of the untruth, the smallest planet before it realized oceans of its own. what is anything without a process, god or otherwise?

today I was told that a keloid is scar tissue that just keeps growing, unexpected but a kind of addition just the same. I'm a vector in that even when standing still some part of me has both a speed and a direction. my body cannot tolerate the physics so I tear through my own form too often.

the last stars I took the time to sit and see in the sky dance at the edge of my loose-lipped memory. the act of forgetting is cruel and merciful, sometimes at the same time. am I alive because I have dulled the edges of myself? what I experience these days stands stark, contrasting the mind and body that were also once called mine.

nothing touches each other at the sub-molecular level. what's a process without a beginning? oxytocin is the chemical of intimacy. race is a socially enforced social construct. I work myself up about how much I care and that is as beautiful as it is dangerous. if life comes with any lessons it is the abso-

lutely finite nature of my being and the inherent but also necessary cost that comes with growth.

the earliest vivid memory I have starts with a view of a tiny plastic play kitchen in a room with white walls and a doorway without a door into the real kitchen. my mother is there washing dishes with the sunlight shrouding her head perfectly. whether ourselves or anything else, not enough attention is ever given to the start.

nowhen

first, a snapshot: body stilled, slow from evening slumber. the early night, purple sheets, disoriented. hand on knee in bed, not moving at all, face a mask of storms.

never having deleted a single voicemail off my phone in the two years I've had it catches up to me when there is no space left and it's time to condense. one cursory scroll, his name over and over again.

I had almost forgotten the pocketdials, my frustration with their persistence tempered by fascination, his world on the other side of the static

this particular recording took place on August 14th of the previous year, 6:16 pm. his voice, then mine, walking into my room.

I don't remember what I wore that day, or if the weather was less than perfect. the pocket fabric of his shorts makes that other life tinny and far away but I know better. I live on the same floor in a different room. I know how long this hallway is.

give me your moment of clarity, a world you knew because the loose threads could be traced as they gathered three degrees from yourself, ear to phone to pocket. I'm held frozen by the sheer mess of it, the way everything has aligned so fucking

nicely. I want to punch H.G. Wells
in the face as I eavesdrop for every scrap.

duende, a performance of what I can do to myself

"I have heard an old maestro of the guitar say, 'The duende is not in the throat; the duende climbs up inside you, from the soles of the feet.'"—Lorca

I vomited the boy. a right hand first, callused and familiar. arm, shoulder, that damn hair. I wonder if he'll take everything with him and I will lose everything that saved me. as he climbs out of me I think about writing him into everything, how he left and that next moment that I can remember sunlight in the window I told the world it was magic. now this. how comparatively painless, for the rest of him to leave at once.

I'm tired of writing about him anyway. wrung myself out, found only these stale thoughts: the world cruel and love poems cliché. the point is that the not-him is out of me now. I did this myself. the point is I have my hands over my eyes because I don't want to look. I did this myself. call me bad Xerox but I don't want the two hims to find each other, for how deeply I cared to be obvious to everyone with an eye for detail in this new carbon, whether the well-nourished nature of my haunting or the tinted flowers in my eyes.

writing what I need to means killing the son my parents thought they had

it's the night of Halloween on into the morning and Meredith and I are underneath the baby nightlight with the same album looped, studied like a bible or an academic exercise. we're young and smart enough to be sad so we'll take each one and turn it over. she's our age, and queer, and she writes beautiful lyrics we take apart and relate to ourselves. the song changes. I think about how J was picked up by his parents, and how that probably means rehab, how many of our friends are not okay. the way work school and few funds come together is a hell of a thing. we'll think we're original and maybe we are or something. we're desolate, existential, and seeking to keep our heads above water but the truth is also something to navigate. at all times I imagine the perfect son I could have been instead of the shadows on the wall I can't help but make. it's 5am in her living room with that same pool of light on the ceiling. every ten minutes I'll mention my family edgewise and my eyes will film with tears, like bad clockwork, like every third song.

on having a witch head, a candle, a onesie from Studio Ghibli's Totoro, a grotesque sculpture of a pig chef eating pasta, and half a pomegranate

it is strange that yesterday I uttered
the word home with the opposite of a qualifier
so now it is the truth I suppose, confirming
the vacuum felt in the shell my mom owns,
or my father's place I haven't slept at, to say nothing
of his new wife and step-six-year old to parent,
to not even speak of how nice they are or how
she calls him dad. the space I can now populate
with myself is at times a room and twenty-two
everything else is a visit or storage. I came to this house
with no room left to push and look at everything I can find here.
my walls are green. my sheets are purple. I have a bookshelf
above my bed and it's also where I put my glasses. it is small
and mine and enough. I can feel safe here. my key fits
in the lock. above my bed some previous inhabitant
left those glow-in-the-dark stars from my 90's childhood,
a tidepool of a cosmos bursting from the corner
in the nights I lay there, center of a new kind of universe.

Wilson Kung



Sophomore

Major: Screen Arts and Culture

Minor: Creative Writing

Wilson is a sophomore studying Screen Arts and Cultures and Creative writing at the University of Michigan. He is from California, but has lived in both Taipei and Beijing as a child. In his spare time, and in addition to writing stories and watching movies, Wilson also boxes for the University of Michigan boxing team.

Untitled

His Kenworth eighteen-wheeler was pregnant with five thousand pounds of refrigerated salmon when it glided down the two-lane Oklahoma highway. Hours ago he had passed the only trees for the next two hundred miles. He didn't have enough time to have a good look; to properly appreciate the stiff figures that helped him break up the monotony of the plains. The trees in Oklahoma did not grow the same way they did in say, Northern Arizona. They grew solitary here, not in bunches, sprouting from the ground like a streak of backwards lightning. At one point in his life he thought the sight of these asymmetrical trees after a long haul to be a wonderful sight. Today, he thought of the trees sinking patiently into the surrounding swamps. The passing storm had raised the water level so that the trees reflected perfectly from the swamp's surface.

He was glad to be on the near-empty highway today. Last week he had pulled off on the side of the road, climbed down from his truck, and laid in the middle of the road with the smell of burnt rubber, tempting another truck

to drive on by. He had felt his skin crumple against the pimply road. He wondered if that was what it'd feel like to press his face against a starfish. The sky was a cheap, pale blue. The storm clouds had barreled their way across the plains ahead of him in the night and as he looked out his left window, he saw miniature canyons that snaked along the highway. Small streams had carved them into the plains thousands of years ago but the water had given up before they could achieve any depth. The ground sloped inward like a jagged trough; a scar on the never-ending flatland, constantly scabbing over with newly sprouted grass. Ahead, he saw turbines spinning in the wind. They had been planted into the landscape with such authority they could not be ignored, even when going at the speed limit of eighty miles per hour. Some of them had stopped spinning.

The Eagles' *Tequila Sunrise* began playing on the radio. This would be the eighth time he listened to this song since the last rest stop. He remembered that the band had just finished their final tour. He had wanted to see them live, but that would not happen now.

It was early in the morning when he came into the truck stop. The sun was just beyond the horizon when he walked across the street towards a rundown diner, anchored to the side of the road like it had been dropped from a plane. The bright green neon letters read "The Two-Palm Diner," although there weren't any palm trees around. The sky was beginning to glow blue with the slowness of a heating coil but he was too tired to be looking up. Instead he looked down at his boots and thought of the swollen feet inside. He saw the clay-red dirt and the silhouettes of horned cliffs in the distance and knew in the back of his mind that he was somewhere between Arizona and New Mexico. His mind vibrated with the frequency of his diesel engine and he thought of the giant refrigerator he had attached to the back of his vehicle. As he walked into the diner his mind was on the dead fish he was hauling. A refrigerator is no place to be buried, he thought. He sat down in an empty booth at the back of the diner. The red synthetic leather, cracked with age, squeaked under his weight. There were a few other men in the diner and because their faces were also unshaven and because when he looked into their eyes he imagined shutting garage doors, they were truckers like him.

"Heya, Jim. I was wondering when you were going to roll through."

Sallie, who had been waitressing for over twenty years and owned the diner along with her husband, walked over to his table. She had in her hand a pot of coffee.

"Morning."

"Morning to you, too. Say, it's been a while seen you came through."

They still got you running the same route?"

"Yes ma'am."

"It sure is good to see you. Most of the other drivers who come in here, well they just got no manners or nothing, don't got the time for a friendly chat. That's what I like about you Jim, you always were one to listen."

"Sure."

"What can I get for you?"

"Steak and eggs. Some coffee too."

"I'll be right back"

He fiddled with the miniature jukebox on the table. It was covered in little brown stains that could be either grease or rust and the knobs creaked angrily when turned.

"Here you go, steak and eggs. You want some sugar and milk or anything?"

"Sure."

"You know that storm that passed through around here? The place was flooding like it was the end of days, dear God you would not believe. Anyways, I heard the flash flood washed away this Navajo woman from the reservation. She was just walking around doing whatever it is they do and the waters just came. Washed her away like she was a twig. It happens all the time really, someone go missing, chances are they were killed in a flood. They never did take good care of their own. *I heard* the police already stopped searching for the body. Shame really. What do you think of that, Jim?"

"Is there a pharmacy around here?"

"Pharmacy? One just in town, about twenty miles. But what you looking for a pharmacy for?"

"Trouble sleeping."

"Let me get you some more of that coffee now."

"Did they find the body?"

"What's that?"

"The body."

"Oh right, that poor Navajo woman. No, they really didn't."

By high noon he had parked his truck along a flat patch of dirt near the side of the road. These were not highway roads and it had taken some maneuvering. The truck had almost tipped and when it didn't, he had thought of a news story he once saw of a highway accident involving a Budweiser truck. People had come out of their cars to scavenge the cans of beer that had been spared by the collision. He wondered if they would do the same for his salmon. He had passed into the reservation a couple of miles back but besides a rundown sign, there was no indication that he was someplace new. The desert plain extended for as far as he could see. Great anvil-like mountains shone with a dull red in the distance. Patches of green shrubs dotted the landscape of yellowing grass and black leafless bushes. The soil was the color of burnt sand. The 30mg of Restorill he had taken an hour ago was beginning to take affect. The pharmacy had said this was their strongest, but it was over the counter, and he wondered what would happen if he was to take the whole bottle, all thirty tablets, at once. He contemplated taking at least a few more before he set out. When he stepped down from the driver's seat, he felt a heavy warmth wash over him. The air was dense like a liquid and he felt himself drowning. The left side of his body was tanner than his right; constant exposure from the window had made him less sensitive to the sun in those parts. He slung onto his shoulders a backpack, and stepping into the brush, he left behind the truck.

He walked for some time. At first, he had only wanted to see the great red rock that lay at the center of the reservation, but when he reached it and realized he had no feeling towards it, he continued on. He was drawn into the desert, as if his footsteps could somehow add to its emptiness. Soon, his shirt became wet from perspiration and he wondered if he would be brave enough to die of thirst. He wondered what kinds of ants or lizards lived in the Mojave. The walking was tedious and he looked for a place to rest. He wondered if he would find a good place to sleep and he felt for the bottle of sleeping pills in his pockets. If he wanted to, there would be enough, he thought.

Sometime before sunset, he had found the Navajo woman's body. She was coiled around the crooked trunk of a Joshua tree. When he found her like that, face down, her body bent in an unnatural angle, wrapping itself half-way around the thick branches that blossomed into green pineapple tops, he thought himself unlucky to have found her. He hated the idea that he might now be responsible for the body. He also thought it ridiculous that there was a national park in California named after such a tree. She wore torn cargo pants and a faded red flannel; her black hair was hopelessly tangled in the bark of the Joshua tree, and as he walked closer, he saw that her skin was wrinkled and dry from the desert heat. He stopped a handful of steps away from the tree. This was close enough, he thought.

He circled the tree, taking in all the angles in which the body and the

tree came together. Removing the body would not be more difficult than untying a knot. But when he approached the body, he did not know where to start. When he looked up, the clouds that hung just above the horizon seemed thin and stretched out. The sky was blue but the setting sun painted the clouds a sharp luminescent orange. He stood there watching the sun, and as it shifted so too did the shadows on her face. For a brief moment, the Navajo woman's mummified face seemed to move with expression. The light outlined her brow and the bloated eyes that protruded from them, shaping them into an inquisitive stare. The eyes, monstrously large and the color of rotting chestnuts, seemed to stare back at him quizzically. He looked down to her nose, a black, leathery piece of overstretched skin pulled taut across her cheekbones. Intuitively, he held his hand to his face in disgust. He felt for the firmness of his own nose and ran his fingers through the prickly stubble on his cheeks. Suddenly he felt very cold and very thirsty. He could feel the bottle of Restoril press against his jean pocket like a cancerous lump.

When he finally reached for the woman, he was surprised to find that her body came free from the tree easily. He was startled by how light the body felt, how fragile and tender it seemed. He took a moment to gather his courage. The woman's obsidian hair still attached her to the tree and he had to untangle them from the trunk before he could pick her up. He imagined that he was simply pulling hair from a comb. But her coarse hair had braided itself so tightly around the tree's spikes; it was as if the hair grew from the tree itself. The sky had become a tone of indigo blue and he knew it would soon be too dark for him to see. He wondered if this woman had a family. He hoped that she was not somebody's wife. His hands reached around her neck protectively. With a sudden violence, he tore her free from the tree. Most of her long black hair now hung freely from the tree. Parts of her scalp were still attached, but it was dark enough for him to ignore this detail.

Suddenly he noticed that her body radiated soft warmth and his fingers tightened around the base of her skull. Her skin felt rubbery and smooth like the bark of a birch tree but he felt no gentleness in them. They were black, as if charred by fire, and he could not tell how old she might have been. With his other hand, he pulled her up by the legs and hoisted her into a fireman's carry. But even through her clothes he could feel the brittleness of her dried body. As he began to walk, he tried to avoid touching her skin. The sun was fully faded now and strained his eyes to avoid tripping over a rock. While she was not heavy, less than fifty pounds he thought, his shoulders strained from the weight. He thought about leaving her. But when he remembered the sinking acceptance he had felt when he saw his own wife's body, he knew there was someone who needed to see the corpse.

He began to hum the Eagle's *Tequila Sunrise*, the lyrics playing in his head like a stuck phonograph. *Take another shot of courage, Wonder why the right words never come. It just gets numb.* He had trouble remembering the rest, which frustrated him but there was nothing to be done about

it. Although the Restorill had worn off hours ago, he realized that he had not slept in a very long time.

By the time he reached his truck, there was very little light left in the sky and his feet dragged from the exertion. Breathing heavily, he set the body down by the front tires. He opened the passenger door and, with one jerk, hoisted her into the seat. Careful not to touch her skin, he arranged her in a seated position. Her head hung limply from the seat back as he secured her with the seatbelt. He circled around and entered from the driver's side. He reached for the Restorill and took a handful of pills without water. He turned on the fan, closed his eyes, and slept.

When he awoke, it was still night and his hands intuitively felt for the steering wheel. He turned the ignition but realized that he had left the engine running. He looked over to the body that sat next to him and suddenly he noticed that it did not smell, as he thought it might have. Her head was turned away from him.

"What am I going to do with you?" He said.

He thought about leaving her somewhere in the reservation. Someone would find her if he just set her down by the side of the road. This is where she belongs after all, he thought. But he was the one who had found her and carried her body out of the desert. He pulled out from the shoulder and began to drive. He drove slowly and his headlights flashed bits of color into the narrow roads ahead of him.

"Where do you think you're taking her?" A voice asked.

He jerked his head to look at the body but saw that it did not move. Finally, taking his eyes off the road, he turned around and saw that it was his wife who was seated in the back. Her skin glowed with pale light, outlined by neon shades of blue. He looked up to see if it was the moonlight, but the waxing moon shone dully on the horizon; it was barely bright enough to silhouette itself against the night sky. He looked back at his wife and realized the light was emanating *from her*. Her skin had an odd translucent quality to it and she appeared flat, as if she was made of a singular pane of glass. He looked back at the body and wondered if the Navajo believed in ghosts.

She wore a tight fitting t-shirt, the kind she had worn before the years of marriage had changed her figure, and when he squinted, he saw that her face was young and with a child-like roundness as it had been when he had first met her. Her blonde hair was cut short, fitting itself perfectly around her delicate neck. When people had asked him, he had said that this was one of the reasons why he had first been drawn to her. He remembered how towards the end, she had not had the energy to maintain it and it had grown out down to her waist.

She had always called him James. Even though everyone in his family called him Jim and even though he preferred to be called Jim, she had insisted on calling him James. It was her nickname for him. He had always found the way she said it a little off-putting.

"What are you doing here, Ellie?" He asked.

"I need to talk to you." She said.

He rubbed his eyes with one hand but did not look back at her and instead stared at the road ahead. The plains opened up before him, the asphalt nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding desert. The tar-like darkness pushed in from each side of the car lights.

"But you're dead." He said.

"I know."

"What is there to talk about?"

"I know what you've been thinking of doing."

"That's not any of your business."

"Where are you taking that body, James?"

"To Tucson. There will be a morgue there. Someone to identify her."

"What's the point? You never were one to care for strangers. You know that time we were walking down the street in Las Cruces, it had been one of those moments when being home made you happy, not restless, so I remember, we saw this couple arguing and before we knew it, the man had pulled out a hammer and cracked open her skull. He ran but no one chased after him. You didn't even look at the body, you just kept on walking, we could have called the police."

"This is different. I found her."

"Why does that matter? You think you need to do something responsible?"

"Leave me alone. I'm driving."

"I always did wonder what you did with all the time you spend in this truck."

"I just need to make sure this body is taken care of."

"And then what?" She asked.

"I don't know." He said.

"Those pills don't work, James. I've tried."

"You have?"

"The week after my mother's funeral. At the reception, you refused to go inside. You just sat there on the church steps and smoked. I was so embarrassed. We fought that night. I don't even remember what it was I said, something about your family, but that was the first time you hit me."

"Yes, I remember."

"The week after, while you were on the road, was when I did it. They didn't do anything; I didn't even go to the hospital. Just woke up a day later feeling awful."

He turned towards her. His foot eased from the gas pedal and the oversized wheels of his truck rolled and rolled in the dark until they stopped. The Navajo woman jolted forward a few inches. Jim saw now how small the woman must have been, no more than 5'2 he thought. The body was shriveled but the features of her figure were intact. The hunched shoulders and slender arms pointed inward. Jim imagined her last moments; she must have braced against the wave before it washed her away. He wondered if she knew she was going to die, if the bracing had been simply instinctual, or if she had daringly tried to protect herself against the water.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I did it?" She asked.

"No." Jim said.

When Jim focused again on his wife, he was afraid of what he might find if he looked into her eyes so instead he looked down to her hands. How much time had he spent watching those slender hands, an artist's hands, at work? How many times had he felt them, calloused and dry, rub against his own skin? He had always loved the power and courage she held in those hands. He had once bought her an expensive jar of hand lotion but she had simply smiled and said her hands were not the kind that needed his care. They were the kind of hands that could hide the swelling of a black eye with makeup. They were hands that had not been born for the violence of his world but excelled in it nonetheless. He wondered if he would be able to hold them now.

"Are you here to stop me?" He asked.

"No, James." She said, "It's not about you."

"There's nothing left to say between us. It's been such a long time. I buried you."

"Why'd you stay on the road for so long?" She asked, "You must have

known there was something wrong between us. You could have found another job."

"I don't know. It wasn't the job."

"I never saw you. It was like I wasn't even married."

"You were taken care of." He said.

"I was so young when we met. Do you remember the day? I was still waitressing at that diner. You had steak and eggs. There was something about the way you smiled that made me feel so safe. Maybe it was because you took the time to read my nametag and call me by name. Here was a man who would be gentle to me, I thought."

"I married you, didn't I?"

"Do you regret it? It never seemed like we got along. It was always that I didn't give you enough space or I expected too much from you, if you wanted to be alone so badly why'd you marry me in the first place?"

"I don't know," He said, "Most of the time, I just didn't have the right words. I never knew what to say."

"Don't you know how lonely I was?"

He thought about the sleepless nights he spent cooped up in the driver's seat of his truck, the heat on full blast against the cold night. There were few truck stops in the Southwest that did not have prostitutes, but when he found himself in one of them, he would often have to spend the night awake and alone. There was a point in the night when he would accept the idea of him not sleeping and he would turn on the radio. Those were the nights when he thought of Ellie's hands, how they used to slide their way down his beltline. He remembered how they radiated with warmth as they rested gently just below his hips. In his mind, the two of them would be lying in their bed and she would not even bother to unbuckle his belt. After the accident (he still believed that it had been an accident), those were the nights when such a memory was the only way for him to fall asleep.

"No." He said.

"You're lost." She said after some time.

"There's only one road. I just have to keep going until I reach the I-40. Tucson won't be far from there."

But as he stared out the dirtied windows he saw that the desert had given way to angular cliff sides. The road curved around these towering mountains, and through his front lights, he saw glimpses of rust-red rings circling the sedimentary rock. This was the first time he saw them up close

and he wondered how far he was from the closest town.

"What happens when we get there?" She asked.

"I give her to the police. Drop her off at the morgue. Someone there will know what to do."

"And if they ask you how you found her?"

"I just did." He said.

"And after that? Will you go back to driving your route?" She asked, "Why are you still driving? You always did complain so much about it."

"It's my job." He said.

"Towards the end, when you started coming home less and less, I always wondered, was that because of the job?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"It matters. I need to know, James. Did you ever love me?"

He looked back on the day he had found her, dead for six days, on their living room couch, with a strange detachment. He remembered the hard shadows of his figure as he walked across their bare, dirt yard towards the door. It was noon. The haul he was returning from had only been two weeks. But when he opened the door and found her, he remembered how natural it had felt, how inevitable. He hadn't even been angry. It all seemed so clear to him, and he felt with a sick sureness, a part of him drop away. He knew then that whatever it was that fell from him that day, he would not be getting it back.

"I loved you." He said.

"You didn't even know I was using heroin." She said.

"I did. I suspected you were, not heroin maybe, but something. It wasn't hard for me to find the needles."

"Then why didn't you do something? You could have stopped me."

"I don't know. I didn't feel like it was my right. I thought that I had a hard enough time making myself happy, I had no business telling anyone else what to do. I didn't think it was dangerous. I'm sorry."

"But I was your wife."

"Sure."

"Didn't you care about me?"

"I did," He said, "most of the time."

His mind went to the time he first learned about the law of entropy in sixth grade science. His teacher had told the class that while it was easy to mix up the ingredients of a cake, it was a hell of a lot harder to separate them once it was baked.

They exited the asphalt road and he turned onto the concrete highway. The single lane became four and then eight. He could now see the distant lights of other cars speeding on ahead of him. Soon, statue-like buildings rose from the desert skyline, outlined by the backdrop of a wide mountain range. He pulled off the highway and saw the familiar Exxon's and Denny's that crowded every exit. He passed the lights of empty strip malls and saw palms dot the streets. After some time, the truck halted to a stop in front of the Tucson Police Department. Jim looked over once more at the Navajo woman. She would be buried soon he thought. There would be a procession. People would come claim her. In the dark, the corpse's face glistened. It was as if it were a well-polished piece of leather and he suddenly felt like he could no longer stand its presence.

"Do you think I will see you again soon?" He asked.

"I don't want to see you again. Please." She said.

"I've really let you down, haven't I?"

"I suppose."

He set the body down in front of the station by a brick column. Under the flickering street lamp, it looked as if she might have been sleeping. Without giving the body another look, he climbed aboard his truck. His wife was gone by the time he settled into his seat.

"Goodbye, Ellie." He said.

He pulled out from the police station and back onto the road. Before long, he again found himself surrounded by the desert landscape. Pulling out into a stretch of empty dirt, he parked his truck. He reached for his bottle of Restorill. Holding it in his hand, Jim felt the thirty tablets rattle in the tiny plastic canister. Finally, without opening the bottle, he placed it on the dash.

"That was a good thing." A voice said.

Jim turned around and saw that instead of his wife in the back seat, it was his brother. He was outlined in the same spectral blue light as his wife but with less intensity, and instead of flatness, he appeared full, as a living man would. Yet his presence felt empty, it was as if he did not want to assert himself into this world. His skin was not merely pale but fully translucent and his figure seemed like an outline traced in white chalk. But what Jim

was most surprised to see was his face. His familiar balding head was caked with dried blood, and just under his right brow, where a sharp blue eye used to be, there was a bullet hole. It was a hole that opened his face up like a blooming flower.

"Hello, Jimmy."

"Hello, Travis. I wasn't expecting you."

"Stop looking at my face dammit, it's not like I could slap a little bit makeup on and call it a day."

"I was going to say, this is the best you've ever looked."

"I see you're still a sour-mouthed son of a bitch."

They laughed at this joke, and suddenly the intimacy of their childhood came rushing back.

It had been a closed casket service. Jim remembered how delicately they had placed the American flag, folded into a triangle, on top of his wooden coffin. He had been the only member of his family in attendance. When Janice began to cry, he did not look for the words to comfort her with. He simply stood there in silence. He remembered how little sympathy he had for his brother's wife. She had not even known Travis for half the time he did, and yet she was the one in tears. Later on, when he attended his own wife's funeral, he remembered how he had not cried. He felt a tinge of shame at the memory and he hoped his brother would not ask him how Janice was doing.

"That woman, do you think they'll I.D. her?" Travis said.

"Sure. She's just another missing woman." Jim said.

"You didn't have to rescue her."

"No, I did."

"What the hell do you think you're doing out here, Jim?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"All those sleeping pills do is mess you up real bad."

"I know."

They laughed. Travis had always said his name with a playful teasing. The way the J rolled off his tongue and the way he held the M in his mouth made the name seem like the punch line to a joke. When they were young, Jim had loved the way his brother said his name.

"Well what do you plan to do now?"

"I think I'll just wait here."

"For what?"

"I don't know."

"You're not going to die, Jim."

"I've been suspecting that."

"Why don't you just go back home?"

"There's nothing for me back home. You don't know what it's like to wake up one day and find that you don't know how to be happy anymore. It isn't the chemicals in my brain or anything like that. It was just one day I realized that all this time, I couldn't find an inch of happiness left in me. It's like all the happy moments I was destined for are behind me somewhere. And I don't have the energy in me to reach for them. The way you go about driving all those highways, at some point you just have to turn it all off, and I didn't know how to turn it back on."

He was surprised he was still capable of saying so many words at once. He had not planned to say the things he did, but the words had burst forth like an overfilled dam.

"Sure. That's tough."

"That all you got to say Travis?"

