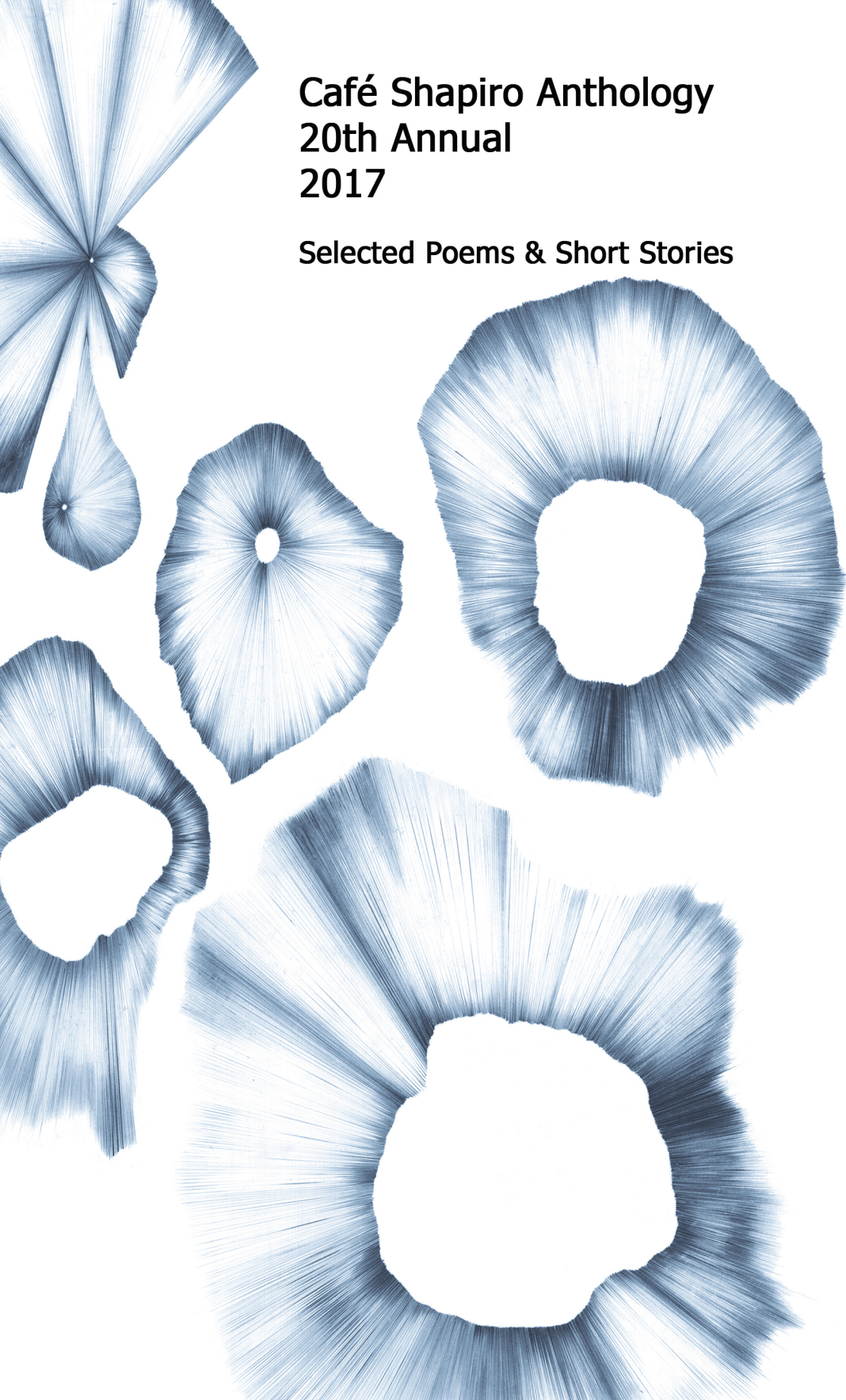
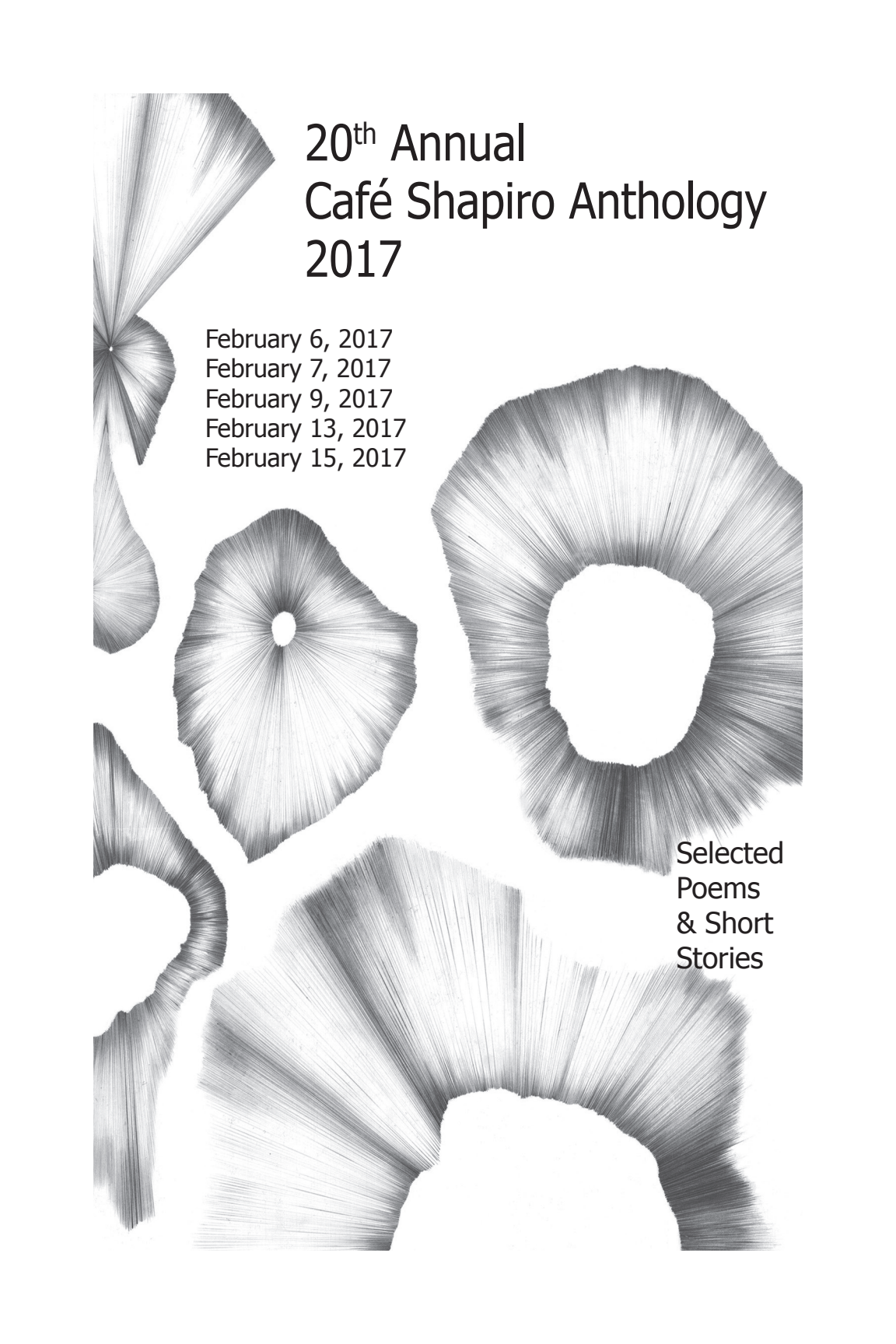


**Café Shapiro Anthology
20th Annual
2017**

Selected Poems & Short Stories



The background of the cover is composed of several overlapping, irregular shapes. Each shape is filled with a dense pattern of fine, radiating lines that create a textured, almost crystalline appearance. The lines are most concentrated in the center of each shape and become sparser towards the edges. The overall effect is a complex, organic pattern that resembles a microscopic view of a mineral or a close-up of a fan of shells.

20th Annual Café Shapiro Anthology 2017

February 6, 2017
February 7, 2017
February 9, 2017
February 13, 2017
February 15, 2017

Selected
Poems
& Short
Stories

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Image is titled *Eusapia* - a graphite on bristol drawing, and a 2D translation
of Italo Calvino's fantastical narrative *Invisible Cities*.

Introduction

Welcome to the 20th Annual Café Shapiro!

I am excited to introduce the 20th Annual Cafe Shapiro anthology and invite you to read the following inspiring and thoughtful University of Michigan student authored poems and short stories. These works will draw you into the creative process, welcome you to think and rethink your assumptions, and connect you with the students through their individual expression. You will find a unique window into the Michigan learning experience.

When Cafe Shapiro first launched twenty years ago, it was a bold experiment, a student coffee break designed as part of the University's Year of the Humanities and Arts (YoHA). As the University celebrates its bicentennial, Cafe Shapiro is an example of how past innovations become a part of current campus traditions. YoHA set out to explore the role of the arts and humanities in civic and community life through a variety of programs. Twenty years later, Cafe Shapiro continues its tradition of featuring undergraduate student writers nominated by their Professors to perform their works and through during so continues to demonstrate the value of the arts and humanities.

The act of reading one's work out loud is a new experience for many of our students. Throughout several evenings in February, students will gather in the Shapiro lobby and share their works. They will be joined by friends, faculty, coaches, and family, as they demonstrate the power of speaking and performing. They will participate in an authentic act of creation, speaking possibility, expressing beliefs, and imagining the future.

Twenty years later, Cafe Shapiro has become much more than a coffee break. It has become an annual event featuring undergraduate student writers as they think creatively and critically, reason, ask questions, and develop the skills that help them understand and participate in our world. We also publish this anthology of their work, making it available in print and through Deep Blue, the University's institutional repository. Through this process, students have the opportunity to learn about copyright and related steps to publishing their scholarship.

We thank the many librarians and library staff for making this event possible. Events such as Cafe Shapiro make visible the Library's commitment to learning. We provide a neutral and engaged space for students to practice, learn and grow their scholarship and advance their learning journey. We are enthusiastic partners with faculty and students, looking to enable the exploration of new ideas while capturing passions and self expressions.

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

Laurie Alexander
Associate University Librarian for Learning and Teaching
University Library

Contents

Introduction 3

CHLOE ALBERTA

Say Something 10

SIDNEY ARRINGTON

Craftsman Finds Slave Hair in 200 Year Old Chair 22

Dear America 24

Waning Crescent 25

That Ice Cream Truck Song From Your Childhood Is Actually Racist 25

ALEXIS AULEPP

Consent 27

Letting Go 28

Naked 29

ERIN AYALP

This Land Is Your Land erasure poem 30

Barbie coloring book erasure poem 33

ADELA BAKER

Tuesday Morning 34

Protest 35

Boston 35

Habits 36

Never Fully Dressed 36

RACHEL BEGLIN

holden caulfield at a bird skinning 37

territory 39

factoid 40

dick pics in the sistine chapel 40

ALISON CAMPBELL

American Eulogy 47

Origin Story 49

Semantic Satiation 50

Inside Out 51

DAPHNE CANTUBA

Dream Girl 53

Naomi 60

MARIAH CARDENAS

Rapunzel's Pills 65

ALLISON CHU

What About a Whale? 71

Love of Dust 72

Pens 74

Laughing/crying 75

Us solo, after Karg-Elert 76

KAREN DUAN

Dual Space 79

LAURA DZUBAY

Paradise 94

ANGELICA ESQUIVEL

The Day Of 102

SOFIA FALL

Exhibit 1 110

If You Would Take Our Bodies 111

Machinations 112

ZOYA GURM

Marcie 113

PEI HAO

Chinoiserie 116

Farewell to Meng Hao-Ran from Yellow Crane Tower 118

Evening Meditation 118

Morning Departure from Bai-Di 118

Lament of the Jade Stairs 119

Viewing the Waterfall at Mount Lu 119

Distracting Myself 119

Letters from Chang-Gan 120

TOMMY HAWTHORNE

Ghazal/Portrait 121
Silver 122
Sap 124
Preservation 125
Language of Pigment & Color 125
Failed Quaker Meditations on Fire 127

JEAN ANNE HENG

Train 128
QUEEN 135

GRANT JAMES

For Old Long Ago 136

KATHLEEN JANESCHEK

Daddy, the Bastard, and the Prince 145

SCOTTY JARACZ

Dead Living 157

LUC LE POTTIER

1 a.m., West Liberty 165

LILLIAN LU

Tactical Retreat 167

JOSHUA MANDILK

You Can't Drown a Fish 172

PATRICK MCLINDEN

This Person 180

GRACE MORRIS

God In the Form of A Rabbit 184
Red 193

NADIA MOTA

String Theory 194
Chiflada 195

Somewhere Off the Pennsylvania Turnpike 195
Epilogues 196
In Which I See My Father Fearful 197

BHARAT NAIR

Strange Vigilance 198
Ikerantapolous 201

KATHRYN ORWIG

Star Girl and the Marble Roller 203

ELENA RAMIREZ-GORSKI

Basement Song 207
Phaeton 208
Untitled 209

SHASHANK RAO

Contrition 211

KEENAN REBERA

Telephone-Wire Sneakers 221
A Bus Station, Sometime Before Christmas 222
Veterinary Clinic, Midsummer 223
The Rock and the Rabbit 223
Postclinic, Midsummer 224
Flagpole 225

MARIA ROBINS-SOMERVILLE

Elegy for the Red Thermal Shirt, Age 5 226
Small on the Lake 227
Glimmerville 227
Settling 229
Changing the Marquee at Dusk 230

MICKAYLA STATEN

Full Speed 231

NATALIE STEERS

An Incomplete List of Overdue Thank Yous 234
Terms, Conditions, and Stipulations of Ghosthood 237

EVAN VEASEY

A Daydream, a Ghost 260
A Glass of Water Fell 261
Your Body 262

ELEANOR WILSON

Early Morning Rain 264
Fade Out Line 265
Nick Missed: 266
The Stitch 266
All Those Curls 267
Sputtering 268
Dust and Wine 268

CLAIRE WOOD

On Nights Like These 269

MINNA WYBRECHT

A Broken House 276
Not Good Enough for Religion 279

SELENE YANG

A Disappointed Optimist Sits Down to Watch the Blockbuster with a
Thousand Rereleases 298
Pins Drop 301
Queen of Stars 302
Immigrant Math 303

ALEXA ZIELINSKI

Possible Uses for a Rock 304

CHLOE ALBERTA



Junior

Major: English

Reading: Fiction

I am from the small town of Portland, Michigan, and in my free time I like to read, write, and act! I love everything about the University of Michigan, especially the football. When I graduate, I hope to move to New York and pursue a career in journalism or publishing (if writing the next Great American Novel doesn't work out).

Say Something

It was a Tuesday in August, the kind of day where the dry Arizona heat made the little red hairs on Sarah's arms threaten to burst into flames, made her skin itch and the parking lot sizzle like a frying pan. That was the day Danny died.

She was supposed to be behind the counter at Pete's, a smile plastered on her face and sweat beading up on her hairline from the oppressive heat emanating from the stone oven while customers complained and the acned high school seniors sliced pizzas at a snail's pace. But she had called in sick because she wanted to be home when the man arrived to fix the air conditioning, so she was sitting in her living room in front of a fan and drinking a Coke when the phone rang. The quavering voice on the other end of the line was quiet, so at first Sarah couldn't tell what it was saying. But Danny was a name she could hear from across a crowded room, across an entire ocean probably, and her ears honed in on its syllables.

Something about a garbage truck.

"...by the time she got there, there was nothing more to do. I'm sorry." A pause while the owner of the voice listened over the hundreds of miles of telephone wires, probably wondering if Sarah was still on the line. "They wanted me to tell you to come stay at the house. If you want to come for the funeral." She murmured something that must have been a satisfying response, because the caller said goodbye and hung up.

Sarah stood there for a while, hand on the phone and eyes fixed on the Pete's Pizzeria – *We Deliver!* magnet on the fridge. It was dark in the apartment, the curtains drawn to keep out the heat and the lights off to keep the energy bill down. But suddenly Sarah felt an intense need for light, her eyes cried out for it, so she opened the refrigerator door and the light clicked on, and she sunk down to the floor in front of it, feeling the artificial chill wrap around her body and settle on her skin.

The last time Sarah had seen Danny had been in a big, open room with wooden walls and marble floors that bounced every word, every sigh, every scrape of pen on a legal pad back into the heavy air. They sat in the third row with the prosecutor's other witnesses. Ben and Nathaniel were there, two boys who had lived with Sarah and Danny and their foster father for a few years and who were now twelve and fifteen respectively, gangly and defiant with all their fear clenched tightly in fists.

The hard-faced prosecutor called them, one by one, and they all answered the questions she asked and didn't look anyone in the eye. Sarah watched her foster father, hunched over next to his defense attorney, hands crossed and hurt twitching across his face. She wanted to punch him and hug him at once, and she half wished that he would look at her, tell her what to do, tell her everything would be okay.

Danny took the stand, the star witness, the first victim. He was always so composed, the foil for Sarah's temper and spitefulness. She met his eyes, forming that unspeakable twin connection across the thirty feet of courtroom, and she could feel his controlled anger, his determination to sink the man who had raised them both and ruined Danny's life. With his first word the jury was convinced, she knew it. He had that effect on most people, but not on her – too many years of watching him at work had rendered her immune to his intelligent persuasion. She wondered whether it was really fair for a student of Yale Law to testify as a witness. The truth spilled over the polished courtroom floors, dampening leather shoes and dress socks, making feet arch and tap in discomfort.

And then the prosecutor called Sarah.

She was supposed to be the witness to Danny's story, the only one who was there and could confirm its truth, but she suddenly felt very much like a child, back in the kitchen in their old house, sculpting animals out of Play-Doh and presenting them proudly to her foster father, who would praise them and declare them works of art every time, and he would sweep her up in his arms and call her Donatello. She looked at him there, so small behind that oak desk, older than she remembered and so sad. She looked at Danny, and he stared back, confused by her hesitation.

The prosecutor called her name again, and she shook her head slightly. The other children were looking at her now, too, and her foster father and his attorney. And Danny. His blue eyes, the exact shade and shape of her own, spread wide with surprise and then twisted into anger and hurt, unlike anything she had ever seen in them before. The room whirled around her as she ran to the exit, Danny's horrible stare a dagger slipping through her ribcage and neatly puncturing her convulsing heart.

The taxi dropped her in front of the house, a tall post-colonial with white siding and green shutters, the kind of place Sarah and Danny used to ogle over in magazines. Sarah felt out of place in her old jeans and baggy sweat-shirt, and as she rang the doorbell she became highly aware of her sour airplane breath. It would be so easy to turn around, to find another flight back to Arizona, to pretend she hadn't known the address and maybe send some flowers to the family. She was about to turn around when the door creaked open a few inches.

Then Sarah was looking down into Danny's eyes, soft and deep and blue, and she was back in the creek behind their foster home where they would splash each other, soaking their cuffed pants and dirty old t-shirts, she was in fifth grade English winning their across-the-classroom staring contests. She was tucked into the corner of the closet with him where they hid when their foster father drank, she was shouting goodbye through a bus window as she left for college. She was frozen in place on the bench in that haunted courtroom.

The child peered up at her, those alarming eyes wide, little red curls falling out of a barrette and skewing across her forehead. Sarah stared back, lips slightly parted as if to speak, but the words caught behind her teeth.

"Addie, baby, who's there?" a voice called from inside. Its owner swung the door open, and Addie ducked behind the legs of Danny's beautiful wife. She looked tired, her fair skin paler than in their Christmas card photos, her hair falling limply on her shoulders. Her red-rimmed eyes widened as she

took in the image of her visitor. Sarah knew she must have been a ghost to her for those few seconds, with the same short, tousled red hair as Danny and the same small mouth and pinched nose. The same way of standing, left hip tilted outwards and shoulders slouched slightly forward.

After a moment Danny's wife – her name was Veronica, Sarah remembered – blinked and attempted a gentle smile. "You must be Sarah," she said. "Please, come in." Sarah nodded and followed Veronica inside. Addie pattered up the stairs to hide.

As she stepped inside the house Sarah felt like an intruder, like she shouldn't dare step foot in this home where Danny used to be happy. Chatter seeped out through the crack under the door at the end of the hall. She took in the pale yellow of the walls, interrupted at regular intervals by pictures of a smiling family at the beach, a smiling family at Niagara Falls, smiling parents with a slightly pouting daughter in front of the White House. Something twisted in Sarah's stomach as she stared at the photos of what she had never gotten around to wanting, maybe because she never had felt like she deserved it. It was the same feeling she got every year when Danny sent her their Christmas card, her only view into his life after that day in the courthouse, even though he had reached out to her, forgiven her. Of course he had forgiven her, with his incomprehensible kindness. His forgiveness wasn't the problem.

Their foster father had been convicted, despite Sarah's newsworthy exit. She had seen it in the papers – ten years in the state prison in Tucson, possibility for parole. Journalists squawked through her answering machine. "Do you think the sentence would be longer if you had testified?" "Will you visit your father in prison?" "How are the other victims taking the verdict?" For a few days she would pick up, listening in silence as they asked the questions that she couldn't ask herself and then hang up when they started to ask if she was still there. Finally she disconnected the phone, and when she plugged it back in there was a message from Danny.

At first she thought it was a wrong number, because there was nothing but silence and static sounding through the machine. Then Danny cleared his throat and said her name, and his voice was broken and tired and fell heavy on her ears. She closed her eyes. *Sarah*, he said. *Please, Sarah. I don't know what I want to say except that I want to understand what happened. I miss you and I want everything to be okay again. This is over now. I need everything to be okay.*

She called him back once, but at the sound of his voice a lump rose in her throat and her tongue seemed to swell up, filling her mouth with its inadequacies. How could she, the girl who threw punches on the playground with

the foster care boys and stood up to the mean older kids, explain with her clumsy words why she had fallen so utterly weak at that most important moment? So she hung up and didn't call again, but she didn't delete his message, either. The reminder blinked red.

She followed Veronica up the stairs to drop her duffel bag in the frilly bedroom where she would be staying. Sarah wanted nothing more than to sit there in the dark, curtains drawn, to think for a while, but Veronica led her back downstairs. "You know Ben Thomas?" she asked. "And Nate Gill? They're here, I'm sure they would love to see you."

Sarah's heart jumped in her chest hearing those names. She very much doubted that the boys would be happy to see her, almost eight years later, when the last thing they knew of her was her betrayal of Danny, their hero.

Voices washed over her as Sarah followed Veronica through the hall door into the kitchen and adjoining sitting room. She was introduced to everyone: Veronica's mother, who stopped tossing a salad to wrap her plump arms around Sarah in sympathy, and her silver-haired father; three of Veronica's cousins from Boston and her friend from work, who were all gathered around a computer pulling pictures of Danny into a slideshow; Veronica's loud aunt with a bad perm and her husband, a bald man with bizarrely white teeth. A couple of children wove in and out of pairs of legs, chasing each other across the tiled floor.

Nate and Ben were sitting on the couch watching baseball. Their boyish stringy limbs were gone, filled in and replaced by muscle and tanned skin. Ben's eyes were still too big for his face, though, and Nate had the same square glasses and curly brown hair. Their smiles slipped a little down their jaws as they turned their gaze from Veronica to Danny's twin behind her. After a moment Nate stood up politely and nodded a greeting.

"I finally sorted out the flowers," Nate said to Veronica, who had taken a seat in an armchair. The other chair was strewn with papers, leaving Sarah to either stand awkwardly in the line of view of Veronica's relatives or to take the spot between the boys. She chose the latter and regretted it at once, the air on either side of her tingling with hostility and her muscles tightening to avoid accidental contact. "I just need to tell the pastor who will be speaking."

Veronica looked at him, her face drawn, and then at Ben and Sarah. "I was hoping you three might be able to," she said. "I know it's a lot to ask, but I think it would mean a lot to him."

"Of course we will," Nate said.

Ben nodded and Sarah could feel his gaze, hot on the side of her face, but she didn't say anything, looking instead at the plush tan carpet and wanting to disappear inside of it. Ben laughed.

"Ben, please," Veronica said, her voice a whisper.

"I'm sorry, V," Ben replied, "but did you really expect her to say anything? She never does, not when it matters. Not before it's too damn late."

Veronica's relatives in the kitchen were watching, looking from Ben to the newcomer in confusion. The plump mother locked eyes with Veronica and Sarah realized that she knew, too, even if the other family members were oblivious, Veronica must have confided in her. Danny's wife was trying to wipe away quiet tears.

Ben stood up, his face flushed. "Why did you even come here," he said, glaring at Sarah. "What, you knew you wouldn't have to face him so you thought it would be fine? Fine to just show up after eight years and have the same right to mourn as all of us, who actually cared about him? Who were actually there for him?"

Sarah realized that she was standing. Veronica's eyes were trained on the ground, and Nate was looking at her, that old hurt rising and warping his gentle face. The room spun around her as she tore her feet from the floor's snare and half ran, half stumbled down the hall, up the stairs, into the wall-papered bedroom that felt cold for all of its flower print, and she tucked her knees to her chest and lay there on the floor, screaming silently into the carpet.

It started when Sarah and Danny turned ten. It was the year after his wife had left him – they had called her by her first name, Elise, a refrigerator of a woman with a penchant for inappropriate jokes, and she had just up and left one day, leaving a note on the table that the children weren't allowed to read. They had had a party for their birthday, with a piñata and the neighbor kids, and their foster father had made a horrible cake but they ate it anyway, appreciating the effort. He had gotten them each a bike, and they spent the evening tearing around the subdivision while he watched and cheered and Sarah beat Danny in almost every race. That night Sarah was getting a drink of water in the dark kitchen when saw him slip quietly into Danny's room.

At the time, nothing seemed wrong. Then sometimes he would come home with alcohol on his breath. The anger came gradually, so subtly and slowly that they hardly realized there was a change until one evening they felt genuinely afraid of him, and the next week he screamed all through the

night until the neighbors called the police. But many nights he came home happy from work, whistling up the driveway and joking with them as he cooked dinner. Those were the nights that he went into Danny's room.

Danny grew sullen and quiet, wouldn't play kickball in the cul-de-sac with Sarah and the neighbor boys, and Sarah began to notice that he would jump at the slightest touch. One day she asked him what was wrong, but he just murmured something about school and told her to mind her own business. She would often find him sitting behind the house, hidden behind a shrub and reading a book or digging little holes with a stick, and he would say nothing but allowed her to join him in the dirt.

One night their foster father was helping Sarah make chocolate chip cookies, and Danny was at a friend's house working on a school project, so she asked him if he thought Danny was okay. He turned to her, surprised.

"Of course, sweetheart. Why wouldn't he be?"

Sarah shrugged, and he let her lick the spoon.

She had thought she knew what was happening, but what if she was wrong? What if she tried to help and she only made it worse for Danny? What if nobody believed her? Danny would never talk to her about it, no matter how hard she pressed. So she kept quiet.

When they were fifteen Nate came, and the next year Ben, and Danny began to act more like his normal self. But Sarah didn't come out of her room at night anymore. She didn't want to see her foster father's big, rough hand turn the doorknob slowly and quietly creep through the new boys' bedroom door.

Sarah felt like someone was watching her. She unfolded her body and turned around to see Addie in the corner, holding a stuffed animal, a well-worn tabby cat who was missing a button eye. It reminded her of the sopping kitten she and Danny had rescued from a gutter one rainy afternoon.

They looked at each other for a moment, then Addie spoke quietly. "Are you sad about Daddy?"

The lump had risen into Sarah's throat again, and she nodded.

"Me too." Addie scooted shyly closer, clutching her cat. "Are you my aunt?"

Sarah nodded again.

"Daddy says you never came to visit before because you live too far away."

Up close, Sarah could see the pale freckles on Addie's nose. She wanted to reach out and touch her hair, to see if it was soft or more coarse, like Danny's, to hold her like she held Danny when he was thirteen and woke up screaming every night from some terrible nightmare that she wished she could share like they shared everything else. She did live too far away, but it wasn't miles that had separated her from Danny and his family. She lived in another world, her own planet of shame and cowardice. She had never known how to leave it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and the tabby cat looked at her with one shiny black eye.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Veronica's family had trickled back to their hotel rooms and Ben had gone out to see an old friend, so Nate heated up a casserole that someone had sent over and Sarah set the table. Addie hadn't come down, and Nate asked Veronica if she wanted him to go get her, but apparently Addie hadn't been eating much since the accident and cried whenever Veronica asked her to the table.

"I'll bring her something later," Nate said. "Maybe she would eat some of your cookies, Sarah."

Sarah blushed, grateful for Nate's gesture of kindness. Truthfully her baking was awful, but for some reason the boys used to tear through it with fervor. "Sure," she replied, and when she looked at him he smiled a little. They ate, forks clinking in the silence.

After a while Sarah heard a sniffing noise, and she looked up to see tears streaming down Veronica's cheeks, her fork frozen in midair and her lips pushed tightly together, suppressing. She didn't know what to do, so she made a sort of strangled throat noise and Nate mercifully looked up, rushed to Veronica's side and put an arm around her.

"I'm sorry," Veronica said through a layer of water and phlegm. "It's just so... Nobody dies like that, hit by a garbage truck? It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? I keep finding myself almost laughing but then I remember that it was him, my Danny, and he's gone and all because I forgot..." She breathed in deeply, wiping under her eye with one hand and smearing makeup all over her cheek. Her voice became a low, weary whisper. "I forgot to take out the garbage on Monday night."

Nate shook his head and turned Veronica's face toward him. "Hey, no no no V, this is not your fault. This isn't anybody's fault," he said firmly. Veronica buried her face in her hands and shook her head. "I'm going to go get some tissues for you, okay? And I'll make you some tea." He looked at Sarah pointedly and she replaced him at Veronica's side, kneeling on the hardwood and awkwardly placing a hand on her shoulder.

Nate left the room. Veronica looked up at Sarah through her tears and sighed, and Sarah was afraid of what she would say. "He didn't blame you, you know," she said.

"I know."

"I don't really think Nate and Ben do either."

Sarah shrugged. She knew they did. Ben, at least.

"I'm sorry I don't want to...I just...You knew him. Better than Ben and Nate. I know we don't really know each other but I feel like I do, he told me so much about you." Veronica wiped her nose on a napkin and paused. Sarah stared at the floor, not knowing what to say but knowing that Veronica needed this, admiring her for it. "He was really angry for a while. He was angry when we met. Sometimes he would just disappear for a weekend and then show up out of nowhere and get mad if I asked where he'd been. But by the time we got married it was better. And when Addie came along he was the most incredible father. But he would get distant at night, after we tucked her in. Finally I convinced him to come with me to talk to a marriage counselor and everything was better. Not perfect, but a lot better. He missed you a lot. I think that was always the problem."

Sarah closed her eyes. She didn't want to talk about this, not with Veronica, the stranger who loved her brother more and better than she ever could. She could have said it to Danny, though. At that moment she knew she could have looked him in the eye and said it. *I miss you too.*

Always too late, like Ben had said. Too damn late.

Sarah and her foster father got along well. Even after Danny started avoiding him, Sarah would help make dinner, he would take her to work on snow days while Danny stayed at a friend's. He came to all of her soccer games and she always ran faster when she saw him on the sideline, his big, dimpled, mischievous grin like they were sharing a secret.

Their father had only ever hit Sarah once. She had gotten in trouble for fighting at school, and he had had to leave work to pick her up and take her

home. Grounded for a week and receiving an unwanted lecture on the art of walking away, she was feeling spiteful. "You're such a *jerk*," she said as they pulled into the driveway. "No wonder Elise left you." It was the first time anyone had mentioned Elise since the divorce, and her foster father's face went pale and sad. He drank that night, and when Sarah's hand slipped, pouring his whiskey all over his arm instead of the glass, he screamed and slapped her, sending her reeling across the room and leaving the throbbing ghost of his hand tattooed on her cheek. Danny had run to her, and their father stood and walked out, and they never talked about it again.

After the trial she didn't visit him. He didn't write. The man who had raised her became a stranger, yet she still couldn't bring herself to hate him. For the slap. For screwing up the only family she ever had. No, there was only one person she hated, and it just happened to be the only one she could never run away from.

Alone in the bedroom after dinner, Sarah wondered if he knew. Had anyone called her foster father in his cell, whispered the words and a sympathetic apology? The weight of her hand on Veronica's shoulder as she cried had reminded her of his comforting embrace, all those times when she was young and scraped her knee on the sidewalk or one of the neighbors had called her names. Veronica's tears reminded her that she wanted to cry to someone. She didn't know what she was hoping for, if she called him now. Was it consolation she sought, or did she want to hurt him with the news, make him feel the sting of regret? She dialed the number for the prison, waited while a woman with a raspy voice screened the call and connected her to the prisoners' phone lines.

"Hello?"

"Hi. It's Sarah." For a moment there was silence on the other line.

"Sarah?"

"Yeah."

"I can't believe...It's been...what, seven years?"

"Eight years."

"Eight years. Wow." His voice was just as she remembered it, low and a little raspy, like popcorn kernels against the inside of a paper bag. His words rushed out. "I'm going to fix this, Sarah. I have a parole hearing coming up, and after we can get coffee, play some chess maybe. I want to make it up to you, I've been gone for too long. I wish we could have talked sooner, did you

ever get my message? I tried to call you a few times.”

He was lying. She had waited for months for his call, hoping he would reach out to her, tell her it had all been a big misunderstanding and they dropped the charges and it was time to come home, or at least to apologize or even, as she feared, to thank her for taking his side – but of all the unfamiliar voices that had taken up residence in her answering machine, his was never one. And now he dared to lie. Anger burned up inside of her, twisting her heart. It was a fire she hadn’t felt in years, not properly, one that had been tampered down by the unflinching cold of letting people down. She wanted to slam the phone down, to run as far away as she could from that voice that was still emanating from the earpiece. Instead, she found words.

“I will be there.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll be at your hearing, Dad.” The word felt foreign in her mouth, bitter for the first time, and she knew it would be the last time she would say it. After hearing Addie’s sweet voice use it, after it became Danny’s new name, her foster father no longer deserved it. She would not tell him of Danny’s death, she decided. He didn’t deserve to know, and he didn’t deserve to care. “I will be there and this time I’m going to talk. And I don’t care if it is too late to make a difference. I don’t give a damn what happens to you now. This is for me. And for Danny.”

Sarah hung up the phone, feeling the ‘end’ button compress under the pressure of her finger, hearing the line click dead. Behind her the pale glow of sunlight pushed its way through the curtains and she turned her head towards it, away from the empty phone and the echoes of her foster father’s voice. It was over.

On the day of the funeral it poured. Strangers in black dresses and black suits dirtied their shiny black shoes trying to jump over the whirling eddies in the parking lot. The marble floor of the church squeaked under wet feet.

Sarah hadn’t been in a church since she was young, when Elise had made them go every once in a while. This one was smaller than she remembered them being, or maybe her childhood memories of shorter legs and smaller hands were clouding her perception. There were twenty people there already, milling about and speaking to Veronica, kissing her cheek and shaking her hand and turning down the corners of their mouths in sympathy, or maybe pity. Aside from Veronica and Nate, who said hello while Ben looked pointedly out the window at the rain, nobody talked to Sarah. They were all strangers from Danny’s world, which she had watched through Christmas

card windows.

Addie was sitting cross-legged in front of the closed casket, beautiful and sweet in her dark green dress and matching tights. With a rush of desire to find that innocence again, Sarah went and sat down next to her, looking up at the big mahogany box that held the third head of red hair in their little triangle. The murmuring people in the entryway didn't seem to notice them – they were all alone with Danny. Sarah tried to pray but she didn't know how, or even if she believed in prayer. So instead she tried to find the words that she should have said when Danny picked up the phone so many years ago, the words that she could have said thousands of times if only she hadn't been so afraid, or if she could have ever figured out what it was she was afraid of. The words flowed easily, filing out from the space in her mind where they had been waiting all of that time, and with each syllable her body relaxed and her heart beat slowed.

In the quiet of her mind she told Danny how confused she had been that day in the courthouse, with her father on one side, the man who taught her how to play chess and baseball and the first person who had ever *wanted* to be their father, and her brother straight ahead, with whom she shared blood and had shared a womb, the most connected she had ever been or ever could be to somebody. She told him how she wished it had been her instead of him, their foster father's victim, so that she would never have doubted him or had to see the deep, inescapable anguish that plagued his life. She told him how ashamed she felt to have had those thoughts at all. And then she said all of those things again, this time to herself, to her shamed and damaged heart and she could almost feel the muscle mending, rediscovering the places where its flesh was supposed to connect.

A little voice was saying *it's okay*, and she knew it was Danny, but when she opened her eyes she realized they were wet and she was shaking and Addie was holding her hand and her lips were moving. "It's okay," Addie said, her bright eyes glimmering like her father's.

SIDNEY ARRINGTON



Major: Afroamerican and African Studies, and Political Science

Minor: Community Action and Social Change

Reading: Short Poem

My name is Sidney Arrington. I am from Detroit Michigan and a Sophomore at the University of Michigan. I'm majoring in Afroamerican Studies & Political Science with a minor in CASC. In my spare time I love to watch Netflix, stare out the window, observe the moon, and write poems.

Craftsman Finds Slave Hair in 200 Year Old Chair

Freeman
a surname
meaning free man or
man born free
usually acquired when
a slave was released
and
"a free man"

Freeman
a
craftsman asked
to perform his craft
received a
chair in Georgia
to restore
it's 2016

White, plush,
four buttoned chair
filled with layers of
slave picked cotton and
don't forget
piles of
their hair

Thick, lushy, bushy,
brown, black, soft

hair
removed in 1619
When did it end?

Hands bloody and blistered
from cotton
slaves beaten
heads shorn and forgotten

One paragraph
or vague section in
HIStory books

Emancipation Proclamation: 1863
Ended: 1865
Is it really over?

How many slaves?
How long did it take?
Was my ancestor screaming?
Was their heads peacefully shaved?
Or did she scream and was held
by the neck?
Is it okay to keep?
Did Mary, Joe, and Billy enjoy their seat?

Georgian family wants it
kept intact

Dear America

Dear America,

Here's a bedtime story
it'll make the 10 o'clock news but not the history books
teachers won't even mention it or take a second look
Once upon a time, not long ago
the moonlight lit the streets
not in Detroit but in Ohio,
New Jersey, Alabama, all the way in
Milwaukee.
ever since a black boy was born
on his forehead read
REWARD: FOUND DEAD OR ALIVE
and he better not drive better yet walk the streets alone at night.
America the land of the free, *laughs*

Dontre Hamilton, John Crawford,
Micheal Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin,
Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Akai Gurley
Tamir Rice, Ruamain Brison, Jerame Reid
Tony Robinson, Phillip White, Eric Harris
Walter Scott, Freddie Gray

Shall I go on?
Better yet America shall I not have children?
my black boy will stay alive
I'll be damned if another cop put a bullet in between a black boy's eyes
it's the jobs of cops to protect and serve
not make my son America's Most Wanted
and paint the sidewalks with his blood -- --

Sincerely,
Every mother scared to let her child walk out the front door

Waning Crescent

And sometimes the moon smiles and does not hide in darkness
changes while lying in the sky -
full moon when she's at her best, half when she's
been put to the test,
shinning for society
in love with the stars,
appealing enough for people
to land on her
follows you in the car at night
but you're blind to her existence in the day
when will being the moon be enough?