"Go home." Travis said, "You want to hear a secret, Jim? When I ran out of cover and got shot to hell, I knew that I was going to die. It was on purpose. I wanted it. It was just this sinking feeling I had in the pit of my stomach, an instinct, I didn't even think about it, I just ran. And they shot me. You remember how when we were kids, and I would have nightmares and wake up screaming and crying? Dad would come, and since we didn't know if he had been drinking and was going to tell us off for waking him, or if he was just plain old dad that night, you would pretend like you had been crying too so we would both be in it together? It was like I was living in that nightmare, except this time, screaming and crying wasn't going to wake me up. Now, you might think that it was the war that really messed me up but it wasn't. Sometime after my first tour, I woke up one day, looked at myself in the mirror, and just realized how fucking tired I looked. And I felt exhausted. When I was home, I slept all day, but it wouldn't go away. Eventually I just stopped sleeping all together. When I was in Iraq, I believed full-heartedly that it was that *place* that was making me so damn unhappy. I thought if I could just see the sun rise over that Arizona desert with my wife one more time I would be happy. But when I came home, I couldn't stop thinking of

Iraq. In the end I was just switching one desert for another. That was when I realized it wasn't the place, it was me. I was just broken."

"Do you think it runs in the family?"

"What?"

"Wanting to kill ourselves."

"No, I don't think so."

"What about dad? You don't think all his smoking and drinking was him choosing the way he would go out? Or maybe he just never had the courage to grow old and see his son's lives go to shit like his did."

"I don't see what one thing has to do with the other."

Jim remembered then how much more hopeful they had been in their youth. How much they had dared to dream. He remembered sitting in his trash filled living room with his brother watching the Arizona Cardinals play, listing off their future statistics in the NFL. Or when they would sit by the window and look at the cars that passed through the gas station across the street, and dream of driving brand new convertibles. Those cars were always in a hurry to be somewhere else.

"And what about you? You think dragging yourself out here to die. Alone. You think that's courage?"

"No." Jim said.

"It wasn't brave what I did." Travis said.

"No, I don't suppose it was."

"I can't save you Jim."

"I don't need you to." They waited in silence for some time before Jim finally spoke again, "I guess spending all that time alone just really fucked me up."

Jim thought of his wife. About how much he had convinced himself he needed to see her. To feel the weight of her hands one more time. He thought of all the time he had wasted, about how easily he had smothered their love with his apathy. Suddenly, he could not feel any intimacy towards his wife. She seemed to him, in that moment, a stranger and no matter how hard he tried, he could not close the distance between them.

The sun began to creep its way past the jagged horizon. The very tips of those great red-rocked mountains began to shine with brilliant yellow.

"The sun is coming up."

"Goodbye, Travis."

As the sun worked its way upward, it painted the sky a bright acrylic orange. Blue and purple hues crossed in the sky and as the new light fell on the land, he saw the mosaic outlines of cacti and other vegetation. He watched the sunrise intently and wondered how many more of them he would have to see. Suddenly, he remembered the final lyrics to his favorite song. *It's another Tequila sunrise, And this whole world still looks the same. Another frame.*

He felt a strange sense of achievement at having completed this task. The hot redness of the sun seemed so natural here, the way it made its way across the red rocks and the red soil, it was as if the sunrise blended together the sky and the earth. He marveled at this moment of confusion. When his senses returned, he looked at where the body of the Navajo woman had been. With a sickness he realized that to live was his curse. He would not die that day.

Susan LaMoreaux



Junior

Major: German

Minor: Sustainable Food Systems, Art & Design, Creative Writing

Susan LaMoreaux is a junior in LSA, majoring in German and with minors in Art & Design, Creative Writing, and Sustainable Food Systems, a selection which accommodates some of her wide range of interests. When not participating in school-related activities such as class or homework, Susan enjoys cooking, dog walks, and reading and composing fiction and poetry. She is currently working on a number of fantasy novels, and would like to complete an MFA in art, writing, or perhaps both. In the meantime, she wants to take a year off after graduation to travel the world. She participated in the New England Literature Program last spring, and one of her poems, *Can I Make a Mountain*, won a Marjorie Rapaport Award from the 2015 Summer Hopwoods. During middle and high school, she was an active participant in creative writing workshops held by 826Michigan, a branch of a national tutoring non-profit, and had her work featured in many of their publications. She is a native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and has lived there all her life.

Transcendence

There was a moment—
I spoke of it
with my mother
this morning.
 You stood there
 brown dress and shining hair,

and the world around you so
green,
 truest
summer-hearted
 green—
your smile
 turn of footsteps, captured
in the box you held, books on books
 and yellow blossoms
opening
 gold.

You spoke, but I,
 skirt swaying, didn't hear
what was said.
 I was all sky, mind blue and pretty
catching clouds
 in this brilliant moment
of green leaves,
 sunlight.

We two, suspended
 inside summer, breathing it
full, finding
 where we left
 these secrets
as children—
 My grandfather's smile
sounding out this evening
 his son and grandson
taking turns
 to speak and listen.
 Refraction of summer sun
and wide blue skies—
 rainclouds and bolts of lightning,
all there
 in the simple question,
 glance of your eyes,
 cradled flowerpot,
 and the words—

Remember this always.

But I
 do not
 forget.

Four Ways of Dreaming

1) September

Months weren't enough time, but,
months ago, she stepped out under moonlight
in pajamas and bare feet, grass wet on skin, thinking
of you. Remember
how that turn of night signaled
her dreaming?

Skudding silver clouds dominate the face
of these memories, reaching, hitting —
always hitting a wall. Fist
on glass.

So all she can see when she looks at you
is her own self,
this bright reflection,
waiting.

2) August

Ooh — sigh of shag carpet, soft on her feet.
She drops her purse, sits between the mirror
and desk chair, desk's surface cluttered
with cards, shattered screens, and other things in dust
that you've forgotten
Are you okay? you say. Can I get you anything?
No, she replies, I'm
good.

You recline in the curve of door and wall, lit by late-afternoon light
from the window
set above the bed. —how can you possibly
be comfortable like that, she wonders
but doesn't ask.

And playing cards pass hand-to-hand
as you share stories
and listen
speak
listen.

She almost wins, but then
you crush her
instead.

3) July

On top of the time, she once thought —
now she's lost track, it's eat to live, and then try to run
away.

Do you know
how much she needs to see you?
When you say yes,
there's nothing in the world
but perfection,
city lamps lit
with a low-hanging moon, and the echo of song floating, following
your footsteps.
She'll watch and laugh, tell stories,
feeling safe among smiles, all shining
made-up
eyes.

Wouldn't it be wonderful
if an evening could last
forever?

4) June

No matter the passage of time, she knows
she will see you again. Who forgets their shirt
on top of a friend's luggage? – This dream's
breaking up. She thought she walked
under ancient oak; now dream
wakes into dream, watery as the shadows
of windowpanes, for just a moment
catching to a halt
in your arms.

Can you ever
understand the feeling? –That fission from ideas
into stark nothing, the reality
of this four-walled room
and its corners, the darknesses they hold?
–This is what she asks herself
as she lays back again, tries again
to fall asleep.

Within this moonrise, help her relive
those memories.
They belong
to you.

Friendly Advice from the God of Love

Sitting at your table, I see you there —
enjoying, for a moment, being pampered
even as your leather boots pinch your toes
and you've already cleaned your plate, fork skidding
in the remnants of those lovely mashed potatoes —
I had some, too, and weren't they delicious? Now
it's on to cake and candlelight
flickers over your face, and you wish
for more solid knowledge, direction and perception
with every ring of fork tines on the porcelain.
Someone else's wedding, you're thinking, a cousin's
but what does it matter?
It could be an uncle, or an aunt, and all the same ...
Well, Honey, let me tell you something.
There are things you choose, and there are those
that are chosen for you.
You can't choose your family, but one day you can decide
who you get to marry.
I know, I know — seems like it'll never come, but trust me,
it'll be here sooner than you think you want.
Enjoy the moment, sweetie. I want to see you sip your drink
and drag everyone
onto the dance floor; kick up those heels, let your skirt flare
around stockinged legs
and don't worry about the time. Party until
it's over, and if anyone looks your way, shake his hand,
smile, laugh. You look beautiful
when you do that, sugar, truly —
trust me. I
should know.
Those wreaths of little lights above
sparkle on your skin — there you go, there
you go.

You know
it's also okay to ask for a ride — hey,
I do it sometimes
even with wings. Sometimes
it's just a little easier
letting someone else
carry you home.

Hannah Rowan Loveless



Senior

Major: Economics; Minor: Urban Studies

Hannah Rowan Loveless is a senior at the University of Michigan, majoring in Economics with a minor in Urban Studies. She is the token “Idahoan” in most academic and social environments here at Michigan. This is a title that comes with great responsibility, as she often finds herself having to justify the merits of her home state. After all, it’s more than just potatoes.

Hannah’s first attempt at the art of fiction began in Mrs. Spurgeon’s first grade classroom. Most of her classmates saw the class story project as an opportunity to write about bunnies and princesses or maybe a really cool fireman. Hannah, on the other hand, wrote a compelling story about orphaned ducks who somehow became superheroes and fought alien invaders, because, why not? Violently graphic illustrations were very much included in this particular piece of fiction.

While Hannah’s work has (hopefully) progressed from the days of ducks and poorly drawn gore, her creative objective remains largely the same. As a writer, Hannah likes to create dark, uncomfortable situations and describe them in upbeat ways. That’s kind of her M.O—in life and other things.

Urban, grandma-chic, holistic, and frontier are some of her go-to buzzwords. When she’s not indulging in the capitalist zest of a Starbucks latte, she’s probably spinning up new story ideas while sweating it out at a spinning class. (See what she did there?) Oh, and she’s a dog person. That’s probably the most important thing about her.

We're Not Cool

Ada never dresses for the occasion. Beads of sweat gather along her widow's peak as drops of water land on her mahogany-toned cowboy boots, bleeding into the wrinkles of the worn leather. These are her favorite shoes.

She steps over the cracks in the sidewalk and tries not to think about the motley crowd of people around her. She hates being convinced that by putting herself out there, somehow the heartache of the last seven years will dissolve into the nearest glass of alcohol. Somehow, pulling on a pair of jeans that would fit better if clothes came in half sizes, will allow her to radiate confidence. The spray tan that looks a little more orange than bronze will supposedly serve as an alternative to vitamin D and other things. That's how you wake up from the delusion, get out of bed, and move on with a life that you've been told is out there, waiting.

Ada leaves her Ballard apartment each day—the one with white brick and hallways that smell like the Japanese restaurant next door—with every intention of action. She comes back each night exhausted, with a pain in her left eye that won't go away with Aspirin or even red wine. Ada keeps meaning to get her eyes checked. There's a lot she's been meaning to do lately.

The reality is she's cold. Yet, she's sweating due to stressed-induced anxiety—a trait most likely inherited from her mother. This place, this crowd, this city is setting Ada on edge. She can't shake the disquieting feeling that no one is getting any younger, and she's certainly no exception. In fact, Ada is the very law of mortality. She can already feel the goose bumps forming along her shins. She steps over yet another crack and for a moment contemplates setting her boot down on the space between the two slabs of grimy concrete.

They never talk about what happens after starting over. No one ever mentions what occurs when the honeymoon phase of taking measures into your own hands and doing things simply because you want to fades away and you come face-to-face with the bleak reality of being acutely alone. Nobody warned Ada about microwave dinners, old sitcom reruns, public transportation, and empty bedroom walls. No one told her how to act while speed dating, virtual dating, or—most importantly—what to do when you're not dating. Nothing was said of this feeling you get when it's Thursday evening and you start to miss the porch lights from your childhood home. No one told Ada shit and now she's stuck in a city as foreign to her as the back of some future lover's hand. She's stuck here in the alleyway behind the ShowBox Theater on a Friday night because the notion of him was better than the reality.

It's only in retrospect that Ada can admit she believed in the idea of him for about seven years too long. Dave slept, a lot. He was always sleep-

ing through movies, during guitar solos, and oftentimes in the passenger seat. It was rare for him to get out of bed before noon on Sundays. Sleeping in wasn't enough, though. Dave was still tired—tired of Ada's friends, her mother, and her ambitions. Ada was exhausting. So, Dave began sleeping around.

The entire time, Ada thought she was doing all the living for the two of them while he slept. The world was exciting then. Flowers bloomed, a fox gave birth to two cubs in the park behind their apartment complex, it even snowed once—in April at that. She used to think she was selfish, that she should exert some form of tough love and wake him from his go-to state of slumber. Then one day she came home from the café early.

Now she realizes that she hadn't been living at all that spring. Ada had spent years crafting a dream of the two of them. They weren't destined. They weren't in love. They were two self-righteous assholes who were too busy with their own issues or whatever to notice, really notice, the other. Ada doesn't think about him as much as she used to, which was nearly most of the time. Sometimes, she'll dream of the way his hands cupped his chin as he slept. Then she'll dream of the way that whore's legs curled around him, as she dozed nonchalantly in the bed Dave and Ada had spent an entire Saturday building together out of the fragmented instructions from Ikea.

It's not that she hates it here in Seattle. Hate is probably too heated of a word for this lukewarm city. In fact, any sliver of emotion Ada feels toward the city is dampened with rain, mist, or that thing Wikipedia referred to as the Seattle Freeze. Any city with a term for the impersonal nature of its inhabitants is probably not a city that Ada should've even remotely considered. Yet she's here, standing alone in the heart of downtown, braving the Seattle Freeze as the chilly October night air settles around the urban skyline.

No, she doesn't hate Seattle; she just isn't a part of it, not exactly. Her personal style preferences are no help either. Copper on grey: Ada's outfit is a palate of neutrals— so much so that she blends in with the brick wall serving as a parameter for this only moderately sketchy alleyway. No one can separate her from the bricks, yet there must be some sort of underlying force that allows the other city-dwellers to know exactly where to project their belligerent spit and toss their empty Keystone Lite cans. Somehow, everyone around her knows that the only time worth paying attention to her is when she nearly drops her phone in a puddle. She hates the rain. It's been approximately sixteen minutes since the concert ended and Ada is still outside, waiting. The ticket stub she had designated as worthy autograph material for any member of the main act, The District— if she actually gets to meet them— is deteriorating in the rain. This is how things are here.

A friend once told Ada that she must be out of sync with the universe—that she should try transcendental meditation or at the very least eat more foods rich in magnesium to get back in tune with life and everything else.

If she's being honest, though, Ada would rather stick to couch-surfing and Venti Chai Soy Lattes for sustenance. Ada isn't much for spirituality, anyway.

There's a girl with strawberry blonde hair and a frayed denim skirt in the line. She doesn't think anyone will notice if she cuts a few spaces in order to better her chances of meeting The District. The girl eventually stops just a few spaces behind the front of the line and looks back at her friends— probably high school students— and gives them a thumbs-up, indicating what she considers to be a success.

Jenny—the friend who convinced Ada to come to the show in the first place—is nowhere to be seen. She'd said she'd only be gone a few minutes; she just needed to use the bathroom. But both girls knew the truth when Jenny left Ada alone to serve as a placeholder rather than an actual friend. Jenny, like most of the women Ada's managed to meet in Seattle, is primarily concerned with "finding herself" in relation to the thoughts and desires of men aged twenty through forty-five. The bathroom was complete bullshit. Ada knows that. Jenny's most likely lingering at the venue's bar, tracing her finger along the edge of a martini glass, trying to persuade some poor bartender that it's in his best interest to give her another drink, on the house. Jenny's doing all of this as Ada waits.

Jenny isn't all that bad. Ada has to constantly remind herself of this. She was her first friend here. Ada met Jenny at the pub where they both work. They bonded over the lousy roommates they found online, the ongoing struggle of adjusting to the gray of the city, and a sense of nostalgia they both carried for old VH1 reality shows.

Jenny recently graduated with a Masters in Journalism from UCLA. This was the first of many strikes in Ada's book. Californians aren't to be trusted. Jenny justifies her journalism degree by sometimes contributing to her blog, *Jenny Things*. She's convinced that The District (deemed by five music blogs and one underground music magazine to be "the next cool sound of our generation") will give her even five minutes of their time to answer a few questions. Jenny is slightly delusional. That said, at least she's not the one standing alone in line tonight.

Ada clicks her boots, crushing the slimy, ruby red leaves beneath her feet. Some days, she feels like Dorothy in the Emerald City and she wants to go back home, back to Santa Fe. She knows no amount of boot-clicking will fix this but at least it's a way to pass the time. No one around her seems to mind that they're been standing in the cold for the better part of the last hour. Maybe that's just how it's done in Seattle and big cities in general. Time and climate are secondary to experience.

The Showbox will never be Ada's top choice for spending a Friday night. There's something about the aura of the place, the smell of its public restrooms, and the ink scribbled in the pea green stalls that makes her uneasy.

Tonight, in between acts, she found a brief passage from Ginsberg's "Howl" on a toilet seat that read:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked.

The line was actually rather beautiful but Ada couldn't get over the idea of a world where poetry is written on toilet seats. Honestly, Ginsberg probably wouldn't have minded it much. He'd maybe even thought it was funny. There was an advertisement for a natural breast enhancement cream taped onto the stall.

Ada remembers a time when this city was cooler. There was this time when Grunge still lingered in the rhythm of the city. You could literally feel the angst of the nineties. If you were lucky, you could taste it in your cup of coffee in a time when Starbucks wasn't yet considered fast food.

A little over fifteen years ago, which sounds even further away from the present than it is, Ada's father—the family's token music *aficionado*, took her to Seattle for her seventeenth birthday. Together, they sat in the Tacoma Dome, wedged between fellow fans as the Rolling Stones performed some of the greatest music ever to grace earth with its presence as part of their Licks Tour. Mick Jagger was a god that night, commanding the stage in a way no man of this earth would be capable of. He was beyond cool; he was timeless. Musicians like that don't exist anymore.

As she does an all but subtle 360, observing her fellow concert-goers, Ada realizes she is alone in a sea of culture hustlers. Magenta lips, pleather leggings, and letterman jackets that say things like *Swagger* seem a little tacky, but are what most consider cool these days. No, this isn't the Seattle she remembers. That said she's no longer the same girl she was over a decade prior, either. Cities, like people, change and it's not always for the best but it's inevitable and there's not much you can do besides accept it and hopefully one day get over it.

Sometimes, Ada wishes she had fewer inhibitions. Most times, Ada's the type of person that keeps herself a safe distance from the heart of action. She hates front rows but wishes she didn't. During the opening act, Ada stood back as Jenny pushed through masses of mostly women, inching closer and closer to the stage. She almost made it to the front of the crowd, but couldn't get past this one girl who was spinning in circles, like some whimsical gypsy woman. Ada imagines this is how people must've danced at the first Woodstock.

David used to say that his favorite thing in the world were salted caramel truffles. He said they tasted exotic, like the best vacation you could ever think of was condensed into a tiny confection. Ada often stayed in the café's kitchen long after closing, making the truffles he loved more than most

things. She'd bring them home to Dave, telling him they were just "extras" from early that day.

It was kind of hard to tell what the girl looked like, given the lighting. She was definitely slim though, with sleek black hair. She was wearing cut-offs shorts despite the cold outside. Her arm was extended toward the stage and Ada swears that for a moment, the girl held hands with the band's lead guitarist.

The café had initially been Dave's idea. He told Ada she needed to quit her dead-end job in real estate and start making things that make people happy. They named it the Yucca Café, after the state of New Mexico's official flower. Yuccas represented beauty, durability and everything Dave felt compelled to tell Ada she was on a daily basis. She lost the café in early 2012, and that's about the time Dave would argue things started to spiral downward. Ada knows this isn't true. Everything is always falling apart. It's just that usually we forget to pay attention.

People kept bumping into Ada and she hardly noticed. She barely even paid attention to the show itself. This girl was too fascinating. Like Jenny, she seemed spontaneous and probably a little selfish. Unlike Jenny—and most other girls for that matter—she looked like the type of person who was generally successful in her endeavors, no matter how far-fetched they were.

Ada's legs keep falling asleep. Her poor circulation doesn't fare well up north. Her fingers are turning purple, so she hides them in the pockets of her navy trench coat. Screw Jenny. Screw this show. Screw the couple behind her that enjoys displaying their affection a little too much. As the late hours of night creep into the first signs of morning, Jenny emerges from inside the Showbox. Her long, mousy brown hair looks a bit disheveled. Ada will probably have to call her a cab. Jenny slowly saunters over to the spot where she left Ada and reluctantly reassumes her position as supposed wing-woman.

"Where were you?" Ada asks more out of obligation than curiosity. She doesn't care where Jenny has been the past hour. Her interest would only feed Jenny's issue with a general lack of self-awareness. She doesn't care if Jenny is having a great time tonight or not. She doesn't care about any of this.

"I met a guy, well, the bartender. He seems nice, I think," Jenny replies between nicotine infused breaths. "Thanks for saving my spot. They should be here any minute now."

The two girls stand side-by-side, with their shoulders hunched in weird angles and knees locked in a way that makes them seem indifferent to the night. Neither says much, which is fine. Ada tries to think of interesting pairings with pumpkin. She needs to start baking again—not just cherry pies and apple strudels she needs create provocative, delectable, aphrodisiacal concoctions.

There is a bit of a false alarm as a crew of hooded figures—presumably the opening band—walk out the door to the alley. Ada can't remember their name, but she knows they were good at least. They did this cool thing with the base that she had never heard before. They look up together at the night sky that seems to be collapsing on them. They stick their tongues out, in jest, to catch drops of the famous Seattle rain. Ada knows they were probably band geeks or art nerds in high school—the kind of people she wouldn't have associated with, for fear of being defined by a particular, unfortunate teenage stereotype. It's funny though, she never would've given them the time of day and now she's literally shaking with excitement at the sight of them. Fame has that kind of effect on people who peaked in high school.

The most striking of the band's members is the guitarist. He pushes back espresso-toned hair and bums a cigarette from some innocent-looking fan. His white V-neck subtly exposes a series of tattoos that scream *anecdotal*. Denim hangs effortlessly off his hips, cuffed just below the ankle to expose black Chuck Taylor's. He has a well-trimmed goatee which usually doesn't work on guys, but he seems to be an outlier. This guy looks as if he woke up one day and decided he wanted to look intoxicatingly attractive.

In some strange twist of fate, the guitarist walks casually in their direction. Jenny fixes her skirt while Ada pretends to look at a text on her slightly water-damaged phone.

"Do you have a lighter?" he asks the air surrounding them. The two girls look at each other in disbelief and disappointment. The guitarist is talking *to* them, but he doesn't seem eager to talk *with* them. Jenny quickly pulls a lighter from her purse and hands it to him. He offers his thanks and begins to walk away.

"My name's Jenny," she blurts, apparently not realizing that their brief interaction did not warrant introductions. "My name is Jenny and this is my friend, Ada."

The guitarist turns around, most likely for lack of anything better to do. "Oh hey," he says, "I'm Steven."

"Great show tonight," Ada mutters, weaving together her knuckles as she speaks. She shouldn't have said anything. Now she looks desperate.

"Do you know when the other band's coming?" Jenny asks, clearly not satisfied with a mere member of the opening act.

Steven the Guitarist shakes his head which is turned to the left; clearly there are more important things to pay attention to than the two girls. He doesn't know and doesn't care where the main act is. Ada notices a tattoo of the Zia Sun Symbol just below his right ear.

"Are you from New Mexico?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Your tattoo, it's like the state flag."

"Yeah, I guess. I'm from Albuquerque. I honestly just like the way the sun looks. It's cool, right?"

"I'm from Santa Fe, originally."

"So, we basically grew up in the same place. That's cool."

Ada tries to mask her irritation at Steven's last response. Albuquerque and Santa Fe are not basically the same; they're not even kind of similar. Steven the Guitarist is apparently a dumbass.

The three of them spend the next few minutes or so transitioning from one topic of small talk to another. As much as Ada hates to admit it, the conversation almost makes her feel, well, cool. He seems vaguely interested in her thoughts on the show. She acts like she cares where the next stop on their tour is. She feels like this is what conversation is supposed to be like. This feeling is short-lived, however. Perhaps in another life or universe she may have been a part of the exclusive circle of people reserved only for the pop culture elite. Tonight is neither the time nor place, though. Tonight, it's not about Ada and it's not about Jenny. It's about the girl who held Steven the Guitarist's hand during the show; it's about That Girl.

That girl was the name assigned by Ada to the woman who would ultimately steal Steven's heart that night. Truth be told, That Girl could be anyone. She's a mysterious composite of beauty contained in an olive-toned capsule of poise. She's textbook cool—timeless even. As Ada stands pining over a man who is really only a member of the opening act, this girl poses, as if on cue—ankles crossed, chin tipped up toward the midnight sky, one hand resting on her hip, the other holding a cigarette. She appears to be right in the middle of some *avant garde* fourth position. Ella is a macabre yet undeniably endearing urban ballerina. She extends her hand in the general direction of Steven the Guitarist, as if gracing him with the opportunity of introducing himself to her. They've already met, though. Their introductions are nothing more than those of old friends, or maybe lovers, catching up after years of falling off the grid of the other's earth.

"You're that girl."

"Yes, I'm that girl. Did you miss me?"

"That was really cool, what you did back there."

"It was nothing."

Ada remembers that Ella had pushed past security in order to get

onstage and dance alongside Steven the Guitarist during the band's most popular song, "Wanderlust."

As the star-crossed lovers exchange numbers and witty retorts, Ada and her friend linger off to the side, wearing grins on their faces that look as if they're been brushing teeth with lemon juice. They're trying to maintain a composure that they clearly never possessed in the first place.

In this moment Ada hates That Girl, or whoever the hell she is, more than she has ever hated long lines, beer breath, overly affectionate couples, and dress size 0 combined. After all, That Girl is the type who surely must wake up each morning with doors flinging wide open. Ada wakes up each day with profanities swimming through her head and an ache that feels like morning sickness but definitely isn't. That Girl's the type who falls (quite literally) into the hands of musicians, artists, intellectuals, and the like. As these men, the greats of our generation, spin That Girl around in their arms, Ada can't help but think the girl's eyes twinkle to the same extent that her own premature crow's feet mute any laughter that might pass through her lips. Ada is older than her age. She's cynical, with a nose that looks slightly bigger than it did last week. She doesn't hold open elevator doors for people.

Ada isn't cool, but That Girl is. That Girl is twirling in circles as she walks all over this man. Ada wants to go home, now more than ever. She wants to take the bus back to Ballard, get out her old CDs and clean her room until it looks like someone who definitely isn't her lives there. She wants to bake galettes, croissants, and lavender shortbread. Ada thinks she might just leave Jenny to fend for herself tonight.

Sure, That Girl won Steven's attention, and probably won the night in general. That Girl is sheer inspiration. She got what she wanted: the satisfaction of being the most desirable girl within a two-mile radius. The fact that she is currently leaving the premises without the smitten band member is nothing more than a victory lap. She's probably the only true Seattlite here tonight. Dave would've liked her. As That Girl fades into the distance in heels that strut to the rhythm of traffic lights, Ada can't help but imagine this is the mystery girl's way of saying, *You'll get 'em next time, kid.*

Steven walks back and begins to strike up what appears to be a very compelling conversation with Jenny. Ada notices commotion by the door. Seconds later, The District steps out into the night with the lead singer, Tyler Rumfield, at the head of the pack. His bleached undercut works peculiarly well with what is clearly a well-worn wife beater and skinny black jeans. He looks cool—cooler than Jenny, than Steven, and possibly even That Girl. Ada grabs the ticket stub from her pocket and starts to push through the line. She doesn't know what she's doing. Maybe this is just Ada's way of being cool.

Mark Malakh



Senior

Major: Economics

Mark Malakh was born in Russia in 1994, and moved to Ann Arbor in 2001. He peaked in the third grade, when he was the third person in his grade to memorize the times table, and was granted the official title of "Multiplication Master."

Suburban Street Corners

Daniel Kaplan spent the first few weeks of his summer break in a darkened basement, leaning back on his white faux-leather chair, his pasty face colored blue from the reflected glow of the computer screen. His daily agenda consisted of getting in touch with *hip-hop*, a genre of music he had discovered only last year, in 8th grade. During the school year, he was not able to devote too much time to activities outside of his studies and extracurriculars (cross country, track, and chess club), although the passing interest in rap was, according to his mother Barbara, responsible for his Accelerated Algebra grade slipping down to an A minus, and for his falling citizenship grades. Now that he had no responsibilities, he could finally devote his days to the exploration of what he thought was a great genre. *This is a genre that really represents me*, he thought. *These artists really get me.*

His introspective voyage of self-discovery was interrupted by an unwelcome screeching from the kitchen above the stairs.

"Daniel, it's time for dinner!"

"Mom, I'm watching *The Wire*."

"Get up here right now, and eat your dinner. I've already set the table!" the voice yelled back.

The last two weeks, Daniel had been on a Danny Red binge. Danny Red was a rapper from Detroit, who's had a hard life of Adderall and alcohol addiction. Most of Red's songs were about robbing people, his friends dropping dead from gunshots all around him, and unnecessarily long lines at the DMV. Daniel Kaplan was a schoolboy from Grosse Pointe, which was pretty much Detroit, and he also had an Adderall prescription for his ADHD. Last summer, his friends didn't take him on a group bowling trip, and Stephen didn't invite him to his birthday party, so he has also faced his fair share of challenges. He could really identify with the trials and tribulations of Danny Red, and he even had the same first name as his favorite rapper. Daniel Kaplan listened to a few other rappers (Big Boozie Pete from Atlanta, Vince Hole Punch from California, and Altai Tuul, an avant-garde rapper from the Mongolian steppes who combined rapping with Mongolia's rich throat singing tradition). He also listened to Cher, for undisclosed and difficult to understand reasons. Together, the few rappers that he cared about (as well as Cher), made up the background track of his summer, always playing from a set of speakers in his basement while he browsed internet hip-hop forums or watched the Wire.

"Daniel, get up here right now!"

The staccato voice from above now carried across a greater sense of urgency, coupled with a static, omnipresent sense of disappointment.

"If you don't get up here in this exact moment, we will take away your chess club privileges. Your food is getting cold."

Daniel Kaplan had no choice. He was backed into a corner, and like any wild beast backed into a corner, he was forced to do something brash and wild, something that he did not want to do and would later regret – he had to go upstairs and eat the dinner that his mother had prepared for him. His feet dragging, his mouth making a strangely consistent, angry moaning noise reminiscent of a zombie, he moved his body up the basement stairs. He made sure to stomp his feet hard enough to express his dissatisfaction, but not so hard that he would damage the stairs and incur the wrath of his mother.

"Daniel, what took you so long?"

"Dad, I was ruminating and getting in touch with the genre of hip hop."

"I have to say, your mother and I are quite dissatisfied with the way that you've been spending your time recently."

"You just don't know me, dad. You too, mom. You two just don't understand. You can't identify with the post-post-modernist challenges faced by privileged youth in suburbia. These are the musicians that I really identify

with - Danny Red, Big Boozie Pete, Altai Tuul...Cher..."

"Well we understand rap, but why Cher?" his mom chimed in.

"Yes, son, have some self-respect."

The table held up a heavy casserole dish that housed mysterious, swirling colors and floating chunks of food. A frosted plastic bowl sat on the table as well, holding a bland, cold Caesar salad that was just recently taken out of a bag from the fridge, covered in an anemic dressing.

Daniel resented his lot.

"This rap music is why his grades must have slipped. An A minus in a math class, a 2 in all of his citizenship grades – can you believe it? This has never happened before."

"I remember he was such a nice boy. Remember his bar mitzvah last year? His Torah portion was about the Tower of Babel. He was so cute up there when he read it out."

Daniel had never understood the moral behind that story. As far as he was concerned, a lot of talented engineers got together, secured the funding and supplies to build a tower of baffling height, and, he assumed, found effective administrators and laborers to build said tower at break-neck speeds. What did God do? He rewarded their administrative and architectural prowess by coming down, mixing up everyone's languages, and making it impossible to build a big-ass building. This, Daniel thought, was kind of a dick move on the part of God, and put him off of the whole idea of becoming an engineer or architect when he grows up.

"Yeah, and now he's spending his time in the basement listening to Big Boobie."

"It's Big Boozie, Dad, and he's got a sick flow. You have to understand that he spits straight fire over trill beats."

"Look at him, Barb – he's just like your mom. He gets all this gangster rap nonsense from her."

Daniel spent the rest of the night in a gloomy malaise, contemplating his station in life. Nothing seemed right around him after he realized that his life reflected the stereotypical suburban childhood. "I am naught but a product of the Capitalist substructure that serves as the origin of the rotten tendrils that squeeze the good out of society – a member of the petit bourgeoisie forever fixed to a life-course structured around the procurement of goods

and services and on the commodification of interpersonal relationships,” he thought. He didn’t know what any of that meant, but he read something like that on a radical communist blog at one point, and it sounded like it fit the occasion. He got on an instant messenger service online, and sent the above to a friend of his. His friend saw the message but didn’t respond. Daniel waited five minutes. Still no response. Daniel saw that his friend saw the message and didn’t respond, and got a bit more upset. He had to change his life around, to add some excitement to it. He had to do this, but he didn’t know how.

He thought of joining a gang. Were there gangs in Grosse Pointe? No, he’d have to commute to Detroit. This would work during the summer when he wasn’t busy, but would conflict too heavily with his homework and extra-curriculars during the school year. Was he even cool enough to join a gang? Probably not. All of the trouble-makers at school didn’t associate with him. Billy Richardson, who people say once got a duck high by blowing marijuana smoke into its bill, would always make fun of Daniel when he saw him, and Billy was probably not as bad as some of the members of actual gangs.

Daniel thought about the activities that Danny Red mentioned in his songs, and wondered what he could do that Danny Red does. Gang activity was out of the question, as he previously determined, and waiting in line at the DMV was too, since he wasn’t old enough for a license. The Adderall is a whole other story, though – there had to be a way that Danny Red gets his Adderall, and Daniel assumed that this was not through the medical system. There are probably other people like Danny Red here in Grosse Pointe that want to have Adderall but can’t get their hands on it. He could sell Adderall. He could deal drugs.

Daniel opened up his word processor, getting ready to draft up a business plan. He would start by selling the amphetamine that was prescribed to him, and would slowly expand to other prescription stimulants. He knew that Timmy Hamilton, Richard Wu, and Amy Singler were prescribed Ritalin, while Becca Roberts, Cindy Stevens, and Haley Baird were prescribed Vyvanse. Come to think of it, a frightening portion of Daniel’s acquaintances were prescribed stimulants. He hoped that this wouldn’t be enough to saturate the market. After that, once he’d built up a good reputation for stimulants, he would move on to some other drugs if he wasn’t too busy. The whole time, however, he would rule the Grosse Pointe prescription stimulant trade with an iron fist. Just like Danny Red. This was his short-term expansion strategy, and he carefully drafted it up on his computer.

His excel spreadsheet delivered promising news. He had no variable costs, as the medication was covered by insurance, relatively few fixed costs (for the baseball bat that he would buy and various incidentals), and a revenue of around five dollars per unit sold. Daniel’s research, analysis, and market forecast spelled a booming business selling Adderall. More impor-

tantly, he could now become closer with his favorite musical idols through sharing similar experiences. Even with Cher.

That night, Daniel went to bed feeling giddy and free.

The next morning, Daniel awoke feeling similarly giddy and free. In his dreams, he also felt giddy and free. A lot of giddiness and freedom was occurring inside his eighth grade brain. He ran down the stairs with such a speed and zeal that he almost tripped and fell, and was carried into the kitchen by his inertia (and strength of will).

"Good morning, Mom! Good morning, Dad! What a great Sunday morning it is!"

"Daniel, why you seem pretty giddy today!" his mom said.

"Free, too." his dad chimed in.

"I'm both of those things, thank you for noticing!" Daniel said.

Daniel poured himself some milk and cereal, then proceeded to scoop and shovel it into his mouth. His mother once read in a book on early adolescent psychological development that children that had weekly summer assignments from their parents ended up doing significantly better in high school, so she would assign him such weekly assignments. While he was eating, she took the opportunity to tell him about this week's assignment in which he would have to write a short story where the protagonist suffers an unprovoked and relatively unexpected death as the plot winds down. Daniel didn't listen, focusing instead on his upcoming day of selling drugs. He quickly finished up the cereal, went upstairs and got dressed, and approached the front door, his orange prescription bottle in his hand.

"Goodbye, Mom! Goodbye, Dad! I'm off to sell drugs!"

"Okay, have fun honey," his mom said.

"What did he say, Barb?"

"Dunno, something about playing with his friends."

Daniel stepped outside. The sky was blue, the sun was bright. Perfect drug dealing weather. Despite his carefully structured business plan, Daniel didn't know where to begin. All of the best rap songs featured the protagonist dealing on a street corner – first you start off on one, then you give out free samples and build up some notoriety, and eventually you have a host of people under you to sling prescription stimulants on many of the corners of

downtown Grosse Pointe. But it all starts out with carving out a street corner to call your own. He also needed a baseball bat to break the knee caps of those who opposed him. It was all business, nothing personal.

He purchased a baseball bat from a sporting goods store for thirty-two dollars and eighty-five cents. It was made out of a durable aluminum alloy, and was too big for his body, both signs that it would serve his ends well. He also bought some chalk to make his street corner feel more like home. He was a formidable sight – reflective tear-drop aviators, an aluminum baseball bat, cargo shorts, and a 2014 Michigan Math Olympiad runner-up t-shirt. Before properly slinging drugs, Daniel needed to take care of the issue of having a posse. On his way to the streets, he stopped by his best friend Sam's house.

Two years ago, Sam ate a centipede as part of a dare.

Daniel rang the doorbell. Sam's mother answered.

"Hi Mrs. Taylor, can Sam come out to sell drugs?"

"Sam, come down here, it's your nerd-friend Daniel!"

Sam came running down the stairs as his mom disappeared inside the house to watch a reality TV show about Alaskan accountants.

"Hi Sam, can I interest you in dealing drugs today?"

There was a pause as Sam gathered his thoughts.

"What?" Sam countered.

"Can I interest you in dealing drugs? Adderall. It would help me overcome the ennui that I experience daily due to the rigid confines of affluent suburban life, and would help me feel closer to my rap heroes. Look at this baseball bat, we can use that for enforcement."

Another pause.

"Okay, I guess. My mom takes Prozac. Should I bring her prescription?"

"That's a grand idea, now that I think about it. We can reach a larger market that way."

The issue of a posse taken care of, Daniel and Sam set out toward downtown Grosse Pointe. They approached a seemingly busy street corner and set up camp there. Daniel gave Sam the baseball bat, Sam being the larger of the two. He told him to look stern and imposing. While Sam was busy looking stern and imposing, Daniel began to decorate the sidewalk, writing "ADDERALL FOR SALE \$5" in large, pastel-blue letters.

The next three hours were largely unsuccessful, and Sam and Daniel barely managed to sell anything. The two boys had a good system going, in which they would approach passersby, and Daniel would ask, "Excuse me sir," (or madam), "Would you like to buy some Adderall or Prozac?" They were polite and client-friendly, but the only reactions they would receive from the adults ranged from confusion and panic, to dismissive "aww that's cute"s. One shifty-eyed lady with a perm, clearly stressed out by home life, did seem to stop and actually consider buying some Prozac, but ultimately decided against it. The only drugs that Sam and Daniel sold that day were sold to a couple of college-aged kids that were walking by. Ultimately, they only made \$20 dollars, which wasn't even enough to recoup the cost of the bat and chalk.

Daniel's passion towards this activity started to falter. This was far away from the exciting life that he imagined he would have. No one had robbed them, they broke precisely zero kneecaps, there was none of that "adversity" that Daniel had expected. If anything, he felt more trapped by capitalism and affluence than he would otherwise, as he was now was the owner of a failing business. There was no risk in the ordeal, since Sam and he could just come back the following night to a comfortable house.

The stakes were raised an hour after their first drug sale, when Sam spotted a policeman walking toward the corner, clearly headed for them. Daniel informed Sam that he had to act natural, so they both stood in place without moving much, in the hope that the man wouldn't see them. Regardless of their efforts, he did, and stood over them with crossed arms, blocking out the sun. Daniel, during the officer's approach, felt as if his body was an empty shell, as if he was viewing his impending doom from outside of it. He'd never been in trouble before. Sam readied the bat.

"Hey boys, I've been informed that two people here matching your description are selling illicit substances." Daniel was scared. For his part, the officer just seemed excited that something genuinely illegal was happening in his town for once.

"Adderall? We're not selling Adderall. We're good kids, sir, I promise," Daniel said. Both his voice and lip were quivering.

"I never said anything about Adderall. Looks like you know something I don't, kid."

"No sir, we're just playing baseball here," Sam argued.

"Alright. You kids don't look like the trouble-making kind. Both of you look like total nerds anyway."

With that, the police officer left. This was Daniel and Sam's first serious brush with law enforcement, and they felt a sense of exhilaration that they've never felt before. Daniel secretly decided that the rough and tumble life of the streets was the life for him.

At 8pm, as the sun was setting, Sam and Daniel decided to call it a day. The rest of it passed uneventfully – four more sales, all of them to adults. Thirty one dollars in revenue, almost enough to cover their fixed costs on the first day. They could've even done well without the baseball bat, since no one tried to rob them the whole day.

"Daniel, you don't understand," Sam said, "it's like a toilet plunger – by the time you need one, it's too late to buy it."

In a way, the uneventfulness of the day began to wear down on Daniel on their walk back home. He started his life of drug dealing because he wanted to experience excitement and danger. Instead, he experienced boredom, and his legs got tired from standing around too long. He had some in his basement from a few years ago, when his family went camping. It would be prudent to bring lawn chairs next time, he thought, but he didn't even know if there would be a next time.

Sam interrupted Daniel's thoughts:

"Daniel, I don't know if I want to do this anymore. Selling speed and Prozac is boring, and my arms got tired from carrying the baseball bat. We didn't even make a lot of money."

Daniel thought. The next five minutes were spent walking in silence and dejection. He agreed, in a way – he didn't feel excited, only worn out, and the financial reward was relatively miniscule. "Maybe you're right," Daniel said, and continued walking toward his neighborhood.

"There's a lesson to be learned here, I think," said Daniel, "We can't go looking for excitement in realities that we fashion for ourselves based entirely on the media that we consume. It might even be insensitive to idolize the lives of these rap icons, since we're actually doing nothing else but commodifying the difficult life experiences which they did not choose to have in the first place. Drug dealing isn't right for us, Sam, and we have to realize that it is precisely our privileged position that allows us to only be passively invested in the outcome, all while facing minimal consequences from law enforcement, even while the evidence is pretty strong against us.

"It's pretty clear that we have to join a gang instead."

Sam agreed with Daniel's wise words. Together, they continued their walk home, the sun setting against their backs.

Katarina Merlini



Junior

Psychology and English

Katarina Merlini is a fiction writer and poet from Birmingham, Michigan. After changing her major five times, she settled on pursuing her passion of reading and writing literature. A seasoned writer of fiction, she describes poetry as the mistress who can't say no. Her inspirations include grunge and alternative culture; Ambient dreams and nightmares; and the weird thoughts that tumble in between sleeping and waking.

Passage; Four Microcosms

seeing through the eyes of Icarus
ridges blue as a fly's belly
prismatic eyes demand fractals
a dull plain turns to honeyed hive

a cataclysm calls the rivers back
to disappear down the throat of Porphyron
among the debris sat a child
in fleshy hell he dreams of empyrean

a serpent lives at the bottom of the sea
his undulations cause the waves
envious of how the sea cliffs rake the sky
he builds his nest of eroded stones

she's made her home in a valley low

the summer storms lap up her work
autumn leaves set soul alight
her home will stand once more

Bet Your Mind

your pockets
always filled
with star stuff
wrapped in paper
thin skin
rolled tighter than a chrysalis
then lit
inhale
stardust

your eyes shine
brighter
than the fluorescence
reflected
off my sweat stained
stomach

diamond rings
between my teeth
clouded eyes
we're all smiles we're
all smiles
unsteady smiles

honey filled
syringes
tie me off
with your tongue
be sure
to close the door
behind you

Exiled: A Review

lost voices sing
of lightning and
shapely disgrace

towards these
we tilted vanes
sharpened masts
ennobled spires

not enough not
enough fate written
in letters of fire
fallen embers burn down
in a spiral
round your crown
you the careless king

we were welcomed
fake emperors of
a fake empire built
on mountain of chaff
and old photographs
yet we mourn
still waits the sun
on moonset that will never come

pounding starlight
resonates with
the pulse in my temples
the pulse of your lips
haematic blooms flower
on pale cheeks
under empty sockets
gaping like doors

Nucleus

I've grown weary of my treacherous heart
for too long it's sat vapid in my breast
a thankless burden I could do without
a scythe cutting silk it whispers in the night
the truths wound deeper than the lies

with yellowed nails I dug in deep
cracked through ribs and slipped through sinew
I pulled it out with an old coat hanger
cleansed the wound with warm watered wine
and sewed it closed with willow vines

I've kept the withered thing in a mason jar
filled with formaldehyde
it's grown an eye and watches me sleep
sometimes I ask him what he's called
he has yet to answer me

Emptiness, An Aspect of Death

once you told me
we are born
two-hearted
one beats
strong and bare
the other we create
as we stumble
through time

but where is this second heart

if I were
to split open
your skull
would I find it there
delicate
a field mouse
curled tentative in
grey matter

or perhaps I
should start this way
crack open your ribs
lift your lungs
spread them wide
would I find it there
cocooned
a silvered butterfly
waiting for wings to dry

Fade Into Self

fog slithers
through the streets
up to the window
of my third floor apartment
it bows and buckles
against the pane

open the window
just a slit
enough for tendrils
to flow down the wall
onto the floor
blanketing ancient slats
in wanton eddies

the room fills
eddies intensify
to damp inferno
shroud unchaste
nakedness
seep in every pore
body edges evaporate
I slink out the window

Katie Miller



Sophomore
Major: English

Katie is a sophomore majoring in English, and a regular contributor to the satirical publication *The Every Three Weekly*. She believes the key to a good story isn't a fantastical series of events, but a shift in perspective. Having spent her childhood in a tourist town no one visits, romanticizing the mundane is how she was able to stay sane, and even that trick only worked half the time. She admires people who ask provocative questions, apply themselves to their goals, and stick to their guns- even when this euphemism implies protesting against the NRA.

Watermarks

The knob was already unlocked when I twisted, and the front door swung loose into its splintered dent in the wall. Ivan was unraveled across the least stained armchair in our living room, the realtor had described it as cozy, which in retrospect could be in regard to the family of mice who made their home beneath our couches and entertained whiskered guests each night around 11 PM. Our peanut butter traps caught dust bunnies and our smarting toes, but never the mice, whose stomachs bulged with the remnants of Ivan's midday popcorn habit.

A book had slouched against his deflating chest, and thin light dusted its embossed cover, the author's name larger than the title in that style I hate. Its pages crinkled with his whispered breathing, and a peek into his mind revealed illustrations of him running toward a cliff, wildfire licking his ankles. Sure, the house wasn't empty as I had hoped, but his sleep was enough

to ensure a bit of solitude—a rarity in a big city—and unleash my train of thought in his dazed company. I fantasized about my office mate—*Tom's eyes ultra-blue, piercing in the morning after his bicycle commute when the wind has whipped up tears. I could ask him to coffee, steal a kiss in his poster-coated cubicle.* The sound his pants zipper would make resonated internally, and my spine unfurled with a shiver that traveled to clenched toes. *I could call my mom later, ask her how dad's been handling his emphysema, he's getting older. Maybe he'll choke on his stupid phlegm before I get a chance to, the welts he left with his belt— I should be past this— forgive and forget but forget first, then the apology won't be necessary— Board meetings... That long black table, so sterile, grim faces, all of them... the donut incentive doesn't keep Charlotte's voice from giving me migraines... she's all nasal... My nails are too long— is that dirt? When did I even touch dirt... really could use a trim—*

"Charlie, you're already home," Ivan started, dragging the back of his hand over crust near his lip.

"Yeah, I guess it's a national holiday. Flag Day or some shit. All us government employees are free to celebrate with a sale at Art Van. I didn't get the email before I was already at my desk." I tried to redirect my mind to this map of Eurasia I was assigned to memorize as a kid. If he snuck a glance all he'd see is the capital of Russia in black text, the crosshatching that indicates mountain ranges—*I wish I could afford to travel— rich kids, studying abroad on daddy's dime, all of them can't wait to own a franchise just like him— fuck I'm too comfortable—*the Mediterranean sea, the Atlantic ocean was a blank border in print.

"Oh, well, I don't have class today so I'll be around. You didn't see any of my dream, did you? It was awful." While he massaged his closed eyes, his mind became graffiti in the overpass that we shuffled through daily. Sometimes we would stand in the cavernous space together and take turns guessing the spray paint's origins while engines churned serenely above us. His memory wasn't exact but the colors and shapes were all present. He smeared a lash off his cheek then blew it from his thumbnail— a single candle wick.

"I caught the tail end of it." Shrugging, I remembered the states that comprised the UK: Great Britain, Northern Ireland, tidy lines and edges between populations.

"It was wicked. No idea where that blaze came from, it started as a camping trip. I fell asleep reading this book about the wilderness..." his eyes trailed to his chest and he dog-eared a page before tucking the novel under his arm.

"Were you smoking again?" I'd known Ivan since grade school, but he scrambled to conceal insecurity behind cement.

"No! I mean, it's just a dream anyway. I can't remember. You know how it is with dreams, they're fantasies." The sinew of his neck clenched, and he raised himself off the chair leaving a warm impression in the faux suede cushion. I pushed intently into his mind searching for a tell, but he held a single gang sign as the entire picture, red claw marks that bled the cement with tires humming overhead. "Want to grab coffee?"

"I didn't have any intention of buying a sectional today, so sure, why not," I grabbed my coat and tugged the chilled sleeves back on, zipper still dripping with snow. "You can pick the joint," I said, stuttering internally over distant rivers. *The Volga, Danube*, I forgot where their little drawn wrinkles connected on paper—tried to convince myself that they could churn rocks to sand.

I've been told my thoughts are harder to read than most, chicken-scratch handwriting with letters missing and words tightening into disarray at the ends of unplanned lines. It makes sense—my difficulties with focusing have been an issue since primary school, and the resulting grades landed me a low-paying position as Watermark Inspector at the county building. Most of the time my head is anywhere but in my cubicle. I check for spelling errors, clarity of the press; my domain are all the characteristics of a professional looking stamp. Mrs. Cleaver warned me in the third grade that minds like mine don't go on to do great things without great effort, but I was half-listening, and it isn't like anything I heard as a kid was effective in deterring the mistakes I made as a teen.

Ivan released a cooling breath over the steam from his mug, then tore four packets of sugar that gushed with a swift hiss. The spoon he used to swirl the coffee was hastily jammed into his mouth, and he gnawed looking demure behind the heady fog. His thoughts loosened for a moment and a series of pictures escaped, they moved in sequence—*coffee, ashtrays, their fumes mingling*.

"I feel you digging around in there. Cut it out," he burst, "people are going to pry, I get that, but it would be nice to feel like I had some control over what I share with friends. At least give me that. So coffee and cigarettes smell kind of similar. Thinking of that is no different between considering that a young Paula Deen was probably pretty attractive, right?" Ivan took a sip then grimaced and returned the spoon to his lips, smacking at its stem. It wouldn't be such a challenge to stay out of his mind if he'd tell me something personal every once in a while. Instead we talked about politics, making grand statements without watching debates, and occasionally complained about other people not present.

"I guess that's true. Sorry for giving you a hard time earlier, Ivan. It's just that I know what puffing on those death sticks does to people. They're

insidious." I fixed my eyes on the coffee directly beneath me, conscious of the chatter of the room; all the voices, thoughts—the streams of textbook paragraphs from strangers studying mingled with clanging from the kitchen and the rush of the milk steamer. It was easier to let your guard down in a place this loud, but I walled in the memories of my grandfather's oxygen tank and his hands bruised by gentle contact. I'd never told Ivan why I was so concerned about him, but I doubt my anecdote would change anything that public shaming couldn't.

Ivan's brows lowered softly like two halves of a draw bridge. "You'd think all the new restrictions on public smoking would be enough, but the addiction is way harder to fight than you can imagine without having felt it yourself," he said, sliding out the spoon and looking at himself reflected in its curvature. "It's like I'm infatuated with the things." *That sounds like domestic abuse.* I peered with a gossamer presence this time, nudged his encroaching sadness in comforting solidarity.

He leapt at my intrusion, glare mirrored in the utensil he now wielded as a weapon. "I said cut that out!" *Jeez Ivan, uncalled for.* Startled, I jostled the table and spilled a ring of coffee over my mug's edge that flowered onto the wood's surface.

"I'm just trying to be here for you," I muttered, then rose with a single finger pointed at the growing puddle. "I'll be right back." At the counter I located the box of napkins, jammed as usual by impatient customers. *Are you serious—come on.* The frail recycled paper tore easily, and I ripped through 6 sheets before a delicate hand cupped my shoulder.

An ex-girlfriend, Jillian, was hiding behind her raven colored hair, smirking with secrets. "You're making a mess of that, Charlie," she said, then sniffed air instead of laughing.

"They're green, so it's not like I'm killing more trees," I said, counting the napkin confetti in my hands, not meeting her gaze. In the voice of a puppet from an early morning children's special I numbered the shreds, *1... 2... 3... 4...*

She reached around my bowed head and snatched a few blue packets from their grated cup. "It's hardly recycling if they end up right back in the garbage," she said.