That Ice Cream Truck Song From Your Childhood Is Actually Racist

The big, white van
creeps down the street

child screams: It's the ice cream truck!
catchy song continues to play
children yell: Hold

begging their parents
for dollars to
purchase
vanilla
strawberry
even chocolate

they always know
when he's near
in 1916
Harry C. Browne
made a catchy song
but now it's clear

the jingle you
couldn't get out
of your head
said: Nigger's love watermelons
Ha, ha, ha

the melody
was created in the 19th century
Entitled: Turkey in the straw

even before the 19th century
they got the melody from
some British guy
entitled: The Old Rose Tree

laughs, America!
we can't even
enjoy ice-cream

ALEXIS AULEPP



Freshman

Major: English and Communication Studies

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Poetry

Alexis Aulepp is a freshman in the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program who currently plans to double major in English and Communication Studies. Her favorite things to do include writing poetry, taking photographs, asking too many questions, walking around in her socks, and stopping to pet cute dogs on the street. Her friends often tell her that her poems make them feel anxious and depressed, but she hopes you'll find them enjoyable nonetheless. This will be the sixth time one of her creative writing pieces has been published, and she hopes it won't be the last!

Consent

Yes, her skirt was on the shorter side
but still a decent length
and she'd had a couple drinks that night
so she wasn't at full strength
but she insisted that it was okay
because how could she have known
that you would take her by the hand
and lead her upstairs all alone?
And when you locked that heavy door
and did your belt unwind
she asked you what was going on

but to answer you declined.
Then you shoved her on the bed
without a word of her consent
and she thought to tell you "stop,"
but you would simply not relent.
Soon her skirt was on the floor
and then her bra and panties, too
and she tried to make you stop
but there was nothing she could do.
So she stumbled home at midnight
crying, beaten, violated
all because some jerk like you
thought that consent was "overrated"

Well, it's not.

Letting Go

I search for you
in crowds.

I see your face
in fleeting glimpses
and follow the movement
for a brief second
until I realize
it was not you that I spied
just now
walking past.

Sometimes
when I'm tired
I lean against
a memory of you.

In crowded subway cars
I turn my head
eagerly
at the sound of your voice.

On summer nights
when the walls are whispering

I think I hear your footsteps
coming to my door.

I reach for you
in the darkness
but the wind
always
carries you
away.

Naked

You stood naked before me
not in body, but in soul
clothed in nothing but your vulnerability
shivering under the slight caress of my gaze

I took my time
appreciating the sight of your exposed heart
exploring every inch of your bared mind
learning all the fragilities of your unprotected soul

I traced the curves of your desires
as one would trace a figure
slowly and with great care
memorizing every detail

I cupped your weaknesses in my hands
and pulled your strengths against me
drawing your insecurities closer
then closer still

We were together
in that small, infinite space
your dreams and mine colliding
your hopes and fears my gateway to another realm

You looked at me
with naked eyes
and I, too, began to undress

ERIN AYALP



Senior

Major: Communication Studies

Reading: Poetry

Erin is a senior majoring in Communications Studies. She grew up playing and making music, but while at Michigan, she pursued other artistic areas such as film, acting, photography, and creative writing through her classes and activities. She plans on going into advertising with the hope to incorporate her passion for creative expression into her career. If you let her pet your dog or make her bacon, she will love you forever.

This Land Is Your Land erasure poem

(erasure poems based on DAPL events - original lyrics by Woody Guthrie)

Version 1:

This land is your land, this land is my land
From the California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters
This land was made for you and me
As I went walk ing that ribbon of highway
I saw above me that endless skyway
Saw below me the golden valley
This land was made for you and me
I roamed and rambled
and followed my footsteps
to the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts
all around me a voice was sounding
This land was made for you and me

When the sun come shining,
 then **I** was strolling
 In wheat fields waving and dust clouds rolling
 The voice was **chant**ing as the fog was lifting
 This land was made **for** you and me
 This land is your land,
 this land is **my** land
 From the California to the New York Island
 From the Redwood Forest,
 to the Gulf stream **waters**
 This land was made for you and me
 When the sun come **shining**, then I was strolling
 In wheat fields **waving and** dust clouds **rolling**
 The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting
 This land was made **for** you and me

Version 2:

This land is your land, this land is my land
 From the California to the New York Island
 From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters
 This land was made for you and me
 As I went walking that ribbon of highway
 I saw above me that endless skyway
 Saw below me the golden valley
 This land was made for you and me
I roamed and
 ram**bled** and followed my footsteps
 To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts
 All around me a voice was sounding
 This land was made for you and me
when the sun come shining,
 then **I** was strolling
 In wheat fields waving and dust clouds rolling
 The voice was **chanting** as the fog was lifting
 This land was made **for** you and me
 This land is your land,
 this land is **my** land
 From the California to the New York Island
 From the Redwood Forest,
 to the Gulf stream **waters**
 This land was made for you and me

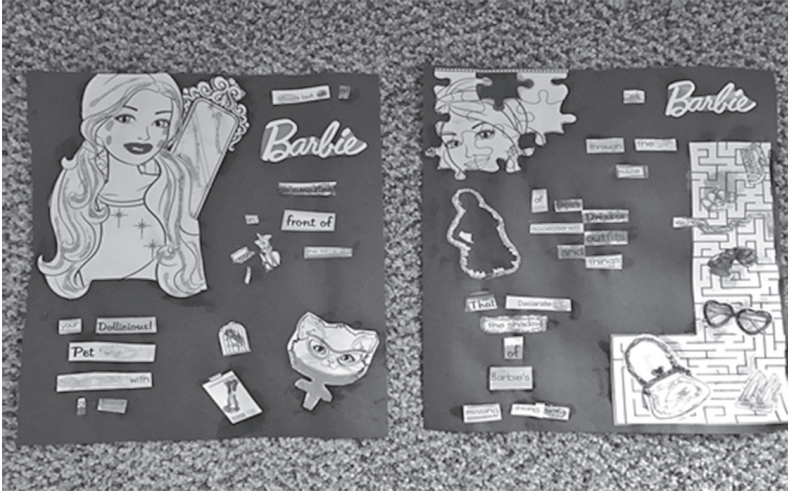
Café Shapiro 2017 Anthology

When the sun come **shining**, then I was strolling
In wheat fields **waving and** dust clouds **rolling**
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting
This land was made **for you and me**

Version 3:

This land is your land, this land is my land
From the California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters
This land was made
for you and me
As I went **walk**ing that ribbon of highway
I saw **above** me that endless skyway
Saw below me the golden valley
This land was made for you and me
I roamed and rambled
and followed **my footsteps**
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts
All **around** me a voice was sounding
This land was made for you and me
When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
In wheat fields **waving and** dust clouds **rolling**
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting
This land was made for you and me
This land is **your** land, this land is my land
From the California
to the **New York Island**
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters
This land was made for you and me
When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
In wheat fields **waving and** dust clouds **rolling**
The voice was **chanting** as the fog was lifting
this land was made for you and me

Barbie coloring book erasure poem



Look at
Barbie
So amazing!
In front of
The mirror.

Your Dollicious!
Pet
With
A collar

Help Barbie

Through the
Maze
Of Fancy
Dresses
Accessories
Outfits
And
Things

That decorate
The shadow
Of
Barbie's
Missing dreams

ADELA BAKER



Freshman
Major: English
Reading: Poetry

Originally from Ann Arbor, I am a current freshman majoring in English. In my free time I like to read, swim, play with kids, and watch *Project Runway*. Talents include wiggling my ears and saying the Pledge of Allegiance backwards.

Tuesday Morning

I don't like coffee but if I had a grizzly
beard, maybe I would.
Just a little grizzle, just a little

drizzle in Seattle the lattes
slide over the counter to the beat
of bodies dress shirts scooting
ducking under awnings lofting drinks and I
gesture silently to the barista for the cream because
the marketing team's on the phone
our startup's heating up and management

wants a projection.
I've never traveled to Seattle but if I liked
coffee, maybe I would.

Protest

child of pearl
 you are free of the patriarch.
 I have released you of the arcane names
 of the forefathers. I have
 absolved you of the fountain
 of youth and gifted you the fruit.

child of pearl,
 you are screaming against the glass.
 I have made you a bull,
 according to your kind. I have handed you
 the china and you are salivating
 against the reigns but

child of pearl,
 you are but a child
 and I will grind you into the
 dust.

Boston

There, they listen for the afternoon,
 for the crack of collapse.

And after the sunshine snaps
 clean on the frost,
 they listen for their own voices booming
 a cannon, for the muted drop of mittens into deep
 pockets, for their heels like
 bullets on the cobblestone,
 for the rattle of cranberries rolling in
 wicker baskets.

Pop takes off his thick black glasses
 for grace.

Habits

later,
i learned to thirst.
and after that, to
bite the lip of what i had, to press
the chest, to jerk the
waist

later,
i learned to claw,
to feed the beast with my own
tongue,
to close my throat and rip my
thighs apart

but that was later,
-- and did i know? -- when i
first grazed that fingernail like a
shard of glass
that it would slice my hand

Never Fully Dressed

I shaved my legs with
toothpaste.
I scrubbed my hair with body soap I washed
my face with oil
and I woke up but it wasn't a dream and I thought I woke up but it didn't
stop.

I smelled clean,
but everybody knew.

RACHEL BEGLIN



Junior

Major: Environment

Minor: Law, Justice, and Social Change

Reading: Poetry

Rachel is a junior studying PitE with a minor in Law, Justice, and Social Change. She hails from the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona. She's a proud feminist, and centers a great deal of her work and thoughts on gender. The best class she's taken at the University of Michigan was either ornithology or Ancient Greek/Modern Gay Sexuality. She has a tattoo of the solar system and considers activism and social justice her life's calling. She also has a pet fish named Jet Fuel.

holden caulfield at a bird skinning

How the hell do they do that?
 They've got this bird, dead,
 all limped
 over and sad as hell, really.
 I'm watching them flip
 its goddamn
 little body around,
 inside out.
 I promise you skin's
 not supposed to do that,
 like wrapping paper torn off a gift,
 and I got pretty damn near

queasy when they popped
its skull back in.

They use scissors, you know,
goddamn craft scissors like my sister
uses to make little cards and things,
scissors to split the spine in two.
“That’s what gets to people most
the first time,” he says,
phony as hell.

“The bones snapping.”

It’s a lousy bird anyway,
a chickadee,
I mean it’s nice and all
but I mean to say
there’s about a million of them
in my goddamn backyard,
unobtrusive little things,
bouncing in black hats,
black-capped.

The damn thing won’t even
go on display –
just formaldehyde away in a drawer forever.
Who’s gonna see him after we’re done?
It makes me sad as hell.
It really does.
“Here’s the wings”
he unfolds them like accordions
pinned up like Jesus Christ
“Here’s the heart”
the goddamn heart
between silver
tweezers
and I gotta know if my heart’s
that small.
Hell, the thing’s getting all stuffed up
and pretty like girls
at the movies.
I really hate that.
Why’s the bird gotta look so
goddamn pretty?

territory

for the Water Protectors at Standing Rock

He probes,
invasive, unwanted
into her skin, her underbelly,
places she has not given him permission
to excavate.

Banging, screwing, penetrating:
why is it that we talk about fucking women
the way we talk about exploiting
Earth?

trigger warning: you're 70% water
trigger warning: Christopher Columbus committed genocide
trigger warning: stop conflating brown people with brown Earth
trigger warning: I changed my mind. Let me be both dirt and woman.

Extraction is the definition of patriarchy
taking
t a k i n g
t a k i n g
t a k i n g
get your teeth out of my pomegranate skin,
pull your drills out of her.
Our flesh is not for taking.

I think men don't want to learn what consent means.
As long as the word stays slippery
they can let it slide,
seep, blackened, into the rivers
they love to hate.
Don't they know water and oil
can't mix
no matter how much force or money is thrown at them.
I don't want any more rivers to run black.

Where are the Water Protectors?
I'll show you – they're out in the cold, on a flood plain, along a river
with stories to tell,
over the bones of their grandmothers
asking Earth permission to camp along her spine. Kissing her gently
with every bare footstep,
the firefly steps of men who know everyone

is borne in wombs. Men who only eat pomegranates

when they're ripe. Men who teach their sons
that water is life,
even the river between her thighs
and the mascara rivers that stream from her eyes
and the rivers that carry
blood to her pomegranate heart. Teach boys
to stop blackening every river they swim in.
They have so much dirt
under their fingernails.

factoid

The sun is forty-two human years old and six dog years old, if we're talking averages. It sounds pretty hopeful when you put it in dog years, because when you tell your friend your dog is six they think *okay cool I don't have to console you about your dead dog for a while* and the dog still sometimes plays with his tennis ball and wags his tail like a goddamned speedboat rudder whenever you get home. But when you start approaching your forty-second birthday you're like *holy shit am I gonna get cancer alzheimer's dementia type II diabetes parkinson's lou gehrig's??* And it's mostly fine, I mean, you're only halfway, right? But the better half might be over and someday you'll be fifty and have a twelve-year-old dog that doesn't like to walk anymore and has fat tumors at the elbows. Look, I know the sun's not *that* old but she's getting up there and scientists are giving her 4.5 billion years to live and I know that's a long time but jeez – look how fast the first 4.5 billion years went! Blink of an eye, really. At least the sun'll outlive my dog; I wouldn't want him to see that, y'know?

dick pics in the sistine chapel

I.
adam and eve
penis throbbing
moses
ten-second snapchat
god's hand

touching himself
 it took michelangelo four years to paint that goddamned ceiling
just ten seconds
 are all forms of art created equal?
well they were both created in god's image. . .
 who even is isaiah?
want touch want thirst want
 25,000 tourists visit the sistine chapel every day
is this sacrilegious?
 you can see where michelangelo introduced himself into the painting—
this is definitely sacrilegious
 y'know these guys would have sent dick pics
is art less worthy if it lasts ten seconds and disappears?
 ha ha he only lasted ten seconds
we love things that don't last forever
 ancient rome, easter island, printing presses, orgasms
stop it this is literally the pope's house
 a dick pic has to be at least equally artistic as the sistine chapel
"michelangelo actually creates the illusion of shadows..."
 i mean you have to get the lighting just right to capture the size
art should make you feel something
 oh i feel something
i've always been an art snob
 picky about my pieces
it takes something more than fame to make my heart stutter
 tell me mona lisa ever did anything for you
your moaning, on the other hand
 michelangelo's fine. don't get me wrong, it looks like he worked really
hard
 it's just that i really only started believing in god
when i saw how immaculate the human body could be
 there's something divine in the timelessness of both
italian renaissance and fleeting phalluses
 you were timeless, baby
you could tell me in ten seconds
 what michelangelo needed four years to convey

 i never understood how people enjoyed
stargazing
 constellations always there, unchanging
see, i like it when things get snatched out of my
 hand of adam reaching out for—
—eplay
 maybe the dick pic wouldn't be so hot if i didn't get the
open-this-when-you're-alone text in the freaking sistine chapel
 i like the nerve—

and my nerves crave something bolder than paint strokes
—of some people. i want to be 5,000 miles from here
probably how michelangelo felt when he got locked in this hall for four years
maybe i'm finally feeling exactly what he wanted me to feel after all
intensity, determination, the pulse of endless yearning
to be perfectly frank i'd rather live for a moment than a millennium
ten seconds
i stayed in the sistine chapel for forty-nine minutes
i could have orgasmed at least three times

michelangelo might've been afraid of wasting time
so he made something that would last
a painting that wastes everyone else's time
i prefer art that gets to the point
minimalist
modern art
it doesn't get more modern than this
museum sign reads: freshly dried semen on woman's chest
museum sign reads: deep-throating in fraternity basement
museum sign reads: this exhibit will only last ten seconds.
thank you for your patience.
museum sign reads: this ceiling was completed in 1512
museum sign reads: no photos please
museum sign reads: please keep quiet
and not in a kinky way

i got a dick pic in the sistine chapel
i got a dick pic in the sistine chapel
and i liked it
i liked it more than the sistine chapel
giggling beside the ghost of michelangelo
what a rush of
paint, the colors of the sistine chapel swirling
god created light
and then oceans and then trees and then
and then people who could appreciate art
i'm pretty sure god said let there be
umph.

II.
nude beaches, sun-leeched
Europeans free
to be phallic.
four hundred:
the number of penises
glazed into the armored walls

of the Sistine Chapel,
 incredible like
 getting a tough stain out
 is incredible
 or recovering all your lost files
 is incredible
 but it's incredulous how
 people worship Michelangelo's painting
 more than God's design
 which is what the ceiling was about
 in the first place

If "modern art" can be a pile of garbage
 or the contents of a woman's purse—

If there's an aesthetic to the way you
 make love with your toes curled
 or a performance piece on the angle
 of your navel
 as it crashes into me—

then surely a "you up?" text message at 2:14 am
 is just as intricate as the fourteen
 lines of a Shakespearean sonnet
 surely your ten-second snapchat
 should be studied as thoroughly as the ten commandments
 surely the wrist technique for paint strokes
 can't be all that
 much more admirable
 than the strokes that make us
 shudder

III.
 there are more dicks on the ceiling
 of the pope's house
 than are saved in my phone
 under your self-titled album
 (and I counted 22)

one lift, two airplanes, one hitchhike
 a bus station.
 that's what it took to be in the holiest chapel
 in the world
 but all I can think is
holy shit that's a lot of penises

did I come all this way to learn
that humanity has been worshipping
the blessed cock since
1512?

I'm not sure what's more impressive:
the four years Michelangelo spent gazing
up at a constellation
of soft penises he whipped out
of his own imagination,
or the extensively thorough archive
I keep
of pictures of your dick

Catholics,
if the walls of the Sistine Chapel could talk,
imagine what they'd have to say,
the things they've seen.
a four-hundred-year-old
chapel full of four hundred penises:
lots of room for naughtiness,
tasteless jokes, untimely erections,
a quickie in a too-small
Italian bathroom stall.
it's the triple-word-score
of sin,
which is pretty *damn hot*
and yes I'm talking about eternal damnation,
I'm looking at Michelangelo's horned Satan
as we speak.

I'd like to be the record-keeper
of all things deviant.
There's something worth commemorating
about sending *what are you wearing right now*
from beneath the Sistine Chapel
What can I say?
I like to immerse myself in my work.

IV.
the first time someone snapchatted me
a big ol' penis
you can bet your ass I averted my eyes
'cause Mom could be looking over my shoulder
for God's sake

the second time someone snapchatted me
 a cock
 I did the same motherfucking thing
 I didn't ask for your dick
 to show up on my phone
 the first time
 and I certainly didn't ask for it
 the second time

the third time someone snapchatted me
 their hard-ass dick
 it was my boyfriend
 I thought I was in love, y'know

my family was on vacation
 my sneakers were squeaking
 in the holiest hall
 any Good Catholic would recognize
 (hint: it's the Sistine Chapel)

psttt
 c'mere
 lean in
 I don't know how to reconcile
 the fact that I liked it.
 I don't know why I liked
 the look of his flesh
 against Michelangelo's portraits
 but I loved it
 I wanted to pin him up against the million-dollar walls
 I wanted to be an artist
 create something
 hand-made

there's a lot of stimulation
 to be had
 when you're looking at something so
human;
 the only thing more human
 than art
 is more human.
 more
 more
 more

I don't actually believe in God

for a number of reasons.

1. What kind of God would allow snapchat to only last ten seconds?
2. What kind of God would make him 5,000 miles away from me?
3. What kind of God would turn me on in the middle of the Sistine Chapel while my parents stood nearby, listening to audio museum tours about renaissance art?
4. What kind of God would make Michelangelo spend four years staring at a ceiling of dicks and then invent the camera?

ALISON CAMPBELL



Sophomore

Major: English and Art & Design

Reading: Poetry

Alison Campbell is a sophomore at the University of Michigan studying English and Art & Design. This is Alison's first time being published, and she is simultaneously anxious and exhilarated though -quite conveniently- mostly the latter. Writing has always been an impulse for Alison, who has been jotting down poems on napkins and the like since grade school. For Alison, art and writing are her favorite methods of communicating and comprehending the subjectivity of the human experience.

American Eulogy

This is not a birthday party,
 this is a funeral.
 though maybe it is a celebration
 of the persistence of
 intolerance,
 but I forgot to bring a card.
 Card.
 Green card lottery.
 I'm building a wall around my soul,
 and the politicians are going to pay for it.
 The politicians are going to pay for this.

When I was younger
my mother did not tell me I was beautiful
because she did not want me to stop reading.
But who deemed beauty and intelligence
to be mutually exclusive?
And no, I am not 'smart'.
I am flesh and bones and revolution.
And no, I am not 'pretty'.
I am a thunderstorm with skin.

Skin. Skin. Skin. White skin. White supremacy.
White power. Privilege. White Privilege.
Check your privilege if the only green card you have
is your daddy's MasterCard.
And take a shot every time you read
another 'God has a plan' status on Facebook.
Shot. Another unarmed black man shot by law enforcement
enforcing white skin white supremacy.
What kind of benevolent God's plan.
God's Klan.
And God knows priests only show love
to white boys in the dark.

Dark. Dark night. Women.
Men. Whiskey and shadows
and strange older men who want to call you baby.
Meet men who treat you like meat. Raw and bloody.
Meet raw and bloody.
Me. Raw and bloody.
Bloody. Body.
A white man told me that my body was not my own,
And cut me in half.
Cut meat in half.

Women.
Women walking alone.
House key claws peeking out between fingers of a clenched fist.
Footsteps. Bass drum heartbeat.
Beat, beaten, battered, bruised
because women do not warrant empathy unless they are someone's
mothers,
sisters,
daughters.
Someone's.
Apostrophe-s-possessive. Possession. Property.
Women owned by men.

Both slaves to our biology,
and its corresponding shades
of blue or pink.
Black or white.

But my uterus is not a warzone.
And melatonin is not an act of war.
A black woman weeps.
Her children beg for salvation,
but she is not Mary.
Everyone knows that Mary was white
-washed.
White. White. Right. Right?
Wrong.

White supremacist white hot anger towards
that which they do not understand.
Black the void of a nation.
Black hole hopelessness. Black hole holy.
Holy. Holy. Holy.
Black is holy.

If the dinner table is no place for my politics,
biology is no place for yours.

Origin Story

for George Ella Lyon

I am from fresh water
and my mother's broken bones.
From golden pastures
(Paradisiac harvests
of archaic ways,
sepia like nostalgia.)

I am from my grandmother's lilacs,
from purple.
And no, not lavender like a newborn,
I am from violet like a bruise.
Watercolor galaxy of
heliotrope and onyx,
staining my porcelain limbs,
pigments coalescing into black.

I am from an internal void-
resulting dopamine deficiency
and a therapist's Lolita daydreams
of kaleidoscoping Zoloft blue
and spherical Lexapro white,
not much unlike the oblong white of Vicodin,
both numbing.

I am from the small town Sunday morning
repertoire of 'hallowed be Thy name's.
My twisted branch bones reverberating
'hollow be thy name's.

I am from doormat women
with curved frames,
our spines bending us
into submission.
From rubber band compliance.

I am from steel bolt-bound vertebrae.
From the physical reminder
that
I
was not
born
to be
spineless.

Semantic Satiation

*Alternately Titled: Postcard to Phobos from an Acid Trip at the Heartbreak
Hotel with Love*

If you say something enough times it loses its meaning
I love you
The concrete's phonetic metamorphosis into a hollow moon, rusting
I love you
The vanishing point of an eternal leather jacket highway laced with electric
yellow thread, always looming
I love you
Meaning drowned in pink satin sheets and stale gas station tequila
I love you
The stranger in the mirror

I love you

Her youth obscured by red lipstick and a nicotine miasma

I love you

She looks just like you

I love you

Save for her flickering neon vacancy

I love you

The evaporation of time spent convincing yourself that the reflection is not yours. Cannot possibly be yours

I love you

You ask her how she got so empty

I love you.

Her hollowness echoes

I love you.

Your words echo

I love you

Everything that's empty does

Inside Out

I spent another afternoon
thinking about synonyms
for loss.

The dry heaving of
bereavement,
wind echoing cataclysm
through the metallic skeleton
of an abandoned
amusement park.
Creaking deprivation
and rusting ruin.

Loss.

The dull ache of you,
a phantom limb.
The January I smoked
menthol cigarettes
and learned that
home is a feeling
not a place.

Home.

Home is our extension cord fingers tangled
on the center council
of your 2003 Honda civic
silver like lust.

The skeletal skyline
of a chemical wasteland,
golden smog kisses
that tasted of gin and the threat of subsequent longing. Your gravity creasing
the fabric of space-time like sheets of pink satin, wrinkled.

I spent another evening in his arms thinking about synonyms for regret,
knowing
the perfect ending will only feed the compulsion.

DAPHNE CANTUBA



Sophomore

Major: Biochemistry

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

I was born in Manila, Philippines and moved to Saudi Arabia when I was three then West Bloomfield, Michigan when I was five. I just recently won a Hopwood Underclassmen Fiction Award fall term. In my free time I like to draw, binge Netflix, and rub my cat's tummy.

Dream Girl

My eyes stung from the bright computer screen that I've been staring at for three hours. I didn't know why I had this strange determination to find out what that song was.

I didn't know the words, nor the title, nor the singer, I just knew how it went. I spent three hours typing out what the lyrics could be. Three hours of clicking on random YouTube videos and Google play music and scrolling through Pandora and Spotify. No luck.

I heard the front door make a piercing screech sound and then a thud. I got up and poked my head outside my bedroom. I looked down the hallway and saw Mikey and Jen arguing again. Their arms were waving around all over the place. Jen's looked especially noodly. Mikey's mouth had a constant momentum of open and close, open and close. Jen's black hair was about to come alive under her untidy bun. She was so tiny compared to Mikey. In her scrubs she looked like a child playing pretend nurse throwing a tantrum.

Mikey looked like that big kid on the playground who smelled fear and ate the kindergarteners.

I swung my head back into my room and closed my door, trying not to make a thud. I didn't want to be dragged into anything. I sat back down onto my bed, criss-crossed, and plopped my laptop on my lap. I placed my earphones in and tried really hard to ignore them. They did this constantly. I didn't even know why they were still together. I continued trying different arrangement of words. I really couldn't figure out the song.

Jen and Mikey got louder. I couldn't concentrate anymore, so I gave up. I heard what seemed like sobbing. I realized it was Jen. I decided not to leave my room until Jen left. Eventually, I was finally free to come out.

Mikey was sitting on the couch, his head in his hands. Our living room was plain.

It had a grey couch, a wooden coffee table, and a tiny flat screen TV on top of a big clear bin. Inside the bin were stacks of Xbox games. On the left side of the TV was the Xbox. I didn't know what to do exactly so I decided that I would walk over to the kitchen, grab milk, then act like I just saw Mikey there. I didn't want to deal with their shit.

I walked over to the kitchen pretending not to notice anything around me. Piles of dirty dishes filled the sink. Empty pizza boxes stacked up on the counter and empty beer cans were scattered all over. I opened the fridge. It was like Antarctica in there. No sign of life forms. I closed it and decided to just get water from the sink.

I gulped down the water and took a deep breath. Here I go, I thought. Hero mode.

"Hey, Mikey," I said.

"Oh, hey Nick," he said.

"You okay, man?"

"Yeah. Sorry we always do this to you."

"It's fine. It is what it is."

He got silent. I felt like I needed to say something.

"You wanna talk about it, man?" I said.

"Maybe later. Wanna play some zombies right now?"

I accepted his offer. I didn't push anymore. I was so relieved he didn't want to talk about it. I hated talking about shit like that.

There was always something stress relieving about playing COD. I didn't know how to explain it. It's like I would get lost. The zombies had a rhythm to them. The way they sung waahhhh and limped all over. Spaghetti or ravioli or whatever shit that was dripping out of their mouths. I could ignore the world and just shoot. So I understood why Mikey just wanted to play COD.

After a few rounds, Mikey excused himself to do homework. He was a broad shouldered man, only a few inches shorter than me. I was pretty lengthy. Like a stick almost. There's only a few people I know that was taller than me.

Mikey had dark brown hair, always kept really short. He was never one to grow his hair past an inch. He wasn't fit, wasn't skinny, and wasn't fat. He had a little beer belly going on.

I went back to my room to do homework and figure out what that song was. I never noticed how many posters I had on my wall. I guessed they accumulated over the years. Artists like Red Hot Chili Peppers, Radiohead, and the Goo Goo Dolls hung on the wall. I stayed up late trying to figure out the song. It was a Friday night anyways.

The next day I woke up at around noon. Mikey was still sleeping. I went to his door and knocked. I was starting to actually get worried.

"Yo, Mikey, you okay, man?" I said.

No answer.

At that moment, I didn't care about his privacy. I didn't want my best friend decomposing in there. I barged in and found him curled up in his bed. He looked like a burrito from Chipotle, very broad.

"Yo, Mikey," I said. "You can't keep doing this. I know it's hard but if it's not working out with Jen anymore, you two should just break up. I mean, look at you, man. You're a fucking wreck."

He turned around slowly. His brown hair stuck up like soft serve ice cream.

"I know," he said. His voice was low and tragic. "But six years, man. You can't just throw away six years."

He made a good point. I didn't know what else to say nor did I want to continue the conversation. All I wanted was for him to get his ass up.

"Look, I don't know. I'm not an expert. Just get up."

He got up and walked past me. He went straight out the door and I heard another door shut. I assumed he went into the bathroom.

I wondered if Mikey was still planning on proposing to Jen later in the year. What happened to them?

Senior year of high school they were inseparable. They were disgusting; always holding hands and cuddling whenever they could. During lunchtime Jen would even sometimes sit on his lap. Junior year of undergrad they moved in with each other. They lived together until we graduated and Mikey and I decided to do grad school, and Jen was done. Mikey and I became roommates and Jen went home to her parents. The plan was she would wait until Mikey was done so they could get married. Next thing we knew, Jen got a job at the hospital near campus and moved into an apartment with some fine ass chick named Nina. She said she just couldn't stay away from Mikey.

He came out of the bathroom, more awake now. I decided that getting him to open up was the only way I could get him to stop being such a melodramatic pussy.

"Mikey, we knew each other for twelve years, you can tell me anything," I said.

"It's just been stressful ever since Jen started going back to therapy," he said. "She's been remembering some shit that happened years ago, apparently. Fuckin repressed memories, they call it."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I love her and all. I just don't know how to deal with all that." I didn't know what to say, so I stayed silent.

"I think I'm going to go home to my parents tonight," he said. "I need to get out of this shit campus for tonight."

Usually I would've commented and teased him about how he was a grown ass man going home to his parents because of some relationship issues, but he wasn't in the mood. I thought about my dad and how he would've probably said I was a pussy if I had done that. He wasn't one to talk, he wasn't really the best husband out there.

"I'll call Jen and tell her," he said. "Okay."

It's been awhile since I had the apartment to myself. Of course, the loser that I was, I spent that night trying to figure out what that damn song was. I felt so at ease being shirtless and just having my boxers on.

I heard a knock on the door so I put on a shirt and sweatpants. I was irritated about how they interrupted my peace. I looked through the peep hole. There was Jen. She seemed even tinier through the peep hole. She was a hot mess. I opened the door and she came storming in.

"Where's Mikey?" She screamed.

"He went home to calm down," I said. "Did he not tell you?"

"Oh, I know. I just wanted to make sure he wasn't here."

She made her way to the couch and let all her weight fall on it. She started crying. Her dark, straight hair was tangled in some parts. Strands were on her face, one even made its way inside her mouth. She didn't care. She had dark, blobbish circles around her eyes, obviously from her smudged makeup. Black lines crept from her eyes to her chin like war paint. The straps on her gold dress were coming off. She left one of her ridiculously tall high-heeled shoes by the front door and the other in the middle of the living room.

"Sorry, I look like a raccoon."

She giggled at the thought of it. I didn't know what to do. I've known Jen for years. We went to highschool together, all three of us. Then we spent undergrad together, all three of us. And so then Mikey and I was in grad school, with nurse Jen still lingering around.

She started snoring, so I left her to go to my room. I really wanted to figure out what that song was. After a dedicated two hours of listening to the first five seconds of songs and closing ads about porn, I finally found it. I started playing it and it took Jen only a few minutes to come barging into my room, singing along.

"Soy un perdedor! I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me?" Her voice was beautiful, it wasn't strained. She didn't have to try. It just made its way out like liquid.

"I love this song," she said. "Loser. Beck."

She started twirling in circles around my room, her noodle arms waving everywhere. She was so graceful, like a ballerina high on ecstasy. She was slender and fluid. She moved through the room like paper.

"Dance with me, Nick."

She walked towards me and pulled me up. She took my arms and wrapped it around herself. I couldn't resist. I just went with it. I held her close like how I've always dreamed of holding her. Her hair smelled so nice.

"I can feel how hard you are," she said.

She started kissing my neck and I forced my lips onto her. She pushed me onto the bed and we were at that position for a few minutes. Her breath smelled like alcohol. I wanted her for so long.

I wanted her in AP chem, when she sat next to me and we would whisper about Pokemon. I wanted her during junior year of high school, before her and Mikey got close. I wanted her sophomore year of high school, when rumors about her sleeping around with senior boys were spreading. I wanted her that day she told me about her favorite song- "Loser" by Beck. I wanted her, but I always hesitated. She was beautiful and smart and enchanting. She was broken and crazy and lost. And I wanted all of it.

"Stop," I said.

"Do you not want me?" she said. Her muddy green eyes stared at me coldly.

"This is wrong. What about Mikey?"

"I love Mikey."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Because Mikey deserves so much better. Because this is what I'm used to. This is what I am. Before Mikey."

I would've called bull shit and accused her of being a slut in a split second but I knew she was being sincere. She did love Mikey. She really did. I felt pity for her. I felt pity for Mikey.

"Look, Nick, I know you've always been in love with me. I know. But I'm not who you think I am. Let's just do this now."

"I can't. You're drunk."

I handed her my phone with Mikey's contact information on it. She looked at it for a few seconds and grabbed it. She went into the bathroom.

I sat frozen on my bed. I could hear Jen's muffled voice from the bathroom. She was sobbing and giggling at the same time.

I closed my eyes and pictured their wedding day. I would be the best man. Jen would look so beautiful. She would be happy and so will Mikey. Nice guys finish last, they say. I would probably disagree.

Naomi

I swear I saw her. There she was. Standing in line inside the small Espresso Royale. She was wearing mocha colored suede booties that had two inch heels. I always wondered how short she was if she didn't wear those heels around all the time. She gained some weight since high school, maybe around twenty pounds. You'd think that would ruin her Egyptian goddess looks, but it didn't. It made her curvier. Her boobs got bigger and her ass got wider. You're probably thinking at this point how creepy I'm being. But let me explain.

Naomi was the girl everyone hated for being almost perfect but always gawked at. Every girl in high school had a love-hate relationship with her. She enchanted the whole school with her beauty. Guys treated her with utmost respect, which was surprising for high school boys. A girl like that, Parker had once said, deserves courting.

Her black hair was cut to shoulder length, with her giant curls making it look like mom hair. She was wearing a navy blue pea coat that had those poofy skirts at the ends. She was still wearing her signature yoga pants.

"She looks like a mom now," I said to my friends the next day.

"Does she really? I'd thought she would be pregnant by now," Lana said. Lana was your grade A savage bitch.

I told them all how she still wears yoga pants with mocha booties and how those two never matched in the first place. They all made snarky comments, especially Lana.

"I wonder what she has been doing lately. She's been M.I.A.," Regine said. She always had this intriguing look on her face like every moment was science class.

"Who knows. Who cares," I said. I cared.

Especially when I started seeing her more and more at Espresso Royale. I started imagining over and over again what her morning routine might be. I wondered if people still gawked at her as she walked by. I felt enchanted by her, just like I did in high school. She wasn't as pretty as she used to be, actually looked very mature, but I still found myself falling for her. I had this weird attraction to her.

"I wonder what she's up to now," I told Danny. I was lying on the floor like a starfish while staring at the ceiling. "She's been in Espresso Royale almost everyday for a whole three weeks now."

"You've been talking about her a lot. Are you sure I have the right parts for you?" Danny said. "Don't break my heart now."

I gave him a childish smile. Then, Danny told me to get up. I told him I couldn't because starfishes are invertebrates. I can't believe he's been putting up with my crap for two years now. Of course, I've been putting up with his too. He commented on how immature I can be. In response to his comment, I found myself waving my arms like noodles and yelling "I'm a sea cucumber."

The next day, I met up with Lana and Regine.

"Oh, I saw Naomi a few days ago. She had the appointment before me at Dr. Ishmael's," Regine said. "You're right. She totally looks like a mom now."

"What was she doing in therapy?" I said.

"She's probably psycho," Lana said. "Remember what happened senior year?"

Naomi completely went berserk senior year at her boyfriend. Worse, it was in front of everyone. No one even knew what she was yelling but I remember her voice was so raspy and piercing. At that moment, her plastic skin turned to flesh and her eyes turned real. Everyone else saw a she-monster emerge but I saw something else. I saw a porcelain fragile doll turn into a human.

"Uh, I go to therapy, Lana," Regine said.

"Yeah, but you're the good kind of crazy. Naomi was something else."

We all laughed as we made snarky comments. We moved on from Naomi to other people. I found myself drifting back to her though. I wondered if Regine and Lana noticed. I wondered if it was only me, or they had it too—this obsession with her, just like in high school.

"I wonder how psycho she is now?" Lana said. "You should totally find out."

For some odd reason, I took that dare to heart. It was like a mission for me. So I planned it out. The next day, when I saw her at the coffee shop, I would watch where she went and sneakily follow. I wanted answers. Is she actually completely psycho now? Is she pregnant? Maybe she is a mom now. How come she doesn't hang out with anyone anymore? The idea of sneaking around delighted me. I felt very playful, like a child who just wanted to dress

up and explore.

So there she was, ordering her usual medium white mocha. I noticed she had a paper bracelet around her wrist. It looked like it could be from the hospital. That got me even more intrigued. As she walked out of the coffee shop, I got myself ready. She turned the corner and walked past me through the window. I got up and started following her. The whole time I just watched her curls spring up and down.

The city was crowded as usual. The winter air cut my skin into millions of pieces. The sun was shining and felt nice on my cracked skin. There were students with backpacks walking at the speed of sound and men with suitcases fixing their ties. Women with beautifully decorated faces passed through the many neutral faces. Their shoes clicked through the pavement gracefully.

The smell of the winter air reminded me of the parking lot back in high school. All the girls would be barely covered, trying to show as much skin as possible. We would all have lotion in our backpacks to protect our cracked skin. Naomi would always park as close to the front doors as she could. Her skin was flawless. It was almost like even the winter air knew who she was. I, on the other hand, would park at the first spot I saw. The air hated me so there was really no point in protecting my skin.

Naomi stopped at a three-story apartment complex. She dug through her floral designed tote bag, probably looking for her keys. She looked up and at that moment, I didn't know what to do. She smiled at me and I stood there frozen. I didn't even know what facial expression I had, hopefully a smile.

"Claire?" She said. "How are you?"