I looked up to her chewing her tongue. It was obvious when she was trying to find something interesting to say. She listened for punch lines rather than comprehension, and appeared jilted now.

I seized the tension between us to make a less than funny joke, sniping "my chi is vegan enough that it doesn't matter what I do. PETA has my back." She laughed like I expected, but it tapered quickly. Shadows be-

neath her eyes were deep ponds with murky bottoms. Their violet presence distorted my cover, and my numbers bobbed in different directions: *what happened to you, Jill?*

She sighed cinematically, although no one was watching. Voices, keyboards, and porcelain landing on tables crescendoed without us. "Nothing that doesn't happen to everyone."

"Jill, you look lovely, I promise, but like the prettiest zombie I've ever seen," I tried to edge my way into her thoughts without disrupting her, but it was all Spanish guitar. She was taking lessons. Interpretation of their twanging melodies would be subjective.

"Hey, get out of my head! Do you suppose you can rifle around in there like it's your god given right? You left without any warning—any reason... Jesus, Charlie, I don't owe you crap. Especially not an explanation." Her feet spun away from the counter, but she hesitated and toyed with the filmy packets of artificial sweetener in her fist. She wanted my audience for her grand exit, and hovered in the spotlight of my gaze. "I'm learning that one person always loves the other more in a relationship. They're built on a lack of balance masquerading as stability. Besides, I'm fine, truly. Work isn't great, but it's tolerable. At least I'm not surveying watermarks for a living..."

"Oof. Tell me how you really feel," I chuckled while slinking an arm around her soft cardigan. "I'm sorry for how things ended, but it would have been unfair to you to..."

"Don't give me that bullshit Charlie... I'm glad you're doing well," she straightened her posture and crossed the café to a single chair in the corner that cradled a purse I was certain smelled like flavored coffee creamer she'd stolen from gas station counters, crushed into its striped fabric. I returned to Ivan suckling his spoon, and watched my handful of napkin pieces absorb cold coffee, the little puddles seeping through and highlighting the recycling insignia. In the office their branding would lose points for being droll.

I didn't think water cooler conversation was real until I worked in a county building, but the small talk, broken up by gurgling air pockets meandering to the jug's top, is unavoidable. To prepare for mundane encounters I check the weather in bed on my phone, *it will be 34 degrees with a chance of flurries*, and I have an email subscription of current events from the Times that announces itself on my desktop around noon each weekday. The most upsetting headline fuels my nondescript babbling, and today it's a church that's been gunned down by extremists.

"Can you believe it?" I ask politely, between sips from my white paper cone. It's Monday, and a few of us are gathered in the dreary lounge, hovering beside the water like a herd of wildebeest. In my mind I'm retracing key witness statements: *I played dead for 20 minutes while the gunmen obliterated*

ated the pulpit. Horrifying. They all wore red masks.

Tom is beautiful in a cowl necked sweater, swiping the screen of the pedometer on his wrist. "I've already walked 1,000 steps today, holy mackerel." I tolerate his empty-headedness to admire the coil of his thick hair and the way his clavicle can be hued of bone yet still suggest virility.

"Wow, that's impressive. How are you managing it in an office setting?" Tom's mind is simplistic— almost never blockaded like mine. He's visualizing a run along a local beach, and I can feel the traction of sand and the briny spray.

"I walk down the aisle every 30 minutes I'm at my desk. It prevents clotting and keeps me focused." His lips are glazed like cherry donuts, and my recited article falters mid-sentence. *They were terrifying—god, sexy—horrific monsters.* A round woman named Linda raises her eyebrows across from me, then fingers the cross around her neck. I try to keep a low profile, but so does everyone else, and I count on unspoken Midwestern politics to retain our peace. Linda adjusts her heavy sweater that doesn't conceal the pudg around her middle and exits the room on clicking heels.

"Yeah, I should try that," I say without consciousness, then crumple the cone and heave it into the recycling bin we installed a few weeks prior. Even if Tom doesn't acknowledge my flyaway thoughts, I'm shocked that he hasn't followed my up-and-down looks, or spotted the condensing sweat above my brow.

"You could get one of these devices, they've really helped me on my journey to fitness," he says, suggesting he's trekked across mountain ranges rather than through slate grey compartments that trap us bored employees in plastic chairs. Our uncomfortable models don't even have wheels to swivel on. Those extravagances are reserved for the higher-ups.

"I guess I could." I contemplate saying something to him, as employees filter out of the room, one by one pantomiming basketball shots and indulging in high-fives, repeated when necessary for square strikes. "Tom." *Wait, don't, this could end terribly, stop.*

Tom tilts his sculpted jaw and pauses with his lips pursed, *his lips*, "what's up?"

"Something, but I'd like to talk about it later if that's okay." *Shit-shit-shit.* He shrugs, clueless as ever. I'd ask him to drinks if I thought it would fit into his diet plan, but instead I ask him to meet me at my desk after work.

I wish we could all be honest with each other, and interactions could feel like they used to in grade school rather than a never-ending slew of interviews. Everything's competitive this way, and even my best friends are my rivals in this could-be homecoming election. We're seeking popularity—vy-

ing for the crown. Kids say the darndest things, but they're what we're all thinking behind our mental blockades. Maybe that's why willpower is called fortitude. It's all a battle to conceal your weaknesses and arm yourself. A quick game of truth-or-dare used to be able to bond a large group of us into one, blushing unit; crushes revealed, regrets solidified by speech, everything spilled and saturating us with its inexplicable color. Adults are still playing, but we always choose dare. At least I do. Even when it means running as fast as my lies can carry me, or sneaking around the office building after hours.

I clock out at 5:30 and wait at my desk until 6, flipping through news articles with disinterest, eyes going bloodshot in its blue light. At 6:15 I walk to Tom's cubicle, and he's not there.

At home Ivan's sleeping again, and I curl up in the seat across from him, listening to his milky stream of consciousness and loosening my professional posture. He's thinking of fire again, but it's not frightening. His dream is in shadow and his internal voice is comfortable, maybe even higher pitched, but that could be because it sounds how it used to when I met him, with no sharp edges. Not everything he says has to be fascinating for me to want to listen—sometimes it's enough if it's true.

It's Tuesday, and I've been staring at the same emblem mock-ups for 35 minutes, but they all look the same to me. A little splotch with some text, the business names and executive titles are so proud of themselves. They fill up the corners without faltering, while I'm shrunken at my desk avoiding Tom. I brought a water bottle with me and haven't had to use the restroom yet, but it would be my luck if I developed one of those blood clots from sitting too long.

A voice is calling my name, but I check my phone instead of answering. There's a crime alert flashing at the top of its pixelated screen. Fire rescue is making traffic difficult on West Finway and should be avoided during evening commutes. Details are being withheld until families have been contacted. The office phone chimes wildly, and I touch Tom's sleeve on my way into the main building, a shrill voice is calling my name.

"Charlie, it's urgent," Charlotte's garish nail polish is bleeding over her cuticles, draped around an antiquated phone like a shawl. I selfishly remember my own untrimmed fingers, distract myself with their filth while she shoves the receiver to my chin. *A fire at your residence. Repeat that, please? A fire at your residence. It doesn't look like arson. Man named Ivan didn't make it out, the neighbors called in 911. A cigarette might have sparked the blaze. Your renters have been contacted, we've found you temporary housing. Repeat that, please? Ivan didn't make it out.*

I thank the operator for telling me my home is ashes and reminding me that I didn't say good morning to my closest friend on the way out this morning. The phone is already ringing a solemn tone when I pass it to Charlotte.

"Is everything okay?" She asks, and I grit my teeth. I count heart beats in a puppets voice, *1... 2... 3... 4...*

"Nope."

"Clock out when you leave," she insists, so I do.

After a clumsy, 7-block sprint I'm slush covered and heaving at what used to be my stoop. Sirens are making it hard to hear myself think, and in this instance, I'm grateful. It's hard to tell whether I can see my breath due to the contrast in temperature or the smoke I'm gasping. A massive rubber glove offers me a surgical mask, a pen and a packet of paper work.

"Thanks," I blurt through periwinkle lips, and shakily strap on the chintzy device to filter Ivan's ashes out of my lungs. I'm not sure how investigators determine where a fire began, since from this vantage point it's a charred heap. The wreckage blends together and I visualize the floor plan, hypothesize where Ivan would have been at 3:30 on a Tuesday afternoon. *Why wouldn't he just leave the building when he smelled smoke?* It's a mystery, but dusting for prints is useless in a plot of soot.

"Are you alright?" The fireman who had passed me the mask seems genuinely curious behind his yellow plastic eyewear, and I nod without breathing. "Okay, well fill that packet out. We need it for the insurance. I think the kid's parents have been notified, and someone found you a motel room, so there's nothing for you to worry about now." My tears have tumbled into the ink on the top right corner of the page, distorting the officiating title.

"I'm sure," I reply without inflection, then begin writing my basic information. Name, date of birth, social security number, insurance provider; all the little symbols of my handwriting are difficult to read, but that's someone else's miserable day job to decipher.

A car without blue and white lights parks a courteous block away from the wreckage, and the door opens and shuts within seconds. Jillian hastily approaches with her arms crossed beneath a brightly knit scarf. She tucks it over her chin as her figure enters the smog.

"Charlie, oh my God." She's closer then I'd like to be to anyone now, coughing, but I accept the hug she initiates and melt in her familiar scent. "Oh my God."

"They think it was a cigarette," I speak the words into her scarf, but my

mind confronts the truth: *they think it was a suicide.*

"What did you say? Your voice was a little muffled," she asks, and I count the tears that I can't hold on my lashline, they're too heavy, 5, 6, 7, 8.

"I'm not sure," I say, and mean it. She squeezes tighter, and I wish I could love her the way she hasn't stopped loving me. This embrace is a maternal gesture, and I receive the affection from her like a lesson.

"Do you need somewhere to stay tonight?" she asks, and I'm too exhausted to give an excuse so I follow to her car that doesn't have any new scratches in its paint. I think about leaving one now with the keys in my pocket that don't belong to anything, but instead I chuck them into a neighboring yard and they tunnel through piled snow.

On the expressway later I stop counting headlights and let myself sink a little, the radio is pulsating with NPR. I'm too tired to hide. We've slept together, so I'm sure she remembers my subconscious. I've been haunted by her dreams for a while, all the times I've been in them, wearing suits I don't own and kissing her with passion that wasn't mine.

San Pham



Senior

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Eating Oceans

i.

Tell us a bedtime story, they say. Their mother sits on the edge of the bed, crinkling the blanket. The girl smooths out the wrinkles. Her younger sister then jumps on the bed to join the rest of her family. The girl sighs, yanks her sheets and blankets to her chin.

Her mother is tired of reading the same book again and again. "Why don't I tell you my story," she says. The girls nod eagerly. *We love you Me, more than anything in the whole entire world.*

The oldest, Nguyet, named after the moon, was born after her mother drove to the hospital by herself at night with the perfectly circular orb in the sky casting light. She reads mountains of books by sunset and spends her time with her art projects, the peaceful one. Hoping for the same luck with the second daughter, her mother named her An, for peace. An had colic for six months.

"*Stop moving,*" Nguyet says crossly to her younger sister, who is bounc-

ing up and down from the excitement.

"You stop moving," An says back, her face punched with dimples on each cheek.

Their mother winces at her daughters' use of English. Yet she acknowledges it's a battle she has already lost. "Do you want a bedtime story or not," she says to her daughters in their tongue. She could use an early night anyway. But the noise and fidgeting cease and they look up—four adoring brown eyes.

Taking a deep breath, full of neglected dust, she begins.

Across the ocean there's a country, Vietnam. It's a peninsula—like Michigan—except with an ocean embracing the country rather than lakes. It isn't cold like here, there isn't any snow, ever. It's a tropical climate, and the humidity consumes you. There are so many good fruits and seafood. My favorite fruit is spiky and it stinks—oh god it stinks—but inside it is rich and yellow and it fills every one of your taste buds. I used to eat them, walk around barefoot and spend my days climbing trees.

1979-SAIGON

My feet wear callouses and the stickiness from the quả sấu riêng coat my mouth and fingers. I take turns biting into the fleshy fruit and licking my fingers, to the beat of my footsteps. *Bite. lick lick. Step. Bite. lick lick. Step.* I'm the seventh child out of thirteen so I am forgotten enough to have freedom to do and go as I please. *Bite. lick lick. Step.*

Too soon, the fruit is gone. I have some bills in my pockets—despite the war, the jewelry shop is still doing well, and Bõ convinced Mẹ to give me some extra money.

Mẹ still says I'm getting spoiled, and that I'm going to grow as round as the fruit I eat. I say at least I'm getting nutrients while my older brothers are spending their money on cigarettes, or a new part for their motorcycle. But since Bõ is finally back, Mẹ has been much more lenient. We were all so happy when he finally returned, new lines all over his face and thick scratchy shields on his palms, his skin pink and raw. Mẹ scoffed when Bõ picked me up and swung me around when he came back and told me how much I had grown.

Mẹ says that now I'm ten, I have to set a good example for my younger sisters. They have six other older siblings to look up to, one less won't matter that much. Mẹ says I have to be less care-free and thankful for the privileges I get. *There's a war going on, it's too dangerous with your attitude,* she says.

But I'm the seventh child, the fifth daughter, and nestled in between

enough troublemakers and favorites to go mostly unnoticed. It's only when I come trudging back home, tracking mud—when Mệ sees my footprints and remembers that there's a body attached to those dirty markings—her daughter. Or maybe she only cares about the footprints and their markings around her clean house.

"*Mong Trinh!*" her voice echoes like clanking metal throughout the house. All my siblings scatter into shadows. "Trinh!" she yells out again, the force not waning even when she's standing a foot away from me.

"Yes, Mệ," I say.

She looks at me, exasperated. "You know, your father and I named you *pure*. If we have any more children, maybe we should name them *dirt* or *mud* or *wild*. That way, they will turn out to be clean and peaceful children that don't stomp over my clean house with god knows whatever is outside." She sighs dramatically, hands raised like she's praying to the ceiling. I look up. Yup, peeling paint and cement.

"I was on my way to wash them off, so when I was cleaning the mud from the floors I wouldn't add to the mess," I lie.

Mệ looks too tired to argue with me. "Well clean it up," she orders like I hadn't *just said* that I would take care of the floors.

I'm scrubbing away the caked dirt at the tiled ground when I hear Mệ whispering harshly. She's talking to Bõ behind closed doors.

"They wanted you to go into a reeducation camp? You killed how many people?" she says, her worry coming off as anger. "I told you to be careful. I told you that publicly supporting and fighting for the Americans would bring trouble. I told you—"

"We have to make plans, there isn't time for *I told you so's*," Bõ cuts in. "I'm not going to a reeducation camp where they stick everyone who can actually help put this country together into hard labor and punishment. I'm going to take care of you, and I'm going to take care of this family."

I have stopped scrubbing, too scared to make a sound. My ears stretch to the words behind the door. This is the one time I am thankful Mệ has a loud voice.

"So what do we do?" Mệ questions.

"We have to leave," Bõ says. "For good."

The next day, we all crowd around the table as we eat breakfast. Bõ and Mệ sit at the only two chairs currently around the table, as the rest of us hover around them. My brothers lean against the counter, slurping up

noodles. I eat *bánh bao* in my hands, the soft bun steaming in my mouth as I chew. Bố waits until I have taken my last bite, the last of the eggs and vegetables inside absorbing into my tongue. I swallow.

"We're going to visit your grandmother, who is very ill," Bố says. We all know this is a lie. Bà ngoại died five years ago. I can see her shrine through the doorway surrounded with a smoke of incense.

Bố looks into each of our eyes. The silence is long.

"Now ingrain this into your memory. Bà ngoại is sick. You are visiting her. This is what you will tell the soldiers."

"Tell the soldiers?" my younger sister asks. For once my mouth is shut, not from fear of letting my parents know I was eavesdropping, but from fear.

"We have to escape the country," Bố says, his tongue hitting the silence like sandpaper. "I am no longer safe here in Saigon. We're no longer safe here."

Years later, he would tell us that he had barely escaped prison—killing a guard for each step closer to freedom and his family.

"What about the babies?" my older brother asks, speaking of my two youngest sisters who can barely even walk. "How will they survive the journey?"

"They won't be coming with us," Bố says. We all look at our parents, confused. *Are we leaving them behind? Who would take care of them? Everyone we know is dead, scared, or gone.*

My mother's face is dry, she cried up an ocean the night before. "I won't be coming with you." Each word pounded into our hearts. "I'm staying here with them."

"*Well what about us,*" the words fall out of my mouth, sounding whiny and selfish even to me.

All the shock from last night becomes very real and I can feel my face flush with heat.

"How dare you make decisions for us? What if we wanted to stay in Saigon? Why can't we just take the babies with us on the trip? What if we need you, Mẹ?"

I storm out the kitchen, pausing at my grandmother's shrine to light an incense. Then in the smoke I continue my exit. I go to my mattress on the floor of the huge room we all share, and cry.

Bố follows me in, and I can feel his weight on the cot.

"I will be here for you children," Bõ says. "I am always here."

*

We used to always joke about which parent we preferred. We favored Mệ when she stood up for us against shopkeepers who tried to bully us into paying for a more expensive ao dai, or the kids down the street with the scary dog. Bõ let us sit at his feet while he hammered at metal, or giving us tastes of food that he would prepare for dinner. Mệ was the force, the bright sun that lit the earth with her power. Bõ were the shadows, casted where Mệ couldn't reach, our respite from the heat.

After dinner we pack what we can carry until the day wanes into darkness. I used to have dreams about this, my house is burning, fire tasting all it can, before consuming. Do I pack my memories, or the necessities?

Mệ goes through each of our bags, her last motherly act. She looks into mine and lets out another deep sigh. Out of habit I look away, but remember this is the last time I might be her daughter. I memorize the lines around her eyes, which start to wilt.

She silently takes out a twig from my favorite climbing tree, a few incense sticks I took from the shrine, and starts pulling out a comb before she stops. It's her comb, knotted with long strands of thick black hair.

Tears leak from her dark eyes, and she puts the comb back in, and we both pretend it never happened. *Be good*, she says to me. She moves on to my younger sister's bag.

The store front creaks open to the ceiling. I glide my hands along the jewelry counter, marking the clean glass with my fingerprints and palm lines.

Mệ stands at the counter, looking as if she's about to start another day of ork in the shop. The lighting is wrong though. Where early sun usually greets, shadows from overhead electric lights streak across her eyes and lips. She hands us each a heavy package, wrapped in newspapers.

We walk out the store front, in silence, clutching ourselves to keep what we have left together.

ii.

Her mom doesn't understand.

Nguyet cries, as the world is shut out from the backseat. "Get out of the car, now," her mom orders for the fifth time. Nguyet refuses to move. In the backseat, time has stopped. The backseat is her wall against the truth.

"I'll just leave you in the car then," her mom tries reverse psychology. Both know this won't work.

Her mom crawls into the car now. "Just because you're switching schools doesn't mean you won't see your friends. We're just moving fifteen minutes away."

"This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me," Nguyet says. "I ha-

Her mom interrupts Nguyet so she doesn't have to hear the rest of the phrase.

"You're nine years old, you will survive this," her mother says back in an encouraging tone, but she can't help but leave the end of her words a bit sharp.

*

Nguyet wraps the Christmas presents this year—her mother's, her sister's and her own. Her mother is unemployed again, but this time it's worse than it's ever been before. She remembers the joy the three of them had when they had moved in to their first house. None of the furniture had been brought in, so they all ran around and slid on the hardwood floors, and down the thick stair railing. "Why can't we have a Christmas tree this year?" An asks. "Why do we only get one present? Naomi gets *seven* every year," Nguyet proclaims.

And so brimmed with guilt, their mother eats less and puts what's left in her checking account into the last tree they can find at Frank's. As it was rejected by the entire town, the tree is small, more sticks than green. It has a hunch of an old man who spent his youth staring at the ground. "It's like the tree in Charlie Brown," their mother says. The two daughters are too happy with getting the *last* tree in all of town to care.

Later that night, Nguyet sees her mother cutting up her credit cards. "Never get credit cards, Nguyet," her mother orders. "Only spend what you can afford." She tosses the triangular bits into the trash.

*

At the end of Nguyet's piano class, her mother stays behind to talk with her teacher, Mrs. Sarah.

"I can't afford another month's worth of lessons, is there any way she can get a scholarship?"

Mrs. Sarah will do anything for her favorite student. Though Nguyet was the one who chose piano many years ago, the awe has worn off and she spends most of her practice time whining. She manages to persuade the local art center to give her daughters free lessons. She pays for her daughters' rec and ed sports, dance lessons, swimming classes, orthodontia *and dammit*

their eyesight sucks too and the gas it takes to drive them all over town. She gives her daughters all the lives she wanted so desperately but could never could have. She gives her daughters everything—and nobody can claim that a mother with no supporting family or husband is less of a parent, is less of a mother.

1979-PACIFIC OCEAN

I need my Me, I'm only ten. She isn't dead, but she might as well be. It's been six days, five nights, and the terror of escaping the country has been replaced with endless ocean and hunger. Bõ keeps us all close. He's already lost his wife and his youngest daughters. Now he looks at all our exhausted faces. We're packed in this ship with half a thousand people like the fish that come in tins. There is barely room to sit on the floor. We need food, and the captain is living a life of luxury in his cabin while the rest of us immigrants starve. Bõ looks angry, his wrinkles have become permanent. He tells us all that he'll be back—with food. We're too hungry to question how he'll get it.

Minutes later we hear screaming and we all stand up. Everyone on the boat hears a commotion and nobody can tell what is going on. Then the crowd parts and Bõ heads towards us, a butcher's knife in hand. "I chased the cook around the boat until he promised he would feed everyone," Bõ explains.

Soon we are all given stale *bánh mì* and we all shove it into our mouths, treating every bread crumb and drip like gold. The satisfaction doesn't last long.

"Pirates," someone screams and the ship turns to panic. Bõ gives us the knife still clutched in his hand. "Chop off your hair now, look like a boy." Dutifully, we pass around the knife and help each other cut off our long hair. I start to tear up, years of growing out my black hair to emulate my older sister's—gone.

The captain is locked in his cabin, and nobody knows what to do. Bõ hands my older brother the knife—*take care of our family*—he says, and rushes off again. I run after him and my older brother yells but I lose him, thanks to the frightened crowd.

I manage to keep up with Bõ; the years of running barefoot make it easy to dodge people. The wood is scratchy and I can feel splinters attempt to stick into my feet. He runs up to the steering wheel and takes command, his war instinct taking control. He doesn't see me, though I'm right behind him. I see the pirate boat in the distance, looking like a cockroach slowly gliding from within the cracks in the walls. I'm terrified.

Bõ is calm, and looks in the opposite direction of the pirate ship. There, a thick and heavy fog hides the ocean. The pirate ship is getting closer—

enough for my imagination of pirates with sharp teeth and evil cackles to form. Our ship doesn't seem to be going fast enough, we have nowhere to go. Ahead is only ocean.

Bố keeps looking at the fog, and then at the incoming pirate ship. He looks behind him and he finally sees me. "Trinh," he says calmly to me, "everything will be okay." He then steers the ship into the fog and drives it into nothingness. We can't see the pirate ship, we can't see anything.

Hours later the fog clears and the ocean returns, empty of any pirates. The captain has finally come out of his cabin to scold Bố about getting the ship off course and lost. The people on this boat are too relieved about our escape from the pirates that they now revere Bố.

We're going to die out here. Die out here only remembering ocean and sun. I remember a story my sister told me the other day about how a woman became blind from looking at the sun when she woke up on a ship. I don't want to go blind.

Then in the distance I see it. A strip of land. After days of only seeing water it breaks the monotony of ocean. "Bố!" I say excitedly. "Look over there!"

The captain sees it too, and soon the strip of land turns into an island. Our island of refuge. People are crying and clutching each other. We won't die another victim of the ocean. The group of five hundred people flow out of the boat, hesitant, but eager. They all stumble around, nobody has done anything physical for a while. A few people start vomiting, giving back to the ocean.

"We need to make shelters," Bố says loudly to our stranded group. He points to the thick tropical leaves of the trees on this island. "Take those and we can make huts for everyone." My brothers leap to join Bố and my sisters and I go search for fresh water. When we come back, we return to a community of people—all connected through our pain—all working together to form homes. We head over to Bố and our brothers, who have just completed turning a bunch of leaves into a shelter. They admire their work.

For the first time, we feel safe. We all go to bed instantly. I stare at the stars, which punch holes into the night. The biggest hole is the full moon in the sky. Soon my eyes close and all I can see is dark.

We are all awoken the next morning by screams. My sister is standing up, and tears pour out of her eyes as she jumps around, swatting her arms and legs. Soon we all realize that we are covered in red ants. They have bitten their way through our skin and we all run out from under the leaves. My sister keeps clawing at her ear, "*there's one inside it*" she keeps saying but we're all too busy worrying for ourselves to care.

After we have cleaned ourselves from the ants, Bõ inspects the area. "They live in the leaves," he says. "We'll have to find something else to live in if we want to survive."

That's when I realize that we won't be rescued. Nobody knows we're here, nobody will come and get us. We're stuck on this island with the red ants forever. I miss Mę even more. She wouldn't make the mistake of using ant-infested leaves to protect us. She would inspect everything before she let her children touch it. She would yell so loud that all these ants would drown rather than deal with her.

But Mę isn't here. All we have are each other.

iii.

Nguyet spends her lunch serving hot lunch. "I get free hot lunch every day!" she says excitedly to her mom. She doesn't notice the embarrassment in her mother's wrinkles that are starting to stick.

"You don't have to do that you know," her mother says. "Wouldn't you rather spend lunch with your friends rather than work behind a counter?"

Nguyet shrugs her mom's words off. "I work the most jobs a fifth grader can, I get to help with the kindergarteners, I get to be on safety patrol *and* serve lunch." Nguyet's face brightens up with pride.

Her mother then smiles back at her daughter, reflecting her daughter's pride. Nguyet's smart, talented, a hard worker, caring. Maybe she isn't as bad at raising her daughters as she thinks. She is a mom. She has two wonderful children. They are a family.

The next day she decides to go visit Nguyet during her lunch break. She parks her car, strolling into the elementary school, imagining the happy grin Nguyet will break into when she surprises her.

Nguyet is working behind the counter, gloves in her hand, a ridiculous hair net over her head. Her glasses are slipping down her nose, and when she talks, you can see her front teeth stick out. She'll need braces in a few years, but for now, Nguyet's mother cherishes the time Nguyet will be a child.

"Nguyet!" she calls out. Nguyet sees her mom, and shock passes over her face.

"What are you doing here?" Nguyet asks carefully.

Her mom grins, "I'm here for lunch!"

Nguyet repeats her question, still in shock. "What are you doing here,"

she trails off.