"I'm good," I said. "How have you been? What have you been up to?"

"Well, school. Are you doing anything else today? Let's catch up."

For someone who fell off the radar for awhile, she seemed too eager to have me over. I accepted her invitation.

Her apartment was beautifully decorated. It had colorful medallion tapestries hung all over the place. Succulents grew from pots at every corner. Tribal rugs piled up all over the floor. Beads of gold, lavender and shades of red separated the kitchen and the small dining area. It looked like it came straight out of an Urban Outfitters catalog. Some of her paintings hung on the walls and pictures of what seemed like her and her boyfriend's families. She was still dating the same guy since high school. I was surprised he didn't break up with her after the fiasco senior year and the fact they came from

opposite sides of the universe.

Three pill bottles were on the dining table. Maybe Lana was right. She probably completely lost it. I kept staring at her paper bracelet until she noticed. She covered it with her other hand and tried to redirect my eyes onto hers. I felt really awkward. I didn't know anymore if I was doing the right actions or not.

"So, how have you been lately?" I said.

"I've actually been struggling a little," she said.

"How so?" There was a pause. I had to say something else. "I mean, you don't have to share if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine. I've been diagnosed with a mental illness."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

I was surprised how open she was, especially since it's been two and a half years since we last saw each other. She smiled at me in a Barbie Doll way. Her face was full of passion like a beauty queen crying on stage after giving her speech. I never noticed how brown her eyes were. I knew they were big, but I didn't know they were that dark. Another thing I started noticing about Naomi was that she wasn't white. She was olive skinned! Now that I think about it, I never knew what ethnicity she was.

"If you don't mind me asking," I said. "What exactly is your race? Sorry, I don't mean to be offensive."

"It's okay," she said. "I get that question a lot. I'm mixed. My mom is Ethiopian and my dad is white."

For all the years I knew her, I felt bad that I missed such a significant detail about her. I never noticed how nonchalant her personality was. This girl had a mental illness? At that moment, I found myself simply liking her. I didn't love her nor hate her. I just liked her. I liked her looks, I liked her mocha suede booties, and I liked that she wears them with her yoga pants.

I asked her what she has been up to and why none of us have heard from her in years.

"I've been busy," she said. "Priorities, you know." She stared at one of her succulent plants and clearly was thinking about something. "It's so weird, you know?" She paused for a little bit, inviting me to think. "In high school, we were all little shits who thought we were shit when we weren't shit." That

made me smile.

"Claire," she said. "I like you more than most of the people back in high school. They're always so melodramatic and they stress me out. You- you just don't give a shit. I remember in high school when the sub told us we couldn't work together then next thing I knew you told me, 'Hey, let's work together.'"

I realized what was going on now. She needed someone. Well, someone else other than her boyfriend. She cut herself from the world and now she found herself desperately needing a girl friend to rant to, to get advice from, and to just be there. I didn't understand why she chose me to rant to. I assumed it was probably out of convenience since I did kind of showed up at her doorstep.

When Danny came over, I told him about how mentally ill she's been. He gave me a sincere worried look in return.

"I can't wait until I tell Regine and Lana," I told him. He gave me a confused, disgusted look.

"What?" I asked.

"Well, it's really none of their business," he said.

I didn't respond. I dismissed what he said right away and thought about how much dirt I have on Naomi. I imagined myself a spy reporting to my two allies. Then, I thought about how I actually liked Naomi. I didn't hate or love her anymore. I thought about how obsessed I've- we've- been with her in high school. Why was I so obsessed with her?

The next day, I met up with Regine and Lana. Lana looked polished as always, her eyeliner like fresh asphalt, flawless and layered on carefully. My focus shifted from Lana to Regine. She wasn't into makeup like me and Lana.

Lana pointed out my new shoes. They were dark brown ankle boots with heels. Both girls were surprised about my choice, since I was never into heels.

"So did you figure out what was up with Naomi?" Regine asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing?"

"Yeah, she's fine. She's just been busy."

MARIAH CARDENAS



Junior

Major: Spanish and German

Reading: Short Fiction

Mariah is from Farmington Hills, MI. She enjoys reading, writing, and running, and she is an aspiring author, among other things. As of right now, she plans to obtain a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature after completing her undergraduate degree. She is a leader in Cru Christian Organization and is the communications chair of the LEAD Scholars Advisory Board, and she works as a waitress at a BBQ restaurant in her home town on the weekends.

Rapunzel's Pills

I never actually wanted to be a drug dealer, you know. I never thought that I would be selling weed and Adderall to college students. I never thought I would be selling heroin to the druggies on Cass Corridor.

And I certainly never thought I would be a murderer.

I just needed a couple hundred dollars for my absurdly expensive college textbooks.

Now, I know what you must be thinking. "She's so lazy that she couldn't get a real job and had to end up selling drugs."

Wrong. I worked forty hours a week and carried a full schedule of six-

teen credits.

“Well, didn’t you apply for financial aid?” You would probably say in your condescension, as your mouth snapped shut after the shock of my schedule.

Of course. I’m not an idiot – I just didn’t qualify. My parents divorced when I was six, but my daddy is a rich businessman with Armani suits and a black Mercedes Benz in his driveway. My mom is a waitress, a single mom with three kids. It doesn’t matter that I haven’t talked to my dad in years or that he thought it was a good idea to beat my mom so hard that he broke three of her ribs. It doesn’t matter that when I dared to beg him for the money that I need for my education, he cackled and laughed in my face like the Joker. After all, who is his daughter to ask him for money? But no, the Office of Financial Aid doesn’t take that into account. They just saw dollar signs when they looked at me, despite the fact that I had only ten dollars to my name.

“Well, what about loans?”

Yes, I have loans. So many loans that I will never be able to repay them, but I still needed more money, and my mom’s credit score is so low that it’s the same as your IQ.

So I worked, and I worked a little bit more. Instead of sleep I drank coffee and used Red Bull as a chaser. After all that, I managed to get just enough to pay for tuition for the semester and the rent on a little apartment close to the projects. I registered for all my classes, but I didn’t have enough money left for books, let alone food.

After my dad humiliated me, I vowed that I would never ask him for money again, but I did. I groveled at his feet, weeping and begging him just for a few hundred dollars for books, less money than the Rolex on his wrist or the giant diamond on my stepmom’s finger. But he threw me out of his home, leaving me on the sidewalk like the trash he told me I was.

So, I drove my beat up Pontiac back to my “home”, my heart constricting in terror when I heard it backfire and creak. I just knew that one day it wouldn’t start, and I wouldn’t be able to afford to get it fixed. I could only put five dollars of gas in it at a time, anyways. I knew exactly how far my car could run on fumes before I got stranded on the side of the highway.

I stumbled into my empty apartment, not having to worry about running into anything since the only furniture in it was an air mattress, two lawn chairs, a lawn table, and an old couch that I picked up from the trash on the corner of someone’s house. Actually I picked everything except the air mattress out of the trash, just like my mama taught me.

I sat down on the lawn chair so hard that I ended up breaking it, and I fell on the floor, my pathetic form sprawling onto the ground, my long hair flying like the mop that I used to scrub the floors at work, the tears burning my eyes like the bleach I used to clean the sinks.

I wished I had some bleach to drink.

It would've felt better than that desperation in my stomach, than that crying out in my soul. I was so close to having enough... But close only counts in horseshoes and expiration dates. I lay on the floor for a couple of minutes, just allowing the tears to fall down, allowing myself the luxury of resting on the floor, an expensive moment of mental breakdown that only the rich can afford, before pulling myself up and assessing the area around me.

Was there anything that I owned that was worth enough to get me textbooks?

Everything in my apartment wasn't worth more than twenty bucks, tops. I ran my hands through my thick black hair, and I realized that I could sell it. Maybe I could have gotten a couple hundred dollars for it, but I didn't want to do that... I didn't want to sell my hair. I love the way that it looks in a long braid, love the way that it bounces. It's the only part of my appearance that I actually like.

There had to be something else.

And there was, there was the pills. My mom didn't have health coverage, but, somehow she managed to get me on my dad's insurance, at least for a few more years, since he didn't have to pay much extra on his corporation's plan. And I went to the hospital for a ruptured ovarian cyst last winter, and they wrote me a prescription for fifteen oxycodone.

I knew that oxycodone went for twenty dollars per pill. There was \$300 sitting in my medicine cabinet, just waiting for me to cash it in. And I knew a few people who would buy a whole bottle of oxy... I once saw one of my coworkers pop a random pill that she saw on the ground just because she thought it *might* be a painkiller.

Nasty habit, that.

But did I really want to feed her addiction? I could picture her in my mind, her stringy blonde hair limp and her bright blue eyes hungry and searching for their next fix. She was almost predatory in her victimization of herself. And I thought, would I really be doing that much harm? She was go-

ing to be getting them from *somewhere*, right? Why shouldn't she get them from someone whom she could actually trust, someone who wouldn't lace them with anything strange?

I tugged on my hair nervously.

Or I could sell my hair. It would fetch a good price, probably more than the bottle of pills. It was, after all, nearly two feet long. I'd never dyed it – never had the money to go to a salon, and never had the guts to try it myself. I didn't know if I could go through with it. But I did know one thing: I either had to sell my hair or the pills if I wanted to stay in school.

And despite my reservations, the choice was easy.

Within two days, my coworker Ashley, had her pills, and I had my books. I tried to ignore the guilt gnawing at my chest whenever I flipped my economics text open. I tried to ignore her large blue eyes, dilated from the painkillers I sold her.

I tried to forget about it, but then my car died a week into the semester, and I had no money to get it fixed. I took the bus the day after it happened, clutching my purse to me so tightly that my knuckles turned white and looking around so intently that my eyes dried out.

My aunt almost got raped at a Greyhound bus stop once.

God, I can still remember sitting at that bus stop. The fear was so strong that it twisted my stomach into knots. I felt the pocket knife in my jeans, but I was scared. Every movement terrified me. I knew that rapists liked to grab long hair like mine to trap their victims. I knew far too well what kinds of monsters were lurking in the dark, and I knew that I had to find a way to get my car fixed.

And Ashley poked and prodded me in the side, asking me if I could get her more drugs. It didn't even have to be oxy, any narcotic would do. And her boyfriend could use some weed...

I twisted my hair nervously as I went to my mom's crooked doctor and hit up my friend, Jay, and I got her the drugs. She directed a few more coworkers to me.

And I got my car fixed.

With each ounce of weed that I sold and each bottle of pills, it became easier to justify. I was the drug hub of my work place, and eventually a

few trusted college students started going to me to supply their Adderall. If you wanted it, I knew where to get it for you. But Ashley was still my most devoted customer.

I ended up being able to cut my hours at work in half. I was able to bring my grades up. I started sleeping for six whole hours each night. I was actually able to buy a real mattress. I was loving my life as a drug dealer, and I got through another year of college with no problems.

But I still refused to sell the really hard stuff to anyone. Now that was a line that I was unwilling to cross. No crack. No crystal meth. No heroin.

Then my mom got sick and couldn't work, and since she didn't have any insurance...

And I braided my hair and started selling the drugs that all druggies should know to avoid.

My mom ended up getting better, and my hair kept on getting longer. It was down past my ass now and healthier than ever. My brothers were successful. Hell, I was successful. I only had one semester left of college. And then I could get a real job, a respectable job. I could stop selling drugs, stop scrubbing floors altogether. I was so close...

And then I got the phone call.

My phone was on vibrate, and it vibrated in my knock-off purse, rumbling like an earthquake. I picked up the phone and it was one of my coworkers. She sounded distressed. She was crying.

Ashley was dead, her six-year-old daughter had found her convulsing on the ground and called 911 with her high little voice screaming that her mommy wasn't moving, her mommy wasn't moving...

The official diagnosis? Drug overdose.

God, I felt like I was falling again. I felt like I was falling off a cliff, but I really just fell into a chair.

I killed Ashley.

If it wasn't you, it would have been someone else. I tell myself. But it wasn't, it was me. I close myself up in my house, and my customers blow up my phone with their addicted desperation. I don't leave the house, not for the first day of classes, not for the second. I don't go to work. I don't get

groceries. I don't even go to the funeral. I just lock myself up in my tower, with my dear friends Molly and Maryjane and a few bottles of pills that will never get sold.

The police will find the drugs with my dead body.

I should have never sold that first bottle of oxycodone, but at least my hair is long enough now that I can hang myself with it.

ALLISON CHU



Sophomore

Major: Clarinet Performance and English

Reading: Poetry

Allison Chu is a sophomore dual degree student in clarinet performance and English. She loves listening to classical music, traveling, writing, reading, and watching the clouds. Originally from New Jersey, she has come to call Michigan a second home. Her favorite things to read include poetry and fiction, specifically things that make her think.

What About a Whale?

I want to be the little shrimp escaping your
 gaping mouth,
 scurrying across your bumpy back
 against the current of a thousand bubbles
 that balloon from your mouth—
 meager, yet important.

Do you think people will notice?

 If I lie here on the cool floor,
 pretend it's the silk of the ocean,
 feel the grains of sand in carpet loops
 and watch you let your flippers swim
 through invisible waves.
 No one will see—let me

flip flop flip flop flail
 uncontrollably tangle
my limbs with yours.

Salt crunches between my teeth,
 a gritty soundtrack underneath
the seagull calls. They dance
in swaying circles in the air, the way
you swing in the kitchen, masterfully
navigating between islands of pasta.
I try to dodge the spray of your spout,
running from the butter that splatters
out of your pan.

They communicate by moaning—
 you sigh in your sleep.
Do you mind
when I brush up against you,
a slight push, make a noise?
 You ignore it
and tuck me into the pattern,
legs between boxes, arms next to lines.

Under the stars, you glide,
one hand tucked into a pocket,
the other warmly resting
behind my neck,
guiding me.
We're quiet, floating along
under seas of black skies and stars,
glittering, catching
on the infinite angles of waves.

Love of Dust

She left her wedding album sitting on the bed
in the third bedroom, on a dusty bedspread
that looked as if it hadn't been changed for years.
She probably hadn't - Eddie doesn't go in there
anymore. He sleeps in the guest room downstairs,
even though his faded stuffed animals,
faux-fur coarse from years of washes, are still

under the bed. The rest was packed away
in organized boxes:

Albert, Eddie, Bedroom, Kitchen,

none with his name.

Did she leave it for his ghost?

It's pristine—

far from the dog-eared copies
of worn baby photos and family reunions,
faded from hanging in the living room
in a geometrical splatter across the walls—
a photo Tetris she played when she sat
in her rocking chair, watching
the afternoon sun touch each smiling face.
Did she think about him when
she saw those photos?

But the album was dark—black and white—
each face pressed carefully between
thin sheets of secrets. He looked stronger,
standing taller, more handsome
than I remember.

Her truth was never real —

pretending that every time she helped him out
of his straight-backed chair in front of the TV
and shuffled with him to his bed
was as loving as the worry lines that appeared
between her eyebrows and at the corners of her eyes.
She fooled me—if not love, what else?
I only noticed it when I watched her
take down the photo collage,
that together they were missing—
her fairytale walked into a cathedral
and disappeared, tucked away and erased
by the time the dust had settled on the old bedspread.

Pens

1.

I celebrate the death of each pen
as if it were the birthday
of a best friend, cheering her on
as she blows out the candle—
“the ink is about to run out!

 Come quick!”

It’s not that I welcome the feeling
of tossing the empty carcass (slamdunk)
into the trash can, soon to be the
company of dirty tissues and that
crumpled ball of paper. They used
to belong to someone, you know.
Cried-into-tissues don’t unfurl,
but ooze and crust over that finality,
clenching secrets and stolen moments
in grips like that mother down the street,
holding her child in tow as they
cross, her #30 royal blue ink dress
smudging and staining each step.

2.

My mother doesn’t care for pens.
She can’t see the difference
between a prized purple *Pilot G-2 .05 mm*
and the sleazy specimens in hotel rooms
that you’re not supposed to steal
(but do anyways).

She loves those pens,
one for each nook and cranny of
her life—convenience, she claimed.
I hated when she took them,
shuffling guiltily past the housekeeping carts,
eyes on the neutral colored carpet,
hoping the ink wouldn’t trace her trail.

I take those hotel pens now, pocketing
them for her on the off chance
she doesn’t have one, searching in her
Mary Poppins bag of everything,
just so she has an excuse to
write me back.

Laughing/crying

1.

On the stone steps outside the auditorium,
we sit, watching your smoke
make billowy swirls against the black sky,
listening to the stillness.

It is too quiet, so you hum some
Bruckner symphony and make me guess—
I guess incorrectly. You smile
and put your arm around me anyway,
welcoming me into the fog.

I hate the smell,
yet I lean into you, basking in
the feeling of hating smoke and
guessing incorrectly. You gesture to
nearby buildings with arms wide open
and shout—I nearly fall—we're cold—
but I laugh until I cry, loud awful noises
that don't sound anything like
Bruckner symphonies or any symphony
at all, just pure, vocalized happiness.

2.

Why do I cry during the happiest moments?

3.

We lean over the keyboard,
shoulders brushing against each other
in the pattern of sound waves,
oddly circular, with direction.

Hands follow the music,
tracing the language on the keys
and slamming down chords
that shake the bench we sit on.

It trembles, like your shoulders did
when lighting little fires became
a necessity, no longer a game
(the beast always wins).

I ride each chord with you,
letting you transplant
the fervor inside to the dusty piano,
fingers flying, us soaring.

4.

Post-its decorate my walls
like paint samples of neon colors
covered in sprawling handwriting—
 lists:
things to do, things to remember,
one hundred billion cells
in a human brain, but not enough
to keep track. You laugh,
then apologize, but even your
presence can't prevent the onset:
blurred eyes, stiffly clenched fingers,
 frozen—
once a day, twice a day,
you hand me a cup of dark coffee,
hold my hand,
warm the fears away.
 Together,
we mark minute ticks on each
finger, counting.

5.

I'll help you, you say.

Us solo, after Karg-Elert

A piece of music in words. Style markings taken from Sonate für Klarinette solo.

Moderately moved/agitated

and so we *gradually press* onwards,
 me and you, in the quest to be
merry, happy, as we say.
 It makes no difference, really, as we take
tempo as before.
 I watch those geese that fly over the pond,
 wings flapping to their own marches,
always animatedly/lively
 and laugh at how they disrupt the
solid
 plane of sky, ribbons of reflection left in a

quiet/calm

wake behind them. That is how I want to be,
especially with you,

lovely/sweet

wipe the tears from your eyes,
finding fault somewhere between us,
press my nose against yours—
what are those called?

Not too fast

I plead with you, steps tumbling forward
like dominos falling in line.

Full, but tender

your hand swings in mine,

always calm swaying/rocking -

did I say something?

As before, lovely:

it doesn't take long before
the hugs are back,
Frank Sinatra playing in the background.

Expressively

you spoon the pasta onto my plate,
drip olive oil over the mountain.

Very emotional

is the silence, a shield
that wraps around us,
warps and contorts to

always excited

words that seem to spill out of
my mouth—I think—

pressing

deeper into casual wounds
created out of accidents—
we can figure this out.

Again calm

It's 2 am, and we tried. Tried is tired
with the letters all flipped around.
We are flipped around,

extremely full

of pasta and sighs,
raspberries and mis-ideas.

Lovely

I say, then no solution is a solution,
and we move on,

forward

together,

to go back

to singing Sinatra and dancing
beside forgotten pizzas,
figments of dreams.

Very expressively

I kiss you, your lips are salty
from crying (whose tears?),
feel your chest
make its

calm swell.

We blink
and continue on,

as improvised

KAREN DUAN



Senior

Major: Architecture

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Personal Essay

Karen Duan is a senior in the architecture school with a minor in Creative Writing. Outside of drafting speculative spaces at studio, she enjoys collecting felt tip pens and postcards. Karen's favorite things to read include collections of short stories, dystopian science fiction, and anything by Jamaica Kincaid or George Saunders.

Dual Space

My mother and I are driving down M-14 in separate cars. We're cruising in a loose formation — me in front, she behind — each in our own vehicles with our right foot on the pedal.

It's 8:15 AM, and Ann Arbor this Sunday morning is crisp and bright, the two lane highway ringed with the granulated foliage of fall leaves. Every few seconds, I check the rearview mirror, where my mother sits in her shiny CR-V with a generous amount of following distance between us.

The highway is completely empty. We see one other car in a fifteen-minute span: a massive Prairie Farms Truck, which roars past both my mother and me. Then the plastered image of small cows under their oversaturated blue sky recedes, and we're alone again, chugging along at a constant 60 mph.

In the original plan, my mother was not supposed to come with me. My Aunt Hua had flown in from Houston, and she and my mother would leave Sunday morning for Mackinac Island.

Still, my mother lamented not being able to accompany me. “*Zǎo zhī dào, wǒ men jiù bù xuǎn zhè gè tiān le,*” she told me, pawing my shoulder. *If I’d known, we would’ve picked a different date.* This she stated as if my capricious decision to revisit a childhood institution somehow took priority over the six days she had to spend with her sister, whom she had not seen in over two years either. It was an exchange particularly emblematic of my mother, whose love materializes in a prioritization of her children’s needs, however whimsical, over even the most pressing of her own.

Her reaction had everything to do with the location: I was headed to Ann Hua Chinese School. It was a sphere I hadn’t entered, much less thought about, since my graduation from the institution at age fourteen. By now, over seven years had passed.

At the time, I’d detested the obligation. Every Sunday, my mother would herd my sister and me into the car, and we’d chug across town to the Dow Building on University of Michigan’s North Campus. I would complain, and my mother would drown me out with grand conjectures of how grateful I’d be for this experience in the future. Then I’d sit for two hours in the stuffy lecture hall meant for college students, scratching Mandarin characters on sheets of gridded paper among twenty other Chinese American kids.

My mother and I get lost twice en route. I use the word “lost” loosely. We each take a wrong turn once, and then a series of unceremonious beeps ensue like pig snorts to redirect the bewildered individual.

It’s not entirely our fault — we’ve both entered foreign territory. The Ann Hua Chinese School I once attended has shifted locations not once, but twice, since my graduation. This new address, at the “Crane Liberal Arts & Science Building” on Washtenaw Community College’s campus, is thus strange land to both of us.

As we enter campus, the low-lying sand-toned buildings unfurling like dunes before us, I can’t help but notice how this new landscape differs from the one I remember. This is urban sprawl if I’ve ever seen it, with the buildings placed imposingly and monumentally far apart, the wide sidewalk-less road we drive on snaking between each outlying structure.

It takes three minutes to drive from the Washtenaw Community College entrance sign to the Crane Building. The building itself is indistinguishable

from the others: long orthogonal masses with pristine edges. But it differs, drastically, from what I knew.

Here, everything is flat. The cascading stairs I once scampered down to get from the parking lot to the Dow Building, gone. The beloved white sculpture outside the Dow Building, too large and too abstract to gain my adolescent appreciation, gone. Neighboring buildings traded for a perimeter of soft red trees that circumscribe the whole campus.

My mother and I park next to each other in the gigantic lot. It's creepily empty, with six other cars in what must be a two hundred-foot radius. It's now 8:46 AM, and classes will start in fourteen minutes. We debate whether or not we've arrived at the wrong place.

Then we spot a young mother in the distance, carrying a hot pink backpack by its straps. Two bouncing children, their heads shiny and discernibly black, trail behind her. They're headed for the "CRANE LIBERAL ARTS & SCIENCE BUILDING," a title fastened on the building's top corner in massive Serif letters.

"*Lai dui le,*" says my mother, before I can respond. *This is the right place.*

Then we walk together towards the lonely, hulking mass of the Crane Building.

When I first proposed to revisit the school, my mother's impulsive instinct was to come with me. "*Wǒ gēn nǐ yī qǐ qù bā?*" She said. *Why don't I go with you?*

It was two weeks before Aunt Hua would arrive, and I'd come home for the night, my computer perched on a silk tablecloth my mother had once carted back from China.

I must've accumulated some apprehension over the visit, because at her words, my chest released. Then she remembered that she and Aunt Hua would leave for Mackinac Island, and the apprehension resurfaced.

It wasn't that I was timid or mousy or somehow intimidated by the new faces of adolescent Chinese American children. But the school had clearly evolved since my graduation, having shed its recognizable features.

For one, there was the new location. The Ann Hua Chinese School I remembered was indelibly linked to its drab brick structure — the Herbert H. Dow Building — in the midst of the lithe deer and stone buildings that so define the University of Michigan's North Campus. Years later, it's this build-

ing that I remember with precise clarity: the monotonous brick surfaces and blackened strips of glass.

It was my mother who told me that the school moved the first time: Ann Hua had been dismissed from the University of Michigan. It was vandalism, destruction of property, just think of all the kids who trafficked through every weekend. They'd moved to Concordia, another university farther away.

I'd been shocked, even then. It was an institution I so associated with place, that to imagine it uprooted was jarring, even outrageous. But neither of us knew that the school had since moved again.

"Zhēn de?" My mother asked me, hovering behind me as I surfed the website. *Really?*

"It says on their website," I pointed.

"A, nà kě néng jiù shì de. Jiù shì de," said my mother. *Oh, then it must be. It must be.*

I wanted sit in on a class. It didn't matter which class, so long as it was a class, which I thought a simple enough request. Instead, it proved difficult.

My mother and I examined the list of teachers. She squinted at the Mandarin characters as I read the English letters, until we reached the bottom without passing a single familiar name. Everyone we knew had phased out.

Connectionless, I emailed a random teacher off the Ann Hua website, completing the standardized "Contact" form in Mandarin.

Outside, the sky had darkened. The chandelier in our dining room hung too high to replace the now-feeble bulbs, so my mother had since added various other lamps to the space, which radiated yellow light. I sat at the head of our dining room table, where I always sat when I came home to work, and my mother stood behind me, massaging my words as I typed them.

For years, I had done the same thing for her. It started in high school, this inaugural responsibility: editing my mother's emails. At first, it was a simple grammar check. I'd correct phrases like "*he is also agreed*" to "*he agrees,*" or "*if it is convenience*" to "*if it's convenient.*" Then, as I grew older, it evolved into more of a scriptwriter role — my mother spelling out just the basic skeleton before we'd sit together, she narrating her desired message in Mandarin as I typed paraphrased English sentences, an entire process of about five minutes. Then I entered college, and my mother reverted to independent writing. But sometimes, on the weekends when I'd come home, she'd still approach me with the tentative question, "*Kāi Kāi, ké yǐ dá rǎo nǐ yī*

xià?" Kai Kai, can I bother you for a bit? Then she'd lead me to the kitchen, where the iPad would glow and my mother's email would begin: "Hi Grace..."

But now, it was my mother who stood behind me as I sounded out my clumsy phrases in Mandarin — a curious reversal of positions.

"Xiang wen yi xia? Jiu xiang wen yi xia?" I bounced off her.

"A, ting hao de ma... Jiu yong ni zi ji xie de zui hao, shi ba," said my mother, clearly hesitant to write the message for me. Yes, that sounds fine... Just your own wording is best, right?

For ten minutes, I fumbled through different wordings that my mother shyly affirmed, before nudging me in the correct direction. Then I sent the email, which yielded an automated "received" notice, but would ultimately remain unanswered, instead sitting in my inbox as an ode to my pitiful Mandarin. For despite the time I'd spent writing it, the email read pathetically short and simplistic, even childish. Somehow, I'd thought my Mandarin was much more eloquent, that I might be capable of graceful, well-worded paragraphs. Of course, my time away from Ann Hua must have contributed to that. But I hadn't imagined that it crumbled to this level, to the point where I could not construct formal sentences without distinct, conscious effort. And even then, they were only rudimentary lines.

你好，

我叫段凯伦，也是安华中文学校毕业的学生。我现在在 Michigan 大学上大四。我现在在修一门英文课。我们需要写一篇作文回忆我们的小时候。所以我记起我在安华中文学校上学的时候。

想问一下，能不能让我在你班上听一节课？

谢谢，段凯伦

Hi,

My name's Karen Duan. I'm a former graduate of Ann Hua Chinese School. I'm currently a senior at the University of Michigan. I'm currently taking an English course. We need to write an essay reminiscing about our childhood. So I thought of my time at Ann Hua Chinese School.

I wanted to ask, might I listen in on a class?

Thanks, Karen Duan

Such read my unanswered return debut to Ann Hua, which I muttered a vague version of to myself in the bathroom mirror for three consecutive nights. Then I didn't worry about it at all, until it was the Saturday night before I planned to visit Ann Hua, and my mother came knocking on the bathroom door.

It was past midnight, and I stood flossing by the sink.

"*Ai, Kai Kai,*" my mother whispered, standing in a Looney Tunes night-gown with her face pressed up to the door.

I thought she was about to scold me into bed, as she often does. Instead, she'd arrived to make a concession: she would go with me, she wanted to go with me, it would make her feel better to go with me, lest I travel all the way there for nothing.

I said, "Oh, okay," immediately. Then the relief gushed over me, and I said, "Oh, yeah!" once I realized that I would not have to do it alone after all.

Because I was, in fact, nervous to return to Ann Hua. It was a nervousness that had hounded me for the last week, and would hound me even as I drove down MI-14 escorted by my mother. And it wasn't the presence of new students or the new institution that I dreaded, but the actual interaction. The few sentences of clumsy Mandarin I would have to bumble in exchange for the revisit.

To clarify: I consider myself fluent in Mandarin. I'm capable of casual conversation, of managing street signs, of texting and ordering off a menu. Since my graduation from Ann Hua, since the AP Chinese Test and SAT Subject 2 Chinese Test, since testing out of my college language requirement with Mandarin, surely, I'm fluent.

And yet, what relevance does paper-validated fluency have when I can't speak to my mother for a full two sentences without slipping in English words? Entire chunks of English phrases? My friends who listen to my phone calls with my mother are always amused by the fragments of English, weaving in and out of the dialogue.

"It's so interesting, which words you choose to speak in English," my friend Ellery once told me.

In reality, it's not a choice. If I could, I would speak completely in Mandarin. But I can't, or it takes incredible effort to. Instead, the words I speak in English are markers of when Mandarin fails me, when the specific term or phrase I want is frustratingly beyond my knowledge or requires too much ef-

fort to recall. And so I revert to English. It's these dropped-in English words that are not so much symbols of agency, but rather, a literal materialization of the limits of my Mandarin.

The Crane Building is incredibly quiet and empty. There's no grand entrance, so my mother and I slip in through a side opening — a glass door wedged in the concrete, which immediately leads to stairs. Inside, there's natural light — a lot of it — and the entire stairwell is white, already sleeker and more dignified than the crusty elevators of the Dow Building. In fact, the whole structure feels untouched.

I've been clinging to a room number — LA 260 — which, as it's listed on the website, is the "Administrative team on-duty room/Parent rest area." But when we reach the second floor, it's clean and vacant. To be honest, it looks like the interior of every college building I've ever imagined — artificially lit, with an unoffensive color scheme and waiting benches outside each room, the floor sheathed in a polite array of gray and teal tiles. The only oddity is a large collection of butterfly portraits that adorn the walls in meticulous rows, the pastel backgrounds offering a desperate attempt to personalize the space.

I have no idea what this hall looks like on a weekday, when it's perhaps overrun with college students who might congregate in languid hordes down these halls. I can't imagine it either, given the eerie serenity of it now. The Dow Building had that funny quality about it, too. From 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM every Sunday, the Dow —known on weekdays for its Hanawalt X-ray Diffraction Lab and Electron Microscopy Room, among other intimidatingly scientific rooms — would transform into a convening point for hundreds of K-12 Chinese American children, who poured directly from their parents' cars into university classrooms. Meanwhile, a mere six hundred feet away, the same college students who might attend weekday classes in the Dow would study in the neighboring Duderstadt Library, unaware of the intricate cultural center setting up, whirring, and then deconstructing a brief two-minute walk away from them. I like to imagine, however, that some of these students must have — at least once — wandered into the Dow Building on a Sunday afternoon, and found themselves in a swarm of screaming and scampering Chinese American kids, clutching shiny bags of snack-size Cheetos during their afternoon break.

The new Crane Building, however, is intimidatingly clean, well kept, and empty, despite the fact that it's now 8:51 AM and class will start in nine minutes.

It manages to impress my mother. "*Ting hao de,*" she says, admiring. *Pretty nice.*

But when we reach LA 260, the room is empty — the door locked, the lights off. I shake the handle, and then submit to panic, blubbering to my mother.

All she says is a sanguine, “*A, guan le. Zen me le?*” before brushing past me, wandering down the hall. *Oh, it’s closed. Why is that?*

I stand, miffed, in front of LA 260.

My mother is comfortable here, strolling down the hallway in her puffy fall vest, her head tilted and peering around. She holds an air of authority, in this particular sphere, that she might’ve held her whole life had we grown up in the same country under the same language. I pad behind her, basking in her company.

As a child, my mother would often humiliate me through language. Whenever she raised her voice in public, her accent would flare and my face would flush. It didn’t matter if it was a just cause — if she’d been wronged and now rightly arched her back — I always felt angry, even betrayed, when she dared to cause a “scene.” And I never concerned myself with the exact cause of her anger. Instead, I recoiled from the anger itself, which always manifested in bulging vowels and too-sharp consonants that inevitably singled us out. If we had been the only people of color in the space before, we were now distinctly the “Others,” a status I actively detested.

It wasn’t until high school that these defensive reflexes finally began to break down. Still, I blamed my mother for her English, unable to understand her accent even as I sat in my Sunday Ann Hua Chinese School classrooms, bleating fractured Mandarin.

Whenever we left Ann Arbor, it was my sister and I who led my mother through public. We would charge through the intricately choreographed courses of metropolitan airports, yelling and pointing at signs as our mother trailed behind. In new cities, it was my sister and I who googled all our must-hit locations, printed out daily itineraries with addresses for tantalizing restaurants and museums, which we then tugged our mother along to.

My mother often jokes about this arrangement, citing it as proof of her amazing daughters. “*Wo men yi chu qu, mama shen me dou bu yong gan!*” *Whenever we go out, mom doesn’t have to do anything!* In retrospect, I wonder if she’s ever felt, just once, a bit lonely — if not helpless — as my sister and I bicker over directions in a language that’s not our mother’s, on an interface we’ve never taught her how to use.

And yet, Ann Hua Chinese School is distinctly different territory. Here, I'm the child again. Toddling, nascent, dependent on my mother to accompany me through the world.

She is, as of right now, motioning for me. My mother's found a promising classroom down the hall, with a slim window perforating the door. When I approach, I can see the tiny heads of Chinese American children, who sit in chairs padded by bright jackets. There are parents, several of them, swarming around long tables.

"Jin qu ba?" Says my mother. Let's go in?

But she lurks purposefully behind me, I can tell. So I twist the handle, which rotates with a click, and enter the classroom first.

All along, I'd assumed that my mother wanted to accompany me to do the negotiating, to absolve me of explaining myself in Mandarin. But when we enter, she immediately abandons me, crossing the width of the classroom to chat with a younger mother I don't recognize, whom my mother is apparently animatedly and closely affiliated with.

The teacher leans over a projector at the head of the room, alone. The adults — all mothers — are twittering over their children, who sink into their seats with their eyes still sleep-swollen.

Maternal Mandarin buzzes around me, and even though I'm a graduate of this institution, even though I've attended it — consecutively — for eight years, I feel distinctly like an outsider. The room, the teacher, the building and the drive up to it are strangely new, and there's nothing familiar here to grasp onto but my mother.

I head for the teacher. I don't want to loiter and appear out of place, much less wait for my mother. And I must have this decisive gait to my walk because the teacher looks up before I reach her. She is short, soft, spectacled, with a sweater draped over her shoulders. She's been hunched over the projector, waving her hand on the screen. Now she straightens: a forty-year old woman with cheeks that bounce light.

From the beginning of our interaction, I'm intent, scrambling for words. Then I open my mouth and they all come out at once.

I start speaking and stumbling immediately. I'm almost tripping over myself, trying to push out the words I've been furtively reciting in the bathroom. I think I'm afraid of losing concentration and faltering, but it's true: this is the longest string of Mandarin I've spoken in six months. Pure Mandarin, unbroken by any English. The last time I spoke like this we were in China, the

country that's not my country, where I'm both an outsider through language and an insider through my parents, my blood. How ironic that the language I was raised on, the language that was my first language and once my mother language — Mandarin — soon whittled into the red flag that would lock me out of my blood-line country, that would come to define me, more than any of my Western brands or preferred cuisines or cultural oddities, as a "foreign American" in China. This is the stumbling Mandarin I know: one that's capable of exposing me, de-legitimizing me in a second.

In the end, my interaction with the teacher goes incredibly quickly. Some version of the message manages to escape, in which the words are all strung together and obviously rehearsed. She listens politely, albeit with her eyebrows raised and mouth half-open, as if waiting for a punch line that never arrives.

I never actually introduce myself by name. Instead, I'm the nameless Ann Hua graduate, just here to observe class. I'm not sure the teacher ever fully understands my motives, judging by her blank facial expression; and I don't have the Mandarin skills to explain my exact reason for arriving in this sterile classroom, much less to articulate how a lifetime of growing up with my mother in her non-native country might have crippled the first language she taught me, to the point where I've lied about my motives for arriving because "reminiscing on childhood" is much easier to communicate than an idea about two generations of people straddling the periphery of two nations, and all the sacrifice, tension, and heartbreak wrapped up in that, beginning with my mother's English accent and ending with the loss of my once-fluent Mandarin.

Plus the teacher is friendly, accepting my simple version. "A, *xing ba*," she says, agreeing in a daze. *Oh, okay.*

I latch onto the consent, thanking her perhaps too forcefully. But I can't help it — it's over. The little trial of my Mandarin, passed.

As it turns out, my mother is still chatting with the younger woman. They stand at a table, the woman's child squishing her cheek against her mother's legs, pouting in her pink jacket. If it wasn't clear before, it's clear now: I've entered the youngest Ann Hua Chinese School class, *Jida 1*, for what must be six or seven year-olds.

My mother introduces me to the woman, the wife of some colleague of my father, who compliments how *biao zhun* — native — my Chinese sounds. My mother laughs, flattered. Then she excuses us, checks that everything went okay with me, and leaves, clutching her pale purse and waving before closing the door.

For the amount of time we've spent talking about this, I can't believe I let her come all the way here for just that. It's been thirteen minutes since we stepped out of our cars and set foot in this classroom taken over by six year-olds. Now my mother will drive thirty-five minutes back home, having overseen her maternal duty.

Alone and chastised, I hunker down in the corner of the room. No one pays me any attention, except a few children who stare and then lose interest, burrowing back into their chairs. This is fine by me.

The classroom itself contains all the markers of elementary school: strewn backpacks, boys and girls in cotton pants, the tabletops populated with tin cases that brim with pencils and plastic water bottles with plastered patterns.

Only all of these exist in a space designed for students three to four times as old as these scampering children, who are the same height sitting as they are standing. There are no posters with class rules written in bold sharpie, no sticker charts, and no shelves with board games. Instead, there are clean walls, gray carpets, and blackboards, wiped smooth and empty.

This is borrowed space, subject to a schedule and a contract. As a child, I could never understand this concept of "renting." Whenever we arrived to the Dow for our two-hour Sunday slot, this was the only Dow I knew and the only Dow I could imagine: the dim hallways overrun with Chinese American children, the skittering of adolescent sneakers, and the Mandarin — fluid, constant. That these hallways could house, and were meant to house, an entirely different population was beyond my awareness. Even on the rare chance I saw the lone student, darting through our black-haired hordes, I assumed them the outsider.