It takes a moment for her mother to register her daughter's emotions.

"Please leave, I'm busy Mom," Nguyet punches into her mother's heart.

"I'm sorry," her mom finds herself saying before slowly walking away. "I guess I'll see you later when you finish with school."

Nguyet looks at her mom's retreating figure, in shame. She almost runs after her mom, *I'm sorry* she says again and again in her mind. If her mother just turns back, Nguyet will run into her mother's arms and give her the biggest hug.

But her mom doesn't look back, and Nguyet doesn't run after her mom.

She's grown up now.

*

Nguyet remembers the first time she was aware of her skin, her nose, her eyes. Her *ethnicity*. She spends her days looking in mirrors. "Why is my nose so big and flat? Why don't I have the wrinkle above my eyes? Why am I brown everywhere—can I get contacts? I want one blue eye and one green. Today the substitute asked me why I don't have an American name. Why did my name have to be Vietnamese?"

Nguyet is in middle school—where everyone else has seemed to claim their beauty and sex in ways Nguyet can't. The year before, girls bullied another classmate for having a red stain on the butt of her pants. *Caitlin has her period*, they all laughed loudly. Nguyet didn't know what a period was. Nguyet doesn't know a lot of things, she's too shy to ask her mom, of whom *shy* is a laughable concept. She doesn't know what it's like to shop for clothes, all what she wears are what her best friend has outgrown. She doesn't know any music except what her mom listens to—Dido and Norah Jones. She doesn't know what it's like to have a father.

She used to take pride in these things—this made her special and unique. But Nguyet wonders that if she had a father now, her mother would be less stressed and stop yelling at her. *You're eleven now, you don't need me to walk you to school. You're eleven now, if you want something else to eat then buy the groceries and make it yourself. You're eleven now, you're not a child anymore.*

INDONESIA-1979

The natives call the island *Galang*. Bõ tells me the island is about 13 kilometers long. Though I wouldn't like half a thousand people storming into my home with no imminent plans to leave, the natives show us how to build

shelters and find food—before retreating back into the deep tropical jungles. Every day we fish, and and pick fruit. I spend my days walking around bare-foot exploring the nature, and sucking the juices from the tropical wealth. Bõ and the other adults choose a representative to go off in their newly made canoe to go to the main island of Indonesia to ask for flour, rice, and other provisions. I cry every night, every day. The tears never stop.

One day, Bõ tries to teach me how to fish. He hands me a net he crafted days before.

I am sick of fish, cooked the same way with no variety. I miss the spiciness of my childhood, which I feel disappearing each day since we've left Viet Nam.

The fish, and any ocean creature really, must feel my hatred because hours later burning in the sun, we catch nothing.

"Be patient," Bõ tells me for the hundredth time. And like a fish out of water, I snap.

"I'm done fishing, why can't I just pick fruit like I usually do? I'm sick of waiting," I say. I stand up and throw my net on the sand, denting the shore and sand flings out and stings our legs. "I'm done waiting for fish, I'm done waiting for the sun to set, I'm done waiting for people to save us."

Bõ is silent, which keeps my anger flowing. Mẹ would have started yelling back and we would have had a screaming match until our voices were taken away. Angry about our situation, angry that he isn't yelling back, angry at my loss, I stamp my foot on the net my father crafted, breaking it in two.

"We should have stayed in Saigon! With Mẹ! What are we doing here! We have no hair, no home, no mother!"

Tears start leaking out of my eyes, and I angrily wipe them away. I'm not sad. I'm furious.

"This is all your fault! Why did you have to make all this trouble! If you didn't ruin it for us in Vietnam we would still be there, a whole family still living in our own home!"

Then I walk away from Bõ and his stupid fishing making sure to kick sand so that it heads in his direction.

Here on the island, our troubles of war and loss turn into purgatory, the waiting. Being deserted on a tropical island due to a pirate attack—it sounds like a storybook. Or a dream I would create for myself on top of the tree, above the smoke and honks of the motorcycles below.

I walk to a tree, different than my tree. The bark is smoother and shini-

er, the branches folding into giant glossy leaves, with no support. I reach my hands to the nearest limbs which opens its arms in comforting embrace. I jump, expecting my fingers to clasp these hands. Nails, palm, air clutch each other, folding into a black hole and I fall, my bottom meeting the earth. Dirt and rocks meet skin. Teeth meet tongue.

Blood creeps out of my skin and mouth and I lick it back up; it fuels my anger. I jump again.

More red.

Again and again and soon the red is washed away by salt.

Bố finds me, the sun marking lunch time. I hadn't gone far, too stubborn to move on.

"If your mother could see you." He speaks out of habit. *If your mother could see you she would scream at you until your insides hurt.* "Let's wash you off," he finishes instead.

He clasps his hands into mind, pulls me up from the ground and crushes me into a hug. We walk together, holding each other, to the water, where he tugs my shirt over my head.

My mother isn't here, and she will never be here. These tears will never bring her back.

I walk into the ocean, and my body sinks into it, the waves cradling me.

*

Hours later, I lay naked in the sand, the sun warming up my body. Tomorrow, I will wake up with my skin bright red and burning, but that is hours away from now. Someone runs past me, kicking sand into my face. I stand up and start yelling at whoever dared to destroy my peace.

It is my sister. I wait for her to start screaming back, as we usually do. But instead I hear tears. I didn't think I was that mean.

She stands in the ocean, her legs tightly pressed together. I enter the water to get closer to her. Where she stands, the ocean turns rusty around her.

I see streaks flowing down her legs, and her hands desperately trying to catch and purge whatever she can with the ocean water.

"It won't stop, it won't stop," she says. Her salty tears are no match for the rust of her blood.

I hear yelling and I turn to see my eldest sister running towards us, not

bothering to undress before leaping to join us into the water.

She joins my sister and comforts her. "It's okay, calm down, I'm here," she says.

I feel out of place. I leave them, as they cry their blood and tears.

iv.

She feels curses coming from her tongue. She bites down before it spews out. It's so hard for her to be a mother and to be angry. Everyone warned her about teenage girls but she waved them off, claiming that Nguyet and An wouldn't be like those other Americans.

Nguyet and her argue every day, every night. All the doors are broken in the house from all three of them slamming into the frame. The house is filled with yelling, each of them alternating which one is mad at each other. She hears Nguyet cry herself to sleep, and muffles her own tears into her pillow. Daughters can't carry their mother's sadness on top of their own.

She can feel her wrinkles start to dig into her face—between her eyebrows, across her forehead, lining her lips. She looks into the mirror, to check the last years of her youth. *I'm growing into my mother.*

Nguyet dreams of flying, she doesn't fit on this earth. She leaps into the air, floating over land and oceans.

Her mother dreams of burning houses. She wakes up sweating. "Everything is okay," she says out loud. "Everything will be okay."

GALANG-1981

Months later when the ship comes, I am not around to see the shadow in the distance. The horns shoot through the air like rope. We all run to the shore, each honk bringing us closer back to time. We have a future. We are done waiting.

The soldiers, pale and shaven, step out of the boat. Their shoulders are squared back, heads high, proud that they are our saviors. It is lunch time, and the soldiers feast on what they have brought from their ship, while walking around to check in on all of us *refugees*. We all see them as heroes, saving us from this purgatory.

"It is amazing you've been here for a year," one of the soldiers remarks, observing the sturdiness of the hut Bõ made, in disjointed Vietnamese, his white teeth sinking into a red shiny fruit. The juice leaks from this red fruit and paints his chin and the collar of his uniform.

"It's an apple," he remarks, noticing my curious eyes at this strange fruit. It's been a while since anything has been so new to me. The juice pouring out, the beautiful color. A durian is ugly on the outside and smells like vomit. Something this gorgeous must be even better on the inside. I want this fruit.

Bõ comes to me, placing his hands on my shoulder. He looks short now, weak, compared to the tall broad soldiers.

"Ap-ple," the soldier enunciates, speaking slow, looking down at Bõ and me. "Apple."

*

The first food I will buy in America is an apple. I will pick the shiniest, reddest apple.

I will take a bite, my tongue curling up as the buds spark in anticipation.

It has no flavor. My hopes will leak out with the juice and I will angrily wipe it off with my sleeve.

Disappointed I will toss the apple as far away from me as I can. It rolls under the shelves, joining our dreams and turning into dust.

v.

"You're pronouncing your name wrong," her mother tells Nguyet.

"I'm *American*," Nguyet says. "It's your fault you didn't teach us Vietnamese and it's your fault I can't pronounce Vietnamese correctly!"

Her mother rolls her eyes. "I tried," she says back. They both glare at each other.

Her mother takes a breath. "Okay, listen to me. Nwe-ay. Listen to my inflection. Watch my tongue." It takes Nguyet a few times to get it. Kind of.

"Okay, now my name."

"Trinh," Nguyet repeats back.

HOUSTON-1985

We speak English fluently, all lying about our ages to have extra years to learn. I still dream in Vietnamese. I wake up with licks of fire tasting my skin, now the only home I have now that my house is burned down. Now the dreams include my mother, screaming as the fire eats her up.

I am walking back from school when I hear the most beautiful sounds.

I follow the music, dancing and skipping along the way, humming poorly along.

I find the source of the music, through a window. I creep up slowly to the glass. A girl sits at a bench where her hands move along the instrument around her. A teacher stands above her, criticizing the way her hands move.

I spend the next hour listening to the sounds her hands make.

When I come home, I immediately tell my brother about this instrument.

"It's made of wood and you sit in front of it, and then your hands hit these white and black buttons!" I tell him, my face flushed in excitement.

"It's a piano," my brother tells me.

I go to my father the moment he puts his coat away.

"Please can I learn how to play the piano?" I ask. "I will still work hard. This is the only thing I have ever asked of you, BỐ."

He looks right through me, wrinkles clouding his eyes.

"No money," he says. "Do well in school to make money."

Then he leaves me in the hallway with my tears. I never ask for anything from him again.

The next day after school, I march to the window, and listen to the girl play and the teacher teach.

I soak up every word. I will learn piano, with no money and no instrument.

I came here to America, I survived wars, pirates, a deserted island.

Learning piano, will be easy.

HOUSTON-1988

Bố is no longer the hero. I watch him as I wait tables as he takes a scheduled break from cooking. What once made him valorous when he fed the ship of refugees becomes a mundane chore. It's survival, in a different, less empowering way. He smokes a pack a day and leaves a bit of himself with the ash and crinkled butts. He pulls the box out of his pocket and the white rolled paper shimmers out and finds its way in between his

stained chapped lips. His thumb strikes the lighter and he makes fire, an easier method than back on the island with sticks and friction. He takes a deep breath. And like a dragon, he lets the smoke breathe out. It fills the air around him, consuming.

He escaped persecution only to find himself, a single father having to take care of too many children. Too many *teenage* children.

Bố has too much to worry about to care about any of us.

Where he was once the respected man who saved lives, he now is looked down upon, and rejected in favor of people with paler skins who have yellow hair, straight small nose, tall limbs. He owns a Vietnamese restaurant now, with a tailor on the side. We need all the money we can get. America isn't Vietnam, but with Bố being a war criminal, and his wife on house arrest, it's the only place we have.

*

I am in class when the principle politely interrupts my teacher mid chalk-stroke on the board. "May I borrow Trinh?" he says.

He walks me to his office and pulls out a chair for me to sit in, before sinking into his own.

He smiles, his teeth too white and straight.

"I am pleased to tell you that you have received a full scholarship to university," he lets out excitedly, and then grins again in preparation for my reaction.

I'm not surprised. I worked hard.

"Your parents must be so proud of you, their intelligent daughter about to graduate high school and getting a full ride to college."

I smile, mimicking his shiny grin, but with my fake implants that I received when first arriving in America, to replace the mouthful of rot that had grown.

People like him don't understand that there is nobody to celebrate me. I work hard for myself, I work hard because I have to survive.

Bố is smoking more, each breath he lets out more poisonous. I imagine the Bố of my past—the one who would have been the cheerleader for us in our lives, rather than a teacher stuck with detention duties.

Texas is hell.

vi.

In 1992, President Bill Clinton lifts the embargo. Trinh's sisters start booking their tickets to go home, for the first time in more than a decade. *What's the point*, Trinh thinks, pregnant with her first child. Her father is dead (*lung cancer*, the doctors prescribed years before), never to be reunited with his wife.

When their family visits the grave a decade later (Trinh's father never returning home after all), her daughters are more worried about supernatural forces than the fact that their grandfather, her dad, is rotting in the dirt. Nguyet senses the death, and refuses to let her feet touch the ground.

She doesn't want the rot to catch.

vii.

MY MOTHER'S TONGUE

echoes like clanking metal
and scatters in the shadows.

sharp with red
it whips back around.

it strikes a light(ning) curse in vietnamese
to remind us that if we could understand
more
than just numbers and basic greetings
her words would have more strength
more power.

our english and our voices cease.

we count the seconds between the flash
and the thunder.

1/ một
Tên tôi là Nguyet

i am the light in the dark sky.
i only shine for myself.
i move oceans.

2/ hai

Tôi hai mươi hai tuổi.

twenty two years of wishing for moonlight skin and ocean eyes
are gone and i embrace the rest of the dark sky.
i stand on the earth.

3/ ba

Tôi sống ở Mỹ. Mẹ sinh ở Việt Nam.

we try and eat the ocean but we drown before we can touch.

4/ bốn

Tôi thích là nhà văn. Tôi thích là giáo viên.

i write. i teach. i learn. i swallow. i digest.

5/ năm

Con yêu Mẹ.

I love you with your tongue.

-Nguyet

Serenity Powers



Senior

Major: German, Creative Writing and Interdisciplinary Astronomy

Serenity was born underwater in a horse trough in Pontiac, Mi. and their subsequent behavior has been no less of a surprise. Serenity has approximate knowledge of many things including German language and culture, the Titanic, sharks, modern Iceland, astrobiology, and gothic literature... and encyclopedic knowledge of others such as Yu-Gi-Oh!, the Eurovision Song Contest, and German rock band Tokio Hotel. Serenity has made an unofficial career out of attempting to compile this daunting mass of random information into fiction. The jury's still out on whether or not this endeavor has been successful, but in the meantime, fans of Serenity's fanfiction seem satisfied enough.

Owlman

When Milan Knežević was told by the Belgrade Center for Protection of Children, Infant and Youth director that an English couple had requested to adopt him, he'd readily but shyly responded that he'd like that before frowning with concern. "But I don't know English," he fretted, his hands clasped. "Will they still want me?"

Andrija Milić, a stern, matronly woman in her fifties, couldn't help but want to comfort the nervous little boy standing before her heavy mahogany desk.

"I wouldn't worry." Her voice, a timbre of reassurance, rose and fell in warm confidence. "I was told they've even learned a little Serbian for you, but

I'm sure you'll learn English more quickly than they'll learn Serbian." Plastic and rubber and wood rolled against one another as she opened the top drawer of her desk to retrieve a plastic-wrapped slab of slightly stale pistachio 'alva.' The wrapper crinkled against her skin as she peeled it back, then came a whisper of silky paper against cardboard. Milan held out one small hand, and a piece of alva wrapped in a tissue from her desk was pressed into his palm.

The crumbly confection with its familiar nutty flavor assuaged some of Milan's fears, and he asked if he might see a picture of his new family.

"Of course." A flutter of paper against thin plastic. A quiet *click* of metal falling back into place. Unclipping the photo the Hutchinsons had attached to their application, Andrija got up from the desk to join him so she could name them for him. Milan stashed the remainder of the alva in the pocket of his cheap green t-shirt and took the picture from her, holding it up close to his eyes.

"They look nice," he said of the dark-haired woman and her blond husband who were smiling into the camera.

"They are Annabel and Nathan Hutchinson, and they live in a village in southern England, by the sea I believe. They also have a cat."

"When do I get to meet them?" Milan asked eagerly before frowning again. "Oh...do they know...?" He gnawed his lip where the taste of pistachio alva lingered.

Andrija ruffled his hair, and Milan's eyes slid closed in contentment. "They do. They're smart and know that it makes you special. That's why they picked you all the way from England."

"Really? And I'd have a cat? Do they live in London? Can I meet the queen? Will I get to go on a plane?" The tranquil moment was over, and Milan was suddenly brimming with questions, his pale face flushing and his light blue eyes shining, perplexed by, but excited about the family from England who wanted him.

Andrija smiled gently at him, touched by his bravery. But then, she'd always been touched by that. She hoped the Hutchinsons would treasure him as they'd promised.

Feeling his back pressed against something solid had always made Milan feel safe. If there was a wall behind him, he could walk as slowly as he pleased without getting in the way or being bumped into, one foot carefully crossing over the other. At least, that was the idea.

Milan hadn't gotten more than a few feet from Andrija's office door when someone--a blur of dark blue t-shirt and skin and blond hair--slammed into him, knocking the air from his lungs.

"Oops, sorry, didn't you see you there, *vampire*." Damir was still standing close enough that Milan could see he was smirking. It was a stupid joke, and one that Damir never tired of.

"That's because I was invisible," Milan said after he'd caught his breath. He'd learned that if he played along when the others teased him, they often grew bored and left him alone. This discovery had come a half a year or so before when Luka'd asked when Dracula was coming for him. Instead of crying as he'd done in the past, Milan had replied: "probably tonight. He'll drink your blood if I ask him to." Luka'd recoiled as if Milan had slapped him, and run to tell one of the volunteers. The harried woman had admonished Milan for making threats and Milan had felt the stirrings of exasperation. When he cried, he was told to toughen up, and now that he'd toughened up he was being yelled at. But ultimately, Milan decided he preferred being punished to being teased, and consequently developed a reputation for being weird and creepy. Fine by him.

Now that they actually believed he wasn't quite human, the others left him alone. Except Damir, who for some reason had elected himself as the hero destined to slay the monster. He lay in wait around every corner, his foot outstretched, he pulled Milan's hair in the lunch line, he stole his sunglasses on the playground, laughing like a maniac when Milan scrunched his eyes in discomfort, immobilized by the brightness of the sun. And he was always trying to steal his bed.

Damir thought it was hilarious how frightened Milan was of climbing the wooden ladder to the top bunk, and would sprawl out across the bottom without budging no matter how much Milan pleaded with him to move.

Instinct told Milan to tell Andrija that Damir was being mean to him, but his pride refused to allow him to lower himself to tattling. He was eight, after all, practically a teenager; teenagers didn't *tattle*; they took it like men, because, after all, a teenager is practically a man.

"If you're invisible, how come I can see you, huh?" Damir demanded.

"If you can see me, why'd you run into me?" Milan smiled in triumph.

Damir faltered, started to retort, then shoved him instead.

Milan threw his hand out to catch himself against the wall, but misjudged the distance and and fell hard on his backside on the floor.

"What's going on out here?" Andrija appeared in her doorway. From several feet away, she looked like a black and white blob with dark hair. Milan

was immensely relieved to see her.

"Milan fell over," Damir explained promptly, stooping down to offer Milan his hand. Grimacing at both the pain in his bottom and at once again being the one to take the high road, Milan allowed Damir to heft him to his feet and said nothing of having been shoved.

"Damir, if you're so intent on being helpful, why don't you go to the kitchen and see if Vera needs any assistance making dinner for tonight." Andrija tone was light, but with an underlying firmness that dared Damir to refuse.

Hmphing grumpily, he stalked off in the general direction of the kitchen.

When Damir was out of sight, Andrija turned to Milan. "And you: try to stay out of trouble so I don't have to tell your parents about all the scrapes you get into." She'd meant the comment to come across as joking, but Milan, unaccustomed to being joked with rather than chastised, hung his head, white blond hair falling protectively across his face. "Hey now," she added with more transparent affection. "I'm not quite serious. Come, why don't you go find Sara or Ivo and have them look up your new town with you? It might be nice to see some pictures before you actually go there. It's called Mawnan Smith."

"Ok," Milan answered softly even though he'd already forgotten both words.

Milan tracked Ivo down in the toddler's playroom. He would have preferred Sara--her soft, breathy voice and how it made everything sound mysterious, the click of her heels on the wooden floors, and the stories she told about spending a year in America. But Ivo was easier to find, his deep, booming voice filling whatever space he was in. And he sometimes had candy with him which wasn't so bad.

"Ivo," he called from the doorway, terrified to wade through the sea of staggering toddlers only to trip and fall on one of them. "G-đa Andrija said you should look up Mranan Spliff on the computer for me."

"What?" Ivo asked, handing the child he'd been holding to one of the other volunteers and carefully making his way to Milan, his thick eyebrows contracting in confusion.

"The place in England I'm moving to. I'm getting adopted." The note of fear in his own voice startled him, and it began to sink in that he'd be going to live with strangers.

After straightening out that Milan was actually talking about Mawnan Smith, Ivo looked up the village on the computer in the main office. Milaquickly grew bored hearing about the village's many churches and only tuned

back in when Ivo read: "Mawnan Smith is also home to a number of sightings of the Owlman."

"Owlman?" Milan parroted him. "What's that?"

Ivo shrugged his massive shoulders. "Let's find out." Following the click-through link, he read out the legend of Owlman, reportedly seen periodically in the woods near the old Mawnan Smith churchyard. "The Owlman is described as an owl-like creature with glowing red eyes. Some say he's an omen of disaster or death, others claim he's a manifestation of the energy of the earth, come back to haunt the evil and the wicked."

Milan's eyes widened at the thought of such an amazing creature. If he'd have a companion who could haunt anyone who was mean to him, moving to Mawnan Smith wouldn't be so bad.

"Hey, don't worry--it's just a story; it's not real," Ivo said soothingly, mistaking Milan's expression for one of fear rather than fascination.

Milan was certain down to his soul that Ivo was wrong--Owlman *was* real.

* * * *

For Milan, the following month passed in a flurry of motion, broken Serbian, English English English, and a constant hubbub of activity. The finality of leaving the orphanage, the only true home he'd ever known, never to return, was so far outside his comprehension that Milan was neither nervous nor sad when he packed his meager belongings into a canvas duffel bag and Pokemon-themed backpack--a gift from his adoptive parents. The only negative feeling associated with leaving was a flash of annoyance that Damir would likely move into his bed.

During the cab ride from the orphanage to the Airport, without the aid of a translator, communication with his adoptive parents became difficult. The novelty of using the few English phrases he knew quickly lost its appeal, and so instead of talking, Milan entertained himself by listening to the burble of the radio and looking out the window at the swaths of color flashing past.

As the easy-going, reggae beat of Joca Stefanovic's 'Fališ mi ti' bled into the overplayed Eurovision entry 'Ovo je Balkan,' Milan reflected for the first time on leaving Belgrade. He'd only ever been out of the city a handful of times, only two of which he even remembered, and he'd never before left the country. Never been unable to communicate with those around him.

He'd never been talkative, and the teasing by the other boys had caused him to relish the time he spent alone, but to not understand anything at all, possibly forever, when sound was a sense he'd learned to privilege...that was scary. Milan fought a sudden fluttering panic in his stomach and clasped his

hands in his lap. Not wanting to offend his new parents, he forced himself not to cry. Milan wished Owlman was there so he could cocoon him with his wings. To distract himself from his sudden melancholy, he scrutinized the landscape out the window as scrupulously as his vision would allow.

Green. Everything along the dull gray-and-white of the highway was the rich, earthy green of summer, though the farmland already bore the golden promise of fall. Waves of green lapped at the pure blue of the sky, muted only by Milan's dark sunglasses. They sped past a dark swath of recently plowed land and Milan had the nearly irresistible urge to leave the car and forgo his chance to go to England in order to sink his hands into the cool soil up to his wrists and sift it back through his fingers.

After a brief layover in Dusseldorf, Milan's second plane of the day landed in the small Newquay Cornwall airport shortly before eight in the evening. Milan was groggy from the plane rides and the overall stressful prospect of moving to England, and grumpy about having to spend so much time at the airport. Finally, the party of three was able to escape into the chilly Cornish air.

During the cab ride from the airport to their flat in the rural village of Mawnan Smith, the man fell asleep against the window, his snores filling the silence.

"Are you ok?" the woman asked Milan in Serbian.

"*Da,*" he replied sleepily. With nothing but darkness and occasional flashes of light to be seen out the window, and between the gentle purring of the car and the inviting sling of the seatbelt, Milan was finding it increasingly difficult to keep his eyes open.

He dreamed of the park in Belgrade he sometimes visited after school. Everything was painted a soft black, but he easily found his way from the swing set where Aca and Neda swayed back and forth to a dense clump of leafy trees and bushes. Feeling compelled to look up, he experienced a deep rooted sense of awe. On an impossibly high branch stood a large, dark *thing*. A breeze. The soft rustling of feathers. The clicking of a beak. A bird? No. Milan was certain it was something else.

"Owlman," he whispered, and the figure in the tree peered down at him with intelligent red eyes that glowed through the darkness, luminous white wings raised. *I'll protect you, it seemed to say. We can be monsters together.*

Milan awoke with a jolt in a nest of strange blankets that smelled of the

woman's perfume. Disoriented and unable to see anything beyond the fuzzy whiteness of his own hands, Milan sat up. The pale light coming in through what must have been a window spoke to him of midnight. He was sure it must be midnight. Disappointment seeped through him as he was forced to acknowledge that he'd only been dreaming. That he'd fallen asleep in the car and been carried to his new room. Milan felt somehow cheated. He'd wanted to see the village, see his new home, see the room he was in.

The moonlight filtering in through the window beckoned him and he carefully left the bed after removing his socks, his bare feet clumsily mapping the unfamiliar terrain, his hands feeling out the edges of the bed and the dresser against the wall. The white of the window frame shone brightly against the black of the night. The latch opened easily and he slid the window up and peered outside, but he couldn't tell how high off the ground he was, sending a jolt of vertigo through his stomach. Reaching out blindly to his right, Milan's fingertips collided with the smooth spine of a book. The soft thump of the book hitting solid ground only moments after he let it drop from the windowpane was reassuring. Lifting first one leg, then the other, Milan perched in the window, cold air dancing through his hair and the sleeves of his t-shirt. He held his breath, and jumped. Slick, cool, matted grass broke his fall, but he hissed in pain as his palm landed cruelly against the sharp corner of the book he'd tossed.

Blackness, everywhere was blackness upon which blurry shapes had been sketched. Unseen leaves rustled, the wind whistled against bark and whispered through the manicured lawn.

Tingling with the excitement of a new adventure, Milan crept across what he imagined to be a silent battlefield, his own pale skin flashing rapidly in and out of his line of sight as he walked. He was going to find the tree where Owlman would be waiting for him, waiting to teach him how to hunt, how to fly, how to see.

More than ever Milan knew Owlman was real.

The wind picked up enough to make Milan stumble, and he considered turning back, but there! He paused, trying to rub warmth into his bare arms, squinting, his head tilted. Trees! Surely those were trees. And hidden in the trees must surely be Owlman. And wasn't that a flash of red? The beat of gigantic wings?