Yet, the Dow held two distinct communities — Ann Hua Chinese School *and* the University of Michigan's Chemical Engineering Department — that both came and existed on the periphery of each other's radars, at times brushing, but never colliding, always politely scheduling aside one another. And the building I grew up defining as the Ann Hua Chinese School, was just another rented space — temporary, retractable, not ours. How different the school might have been if we had had our own destined space that was permanently Mandarin, continually Chinese, and not ebbing and flowing between two unaffiliated collectives.

My mother leaves at 8:59 AM, while the room whirrs with just-arriving students and six mothers who will stay the whole class. Kids and parents file briskly down the hallway that was ghost-empty ten minutes ago.

The teacher, whose name I will never learn, attempts to start class at 9:07 AM. "*Hao le xiao peng you, wo men yao kai shi shang ke le,*" she says, bright and belting. *Okay little friends, let's begin class!*

There is no response. Even the mothers are still scuttling around the room, tending to their children. One mother's son, much younger than all the students, dashes in big circles around the room as she frantically attempts to collect him.

Meanwhile, the two girls in front of me carry out a heated conversation in English, native English, which I latch onto immediately.

"It's THIS one, ok? This one!" The girl in pink, agitated, jabs her finger into a workbook. Fifteen years ago, I might have understood such fervor over the correct answer for an ungraded two-hour Mandarin session. But I'm almost twenty-two now, and I can only empathize with her through English, or this shared experience in which we supplement our standard studies with specified language training, so that we might better understand our mothers, our family, and everything we left behind when we shed our mother tongues for an imperialist, alphabet-based English.

But for now, the girl is about seven, and simmers in her pink shirt with plastic spiders.

At 9:20 AM the energy settles, and class truly begins. I write, "FINALLY," in my notebook. Today's lesson is about pronunciation, as the class has not moved onto characters. Like the Chinese school I remember, it's assumed that the children already understand Mandarin. Judging by the fluency of the mothers, this makes sense. There is, however, one mother who's Mandarin doesn't fit in. She's stately and unexpectedly tall, in a pleated shirt with glasses. Her voice catches me at once, and then I learn to recognize it, as whenever she speaks her Mandarin there's a stilted accent.

The teacher runs her standard exercises. She pronounces characters in extremely shrill and hyper-annunciated belts. To accommodate the tones, of which there are four, you can hear her voice inflect entire octaves. "BEEeeeEEEEEEI. BEEeeeEEEEEEI." She asks which tone it is.

The kids respond in a disorganized, monotone chorus. They are fidgeting, twitching. One kid in the front right keeps screaming, "*DI SI SHENG! DI SI SHENG!*" *THE FOURTH! THE FOURTH!*" before the teacher snaps.

"*Bu neng lao di si sheng,*" she chides, a soft lash. *It can't always be the fourth.* The class giggles.

This goes on, and then I get bored. By the time they move onto the projector, I've stopped listening, instead surveying the kids. Most prevalent is their lack of enthusiasm. Besides the one who keeps shouting, all the other kids are slumped deep into their chairs, their small mouths hanging open in monotony, their backpacks half-dangling off tabletops. When I was seven, I felt a similar drudgery about Chinese School. I thought the whole enterprise excessive, unnecessary, and though my mother spent countless hours driving my sister and me to and from the Dow Building, I couldn't understand her attachment to this institution, to demanding that we learn to read and write when we already knew how to speak.

I bickered with my mother about the usefulness of Chinese School, constantly. I argued that it was a burden on our *normal* studies, until she would inevitably snap and end the discussion exasperated, unable to convince me of the utility of learning her language fully, graciously, of bridging the lingual gap between us. Then she would shut down the conversation, stating, "*Ni da le jiu zhi dao le. Ni zhang da le hui xie xie ma ma.*" *When you're older you'll know. When you grow up, you'll thank mommy.*

When and how, exactly, did I fall into this exact prophecy? Where did I learn to be ashamed of my broken Mandarin, a language I once rejected the relevance of so ardently? And why is it that even after I was raised on Mandarin, even after I was born into Mandarin, and even after I once knew only Mandarin, I'm still unable to rekindle it, wholly?

At 9:51 AM, the class goes on break. Half the class screeches and darts out of the room, where the hallway already echoes with the screams of other Chinese American children. The other half dig inside their backpacks, emerging with shiny, plastic bags snack bags that rattle when they open.

I get up to thank the teacher, ready to leave. But this mother, the stately one with the accent, is talking to the teacher and keeps talking to her. At first I'm curious, wondering which generation of Chinese American could produce this peculiar, non-native accent, but the more I listen, the more uncomfortable I become.

Once, in China, my aunt and I were watching a Mandarin competition on TV, where obviously foreign contestants came to display their lingual prowess. There was one contestant, a blonde woman, who went over her one-minute slot, babbling. I thought she carried a clumsy accent, a rather poor articulation of tones, until my aunt turned to me and said, "*You dian xiang kai kai shuo de zhong wen ba?*" *It feels a little like Kai Kai's Mandarin, right?*

I don't want to listen to the mother anymore. Instead, I focus on the

girls at the table next to me, meowing and waving their fingers as they chomp on what appear to be gummies. On impulse, I bend down.

"What are those?" I ask them in English. As it stands, there are two alliances in this room: those who speak default English, and those who speak default Mandarin, and I have just willingly, clearly aligned myself with English.

The girl in the spider shirt answers immediately. "Gummies. From Costco." Like all the kids I've ever worked with, she's accepting, unquestioning of my strange presence in this classroom.

I ask her if they're good, and she says that they're sticky.

At this, a shrill voice cuts across the room. "HEY, WE CAN'T EAT INSIDE." It's a boy, with soft buzzed hair, bent over a table on the other side of the room.

We look him, but don't answer. There's a moment of silence, before he scurries down and rummages around his backpack, chastised.

Then the stately mother turns, presumably at the sound of her son's voice, just in time to see him emerge with a Rice Krispie, the package glinting in fluorescent light. "Kevin," she says, sharply. "No food in the classroom, remember? Only water." Her English is terse, native.

"But everyone else is eating!" Kevin whines.

It's true. The girls next to me stare down at their pile of gummies, suddenly hesitant.

The mother bristles, flustered, "I know — I —" Then she pauses, a beat, before launching into a string of Mandarin.

"Zhang lao shi shou le. But neng zai jiao shi li mian chi dong shi! Ni ji de ma, shang ci Zhang Lao Shi de fang jian mei shou shi hao, dai le hen duo fan nao!" Teacher Zhang already said. No eating in the classroom! Do you remember the last time Teacher Zhang's class was dirtied it brought so many troubles!

I recognize the gait of her speech immediately.

It's part of an awkward, struggling Mandarin. I can feel it in the irregular halts and bursts of her speech, and the way she suddenly catapults from English into Mandarin, as if correcting a bad habit. There's impatience in the way she talks, too: this desire to push all the words out at once, such that

when they don't arrive, there's an uneasy pause.

The teacher nods, complaining of cleaning up after the kids. The two girls, heads lowered in shame, duck outside, along with others who've been munching. I give the teacher a curt thanks, before I leave as well, entering the now raucous hallway.

When I step out, there are kids everywhere. There are adults, too. Grandpa figures with deep-set faces, burrowed into plush seats. Kids with their shiny black hair bouncing as they skitter down the hall, crashing into doors while brandishing their packaged snacks. An hour ago, this floor was barren. Now, it's vivacious, almost too animated. I leave as quickly as I can, dashing down the stairs.

But the community has spilled out of the Crane Building and onto its perimeter. Outside, under a brisk but sunny sky, stand a cluster of Chinese parents, equipped in bright athletic gear. One woman blocks the sidewalk, wielding her iPhone. As I dart around her, I see she's recording a group of oncoming runners, slowly shuffling in pink visors and stretchy blue shirts, staggered in small groups as they round the corner.

In another world, one of these runners might be my mother. But for now, I just want to go. I can't shake the image of that other mother, stuttering as she makes her shift from English to Mandarin, forcing out each syllable underneath the brightly lit Ann Hua classroom, which is actually the Crane Building's classroom and not any of ours at all.

Shivering, I cross the mega parking lot, which is now populated with an impressive scattering of cars. The car that's parked next to me is silver, and somewhat in need of a wash. But I know, for sure, that the owner is Chinese because they've hung this red tassel on the rearview mirror. It's a symbol of fortune, beautifully knotted in the middle. When I was younger, these things — clearly Chinese — used to humiliate me. Now, I covet them, collecting them in a wall in my bedroom.

I text my mother to let her know everything went okay. By now, she should be well on her way. Then I drive alone back to the University of Michigan campus, past the Crane Building with its smattering of brilliantly sheathed Chinese American parents, and back to the landscapes I know, where I won't have to speak any Mandarin at all.

LAURA DZUBAY



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Paradise

*Daddy, won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County
Down by the Green River, where Paradise lay?
I'm sorry, my son, but you're too late in asking,
Mr. Peabody's coal train has hauled it away.
—John Prine, "Paradise"*

When we woke to the ash falling we knew it was over. No phone calls were made, nobody had to guess where anyone else was. One by one, the grownups stepped outside into the pale morning, chins tilted up toward the sky, hands held out with their palms facing upward as if awaiting gifts from Jesus himself. All around them the gray ash swirled, catching sometimes in their hair and against their clothes, drifting and fluttering like snow.

School was canceled that day because all the grownups – at least the ones who were left – were meeting up to see what to do about the Tennes-

see Valley Authority. None of us kids knew much about what the Tennessee Valley Authority was, but we knew it was a big company that had something to do with coal and was trying to buy everybody out. They'd bought out a lot of families already: the Buchanans, Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard, the Moores and their children. None of us had been all that close with the Moore kids, which was why we hadn't thought about the company very much so far. As far as we were concerned, a company named after Tennessee could only have so much to do in Kentucky anyway, and the whole thing – the steady house-by-house takeover of land, the fumes from TVA machinery that now hung in the air – would blow over by the time the next winter rolled around.

"Maybe we shouldn't go today." Rose said it quietly, on the floor in the narrow closet next to the kitchen, while we were getting on our shoes.

I looked at her. Rose was older than me – twelve – practically a teenager, and she was plain-looking in a way that made her seem older. Brown hair parted neatly down the middle, brushed but frizzy. She was wearing a violet turtleneck and watching me with her dark eyes, in a way that seemed knowing and that I didn't entirely understand. "Why not?" I whispered, because she had whispered.

"That ash. It's from the plant down the road, everyone saw it."

"We still have to go," I said, and she relented.

So we got our bikes out of the garage, met Maggie and Joseph Gilmore at their house on the way out of town, then took the dirt road out of Paradise that dead-ended at the Green River. Bike wheels whirring under us, flicking up dust. Maggie, the youngest of us at seven, had her curly pigtailed flipped back over her shoulders, stray vanilla-blond locks whipping around, coming undone as we gathered speed. The sky stewed overhead, thick and milky, but the ash fell away more and more as we got farther from town.

"Maggie," Rose said, "why are you wearing that coat?"

We biked in pairs, us boys up front and Maggie and Rose a few yards behind us, but everyone could still hear one another. Maggie's coat was thick and woolen, I had recognized it from winter, and the hood was pulled up over her head. It was May.

"So the ash won't burn my skin."

"Who told you it'd burn your skin?"

"My mom." A pause. "Didn't it burn your skin?"

"No."

"Did you feel it at all?"

"Yeah," said Rose, "but it didn't burn. I think all the heat had gone away by the time I touched it."

"Well, what did it feel like?"

Rose considered the question for a moment. "Dead skin," she said finally. "Like flakes of dead skin."

"Eww," Maggie shouted. She was younger than Rose and a girl, so she was grossed out by this sort of thing.

When we got to the river, we left our bikes in the usual place, behind some thick bushes in the grass not far from the road. Maggie shrugged off the giant coat and draped it carefully over her bike to keep it from getting in the mud. The water was stiller than usual today, moving in occasional small shudders against the banks. Golden-green like heaven, like the shimmering copper mounds at the bottom of a fountain, ridged with moss. This place was where you could get to the river most easily, but of course it went on for miles and miles, Joseph said probably four or five hundred miles at least, from our town toward the Rochester Dam and Mammoth Cave and eventually all the way up north to the Ohio. The river slipped away from Paradise here and into the deep uncertain woods where Muhlenberg County faded into forest. These were woods that we four combed afternoon after afternoon, or day after day on the weekends, and had been combing for several straight months now, ever since the day Michael Harris had gone missing.

Michael Harris was our Tom Sawyer in every sense of the word. He wore a bright red bandana, tied around his left wrist when it wasn't on his head, and he was the best of all of us at finding things to catch from the river during the summertime. Bullfrogs, every once in a while, and crawdads. None of the rest of us could find a crawdad to save our life. Joseph said he'd found one once, but he didn't show anybody and nobody had seen him catch it, and Joseph's word is about as good as salt anyway. Joseph looked for river creatures the same way the rest of us did, bent down on both knees in the cold muddy grass, hands swiping around under the shallow water at the river's edge, scooping up handfuls of roly-polies and silt to drain through our fingers moments later. Not Michael Harris. Michael would jump straight in, splashing anyone who had been unlucky enough to be standing close by. He'd plunge down into the deep murky parts of the river, stay down so long we'd sometimes start to worry – Rose guessed he stayed down extra long just to scare us – and then he'd burst up again with another great splash, dark hair sopping wet and stuck to his forehead, green eyes gleaming and

mouth spread wide open in a grin that dripped with river, a fat red crawdad twitching and feeling around in one fist.

The grownups all loved Michael, too. He was nice to the teacher at school, brought her fresh Jonathan apples from the tree in his yard. He knew how to be funny in a way that grownups liked, which was different from funny in the way that kids like, although he was good at that too. If any of the rest of us had gone missing, me or Rose or Maggie or somebody, people still would have minded, but I don't think it would have torn everybody up the same way it did when Michael went.

"We oughta go far today," Joseph said with an air of decision as we headed down the narrow riverside path that led into the woods. We walked single-file, Joseph and then me and then Rose and then Maggie, like a regular band of expeditioners. Joseph was wearing a tank top faded with orange stripes, and under the straps of his backpack in front of me I could see his bony shoulders, squared with determination.

"Farther than we went this weekend?" asked Maggie.

"A lot farther."

"How come?"

"In case we don't have much time later," said Rose.

"Well, we'll come back tomorrow," said Maggie. "And the next day."

We picked our way through the weeds and over logs, eyes still trained to the ground, since we walked down this part of the path every day and we didn't need to be looking around just yet. None of us were quite sure how much Maggie knew – about the ash, about the tainted air and the coal company – or how much we ought to tell her.

I personally was thinking about me and Rose's parents on that morning, the morning the ash first fell. The looks on my mother and father's faces, dumbstruck – from sleepiness or from astonishment, I couldn't have been sure. They had only just awakened, had scarcely gotten dressed, and then maybe while still half-waking they had seen the gray stuff flitting against their windows, gathering like dust on their porch. Our porch. Our neighbors outside already, wandering lost in their own town, reaching with deadened arms up toward a metal-gray sky. Rose and I knew what the ash was because our parents had been talking about it for months by then, maybe years, about the power plant going up down the road from us. It'll poison the air, they said. It'll poison every one of us. But we wouldn't leave, because our parents had been born in Paradise and our parents' parents before them

and their parents before them. Our whole family was buried in this town at the Adrie Hill Cemetery, and someday, we fancied, we would be too, no matter how much money any company ever offered us.

It was a wonder the Gilmores hadn't left yet. Maggie had been sick as a baby, and now Mrs. Gilmore fretted over her like a nurse over a cancer patient. If anyone was going to be bought out to leave Paradise for cleaner air in a foreign city, it was the Gilmores for sure.

"We'll come back here every day," said Joseph confidently, ducking under a log that had fallen across the path. "Every day as long as we live, until we find Michael." He had been saying things along these lines since January, likely more for his own benefit than for anyone else's.

"It's summer now," Rose pointed out, "so that should make it easier." Her voice was toneless, as though she could barely even hear what she was saying.

"It's not summer yet," I said automatically. "Not 'til school's out."

"It's practically out. It feels like summer. We've only got a little bit left," Rose said, which was true. Only a little bit of school left and then we were out, free from any obligations, free to spend our days at the Green River for as long as we wanted and to eat watermelons and catch crawdads and sleep over at each other's houses. Just one long golden stretch of summer to make up for our schoolwork, for Michael and for the Tennessee Valley Authority, for all of the winter that we'd been going through lately. Joseph and I had plans to explore the power plant together as soon as we got a chance, hopefully with Michael, although we weren't about to tell the girls that.

"Anyway," Rose said, "what I meant is that it's warmer than it was."

This was true. Michael had disappeared right after New Year's, when a lot of the river was still frozen over. The search parties from town, made up of all our fathers and mothers, had given up near the end of January, beginning of February, which was when the four of us had taken over. Trudging through snow and treading carefully on the icy stretches in February, then crunching over melting slush in early March. Thick boots and mittens and scarves to hide our necks. Breath materializing in front of us, taunting Michael's ghost, almost. *We're breathing, Michael. Are you?*

It took us until almost lunchtime to reach the part of the river we didn't know as well. Where the tangles of weeds and underbrush took on unknown shapes, where we came upon foreign forbidden flowers and plants, where the trees were alien and their dark branches bent oddly, all strange and sinister. At least it seemed that way to us. It had taken us a while to work up to

this part of the river, since we were so in-depth about everything – we could spend a whole day or two just at one spot, venturing further and further away from the water and into the trees, the four of us spreading out in each of the cardinal directions, bushwhacking sometimes as far as a mile.

We couldn't keep walking any later than one or two in the afternoon, or else we wouldn't be out of the woods until after dark. Joseph was the one with the watch. He stopped us at what he figured was a good spot, we all more or less agreed, and we dumped our backpacks in a pile in the grassy clearing next to the rushing water.

It was a rule among us that we ate lunch before we started looking, to refuel after the walk. We found places to rest – fallen logs and the knotted bases of trees, dry patches of grass – and sat in a loose circle facing one another, digging apples and aluminum-foil-wrapped sandwiches out of our backpacks.

"I hope we find him before summer," said Joseph as he unwrapped his sandwich, peanut butter smeared in the creases of the crumpled aluminum. "Or at least before July. It wouldn't be any fun to keep coming out here when it gets really hot out."

"Plus it wouldn't be any fun to have summer without him," said Maggie.

"That too," Joseph agreed. His mouth was full from chewing. He swallowed after a moment and then his mouth broke into a peanut-buttery grin. "Watch us find him—" He stopped, licked the brown stuff away from his teeth. "Watch us be out looking for him one day, and he just jumps up out of the water with a crawdad in his hand. Just splashes up out of the water, like, Hey look, guys, look how long I stayed under!"

We had all memorized this mental image, partly I guess from having seen it in person so many times, but mostly from all of the time we had spent over the last few months picturing it. Michael, drenched, clutching the clawing creature in his hand. Usually we'd all smile whenever somebody mentioned it, but today no one really responded.

"No one could hold their breath that long," said Rose.

"If anyone could," said Maggie with obvious reverence, "it'd be Michael." Maggie was in love with Michael, had been for years, got all doe-eyed and faint whenever he was around. Every time she got sick, he'd drop by the Gilmores' and kiss her on the cheek, leave her apples and flowers, cards.

"*If anyone could, it'd be Michael,*" Joseph mocked her, tilting his head back, clasping his hands together and rolling his eyes as if in a dream.

Maggie shoved him. "Don't be mean."

"You shouldn't be so obvious," Joseph told her. "He's never gonna like you like that if he knows you like *him* like that."

"That's not how it works," said Maggie.

"Is too."

"You're right, Maggie, it's not," said Rose, talking to Maggie but looking at Joseph. "That's just how boys think it works."

"Oh yeah?" said Joseph. There was a little peanut butter just under his lower lip. He looked like he was trying not to smile.

"Yeah. Boys think they've gotta be mean to you or not talk to you, and that's how to get your attention. But all it's really doing is making them look like a bunch of babies."

"Not all boys are like that," I said.

"Not Michael," added Maggie.

"No," Rose agreed, "not Michael. He – he's better," she said, and then she looked quickly down into her lap as if to avoid making eye contact with any of us. She had been about to say *was*, I could tell – had been about to say *He was better*, but she'd been frightened, or maybe she had wanted to spare us.

We watched Joseph, waiting. He reached up and wiped the streak of peanut butter from his chin. "Yeah," he said then, finally. "Yeah."

We sat without talking for a few minutes. I could hear everybody chewing their food, and the river moving past and the trees shifting occasionally in the breeze. The air smelled rotten – not as bad as it smelled in town, but close – and I thought about the crawdads and wondered whether the water here tasted bad to them.

After a minute or so, I made eye contact with Rose. She had been staring into space looking blank, dejected, and only just then did I realize how much she, barely the oldest of all of us, resembled our parents. It wasn't even in how tall she had gotten or anything like that – it was in the look on her face, so very much like the looks I had seen on my mother's face and my father's that morning, as they stood in the ash falling under the white sky. Rose looked away as soon as she saw me watching her. That was when

I really knew that to Rose, Joseph and I were just like Maggie, young and hopeful, kidding ourselves. Rose already knew what our parents knew about Michael, about the power plant. At that moment I thought I knew it too, and it made me angry. Let's just leave, then, I wanted to say. If all of this is such a lost cause, then let's give up. We all saw the ash. If we're not going to see the search through, if we're not going to see our own land through, our own town, then let's not stick around at all, not another single day.

I had seen those stricken looks on my parents' and on all of our parents' faces only once before, the night Michael Harris disappeared back in January. We had just gotten through celebrating the new year, and Michael had gone back alone to the Green River to look for his gloves, which he'd left there and forgotten earlier in the day. By the dead of night he still hadn't returned, and one by one flashlights had flickered on like lanterns across town as we headed out of our houses to convene in the streets of Paradise. We walked to the river together as a crowd, a community, our beams of light arcing into still clusters of trees and casting blindly at patches of grass off the side of the road. *Michael! Michael, are you out there?* My family and the Gilmores, Mr. and Mrs. Harris, the Taylors, the Austells. The Buchanans, who were still standing their ground at that point and wouldn't be bought out until April. It was cold out and nobody felt like crying yet, we were just moving, out of the town and toward the river like ghosts, eyes wide open, insides numb, frozen.

Some of us must have known that very night that the boy would never be recovered, that he would be left behind with Paradise and the Green River forever just like the Adrie Hill Cemetery, while the rest of our houses and buildings were all torn down that year or the next to make room for the plant. The air that we breathed was no good, it could not be sustained any longer. The Pritchards already knew this, and the Moores. Within a year, the Gilmores too would move east to Virginia, Rose's and my family over to North Carolina. Most of us would never visit here again, knowing all too well what we would find – our landmarks buried under fat metal pipes and fenced facilities, the foul stench of machinery. By the time the ash fell, a strange feeling combined with the actions of the Tennessee Valley Authority had already splintered us, but on that January night Michael went missing we all moved together as a group, many of us even holding hands, the whole town staggered, venturing together toward the river and the pitch-black forest for as far as we could make it until dawn.

ANGELICA ESQUIVEL



Senior

Major: English and Creative Writing

Reading: Short Fiction

Angelica Esquivel is from Ohio. Her work has appeared in a previous *Café Shapiro Anthology*, *Fortnight Literary Press*, as well as *What the F?* Feminist publication. She has received a Hopwood Award in poetry. Her work focuses on the intersections of identity, including gender, class, race and place, facets she has become more conscious of during her time as a queer, woman of color student amidst a population of mostly white, affluent peers. In her free time she enjoys writing, reading, painting, and sewing.

- Angelica dedicates this reading to the memory of Cash Phillips.

The Day Of

You drive to the outskirts of town, past the endless Ohioan cornfields, to a reservoir tucked away in the country. It's balmy outside despite being the end of October, and you're conscious of the dense air flowing into the car, into your lungs, and then back out again. Three days ago, your best friend overdosed for the fourth and final time and now the late-autumn sun nauseatingly reflects off your windshield. A song plays quietly on the radio, something from Kendrick Lamar's first album, maybe "Blow My High," but it's overtaken by the sound of Dakota sobbing in the backseat. In the rearview mirror you see her take gasping, jagged breaths, her long brown hair stringy with the moisture of her tears. Ethan scoots over and takes Dakota into his arms, murmuring, "It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay."

Maritza is the fifth person in your high school class to die this way.

It happened at her boyfriend Chris's house on Cherry Street, which was where you guys hung out most of the time because there weren't any adults around (except for Chris, who doesn't count). You weren't there the day that it happened. As Maritza got out her crescent-moon drawstring bag, tilted the plastic envelope of powder into a spoon with some bottled water and held a pink lighter underneath, you were swimming laps at the YMCA across town. As the needle pierced the skin of her forearm, her pupils constricting, her breath slowing, you did a flip-turn off the pool's wall. And as you came up for air she collapsed to the floor, stopped breathing entirely, and suffered multiple strokes from a lack of oxygen to the brain.

Chris found her, still warm, and tried to administer CPR while on the phone with the hospital. Truth is, he was probably too coked up to be of much use--though you weren't cruel enough to tell him that. At the hospital, they hooked her up to a machine that gave her breath and after a day, she began to breathe on her own again. She probably could have stayed there forever, a slightly mussed Sleeping Beauty. But she would never be able to return to us the way she once was. Her mother took her off life support and she passed away in the night, though you knew that as soon as she fell to floor in Chris's house, she was gone.

You dig your fingernails into the steering wheel and shakily ask Alé, your cousin who's sitting in the passenger seat staring off into space, to light a cigarette for you. The initial puff is jarring. You remember: this isn't your usual brand. This is Maritza's last pack, lime green American Spirits that she switched to after reading that David Lynch, her favorite film director, smoked them. By now, Dakota has quieted down in the backseat and there is only the crinkle of a wrapper as Ethan splits open a peach-flavored rello and pours the contents on an old yearbook that you keep under the seat for such purposes. He rolls a blunt and hands it to Dakota, who inhales slowly. It smells almost like sage, a bitter and sour burn that gets rid of the negative spirits in a confined space.

The windows of your hand-me-down Ford Taurus begin to fog and Dakota offers the blunt to Alé, who waves it away. "Come on, what would Maritza do?" Ethan asks.

"I know exactly what she'd do, that's the problem," Alé replies.

"I hope you aren't insinuating that weed is equivalent to heroin," you say. You want to add a snarky comment about her affinity for alcohol, but don't. You were friends with Maritza longer than any of them, since Pre-K, and

have always felt protective of her and her sometimes questionable decisions.

Also, you wonder if you aren't at least partly to blame. Maybe your explanation made it easier for her to relapse. You said the series of events out loud, trying to make sense of it yourself: her addiction began with a tennis injury that required surgery and a prescription for Vicodin, so that when the prescription ran out she began buying pills off the street, and so that by the time those got too expensive she was desperate enough to try the cheaper and more readily available alternative, heroin. These were simply the facts of what happened but you worry that by excusing her this way, you might have made the decisions seem not like decisions at all, but rather an inevitable downward spiral that began the moment a pharmacist handed her the first bottle of pills.

There were glimmers of hope right before the end. You could tell by looking in her eyes if she was fucked up, and the last few times you saw her, she clearly wasn't. Instead, she talked about positive affirmations, her new yoga routine, meditative exercises that her counselor had taught her. You were freaking out about the upcoming ACT and while she sat across from you on the unfinished floors of Chris's house, pretzel style, she told you to match your breathing to hers, not to worry about anything except the present moment.

You try to do that now, focus on the sound of Alé's voice, the gentle shaking of your car as you drive down I-75. "My mom can tell if I'm high just by feeling my hands," Alé says with wide eyes. "I don't know how, but she can."

You start laughing, thinking about the narrow-eyed glare Alé's mom throws at you whenever you drop Alé off, and how Maritza believed that she practiced dark *brujería* in her free time. Tears run down your faces as you laugh, a laugh that stretches on for minutes until you don't know what you're laughing about anymore. You turn off onto a gravel path and pull into the parking lot of the reservoir, a small, manmade body of water across from the country club where prom is held, and turn the car off once your temporary hysteria subsides. The reservoir is the only picturesque thing about this town, a place where you all came to feel like you deserved something more beautiful than empty business fronts, dilapidated factories and flat, mice-filled cornfields. After getting out of the car, the four of you walk around the reservoir to an abandoned building that sits behind it and cross a rusted metal bridge.

"Wait up!" Alé says, teetering on the bridge.

"What did you wear high heels for?" you ask her, although you go back

and extend your arm to her for balance.

"What would Maritza do?" she snaps back and you laugh, nodding in concession.

"When does that thing start, anyway?" Ethan asks, referring to the memorial party being held for Maritza (this town doesn't do funerals). You are exhausted from crying and remembering and know you are about to be even more exhausted when faced with Maritza's mother, her little brother, your other classmates.

"Not until five. We've still got some time," you say. After the bridge, you push through an overgrown path, thin branches scratching at your legs. There is another reservoir, hidden entirely by trees, with a small island in the center. You sit on the grass, pulling your patterned skirt around your knees. It really is lovely outside today, the trees all glowing orange and scarlet, the water still and the breeze gentle.

You last came here a few weeks ago, with the same people as well as Maritza. You had done the same thing, lying in the grass in the sunshine. Maritza had closed her eyes, a cigarette hanging from her fingers, and said something about being able to feel the spherical energy of the earth. Then, it began to rain and the five of you ran back to the car and watched as clouds swirled above the reservoir, some of them dipping so low you might have been able to reach up and touch them. The sky was divided, half gray and half clear, so that you knew before long, the storm would come to an end.

Sitting in the car, smoking and talking as you'd done hundreds of times before, Maritza said five was a very blessed and fortunate number, according to her psychic, so we had better not make anymore friends. Now, you think five wasn't as lucky a number as she thought, or perhaps your luck just finally ran out.

The spherical energy of the earth. It kills you that you can't remember her exact words, but you try to recapture that feeling as the ground presses against your back and the grass prickles your skin. You lay there and don't think about walking to Maritza's house after a tennis match, in shiny white sneakers and red tennis skirts. (The real reason you two joined tennis: on match days you get to wear the tiny uniform to school instead of the shapeless khaki/polo/cardigan combination). You don't think about everyone constantly asking if you were sisters, since you both had the same nose-pointed smile and brown-black hair. You don't think about when, in second grade, you both dressed as Selena for Halloween and you thought your friendship was over for good. You don't think about the first three times she overdosed,

how she began to seem like a walking ghost to you, but a ghost you loved and would be honored to be haunted by. You don't think about how you tried to be both there to support her and not there to save yourself the pain. You don't think about when she was tangible, sitting in front of you in Pre-Calc, tilting her head back and asking you to play with her hair. You don't think about her mother, who wasn't particularly fond of you, crying into your shoulder in the hospital room. You don't think.

"We should bring some of her ashes to spread here," Dakota, who has been wordless all afternoon, says.

"Have they cremated her yet?" Ethan asks. You wince, picturing Maritza's body being placed into a furnace. But you tell yourself, it's just a corpse. Maritza's soul left it before it got anywhere near a crematorium.

"I don't know," you say. "The hospital asked for her organs before she passed away, but I don't know if her mother agreed. She said she would give me some ashes. But Maritza would have liked us to spread some ashes here." You pull out clumps of grass with your hands, letting them fall to the ground like confetti.

"Do you guys ever wonder if the government intentionally allows heroin into our cities the same way they did with crack back in the eighties?" Alé asks. She's big on conspiracies, but you don't hold it against her, understanding the desperate need to believe in something, anything.

"Probably," Ethan says, "They want us to stay poor and stupid so we're easier to control. And it's, like, population control, too."

You shrug and look up at the sky as if you are expecting something, though what exactly, you do not know.

Driving back into town, you pass Halloween decorations, an inflatable pumpkin, fake spider webs. You pass a line of vehicles at McDonald's, a person entering the car wash across the street. A man on the sidewalk spins a sign, a big arrow encouraging you to try a new wireless plan. You are appalled that the world is going on, given the circumstances.

Your mood changes just before you turn onto Maritza's street, seeing the lines of cars parked on neighbors' lawns, loud Tejano music spilling around the block. Her house is a tiny two bedroom, but now people mill across the lawn, holding candles or beer or styrofoam plates of food. You smell barba-coa, too, and you can almost feel Maritza in the space beside you, urging you to have a good time. You see her little brother running around with his

cousins. Your parents, who were friends with Maritza's parents when they were in high school, are there. You think you've run out of tears to cry but when you see Maritza's mother, looking blank and shell-shocked, you can't help but weep.

You want to blame Maritza's addiction on her mother, and you partly can, because her mother kicked her out of the house at fifteen for "not acting like a Christian." She moved in with you for a while and then into Chris's house. Ironically, Maritza's mother loved Chris, which made you feel better about her not liking you: she was simply a poor judge of character. After Maritza's first overdose, she went to rehab for a while. (You told people she was visiting her cousin in Florida. They assumed she was taking care of a pregnancy). She moved back in with her mother when she returned, but her mother, feeling guilty and not wanting to send her into a relapse, became too lenient. She let Maritza do what she pleased and gave her money whenever she asked, which was ill-advised.

Maritza and her mother were frustrated at one another, they quickly turned into people neither of them could recognize. They fought incessantly, cursing at one another and breaking things. You don't know how many times Maritza called, crying, and you heard her mother screaming in the background. So Maritza moved out again and back in with Chris.

By now, however, the mutual reeling sense of loss and confusion overshadow any bitterness from before. Dakota, Ethan, and Alé approach the party slowly, taking stock. But you rush toward Maritza's mother, the only other person who could have loved Maritza as much as you. She sees you coming and extends her arms the same way Maritza would, making it clear before you are anywhere near her that she wanted to give you a hug. Sometimes, her arms would be open for a comical amount of time as you walked down the sidewalk and toward her, and you would embrace the cheesiness and hold your arms out to her, as well.

You reach her mother, who's wearing a rainbow paisley top and a long flowy skirt, so unlike her usual dark-palleted clothing, and so incongruous with her exhausted, somber face. You know she dressed this way for Maritza and it makes you cry even harder. The relatives standing near her give you some space and her mother holds you, her dangling dreamcatcher earrings brushing against your face. She is so warm and softly says, "Mija, mija, mija." You feel a transferral of her love for Maritza turning halfway into love for you, who is here and solid. When you finally pull away, you look into her mother's face for a sign of the future or a reminder of the past. Maritza inherited her mother's straight eyebrows, her thin lips, her hug. In the years to come, even after you move away from this ghost-filled town, when you return to visit family you will always stop by her mother's house, eat the arroz con pollo she cooks for you, drink the spiced hot cocoa that always was

Maritza's favorite.

You make your way around the party, feeling Maritza's energy everywhere you go. You drink in front of your parents and for the first time they don't say anything. You eat a plate of beans and help the younger kids smash open a Mexican-candy filled piñata, smiling at the fact that someone actually thought to bring a piñata. Maritza would have loved it. You smoke with her elderly, gray-haired Uncle Chuy, noticing how age barriers and social niceties have fallen to the wayside. Everyone is themselves, dancing, eating, and being near one another late into the night.

You go inside to use the restroom, feeling as untethered as you did upon hearing the news of Maritza's death. But now, it's a good kind of untethered. One of your classmates, Ricky, a guy Maritza used to kind-of-date, is passed out on the couch. In the bathroom, you look at yourself in the mirror. Your eyes are red and swollen, your hair unbrushed, but you smile at yourself anyway. Tonight seems shiny and yellow, reminding you of the many house parties Maritza talked you into going to. You understand her now more than you ever did before, you think, and what it is to feel incredibly old at sixteen. The realization is at once exhausting and invigorating.

You puke a little into the toilet bowl. It comes out red from all the spicy watermelon-flavored rebanaditas you ate from the piñata. It looks like watery blood and Maritza always said you were lowkey morbid. You flush the toilet and rinse your mouth under the faucet, splashing water onto your face. Grabbing a can of Gillette Venus shaving cream that sits on the edge of the tub, you go back into the living room and spray some into Ricky's hand.

Ethan and Dakota come inside, looking for you, and you hold a finger up to your lips and nod to Ricky. They suppress laughter, sniggering, as you poke his face with a paper napkin until he moves his hand to scratch it, covering himself with foamy shaving cream. He jerks awake in bewilderment and you all laugh hysterically. He looks confused until he remembers where you guys are, jumps from the couch and snatches the shaving cream from you.

"Aaah!" you run outside, followed by Ethan and Dakota, Ricky stumbling after you. Your mother is standing next to a table of beverages on the lawn, and makes a face that looks like it wants to be a scowl but won't for the sake of decorum. There is a sudden pulling feeling inside of your chest, and you feel the physical absence of Maritza strike you once again.

After the party, you stick around to help Maritza's family clean up. Her Aunt Bev hands you a stack of leftover photographs of Maritza that she had printed to hand out to guests, and asks you to take them inside. There is shaving cream on the couch from earlier. You'll have to remember to clean

that up.

The aroma of food brought by relatives and friends fills the house; menudo, caldo, tamales and endless piles of tortillas. You realize you are incredibly hungry. You go into the dining room and set the pile of pictures on the plastic-covered table. Someone you assume is Maritza's grandmother stands by the table, putting tortillas into Ziploc bags.

"Hola," her grandmother says, and before you can reply 'Hola. ¿Como estás?' she asks, "¿Tienes hambre?" She hands you a plate and piles food onto it; fideos, frijoles, molé, a scoop of salsa to top it off. You sit down and thank her, begin to shovel food into a tortilla.

After you eat, all you want to do is go home and get into bed. You take the stack of pictures from the table and go to Maritza's mother's room to place them on her dresser. You open the door and find yourself face to face with una ofrenda, you had almost forgotten that Dia de los Muertos is in a few days. Maritza's mother has put up dozens of framed pictures of Maritza at varying ages and places. There is a picture from fourth grade, of the two of you and some other people standing on the playground of your elementary school which has since been demolished. There is a picture of her in a play her freshman year, wearing heavy stage make up and beaming under the lights. There is one of her screaming on a roller coaster at Cedar Point.

Pictures of other people are on the altar, too, people you never met, some of whom probably died before you even born. A yellow-sepia fading image of a man on a horse, wearing a cowboy hat. A woman in a puffy-sleeved white wedding dress. You take a picture from the stack and lean it on the altar, among marigolds and papel picado, punched garlands of colorful paper. A sugar skull kindly smiles at you. You light a stick of incense and place it in its holder, inhaling the familiar scent that used to envelope the two of you in Maritza's bedroom back when she lived with her mother, the window cracked open and a towel stuffed under the door. Memories of Maritza float around the room, settling on every surface. Tears well up in your eyes, all you can do is love her. You reach your fingers into the small ceramic bowl of grainy salt, pinch some up, pour it in a circle for the continuation of life.

SOFIA FALL



Junior

Major: English and PitE

Reading: Poetry

Sofia is a junior majoring in English and Program in the Environment. She grew up in Ann Arbor with her three sisters. She likes reading, hiking, dancing, and road trips. After graduating, she'd like to work in conservation in Montana or Maine.

Exhibit 1

a photograph
on the wall of your house
that's standing still, although
your city is only salt now,
and lately I've wanted a covering
thicker than rime
or simple skin. I only pinned insects

to your eyes to see blood seep,
because you thought teeth made
a grey tangle of my skin
and pressed your mouth in me
to say listen like it wasn't a prayer,
like it wasn't everything we had

except for salt, except
for slivers of slow loam and skyline,
rust and dwindled wings.
You always wanted me ossified
for recollection, wide-eyed

inside a clouded jar, a relic
 for meticulous curation. Listen:
 I never learned how to accumulate,
 how to thin ichor from rind

and force my body
 into warmth again, where the earth
 is nothing but horizons

and the air is a museum
 of surrendered breath.

If You Would Take Our Bodies

When we were honeyeaters,
 we had tongues to take sugar and bitter berries,
 mouths for octopus and rust and sea. Every morning
 we followed salt out to the horizon, made our landmarks

out of furrowed skin, our boundaries
 just crease, just scar. We kept our many eyes polished
 in a silver box, pupils lidded with red maps
 to lead us back to the olive trees.

We sent our enemies our irises. They thought
 our hollow sockets sightless and we smiled
 without showing our teeth. Later, huddled near
 each other's lips we whispered how one day

we would invite them in without looking,
 reveal our retinas floating in the olive oil,
 take their fingernails to soak in brine
 until they were ripened, sweet.

Machinations

Grandmother said that I was born with bile
in my eyes and skin. I only remember her
by her teeth, streaked yellow when we watched
the cardinals plummet from the sky
that spring she laughed
and said my early body

was too small for her to hold on to. Grandmother scorned
my useless matching eyes, ten crooked fingers. She said
she knew a woman once with silver buttons
running down her spine. She laughed. She indicated
her own hooked vertebrae beneath skin, split open
her palms to reveal hollow carpus, *See? I've never had*

the kind of bones for holding on to. She laughed,
said even after bile bled from the whites of my eyes,
I looked ravenous, looked lean, *you couldn't hold a child*

who was lungless, who was lioness. Grandmother peeled
each metacarpal from her skin to show
its machinery, the way metal hooked metal
through slippery vein. She said she knew a woman once
who traded silver joints
for measly bone. She laughed. She implicated

her two-toned eyes, requested the cartilage
from my fingers, said she'd remember me
biled, remember me stripped of skin. I was ravenous.
I still remember her yellow-streaked teeth
that spring she took my eyes out,
threaded them back through with wire.

ZOYA GURM



Freshman

Major: Undecided

Reading: Fiction

Zoya Gurm is a freshman at the college of Literature, Science, & the Arts. Her writing is inspired by places and people she encounters in her travels or day-to-day life. Her works have been featured in *Nowhere Magazine*, *Control Lit Magazine*, and various anthologies. She is the recipient of the Fall 2016 Hopwood Awards in Underclassmen Fiction and Underclassmen Poetry.

Marcie

I was with Marcie the day she almost died and I was with her the day she did.

Marcie's mother had wanted a son to raise brawny and strong but upon delivering a young baby girl, lost any such hopes. Marcie came out a strange baby, skinny and twisted at weird angles, a dumbfounded expression on her face despite her closed infant eyes. She was far from the miracle her mother expected. Nobody cried in the delivery room, only the nurses smiled.

Marcie grew in the quick, uneven bursts that defined her childhood. In the fifth grade, Marcie had long chicken legs but her torso was short and squat. In the seventh grade, Marcie's skinny brown arms grew dangly by her side, so none of her skirts fit her school dress code. In the ninth grade,

Marcie's shoulders widened and her neck craned, her torso evening out the long limbs. And by the eleventh grade, Marcie lost the baby cheeks and had grown breasts and a wider pair of hips, growing womanly and even once and for all.

But Marcie never grew brawny or strong. As I knew her she was only afraid and cowardly, watching from a lawn chair as the rest of us prepared to go into the world and face life as she is, indecisive and unforgiving and so merciless that a girl like Marcie could easily snap.

The first time I actually spoke to her was when we were assigned to do a school project together. It was in our economics class and I ended up doing most of the work. I would sit across from her and talk through my ideas—she'd nod and smile but offer no suggestion of her own. Most days we would meet in libraries to avoid the intimacies of inviting each other to our respective homes.

At the time I didn't think much about those night routines. For two weeks, we'd meet in an apologetic silence, about an hour per evening. We'd comb through textbooks and munch on granola bars. We'd speak in short bursts. She would pick at hangnails and wouldn't look me in the eye. I think about them sometimes now, wondering what she was thinking, what she was so afraid of.

It was a Thursday when her car skidded off the road and flipped over. The newspaper printed the details: It was 8:13 pm. Her seat heater was turned up all the way. Soft music was playing on the radio. The roads were icy, but not that icy. She was on the highway between her mother's one-story home and the public library.

In the moments when I first received the news that she was in the hospital, I tried frantically to remember the last words Marcie had said to me, or the last I had said back. I cried those nights, agonizing over what they could've been, but the only sounds I could recall were tentative peelings of granola bar wrappers or a whoosh of air as we turned a page. The rest was all a blank, the words were lost.

But she recovered. Our worry dissipated and scrawny Marcie went back to being scrawny Marcie. The bouquets we had bought her wilted and our fifty-cent "get well soon" cards were recycled. The eccentricities of her strange household—her angry mother, who found ways to confront and offend each and every member of our community, and quiet, ignored Marcie, who we all pitied a little but not a lot—faded into the backdrop once again.

Most said it was just bad luck, to survive a freak accident by so little only to be killed by something so mundane as a case of the season's flu a few months later. The only deadly case in the state at that.

"Marcie's in the hospital again," my mother told me one evening. "You remember her, the girl from your school? Something in her stomach, I think." She told me to bring a card and some chocolates to the hospital room. She heard the neighbors had baked Marcie's mother a casserole, so we had to follow suit.

"It's the only time anyone wants to do anything nice for that family," she said. "When that poor girl is hurt."

When I went to the hospital room, Marcie was alone. Her lanky body was squirming around in pain, but there were no nurses or family members for comfort. Her face was pale and her eyes half-closed. I couldn't tell if she was awake as I put my gifts on her bedside table.

She spoke to me in a raspy voice, deeper than usual. "You don't have to stay very long." I thought she was joking, but I left shortly after.

Marcie died that night. The obituary in our town's paper said it was a painless passing, but from what I saw it wasn't. At school, we filled her old locker with flowers and pictures as a memorial. I knew that even as a ghost, she wouldn't come back to see it.

Nobody knew what to say. We weren't surprised, but we didn't know why we weren't.

"I always knew something was wrong with that family," our neighbor told me in the days leading up to the funeral, leaning over the fence like she was sharing a secret. "She must've been cursed."

I think life sets out against certain people, chasing after them and burning their tails. No one could ever picture a girl like Marcie as an adult, so life didn't let her get there. Merciless and unforgiving, I'll tell you.

Marcie's mother couldn't pay for a nice funeral but the community chipped in just so we could say we did. We had car washes and car washes at school and the wealthier families threw some money at the cause. A few students gave eulogies at the funeral because their parents made them. We all went to Marcie's funeral but no one looked anyone in the eye. Nobody cried in the cemetery, only the morticians smiled.

PEI HAO



Senior

Major: Biochemistry and English

Reading: Poetry

Pei Hao is an LSA senior majoring in Biochemistry and English. In his free time, he enjoys training for a triathlon, watching Chinese Rom-Coms, and cleaning his room. He is currently attempting to publish a magazine and to apply to med school—neither of which is proceeding as planned—but he still hopes for the best.

Chinoiserie

UDUMBARA, soft shell of pale bulbs
emerging from vines and bedrock
once every thousand generations,
resting on xylemnous threaded tendrils
bathed and borne of the golden light

SUTRA, on the White Lotus,
suspended above a giant pond,
the Buddha blossoms and inhales

the CONCH trumpet blows
ground tremors and water shivers,
all nature is eavesdropping
into this holy secret

he speaks; temple bells across
the earth start tolling in unison,
GONG

DUKKHA: EXISTENCE IS SUFFERING
Gold light floods into the aether from his every word
GONG

TANHA: WANTING CREATES PAIN
Marvelous color erupts from gold
and shakes in kaleidoscopic chaos
GONG

NIRODHA: CEASE DESIRE FOR NIRVANA

his words spread out in sonorous waves
like wind breezing across grassy fields,
the cosmic vibrations echo forever

Three times the BELL tolled,
the Buddha disintegrates as
the sun sets beneath the horizon,
it is dark and still, once more.

黄鹤楼送孟浩然之广陵 Farewell to Meng Hao-Ran from Yellow
Huáng hè lóu sòng Mèng Crane Tower
Hào rán zhī Guǎng líng

故人西辞黄鹤楼, An old friend departs westward from the tower,
Gù rén xī cí huáng hè lóu

烟花三月下扬州。 Thick mist and spring flowers follow him down river.
Yān huā sān yuè xià yang zhōu

孤帆远影碧空尽, His lone sail fades against the empty-blue sky,
Gū fān yuǎn yǐng bì kōng jǐn

唯见长江天际流。 Until the river flows into the horizon.

静夜思 Evening Meditation
Jìng yè sī

床前明月光 The moonlight beams upon my bed
chuáng qián míng yuè guāng

疑是地上霜 I wonder if it could be frost instead?
yí shì dì shàng shuāng

举头望明月 Head tilting back, I watch the moon
jǔ tóu wàng míng yuè

低头思故乡 Eyes looking down, I dream of home.
dī tóu sī gù xiāng

早发白帝城 Morning Departure from Bai-Di
Zǎo fā bái dì chéng

朝辞白帝彩云间, I alight at dawn from the town clad in clouds,

千里江陵一日还。 My long-missed home is just a sunset away.

两岸猿声啼不住, Chimps endlessly calling in floods from both shores,

轻舟已过万重山。 My raft drifts past ten-thousand mountain ranges.

玉阶怨

Yù jiē yuàn Yù jiē shēng bái lù

Lament of the Jade Stairs

玉阶生白露， The stairs of white jade gathered morning dew,
 夜久侵罗袜。 It slowly soaked my socks as night arrived.
 却下水晶帘， I drew the crystal curtains in my room,
 玲珑望秋月。 To see the glimmer of the harvest moon.

望庐山瀑布

Wàng lúshān pùbù

Viewing the Waterfall at Mount Lu

日照香炉生紫烟， Violet clouds taper like incense of the dawn,
 遥看瀑布挂前川。 From afar, the falls hang a blanket of water
 飞流直下三千尺， Flying straight down a thousand meters
 疑是银河落九天。 As if it were heaven's silver river.

自遣

Zì qiǎn

Distracting Myself

对酒不觉暝， Sharing wine with good friends into the night,
 落花盈我衣。 I wake in a bed of fallen flowers.
 醉起步溪月， Still drunk, I follow the stream of the moon,
 鸟还人亦稀。 The birds are silent; the people are few.

长干行·其一 Letters from Chang-Gan

妾发初覆额
折花门前剧
郎骑竹马来
绕床弄青梅

At the beginning, I hid under my bangs
and stuck folded flowers at your door
You rode a bamboo steed as I chased you around the bed,
And our young love bloomed into green plums

同居长干里
两小无嫌猜

We both lived down Chang-Gan, down the same street
Two children lacking ill will or doubt

十四为君妇
羞颜未尝开
低头向暗壁
千唤不一回

At fourteen, I became engaged to you
But I was so shy, I could never look up
So I stared down, in the dark, and faced a wall
and never responded to one of your thousand calls

十五始展眉
愿同尘与灰
常存抱柱信
岂上望夫台

At fifteen, I opened my eyes to you and wished we'd be
the same ash and earth so that we'd never have to part
Often, I remember our wedding rites on the pillar
You vowed to never leave me waiting on the hilltop

十六君远行
瞿塘滟滪堆
五月不可触
猿声天上哀

At sixteen, you traveled far away for work
Qu-Tang Gorge, amidst jutting rocks and swirling waters
And the summer tides made rapid currents
While wailing apes cried out to heaven

门前迟行迹
——生绿苔
苔深不能扫
落叶秋风早

When you left, footsteps littered the doorway
Now, slowly, green moss takes their place
Moss so deep, it cannot be swept away
Leaves are falling in the winds of an early autumn

八月蝴蝶来
双飞西园草
感此伤妾心
坐愁红颜老

In August, the butterflies, yellow,
in pairs, fly to the grass of the western meadow
My heart aches to see these signs
and my face's blush, this sitting worry, fades

早晚下三巴
预将书报家
相迎不道远
直至长风沙

If night falls early on San-Ba,
please send a letter home
And I will come to meet you, no matter how far
Even through the long, winding sands.

TOMMY HAWTHORNE



Senior

Major: Double Bass Performance

Reading: Poetry

Tommy Hawthorne is a senior at the University of Michigan in Double Bass Performance. He has a Boston Terrier named Ziggy back at home in Tacoma, WA. His favorite animal is the octopus, and he wishes desperately that he could care for one as a pet. In his free time Tommy enjoys hiking, reading poetry, trouncing people in Smash Bros, and watching Chef's Table.

Ghazal/Portrait

The sun is missing. Water the forest at night? Waves
to remember the tempest weaving. Your best, mother.

God's golden pipes reaching steeple. Liturgy children
look to, cover ears. Sing it loud! Your voice the tallest, mother.

Boston Terriers lock one as their own. Provider
wrapped in blankets, sleeping - under arrest mother.

Rain? The sun is missing. It rains in Washington. Pills
to remember. Changing species, extinct. Rainforest mother.

Robots and ninja bats, only profession: the Nightmare
Comforter. Hawthorne caretaker and my own bluest mother.

Silver

Clouds forever blot the sky, so that the light is always grey by the time it's touched Tacoma; but these were rain clouds headed toward Wright Park, indistinguishable from the quilt over the city were it not that the water's surface on the bay was smattered into speckles like the rough texture of the white stone lions guarding the tall park gates. On a path by a bench in what will soon become a puddle Andrew Jackson lies face-down on the ground.

*

xii.

Dad calls them "all plastic loads"
says "straight into the neighbor's lungs"
because we don't like the neighbor
and it gets rid of plastic garbage

make a stream from flames
drip purple and blue

Mom lost her job at ResCare
but the fireplace is pretty

xii.

"Go to the movies! Which toy?
Oh! We can do that! Ice cream?
You know it! We got it! Vanilla?
Chocolate? Sorry, we only bought
EVERY FLAVOR. For you guys!
New Nintendo? Nintendogs to pair?
Does your friend have one?
Then YOU have one!

I want you kids to remember,
this is temporary.

I'm doing this so you'll both remember,
this is temporary."

*

Hydro-planing got its name from this rain, and as proud north west residents bustle about - no umbrella and often no hood - the starlings are lucky enough to have a canopy of firs covering them when the wall of water hits. The ground begins its transformation into sludge, but before Jackson can sink into this hermitage of gravel, dirt, and grass, his water-logged face is ripped clean in half by a puff of iridescent feathers with a pair of beady eyes.

*

xiii.

When Dad gets into a shouting match with Tourette's
it's often us that lose.
This happens more frequently now.

Money is the subject around the house when
my sister and I are in our rooms and "can't hear".
I think Tourette's sounds ugly when it talks about money.

I have decided not to use swear words.

xvii.

Mom and I about to look fly as all get out
in our 2002 Ford Taurus Wagon Deluxe
bumping equal parts *Rubber Soul*
and *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*
as I give her a lift from new job at St. Joe's.

It's a crazy feeling:

Mom's had another job two weeks
She's happy
She looks old
Mom doesn't remember things well anymore
She finds out she's not suited for her new workplace
She was only hired two weeks ago
Mom got let go and I'm driving her home
She's just as surprised as I am
She'd like to stay at work but now has to go home

There's a lot of talk at home between Mom,
Dad, and Tourette's about Obama, finances,
W, and when this'll all be over and done.
My sister and I bump "Money Trees"
in the Taurus to the mall for a while.

*

Nestled between a twig and a branch in a fir tree hole, Jackson's face is crumpled and skewered and no longer really a face up in the expertly woven, beak-and-talon-crafted dwellings of a starling desperate for the most notably ornamented home. Other nests will have herbs and flowers - nothing to shake a stick at - but this starling knows that floundering through the torrential downpour will be worth it when \$20 will ensure his nest is filled with baby chicks someday.

*

xxii.
Is the play over?
All shifted, preened, minced.
Folks held fast by loose stitching
miles long, old,
worn, worn.

“It must be nice” gashing
coral from green and red
tiles in the quilt.

xxii.
Was it Dad using all those swears?

*

Rain subsides in Tacoma only when the sun would like an especially difficult workday, a rarity when the bay and the mountains create an oasis in which the clouds can conglomerate and never leave. The starling hunkers down in his nest to dry his feathers and wait out the rain. A passerby rushes through the park on his way to work, not enthralled with the current climate, and pays little attention to green grass and half of Jackson slipping into the mud.

Sap

my face is a jar
of honey, and while

it goes well with tea
there are problems

with sticky. i learned
the ease of stringing together

“i love you” when I began to wish
they made gum that tasted like mint

with no sweet.
but you were

a breath-mint girl anyway.

Preservation

there are still doughnut
 and cookie crumbs
 scattered across the sidecar floor
 attached to Dad's Honda 750,
 odd considering
 how i fear the wind's strength
 will lift me up and out
 at speeds above 30,
 yet those crumbs seep
 sticky in that carpeted floor
 evidence of my crimes
 as i'm too chicken to hold onto Dad
 tight on the bike like Val
 and therefore cannot blame her.

soon i'll wish
 i could ride but won't
 because the whole while
 we occupy separate worlds
 of fogged up goggles ill-fit helmets
 pavement racing underneath
 "You Won't See Me" blaring
 from Dad's tiny rigged speaker
 Val knows i'm singing melody
 and i know
 she's got the ooo-lah-lah's
 on lock- stay cemented

Language of Pigment & Color

i.
~flash blue iris on yellow plain~
 you know i am Danger
 & Death & do not
 approach me

i am Paralysis
 with no
 antidote

do not approach me

without clear intention
your palms face-up
& crab in plain sight

ii.

~flash rippling stripes of isolated flank to opposing male~

Today is not your day buddy back off. I get it: everybody's here for one reason

and that is to fulfill our mission that mission being reproduce and I hope you get your chance pal but that chance is not now, understand? Do you see these stripes? I earned these stripes when I ripped off your brother's arm sent it to the ocean floor and watched the crabs that I'd eat for dinner pick at it amongst themselves, or when I knew this guy who thought mating wasn't

serious business then learned the hard way as I threw him in the tide and flesh scraped/shredded against rocky shore and his chances of looking fly enough to attract somebody went from zero to none faster than your's will. I am Aggression and I do not fool around just keep swimming.

~flash kaleidoscopic greenredblue other flank to potential female~

I hope I've found you well
tonight. These shallows
are warm but if you find
you're cold, the coat
on my back is yours
and I will bend it to
whatever color
pleases you.

iii.

~transparency~

wish Mom had more than 8
arms to look after 100,000

iv.

~freeze and flash into sand~

chromatophores tight
regretting the earlier shrimp feast
that has given you a potbelly
any shark would kill for

yet your eyes still graze
the ocean floor
for grub to eat
after this ordeal is –

(spotted)

~bluff black and white stripes~

you know i am Venom
& Serpent & do not
approach me

you could eat me
you would surely die

i advise you
do not approach –

(bitten)

~flash red and run~

Christ!
Why that arm?
I loved that arm...

syphon engage blub bubbles
swish swerve blub flash
jetblack squirt blub ink
run syphon run squeeze

~flash off relax~

Failed Quaker Meditations on Fire

isn't it lovely how fire can wash warmth over hands without licking them?
how joyfire jingles *pop* and *crack*
and breathes smoke into clothes
that you'll complain about but secretly
enjoy when your hands recollect
how the trees aren't really that tall
when clustered on the mountain.

isn't it unfortunate then that when fire *does* lick it burns
and spreads and must be squelched?

it is interesting how hyperaware
one then becomes of the volume
of fuel present for the flame.

JEAN ANNE HENG



Sophomore

Major: Psychology and Creative Writing & Literature

Reading: Poems and Fiction

I pass my time by adopting dying plants and stray animals, and nursing both back to health.

Train

My handwriting loops across the page and leave burn marks on the white, pristine paper. "It's all in the release, really." My head jerks up to see the nurse smiling at me. Morning sunlight scatters my focus. There are no blinds in this room. I resist the urge to yank at her copper curls until they all lie flat against her head. There's something unnaturally resilient about permed hair, I felt, the way it defied the laws of gravity and natural selection, the way it curled in when it should clearly have hung straight and limp, and it made my skin crawl, crawl, crawl.

"Talk about your triggers." she offers helpfully.

Triggers? You want me to talk about my triggers? A rising resentment takes hold of me by the neck and snaps it deftly. The red curtain descends across my eyes and the nurse disappears. In her place, I see a blurry shadow. Blurry like when you wave your hand really quick in front of your eyes and your fallible, mammalian brain fails to resolve details which leads to motion blur. I found that highly amusing when I first read about it in one of the PSYCHOLOGY TODAY magazines they left lying around in the lounge –

the fact that my brain knew pretty darn well what the details of a hand were and could still choose to not recognize them.

Four fingers, one thumb. Crisscross of green veins and bitten-down pinky nail. A lightly raised welt of scar tissue from when the neighbor's dog bit me. I had thrust my hand through the space in the gate where you could reach into to jiggle the lock open, expecting a friendly lick. The Rottweiler-bulldog mutt had sunk its fangs nearly through my palm, leaving a bloodied trail of open flesh running from the back of my hand to the tip of my middle finger after I had finally managed to yank my hand from between its clamped jaws.

"Gracie?" the nurse's voice snakes around my neck, places an impersonal finger beneath my chin and lifts my head from where I had been staring wide-eyed at the back of my hands.

I'll talk about my triggers. every single one of them. I'll start with the red skirts. It didn't matter what sort, what length. But the red skirts that rose above the knees, that swayed in the wind or to the rhythm of the high-heeled steps, those were especially hard to look at, and even harder to tear my eyes away from.

Red skirts, red skirts, red hurts. Red hurt my eyes and my heart. You want me to talk about my triggers I'll talk about my triggers. Red like the veil of anger and irrationality across my vision. The blurring of a face, the fading of a voice. another one. long hair. the curls. the curl of eyelashes stay on track eyes on me deep breaths.

In.

Out.

"Jesus Christ."

I winced at the expletive, unfamiliar with the way the name sounded coming from the lips of someone not standing at a church altar with a Bible open before him.

"What the hell is your problem?" Amir continued.

I lay silent, listening to the slow whirr of the ceiling fan stirring up dust mites and dissention.

"Why can't you just let her go? I swear, it's not like we went on a two-week trip to the damn Bahamas or something. It was just a crush."

Amir leaned over me, his face blocking out the harsh fluorescent light.

"You don't get it," I said, my voice throaty from disuse.

"Explain it to me then." His voice rose. I tried not to look down at our intertwined limbs, dreading the sight of his hairy thighs draped over my small, shapeless ones. We still hadn't had sex yet. He refused to until I agreed to look at him in the eyes while we did it. The first time he brought it up I had laughed out loud. A single, sharp sound full of all the right nuances of a laugh but lacking in any humor and mirth. It had offended him deeply, and I understood perfectly why. Whenever we were together, my mind wandered to at least a hundred different things. The problem was, my eyes followed.

Amir traced my gaze from my eyes to the ceiling behind him.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"If cereal count as carbohydrates."

"Jesus Christ, woman."

"What were we talking about?"

"Candace, we were talking about fucking Candace and how you think that she's somehow still a significant part of my life despite the fact I haven't spoken to her in two whole years!"

"Did you just say fucking Candace?"

"Are you serious?"

"If you want to fuck Candace, please, by all means." I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and sat up.

"Grace, this jealousy thing, whatever it is, it's not rational, and you know it."

"Are you calling me crazy?"

"What?"

"Crazy, are you calling me crazy?"

"Gracie, hon, come on. You know that that's not what I meant."

"You can call me crazy, just say it."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Gracie."

I had found my leverage. My stepping stone to the next rock in order to cross the river.

"It's fine, Amir. I heard Candace isn't nuts. She'd be a better investment of your time and energy."

"Grace, please."

Like an experienced surgeon, I knew where to place the next cut.

Precarious manhood hypotheses. Scalpel.

"Now you've had your practice with me, you could try again." I said, "Maybe this time you actually stand a chance at getting her attention. You have a track record now of almost getting some. Even though it WAS with a complete psycho. But beggars can't be choosers."

Shock permeated the silence in the room, settling with a sigh on the rumpled sheets between us. I held my breath, waited for the hurt to limp out from his mouth in lowered tones, hobbled breath.

Amir- I knew, would not hit me. With two younger sisters of his own, he was a safe bet against being violent. Unfortunately, that made him easy, and myself, combative.

At times though, I would wonder if I had crossed the line. If I had prodded a little too deeply into some recess within him and stoked a dormant fire. You could never be sure, for certain. But I was prepared.

If a fist were to be raised, I would employ vulnerability and the "I knew you were exactly like them" card.

If not, it would be an exit sign. I would gather my clothes, my victory glow, and leave.

Every one of my relationships, I dissected with a practiced dialogue.

First, the chase. Then, the honeymoon. Finally, the reveal. The reveal was my favorite part. I savored the look of horror flicking across their faces, hid my smile in anticipation of the newborn piety that always motivated the spoken promises that followed close after – "I'll take care of you." "You won't ever have to go back there, to that place." "You're a beautiful, strong woman, and I will treat you like one."

I gathered each sentence like kindling for fire, and at nights I warmed myself with the flames, falling asleep to the flickering embers of fickle com-

fort and validation that licked at the corners of my mind like friendly, orange tongues.

Once, Kaesh Singh accused me of fishing for compliments and I played the waterworks card, sobbing about how he couldn't understand how HARD and DIFFICULT it was to have to drag myself out of bed every single morning because at times you just wanted to sleep forever and never wake up. After pushing him aside blindly, a gesture I regretted because in retrospect it had been a tad bit too theatrical, I went home and painted my nails in ten different shades, wiped them off with acetone, and repeated the activity methodically until the acetone burned my eyes and the edges of my fingernails. Kaesh called me 93 times that night. I resolutely ignored all 93 calls, and by morning, I had almost completely forgotten what he looked like, despite us having dated for seven months

Out of my way. there's her in a red skirt walking down the hallway. red skirts the damn red skirts. are you alright? i'm okay just remind me to breathe and to smile. there's a lovely smile. thank you. i want to talk about my triggers. now i've started don't stop me please. sometimes, sometimes, it's about the eyes. deep, round, and not mine. the length of the hair. it could be anything. vets are a trigger. dogs are a trigger. the sound of a laugh is a trigger. and i have to stop to think i have to stop to remind myself that the ground is beneath my feet and the sky is above my head and between the numbers 1 to 10 is 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and

In.

Out.

there's a pain in my chest. just, right there. yes, beneath my heart. it turns the food mush in my mouth to wet cardboard and my limbs to weights. it also turns my face away from the mirror. i am bitter and sour and all things rotten. i am spiraling down that road where the thoughts are not alright and so i have to count again from 1 to 10 but this time the red has taken over and i am clawing, screaming, scratching at his face and his eyes because he must hurt the way i have been hurt and the way i am hurting. his face is a trigger. his love is a trigger.

Life itself will be a trigger. Forever and ever.

Amen.

Amir walked me to the door. I steadily avoided eye contact. Because if there's anything in the world I hate more than myself – it's eye contact.

There are no mirrors in my house.

"You know, Grace," Amir said, his voice even, his words measured.

I tensed up. Animalistic instinct told me that this wouldn't be the regular goodbye spiel.

"A lot of people have been to that place, where you've been. Not the place place as in the Centre, the place as in – where you were. But Grace, the difference is -" he stopped, pinched his lips together. I could hear his thoughts shouting down each other. I dragged my gaze from his socked feet to the stubble around his chin, and meet his eyes just as the words arranged themselves into battle lines and charged at me. "-the difference is, Grace, they don't want to stay there."

I opened my mouth to deal the pity card, "So you think I'm romanticizing what happened to me?". Script four, page 2, third last line from the bottom.

But the words backed up against each other, tussling at the back of my throat, each refusing to be formed, because they knew, for once, they would lose the argument.

I shut my mouth. The full force of his final sentence swelled like a tide against me. A new stinging behind my eyes.

the nurse walks back

In

"oh, you're done are you?"

yes

"well, time for your next session. let's get some clothes on you. how about this lovely red skirt? you'll look wonderful in it, here let me just take it

Out

I walked toward the station off Briton Street. The wind was unforgiving, slicing at my exposed cheeks. Entering the subway, a gust of stale underground air rushed past me, and I caught a whiff of Amir's cologne that had braided itself into the scarf wrapped around my neck and the lower part of my face. The tide that had been growing steadily since I left his apartment finally crashed onto me and the force of stranger emotions stopped me dead

in my tracks. Someone bumped into me from behind and I stumbled.

"Sorry," I mouthed silently to the air in front of me. The man pushed past me, grumbling as he went. I watched his back blankly as he moved down the stairs and joined the crowd. The handrail was cold against my ungloved hand. One sneakered foot hung precariously over the next step, and I slowly lowered it to make contact with the concrete ground.

I made my way to the front of the crowd at the platform. The railway tracks were a deep, rusted brown. My eyes traced the path it took from one darkened end of the tunnel, to the other. I wondered briefly whose job it was to have laid down the granite and stones in between the tracks. Did they use a claw machine? Or was it all done by manual labor? Twenty men tossing weights upon a smooth surface. Forming friction by force.

The wind in the tunnel picked up with a howl. People grabbed at their hats and newspapers as the gusts whipped at our bodies. Some passengers took a few involuntary steps back. I knew now this to be a subconscious act of survival. That the yellow line we were warned to stand behind was more than mere bureaucratic protocol.

This is how it works: When a train rushes past at high speed, the flow of air accelerates, leading to lowered air pressure. Beyond that confined area, the atmospheric pressure of slower-moving air then outweighs the lowered air pressure, forming a sort of shell around the moving train, so that crossing the line into the shell would result in you risking your entire self being forced forward by the atmospheric pressure behind you. This principle - attributed to Daniel Bernoulli - was what kept planes airborne. It was also what caused at least a dozen subway deaths a year.

A single mistake, or perhaps, a willful step forward.

I turned these thoughts over in my head as I stood waiting, thinking that this was probably what people meant when they talked about the fine line between life and death, sanity and madness, love and hate. Recovery and relapse.

A single mistake, or perhaps, a willful step forward.

I looked up into the glaring headlights of the approaching train as it pulled into the station.

QUEEN

When I was myself they locked me down
 with chains of bad diagnoses and good intentions.
 Papa couldn't understand and Mama couldn't sympathize;
 She wielded the sword of denial, he took up the shield of confusion.
 And thus the war began

When I was myself I rode the darkness like a stallion wild,
 Queen of my kingdom and slave of theirs.
 My words ran river red, eat me, drink to that.
 "Off with her head" and "Has she gone mad?"
 The end, the dragon slain

When I was myself the world was tinged in shades of vivid grey and moss
 green.
 I believed in ochre, and ombré, and ash.
 But then the label came in
 "color blind too, on top of everything else"
 and they undid the done and
 I un-saw the seen.
 I still wanted to be queen

When I was myself I knew what I knew,
 And what was new I knew to be nouveau,
 I knew that the zaps were supposed to be helpful but
 God did it have to hurt so much too

Now I am happy,
 And there is a nice word 'sad',
 Blue is the sky and cutting is bad.

Jack and Jill went up the hill,
 And Mary had a lamb.
 (Lucky girl, I had an electricshocktherapything)

Now I am good.
 Now I am alright.
 Now I am the abstract concept of free.

Now I am QUEEN OF MY KI-
 small words now, child.
 Now I am me.

GRANT JAMES



Senior

Major: English

Reading: Short Fiction

Grant James is a West Michigan native. Someone once called him a 'romantic' while giving him a haircut.

For Old Long Ago

It was 4:32 PM December 30th, 2014 and it was the first time Harry had been home since he left for Basic Training. He said something about how the roads hadn't changed much. We were in the old Grand Cherokee, that boxy claptrap his dad passed down to his brother passed down to him. The same one we'd take three hours north together, Harry, JP, and I, every New Years, to their dad's place. The car conked every few yards on a pothole.

Mr C was never much of a father to Harry or JP. The last decade of his sobriety was mostly spent holed up in the old family cabin that he'd lucked into when his mother passed away, propping his shoddy knees up on the hand-me-down Eames ottoman, next to a waist-high stack of newspapers that served as a table for his ashtray, watching over-the-air broadcasts on the antenna TV set.

JP had opted out of the trip to his dad's place. After spending Christmas at home in Grand Rapids, he'd taken off for Nashville to spend the New Year with his fiancée's family. I still hadn't met her. Harry said she was nice.

Harry looked a lot different. It was the first time I'd seen him in nearly four years, outside of sporadic Facebook posts and a one-time video call. His face was angular and his blubbery cheeks, the ones we'd always give him a hard time about, had hollowed out.

The ride felt long and filled with silences. Before, JP would be in the back seat describing the sensitive parts of human anatomy or planning capers involving contraband and Ski Patrol. We'd arrange the trip weeks in advance. I'd have my annual sparring match with my mother over the whole thing, to which she would always, eventually, consent. But this trip felt colder in the way that meeting old acquaintances always does. There's a sort of testing of the waters, an awkward tip-toeing around. When you're close to someone, it's easier to suss out what wavelength they're on; you can keep tabs on their interior conversation and where it's headed. When you've been apart for a while, in very insular and solipsistic places, where what gets beamed in is mostly different and individually targeted, it's rather hard to get around the sometimes insurmountable heap of ideas, emotions, experiences, and ongoing trains of thought that you've both let fester.

I asked him if he'd turned in to some kind of killing machine.

He let a little air out of his nostrils. He wasn't as big as I'd thought he'd be. He wasn't big at all, really—he was lean. It was like his muscles had constricted themselves around his body in the most utilitarian way possible. I could almost see the tendons in his forearms as he held the wheel.

The man-made forest that had lined both sides of the highway gave way to a sprawl of latent farmland. An easterly wind laid an audible pressure on the driver's side of the car. (The bequeathed Grand Cherokee was manufactured circa 1993, i.e., it was not the apotheosis of aerodynamics.) The car didn't seem to budge, which seemed like a considerable achievement on Harry's part, however, there was no noticeable change in tension on the surface of his forearms. I watched his lips wrap around the mouth of a bottle and expectorate harsh brown wintergreen. I got the sense that he could feel me watching. I wanted him to look at me.

He asked me how school was going.

I told him I was on the Five Year track.

We traced the faded white lines on the interstate, then on Blue Highways under amber skies, through Ludington and Benzie County, past a casino and an apple orchard, on into the state's pinkie finger. It wasn't late, but it would be dark soon.

• • •

It was 3:23 AM January 1st, 2011 and it was our last New Year's Eve before Harry shipped out. Mr C had been in bed by 12:30 and JP had just passed out. We broke in to the safe Mr C kept locked up in the basement closet, pulled out a handful of dusty brick weed that was older than we were. It was all gone rather quickly.

We sat on the sectional opposite JP. We never said anything, during or afterwards. It lasted five minutes, maybe. A lot of hands and tongue. We fell asleep with our heads on each other's shoulders.

• • •

It was 7:05 PM December 30th, 2014 and we were pulling down the driveway. It was dark but an orange light shone through the window. Mr C's house wasn't particularly grandiose but it would be a stretch to call it humble. It jutted out from a slope that ran a half of a mile, through some trees and over a bluff, down to Lake Michigan. It was an A-frame wrapped in blue-grey vinyl, adorned with a copper casted sun above the garage and a decorative block of wood hung with twine by the door.

We stepped out onto the snow with already frozen feet. (The Jeep had long since lost its heat.) We left our skis hanging on the roof rack. We crunched a trail in the snow towards the side of garage. Harry lifted the astroturf welcome mat and grabbed the key. He had to pull the door to his chest to get the lock to go.

The garage smelled like lumber and cold concrete. It remained wholly unchanged. Things: sawhorses, cases of Diet Vernors that had frozen into partial slush making ice unnecessary, old two-hundred-plus centimeter skis with tips like cathedral spires, unfinished carpentry, teak framed breweriana mirrors, duck boots, lined boots, waders hung on the wall next to unashamedly eighties ski suits, and in boxes, halved juice cartons and milk crates were posters, framed and unframed, trail maps, paraphernalia, juvenilia, a diary, screws tacks nails, a blouse, unopened mousetraps, tools. It was briefly our vestibule.

Mr C was asleep in the living room, leaning back in his chair with his arms folded chestways making little breaths that sounded like unfinished sneezes. Across the walls were pictures of shapes and lines, a silhouette of a saxophonist captioned MontreuxDetroit July 1981, and a painting of a bare-backed woman that looked like one out of those Pink Floyd posters that hang

in dorm rooms, all sunbaked and washed out from the time they spent hanging in the warmth of two stories of great, graphematically stacked windows. The record player, the college football game on the antenna TV set, and the wood in the fireplace crackled.

Harry stood in front of his dad's chair with a straight back and his canvas duffel hanging from one hand. After some snaps of the finger, Mr C's eyes flitted open. He did the thing where you scratch your nose by squinting and squeezing the side of your lip. He leaned forward and pressed his hands into his thighs before getting up gingerly. He was wearing the same ancient sheep's wool vest I'd always seen him in. He wasn't a tall man. He had quarter-inch long dark grey hair and a good amount of stubble hiding a meager complexion and ordinary face. The whole ordeal was awkward and rather emblematic. They shook hands, no hugs or anything too personal. I had a sense that Harry was showing off a little, that after four years he'd gone and trounced his father by staying on the straight and narrow. Harry made a little bit of a show of looking around the place with discerning eyes, as if something he were being shown a property, as if anything had changed since he'd left.

Mr C told us he had dinner waiting. He gave me a small downward nod as he walked by me into the kitchen, which I felt was cordial enough.

Harry and I went upstairs to the bunkroom. I wondered if it was a little juvenile. Perhaps for Harry it was a little too familiar. We exchanged a few memories: Remember when I jumped on the top bunk and it came crashing down? Your dad was so pissed. Remember when we locked JP out and he climbed up the balcony and through the window? When he sliced off a chunk of your hair with the razor? You had to shave it all off—looked almost the same as it does now...

We grabbed bowls and silverware, served ourselves stew from the beige Crock-Pot. We took a seat at the log benches, Harry and I on one, Mr C on the other. The smallish oak table was pockmarked, more so than I remembered, from army knives and restless hands. It was a quiet meal. Harry's hands looked like they'd outgrown the silverware. He was methodical with his soup. Every time he raised his spoon to his mouth it seemed to disappear like a magician biting the head off of a quarter. Mr C never ate much. He had a small serving of stew, mostly broth. It was tiresome watching him. It was like he was always skating right on the edge and had to practice almost Emersonian moderation, like the only way he could help himself from guzzling the nearest bottle of Jim Beam was to take infinitesimal bites of his potato.