He pressed onward.

Erinn Promo



Sophomore
Major: English

I'm from Lake Orion, Michigan. There I live with my mom, stepdad, dog, and cat. I'm currently a sophomore at U of M planning to double major in English through LSA and creative writing through the RC. For as long as I can remember I have loved to read and write. In the past, I have focused on fiction, though I am now beginning to delve into writing poetry.

Lunar Lullaby

I nuzzled your back to rouse you.
Freckles speckled on sandy skin:
clandestine constellations.

Half of a pale moon
smiled behind dusty curtains
urged us to touch and trace.

The bed
bathed in silver
sung a drowsy melody.

Brief thunderstorms
in my chest
rattled ribcage
soaked insides.
Little lightnings

in your veins
sparked toes to tingle.

We found each other
in our cloudy skies.

To Accept the Incomprehensible

Crinkled paper the color of urine
covered with incoherent ink
feeds on me.
So many scribbles.
Letters to numbers,
then to symbols,
finally to scratches
pink and scabbed.

A marshmallow
in my pocket
melts into white goo
and sticks to my thigh.
The scribbles, strips of sugar.

Two bloodless stumps,
swollen like baked bread,
balance my halves.
Limbs too feeble to lift the loaves,
have grown green mold.

Tell Me What You See

Petunias tilt their petals
to hush the wild weeds.
A starless sky turns
the flowers' fuchsia
to an ink blot
kept in a plain wooden frame
on the wall of a stale room
with a long black couch
and confessions stacked
in corners, and on shelves.

Stitches

A musty basement
was where I fell to the cement slab
and cracked the fine china of my skull.
The sound of a giant jaw snapping shut.
Nothing between the teeth.
Blood stained blonde.
Mom carried me up wooden steps.
Iron and mildew.
A river of rubies flowed down my neck.

The nurses sat on my wild legs.
The doctor sewed my skin
before my brain could leak onto his table.

I closed my wet eyes and dreamed
of an infinite ocean with tides
that washed away the red.
But it was thick,
and the waves drowned.

Nervous Skin

Careful caresses lead me to a place
labeled anticipation: sharks surround paradise.

I imagine dragons and knives, then bubble baths and silk.
The taste of your peppermint breath sets me on fire.

Cloudy pink and streaks of red blend into smoky swirls,
soft as the covers you sleep under, and just as creased.

A tear in the milky flesh echoes pressure,
peels back a layer as remembrance.

The way a sliced orange leaks juice onto a table
and leaves sharp citrus to linger on your fingertips.

Molly Reitman



Senior

Major: Creative Writing and German

Molly likes to play roller derby and pet dogs that aren't hers. She has aspirations to work in film or television, and also to not die on the street.

All The Time I'm Wasting

This is what I'm doing instead of calling my grandma:

Reading and sorting emails into their appropriate folders. Drinking Coke and sucking on peanuts until all the salts dissolved and the shells start to soften in my mouth. Crouching on the kitchen floor and petting Korra, even when her tail doesn't wag and she's sick of her chin being scratched. Crying about midterms.

My grandma has been sick with stomach cancer for three years. Dad's starting to talk about her like he talked about the dog before we put her down, hinting at her inevitable end in passing, like he was commenting on the weather.

"Yeah, old Sadie won't be around much longer, will she?" he used to muse as he passed behind the table I was silently studying at, his naturally booming voice filling every room of the house to the ceiling. Sadie's ears would perk up at the sound of her name. "I'd be surprised if she was still alive by Christmas."

If there was any reason Sadie lived to be seventeen years old despite the slices of salami and American cheese and broken Oreos we threw in her

bowl every day, it was to spite my father. She died deaf, blind, and incontinent in a white linoleum veterinarian's office, still kicking just to make my dad clean up her piss from the carpet and pick her small white hairs off his dress pants. *'Won't be around much longer' my ass*, she must have gone out thinking. Or so I hope.

Dad keeps telling me to call Grandma, and I keep nodding and smiling and promising and reassuring and remembering and promising again, but the truth of the matter is that Grandma does not want to talk to me.

I mean, she loves me and everything. She sends me birthday cards with two ripe fifty dollar bills nestled inside them, wrinkled from their hiding place in the coffee can on top of her fridge. She always displays the magnets I buy for her. She keeps pictures of me in little golden frames all around her house. She hugs me tight. But she doesn't want to talk to me.

Once, a small white envelope came in the mail from her, for Cory. It wasn't big enough to be a birthday card—it was something different. It was at a time when Dad's long Sunday afternoon conversations with Grandma would boom through the house and ripple Mom's coffee down in the kitchen, and we all got to hear about how angry he was at Cory for doing whatever Cory happened to be doing wrong that week.

I tried to open the envelope without ripping the seal by holding the fragile paper over a steaming pot of boiling water, but the Internet lied and it didn't pop open and reveal all the family secrets. Pressing it up to the light-flooded living room windowpane and straining my eyes to read snippets of text through the paper, I managed to make out the words "you are a disappointment to me." Love, Grandma.

She's never sent me a small, white envelope in the mail nor have I ever done anything bad enough to make it into the Sunday afternoon phone call. She's never scolded me or spanked me. She always makes Thanksgiving cole slaw, cause she knows it's my favorite. She mixes it with her bare hands, because that's the secret ingredient, she told me.

But Grandma does not want to talk to me.

Why, then?

Well, because I'm boring.

Grandma doesn't like when we're left in a room together because my stories are safe and not worth repeating to bowling friends or fellow volunteers at the hospital gift shop. I have no fun drinking stories even though I'm 21, and explaining my living situation at a co-operative house founded in pillars of socialism is simply too indigestible. I spend so much energy trying not to cuss or complain that I forget my personality. I'm a wafer with eyes.

On the phone, she cuts me off halfway through my pre-prepared anecdotes about the hot weather to ask me about school, and interrupts my descriptions of my favorite classes to ask how James is doing—that's his name, right? James? And ends our conversation within three minutes to avoid having to think of any more questions to ask me.

So I lay around my big commie house ripping blisters from the bottom of my feet so they'll never heal as my grandma's stomach destroys her body from within. Korra slides her head underneath my elbow and starts licking my hand, presumably catching all the peanut salt that I missed. She's six years old, a rescue. Soon, she'll be eight, and ten, and eleven, and we'll be carrying her up and down the back steps like a baby because her knees are bad and she can't find her way back to the door sometimes. Soon enough, she'll be staying alive just to piss us off.

My Grandma Helen's other son, Randy, he died while Mom and Dad were visiting me in Italy. He'd had cancer too, the colon kind. He felt so damn bad for dying during our vacation—he knew how long Mom and Dad had been planning it, and how different the sunset over Cinque Terra would look stained with his imminent demise, and he apologized about this in his final words to my father, which he dictated to my Aunt Fran, who texted them to Dad. We cut the vacation short so Mom and Dad could make it back to Kentucky before he passed, but he died on the morning of their rescheduled flight home. They told me I didn't have to come back for the funeral and I didn't.

By the time I finally got back to Kentucky, everyone had finished grieving. It was too many months later and all the birthday stories and yard sales had passed and I never even had the chance to say goodbye. Although, if he really cared about saying goodbye to me, I probably would have gotten a dictated deathbed text message too.

I don't even tell stories well enough for anyone to want to sit next to me at Thanksgiving. I forget names, details, I rarely ask Aunt Marge how her new job is going because I can never remember what Aunt Marge's new job actually is. I'm always conveniently busy when my cousins do that annual camping trip with their buddies, and I'm rarely available for family game night. I'm horrible with babies. I politely decline to say grace.

Uncle Randy didn't like to be left in the same room as me either, so I'm glad I didn't go to his funeral or see his body and that I managed to avoid that last uncomfortable moment of staring back and forth and not knowing what to say to each other. When I finally went back to Kentucky in August, a full size dark stone statue of a poised, sitting dog sat in the corner of Grandma's living room.

"Randy gave me that," Grandma told me when she noticed it had caught my eye. Then, after a moment, she added: "That was the last thing he ever

gave me.”

And she sighed and sank back into the mustard yellow blanket covering the upholstery of her recliner in front of the TV. The dog’s eyes remained fixed upwards, staring longingly and eternally at the dusty pink curtains filtering the light through the broad living room window, which takes up the wall behind Grandma and her chair. A lot of Grandma’s stories these days are about things she saw out the window, or books she’s tired of reading or shows she’s tired of watching. We keep trying to get her to go to the bathroom, but she doesn’t like to get up. If she gets another UTI, she’ll have to go back to the hospital. But Grandma won’t go back to the hospital. She told us.

In middle school english class, when they asked us to call our grandparents and ask for a story, I put it off for days. Finally, Mom got Grandma Dorothy on the phone and shoved the receiver in my hands just as a tale was beginning. It started with a broken down car and ended with the appearance of a beautiful rainbow across the sky, not kidding. Once, Grandma Helen told me about meeting Grandpa Norb at a church picnic when she was sixteen, even though I didn’t ask. I’ve seen one picture of her as a younger woman, in her fifties maybe, and I didn’t learn about her second husband until two years ago when I asked my dad on the long car ride back to Michigan.

“She married this real jerk of a guy, Jack,” he said, looking to Mom in the passenger seat. “You remember him?”

“Mm hmm. Yeah, I’m glad she left him.”

Even though it was my first time hearing of him, I was glad she left him too.

Instead of calling my grandma, I just keep thinking about who’s gonna get that stone dog. It’s sacredness will still be wet like fresh paint—it can’t change hands so quickly or it’ll lose it’s meaning until it ends up sold for eight dollars at a garage sale two states away. Will Grandma make it til Christmas? Will she ruin Thanksgiving? What the hell does she want to talk about?

What I’m doing instead of calling my grandma is compiling a list of facts about her, googling her name and address, remembering clues from the Sunday conversations Dad’s voice carried through the house. I’m worrying about her regrets and her fears, and I’m sure she’s worrying about them too. I’m writing about her and thinking about her and writing about her.

At my grad party senior year, I walked in from the summer humidity and the small talk and found her sitting alone in a recliner, staring at our bookshelves. Her face was red from the heat. I asked her why she wasn’t at the party with everyone else.

"I'm antisocial," she said.

Part of me hopes that tomorrow I'll type her number into my phone on the fifteen minute walk to class, catch her at lunchtime, rush through the three minutes of small talk so if she dies I won't have to feel like an asshole. But Grandma won't die tomorrow, or this week, or even before Christmas. In fact, she'll stay alive for a long time, for longer than we ever thought she could, the cancer ebbing and flowing in and out of her cells like it did for Randy, taking it's time in breaking her down. She'll stay alive for me, I know it. She'll stay alive a little longer, just to make sure I feel bad for never giving her a call.

Cailean Robinson



Freshman

Major: Theater Arts and English

Cailean Robinson is a freshman English and Bachelor of Theater Arts double-major from Atlanta, Georgia. She loves writing, reading, acting and Taco Bell. If she were to pick any four people to have dinner with, they would be Amy Poehler, Libba Bray, Meryl Streep and Jane Austen. Cailean was inspired to be a writer by her seventh-grade English teacher, who she hopes to someday dedicate her first book to. Her favorite quote from literature is this: "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" -Albus Dumbledore

May

Sunlight dapples on the water. A cool breeze winds through the air. A gull calls. A frog croaks. She climbs onto the railing. A breath of silence.

She leaps.

Free falling, then she's swallowed up by the water-so-blue.

* * *

Two weeks previously, her mother is talking to her. She can't hear the words, but she sees her mother's mouth moving, her eyes roving across her own, her head slowly shaking back and forth. She tilts her head to the side, like a scientist evaluating a subject, evaluating her mother's face like a fascinating insect. Her mother's eyes are like blue pools, cool, serene, and in this moment, overflowing, spilling out over the lids and down her cheeks. She reaches out and puts her hand to the little rivers, feeling her mother's

smooth, warm skin. Her mother's voice stops and she looks down at her, her eyes wide. Slowly, her mother raises her hand and covers hers with it.

"What is it, May?" her mother asks. "Do you want to tell me something?"

She only stares at her mother's eyes, lost in their beautiful, blue waters.

"May, please, talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

Her mother's eyes have become oceans, full and tumultuous, pouring out in waves down her cheeks. Her mother reaches up and pulls her hand from her face.

"I just don't understand what's happened to you, May."

She says nothing, only tilts her head to the other side. Her mother hangs her head.

* * *

The students at school call her Crazy. She used to be May, but only people who knew her called her that, and there weren't many. Now everyone knows her, but she's no longer May. She's Crazy. She doesn't understand the name. She's not crazy. She's lost.

The teachers still call her May.

"May?"

There's a beautiful butterfly outside the classroom window.

"May? Are you listening?"

It's got wings the color of a sunset.

"May?"

Mrs. Roberts has eyes the color of a sunset too, a sunset filtered through a curtain of grey. She likes Mrs. Roberts' eyes. They remind her of the beach. They look down on her now, the sunset-through-grey pitying.

"May, honey, are you doing the worksheet?"

She does not respond because she is not May. Mrs. Roberts bends down beside her desk. She looks into her sunset eyes with their black suns suspended in the middle like glittering jewels.

"May, do you understand what I'm asking you to do? Do you need help with the questions?"

She does not respond because she is not May. Mrs. Roberts' sunset grey

eyes flood with pity, dulling the glittering, black jewels in the center.

"May, do you need to see the nurse, sweetheart?"

She likes Mrs. Roberts' eyes. She smiles. Mrs. Roberts smiles too, sadly, as she walks away. She mutters under her breath as she goes.

"Poor girl."

Yes. Poor May.

* * *

She likes Mrs. Roberts' eyes. She doesn't like Mr. Gary's eyes. They're two black stones, warmthless, airless, colorless. They're stones that stare at her greedily, hungrily. She's something for the stones to dissect, an insect to pin on a wall and open up and spill its guts. Mr. Gary's eyes are like Sebastian's eyes.

"May, you cannot refuse to participate in class."

She stares at the black plastic of Mr. Gary's telephone on his desk, black like his eyes.

May isn't here right now. Please leave a message at the tone.

"May, refusing to participate hurts your education. You do understand the importance of your education, don't you?"

Beeeeep.

She smiles.

"This is no laughing matter, May. If you do not improve, I will have to move you to lower level classes, or make you repeat your grade. I'm sorry, but I cannot make any exceptions, even for students who have been--."

He breaks off. She looks up at him, at the black stone eyes. They seem to shrink under her gaze, but only for a moment. He clears his throat and they expand again. She looks away.

"Even for students who have...been in your situation. Please understand that, May."

She looks at the black plastic of his phone.

May isn't here right now. Please leave a message at the tone.

* * *

"May, please talk to me."

They're sitting in the kitchen again.

"Okay."

Her mother's eyes are tired pools today, rimmed in red like red stones around a lake.

"Okay? You'll listen to me this time?"

"Yes."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

Some days saying the words becomes easier. Today isn't one of those days, but her mother looks so tired and sad, so she forces them from her mouth.

"I want you to tell me what you're thinking."

The sun arcs through the window of the kitchen, cutting into her mother's eyes like sunlight through water.

"May?"

The sunlight makes her mother's eyes sparkle.

"May? May, honey, please, talk to me."

The sunlight is dancing, dancing like it did that day over the water by the lake house. Dancing like it did on the wood of the pier. Dancing around them, falling on Sebastian and his cold, black, hungry eyes. Hungry, so hungry for her.

No!

She covers her head in her hands, cowering, shutting out the sunlight and those black, black eyes. Her mother's voice is crying out to her.

"May! May, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

No May. No May. She isn't here. She's gone, gone, swallowed up into those black eyes. Swallowed and gone. Gone, gone, gone.

"May? May, please, tell me what's wrong. Tell me what I can do."

Her mother's voice rises and pleads, and she can imagine the pools overflowing again. Her mother's in pain, so much pain. But she can't tell her. She can't say anything.

No one knows about the black eyes and the sunlight on the pier. She didn't tell anyone. No one knows what he did.

They only know that May jumped.

* * *

It's her fault. She knows this.

It's all your fault, she tells herself over and over again.

Her mother hurts because of her. She doesn't know what to do. She can't help. May was the one who helped. May could make her mother laugh. May could sing, so beautifully that her mother would clap and laugh and kiss her and hold her close. May could cook dinner and clean the house, so that her mother would come home from work and kiss her and tell her that she loved her more than the moon and the stars.

But May is gone. And she can't get her back.

* * *

May disappeared that night at the lake house. May who liked to paint, and who did well in school, and who loved her boyfriend and her friends. May went to the lake house with them. Her boyfriend was named Sebastian. Her friends had names too, but she doesn't know them anymore. They're only eyes to her now. May's friends had eyes like beetles, shiny, glittering, and thin, false. They glittered and flashed as they laughed at things that they said, or things that May used to say. They liked May, they liked that she could entertain them, that she made them feel good.

May's boyfriend had eyes like black stones, like Mr. Gary's eyes. Hard and cold and black, they swallowed her up, up into a lightless void where she couldn't think or breathe or speak or move or help herself. They closed in on her as he closed in on her on the pier, trapping her. Hurting her.

And then after, when it was over, May didn't want to be May anymore.

She sat huddled against the railing of the pier with her face pressed between the bars. She watched the water. Then May stood and climbed over the railing.

She jumped.

It was cold and dark in the water. It entered May's clothes and her hair and her mind. May couldn't swim. May wouldn't swim. May didn't want to be May anymore. She let herself sink, let the darkness descend. May left.

When May left, she came.

She came when they reached the bottom. She could swim, she wouldn't let them sink. She swam, broke the surface, gasped for air. She let herself wash to the shore.

But she wasn't May anymore. She reached in her mind before she closed her eyes from the pain, and May wasn't there. May was gone. She couldn't find her.

* * *

The doctor who treated her that night had eyes like glass. They reflected and blended into the light from the hospital ceiling, so that she couldn't tell if she was looking at a person or at a ceiling. She looked into that glass as the bodies swirled around her and poked at her, and checked her pulse and soaked up the blood and asked 'Who did this to you? Who did this to you?' over and over and over and over. 'Who did this to you? Who did this to you?'

I did, she said. I did.

"You did this to yourself, May," he said.

I did.

"You made me do this. I didn't want to. You made me do this."

I did this to myself, Sebastian. You didn't want to. I made you do it.

It's all my fault.

* * *

Sometimes, when it's too quiet in her head, she looks for May. She sits on the pier in her mind and looks down into the blue-blue water. Then she closes her eyes and calls out over the vast emptiness.

May? Are you there?

Mother is in pain. I can't help.

May?

May never answers.

* * *

"These things take time."

One week previously, her mother is talking to Dr. Ross. His eyes are like loaves of bread, warm and buttery and brown. She likes Dr. Ross's eyes.

"How much time? *How much time?* She doesn't eat. She barely talks.

She doesn't know where she is half of the time. Sometimes, I don't think she knows who I am. I look at her and I don't see my daughter anymore, I see some stranger looking out through my daughter's eyes. How much longer do you expect me to put up with this?"

Dr. Ross looks at her mother with his bread loaf eyes and places his hand on her shoulder.

"You just have to give her more time, Karen. I know it's hard, but you have to let May deal with this in her own way."

The eyes turn and look at her through the window, the blue pools and the brown bread loaves. She looks back at them.

* * *

One day previously, it comes to her. She's lying in bed, enjoying the quiet stillness of the early morning. Then the idea flutters into her brain, like a black-winged butterfly fluttering down onto a vibrant flower. She knows what to do.

I can help, she thinks. I can find May.

* * *

She walks to the lake and out to the pier. The air is bright with sunlight. It dances about her in spirals of gold. She stands by the railing and looks down into the blue-blue water. May is down there. She can find her.

Sunlight dapples on the water. A cool breeze winds through the air. A gull calls. A frog croaks. She climbs onto the railing. A breath of silence.

She leaps.

Free falling, then she's swallowed up by the water-so-blue.

She sinks...

May, come back. I'm leaving now. I can't help Mother. She needs you. May, come back.

The water closes around her.

May, you have to come back.

The darkness deepens.

May...

But there's nothing.

No May.

Just nothing...

Nothing...

* * *

No.

...*May?*

No!

May!

She kicks. May kicks.

She swims. May swims.

She breaks the surface. May breaks the surface.

May breathes.

May lives.

Ben Rosenstock



Junior

Major: English

Ben Rosenstock is a junior studying English and film. Outside of class, he is a Senior Arts Editor for the *Michigan Daily*, overseeing the TV beat. After graduation, he hopes to work in publishing and continue writing fiction.

Untitled

September 9th, 2014. The phone was already in my hand when it started vibrating, and I picked up on the first ring. It was Shannon, calling with the news that her friend Rachael committed suicide. Rachael was a girl I never really knew, but many of my high school friends knew her.

For Shannon and I both, "best friend" had always been a bit of an ambiguous term. We each had our own friend groups and people we hung out with more than each other. I'd never known what made someone a best friend, exactly. Were the people you hung out with the most your best friends? What about your oldest friends? In many ways, my best friend was Shannon. She was the only person I truly felt comfortable telling everything, the only one who seemed to understand every insecurity I ever had, no matter how irrational.

So in one sense Shannon and I were best friends, but in another sense, Rachael was hers. I'd never even met Rachael myself; in the Venn diagram of my and Shannon's lives, she lay in the isolated sliver that belonged to Shannon alone.

Shannon proceeded to tell me the story of how she found out. The details don't matter, except that Rachael's suicide was something nobody could've predicted. Shannon was remarkably composed about it; her voice shook, but she told me the whole story fairly calmly.

I said all the things I was supposed to. I apologized. I said she could talk to me whenever. I tried to be apologetic while still treating her like a human being capable of conversation, not just a fragile flower. Then, just like that, the phone call was over and I went to meet my friends for dinner.

Before I even entered the dining hall, as I was standing and waiting in line, I listened and watched the crowds milling around. I didn't hear anything in particular, just the general buzz of conversation, but I suddenly felt goose bumps covering my arms. It's hard to articulate what was so surreal about it. There was just something weird about seeing life proceeding as normal.

As I ate with my friends, we exchanged jokes. Sometimes I was the one telling them. But my body was on autopilot, saying all the things I usually would and responding the way I always do. I was maybe a little quieter than usual, but not noticeably so. Every time I heard a joke, it felt wrong, but I automatically laughed at it.

The kind of sadness I felt that day was a very different kind of sadness than I'd ever felt before. It wasn't like the near-nauseating paranoia about upcoming deadlines. I didn't feel the overpowering throb of rejection, or the claustrophobic desire to shut everything out of my mind. I just felt this creeping darkness all around me. It was a sort of secondhand grief, the kind of empathetic sadness that you feel when something terrible happens that deeply affects people close to you without affecting you.

At first I felt this sense of powerlessness over my inability to help Shannon. There was no show of sympathy that could really lessen a friend's pain in a situation like this one. Maybe it was something more selfish; maybe I was somehow frustrated at my inability to truly grieve for someone I didn't know well. I think we followed each other on social media, but she was always just a friend of a friend.

As the week went on, I heard about events going on to support Rachael. There was a viewing that many of my friends were returning home to attend. I saw countless Facebook posts. I was in an odd position, feeling obligated to say something but not really having anything profound to say. The tough thing about secondhand grief is that you're never sure where you fit in. Is it appropriate to attend a viewing? Is it okay to make a Facebook post? It's an area where there's no common etiquette.

A couple days later, a girl I knew from high school made an outrageous post on Facebook that attempted to glean some artificial lesson from Rachael's suicide—as if her depression was meant to show us that we all need

to show our love and offer our support to people in need, as if Shannon and all of Rachael's other friends weren't good enough to save her. Shannon and I both furiously commented, together pointing out the offensiveness of the girl's message. Before long, I was receiving texts from people thanking me for intervening.

The fact is, if that girl on Facebook hadn't existed I would've been stuck in the same spot, close to what happened while still ultimately distanced. In fact, I felt a little guilty about the responses I got from the Facebook rant. The grief I felt for Rachael mostly came from knowing Shannon, not from knowing Rachael.

I eventually realized that sometimes it's okay not to fit in. Sometimes it's important not to force yourself into someone else's grief. Sometimes you have to just sit and quietly be there for someone.

I've accepted that there's no way I can go back and get to know Rachael now, but I'll continue to get peeks at her personality through commemorative Instagram posts and shared memories. Maybe I'll never be able to properly grieve for her, but what matters is that she had a wealth of people who cared about her. I'll remember that every time I look at Shannon's arm and see the tattoo that reads "9.9.14."

Lenny Shirase



Sophomore

Major: Undecided

I am a second year student from Los Angeles, who just got into poetry though a class I took last semester. I like clothes, skateboarding, and art stuff. I'm pretty surprised I was chosen for this, and I hope it's not too bad.

you cried a lot, and i cried a little

i think about how many egg shells i'll break
doors i'll struggle to push or pull
furniture screws i'll keep

you make me feel like a fast food stomach ache

i think about how many grocery bag handles i'll snap
the airplane pretzels i won't eat
the ones i will, too

i feel like when you sleep at five in the morning and wake up at four

doors are stupid and maybe i am too

i wonder if doors are as difficult to everyone as they are to me
i never know when to push or pull

i spent forty five minutes
writing about how hand dryer placement in bathrooms is inconvenient
but when you asked me, about us
i didn't know

now it's me
and you too i guess

things just kind of happened

work in progress

i'm pretty sure that i'm happy

lamp shades paint the room smooth
and chargers reach the bed

window light makes the dust dance
i'm in good company

i'm happier now i think

her sheets are still oatmeal
even when i'm late for class

ginger ale reminds me of plane rides and neck pain
and good things too

flowers are prettier dry
stuck in old soda bottles

i hope it stays like this
at least for a little

stupid thoughts from the night before

i went to a fashion show a week ago and i saw a big tan scarf that was
wrapped really beautifully around a girl's shoulders and i think i'm gonna get
something like it and i'm excited about it.

i miss being home sometimes because the sunset reflects against the ocean
just as well as it lights up desert, or whatever you call the la cityscape.

michigan is a cold place but someone there makes me feel not that.

sometimes i feel stupid because i am and sometimes i don't because i'm not.

i like my coffee without anything in it because i think it tastes better like that and it's better for you. but at the same time i eat pizza at three in the morning and eat cheddar and sour cream ruffles so obviously i'm self conscious about people thinking it's a fake social thing to seem sophisticated or something, and i'm not saying it isn't.

i feel like all my choices are in between what are you thinking and okay that's pretty cool i guess, and which one it is really depends on who you ask.

i think my plants did better when i left for a while compared to when i was there which made me feel a little sad and a little more offended.

i started taking vitamin d pills, and also biotin which tastes like a bad vitamin c, and i don't know if it's working but i hope it is. more the biotin because i want my hair to be healthier, but being happy would be cool too.