• • •

It was 12:07 AM December 31st, 2014 and Harry and I had taken our separate bunks. I was up but I wasn't sure if Harry was. I could make him out in the glow of the star freckled sky. He was laying planklike under a plaid blanket.

I imagined JP at his fiancée's house, in bed, clenched and unmoving lest the in-laws hear the bed frame squeak. His fiancée tells him to relax, that they're getting married. He'd whisper something a little bit dirty about being in their own bed next week, and they'd drift off to sleep. I wondered if he would be so quiet if he were here, in the other bunk.

The house breathed the breeze that whistled across the big lake. I wanted to say something to Harry but there was too much space between us.

• • •

EXCERPT FROM The Franklin County Times, July 21st, 2013:

Pfc. Patrick H. McDowell, 22, of Hodges, AL, died July 18 when his living area came under a midnight attack in Fallujah.

Cpl. Harold G. Carmichael, who was in the room during the attack, said in a statement:

"Pfc. McDowell acted as a hero. His actions that night will forever be in my

memory and I will forever be in his debt. [...] My thoughts and prayers go out to his dear sister and mother."

McDowell had turned 22 just six days prior to the attack.

His father, retired Army Lt. Col. Robert McDowell, told the Times, that he had never expected their son would join the Army.

"I was shocked when he decided to join the service. We had never expected that of him," Robert told the Times. "Of course, I encouraged Patrick in his decision."

He is survived by his sister and parents.

• • •

It was 9:30 AM December 31st, 2014 and I woke up thinking about how, in about a dozen hours, we'd be starting another year. I crept out of my bed, walked through the door to the mezzanine. I saw Mr C was already in his chair watching the local news. He didn't see me and I felt relieved; I'm not a morning person. I defecated, brushed teeth, took a medium length low-pressure shower in sulfury water. I was strapping on my underwear in the bunk room when Harry rolled over from the spot he had slept in.

I asked him why he wasn't up at the crack of dawn. He exhaled and rolled back over.

I looked out the window. Over the stretch of snow dusted trees, I could see that Lake Michigan had frozen over a few yards past the beach, framed all around by the depthless white mass of sky and snow.

• • •

It was 4:39 PM December 31st, 2014 and Harry and I were on the packed high- speed chairlift, dangling skis slightly bowlegged over a traffic jam on a painfully gentle intermediate run. Toddlers posing as scarecrows pulled their mothers along on leashes, middle aged men in faded blue jeans and highlighter headbands held their nipple-high poles with ninety degree arms, a woman practically sewn into a full body suit clanked her gate guards against each other, three boys undid snowboard bindings and disappeared into the woods, a teenage girl caught a toe edge and tumbled face first while her friend laughed in schadenfreude. The neck of my jacket was wet from being pulled over my face. The chairlift pulled us up, further into the frost licked breeze.

We pushed off at the top of the lift. I grabbed Harry's arm to drag myself in front of the chair as it swung around. He didn't flinch but he pulled away after I was clear.

We ducked a fence and skied out onto the north face. There was a large bowl, spotted with trees. We undid our bindings and sat down on the rim for a while, hung our legs over the edge. Harry slipped me a beer from his pocket. He threw a snowball and estimated the wind carried it approximately thirty feet west.

I imagined sitting there for another four years, carried to who knows where. What burdens would we bear?

I put the crumpled can in my jacket. Harry was off before me, zagging through trees leaves and spots of dirt. Like riding a bike! We followed the grade of the bowl round, down to a cross-country trail. We skated and coasted, carrying momentum.

After we'd lost our speed, Harry and I had unclipped and started hiking. He was a few steps ahead of me, carrying his skis in a bundle on his shoulder. I dragged mine by the toe bindings, leaving a two-track trail behind me. In the trees we were shielded from the wind and it was pleasant enough. I could see clouds of breath blow by his face like out of the smokestack back home, carried up into thin air and dissipated into the past.

At the bottom, in the parking lot, Mr C was in a fold out chair with his knees propped up on the gate of the Grand Cherokee. He'd taken a few shots at the bumps earlier, fished his knees through woven valleys between moguls while the tassel on his winter hat bobbed up and down like a paddle ball on a string before he retired down to the hidden parking lot reserved for locals and regulars, cracked a Diet Vernors and shot the shit.

• • •

It was 6:16 PM December 31st, 2014 and Harry was sending the Jeep around a ninety degree turn slicked with ice. We were on the back-roads that led back from the ski hill to Arcadia. The roads were long and mostly followed cardinal directions, slamming into T-shaped intersections roughly demarcating county lines.

We rode past podunk three room rambler homes with iced over Jimmys in the front yard. Glover Lake Road was syncopated by potholes in all the same places. The snow had since stopped falling. The sky cleared up and peaked out easily through the absence of light pollution.

We took the road in to the town of Arcadia. It wasn't much of a town, really; it was just a gas station without pay-at-the-pump, an old brick firehouse converted into an elementary school, and a watering hole, The Red Apple.

We made it to the gas station in time. Their hours were arbitrary and holidays only made them more so. The cash-only convenient store had one or two of each item. Single bags of chips and candy were hanging from removable hooks on perforated hardware store walls next to batteries, cords, and actual hardware supplies. There were two cases of beer in the fridge, both different make. They only sold beer which seemed like a perverse sort of puritanism. A teenage girl with brown hair and wool socks peeking out of white espadrilles, pulled over the ends of her elastidenim jeans sat on a stool

underneath a shelf filled with smokeless tobacco and lottery tickets. She rang us up, made a mark in the inventory notebook, held out a hand tattooed with a lemniscate, then sorted our bills into the cashbox.

There was a large hill separating the cabin and Arcadia. It was littered with one-eighty degree San Francisco turns, yellow diamond signs with snake arrows, and cautionary speed limits. When we were younger and we all had something to prove, to ourselves or to each other, we'd play the serious game, the tightrope walk down the edge of safety. We'd be in the Jeep, overflowing with testosterone from days in the sun and snow. We'd see the black-iced turns like they were homework, or jury duty, or taxes, or jobs, and we were here to finesse them without making a fuss—it was our job to take what life had thrown at us and get an upper hand, grab it by the balls. We'd fishtail and lean into the axles, quiet and determined. Even the passengers couldn't sell out the facade. To acknowledge the fact that death or danger weren't abstract fears was to renege cool triumphant repression.

But now, coming to the descent, Harry had the wheel at ten and two with light hands. He bore down the snaky road with no repression, only detachment. There was only road. There was no preformed seriousness, no victory, just a steadfast dedication to that thing which reminds a person that what will be, will be. Today, it was either us or the road. I could feel him feel me white knuckle the flappy handle sticking out of the headliner. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the speedometer rise. Forty, fifty, sixty. We were careening across corners. The radio was off. There was no heat. Mr C was a statue in the backseat. I held my breath. Seventy miles an hour. Harry was leaning back in the seat. A car passed us as we rounded the last corner. It had to have only been a few inches from the driver's side. At the bottom of the hill, Harry let up on the gas. We coasted on momentum, down the road until we reached the driveway.

We pulled in, sat in the car for a moment, fogged up the windows breathing. I thought Harry waited there more for Mr C and I than for him, like a lapse of empathy.

• • •

It was 11:56 PM December 31st, 2014 and the whole thing was a rather quiet affair. NBC was coming in fuzzy through the antenna and the usual suspects were in Times Square backgrounded by gigantic rotating LCD advertisements for Adult Undergarments and Glad, talking about all the things to remember from the year gone by. The fireplace had been fed a steady clip of ammunition and bounced shadows over the sectional sofa and Mr C's lounge chair.

Mr C handed me a pack of papier à rouler and plastic bowl filled with dry weed that smelled like cut grass, lemon pepper, and dust. He got up to stoke the fire and threw another log on. The TV buzzed with resolutions from a washed up lead-singer. I licked the glue and wrapped the cigarette shut, lit the twisted end and passed it back and forth with Mr C. He bogarted most of it. Harry was on the other end of the couch watching crowds of people wearing stupid glasses shaped like four-digit numbers kiss beneath the giant disco ball.

Outside, someone down by the beach lit off a firework. Mr C and I watched red blue green sparks trickle down into smoke and stars and indigo sky over Lake Michigan. Harry looked at the ground and bobbed his knee up and down. The crowds on TV sang and cut through the scratchy signal.

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?*

The room smelled acrid and smoky. Harry got up and went into the garage for another can of slushy beer. I looked around the room at shelves filled with novels and How-To's bookmarked, like most books, a quarter of the way through, then at the clock as the hands all touched, pointing their fingers straight up into a new year.

*We twa hae run about the braes
And pu'd the gowans fine.
We've wandered mony a weary foot,
Sin' auld lang syne.*

The confetti and streamers blew by in Times Square. Mr C turned to me and spoke.

They sure did a number on him, didn't they?

I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that.

It was 12:00 AM January 1st, 2015 and then the clocked ticked another minute.

KATHLEEN JANESCHEK



Junior

Major: Mathematics and Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

Kathleen Janeschek is a junior in the Residential College studying Mathematics and Creative Writing. She was born and raised in a tourist trap on the west coast of Michigan. Her work has previously appeared in *Inner Landscapes: Writers Respond to the Art of Virginia Dehn*, *Best American Experimental Writing 2014*, and *The RC Review*. In between writing mathematical proofs and writing poems about writing mathematical proofs, she likes to browse used bookstores, drink overpriced mint mochas, and sleep. Mostly sleep, honestly. For some time now, she has been stuck in a library and sees little chance of escape.

Scenes Fictionalized from My Life and Fictionalized Scenes from My Life

Daddy, the Bastard, and the Prince

I have dreams about the barn burning. It starts with a spill, then a flame or a spill of flame, I can't decide, and because the wood is old, the setting tragic, the fire spreads and surrounds as if conscious of itself, of the its wake of destruction, and the structure is consumed. My entire family is inside, every Janeschek, every Jousma, every Porritt, for moments ago this had been the scene of celebration, of new beginnings, but the cheers turn to screams, the clatter and chatter of a party at ease rises through the rafters and twists, dying, in the air above. But I am outside it all. I am watching. I see the fire

light, the flame fan, the heat eat, the creeping red turn to crawling black, the smoke mask the horizon, the burnt bits fold to ash, the skeletal remains, the charred limbs, the headline in newspaper font, the ink smudged. I see it all happening, beginning to end, inside and out, all happening at once, as if the burning is a ballroom of dancers waltzing to music I cannot hear and I am at its center. The tragedy tilts in all its perfection and I wake.

There is only me, alone.

Christmas was a room of people I never learned how to talk to. The holiday was at my grandmother's house, which took us two hours to drive to and the rest of the family twenty minutes. I would ask my mother why family functions never occurred at our house, why they never had to drive hours and she told me it was because they wouldn't come. The glare on the snow in the median was blinding, but I don't know who was blinded.

Every year, my grandmother's house was increasingly carefully cultivated and my own clothing increasingly carelessly worn. Her tree shifted from sentimentality, from knick-knacks and children's crafts, to themes, to color-coordinated madness, to expensive balls and bulbs. Everything was intentionally placed. Nothing was simply set there, nothing was thrown together—though her words, always, were "it's just a little something I've thrown together"—nothing was unplanned. And I, meanwhile, was moving away from outfits chosen, bought, and laid out on my bed for just this day, just this once and then tossed and buried in a drawer. I was learning to fidget, to fight, to be free and soon "wear this" became "wear something nice" became "whatever." So I went from frills and dresses to slacks and blouses to sweaters and jeans, and every time the cloth against the skin agitated less, and every time myself against my grandmother's setting clashed more and more. I become the blip, the smudge, the black spot. The Mistake. Capital M.

For the longest time, I didn't realize most people had two families, and thus, two Christmases.

When I was in kindergarten, I thought my father lived in Africa. Egypt, specifically. I had asked my mother where he was and she said "far away." I didn't know many places that were far away. I didn't understand time, let alone distance. He was part of the world unknown to me, in a city of unfamiliar, but this I could not comprehend—I didn't know enough to know what I didn't know. So I assumed. I was informed by what I watched and at the time in my life, what I watched was *The Prince of Egypt*.

The movie is an animated children's film which retells the story of Moses and his freeing of the Hebrews. I don't know how the association between

it and my own father came about. Perhaps, I thought “far away” meant exotic. Perhaps, because I didn’t yet know how to read and didn’t yet understand the signals, the meaning, the significance of capitalization, and I mixed up father and Father. Perhaps, something drew me to the moment Moses learned the Pharaoh was not his father, to the instant erasure of the foundations of his identity. Perhaps I just wished it were true.

This was in the in-between period. After I learned I was missing someone, but before the first meeting, the first word he spoke to me. When he was faceless—but not, like in later years, because I could not picture him—for his features were undetermined, shifting and morphing into a multitude of faces, a monstrosity of faces, ten thousand faces in one. The void he left in my life had been discovered but undefined and I could shape it myself, I could construct a man from his absence, I could paint my image onto him. He became possibility. He could be anything. He could live anywhere. Perhaps he did live in Egypt.

My father did not live in Egypt. He lived in California.

In the movie, Moses’ real father never makes an appearance.

It’s remarkable how film can recreate scenes that never were and leave out all that was.

The furthest west I’ve ever been is the Grand Canyon. I went years ago with my grandmother and six of my cousins, three older, three younger: two sets of three and me. We drove there in a single journey in a single minivan out of the city and into the desert. If it had been nighttime, we would have seen that when we lost the lights of the city, we gained the lights of the sky, but we journeyed during the day with the heat on our backs. It was cold in the desert at night.

The canyon is a crevice in the Earth, a crack dug out from the dirt. Dust, orange at noon, red at dusk, blurs the rock and air and layers itself upon all living things until they blur too. Scrambling along its edges are tourists and families, foreigners and foreign-born, posing for pictures as they tiptoe the drop-off, making a memory of the time they were one slip away from death. When we arrived at these rocks, the matriarch and her flock, my grandmother clutched my younger cousins to herself, standing far back from it all and my older cousins dared one another to hang their legs over the edge, but I was neither clutched nor dared and my place was neither here nor there. I did not know where to position myself, which group to hover near. I wandered close to the edge, like the older kids, but not in their proximity, drawn to this great gaping absence, to *l’appel du vide*, to this emptiness. There was

so much that wasn't there.

That was the same summer I wore only jeans, just like the last three summers, but this time in the 100 degree Arizona heat. I had a body to hide, to cover, a body amid transitions, neither here nor there, a body whose shape I had to learn to inhabit. So I trekked all over the Grand Canyon, kicking up dirt, staining my pants orange, the dust clinging to fabric instead of skin, and at the end of the day, when we returned to our rented room and undressed, I was the only one with legs left white.

That night someone drove their car over the edge. My grandmother told this to me in a whisper when I woke before dawn, her eyes darting between me and the others, enjoining me in a pact of silence. In the morning, I traced my soles over their tracks.

Any Sunday, take your pick, at 7 PM you would find me waiting around a phone for my father to call. The phone I waited around changed as I grew, as the times changed. First it was the home phone, attached to a wall and with no more than twenty feet to wander from; then it was my mother's cell phone, attached to my mother; and finally, like sunlight through the prison bars, my own cell phone. I was confined to my home, I was confined to my mother's side, and then, suddenly, I could be anywhere. *Anywhere*. The delusion of freedom. Parole. My father's phone calls were not optional. I wasn't free to deny him.

There was nothing I dreaded more than being in the car with my mother, on the way back from my grandmother's, on a Sunday evening. If he happened to call then, my mother would tense, fine-tuning her ears so she could hear both ends of the conversation. She became the eavesdrop, then the judge, for after the call was over she would comment upon it, prolonging the ordeal. In her mind, she was devising a strategy to push us closer to one another, to somehow spark a relationship between us, as if his calls were not coming less frequently and lasting less time, as if everything already between him and I could come undone. I've never been certain what she expected to gain. Maybe she wanted the money to send me to his alma mater, or maybe she wanted me grounded to another person, or maybe she wanted him to appreciate what she created. Her motives hidden, her intent clear. But, we persisted, my father and I, united in this one way, as two beings independent of her, independent of one other, each too stubborn to budge, the mirrored image of a mule struggling against its rope.

I did not watch *The Prince of Egypt* in my own home. We did not own the VHS tape. I watched it in the basement of my grandmother's, in a house that feared God. I watched it on repeat, on Sundays after church, after God

had failed to plant His seeds in me. I watched it crouched before the screen, the glow of the movie cast upon my face, bathed in its glory. And when it ended, when Moses got his people across the Red Sea and the Pharaoh was left screaming on the other side, waves bashing against his feet, then I would rewind back, to when the Hebrews were slaves and Moses the Pharaoh's son, and begin again.

Since we didn't own the movie, in the years when I no longer spent hours in my grandmother's basement, I never watched *The Prince of Egypt*. For a time, I forgot about the movie, about my entrancement with it, I forgot about Egypt and Moses, but the echo of the film remained, reverberating against my ribcage, and though I forgot about God, I never forgot the feeling of horror He inspired.

Do you know which signals the truth, "based on a true story" or "inspired by real events"? Do you even know the difference? The former is what they say when they rope real people to the bodies of the past, when actors mime dead men and actresses pantomime dying, when the words spoken were once whispered to empty rooms and ravaged diaries, when we recreate the action someone forgot to record. The latter is when they finish the sentences other people began.

And which is the truth?

I came to Ann Arbor for the first time in eighth grade, but for my mother it was a return. She took me to Zingerman's, a place that had remained in both time and her memory, though larger and tidier, its image more carefully cultivated, a local hotspot turned corporate, not unlike herself, and with my mouth twisted around a too-large bit of sandwich, she told me about how "your father and I" used to go on dates here.

This was her way. When she wanted to discuss something uncomfortable, she would trap me first. I learned to never sit with my back against a wall, never lean too close in the car, never get too comfortable next to her, but every once in a while, I slipped up.

I chewed slowly, as if she would forget I was here if I were quiet and still, while she described how the second floor, where we sat, did not exist (*and neither did I*, I silently added) when they went here, together, a couple. She told me how they met working for the State of Michigan auditing the University of Michigan, how they drove down frequently from Lansing to Ann Arbor, stuck in a car, together, alone, with nothing but themselves to discuss. Nothing but the other to look at. She told me how they clicked, how they flirted, how they worked so well together, but when he asked her to marry

him, she told him no. She said he was the only man she ever loved.

I listened, but I didn't respond. She spoke of him like we were both his former lovers, his former loves, but I was the daughter, the bastard, the unloved.

It wasn't until I came to Ann Arbor as a college freshman, tripping on the steps of the very university that led to my conception that I began to search for traces of him, glimpses of the marks he left here. Living in a place he used to live was a new experience for me, and I couldn't help but expect to find, one day, *Leon Fell* carved into a desk. Walking through a hall or down a sidewalk, I couldn't help but wonder if my footsteps rang out in the same ways his had, if my pacing, my gait matched his when he had set his feet upon these paths.

I have never found any evidence of his existence.

My grandmother used to burn her trash. When she lived in the house by the lake, the home of the basement of my childhood, she would set aside the things that wouldn't burn and the things that shouldn't be burned, batteries and lightbulbs, spoiled milk and meat, and then at the end of the week she would pile the rest of it in the corner of one of her acres, and set it on fire. I watched, too young to do anything else. They were the only fires I didn't roast marshmallows on, the smoke too vile, too wicked to ingest. In my grandmother's eyes, two miniature versions of the fire reflected, contained entirely in the black of her pupils, like two darling pets, and extinguished by the blink of an eye.

In the movie, and the Bible too, God has no face. He appears to Moses as a burning bush but the flame does not burn Moses. It is light, an all-encompassing, all-powerful light. *Only* light, yet, though it is demonstrated that the fire cannot harm Moses, we are afraid. A fire that does not burn your hand is not a sign of peace, it is a sign of power. It is not the end of violence, but a waiver of it.

Then the burning bush speaks. God speaks. God booms. Moses is pressed back against the wall of the cave, pushed back, the power of the Lord revealed. The flame that did not burn was just a game, a ploy to let down Moses' defenses, but now God must remind him not only of His power but of His capacity, His glee for violence. We do not know it yet, but this is the God that kills. And yet, He is still only a voice. He has no face and in our mind's eye we can visualize Him only as the twisting of light, the use-less flame dancing in the dark. He has no face, but somehow He manages to

make Moses recognize His might, He strikes fear into his heart, and Moses is compelled to betray his brother.

Perhaps, I am looking at this in the wrong light. Perhaps, it is not *but somehow*. Perhaps, facelessness is a form of power. When you are a voice, your being cannot be examined. One cannot look at you, look at your eyes and devise meaning from them or study the lines in your face, the map of your life openly and grudgingly displayed. No one can devise a plan of attack. You are shapeless in a helpless way and defined only by your deliberate deeds. Everything exposed is intentional. One cannot control his face, but he can control his words. This is the power of a god.

Once, I was grateful for the intrusion of my father's phone calls into my life. I was at a wedding for someone whom I met that day, a distant family member, perhaps a cousin or second-cousin of my mother's, and we only attended because it happened to take place twenty minutes down the road.

A handful of recognizable family members showed, but soon conversation with them was exhausted and I was left uneasy, watching the room, the laughing cousins, the smiling grandparents, the poured drinks, the scrambling children, the peering elders, this family, joyful and supposedly my own, supposedly my blood running through half of their veins but I was not one of them, I couldn't be, and when I slunk out of the venue to take my father's call, my absence went unnoticed.

Like most of our later conversations, there was an element of levity to it. We were both beyond the point of caring, beyond the worrying, the threats, the hope of something more springing from these calls, and so we had fun with it. We laughed at our own jokes, but not the other's. We spoke cuttingly, never fully insulting, but always on the verge of spitting on the other's face, like the loogie suspended, frozen above its intended victim. We both saw the expiration date of these chats; we both knew the string tethering us to each other would be severed soon and this charade of a relationship could end. But, for the moment, I was enjoying it, at least, as an excuse to leave that barn of people I barely knew, much less understood. I was on a pendulum oscillating between him and my family, seeking to be free of both, but finding refuge in the moment of the swing.

Every movie is inspired by real events. Every work of art begins with the history of the world. We should end every credit roll by listing everything that has ever happened to us.

It's strange, isn't? I could write anything here and you would believe it.

I could write outright lies, I could construct a history of things that never happened, and I could rewrite the things that did. I could right wrongs or I could write wrongs, but not both. At every word I write, I make this decision. I choose to condemn or forget (but never forgive). I become vengeance, I become the liar, and I become whole.

But I don't know what to do with these next words. I don't know which scene to tell.

I never met my father's mother because she died two weeks before I was born. I would have been her first grandchild.

My father's mother was overjoyed to hear she was going to be a grandmother. By this point, she had already given up on the idea of my father ever having children, and her daughter had only just married her husband (a ceremony rushed, no doubt, by my father's mother's illness). Though she knew my mother and father were not married, and this fact must have displeased her, she had hope that they would marry for my sake and at least, perhaps, she would have the chance to hold her first grandchild, the flesh of the flesh of her flesh.

But, as the months progressed, so did her illness. Though she tried to hold on, to become a grandmother before she died, willpower alone was not enough, and before I came into the world, she left it. At least she knew.

In college, for the first time in more than a decade, I watched *The Prince of Egypt*. Someone must have mentioned it in passing, for suddenly it was banging around in my head and I knew I would never get it out unless I first gave in. Admittedly, I was curious to what had drawn me to this movie as a child, what had led to my constant rewatching of the film.

I had forgotten the exact lines, the exact sequence of events, but despite the decade between the selves who watched and were watching this movie, the emotions the film once stirred in me, rose within me again, and it was as if I picked off a scab old enough to be forgotten but fresh enough to bleed. It was *not* as if I were young again, for you never fully return to that state of being, but rather a remembrance of youth, a little echo of what I felt then. For composed with the old emotions were new ones, ignited by all the life I had lived between now and then, the knowledge of a world bearing judgement down upon me.

One thing about the film that must have slipped out of my mind, for really, it makes little sense in the context of a child's movie, was the abundance

of dead children. The movie begins with Moses' mother barely saving him from the slaughter of Hebrew babies by the Egyptians. They don't spill the blood of the babes on screen, only showing the distraught mothers shoved aside, but the genocide is clear and Moses' escape narrow. These are the bad guys however, and for that reason, they can be forgiven. Their moral failings are what allow us to cheer their downfall, to pray for their deaths. The blood spilt upon their hands sanctions the blood soon-to-be-spilt upon our own.

And then, there is the genocide committed by God, Our Father. In response to the Pharaoh's defiance, He kills the firstborn of every Egyptian family. We witness His spirit move through Egypt, sweeping with it the life of sleeping children. We see their breathing halt, their bodies' transition to lifelessness. We watch the hand of the Pharaoh's son fall. Unlike the Hebrew babies, the deaths, the murders, the genocide of the Egyptian children is not given the courtesy of occurring off-screen. This atrocity is conducted by God Himself, and thus *must* be justified—for if not, this movie would be the story of a series of genocides, and all would be condemned—but I could not help but wonder how He could do that. Was this God not Our Father, the Father of us all, and were the children He stole the life from not His children too? This question, buzzingly, dizzyingly circled round and round in my head, followed by a thudding, a throbbing, a heat rising, a clamor banging around in there as if my brain had shrank and was bouncing around in the hollow of my head, free to move, free to think at last, and this continued until that question faded back and a new one emerged from the recesses it disappeared in, which was *how could a father do this to his children?*

By this point, it had been two years since my father and I last spoke.

The final time my grandmother burned trash was the day she moved. She kept the fire going for hours, burning not only trash, but anything we couldn't be bothered to move, bags and bags of stuff and memories brought out from beneath the living, the breathing of the house. In one of those bags were the toys I used to play with when I was left here and one of those toys was this white and red train with a blushing face painted on that I used to pull around the house on a string. My grandmother held it out to me, an offering to my childhood, to the future children of this family, but she had sold the house this train belonged to—no other child would tug on its string *here*—it's purpose was vanquished and it seemed only right to let it burn. So I shook my head, pointing to the fire that had already consumed half of my days here, and then I did something strange: I asked my grandmother to sing.

In my head, my beloved train would be put to rest in the fashion of all

national heroes, burning to nothing as the national anthem played, but as soon as my grandmother opened her mouth, I knew I had made a mistake. She sang like her voice had burned to ashes, collapsed to dust. I was certain it was the same croaking she would make when she died and that I was being given a preview free of charge. I wanted to turn away from it, away from her, even away from the flame, but I remained in the swathe of sound, the reaping of my shame. The melting of my train was indifferent to its soundtrack, but I was not, and though the way its face collapsed in on itself was the same regardless of how the tune was sung, because *this* singing was occurring, I regretted my decision to destroy my train instead of hoarding it, not for any future children but for my own selfish clutching of memories, and I wished to reach my hands into the fire and rescue my beloved. But I was afraid of burning myself and I was even more afraid of explaining to my grandmother why I did that, so I stood and I watched and I resisted running away and I gave in to all my regrets, all the other things I let burn, all the other moments I ruined, all the memories displaced by this one.

The people who bought my grandmother's house bought it only for the land and they demolished that house and with it, any hope of the return of my memories. I suspect no one sung as that home was reduced to dust.

I met my father once. I was seven. The meeting was arranged to happen at McDonald's Playplace, purposely public, purposely suitable for children. I don't know where my mother was, if she was sent far away or was watching twenty feet from us. Either way I was equally left alone with him. Abandoned. I had a kid's meal with McNuggets. I didn't finish eating them.

I don't know how I felt about him before I met him. I don't know if I was filled with the excitement of a child who was finally getting the gadget everyone else had or if my mother's nervousness, founded on her knowledge of my father, had leaped from her to me. I don't know if on the way there I bounced in my seat or if I stared down at my feet forming a triangle where the toes touch. I don't know because I cannot remember because the moment supersedes the anticipation, the memory of him supplants the memories of waiting for him, the realized replaces the imagined. The moment of change does not only alter the future. Like a converted belief, it sends a shockwave along the line of time and the past, as well as the future, is disfigured.

Even now, what I remember is not that meeting—it is that meeting beneath every phone call, buried by every word he ever spoke. It is why I cannot picture him but I can still hear him, why his face collapsed in on itself, why his voice rings like a roar, why his chuckle grates like gravel on my skin. The man I met becomes the man on the phone becomes the man I call father but only when he can not hear me. Even the phone calls were not

constant. The later ones smothered the earlier ones, and I forgot the fear, the powerlessness. I forgot the way he would insinuate that I was an idiot and laugh at his own cleverness, the way he would scoff at what I learned in school, my world, the way he would force me to stay on the line, let the minutes tick by in silence, in wait of the cutting tongue, time slipping away my childhood slipping away, my heart beating quicker as he dragged the phone call out, toying with me, playing with my fear like he were a panther and I a bird with clipped wings. I forgot the time I missed his phone call one week and the next week when I answered he chided me, he belittled me, and when his scolding didn't satisfy the itch to hurt, he began to threaten me. He told me he was going to tell the courts that I missed his call and because of that they were going to take me from my home, from my mother and fly me across the country to live with him, and then he would have custody, he would have control, he wouldn't have to pay child support, and he took such delight, such vengeance in this power over me, and just like that, he taught me how to be afraid.

It was the only time I ever hung up on him.

I could fill a hundred pages with all the things I forgot but do you want to know what I remember he said to me on the day we met?

How many TV's does your mom own?

A few months ago, my cousin got married. I was already in Ann Arbor for the school year and the wedding was in the same barn it was always in, two hours away. My mother *asked* me to come, but it was the first weekend of the Fall semester and I felt like my obligations—my people—were here. I told her no and nothing came of it. No one reprimanded me or took the time to mention my absence. I'm not certain anyone but my mother and my grandmother noticed.

And just like that, I become untethered.

What I wrote earlier, about my father's mother, was a lie. She never knew about me. He never told her.

I have dreams about my father's funeral. Before I go in, I imagine my entrance, my appearance, my apparition in the room to which the heads turn and the mouths twist, the rumored bastard, the prodigal daughter, the woman with the mask. But then I step into the room and no one lifts their head. There are few people there. Mostly old men in suits. I know none of them. They know nothing of me. Unknown, unfamiliar, I am a curiosity. I am

too young for most of their thoughts. I am watched. I am studied. When one gets brave, he approaches and asks, how did you know Leon and I tell him I was his daughter. Then he says he did not know Leon had a daughter or there is a silence where those words would go. I shrug. Even in my dreams, I shrug. Even in my dreams, he does not have a face.

I suppose I am victorious. *Veni vidi vici.*

Sometimes, I move beyond all that, beyond the funeral parlor and the waxed face I cannot dream, and move back in time to his death. He is lying amidst a collage of clichés, he is dying in tropes and averages. The cancer consuming, the heart bursting, the kidneys I wouldn't replace failing. Maybe he burns. Then the funeral is closed casket, then his face remains concealed, then the daydream is easier. I have less to imagine—but then again, there is far less satisfaction. So maybe he crashes, or maybe he drinks himself to death, or maybe he just drops dead. Occasionally, I am playful and Leon Fell fell down a flight of stairs and broke his brains open. But always, in every dream, he dies alone.

SCOTTY JARACZ



Senior

Graduated Fall of 2016 Major: Sociology

Reading: Short Story

My name is Scotty, I currently live in Sparta, TN, which is the exact opposite of Ann Arbor. I am engaged to my other half, and the person who motivated me to write what I will be presenting today. Our wedding is just a few months away, in August, woo! I plan to continue my education by getting a masters in secondary English education, as well as my teaching certificate. I love writing and reading, and would love to pursue a career involved with these two fields. I would like to thank my professor Ms. Courtney Taylor for nominating me, as well as Theresa Stanko for organizing this great event to have writers get their hard work out for other's to hear.

Dead Living

What should I do today? The question came to me every single morning, however, I usually disregarded it. Morning wasn't a time to think, and it always crept in on me. Funny how it did the same thing every day without ever having the decency to ask my permission. The routine had become somewhat procedural. I didn't even need to think of how much coffee I was putting in the pot. It just sort of happened, and the best thing to add to a hot cup of coffee was a little bit of Sailor Jerry's Spiced Rum. Really pushed reality away for a while. My body took the cue from my brain and followed in its pursuit of laziness. I plopped on the couch, too far away from the remote, and too tired to pick it up. I stared at my reflection in the screen.

Is that me? Each individual hair had its own agenda on this man's head. Most of the ones in front had decided to retire and move down south. They met the hair on his face, now collaborating with his chest hair. Christ it was like a fucking family reunion. A bunch of people who continually force themselves into my life, yet I neither want nor need them.

Pathetic man on my television was surrounded by empty alcohol bottles, creating a city skyline of headaches. At least he had variety: tequila, wine, rum, more tequila, more rum. Never mind. The pathetic man was pathetic. He had made me so sick to look at, and it actually made me move from the couch.

I looked for some type of pants to put on. Near the trash can was a pair of dust covered sweatpants that I threw on without thinking twice. While searching for a slightly clean shirt anywhere in vicinity, I noticed my poor hat slouching on top of my dresser. It didn't sicken me like the man in the television, it deeply saddened me. What once was my favorite piece of clothing now lay in shatters, dirt covered, bleach spotted. I gave it a quick hit on my pants, though this could have made matters worse, and placed "Old Blue" in its rightful home, on my head.

I found the remote and started mindlessly flipping through channels. "Breaking News" banners flashed across every screen, but I didn't care enough to stop. After four consecutive runs through each station I turned the TV off. Useless. I felt strange for some reason. A feeling I haven't felt in years. The depressing image of Old Blue must have sparked something in me. For the first time in forever, I felt motivated.

The only thing that mattered that day was getting a new hat. Old Blue had been the best hat ever, and I wanted him to stay in my life, but he, like that pathetic man's hair, needed to retire. It was time for something new. Before venturing out I needed to be sufficiently drunk to deal with all of those humans out there. Another spill or two of rum into the coffee would do the trick.

Just getting to the kitchen was an obstacle for me. Forget the fact I had drunk a little already, but the piles of books and papers scattered across the living room floor made every step a game of Jenga. I tiptoed carefully through them and took the rum down from the top of the refrigerator. This drink was a little different than the first. More of a cup of rum with a little spill of coffee in it. I sat and drank and stared at my nightmare of an apartment, but still reluctant to do anything about it.

At noon I was drunk enough to make for the mall, about three miles away. I covered my alcohol filled torso with my favorite, green and blue, though reeking of stale beer, flannel button-up. I was prepared to drive

there, but to my dismay, cars were lined up in front of my apartment for what seemed like miles. I stepped onto the street and peered in either direction. The traffic reached infinity both ways. My motivation lingered away for a moment, but I caught it before it drifted too far away. Perhaps this jam was going to be a quick one. Optimism. I'm like a whole new person already. Wait until I get a new hat.

Before I went back into my apartment, I decided to ask one of the drivers if they knew what the lineup was about. I approached the car directly in front of me. The man behind the wheel started automatically rolling down his window as I came closer. I couldn't get out a word, gesture, or smile before he had to start and ruin the conversation simultaneously.

"Ya know streets are for cars, not walkers, right?" He said to me in a snotty tone while sneering his nose. Thank god for the alcohol. I crouched over to be eye level. He appeared middle age and donned an opposite mohawk, though I don't think it was by choice. To go along with his fashionable style, he wore huge glasses with brass rims and a goatee, which were both fully engulfed by massive obesity. It was a miracle that his small car could haul its driver anywhere without breaking.

"Yes sir I do. However, I was coming to ask if you knew what this traffic was all about."

"Well it beats me, sonny. I been sitting here for almost a half hour and nobody's moved. Not even a nudge. I threw this old piece of junk (I couldn't decipher if he was referring to himself, or the car) in park after five minutes. I'm just trying to get home to eat some lunch. I live right there!" He pointed at a house approximately 40 yards away. I wanted to ask him why he couldn't just walk, but my instincts told me to not impose that type of question on the man. Though, there is no doubt in my mind I could outrun him. Hell, maybe he is just stuck in his car. Anyway.

"Well that's strange. And you haven't heard anything?" He looked at me with a face full of disgust and said:

"You been listening to a single fucking word I just said, sonny? You deaf? Or just retarded? Get the fuck outta my face." His grammar made me cringe.

I stared at him blankly not knowing exactly what emotion I should feel. Without a word said to that atrocious human being, I turned and headed back towards my apartment. Humans like him have always been a thorn in my side. How is it, that two humans cannot be civilized for a mere 2 minutes. Moreover, what if something really awful happened a few miles ahead, and this is why all of these people were stuck in never-ending traffic? He had absolutely zero care about anything that could have happened. All he

cared about was getting home so he could eat his fucking cheeseburger Hot Pocket.

Humans with no empathy disgust me. They can't even hold the title as "people" because they don't have the necessary qualifications. These "humans", in the most basic, scientific use of the term possible, have no right or authority to engage in social interactions. In my opinion, they have no right to even breathe my air.

Liquor City was still at large when I re-entered my apartment. I grabbed the nearest bottle and took a big gulp. I needed something to rid my memory of the previous events. Tequila. The pathetic man had returned on my television. He reached for a remote control and pointed it directly at me.

The "Breaking News" flashes finally convinced me to give in. I hated watching the news. Every time I turned it on some old liposuction-ed, face-lifted white lady was telling me how to lose fifteen pounds overnight. No details on how the rest of the country is in a free fall, but be sure you know how to make yourself appeal to others. However this time, it seemed something was actually important and worth having "news" about. I caught the report directly in the middle. A man in a tan-colored suit was interviewing another man in orange, hazardous material gear.

"Do you have any more details on the situation?" Asked the tan suit man.

"Not just yet, Bill. We're still trying to figure some things out. But for everyone's safety, we are encouraging them to stay in their homes, lock their doors, lock their windows, close their blinds, and be ready with some type of weapon, just in case." He looked directly at the camera with his blood shot eyes as he said this. I couldn't tell if it was the liquor getting to my brain or if it was actually serious. I wondered if anybody in the traffic outside knew what was going on, or if they were too ingrained with their awful music choices killing off their brain cells one by one. The tan suit man closed the interview.

"Hear that everyone? Wynn Jennings, CEO of *Chemical Industries INC.* has declared a potential 'Zombie Outbreak'. We at News Room 2 implore all of you to be as careful as possible until further details are released." I took Old Blue off and looked at him. I smiled. The news continued with the tan suit man.

"That's all for us out here. A special thanks again to Wynn Jennings, I'm Bill Morgan, News Room 2. Sending it back to you Connie." The screen switched to an elderly white woman whose face was so stretched back from plastic surgery it looked like it could split down the middle at any second. Her

voice opposed her expression, as it was heavy and full.

"Thanks Bill, and thank you to Wynn Jennings. What a terrible thing to happen, we hope everything will turn out ok." She rotated in her chair to meet a different camera, then began announcing:

"To counter that with some happier news, doctors say they have found a way to put a micro-chip in your child to find out exactly when they start having sex. Parents will be more relieved than ever." I quickly changed the channel to another news station, also reporting on the zombie outbreak. This time a younger, Black man with a thick mustache and soothing voice reported.

"You've seen it in the movies, you've read it in books, now it is real life. Zombies. The undead are coming back to life." A news reporter was actually saying these words.

For others, they were probably worried about themselves first, but then they also had some worry for their friends and family. For me, I was just worried about the zombies. A sip of wine remained in my glass from the night before. I finished it and staggered into my bedroom where I crouched beneath my dresser, looking for the switch. Blindly patting the underside of it a few times, I hit the button. Gears began turning underneath my bed. It sank into the ground, flipped over, and rose back to sitting position. Before me laid a gallery of zombie disposal tools. Hammers, hunting knives, maces, spears, samurai swords, claymores, grenades, baseball bats with nails driven through them, axes, and most importantly, machetes. I retrieved my backpack, which had gone unused since my college days. There were still doodle filled, noteless notepads taking up the inside. They were disposed of and replaced with some of these tools. I grabbed an axe and a mace, jammed them through the water bottle holders on either side, ripping through the bottom. I filled the bigger pockets of the backpack with basic food items and two fifths of rum.

After all of these years of preparing, not even knowing if it was really going to happen, it was here: the zombie apocalypse. A time for all people to come together in a common cause, because other things like extreme poverty and child hunger are not that serious. But when people are threatened with something that could actually hurt them, they unite against it. At least I hope so. Otherwise overall world hope is at absolute zero. I only wished Ray was here to be a part of it. It may sound rather ridiculous, but Ray is the reason for my preparedness. He dedicated years on getting ready for this event, just because he wanted to see what people can do when they fight against something together. No person can "team up" with a zombie. There can't be any sort of coalition with them. He always used to say, "the only team a person can be on during the Z.A., is the people team."

A knock came from the front door.

I dropped my backpack by the dresser and closed the bedroom door behind me. Through the peephole was the fat man doing a mini Irish jig. His shirt had become so drenched with sweat it looked as though he were a cold water bottle going through condensation. He knocked again, harder this time. I replaced the chain and cracked the door so only a small portion of his face was visible.

"Yes?" I said plainly.

"Yea, hi. We talked earlier about the traffic. Remember me?"

"Yes"

"I saw that you just lived right here, and I really have to go to the bathroom, would ya mind if I used yours?" He started fidgeting again. It looked more like a human sized water balloon that somebody just poked.

"Well what's going to happen with your car?"

"We ain't moved in over 45 minutes now, see, and I don't think we're gonna anytime soon."

"Have you heard any news yet?"

"No. Please man, I really gotta go" He reached down and held his stomach. This could mean two things: either he wanted to defecate in *my* bathroom, or his over enlarged stomach fell right over his penis, not allowing him to touch it. Either way, I'll be the better person here. I gave him a toothless smile.

"Sure" I said and unchained the door. He wobbled through the doorway, breathing heavily.

"It's right through the kitchen, on your left" I said pointing him through the apartment. He peered at Liquor City and looked back over his shoulder. We caught eyes for the briefest of moments and he returned to his sloth like pace. Every step he took sounded like the final one the old apartment could endure. On his tirade through the living room he knocked over three stacks of books and a stack of papers, not even bothering to say "Sorry", let alone help pick them all up. He managed to get through the kitchen and into the bathroom. I heard the door shut, then he yelled through it:

"Hey! Whatsa matter with this door!?! It don't lock!"

I yelled back, "No one else lives here, you don't have to worry about it!"

"You sure?!"

I heard him take a deep breath and hesitate. This man couldn't do anything in silence.

"Alright, well, don't come in here!" The only thing he should have been worried about was that toilet seat crushing beneath him.

The backpack waited for me and I threw it on and strapped the front closed to relieve pressure off my back. I was already drunk enough, I didn't need any more unbalanced weight throwing me off. I found a Rambo sized hunting knife and strapped it to my leg, underneath my dirty sweatpants - what do they smell like?. The television remained fully covered by zombie news, but fat man hadn't taken any notice. I turned the volume up to the highest level, then strutted to the bathroom and knocked on the door.

"Yea?" Came a fatigued shout from inside.

"The television says there has been a zombie outbreak!" I acted frightfully back. - tell us how his voice sounds

"Yea, you got that thing so goddam loud I heard it in here!"

"What did you say?!"

"You got that..." I opened the door and gave him a toothless smile while patting my machete.

"Hey what the fuck you doin'?!"

"Now see" I may have been slurring while I shouted my words, but I couldn't tell. I was too drunk. "Most people would say that a 'zombie' is a human that has returned from the dead. They crave brains for breakfast and lunch and dinner and the only way a human can kill one is by decapitation. Sound about right, yes? Well that's not my definition. *My* definition of a zombie sounds as follows." I took a few ferocious steps towards him while reaching back as far as I could with the machete and swung down with everything I had.

"Aaaaaaaarrrrrgh!! What the fuck are you doing?!" He cried and screamed and writhed, but he was unable to move off of the toilet. His right arm lie in the bathtub, blood pursed out of the open wound his shoulder used to be.

"A zombie!" I continued shouting to beat the volume blaring from the television, "Is a human who is incapable of understanding what other humans are going through! Why, you may ask? Because they are balls of mass polluting the air and filling real people's minds with the most asinine, idiotic thoughts and procedures ever. THEN! These humans expect people to help them wipe their ass when they get their arms cut off. So here's another fucking wipe, you fucking swine!!" The second hack took off half of his torso, and the fat that spilled out made the alcohol in my stomach swirl around and shoot straight up. I vomited on the severed arm in the bathtub.

My emotions died down. White walls had turned into an abstract painting. Strangely enough, I looked quite similar to the Pathetic man. My entire face was covered in the fat man's red liquid. Old Blue was dirtier than before, if possible. I lost control.

"Look what you did to Old Blue!!" My hands shook viciously - make it a simile - as I ripped the hat from my head and repeatedly slapped the fat man's lifeless face with it. I don't know how it lasted, as I only stopped because my arm felt like it was going to fly off.

Everything came back in a whirl of motions. The part of the fat man's body that remained on the toilet spun in counterclockwise ovals, and the floor became the ceiling from which I was hanging from. I closed my eyes in an attempt to calm the world from its behavior but it had its own agenda. My next thought was to get fresh air, away from the wretched stench of the fat and shit and blood. The steps I took were slow, uncoordinated and uncontrollable. Legs which didn't feel attached to the rest of my body shook with their own seizures. I dropped to my knees, crawled out of the bathroom, into the kitchen, and rested against the refrigerator. My lungs wouldn't take in a full breath. No oxygen was making it to my brain. After fighting for what seemed like hours, I gave in. Blackness.

My eyes shot open and I stared around the room, securing where I was through my surroundings. I glanced up at the microwave clock, which read 2:14. It took me a few minutes to recollect what happened and why I was on the ground. I couldn't remember if killing that fat man was in my dream, or in reality. Using the table and chair for aid, I returned to a standing position and stepped towards the bathroom. The smell came first, then I saw the mess. No dream.

The machete was still death gripped in my other hand. I washed my face and glasses, then turned off the television. Before exiting my apartment for what I would assumed to be the last time, I took a deep breath. I stepped out onto the front porch and looked at the traffic in front of me. The line remained stalled. My journey had now begun, and I smiled a toothless smile.

"Time to find a new hat"

LUC LE POTTIER



Freshman

Major: Physics

Reading: Essay

Luc likes eating raw carrots and correcting people when they spell his name wrong. Sometimes he listens to npr podcasts while he does menial stuff. He likes skiing and climbing, and secretly wishes for a massive, climate-altering mountain to form in the place of the football stadium. He's lived in Ann Arbor since he was little, and he frequently returns home to eat large quantities of food and mess around with his little brother and sister.

1 a.m., West Liberty

But it's hard not to feel hopeless when the leaves follow you through the dark as you walk. They skitter across the pavement in the wind, the uncut fingernails of a thousand-legged spider crawling somewhere behind you. It's hard not to feel hopeless coming home in the dark to find your door is locked. Reaching for your keys or your phone only to realize they're mostly all locked, or decaying, anyways. When you drag your head back to look at the sky and see hundreds of lights speeding in the same direction, strong and purposeful through the clouds, it's easier to be hopeful – until they become stars fixed in place, lent the illusion of motion by the passing clouds. Gunk between your toes builds up after each shift at work, each class you teach, each commute you make. Potholes in your driveway and mold in the cracks between the table, rust on your piano's strings and tears in the armpits of your shirts. What happens, you think but do not say, when the gunk covers everything? Or when the road is nothing but fixed potholes and the

LILLIAN LU



Freshman

Major: Undecided

Reading: Fiction

Lillian is a freshman who has at best a vague idea of what she wants to do with her life. Luckily enough, she still has a little time to figure things out. For now, she likes writing, singing along (quietly) to musicals, and playing complicated games with many tiny pieces at late hours with friends.

Tactical Retreat

Merriam-Webster says retreat is: a place of privacy or safety, refuge; a period of group withdrawal for prayer, meditation. Merriam-Webster says retreat is: an act or process of withdrawing, especially from what is difficult, dangerous, or disagreeable; the process of receding from a position or state attained, 'the retreat of a glacier'. The new year ekes along like a slow-moving snowdrift, a glacial pace, settling high on her shoulders—and then it is February the seventeenth, and retreat is here.

On the first day, God created the heavens and the earth. One was good, and one was worse, so he kept them apart from each other, one lording over the other; and he created light, and saw it was good, and separated it from all the bad and ugly underneath.

"Were you skipping worship today already?"

The cabins their church rents for winter retreat are flimsy wisps, metal poles that fold like cardboard. Constance thinks if Tiffany leans over the side of the top bunk any more, the entire thing might collapse and crush her flat.

The thought spares her from having to answer, from having to remember—that two hours ago she had crept out the back door of the cabin during hymns, snagged someone else's chocolate off their bed, and torn the wrapper with her teeth to spare herself from having to uncover her frozen fingers. For an hour she had skittered aimlessly back and forth across the field around their isolated cabin, stamping slow into slush, marring the pristine landscape as she watched night fall. Somewhere in that orange-streaked area between daylight and sunset, she had gnawed on stolen caramel until her gums felt shiny and raw. It had been good, and the Lord saw that it was good—it was a pain that meant penance, that ended with clean.

"Of course I was skipping. I mean...what did you expect?"

"We do this every year," Elizabeth says helpfully from her right. She's also lying on the bottom bunk. "I mean, *I* didn't skip today, granted, but..."

"Exactly! If you're going to skip every time, at least be consistent and go together." Tiffany's eyes are tiny pinpricks of light, glowing stars affixed to a flaking ceiling. "You should give it a try this time, you know. They invited a really good speaker this year. Liz will back me up, won't you?"

"I mean, he's okay." Elizabeth shifts awkwardly, zips herself back up in her sleeping bag. Above her, some distant acquaintance snores in a way that sounds like a derisive snort. "She's not wrong, you know. Maybe we should give it a try. He might make you think or something."

Just like the one they invited the year before that, and the year before that. Constance lies back in bed without saying anything, stares blankly at the metal rods above her. They remind her of prison bars, a cage that separates her from Tiffany and all the believers and angels and God above her.

Every year, they make little personalized envelopes for everyone and hang them on the walls on the main cabin. It's kitschy, it's cheap; she has seen her fellow churchgoers writing letters to each other in glitter pens on Japanese post-it notes when they should supposedly be taking notes on sermons. More specifically, she has seen Elizabeth glaring at them as they seal their letters with puffy stickers, fold them into flowers over their bibles. Elizabeth says they are fake believers. Elizabeth says they are lying, that their faith is cheap, that their prayers are worthless. She says that she is above the mindless herd, in the way she glances toward the cabin longingly when

she skips sermons with Constance and the way she refuses to take communion even though she is baptized, with her nose up and her hand out. She thinks she sees something everyone else doesn't, thinks everyone else is still wavering on the edge, and she can at least respect Constance for making up her mind and jumping over it.

So they pass their own notes back and forth, dangling limply in those garish envelopes, little jabs and spiteful words about all the people and places and things they hate. Constance likes it; she likes being bitter, she likes being angry, she likes being purposeful. She likes knowing where she stands, having her mind made up. Elizabeth does too, she can tell; they walk tenuous, parallel tightropes that they rely on each other to get across. If Elizabeth can drive home how much she hates all these fake believers, then they really are fake, and she really is better. If Constance can drive home how much she hates this fake religion, it really is fake, and she really doesn't doubt herself.

Every year, the first envelope—and, inexplicably, the most brightly-adorned one—is one addressed to 'God,' a positively tooth-rotting idea dreamed up by their youth pastor as a way of speaking to the holy one privately during the retreat. Their pastor has sworn to burn those letters after their three days are over, has promised the collective that no one will ever read them—but today, after Constance feeds that envelope her same annual confession of doubts, she bites her lip and looks around and, somehow unnoticed, reaches her hand into that forbidden envelope and yanks out a handful of paper. Neat creases, jagged tares, full pages; she holds the church in her hands, twenty-odd voices sticking to her fingers, and she jams them ruthlessly into her pocket and races to the bathroom with that damned envelope on her back as she runs. She reads them in a handicapped stall, the body of the church, the body of Christ, takes her first communion in that damp little closet and flushes them down the toilet immediately afterwards. Her pastor asks for strength, Tiffany tells God she doesn't trust him, and Elizabeth thanks him in an unsigned letter that Constance wouldn't have recognized if not for the swooping downward loops on her y's. They are the same upward curves she uses in her h's when she writes 'hate' and 'horrible', only flipped and rotated and nearly unrecognizable on the first take.

On the second day, God split the water with a dome; he separated like from like, and one was the sky and one was just the same water that it had always been, that it would always be. One was above, one was below; and even if they had started the same, or seemed the same, or really were the same, one was still above and the other would always be far from heaven.

On the third day, Constance finds Tiffany and Elizabeth during the ten

minutes allotted to morning devotion.

"Let's go out and do them by the lake," she says, hands in her pockets, devotion booklet nowhere to be found. The two stand without another word and pull on their jackets as Constance taps her foot by the door, letting sweat seep into her fleece-lined boots.

On the third day, God gathered the waters to create seas, oceans, presumably lakes. Dry land was what was left over from that gathering; it was an absence, a lack, the parts of the world that were shriveled up and dried, a remainder after God stripped them bare. He came back and planted and grew, sure, but that was how it had started; the land was empty. They lived, breathed, and died on empty.

The lake is solid ice at this time of year, the land covered in crystalline coats of frozen water; they are impossible to differentiate, and Constance is two feet out on the lake before she realizes the ground under her is really hollow, ice feet deep. Life is frozen beneath her, fish and algae and filthy muck suspended in blue amber. For a few moments, she is above it all—and then she turns around, and trudges back up, and she is standing back on empty.

Tiffany is doing her devotions, but her eyes keep straying from her booklet. Constance can tell from the way she is perpetually squinting, as if the word of God is too holy and pure and bright for her eyes to bear; which is ridiculous, stupid, it means that she is glancing out on the glassy surface of the water, the sun plastered in the sky like a lopsided thumbprint, the world draped in glittering, ostentatious crystals of snow. Her pen taps, leaving spidery trails of ink along the edge of the paper. They look like footprints in untouched snow.

"I have an idea," says Elizabeth, folding her booklet into quarters and stuffing it in her pocket. Constance's entire body feels numb and cold even as Tiffany sets her own book aside and smiles inquisitively; she feels cold in her limbs like static as the two whisper, then laugh, then turn to her. Their happiness comes from a superior place, some higher power; she cannot help but feel as if she doesn't belong, as if it would be impossible to partake.

But Tiffany's laughter digs icy tendrils into her lukewarm heart and before she knows it she is lying with them on the ground, alongside Elizabeth's warm smile in the pure powdered snow; Tiffany is shrieking with laughter, flapping her limbs back and forth, and the snow that parts under her arms and legs seem more to exude from her than to make way. Elizabeth follows suit, spreading her wings against the ground with her own subdued smile, eyes trained on the bleak blue sky. Constance stares for a second, then follows suit; slowly first, then faster and faster, a snow angel taking flight, soar-

ing lower and lower into the sinking slush. The act is sacred, holy, sanctified; it is the same feeling, the same tingling pain as snow slips under her collar and into her sleeve, the same clean. She listens to her friends laugh and the sound melts inside her, collects like shining dust in her hair and bites at the ends of her fingers and gets into her mouth.

On the third day, Constance and her friends part the water, melt it away from their bodies and leave themselves empty and new on dry land.

On the fourth day, Constance attempts to drive through a winter storm for the first time; as night falls, she packs her bags and says her goodbyes and goes back to a world where the only day she has to think about God and sin and heaven is on the seventh day, when she can breathe easy and relax. It's a practical blizzard when her dad finally drives up to the cabin, the elements protesting wildly as she attempts to escape. They are almost out of the forest when it happens—the road slips, then disappears, and suddenly she is five feet in a ditch and the entire world is behind her, blaring and honking and flashing their headlights in angry unison. Elizabeth calls the church a hive mind. Tiffany calls it one sanctified body.

Her father takes the driver's seat with a sigh as she ventures out into the snow, watching helplessly for a few moments before something compels her to throw her flimsy, negligible weight against the push-and-pull motion of her father's driving. Call it helping, call it getting in the way—she can feel the jagged edges of the license plate as it sinks its teeth into her jeans, the embrace of the grit and frost that gather beneath her as the vehicle whines and fidgets. The car inches forward and backward, heaving itself like the tide in crests and reluctant ebbs; the acrid stench of petroleum fills her nose as the engine bellows like a bull, the glass of the back windshield breaking contact with her skin before the car hits the edge of the road and crashes back with cold ferocity. Her father yells something out the window as the taillights flash, bathing the trees and snow in waves of scarlet and gold, and once again she rises up to meet the car.

Constance thinks to herself for not the first time that weekend, as her fingers slide against the feathery layer of frost on the trunk and the shrieking of tires around her fade into the shrieking of wind, that she is wrestling against the unmovable hand of God.

JOSHUA MANDILK



Senior

Major: English and Health Fitness

Reading: Fiction

Josh Mandilk grew up in Commerce Township, Michigan, and was fortunate to spend many of the vacations of his youth in northern Michigan where his grandparents owned eighty acres of forests and fields, and his family later bought property. He finds a great deal of inspiration in the natural beauty of this great state. Josh enjoys writing fiction and 'creative nonfiction,' and sometimes tries to put to the page his own shoddy attempts at poetry. He has recently been entering, cautiously, into the realm of screenwriting. He also enjoys working out, singing, and spending time with his friends, his family, and his adorable puppy, Luna.

You Can't Drown a Fish

Their names were Clark and Linda Reynolds. My brother shot them in their own house. They'd just been out shopping, and they walked in on him dumping their fine china into a big black trash bag. They screamed and asked him who he was and what he was doing there. But I don't think he understood what *they* were doing there, either. When he turned himself in, he told the police he'd been expecting someone else entirely, that maybe he should've set a trap.

When we were terribly young, at an age when time still worked in our favor, my brother and I would run around in the forest behind our house. It

was a wilderness where we tried to get lost, a foreign front where we could wage our wars, a stretch of enemy terrain with no known boundaries and tripwires hidden in the brush. It was fifteen acres of wooded Connecticut hills; I was seven, my brother, Thomas, nine.

"Chase me, come and find me, Tyler," he'd yell. "The enemies are hiding me away!" And he'd run down the trail, kicking up leaves and grabbing at branches and turning to watch me follow after, his blue eyes wide, his smile broad and broken by unclosed gaps.

Thomas was always much quicker than I, but I knew where to look for him. He'd run to the furthest reaches of our property, where barbed wire stretched, where *Danger* signs were nailed to the trees, flashing their warnings in red and black. And I'd crane my neck to find him sitting in a tree, clinging to the thick brown branches, peering around at the forest floor, shouting "Help me, help me—they're all closing in and we've gotta escape!"

He'd jump down from his tree and we'd somersault in evasive maneuvers, dried leaves crunching beneath us. We'd mimic sword fights and blast the enemy lines with gunfire. He'd monitor our progress, command me to man the cannons or proudly inform me he'd just saved my life. We tried to make the danger feel real, to turn the forest we knew so well into something menacing, a distant war-torn place where we were never safe, where something was always coming for us.

But sometimes Thomas would climb back into a tree and yell "Go, run, save yourself—there are too many of them. I'll protect you!" I'd bolt down the trail, knowing he'd lay down cover from his perch. I heard the boots of the enemy soldiers thundering through the mud behind me as they closed in. I heard Thomas as he made his racket of suppressive fire, reveling in the glory of his final stand. But I always turned back for him. I'd fight through the ranks, however thick, and save him, and we'd walk back to the house, exhausted but alive.

One summer evening Thomas and I set up a tent in the backyard, just beyond where we could see the house. We brought comic books, a battery-powered lamp, our sleeping bags, colored pencils and markers, stacks of paper and snacks. The roof of the tent was clear mesh, and, looking up, we could see the star-speckled sky framed by trees.

We stayed up into the night, well past when our father came to the door and told us it was time for bed. Dad opened the flap and leaned in so we could see his serious brown eyes, so we could watch him trying to be stern. We said okay, told him goodnight, and turned out the lamp. But when he was gone, we switched it back on and used a thick wool blanket to hide the glow, giggling at our cleverness all the while.

We sketched the wars we imagined, the destruction, the marvelous scale of it all. I drew legions of stick figures all lined up, being sent to their death, each side equally fearsome. The backdrop was crudely sketched trees, a quickly penciled-in mountain range, cartoon clouds and a perfectly round sun. After working tirelessly on populating my paper for quite some time, I looked over to Thomas's drawing.

A carefully crafted coastline jagged with gray-shaded rocks, a beach riddled with ghastly-looking men, armed to the teeth, pushing out from the inland forests. And on the wrinkling waves of the ocean, a sailing ship carried two little figures off into the distance. They were huddled at the stern, their gazes fixed on the enemies who'd never catch them.

"It's us," Thomas said.

A couple years later, Thomas and I were at our grandparents' cabin on the lake. Sitting on the edge of the dock, we were dipping our toes into the icy cold waters of an oddly mild November. The sun was retreating beneath the tree-lined shore opposite, the last moments of its light burning out beyond, throwing the pointed tips of the pines into brilliant focus. We'd hooked little bits of hot dog on the ends of two lengths of yarn, and dropped the bait into the lake, pulling it this way and that, watching the little fish dancing around in the rippling blue.

The creatures appeared connected in their movement, brief flickers of white underbelly coming in waves as they darted away from the masses of meat dangling from the thick, white yarn. It was pointless. Surely this wouldn't work, I thought.

"They'll bite," pronounced Thomas. "Just wait, they'll bite. Let's hold the lines still."

Sure enough, as the bait hung steady, a baby bluegill circled my brother's trap and bit. Thomas giggled and yanked, flinging the little fish onto the dock beside us. It wriggled and writhed, its lower lip caught on the hook we'd hidden in the hotdog. My brother and I looked at each other, then at what we'd done and laughed and laughed.

"What should we do with it?" I asked.

"I don't know," Thomas said. His unkempt sandy blond hair stuck up all over, and as he stood there smiling down at the suffocating creature, there was something I'd never seen behind the blue of his eyes.

"Let's throw it back," I offered.

"No," he said. "That's no fun."

He reached down and scooped up the fish and squeezed it in his fist. "Look at its little eyes," he said.

The fish was motionless. It looked so unnatural, alien in his grip, and I wondered if it'd already died. I imagined rolling around in bed that night with the image of the black eyes searching, of my brother's fist tightening until the creature popped.

"Throw him back," I said, reaching to grab his hand. Thomas moved away and raised his prized catch high above him.

"No," he said. "You catch one, then you can do whatever you want. This one's mine." He walked up to shore and took a stone in hand, grinning at me all the while. I was panicked, more aware with each moment that the fish was going to die.

"What're you doing?" I asked, though I knew. Thomas said nothing, but placed the fish back on the dock and crouched beside it. He raised the rock overhead, and I ran to stop him. He pushed me away and I fell into the water. Time slowed a moment as I hung limp in the freezing cold water. And then I stood.

The rock slammed down on the creature once, then again, and again. The thud of the rock on the dock, dampened slightly by the helpless, pulverized fish is a sound I'll never forget, a percussive rhythm hammering somewhere outside my window through every sleepless night I've ever had. I never felt closer to my brother than in those moments, and I never wanted to be further away.

The rough wood boards of the dock scraped my arms as I pulled myself back up. My brother threw the rock in the water and ran up the hill toward the house. Though night was upon us and the sun was just a lingering red-orange hue, I could still see the mess of fleshy wet crimson that stained the dock. I stood shaking, clothes clinging to me, crying as I watched the last ripples disappear from where my brother had cast his stone.

Thomas was a "handful," my mother would say as he tore through puberty. Thomas picked fights in school. In the eighth grade he was sent home with a black eye and, when I saw him, he said "You should've seen the other guy." I learned the other guy was a sixth-grader and that he had a couple bruised ribs. The boy's friends had pulled Thomas off the kid. My mother went to three separate meetings with Thomas and the administrators before they agreed not to expel him.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked.

"Well, he was coming after me," Thomas said.

Three weeks later, Thomas came into my room at two in the morning and shook me awake.

"Hey," he hissed, "What'd you do with my slingshot?"

"What..." I sat up, alarmed, confused.

"It was in my room, and now it's gone. I know you took it—just tell me where it is."

"I haven't seen it," I told Thomas.

"Well then somebody went in my room," he said. "Who went in my room, then?" Frantic, he was rocking from foot to foot.

"Thomas, nobody..."

"Who?" he yelled. He walked to the window and peeled apart the blinds. "I know somebody's got it. I practically *saw* somebody take it."

I ran to my parents' room. I shook my mom's shoulder, and she jerked awake, her blonde hair tossing about as she shot up and looked around.

"Thomas is acting funny," I told her.

My parents sat in Thomas's room on either side of him as I looked on, worried. "I practically *saw* somebody take it," Thomas kept saying. My mother rubbed his back and told him it was okay, that we'd find it, that everything'd be fine. She looked at me with a confusion I'd never seen, as if I, in my eleven years of knowing Thomas, might hold the answer to some secret he was keeping. My father looked mostly at the floor, his hand resting gently on Thomas's shoulder.

Thomas was sent to see a doctor. My mother and father told me the doctor could "help Thomas feel better." Thomas never wanted to talk about the visits. But he slept more soundly, and he never came running into my room in the middle of the night, though sometimes I lay awake, watching the blades of the ceiling fan turn above me, wondering if he would.

Thomas struggled in school, but he excelled as an artist. He loved drawing, sketching, penciling images of people, of animals, of places we'd been together. Landscapes were his specialty. The kitchen fridge was always

covered with beautiful images of mountains, of lakes, of glass smooth ponds painted to reflect the surrounding shoreline and the sky above.

One night—I must have been in the eighth grade—I needed a pencil to finish my math homework. I couldn't find one in my room so I went to Thomas's. His backpack sat on his bed, so I opened it, and, rifling through, I came across a different kind of painting. Blots of heavy black covered the page and caught my eye, and I pulled the paper from the bag, turning to make sure I was alone.

Before me was a forest gone ablaze, the flames climbing high toward the pitch black sky. The moon hung low, but bright enough to form a lone man's silhouette as he ran across a beach toward an unsettled tide, away from the flickering fire that consumed the trees. The colors were blurred and the forest fire cast shadows everywhere. It was chaotic and made me uneasy, and I put it back quickly. As I struggled to zip the bag, I heard a rattling within one of the pockets. I'm sure now it was made by Thomas's pills.

Thomas was shouting. A senior in high school, he was in his room sitting on his bed shouting words I'd never heard before. I was shooting hoops in the driveway. Thomas was cursing at my mom and screaming things that meant nothing to me. Then he was out the door, sprinting down the street and around the corner, his flannel shirt flapping behind him like a sail. My mother stepped out onto the porch, screamed Thomas's name and kept on screaming, even when we both knew Thomas was too far away to hear her.

The police picked Thomas up three miles away on the shoulder of the interstate. He'd started running when the police pulled up behind him. Thomas dove down into a ditch and covered himself with a few handfuls of leaves. He told the officers he was going to see a friend. He said the friend was going to help him, that there was a guy who could save him.

"Thank god it's just you guys," Thomas told the officers. "I thought it was somebody else." He was in handcuffs when they brought him back to the house. And that night I cried myself to sleep.

We were, all of us, celestial bodies drifting apart in deep space. Thomas had moved out after his graduation, and the united front my parents had formed against my brother's instability quickly disintegrated, and their marriage unraveled. They separated during my junior year of high school.

When he left, Thomas said he wanted to be an artist. He was going to New York, but before he left, he painted a portrait of my mother, a wonderful image where she sat laughing, her hair pulled back, her eyes alight, her cheeks flushed and vibrant. My mother cried when she saw it.

Art was a bit of stillness, a constant in a life so shaken and unstable. But before long, Thomas was living on the streets of Manhattan. He'd call my mother often asking for money, telling her about the rehab program he was trying to get into. "If I could just find the money for a place to stay," Thomas told her. "The meetings are Monday, Wednesday, Friday, twelve until two."

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, twelve until two—I could imagine Thomas reading the pamphlet, repeating the dates to himself, changing his delivery with each performance, crumpling the paper back up and making the call. At first, my mom and dad sent him money. But the calls kept coming. Eventually, my parents both refused.

A month after I, myself, had moved to New York, Thomas overdosed. I went to see him. I'd accepted a job in Manhattan right out of college, a management position at a corporate office for a chain whose pizza everyone's probably had, almost certainly hated, but will definitely order again.

"I need help, Tyler," Thomas said when he saw me. Tears welled up in his eyes. His skin looked dry and loose and unhealthy. He was scrawny, and his right leg moved constantly, a twitchy restlessness that shook the hospital bed. It'd been heroin that did it, but I'm sure that wasn't the only thing in his system. Thomas's eyes were wide, his pupils dilated so that his iris was a mere sliver, an almost invisible blue ring around the black that scanned my face, searching for something.

"I love you, Thomas," I said in reply.

I gave him a check for his first month's rent on an apartment in New Jersey right across the state line. I helped him find a job at a supermarket. I bought him a cart full of groceries. I gave him a box of art supplies: a watercolor set, drawing pencils, a leather-bound sketch pad. I told him he had to call me every week to check in. We talked on two consecutive Mondays. Then nothing.

Four months later. I'd received the call many times. Usually from my mother. Sometimes from my dad. Thomas is in rehab. Thomas found an apartment. Thomas was evicted. Thomas said he is trying to look you up to see if he could stay with you for a while. Thomas is back in rehab.

"Your brother's been arrested." My mother was crying and her words came softly, as one long and shaky sigh. When she spoke of Thomas now, her breathing carried the fatigue, the exhaustion that came with years of regret, with month after month of not knowing.

I stood by my mother and by my father in the courtroom. Guards

brought Thomas in, one in front, one behind. Thomas was half the size of either of them. The beard he'd grown made him look skinnier, his face sunken into its untamed depths.

My mother's hair had grayed, but she was still beautiful, elegantly dressed in a black skirt, a gray sweater, clutching her handbag close as if it held within it something that might turn back the time to when she could've done something to save her son, to stop the forces that had torn our family apart. I hugged my father. He'd gained weight, he was balding. He smiled for a moment, but it was an unpracticed movement and slipped away quickly.

The prosecution painted the scene. Thomas had broken into a house in New Providence. He'd been taking things from all over the house. There was no real method to it, or maybe it was a method I couldn't understand. He'd brought a big black trash bag and filled it with various items from around the house. He took the woman's jewelry from a box he'd found upstairs. He took vinyl records, an iPod, and a cable box. He took a camera. He was taking a stack of antique plates from a kitchen cabinet when the homeowners, a husband and wife, came home and found him. They'd been out shopping at the mall, and they'd stopped at an animal shelter because they were looking to adopt a dog. The prosecution attorney made sure we knew this is where they'd been. Thomas shot them with a 9mm pistol he'd taken from another house. He used all of the rounds in his clip.

Thomas told the police he'd tried to put everything back after he'd killed them. He said he'd gone through the house and put the china back in the cabinet, placed the jewelry in the drawer of the bedside table where he'd found it. I guess he'd sounded hopeful when he'd told them this, as if it might absolve him of everything.

There was a moment in court, during the discussions of insanity pleas and the testimonies, the back-and-forth between judge and counsel, when Thomas turned from where he was sitting and looked at me. I felt distant from him now, watching his eyes search my face. It must have been longing I found in his gaze. The guards were getting ready to take him away. He was shackled, and he'd be marched outside, driven to a prison where he'd spend his life lonely and afraid, surrounded at all times by the armies of his captors.

As I stand in my office at the end of the day looking out at the twilight setting in, I can feel Thomas tugging at me from where he's locked up in upstate New York. There, he runs around in the wide open expanses of his mind, dodging the tripwires he's set, rocking himself to sleep in the late hours of the night and calling for me to save him, screaming that if we were just to board a ship, if we could just escape, we'd be okay. And as I lie in bed each night, as I drift slowly toward sleep, I can sometimes hear the percussive pounding of a man who throws himself again and again against a door he'll never open.

PATRICK MCLINDEN



Sophomore

Major: Microbiology

Minor: Creative Writing and Spanish

Reading: Short Fiction

Patrick was born and raised in inner city Milwaukee, WI, where his love of people, learning, and diversity first began. Today Patrick keeps himself incessantly busy between being an RA, the Vice President of Recruitment for Phi Delta Epsilon, and various other endeavors. As a pre-medical student, he uses writing to explore various aspects of the human experience in an effort to further develop himself and his understanding of those around him.

This Person

Why is it that wrong choices can yield the right results? Why does it so commonly happen in the reverse? Where no matter how many right choices we seem to make, everything still feels so utterly wrong. Perhaps we need to understand that, in fact, we never choose anything at all. Things happen, or they don't. Looking at things this way, it just so happens that someone somewhere could be excited. No, thrilled. Maybe right now this person can barely contain their excitement. Maybe today is simply different for this person. Not for any one reason or another, but because perhaps life just happens this way—where things suddenly change without a reason at all. Yeah, let's go with that.

So today is different. Today is better. Today, everything and anything is possible. When it happens, this person will be lying in bed or walking some-

where aimlessly. Perhaps they're on the phone, or online. It could be an e-mail re:

Today things feel different.

Or maybe it's a long, hilarious text message to wake up to in which someone they love so much sent last night. Paraphrasing, perhaps it'll say, Hey hey! What's going on today? I hope you have a fantastic day, okay? And this will be all too exciting.

This person will squeeze their cell phone in a tight, prolonged embrace under the covers, then sigh, take a deep breath and reach for the covers above their face and pull them down. It is time to rise, time to move, time to live. It is time for this person to shake the melancholy dampness that clings to them like water to a wet dog and begin to see things as they may actually be. This person will laugh out loud with a profound intensity and will exhale a smile.

With the next inhale the smell of coffee from the shop down the street will smell like it's right outside. And guess what? As they get dressed they find—surprise surprise!—a \$5 bill. Looks like that coffee from down the road might just be a possibility after all.

When they walk in the cashier will be polite and pretty. They throw out a suggestion and this person will take it, because today is different, today is better, so why not let it be? Why not just go with the flow?

Soon they will feel like doing their homework. This will freak them out because they never like doing homework, nobody likes doing homework. But schoolwork is easy today. On twitter, they might even choose to announce their proclivity and propensity for success in class and in life in general because, what the hell, right?

Glancing up from their cup this person will notice the conversations happening all around them. Everyone seems to be smiling. This person will then notice that they are not smiling and begin to smile too. But this will feel strange and out of place. This will feel like a hug from someone this person really doesn't like. And even though today is different, and today is better, the pervasive smiles will begin to creep this person out. This will be so like them—to become depressed on even the happiest of days, to frown at the right times and smile at the wrong ones. But this person will buck up and join the crowd anyways because that is what you do: smile when everyone else does, and be happy when everyone else is, and do things you do not in fact want to do because you know it is the right thing to do.

This person will finish their cup of coffee and place it in the dish basin. It will clank loudly and disturb the not-so-opportune silence of the cafe. Every-

one will be looking at them. Suddenly, in a sweeping motion, this person will all of a sudden feel like checking their mailbox even though it is the end of the day on Sunday and they have no real reason to feel compelled to check it now. They'll recognize, even if just for a moment, that they only want to check their mailbox because it involves leaving the awkward silence behind.

Even though it will be empty, this person will remind themselves that by some luck it could have been full. They will try and remind themselves that they are supposed to be happy there isn't something pressing and obnoxious to respond to—but it won't help. This person will look down at themselves and bring their hands slowly back up to their chest and grasp at their t-shirt, trying hard to find something to hold onto, trying hard to find something to give them a reason to do something, anything else. This person will look back to the mailbox, back to themselves, back to the mailbox, back to themselves—they too, start to feel like an empty mailbox.

This person's email inbox will have no new messages and they won't have any new text messages either. This person won't receive a text they have come to expect because today feels different in ways they do not and cannot comprehend. This person will wonder why it was that they'd felt so good before and ponder what it was that they had done to bring such a joy to its end.

Now this person might start to notice things they should have before like how their hair might feel greasy or that they forgot to brush their teeth before leaving this morning. They will return home and take a shower. They will undress and avoid the mirrors along the way. They will turn the shower knob too far and won't bother to fix it. A little hot water never killed anyone, they will think. They will stand there and then sit there. This person will start to feel as though they've been cleaved in two. Half of them wanting to get back up and half of them wanting to stay down. They might imagine being made of sugar and melting sweetly away in the warm water. They will close their eyes and breathe slowly. Sometimes, they will think, the only way they have learned to feel alive is to wonder what it would be like to not be. This person knows that sometimes life feels utterly lifeless. This person knows that today might not be different after all.

This person will soon push out of this and slap themselves lightly on the face to snap back—like they do in the movies. They will think briefly that if there was an Olympic event for feeling the ways they do that they would be a gold medalist. Alas, there is no such event.

As this person resigns to the responsibility of the day and climbs back into bed, the heft of this tragedy seems to weigh down on them, pushing them further into the sheets. This person will begin to sleep. The sleep will be long but feel brief.

This person knows that they could get up, go see all of the people that adore and care about them, but what good is it to find out people love you when you don't believe them anyways? This person will tell themselves that they aren't worth it because:

They never return phone calls.

They are falsely modest.

This person has a disproportionate amount of guilt about these two things, which makes them unpleasant to be around. Or so they think. Or so they believe.

Being wrong does not matter much to this person anymore. Being right still does. This person wishes they could feel right—just once. They can, they will and they must. On the brightest of sides, this person is so much closer than they think they are.

GRACE MORRIS



Freshman

Major: Undecided

Reading: Fiction

Grace is currently an undeclared freshman planning on attending medical school, if the heavens will so and they can manage to pass organic chemistry with minimal fatalities. Their hobbies include baking, walking aimlessly through the Arb, and acting surprised when dirt inevitably ends up in the sugar cookies.

God In the Form of A Rabbit

There's a long-sleeved t-shirt on your floor, now. You had slept in it, pulled it loose from the snag of your shoulders, and chucked it into the "shit I can get away with wearing for one more day" pile that is slowly morphing into the "fuck it all; hygiene's a social construct" pile to its right.

Your roommate's in bed dragging pin-needle fingers across a dimmed phone screen and looking neither wholly alive nor dead. Slick porcelain eyes; hollow reflection of light. You wonder how many laundry quarters you could get paid for eating ass. Like, is that something you charge on an hour basis? Per person? Twenty quarters per ass eaten? You wait a few more seconds, then laugh. It's a canned, pre-packaged sound that goes flat against the wall, miserably vulnerable to the silent muck of the room. A dip in your roommate's bed grows wider as he turns, back angled toward you.