Charlotte Stanbaugh



Sophomore

Major: Biochemistry

Charlotte is a pre-med student majoring in Biochemistry with a possible minor in Creative Writing. She enjoys reading and writing in her spare time, and hopes to continue to develop her skills as a writer in the future.

New Life

Do you ever look back on past conversations, past arguments, past confrontations, and come up with a whole big list of things that you should've said or done? Do you ever sit in disbelief that things have ended up the way that they are, and do you think that maybe there's a chance that you once could've done something to influence the present reality, but now it's too late?

I lay in bed and torture myself with these questions, delving deeper and deeper into them. I twist them and contort them until they no longer make sense and they are just letters jumbled up inside my brain, trying to force themselves into coherence.

My alarm goes off but I am already awake. I slam my hand down onto it. The ensuing quiet is striking; I could listen to it all day. My mind races and I close my eyes as thoughts mingle behind my shut eyelids, growing and convoluting around the coils of my brain. Exhaustion fills my head like a viscous liquid, and I wish so badly to sleep, to fall into an unconscious universe and pretend that I don't even exist.

I try not to look outside and remind myself that spring is in full swing. I

try not to remember that it's March and that Jamie has been gone for two years. I roll onto my side and press my head firmly down to my pillow, covering the other side with my hands as I try to bear the pain that encloses my heart as I think of her.

Sometimes I get so angry with her for leaving me to try to fill the void that her absence instilled in me. But then I remember the only person I should be angry at is myself. I was always distracted. I never paid attention to the way she'd wear long sleeves in the summer or how she was always thin but sometimes she was too thin. I think back to times that I should've known, times that should've set off 1,000 alarms in my head but didn't.

I remember sitting with her at lunch one day about a month before she died. We always sat together at lunch. She always had peanut butter and jelly and I always had ham and cheese. Some days, if we were feeling particularly adventurous, we'd swap halves of each of our sandwiches. She was wearing a turtleneck sweater and her hair hugged her face. I remember she'd been acting strangely all day. She was usually upbeat, on the edge of her toes, ready to tell me one of her latest life catastrophes (like the time she bumped into Bryce Caldwell and recapped the whole incident for me: "Picture this. It's Saturday. I'm at the mall because my mom had a total conniption. I'm walking and texting and 110% not looking where I'm going. Then, I run into Bryce freaking Caldwell! But, like, I *literally* ran into him. I was turning the corner by that one store that sells creepy old man clothes or something, and next thing I know I'm flat on my back with Bryce freaking Caldwell on the ground next to me. Of all people! He got totally pissy about it, too. Like, sorry you don't know I'm your soul mate but whatever.") At lunch that day, though, she seemed distracted. She was quieter than usual.

"What's up, James?" I'd asked her.

She jumped in her seat and looked up at me, as if I'd disturbed her rummaging around in the depths of her consciousness.

"I just...I'm totally slacking in Bio. I did terribly on the last test. I don't know," she explained. It seemed half-hearted, but I ditched the subject. I didn't want to get on her case about it.

Moments like these that seemed so insignificant before are what replay in my brain when I try to remember signs she could have dropped, secret messages I, being her best friend, should have been able to decode. I think about these moments until my head is pounding. I pick through every detail of them until I know them by heart. I torture myself with them until it gets hard to breathe, and I am suffocating in my memories of her.

When I'm honest with myself, I can't blame her for why I'm so fucked up. It started way before that. Sometimes I'll ask myself when I stopped being that carefree 9-year old girl who played soccer and loved to eat ice

cream at midnight and wondered about everything, like where the stars went to hide away after a long night of lighting up the sky. Then I'll remember that we lost the championship that year; I'll remember that I stopped loving to eat ice cream at midnight when I realized it made you fat; I'll realize that the stars are always there, that daytime just drowns them out like it sometimes does to me.

I'd always dreaded going to school and being amongst everyone else who seemed so carelessly happy. I'd always wanted so badly to get through one day without being so bone-achingly sad. Back then, Jamie was the one who kept me going. She was the happy and light-hearted one. She had the type of smile that made your mouth go dry. She had the type of laugh that made everyone wish they'd told the joke.

One particular day I remember waking up thinking I wouldn't make it through the end of it. I threw up three times before going to school. I felt devoid of humanity, stripped clean of everything I'd ever defined myself by. I was separated from the whole world, an alien to my own species, an alien to myself. I walked into school that day and immediately felt claustrophobic. Once each period, I rushed to the bathroom just to find myself on my knees dry heaving into the toilet. I went to lunch and sat down next to Jamie. She looked into my eyes and I immediately started crying.

"Maggie," she said and grabbed my hand.

She stood up and I looked at her, confused. She grabbed my ham and cheese and tossed it into the trash. Then, with my hand in hers, she started to walk, half-dragging me towards the door. She didn't say a word. She walked through the halls and out of the front doors of our high school. She walked holding my hand for a long time. She didn't stop walking until we got to a parking structure. Then she stopped and looked at me.

"I come here sometimes. When I want to escape everything. I come here and I go to the top and sometimes I just look at everything below me and wonder about it and sometimes I scream until I can't feel my lungs."

I started to cry again.

"Would you like to see it?" she asked, revealing a sly smile.

I just nodded.

We sat at the top of that parking structure for the rest of the school day, throwing pebbles off the edge and not talking much. I looked down at the tiny people and wondered about their tiny lives and it distracted me from mine. By the time we left, I felt much different than I had upon waking up. I felt calm.

I could say that Jamie saved me that day. She crawled into the dark

place I'd fallen into and kept me company there for a while, making it less lonely.

When I got home that day, I tucked myself into bed, pulling the comforter right up under my chin. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, taking in everything I'd experienced. I pictured myself back on the top of that parking structure with the world below me. It felt like I was above everything that had been hurting me for so long, and I had a thought that maybe there was some chance in hell that I could pull myself out of this dark place and be the person I used to be and wanted to be. The thought was fleeting; I dismissed it. I couldn't afford to get my hopes up like that.

For a long time after, I thought about this day and felt calm, almost happy. Now, all I can think about is that I should have stopped wallowing in my own despair and taken the time to ask myself what made Jamie go to the top of that parking structure. What was making her unhappy? I'll never know the answer to that.

I decide to get up. I sit up and swing my feet over the edge of my bed. The wooden floor feels way too cold under my bare feet and I shiver. I get dressed and make my way downstairs. I find my mom sitting on the couch reading the newspaper.

"Hey, honey," she says.

"Morning," I say.

She looks at me hesitantly, as if she feels uncomfortable.

"How are you?" she asks

"I'm okay, why?"

She looks down at her newspaper sadly.

"Mom, what is it?"

"It's March 30th," she says.

My mind starts racing and I wonder how I could have forgotten. How could it be today?

"I'm going for a walk," I say.

I leave my house before my mom can answer me. I walk aimlessly. My thoughts are coming faster than I can grasp onto any of them. My breath catches in my throat and it feels layers thick. I try to swallow. I shut my eyes and my mind travels through time.

I remember walking home from school on a Tuesday. But it wasn't like

any other Tuesday. Jamie hadn't been at school. Jamie hadn't been there to tell me stories that made me laugh and to eat peanut butter and jelly while I ate ham and cheese. She wasn't there to smile when I couldn't. She wasn't there.

I remember finding my mom clutching the phone receiver tightly through white knuckles, her chest heaving silently. I remember that she looked up at me through red-rimmed eyes and hugged me so tightly that my ribs rejected it, her nails cutting through my flesh.

I remember she said one word. She said it so quietly that I almost didn't even hear her; but once I heard it, I never forgot it.

"Jamie," she whispered.

I remember how the world slowed down. I remember how I couldn't remember the last thing Jamie said to me. I remember how I couldn't breathe and how I left my house and ran, ran without aim. I ran until the pain in my legs and knees was enough to mollify that which was gripping onto my heart and squeezing tightly enough to make existing in that moment unbearable. I ran away from my agonizing reality. I ran until I collapsed onto the ground. Nausea hit me in feral waves and I vomited up all that was left of me.

Two years following her death, I still struggle to exist in a world where she does not; much less one that she thought didn't need her. I just don't understand how the person I looked to for strength must have been even weaker than I. I don't understand how I failed to notice her pain. I feel so selfish it makes me sick. She knew what I was going through better than anyone did yet she kept it completely to herself. I realize then that she wasn't the weak one; she was stronger than I was. Until she wasn't.

I look up and realize I am at the park a few blocks from my house. Dew drenches the grass and I take off my shoes, letting my toes sink into it. Trees hang over my head, half-barren and trying to bloom again. I pause and look around me. I look down at the newly budding grass. I stare at it for a while and think about how despite the fact that winter recklessly sweeps away life once a year, it continues to grow back every spring, as if it has something to prove. I think about all of the forms in which life exists, that there are single-celled organisms with importance greater than even I. I walk through the new, wet grass. I hear birds chirping and look up to see a blue jay perched on a tree branch, staring right at me. I stare back. As I do, I think about the many differences between our lives, our ways of existence, our troubles. One form of life looking at another, I realize that although we aren't the same by many orders of magnitude, we are both alive.

I breathe in slowly. I take in the new life around me, and hope more than anything that I can find my own.

Grahan Techler



Senior

Major: Theatre Performance

"Graham Techler is a writer and performer. He'd fleshout this bio but he's in class and doesn't want to draw attention."

John Toledo In: "Sixth City Blues"

I couldn't tell you how many times I've been ironing my hat while pouring myself a tall glass of cranberry juice when I've heard that familiar knock on my office door. It's practically a cliché at this point. But I've been in the business long enough to know it's time to put away the ironing board the moment I see that silhouette cover up the "Private Eye" lettering on the glass.

I could tell it was Kent a moment after he entered the room by the smell of his signature Montclair-brand cigarette and because I could see him.

"Kent Wooster," I said. "Fancy you coming in today. I was just talking to myself about how often this particular set of circumstances reoccurs when you knocked on my door."

"That is fancy," agreed Kent, and he shook my hand. I offered him a seat and he took it. Kent was the kind of man who knew what chairs are for.

"How long has it been, Kent?" I asked while topping off my glass.

Kent took a long draw on his Montclair and blew the smoke directly into my oscillating desk fan. He was a tall man with a long thin neck. Some friends would joke at parties that he was part giraffe. But of course he

wasn't actually part giraffe; that would be insane. He wore his suits in style and his hair slicked back with enough grease to give a robot liver failure. He hated when his hair fell in his eyes during a session of feverish reporting.

"Last time I was in here was just before the Lake Shore Launderer case," Kent said. "And that was, what? A week ago?"

That sounded about right to me. I was so good at small talk that I one-two'd with a follow-up question: "You still makin' your two cents a word over at the *Cleveland Enquirer*?"

"That old rag?" said Kent with a laugh. "They kicked me straight to the curb, Johnny. Good riddance, though. Now I'm shackled up at the *Cleveland Inquirer*. Suits me pretty nice, too."

Call me old fashioned, but when a man's sitting in your office using your chair, even an old friend like Kent Wooster, it's only good manners that he should get to the point and let you get back to your hat.

"Listen, Kent, do you have a case for me, or are you just here for the pleasure of my company?"

He grinned at me. "Which would you prefer, Johnny?"

"Gimme the straight skinny, Kent." There were only so many hours in the day.

Kent threw a case file down on my desk, where it made a *smack* like it belonged to the chapstick brand "Smackers," was an old-timey term for dollars, or was the street name for EDMA. One of the three.

"Chester Mason. Alderman. *Fourth ward*. Found dead last week in a primate-themed-café at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo."

I spat out a tiny bit of my cranberry juice, like a baby would.

"An alderman killed? Why didn't I read about it in the papers?"

"Because it wasn't in any of the papers," said Kent. "Because the police don't think foul play was involved. Called it a suicide, they done."

I fondled my paperweight as I paced around the room.

"Something stinks here, Kent," I said. "I mean, who'd want to kill himself in the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo? That's one of the most exciting, educational, and affordable places to spend the day with the family."

"It's great for school field trips, too," said Kent. "In fact, I can't imagine killing myself in any of Cleveland's notable points of interest."

"Certainly not the world famous Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," I said.

"Exactly," said Kent. "Nor the West Side Market."

"Or the Cleveland Museum of Art," I added.

"Or the Cleveland Botanical Garden," Kent said.

"Or the Quicken Loans Arena," I said.

"Or Willard Park," Kent said.

"Or the International Women's Air and Space Museum," I said.

"Or ol' Lake View Cemetery," Kent said.

"Or the Steamship William G. Mather Maritime Museum," I said.

"Or SeaWorld Ohio," Kent said.

"Or the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist," I said.

"Or the Cleveland Hungarian Heritage Society Museum," Kent said.

"Or the house from *A Christmas Story*," I said.

"What a thriving city, right?" Kent said.

"Tell me about it."

I juggled three paperweights as the gears turned in my head – I had spent a semester at a world-famous clown college, and used my education to help myself think. "Still," I said, "that comes up two hairs short of a click in explaining *why* Chester Mason would've been killed in the first place."

"What do you think of when I say Chester Mason, Johnny?" asked Kent with a really, really, crazy-high cocked eyebrow.

"Easy," said I. "I think of the alderman who was working to prevent the Mayor from following through on that huge land grab south of the Cuyahoga. What's your point?"

"I think Chester Mason was killed for trying to prevent the Mayor from following through on that huge land grab south of the Cuyahoga," said Kent.

"But you need me to find proof before you go to press on it? Preferably by talking to the Widow Mason over at the Mason mansion uptown?"

Kent put out his cigarette on a coaster. "That's a really succinct way of explaining it, John. I knew I could trust you."

I did a couple of subtle pelvic floor clenches--they help me stay alert on the streets-- grabbed my cranberry juice so I could lean against the rain-splattered window with it in my hand, then turned back to Kent wearing my

best P.I. "I dunno about this one" face.

"I dunno about this one, Kent," I said. "I'm small time. I've always been small time. Seems like this one's way outta my league. Something for the higher-ups."

"Not to spook you, Johnny," said Kent, "but the higher-ups'd never touch this case. Not in a million years, not in Cleveland."

With two eyebrow wiggles and a reporter's salute, Kent walked out the door. Now I had no choice but to take the case. Kent had left me with a murder to solve, just when I thought it was going to be a quiet day for retired-cop-turned-private-detective-whose-wife-was-murdered-by-Eddy-"The-Money"-Calcutta-leaving-him-with-an-empty-pit-for-a-heart-and-a-chip-on-his-shoulder, John Toledo.

Ten minutes later I was downing my third cran-grape of the day at a little hideaway called *Bar's* down the block and around the corner on the ground floor. I'd helped the owner, Eli Bar, out of a tight spot involving his wife, a regular, non-genie lamp, and a humiliating Space Invaders score a couple years ago. He couldn't pay me at the time, but now he keeps my tab open for the times I need to come down and do a little critical thinking.

Fortified, I opened my cool-ass detecting notebook and took stock of my situation. Seeing as time was of the essence, my first instinct was of course to run a couple of causal errands that would put me in touch with a mix of genial acquaintances, fiery ex-lovers, and spiteful enemies. Ideally, this wouldn't only have killed time until it was dark and atmospheric outside, but also this group would make up a web of loose ends that would slowly weave their way relevantly into the murder I was on my way to solve.

With a few cran-grapes sloshing around in me and one eye on the time, however, it struck me as more economic to head straight to the Widow Mason and get things moving. Had I the patience, though, here's who I'd have zig-zagged my way through: Hugh Bentley, a wealthy investor in money I knew from my college days; Skipp, a motor-mouthed bum who sometimes told me the word on the street if I gave him a nickel; Violet Scarlett, an Eastern dame I used to run around with before the war; Happy L'Freight, owner of a local dance hotspot; my Aunt Cynthia; Emily Beaufort, pretty, sensitive, and shy librarian who helps me out with locating relevant newspaper clippings; Eddie "The Money" Calcutta, my wife's killer; and of course Bing the Dachshund, who always had a nose for who was lying in a room and made himself a useful gunfire distraction sometimes, too. Luckily, none of these people will complicate things today.

It was right about then that Eli Bar sauntered over and tossed his bar rag over his shoulder.

"Hey, Toledo," he said, "I'm gonna give you one more drink and five more minutes and then I want you out of here."

In a pit of hell city like Cleveland, you learn to appreciate easy banter between old friends. I would often take a stool at *Bar's* and reflect on the best friend I ever had; my wife Loretta. The bow she tied in her hair. The skip in her step. The way her hands would hold a slim volume of poetry whilst she swung on a swing in the autumn. And it was times like these that I got extra-sad at the thought of never seeing again. And silently cursed myself for refusing to do a job for Eddie "the Money" Calcutta on principle, causing him to kidnap Loretta and blackmail me into doing his bidding, which I did under the condition that he let her go when I had delivered his magazine subscription to the post office like he wanted, not knowing of course that he would go back on his word and drop my beloved Loretta into a vat of acid anyways. My blood boiled when I thought of her killer running free around the streets of Cleveland, kept alive only by my strict adherence to a code of ethics passed down to me from my mentor Detective Daniel D. Denton, but slowly eroding under the constant internal pressure from the vacuous pit where my heart used to –

"Toledo, here's your juice," said Eli Bar.

I forgot what I was talking about.

The front gate at Mason Manor had two decorative steel busts of Chester Mason, each so realistic you could've sworn two frogs that looked kind of like Chester Mason were staring you down. After I was buzzed in, I took my sweet time wandering through the hedges, pondering how such a noble clan as the Masons could have gone so wrong. Was it a bad apple somewhere in the extended family tree? A snake in the grass? Surely someone's jib must have been cut improperly for Chester Mason to have gotten mixed up in such shady business, even if he was a good egg coming from a place of democracy or what have you.

But I was interrupted in my hedge-thinking by the sound of shears making a well-timed snip. When I turned, I couldn't help but notice the estate's gardener, a stunning woman in jean overalls and a floppy hat, coming towards me. She had a lean, hungry, majestic look that made any man feel like a weed, and any weed feel like a worm. Any worm was already feeling pretty insignificant to begin with.

She took off her floppy hat and popped her hip out.

"Excuse me, miss," I said. "I'm looking for Marion Mason. Any idea where I can find her?"

She batted her eyelashes at me. "Why would I know?"

"You are the gardener, aren't you?"

She batted her eyelashes again. "Sure am."

I plucked at the hedge with a cool reserve. "I'd like to think," I said, "that Mrs. Mason wouldn't want a gardener as pretty as you on the premises, making her look bad."

The Gardener gave a gay little laugh. "She doesn't need my help."

"Looking bad or looking pretty?"

"I think it works both ways, myself."

I could see a future with this woman. But just as we were getting somewhere, she cut me off with gesture of her shears.

"Shall we wait for her in the entrance hall?"

The Gardener kicked off her muddy boots while I admired collected portraits of the late alderman adorning the walls.

"Some mansion, huh?" I let slip.

The Gardener perked up.. "Were you expecting something less grandiose?"

"Hardly," I said. "With that alderman money coming in, why wouldn't Chester have built his castle exactly the way he wanted?"

The Gardener gave a pleased nod and went back to her boots. I, back to the portraits.

"I don't mean to be rude," I said, "but I would like to see Marion Mason sooner rather than later--"

"*Haven't* you?" rang the Gardener's voice behind me.

I spun around. Pure reflex, but it works in my favor at dance parties. Before me stood the Gardener, her post-garden face more recognizable as that of Marion Mason herself, unforgettable from the covers of so many Aldermen's Wives weekly magazines. She had managed to change from her overalls into a more appropriate sleek black mourning slip. Her hair was in pin curls and she looked about ready to pounce. Call me a kid, but I'm a sucker for a woman with a normal chin.

"Ah ha," I laughed. "The old 'let-your-visitor-think-you're-the-gardener-so-he-lets-his-guard-down-then-reveal-yourself-to-be-Marion-Mason' trick. Both sexy and utterly unnecessary. I like your style."

"How can I help you, Mr. Toledo?" she said with a smirk. "Your reputation precedes you."

Deciding to stay the path of humility, I put away the card trick I was about to try and impress her with.

"I was hoping I could ask you a few question about your husband's suicide."

Marion Mason took the time to stretch out on a nearby grand piano.

"Ah," she said. "I suppose you'd like to hear about my torrid affair with a Latin lover named Tio Abuelo."

I'd just been about to ask something to the effect of "How was your relationship with Chester before his death?" A Toledo rarely stumbles, but I'll admit this brought me up short.

"I was going to ask a series of leading questions about your husband's involvement in the huge land grab south of the Cuyahoga," I said, "But this Tio Abuelo figure sounds super relevant. Let's follow this."

"Chester, Chester, Chester," said Marion as she played the piano with her toes.

"Chester and I were very open with each other towards the end. We adored each other, always had. But unfortunately when I offered to discuss Tio Abuelo with him, the poor dear got rather jealous. We'd always been civic-minded, the both of us. So Chester took to obsessively opposing the Mayor's attempt to covert the land south of the Cuyahoga into a kind of Hooverville for his own purposes. It would've displaced thousands and made a rotten racket in the process. Chester assumed this grand gesture would win me back, were he successful. Unfortunately he killed himself in that zoo."

I was about to indignantly ask what exactly she meant by *that* zoo, but kept my trap shut.

"I was terribly broken up about it," said Marion. "I miss him terribly. It's terribly sad."

Neither my sweet-ass detecting pad nor my golf pencil could keep up with my scribbling at this golden information, but they tried their best.

"Now," I said, using the reporter's eyebrow trick I'd learned from Kent a while back, "how does Tio Abuelo feel about all of this hoopla?"

Marion took a lengthy drag from a long cigarette I guess she'd been hiding in the piano.

"Highly conflicted, naturally, seeing as he's both a staunch opponent of

the land grab and the Mayor's lover himself."

My years of training and experience in the field were all that stopped me from busting out with a indiscreet "Wait, what?"

"I thought you were Tio's lover?" I asked, desperate for some clarification in this crazy case I'd stumbled into like a severely uncoordinated human.

Marion shrugged. "I'm an evolved woman."

I paced back and forth across the marble tiles that had Chester Mason's face engraved into them.

"Marion," I said, a sudden thought troubling me. "Where's Tio Abuelo now?"

"Why, on his way to the Mayor's office to discuss the land grab," said Marion. "Today's full of coincidences, isn't it?"

I could tell Marion was about to ask me to help with her dumb garden, so I cut to the chase.

"Quick, Marion!" I shouted, running out the door. "To the Mayor's office! And fast -- there's no time to lose and we have to hurry!"

A P.I. is only as good as his powers of persuasion.

It took the sum total of my glutes to make it up the stairs at Town Hall, Marion Mason trailing behind me like a really gorgeous kite.

Always be prepared. That was the tortured private investigator motto long before those little shits over at the Scouts appropriated it. Suffice it to say I had an opening line for the ages ready to go when I flung open the door to the Mayor's office. Actually, I had several.

"Stand and deliver, bucko!"

"They call me Mr. Questions. I hope you're Mr. Answers!"

"Hey, stop right there, Mr. Mayor!"

Unfortunately I was unable to use any of them. Like I had so many times before, I found myself bursting into a corrupt politician's office with a beautiful widow by my side. Far from tying the case up in a neat bow right off the bat, however, today I found myself faced with a ready and waiting Mr. Mayor, his beefy face stretched into a grin, his fat, fat, fat body puffed up in pride as he wheeled around with a gun in his hand; the cowering, sinewy body of Tio Abuelo cowering in the corner. Nothing for Marion and me to do but stand there doing the ol' reverse-headstand.

"Well, well, well," said the Mayor. "John Toledo. And our old friend Marion Mason. I had a feeling I'd be getting a visit today."

I privately cursed myself for forgetting the Mayor's notable Boy Scout background.

"Put the gun away, Mr. Mayor. And release Mr. Abuelo," I said.

The Mayor laughed a laugh I suspected was more to intimidate me than because he'd considered what I said particularly funny. I'm not sure. I'm really bad at reading faces.

"Tio!" cried Marion, "are you all right?!"

Tio sang out that he was all right for the moment in a beautiful and disarming baritone.

"What, jealous, Mr. Mayor?" The move was to push his buttons until he broke like a flowerpot hit by a bolt of lightning. "Both of Mr. Abuelo's lovers in the same office?"

The Mayor shrugged. "I'm an evolved man."

"I imagine you imagine you've got me in a pretty tight spot, Mr. Toledo," he said after clearing his throat.

I gritted my teeth and soldiered forward. "I think the authorities -- namely, the *Governor of Ohio* would be interested to hear about your involvement in the death of Chester Mason, Mr. Mayor."

"I think the authorities would be interested to hear from you at all, after they find you dead at the bottom of the mighty Cuyahoga." Damn. This guy was good.

"But please, Mr. Toledo," continued the Mayor, puffing at his cigar, "indulge my curiosity. How did you unveil this plot?"

I boldly lowered my hands and began to pace around the room. I picked up objects, like telescopes and guitar picks, and then putting them back down, which looked really cool.

"It was quite simple, once I put it all together," I said. "It began with a simple knock on my door from a reporter friend who hinted that foul play might have been involved in Mr. Mason's tragic death in that primate-themed-café. Immediately I was inclined to agree, based on a few facts. One, the primate-themed-café is objectively delightful and could never incite someone to suicide. Second, Mr. Mason's psychological profile, accessed by me, John Toledo, with the help of a friend on the force, suggested that he was not only in good spirits, despite the repeated infidelity of his wife, BECAUSE he himself was engaged to his own *saxophone* in a nighttime swing

band that plays on the south side of town, further strengthening his ties with residents in his ward south of the river, strengthening his soul against thoughts of shuffling off this mortal coil, and encouraging him instead to bear the whips and scorns of time, to coin two phrases. FURTHERMORE, his profile included the fact that Mr. Mason was, from a long stint in a clandestine group of missionaries in South East Asia, immune to most conventional poisons with the EXCEPTION of the bitter herb known as the Frothflin plant, a rare toxin which affects only the one-percent of the population that has repeatedly exposed themselves to saxophone brass, and which was the calling card of the famous political assassin Claude DeTramp, who had innocuous beginnings in a troupe of BOY SCOUTS where he would've run into both you and your Scout partner MATTHEW L'MAY, who enters our narrative as the long lost FATHER of Chester Mason who'd fought bitterly with his son over politics all his life and would've known of both his son's attempt to prevent your land grab south of the Cuyahoga AND his son's saxophone-caused vulnerability to the Frothflin toxin, which was found in trace quantities in last week's "Baboon Burger" at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo's famous primate-themed-café. This information was, of course, given to me in an unrelated incident by cafeteria worker Vernon Berg, whose life I saved during the war. This detail, of course, all points to you as the culprit; responsible for both the death of Chester Mason and the clear intent to off Tio Abuelo, your own Latin lover, for the sake of removing all opponents to a land grab that'd make you the most powerful Mayor in Cleveland's history and secure your stranglehold on the city's poor. AND I can tell you were directly responsible for the Frothflin toxin in the baboon burger BECAUSE contact with the toxin in non-saxophone players has the simple effect of reducing the hair on one's eyebrows by one third."

Now that no one was confused, the atmosphere in the room was significantly more relaxed.

"Also, you were the only suspect and you've just confessed," I added.

The Mayor clapped his hands sarcastically as best he could with a gun in one hand and a cigar in the other, his kind-of-thinned-out eyebrows raised.

"Clever man. But I've met a million John Toledos," said the Mayor with a sneer. "And they're all the same. Your way with words won't save you now."

He cocked the gun. "See you in hell, Toledo."

It was at that exact moment Cairo, the handy Egyptian boy who acts as my sometimes sidekick-slash-protégé whom I forgot to mention until now burst through the window, and, together with yours truly, executed a classic P.I. quarterback sneak. Before he knew it, the Mayor was bound to his Mayor-Chair. Cairo and I laughed and high-fived each other at the bitter irony of it all.

"I called the Governor's office lickety-split, like you asked, John!" Cairo shouted, dusting off his fighting fists.

"Good man, Cairo."

Marion and Tio, locked in an embrace in a relatively private corner of the room, squealed as the door was re-thrown open by none other than the Governor of Ohio, followed closely by the Governor of Ohio's Men.

"I got a call about a corrupt mayor," said the Governor. "Is this the right office?"

"Mr. Governor!" screamed the Mayor. "This is all a misunderstanding! I can explain everything!"

"Explain it to a judge, Mr. Mayor," said the Governor. With that, the Governor's Men carried the bound mayor out of his own office in his mayor chair like Jesus, our Lord and Savior, on the cross on the road to Calvary.

"How the mighty have fallen," said Cairo. The kid could really speak the truth once in a while

"Good work, Toledo," said the Governor. "Who knows, if I can pull the right strings you could get commendation. How does the Cleveland Medal of Honor sound to you?"

"No thanks, buddy," I said, turning to the door and taking Cairo's hand in mine, "I'm just doing a favor for a friend."

Back in my office, Cairo sank into the couch and picked up one of his comic serials. I suppose now would've been the time to call Kent Wooster and tell him the whole juicy story. But then again, we deserved a breather.

"Cranberry juice, John?" said Cairo.

"You read my mind. And hey, pour one for yourself, too."

"You sure my parents won't mind?" asked Cairo.

I shrugged and grabbed my paperweight.

"There are worse ways to pass an hour in Cleveland."

If you want more of John Toledo and Cairo, mail in your box top for new mysteries such as 'Gunned Down at Sun Down,' 'Blood Jewel of the Narragansett,' and 'The Case of the Missing Balloon.'

Shana Toor



Junior

Major: Public Policy

Minor: Creative Writing

Shana was born in Toronto, Ontario and has spent about half her life in Canada and half in Michigan. She is passionate about social justice, politics, poetry, young adult fiction, traveling, and getting way too attached to TV shows. She is currently the events committee chair for *Xylem Literary Magazine*, an undergraduate-run arts publication on campus.

shukran

my maa said when you wake up
thank god. then look
at your hands. light candles
in name of all your mistakes.
take a chance on mystical
predictions. because no one
is smarter than the stars.
incense is almighty. its fumes
cannot fuel cancer. the disease
is your disbelief. stalled. still.
it becomes alive within you.
duas deal the deck we play with.
flimsy cards. wavering faith.
a hymn a day will not bring back
the dead. but it may give some
purpose to meanings lost.

among ashes scattered in holy
rivers. forgotten for years. we
are all searching for excuses
to drown our unholy regrets.
but words do not float on water.
there is nothing to find except
that god of lies. and that god lies.
idle. a beautiful statue behind
a donation box. intricately idolized.
misplaced philanthropy. that is what
the people have made of god.
enlighten me, maa, do we deserve
forgiveness just because we prayed
when you told us to? there is nowhere
to hide from infamous truths.
blood is a breathing thing.
and sacrifice is the end.
not the means. a style of life.
yet here we are. living our lives.
taking signals as orders
from all the gods we prayed to.
and all the gods who lied.

if time was a straight line

some afternoons, your lover
kisses a crescent moon
onto the inside of your
thighs. softly. sacrificing
his pride. telling a story
about love with his tongue.
they say cartography is
a dead language. but his
touches are a map to places
you might discover one day
if you open your eyes. betrayal
is the taste of someone else's
lip gloss on his collar bone
when your eyes are closed.

the truth always comes out
over morning coffee. mugs
drop. almost break when
they crash into the floor.

they don't. but they could
have. they could have been
so many things. they could
have been everything.
it would be easier if they
simply shattered. but no.
they're still usable. all that
remains to tell their story is
the memory of how they fell.

when you leave, he tastes
of himself again. like sun-
flower seeds and lip balm.
maybe mint flavored.
his initials are still tattooed
between flowers and vines
on the skin underneath
your hip bone. birthed from
past promises. many night-
time boys try to make the ink
disappear. but the letters
are like a polaroid you've
stopped looking at but still
saved. since some things
are only meant to be burned.

other bodies cannot erase
what you left behind.
shrinking laugh lines.
ashes finding a home in
your mouths from smoking
together. first kisses between
stacks in the library. plotting
to steal holy water from
the cathedral in buenos aires.
eating cake in children's
arcades. you don't know
which of them you are
more like. the children
or the arcade. you are
the drum that beats.
the heart that doesn't.

Atma Hatya

I wrote my suicide letter tonight
and pretended it was a poem.

I've written so many of these
desperate apologies.

I print some out.
I never sign them.

I am sorry for my birth
and all that followed.

Sorry about crematoriums
stained by the blood and bones

of those who turned to ash
and those who wish they had.

I am sorry about how
like everything else,

even the living
gather dust.

It is terrible to try stitching
my jagged edges together,

even worse to discover that they
do not make a whole anymore.

Sorry for the barely bloody blade
and puked-up pills and rough rope.

I am sorry for not being
all that I should have been.

Atma hatya,
the killing of one's own soul.

But you cannot kill
what has always been dead.

Kate Velguth



Freshman

Major: Undecided

Kate Velguth is a freshman in LSA. Her work has been previously published in *Washington Square Review*, *Menacing Hedge*, and *A cappella Zoo*. Witness has been previously published in the *Washington Square Review*, and received the Hopwood Undergraduate Award for fiction. Her favorite authors are Neil Gaiman, Ray Bradbury, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Witness

This is the city: Windows reflecting the sun, sending Morse-code flashes into every pair of eyes. Concrete buildings that gouge the clouds. Bottle-green flies sucking at garbage. Oil slicks like butterfly wings. A religion that says all roads go somewhere. A statue who blinks very occasionally, when she thinks nobody's looking.

*

The statue in the city is the Seven-Foot Woman Made of Gold. When passers-by drop money into the gold hat at her feet she changes poses for them, an arm raised, head turned, one expression switched out for another. The Woman's movements are smooth, oiled, as though she is made of gears and circuit boards with a skin of the metal for which she is named. When they leave she reaches after them. *Come back*, she seems to say. *Oh, come back, come here*. Her face, a caricature of longing.

*

The Seven-Foot Woman Made of Gold is June. At 6:00 every morning June walks to her spot, a concrete square with several sidewalks leading to it, across from a busy street. She stacks two milk crates, then stands on them and adjusts her long gold dress to completely hide what she likes to think of as her pedestal. Then she waits.

Her skin and hair are gold too, painted before she walked to her place among a few other normal statues. Sometimes she's too tired to shower at night, and in the morning the sheets of the bed in the apartment she shares with her girlfriend are flecked with gold. The paint doesn't ever come off completely. June has learned that, in her five years as the Seven-Foot Woman. There will always be paint under her fingernails, in her hair, behind the curl of her ear. It will come off on her furniture; she'll find flakes in her toothbrush.

*

These are the people of the city: A man kneeling in a temple, his hands shaking with earnestness as he prays. A woman looking for a dress to wear to her sister's wedding to her own former lover. An elementary school boy trying to smoke one of his brother's cigarettes. A woman fixing somebody's computer, and wishing she saw more of her girlfriend. An elderly man singing snatches of old songs as he waits for the bus. Thirty people in a subway car, fiddling with their phones or staring at their laps.

*

June tries to bear witness. She tries so goddamn hard.

*

June works at a used bookstore four blocks down from where she is the Seven-Foot Woman Made of Gold. June doesn't wash off her gold paint when she goes there at 9:00. Finnegan, the owner and her boss, doesn't mind. He says that people who go to used bookstores look at books, not people.

June likes this job, likes the untidy stacks of books and magazines and the smell of their yellowing pages, but it is not what she is meant to do. Often she catches herself staring at the paint-flecked crates and folded dress in the grocery bag below the counter, and she counts down the hours. At 5:00, she says goodbye to Finnegan, changes into her dress and touches up her paint, and walks to the square where she becomes a statue again.

*

When June came out to her two best friends in sophomore year of high school, they stopped speaking to her. June thought they'd get over it in a week or two but it went on: the glances through and behind her, conversa-

tions stopped when she walked by, whispers behind her back but not quite out of earshot. *I am a person; I am not wallpaper.* *See me*, June had wanted to say, never did.

*

Consider this: Eyes slide over you. People only talk to you when necessary. You are afraid to speak to them for fear they will not hear you. When you do, it is not yourself speaking; everyone hears what they want to hear. If you are the only one who consistently affirms your existence, how can you be sure that you are really there at all?

*

June met Morgan when they were both in their senior year of college. June was in the library on a Tuesday night, editing a last-minute paper for a sociology class she hated when her screen froze up. Morgan saw June put her face in her hands and went over to her table where she was swearing quietly at her laptop.

"Need help?" Morgan asked. She was at least a foot shorter than June, brown-eyed, and a computer science major.

"Yeah," June said, fiddling with her pen. "Thanks. The deadline's in less than an hour."

"You've got this saved, right?"

June nodded. Morgan leaned over her, and hummed as she tapped her fingers on the keys. Her perfume smelled like dandelions.

Half an hour later, Morgan had unfrozen June's computer, June had submitted her paper, and the two of them emerged from the library into cool darkness. They walked back to the dorms together. June learned that Morgan was easy to talk to, and Morgan learned that she could make June laugh.

When they graduated, June with a degree in sociology she'd never use and Morgan with one in computer science she would, they moved into an apartment together.

*

June has trained herself not to blink. It took her three years to get really good at it. She has been a statue for five, two since she got out of college, in addition to her job at the bookstore. Now, she does not blink unless no one is looking, or unless she means to. Every movement is deliberate, when you are a statue.

*

A man walks down the sidewalk, oily brown shoes tapping the pavement in a slow rhythm. His arms in his brown business suit swing like pendulums. The wind blows cold against his face and sends little scraps of paper swirling over the pavement: a dollar, somebody's grocery receipt, a scrap of an old birthday card. The man does sales for a computer company, and they are not going well, not well at all. A buyer from another company he had a lot riding on fell through. What is he going to tell his boss, his coworkers, his wife?

He slows, stops in the middle of a square dotted with statues and sickly-looking trees. He lights a cigarette, inhales the smoke. His forehead creases like cardboard and he wraps his hands around the flame. The man tries to breathe slowly but he can't. Another gust of wind snatches the smoke away and he imagines the thin cloud travelling upward and onward. Other people walk around him. He's a stone in the middle of a moving stream; the water touches the rock but does not see it and does not remember. The man will walk to his car and then drive to his house and tell his wife. He wonders if they'll argue. Maybe, maybe not.

A few minutes later the man drops his cigarette butt and crushes it under his heel. Only then does he notice the statue across the way, towering above the people and glinting in the late-afternoon sun. The statue, the woman, meets his eyes. She blinks. She gives him a solemn nod. The man smiles, a little.

*

June tries to explain it to Morgan. They are laying in bed. It is 12:30 in the morning, and Morgan has asked why June doesn't quit being a statue.

"It's not like the money's worth it for your time," Morgan said. "And we have enough, with you at the bookstore and me at my tech job, since if I'm not going to California for the internship. It's kind of selfish. I never get to see you anymore."

June doesn't know how to explain so she pretends not to have heard. Morgan sighs.

"It can't be fun, just standing there." The room was dark and June could not see her, just felt her breath against her cheek. June has never thought of being The Seven-Foot Woman Made of Gold as enjoyable or not enjoyable, just necessary.

"It's not about that, really," she says, not knowing how to put what she's thinking into words.

"What is it then?" Morgan's voice is tense, and she reaches for June's hand and squeezes it, perhaps harder than she intends.

"It's to let people know someone sees them," says June. "Letting people know they're there." She trails off. The words hang over them, heavy and stupid.

Morgan sighs again, and she does not let go of her hand.

The green glowing display of the alarm clock reads 12:43. Morgan and June are pressed close together, foot to foot, arm to arm, shoulder to shoulder. June loves the physical contact. It grounds her, gives her a sense of immediacy: Hands, here. Lips, here. Knees, hips, breasts, mouth. Here. You are here and you exist. June is lucky to have Morgan; she often thinks that Morgan bears witness to her.

*

The next morning, June wakes up at 5:30 as usual. Normally Morgan does not stir at the sound of the alarm but today she stands in the doorway of the bathroom as June paints herself gold. The sound of her voice makes June jump.

"Hey," Morgan says. Her face is puffy, and groggy with sleep. Bits of black hair from her ponytail hang around her face.

"Why are you up so early?" June meets her eyes in the mirror.

"Couldn't sleep. And I've been thinking, and I think I've changed my mind."

"About what?"

Morgan tells her that she's taking the internship in California after all.

She kisses June on the cheek, quickly, and goes back to the bedroom to pack her things. There is a dusting of gold on Morgan's lips, and a slick of tears on June's face. Two weeks later, June notices that the apartment no longer smells of dandelions.

*

These are the people of the city: A man praying for a better profit margin. A woman holding up a dress and telling herself she feels no bitterness. A little boy coughing, smoke clouding his face. A woman with a suitcase in the trunk of her car, wondering if she's done the right thing. An elderly man on a bus stop bench, swinging his legs like a child. Thirty people in a subway car, not one of them looking at any of the others.

*

This is the city: Roads like rock-studded mirrors. The smell of something sweet and rotting. The occasional tree twisting up toward the sun. Subway

tunnels like hollow underground veins. Roads trailing off into a distance nobody can see. And a statue, in the middle of a square.

*

The Seven-Foot Woman Made of Gold adjusts her dress to hide the crates. There are patches in her paint where her skin shows through. The Woman gets in position: one arm lifted, chin tilted, face still. Tomorrow she will go through the motions of her routine, taking and giving, watching and being watched. Today the Seven-Foot Woman Made of Gold does not move for anyone at all.

Claire Wood



Sophomore

Major: Economics and Creative Writing

Claire Wood is an LSA student from Sugar Land, Texas, pursuing majors in Economics and Creative Writing. She loves playing violin and drinking lattes, and often makes people uncomfortable with her excessive use of emojis.

Me, Marie, and the Nameless Man

Dear Nameless Man,

Hello. It's me, from last night. I figure I owe you an apology, for — well, you know. You were pretty angry, after it happened. Zipped out my door like bees out of trees. Not that I could blame you. If I were you, I wouldn't talk to me either. I'd probably steer clear, and I guess that's what you're doing. My original intent was to send you an apologetic basket of mini-muffins, but since I never caught your name, that was unfortunately infeasible. Thus, I hope that an explanatory letter of regret will be satisfactory.

You should know that what happened to happen yesterday was not what I *intended* to happen to happen. It wasn't even my fault, per-say. Marie, and me, and you, and then — well, you know. It happened.

Ah, Marie.

You know the color scarlet, Nameless Man?

Scarlet.

Scarlet is a type of red — a vibrant, shameless red. The color of sex and passion, of brutality and violence.

I guess you might say that Marie's life is scarlet. You can see it in the piercing gleam of her eyes, her long and powerful stride. Marie is beautiful. Not in a mysterious, supernatural sense. No, Marie is *fuck-me* beautiful: tall and slender, with pale high cheek bones and deep brown hair that spills in a tangle down her spine. She wears red lipstick with sweatpants. Her personality is as audacious as her presence. She has, metaphorically speaking, the bulging testicles of an angry elephant. She is cunningly brutal. They talk about friends stabbing you in the back. Marie? Marie stabs you in the front, and twists the blade around for kicks.

Maybe it is this that defines her popularity with men — this shameless, daring vigor. In games of Do, Marry, or Bury, Marie is consistently screwed. She's screwed over Emma Watson, Emma Stone, even cheer captain Emma Patterson — and she's got double D's. Marie is a master of seduction. Men come in swarms, humming like bees. Her love life is insanity: spontaneous and irrational, roller coasters of screaming and slapping and sending them away, only to find them crawling back to her on hands and knees. She kisses them in the rain by the mailbox, and underneath the big oak tree, and in the backseats of their trucks. She's heartbroken and breaking hearts, in love and out of love and making love with the ferocity of a lion.

Yes, this is Marie's life. A beautiful, brutal, fiercely irrational scarlet life.

It is, therefore, relatively ironic that me and Marie are the best of friends. If Marie's life is scarlet, then I'd describe mine as a grayish-greenish shade of beige. My eyes don't gleam, or pierce. I don't really *stride*, either — just walk, comfortably, contentedly, like a happy little turtle. I wouldn't consider my appearance particularly eye-catching. My wardrobe consists of olives and ebones and grays. I avoid red lipstick by nature, and confrontation by principle. If Marie has the balls of an elephant, I have, possibly, *one* of the testicles of my late parakeet, Fred, may he rest in peace.

My love life is a stale, crumbling piece of toast. Dry, off-putting, and generally inedible. I've had one boyfriend, ever — a squat little kid named Rodney — but I never really liked him. I disliked him, actually. The kid was dumb as bricks. We kissed rarely, out of compulsion, his lips blubbery and squirming like two Vaseline-covered worms. Games of Do, Marry, or Bury consistently result in my murder. I wear my literal and metaphorical virginity with a dismal sort of celibate honor. I will be sexless for eternity, *Requiescat in pace*.

Thus, it was in the face of my best friend's scarlet life that I was bit by a moderately cliché green monster of jealousy — and bit hard. Yes, Nameless Man: I envied it. The ballsiness of her stride, the brutality of her words, and the fame she accumulated as a result. I envied the sex she had, and the sex

she could have, the slapping and the screaming and the kissing in the rain. It was a secret envy, silent and bitter within my pumping heart.

Yesterday, Marie sent me a text. If she hadn't, *it* probably wouldn't have happened — the thing with you, I mean. I had on my Scooby-Doo pajamas, hair pinned up in a messy bun, hunched over my Economics homework. My room was, as usual, compulsively tidy, dark blue bed sheets spread wrinkle-free across my twin, textbooks stacked alphabetically on the corner of my desk. I had just pinned up the newest edition to my room on the wall above my bed: a Periodic Table of Elements poster, a present from my father.

Anyway, I'd gone on to the second problem when the news buzzed into my phone. It was Marie. She had, in the stuffy back seat of her latest boyfriend's car, *fainted* from an orgasm.

And you see, Nameless Man, although I didn't know it then, I do believe that this was the thing that pushed me over the edge. A little switch flipped inside of me. I was sad, confused, exasperated, exacerbated with my beige state of being. Why couldn't I have orgasms? Why couldn't I kiss in the rain? I felt it, that bitter envy, swelling thick and viscous within my veins like tar.

I wanted *sex*. I wanted irrationality, and ferocity, and passion, shameless and hot as the boiling sun.

The formal that night was held in the upstairs portion of the Delta Phi house. I wore my black dress: backless, tight bodes — you remember. It was crowded and sticky, illuminated by a soft yellow light that hung in the air like mist. I was worming my way through to the make-shift cocktail bar in the corner when I saw you.

You, in your tight gray slacks and dark-blue button up. You were handsome, I thought — light blonde curls, slightly taller than me, with the glossy eyes of one clearly hammered.

You approached me before I even reached the bar. You had said your name, low and slow (although I do not remember it now) and stretched your hand out in greeting. I had taken it, gently, saying my name back to you.

I have to say, the two of us left pretty quick. We should win an award for that kind of speed. We emerged onto the Ann Arbor streets twenty minutes after my arrival, you in a drunken fit of sensual desire, me in a relatively-severe sober panic.

My place was only two blocks away, luckily, for the wind pricked at our skin like needles. Panic gushed in my veins; I was terrified and intensely jittery, as though I had drunk seventeen Redbulls and an espresso shot. You were clearly not concerned, stumbling along rather blankly at my side. I contemplated making a break for it, sprinting desperately in the opposite

direction. I wish I would have, honestly — but you probably do, too.

We still hadn't spoken when we arrived outside my door. I wondered if hook-ups were normally silent transactions, or if it was just the combination of your drunken state and my social ineptitude. I choked down my fear as my fingers fumbled with the room key. *Deep breaths*, I had told myself. *If she can do this, you can do this*.

You followed me in, close behind. The room was just as I had left it — textbooks in an orderly little stack, comforter spread neatly across the bed.

"Is that a periodic table?" You were behind me, staring in obvious confusion and slight distaste at the poster on my left wall.

"Um, yeah." My words were frantic, scuttled. "I guess we have good chemistry."

That should've been your clue to leave. I wanted to jump out the window. *Good one, me. Very original*. I made a mental note to stop talking.

Your kiss was different than worm-lip Rodney. You were hot and slow and sticky, like warm maple syrup. Your lips sank into mine greedily, forcefully, your right hand pushing up the arch of my back. I remember the Vodka on your tongue. You moved to the bed; I followed. There we were, kissing the way Marie did: desperate girl on desperate boy, Hollywood style.

We sank into rhythm. The trembling, sweaty-palmed discomfort that had so consumed me before faded into a giddy, awkward sort of pride. I was doing it. I was kissing a boy — and one I didn't know. Self-defiance and rebellion shivered in my bloodstream. With you, I had been spontaneous, shameless, ridiculous, irrational — beautifully and dangerously un-beige.

It was then that you took off your pants. The gentle clink of the belt buckle, the zoooooop of your zipper.

I have seen penises in textbooks, Nameless Man. Diagrams glistening in the pages, stuck with lines and labels that jutted out at awkward angles. *Head. Shaft. Scrotum*. I have seen non-textbook ones, too. Drawing penises is, oddly enough, a rather common hobby, if you think about it. Teens scribble them everywhere. On spirals, on textbooks, on walls, on stalls, on *people*.

But, my dearest, nothing prepares you for seeing the real deal. And there it was, *yours*, sitting before me: a little white log, sprouting from the curly brown tufts beneath it. It reminded me of one of those whack-a-moles, and I had a sudden urge to slam a hammer right down on its head (although I didn't, lucky for you).

You made no sound, but the expectation was understood, hanging in the

air like a fat, black raincloud.

My heart thundered in my chest. I can do many things. Rubik's cubes, chemistry, calculus with my hands tied — but a blow job? I embraced my pragmatism, squinting at your schlong. One by one by — five? six? I leaned my head closer, lips hovering maybe an inch above your tip. The anticipation was stifling.

You see, *kissing* is one thing. Kissing is sexy, fun — but this? This moment was an initiation. I would enter the sexual realms, abandon my stale-bread virginity once and for all! My beige-ness would dissolve into oblivion, and I would be left a raw, brazen scarlet. Marie would shriek with delight. No longer would I stand in her shadow. I would be Me: temptress, seducer.

Thus it was, that, in a rush of panicked bravery, I did it. You know what you taste like? Salty, sweaty — an off-putting mixture of saltines and the men's locker room. Your hands moved to the back of my head, guiding me. Up. Down. Up. Down.

It was about a minute later when I began to feel it — the slight, pressing discomfort in my upper sternum. My nose was clogged with congestion, and I needed to breathe.

Gently I began to raise my head upwards. Your hands, however, rebounded me right back down, as though you were dribbling a basketball. Every upward effort of mine was accompanied with an opposing, stronger downward shove from you. The slight discomfort in my chest grew into a deep, throbbing burn. My lungs screamed, but to no avail. I was going down the shaft, deeper and deeper with each propelling thrust until the head itself entered my throat —

Gag reflexes kicked in as my tonsils reacted violently to the fleshy intruder. Guttural sounds erupted from my throat, as I'm sure you remember, and you quickly released my head from your grip as I shoved upwards in a desperate attempt for air.

And this, my dear, is what I so sincerely apologize for. I blame it on my virginity, my prior inexperience with male genitalia that so unfortunately caused me to *severely miscalculate* the length of your penis.

Crunch.

A roar emanated from the pillow.

"FUCK." Your voice was a contorted mixture of shock and pain. "FUCK. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK."

You leapt from the bed in a state of dismay and stood half-naked in the room's center, cradling the miniature trunk in your palms.

I was, as you were, horrified. I didn't move, just sat there, kneeling on the dark blue sheets. My palms had once again broken into a frantic sweat, my tongue sitting fat and dry and disbelieving in my mouth. I had bitten it. I had bitten your penis.

I don't blame you for not hanging around for tea. You had, by this point, stopped cradling your assaulted genitals and were now struggling in a clearly distressed drunken state to pull back on your tightie-whities, jumping desperately as you yanked in an attempt to hurry the process. In a particularly vehement bounce, however, you lost your balance, and crashed head-first into my dresser.

Your face flattened against the wooden board, and my Suave shampoo tumbled to the floor in a terrific explosion.

Let's just say that, by this point, you were a grumpy little bumble bee.

And it was at this point, as I am sure you remember, that I began to laugh. Not the shy, cute kind — a laugh of insanity, high-pitched and all-consuming to the point that tears streamed down my cheeks. I clamped a hand over my mouth to stifle the giggles, but it was no use. I had fallen into a terrible, terrifying fit of hysteria.

You looked at me in awe-struck horror.

"Psycho-ass bitch," you said, and drunkenly stumbled out the door.

It was an unfortunate turn of events. I cleaned up the spilled shampoo immediately after your departure, thinking things over. I had rejected myself in envy of another. I realize now who I am, what I stand for, what I'm not and who I *really* don't want to be. I am not scarlet — nor will I ever be. I am beige. Simply, quietly, cleanly, and contentedly.

And thus, Nameless Man, I apologize. I apologize for your genitals, and for your face, and for making your night rather more eventful and uncomfortable than it was likely intended to be. May your life be one of success and fulfillment.

Regretfully Yours,

Me

Alex Bernard
Jordyn Bernstein
Ashley Bishel
Grace Bydalek
Julia Byers
Sabrina Deutsch
Margot Draycott
Karen Duan
Laura Dzubay
Tori Essex
Sofia Fall
Aaron Finglass
Gavin Gao
Blair Gould
Miranda Hency
Lindendeary Himawan
Grace Kim
Alex Kime
Wilson Kung
Susan LaMoreaux
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