The shirt smells like panic sweat and “fresh energy”, which has started to clog up all the undershirts in the “fuck it” pile. Fresh energy is not as potent as it claims to be, and certainly hasn’t sent you on any lady-fucking bravado adventures, but it’s a staple. You button up all the buttons, twice. Your roommate glances up for a second at the struggle.

Fuck you, you think, smiling.

The dresser drawer’s stuck. You claw at it, thrusting coffee grounds and post-its from the desk onto all your clothes and realize that fresh energy and coffee are amusingly oppositional smells. Your social security card is hidden beneath some boxer briefs below tampons wrapped in a beanie hat shoved in the corner covered by two legitimately clean shirts that you will never actually wear. It’s flimsy, but you don’t think about the movement of shoving the card into your pocket, feeling the weave of the fabric stick to the sores retching glittering pus on your hand, or the bend of the card in your jeans as you let go and relinquish your fingers to the stuffy air.

“I’m leaving,” you say, keeping your right shoe untied.

“To the doctor’s,” you add.

In about four and a half minutes, you actually leave the room.

You had worn the shirt yesterday and also last week. It smelled more like fresh energy than panic sweat; you hadn’t slept in it yet. The day was great for walking, you decided. The leaves had just begun to turn, leaving their mottled little corpses all over the sidewalk.

But fucking cold, your roommate added, slumping against the wall. You decide that he’s hoping you’ll take a jacket. It’s better than assuming he’s malicious, or negative, or a willful pessimist. Better than acknowledging the distance between him and the woven loops of the floor and yourself. You had tried to explain Hegel to your roommate once and have never been friends since. Per usual, you place the fault on your own shadow. It’s your childhood, angles of life you were not taught to hold. The way you hold your shoulders, somehow too stiff and too loose, awkwardly bolstering the neck. Too many buttoned shirts. Not that you can help the way the world views you. But the craving’s there. A hunger that leaks from the corner of your eye as you watch him, hoping he never thinks of you with a similar scrutiny.

How much could he know?

You would like to belong in your own home.

In spite of it all, you’ve managed to develop this pseudo-authentic rela-

tionship where you both pretend to care for one another and make doleful small talk over laundry.

"How was the game?"

"Good."

"Physics?"

"Alright, dude. Not that I know what I'm doing or whatever."

"Then it's good?"

"Sure."

And so on.

Everything is always fine, even when it isn't. Like this one time, you had walked home, right after your comparative literature class. It was hellishly dark. Freaky dark. Someone will get their ass murdered dark. Honest to god, though, you aren't afraid of the dark.

The room was dark, too, but this was a softer kind of night, the shade etched by dirty laundry and a sweater thrown over the lampshade. Your roommate was shirtless on the bottom bunk, ribs splayed out on accordion sheets, hands flailing around like amorphous creatures. There's this liquescent soul-song painted on the walls, spilling all over the bed and onto the floor, unhindered by the brutish light you release upon opening the door. You were overcome with thirst as your throat dried to dust so you stepped backwards into the hallway and seemingly through time; this was a stark reminder of a few weeks ago if you covered the accordion ribs with a garish neon thermal.

Your roommate didn't notice, you told yourself, again. On the floor of the hall you contemplated the omnipresence of other people's sorrow until it all dripped through the carpeting and you couldn't hear your roommate anymore. You slammed the door back to antiquity reentering and released an overtly peaked "Hey!" By now your roommate was presenting as a semi-adjusted individual and gave a passably warm reply.

You considered jacking off in the shower, but didn't. Term paper due next day.

With that said, though, you decide to grab a jacket. It's part of the social contract the two of you have developed, part of the game.

Thanks for the warning, you mutter on the way out.

Such walks are typical for you. After the initial protest of bones and thinning muscles, your body seems to lag behind you, disappearing between the shrouded pathways of the woods. The trees seem hollow and broken, uneven relics colliding with the decaying ferns below.

A runner passes by. Step, step, crack, as she staggers on a branch. For a moment you watch her, smelling your sweat and her sweat, coffee and trees, and could easily imagine a life together. You do this periodically with strangers, falling in love with the perfumes and colognes of other people. For her, you realize, these trees are different. Perhaps glorious, perhaps beautiful.

If only you could see the world in such a way.

Is it any surprise that God appears?

In spite of watching the runner, you trip on the same branch and scrape your twig hands trying to save yourself.

"Nice fall, jackass."

You look up to see an ashen gray rabbit, twitching his effervescent nose in your direction. There aren't any human souls around, save the dead or the dryads if one believes in those kinds of creatures.

"Hello?" you ask, a bit cautiously.

"Hey, asshole," says the rabbit, who is undoubtedly addressing you.

"Um," you say, unable to come up with a salacious comeback.

The rabbit arcs his head around: "I'm God, you stupid fuck."

"What the hell are you doing here anyway?" God continues.

Walking, you stammer, thinking.

"I know all and I see all, you little sleazebag."

"What?" you say, really meaning *what do you know?*

"You came here to die."

God pauses.

"In an *extended* sense. You know, some people die at twenty-five and all that. You aren't even twenty-one yet. Can't drink it away. Not legally, anyhow."

The rabbit twitches his nose more ferociously than before, as if to laugh.

"No wonder you don't have any friends."

God continues to cajole you even after you stop conversing with him, after you beg him to just shut up. If God wasn't a rabbit, you think. You're highly opposed to animal cruelty.

God follows you home.

Your roommate's still passing as normal, choosing your absence to play some Tchaikovsky. It's a pleasant surprise; you didn't know that your roommate had any interest in Romanticism.

He sees you first, then the rabbit.

Before your roommate could let out any explicit (though entirely justifiable) exclamations, you ask him if he's familiar with the Romeo and Juliet Overture.

"Yeah, kind of" he says, staring at God, "Um."

He picks God up and cradles him within his elbow, stroking God with his pin needle fingers.

And God, pleased, says, "What a shithole."

You both decide that this is an issue your resident advisor cannot handle.

God, in the form of a rabbit, leaves pellets of shit all over the room. You're forced to move your clothing piles to the top bunk. Heaven forbid, do some actual laundry.

Bounding around the floor and resting dormant on the jeans discarded from the "near-reasonable shit" pile, the rabbit announces all of your flaws and personal failures. Middle school puberty. That class your roommate dropped last year. Your inability to tie your shoes or buy fitting clothes or just do anything at all. His crying spells, those incurable fractures of personality.

Unable to concentrate on schoolwork, finances, or the collective piles of assorted crap that used to occupy your living space, you and your roommate are forced into legitimate conversation.

"Just so you know," he mentions, "I'm going to miss all the stuff on the floor. It had an atmosphere."

You grin, thinking this is a joke. "An atmosphere?"

"Yeah," he says, "we had the physical incantation of my stupidity in that corner, and your, uh—"

His throat clutches. You both realize the risk of insult.

Picking up the threads, you admit that you're a lazy ass from time to time, your exact words being: "Well, fuck me."

"Er, yes!" he says, "screw the both of us!"

"And it's like you can see your own mortality, now!" he adds, hands clutching his kneecaps.

It's completely ridiculous. "But a perfect metaphor," you tell him.

Together you muse over the now-uncovered stains on the floor, the possibilities of murder that caused those stains on the floor, the ways in which you could die. God's eyes glint in the shadows, body huddled next to the coffee machine. He makes no effort to bother you.

Then there's this one night, another freaky-dark, murderous-night, that you wake up quarter to four clutching the fear of the flames of a dream just beyond the mendacity of a room clutched in shade. God rests atop the dip in your stomach, swirling life and death through his jittering nose as docile as a child, the weight of him both airy and utterly crushing. Your breath coalesces in your throat, dislodging into jagged clumps.

Your roommate is, per usual, awake, brooding over his desk. Eyes like glass, you think. Emerald in the dark.

"Are you...ok?" he asks.

"Yeah," you reply, as your voice cracks around the edges, "Are you?"

"Yeah."

God awakens with a start, leaps to the floor, and announces that you are both full of shit, wiggling his tail in an adorable manner.

Together you learn to handle God's presence among you. After laundry

and vacuuming there's room for a wood-thatched pen emblazoned with hamster wheels and tapered bottles where God would suckle periodically, edging its pearlescent teeth against the metal. Your roommate sketched an inverted pentagram on the top in shaky charcoal lines, and you began to leave conical piles of used coffee grounds at each point. It's become sort of a joke between the two of you. He, with his Presbyterian upbringing, could never have imagined performing such sacrilege.

"My parents, I think they accounted for the usual," he explains "you know, all the drinking that happens around here. They'd be alright with that. But this?"

"Yeah?" you add, seriously interested in the intricacies of his family life by now.

He pauses, squints at the curve of skin on your nose, nervously twining his fingers all the while.

"...my poor mom," and his laughter has meaning this time.

"Your poor mother?" you counter, "if only you *knew*." Your emphasis is firm; there's too much to convey about your life that he cannot comprehend. But you assume he's trying.

You wonder how useful St. Francis of Assisi could be in this situation, digging out some old prayer cards from your desk. Some from your grandmother, an uncle, relatives you haven't spoken to. It's been years. Patron saints, you explain, of animals and beehives and the sick. He seems bemused at Catholicism's need to put all these holy people all over the place.

"Ex-Catholic" you insist, but still defending the practice.

He continues to probe, wanting to know why you don't speak. To your relatives, he means.

You're brusquely interrupted.

"You stupid fucks," God shouts at you.

"No one will ever love you," God declares in a firm mezzo-forte.

One day he whispers an epitaph to you both:

*You're some truly broken, messed over people
Worse than two percent milk and/or open wires
Flailing around your lives as if licking the flames off an oil spill*

*Electricity coursing through the bodies of what you could be
But not what you are, that is dead.
Seriously, guys, why did you even try?
What pedantic assholes.*

God loves everybody, the rabbit declares, you aren't everybody.

"Jackasses!" the rabbit squeaks out, and that is the last you hear of God for the time being.

A fog passes over the room and you fear, for a moment, that the system you've built together will retreat along with God. Neither of you speak. Your roommate returns to his characteristic silence, running his hands up and down his legs.

"Perhaps he's right," he says, "I mean, he certainly isn't wrong."

"What," you ask, forcing yourself to make eye contact, "that we're losers?"

"Mhmhm, yeah. Most definitely."

He returns your stare, oddly complacent. Of course you look away.

"But screw him," he continues, "we'll be fine."

"We got this?" you declare.

He nods. You nod, sending flecks of hair onto your shirt with a jerk of the head.

"Daniel!" you shout, hand rested on the door, "I'm going to a doctor's appointment."

Any other person might have said *again* might have gone *really*, *hmm* with a drawn out *m*, may very well have said nothing.

"Good," he says, letting you see his teeth for a moment before returning to his phone, "I'm going next week, myself."

"But the insurance?" you ask.

"There are still some kinks, but I think it'll work out." He stretches both arms above his head, curving the tips of his fingers into gaps on the air. "I look forward to joining the ranks of the sane!"

"Are you sure?"

He is not, in fact, sure, but he does ask if you know whether or not anyone is using the washing machines. And if there were any quarters lying around. He quickly realizes the futility of asking *you* that.

Heading into the hall, you stop to look back: "See you 'round."

He smiles again, both at his phone and at you.

Again you are overcome with the desire to be another person; to see what you looked like as he smiled at you. Oddly enough, you can smell the cologne he wears passing the bathroom and you open the door with a trembling hand.

Red

A single branch of sapling
laid careful in the water

watch it drift
to the sea until it is
gone

Left only with the taste of salt on your lips
waiting

"Stop playing with the seagulls!"

Blue like the ocean girl

Blue like drowning

Small child skipping toes
over braided kelp
slick hands in the knots of rot lime hair

waiting
to go home

They don't

ever call you beautiful
without first kneeling

to the eyes

"like an angel's"

edge of wolf howl run low; robin's egg laid clean in the eye of a snake; fire
heart splitting at the center; two blueberries left in the plastic
only two

even though he promised

To leave you more
than nutshells

words scraped thin
vowels left in the disposal

take the ends
frayed woolen strings
and call yourself the sailor

fashion a name from the wood grains
salt-specked rose
of the sail unfurling
waiting

your favorite color is red.

NADIA MOTA



Sophomore

Major: Creative Writing and Literature

Reading: Poetry

Nadia Mota is from Adrian, Michigan. She is currently an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, where she plans to major in Creative Writing and Literature.

String Theory

he bites at a green bean and waves his fork, parting the torrid sea or the table between us. he says *why is it so hard to believe in something you can't see?* and i'm not sure how long he can withhold the waves before they come crashing down on both of us.

gravity, he says. *dark matter*. not the bodies dancing closely, but the rhythm under your skin. it's in the night sky as we tilt our heads up on the walk home, searching until we are tired of squinting into the dark. the sky exhales as we turn away.

he knows because something pulls at his chest as he falls asleep, as if tiny strings are threaded right through him and someone is at the other end, holding their arms above their head. *i know they're there*, he says. *i can feel it*.

Chiflada

sunday afternoons in my church shoes, tiny
 broken buckles and satiny white bows
 at the ankles, i sat on the floor
 of my grandparents' emerald house. scratched
 at the peeling leather mary janes and curled
 away from their conversation.
 their open, laughing mouths were lifeboats
 and rolling tongues an ocean i couldn't cross.
 i waited for years, but
 no one ever sent me an invitation.
ay, chiflada, silly spoiled girl.
 i tucked my hands under the folds
 of my white cotton dress, kept my tongue
 at the roof of my mouth.
 i've studied their language, can speak
 now without a shaky voice.
 yet there are still oceans,
 some things i'll never understand.

Somewhere Off the Pennsylvania Turnpike

we slipped through the cracks
 in the pavement of parking lot
 off the course, into the diner
 ordering a dessert because i
 filled my wallet with a vague idea of happiness,
 i couldn't afford an entree.
 the straw was abnormally large
 to accommodate the thickness of the milkshake.
 my cheeks became concave
 valleys in which i found that city, waiting
 among the mountains
 the slope of my nose
 i sipped the strawberry milkshake.
 stowed away on a backroad
 underneath layers of exhaust fumes, unassuming
 but vivid like the strands of pink tucked behind her ear.
 we were out of focus, out of mind
 autopilot strangers in a town
 already occupied by its fair share of "dream big" kids.

we picked at the seams of hand-me-down jeans too small
pulled hard at wind-blown hair in knots
packed in tight to a diner booth meant for two.
the clock hands blurred, time running slow
like wading through salty ocean
driving the car uphill.
every corner a button-up shirt on a barstool
slacks pressed, years of repetition in the creases
faces concealed by similarity
extras in a story I couldn't claim.
we washed up on an island made up
of black and white bars on the television
obscurity dressed in 1950s diner aesthetic
settled into the folds of southern pennsylvania.
the cherry sunk to the bottom of the glass
table cleared of proof that we existed there
once, we found our way off the island.
stepping into dusk, faces washed in blue
the clock hands came back into focus.

Epilogues

1. it didn't feel much like an ending. a phone call and an "i didn't want to do it this way," no rising crescendo climax. just static and slow breathing on the other line.
2. secondhand news has a mysterious stain on the collar. it has a frayed edge, a hanging thread. it gets here quickly because the messenger doesn't want it either. i folded it neatly and told myself i'd wear it someday.
3. i tried it on a few years ago. it didn't fit me anyway.
4. the sky turned clementine orange and i squeezed it with both hands. it rained puddles in the parking lot, little motor oil rainbows that i shattered with bare feet and spun and spun and spun.
5. the first time the thought occurred, my head was resting in his lap while the sun found gold in his eyes. i didn't want to break the sound of our human noise, so i kept it to myself. the sun eventually left his eyes, and so did i.
6. when the song played, i jumped out of the passenger's seat and

started running. two bikers passed by, stopped, turned around. one of them undid his helmet clasp with steady fingers. asked me if i was okay. i told him that i couldn't breathe.

7. the difference between us was that sometimes i cried in public. a song rattling around in my throat. a memory hidden in my sleeve. a stranger with clear green eyes. he would look around the room anxiously; he would be embarrassed to see me like that.
8. i've shoved him under a stack of unread mail. tucked him behind my ear. forgotten and then remembered, repeated the process. it was always something i'd deal with later.
9. i spun until the stars were trails of lucid light, not realizing that my knees had given out until i felt the grass push through the spaces between my fingers. the ground was soft and steady beneath me. maybe this was the ending i was looking for.

In Which I See My Father Fearful

he pins his license and registration between the visor and the roof of his truck before he shifts gears and backs out of our driveway. he says *you can't be too careful*, he says *i saw what they did to that man in his car, right in front of his baby girl*. he feels a target branded into the flesh on his back, knows what it means to be an ant under the magnifying glass *burning burning*.

BHARAT NAIR



Junior

Major: School of Information

Reading: Poetry

Bharat is from Kerala, India. The things he really loves are comic books, film, storytelling, and writing. One day, he hopes to be as good a man as his little brother thinks him to be.

Strange Vigilance

Wind howling, replenishing the earth
Painting the soil green, carrying goodness on her back.

(Is that her?)

Your bounce quickens, upticking.

(Hurry now, dammit)

But you can't help yourself.

You sneakily, like a weary thief,
steal a glance,

but, no. False alarm.

(pew)

The air gusts, pillaging your sighs.

The taunt of every lock.

Auburn, of an undeserved satin feel.

Every womanly stature, teasing.

Maybe it's me, here I am.

All silent tongues and mismatched mouths screaming

face me now.

But not quite yet.

Not quite now.

Once and again,
 reflections arise, trotting along.
 Beating down, relentless and in uniform.
 You raise your palms against the sun,
 shielding yourself
 but enough to pick out her lock.

(This might be it)

(What if I miss it?)

So, high it stays,
 preserving what's left of you.

Two halves brawling in turn,
 With a gut that bears unholy witness.
 One begging to meet once more:
 To talk, enact rites,
 And amend dying lights.
 The other driven mad and witless.
 Praying to be left a-whole,
 as it drowns in solemn dark,
 and breathless drought.

You wonder when.

(When?)

And if that when comes:

(What must be done?)

Must the moment be met with silence
 or controlled rage or unfastened fury.

(What should I do?)

Should she be made aware of her errors?

(Should she be made aware of mine?)

Must we yell and be set alight
 And stab each other to a thousand deaths
 Perhaps.

But then, after that

(What?)

The leaves will keep dying, as they must.
 Warmth – harsh and ever-present – seizes you.
 Killing all, enriching few.
 Blistering and burning,
 every haunting of every cell.
 The scarlet will die and then die again

Until green re-grows.

Seeking, until an earned realization:

Her favorite garbs aren't so unique

(Must've been on sale)

Her pale tone, her dyed red tresses,

Much too rife for trepidation.

Winds returning as ritual,

carrying with it a breath.

And then the sun shines

Past your pupil, right into your retina.

Peering, burning a passage

never to be read by you.

A secret forever held to its burning breast

(Tell me)

So you keep staring into that blinding white,

Your daring eyes soak in it's the deathly gaze;

gaping into it, blinklessly.

Branches turn, static soars and crashes.

Furs grow only to be trimmed.

The winds whisper a tale,

Enacting the role of dutiful sage,

Offering truth,

with an aching, ashen core,

But truth nonetheless.

Certain things are not dying nor living

Certain things are simply dead.

[...]

a coda

Busy youth, sleepless, staring

Dead into unforgiving whites.

Your body begs and weeps,

Shouts for sustenance.

And then,

with no alarm, and

no seismic shifts:

there she sits.

Silent and inattentive and

hair as radiant as ever.

But the days must churn.
 Drinks must be spilt. Then,
 the leaves shrivel and rust.
 Only to cycle back.
 Then, again:
 from life to dust.

On with your vigor and premature sweaters,
 And on with your cursed path.
 (Where should I go?)
 As all around you,
 The earth begins to die again.

Ikerantapolous

Hyphae:
 Florescent yellow
 fur, and the coat
 ever-growing. Whimsical
 shades of green, grey
 bloom. Were it
 feasted upon: a dozen nights
 of dreary sleeplessness
 packed into a singular instance of
 citrus deliverance. And, it
 assaults, admonishes with vigor.
 All for kingdom – unsound and holy.

Neoplasm:
 Inheritance of soul and of death,
 Of the very cells in your body.
 Flowering beneath marrow, spreading.
 Unseen unless predicated. And,
 Be it yellow? Maybe pearl white
 or a lovely crimson red?
 Luscious putridity, festering; as
 it feasts regardless.
 Attaches onto your being, and
 what will eventually become of it.
Do not fret, sings the baritone.
You will not be forgotten, it reassures.

*Your tradition survives on
in your children and theirs'.*

Corpus:

Remember the pus
metamorphosed into dust.
Created, burnt; in hopes
of peaceful treatise and
purification of plague. But,
be mindful of its truth:
It breathes, with
celebration and anguish,
and exhales, with
amber ruin and sultry disease.
Humble, pure, and
utterly rightful.

KATHRYN ORWIG



Senior

Major: Creative Writing

Minor: Study of Russia and Russian Language

Reading: Fiction Short Story

I hail from Traverse City Michigan, although I currently call Ann Arbor home before moving as far south or west or south west, (really anywhere without snow) as I can go. My most favorite genre to write is young adult stories. I am a part of Writer's Community, allegedly started by Arthur Miller back when he attended UofM. I have a cat who is an honorary dog (he likes baths, eats dog food, and sleeps in a dog bed. An honorary dog.) You can find me at any local coffee shop writing about werewolves, cursed pirates, a career assassin turned mother, Shield Maiden Vikings, Dystopian Rebels and Marble Rollers.

Star Girl and the Marble Roller

Fredrick had an obsession with marbles. Ever since he could pinch one between his chubby little fingers he had rolled them, slobbered on them (he was three then, and, as he says, who among us has not sucked on a marble at some point?), and even swallowed one once. He hadn't swallowed it because he thought it was food, like his mother insisted. He had eaten it because he had seen the world through the cat's eye and thought that if he could take in the whole world in one bite, then it would dissolve inside of him and fill him with the deepest oceans, wildest forests and tallest mountains. But his mother never understood this and all that had happened was that the marble came out later in a fit of beets, carrots and lettuces from the night before.

On the morning of his sixth birthday, Fredrick lay on the smooth, well-worn floorboards of his bedroom. His stomach pressed firmly against the ground, his dark brown hair swept to the side, and his sharp hazel eyes watched the marbles in front of him. They rolled along the miniscule cracks between floorboards only to stop a few feet away in dips only marble rollers could see. His parents had given him a new batch of marbles to entertain himself with that morning, while they set up his party down stairs. He could hear their voices and even a few surprised bouts of laughter. It had been many months since Fredrick had heard his parents laugh together.

More marbles clinked in his bulging pocket. Fredrick absent mindedly fingered them, like one would a rosary. First feeling one whole, cool marble, then letting it slide through his fingers, warm from his touch, then the next one. He liked the sound they made, a soft clink muffled by his pocket. He considered rolling three or four marbles in his hands like one would to start a fire (but slower of course), an absolute pleasure. Or holding a handful of marbles in one hand, only to drop them against one another, fast and then slowly to hear that sharp clack sound. They were smooth, soft and so light-weight, as if they were filled with air instead of marble ingredients. Mostly he couldn't tell by feel which was what type, and this gave him a certain satisfaction when he did guess right after pulling one out of his pocket. Surprising to most was that Fredrick didn't have a favorite color of marble, the pattern was more important.

He was the best shooter of shooter marbles in his class, and the highlight every day at recess in a corner on the black pavement of the basketball courts, was trying to see how many marbles he could make burst outwards like a small star explosion. And whenever they played the circle marble game—no matter how much Fredrick might want the runaway marbles—he always played for friendlies, and never keepsies; he couldn't risk losing his own collection. He loved trying to come up with the best angle on the circle to knock two or three marbles outside the chalk drawn line. It was even luckier if the shooter marble trundled out too.

Fredrick knew all the types of marbles. Clearies were a clear marble made of one color, glowing orange, florescent pink, bubbling blue—he liked those a great deal. Cat's eyes which had a distinct three color swirl, were some of his favorites. He was always torn the most though, between loving Micas—marbles that shown so brightly in the sunlight they glittered—and Sulphide marbles—clear marbles with silvery figures in them. Micas were rare and beautiful, but the figures captured Fredrick's attention. He wondered if they lived in there happily, or if they were trapped souls who were tricked into staying in the small glass bead. He figured some genie was behind making Sulphides, he still had yet to prove his theory though. He had one marble he imagined was what his sister would have looked like.

She was silver, of course, small and dainty in the glass world. If he stared at the marble hard enough he could see that she wore a little dress and a ribbon in her hair. Fredrick could not make out if she was smiling or frowning, and her hand was always kept outstretched, palm up. Was she inviting him to come to her world, or demanding a payment of some sort? The flecks in the marble behind her looked like stars. She even looked fragile, which is the way one ought to look after being a Star Girl, Fredrick always thought. A Star Girl, that was what he had overheard his aunt tell his mother on the day they buried his little sister's body.

Fredrick had wandered up to his room on the second floor of their two-story house while his mother and aunt talked in the kitchen. He knew they wouldn't say anything important if he was around. But they didn't know that if he lay on his stomach and peered through the vent in his floorboards into the kitchen below, he could hear every word they said. His aunt poured his mother more tea from the blue, yellow and white Polish pottery pot, but his mother didn't move to take it. She just sat in the wooden chair, with her hands clasped tightly together over her stomach and her red-rimmed eyes locked on something far away.

"Clarissa...Clary..." His aunt started.

"She didn't even make it to morning." His mother shot her hands to her mouth to keep the cries in.

His aunt got up and put her long thin arms around his mother's plump body. Drawing sister patterns with her hands on his mother's back. Fredrick always imagined that only sisters could read these patterns. "She's a star girl, Clarissa, she's now glittering and shining with them all."

Fredrick referred to the girl in the glass as precisely that. The Star Girl.

Plates clattered down stairs followed by a muffed curse from his mother. A thought occurred to Fredrick. If the Star Girl was in the stars, then she could only see the world at night. And if she could only see the world at night, then she did not know what the world looked like by day. Fredrick got up from his bedroom floor and clutched Star Girl in his hand tightly. He ran from his room, down the stairs and out into the living room, through the kitchen where his mother was picking up broken shards, and finally to the slider door. He pushed the door over and holding the marble up exclaimed, "See Star Girl, look at all the flowers in the morning sunshine..."

Water plopped on Fredrick's hand. He squinted at the sky. Dark clouds lumbered overhead and rain was just starting to drop steadily on the flowers in the garden, on the patio set where his party was to take place, and in the small blue pool they had just set up the night before. The little water toys

careened and shook in the growing torrents from the sky, all about to capsize at any moment. It was so dark it barely differed from the light of night. Fredrick pursed his lips and looked up at the clouds and then back to the very wet (and getting wetter) yard. Star Girl rolled in his hand and settled next to the droplets of water. Fredrick's face started to fall as sadness crawled up his throat. He wondered if Star Girl was disappointed in him for not showing her the sun. He was now sure her face held the sternest frown. But then a drop of rain landed on her glass home and turned the world inside her marble upside down, and for the briefest of moments Fredrick saw her smile magnified.

The water slid and curved around her home, melting into the other droplets converging in his palm. Fredrick smiled and as he raced out the door, he held Star Girl high in his fingers. High in the pale, rainy, morning light.

"Look Star Girl! Look! Can you see it? Can you see it? This is all for you."

ELENA RAMIREZ-GORSKI



Freshman
Major: Creative Writing
Reading: Poetry

Elena Ramirez-Gorski is a freshman at the University of Michigan majoring in creative writing. She is from Adrian, Michigan and loves writing, painting, and anything Julian Casablancas has ever done (yes, including Angles).

Basement Song

We all sit in his basement,
Or rather makeshift bomb shelter.
Outside, kids are dying,
Here, we make smoke rings,
Listening to songs going nowhere
And eventually just fade out.

They have nothing to numb
And numb it anyway, saying
Have some fun,
Have a drink,
Take a hit,
Man up,
Lighten up,
Lotus-eaters,
Girlfriend-beaters,

Middle-of-the-street-screamers,
Relax.

I write their epilogues in my head:
Probably still in the bomb shelter,
Smoking harder than pot,
Skeletons permanently contorted in
Duck and cover position,
But having fun,
Still sitting, smoking, sipping,
Because life underground is just
One big stationary parade,
Cut time, baby doll.
Cut wires, couldn't call.

So I just wrote to say that when I left,
There was never a bomb at all.
It was just the Sun.

Phaeton

There could have been a planet
Between Mars and Jupiter--
A hypothetical planet,
Possibly wonderful,
Possibly with moons,
 Reduced to wandering rubble
 By Jupiter's magnitude and quicksilver.

Your mother could have run away
To play Bonnie and Clyde,
Maybe sell her hair and kill somebody's son.
She could have died young, beautiful, supernova.
 Instead, she stands at the kitchen sink
 Wondering if there is a word for the people left behind
 After the ones that got away
 Get away.

You could have had an older brother.
They would have named him Phaeton
And he would've had green eyes, a surf punk band,
Would've picked you tulips,
Hung your paintings on his wall,

Gotten stoned in the garage with his friends,
And asked if you could keep a secret.
 He lived only in bloodied sheets and
 A week of your mother and grandmother
 Not looking each other in the eye.

You could have married your first love,
Said that he is your everything,
Packed his lunch each morning, white bread and an apology note,
Trained yourself not to flinch at hands up your shirt,
And to forgive his slurred alibi.
 He still writes you sometimes
 When he's feeling homesick and
 Hungry for sympathy.
 It used to work sometimes.

You could have moved to a different town,
Read *Catcher in the Rye* one too many times and
Succumbed to Sunday evening self destruction
Without ever meeting your One,
Without a white carnation pressed into his palm,
Or nervous first kiss under Christmas lights.
 He saw you and knew he would love you;
 You saw him and saw stellar parallax--
 Stars shift and maybe nothing bad is
 As important as this.

There is a planet
Between the wall and bedside table--
A small and serendipitous world
Sometimes wonderful,
Sometimes not.

Untitled

I like songs written by
accomplished guitarists
made up of just
three simple chords like
it was meant for
16-year-olds
learning it on
pawn shop guitars.

I like songs that you have to
learn to love like
an old adopted cat
who pisses on all your pillows--
the kind of songs you have to
sit down
get your hands dirty and
have a heart-to-heart with.

I like songs with that freezer-
burnt noise
crushing metal
crashing cars
screeching brakes
but you listen
until you can
make out words and
extract some poetry
from the wreckage.

I like songs where
everything stops
for a couple seconds
and all you can hear is
breathing or
a guitar string bumped
accidentally--
like when it snows so gently
you can't even tell
until you see
snowflakes floating
under street lamps
and then you remember:
the song is man-made,
and so are you,
and how crazy is that?

SHASHANK RAO



Sophomore

Major: English and Creative Writing

Reading: Short Story

I was born and raised in Canton, Michigan and have loved reading and writing ever since I was in the third grade. I love long walks in the Arb, watching Netflix comedy specials with my friends, and reading books from around the world.

Contribution

While a blizzard bared its white fangs in the harsh December night, Shobha Naidoo sang an old love song and wept for the past, brought to her knees by a fridge magnet her daughter had made her for Mother's Day. Her daughter, Anjali. She remembered her with her two little braids asking to see her wedding pictures.

"You never show me anything!" Anjali accused.

"Not now, *puttu*. Green beans won't cut themselves."

"Why not? I want to see them now!"

But Shobha had ignored her, the sound of the knife against the wooden cutting board drowning out Anjali's pleas. Behind her, from atop the fridge, she felt the gaze of the little bronze statue of Saraswasti, goddess of knowledge and rivers, bore into her spine. Is this what you want, the figurine inquired.

"Yes," Shobha hissed, out loud.

"What did you say, Amma?"

"What? Nothing. Nothing at all."

Anjali no longer lived at home and had taken all the wonder and day-dreams that once resided in kitchen cupboards and tin waste bins with her. She had found the albums on her own and had gotten her fill of wedding photos and snapshots of her parents as children dressed in their starched and ironed school uniforms.

"Amma, you look so pretty!" Anjali had said some months after her first inquiry into the matter. She thrust a photo into Shobha's face. It was her wedding portrait. A five-by-seven. Anger pinched the small of Shobha's back, causing her to wince and sharply avert her eyes.

"Anjali! Be careful! You nearly punched me! Enough with all this now. Clean up the mess you made in the basement and go start your homework."

Her daughter, ever dutiful, morosely gathered her materials and skittered off. Shobha clutched the rim of the sink. Deep breaths, familiar breaths. Breaths that echoed faintly the tales of brides past. In and out. And the little bronze statue sat knowingly in its place atop the fridge. Is this what you want?

Years later, Shobha decided that it wasn't. And now, sprawled all around her, photos and love letters from her days in Bangalore like an encroaching tide against her, an island, bereft, alone.

*

She remembered best the two hours before she was to be cast away from her parents' home to live with a man on a foreign continent. She was by herself for those two hours, the only time she'd been alone since dawn. Her aunts, sisters, and cousins had strung necklaces around her neck, clasped bangles on to her wrists, drawn kohl around her eyes, and sat her in the ornately decorated Rajasthan rosewood chair the *chatra* had provided, then closed the oaken doors of the room behind them. Outside, she heard the wedding band rehearsing its repertoire, an unsettling mélange of sounds. She heard the shrieking cry of the *shehnai* above all else, its ghastly noise rising higher and higher like a harpy summoned from the underworld. The noise scratched and battered the wooden doors. 'Let me in!' it screamed 'Let me in to eat you whole!' She began to cry, kohl turning her tears black like opals. She tried to move but the necklaces, the bangles—they were her

chains. She was confined to the red rosewood chair, delirious, disoriented.

The *shehnai* stopped and the harpy was called back to its lair. The gold adornments lifted their weight and she breathed deep, sacred breaths— all the histories of brides before her passing in and out, filling her with tales of woe as per their obligation, taking with them a shard of her former self as per their due.

She stood abruptly. Her sari ruffled and hissed as she turned frantically about the room. Three windows spaced evenly on the right wall. Through them she saw the calligraphic branches of the large *gulmohar* tree that stood like an old god outside the *chatra*, dappled with orange blooms. The windows could not be opened, however. She thought she saw the branches reach out to her. 'Come to us and we can take you anywhere,' they said. But that was a lie. She knew it. No matter what winds pass by or the leaves swept into grand adventures, the branches remain a part of their tree until death or storm do them part.

No doors to hidden balconies, no ladders to basements, no holes to fall through: she was consigned to this purgatory, defeated. In the final hour before her wedding, she watched the last remnants of her resolve crumble away into the tides.

Hinges screeched and oaken doors opened. The *shehnai* commenced. Faces confronted her with all the force of the Indian Ocean. Here it was and there she stood. A long white cloth traversed the distance between Shobha and a man whom she had known for little more than a week but to whom she was now promised for the rest of her days. Not one person noticed the two neat black streaks of kohl that marred her face.

*

The steady procession of family members wishing them well ended with the last of many cousins giving Shobha a gift, a little music box in which a ballerina twirled to Debussy's *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*. She took that music box with her when she said her last goodbye to Bangalore.

The portrait came last. The photographer spent a great deal of time toying with the *pallu* of her sari so that it fanned out at her side. "Sit like this madam," he said, "not straight but a little this way." She did as she was told. "There. Very nice. Hold that position. One, two, three..." A flash. She cringed slightly as the moment was captured. Out of frame, the videographer stood with his camera, recording every blink, every twitch of the nose. Shobha looked into the lens, perhaps hoping to find something in it. Nothing. Only her reflection, her melancholy doppelganger, returned her gaze.

*

The rumble and thud of the garage door opening and closing broke nostalgia's hold.

"Shobu, I'm home!"

She heard the keys clanging as her husband placed them in the camel-shaped key holder she had gotten him for their twenty-fifth anniversary.

"What's for dinner?"

Shobha sighed.

"I made *koottu* and *vangi bhath*. Could you put water on for rice?"

"I will. What are you doing down in the basement?"

For no good reason, Shobha began to panic, hurriedly stuffing all the photographs back into the albums.

"Nothing, nothing! I was just looking for a bowl. I broke one of the new ones." She hadn't. She needed an excuse. She didn't need him to find her in this state of longing. She didn't need to reminisce over the past with him.

She heard him cluck, annoyed.

"*Yennamma*? Those are good bowls! Why can't you be more careful?"

"I'm sorry."

Normally, she would have been more forceful, more defensive. But for now, sorrow muted her voice. And, after all, the bowl was perfectly fine.

At six o'clock sharp he would turn on the news.

"Take," Shobha said, handing him a steel plate chock-full with the food she had made. He ate with his hands as he had done since childhood. *The ancient Indians had it all figured out*, he had told Anjali at dinner one day when she was given the choice between her hands or a spoon. *Eating with your hands, you save the water you would use washing utensils. And if you lick your finger clean, you save the water you would use cleaning them in the basin.* Naturally Anjali had picked hands over silver, but after witnessing the mess she made, Shobha imposed the spoon upon her daughter.

At seven, when the news ended, he got up to rinse his plate. Shobha, having only just sat down to eat, began to flip channels. Local news, tabloid news shows, *Jeopardy*, and infomercials all passed by, vying for her attention. She decided on a rerun of some 90s sitcom.

"We have video streaming, you know. You can watch whatever you want."

"It's too complicated. I'm fine with what they have here."

"Suit yourself."

The show's laugh track interjected. Had something interesting happened? She wasn't paying any mind.

"You know who I saw today?" he asked, boiling water for his evening tea, "Manoj, my old dormmate from IIT. I hadn't talked to him in eleven years almost."

"Mhmm."

"I invited him to dinner tomorrow. Could you make something?"

Of course she could make something. There was no choice for her.

"Don't do too much, keep it simple. I'll make my samosa *chaat* also."

He went to bed early that night. Shobha left her dish on the table and descended into the basement once again, goddess Saraswati at her back.

She knew she saw it somewhere, the one five-by-seven album Zaineb had given her when they graduated college. She eventually found it tucked behind a row of English books her husband had studied in high school. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Sense and Sensibility*, the like. *Devdas* and *Malgudi Days* stood apart as the only works on the shelf authored by Indians.

The picture she was looking for: the two of them, striking a silly pose in front a bush of pink hydrangeas. Zaineb: a name unuttered for so long it left dust on her tongue. Folded neatly behind the photo was her diploma from Tamil Nadu Agricultural University. She had never bought a frame for it, but it was no great matter to her. The diploma, like the photo, was a relic of an era long before the birth of Anjali. An era that she pined for with every fiber of her being the second she saw that smiling face again for the first time on this new continent.

*

It was the second semester of their first year at the Agriculture College in Coimbatore. Not one had seen the other before Professor Subramaniam assigned them to the same group for their final project in Elementary Horticulture. Zaineb was the first to introduce herself. She was a sprightly twenty year-old Muslim girl with impeccable skin and wore a hijab so bright a pink it wore your eyes if you looked at it too long. *I'm from Hyderabad. You?* Shobha had never been the personable type, but something about that bright pink hijab beckoned her to speak. *Bangalore*, she said, *Mavalli to be exact.*

The project was mostly self-directed. Professor Subramaniam gave each set of partners one particular plant to study. Some groups received coffee plants. Others mango trees. Shobha and Zaineb were charged with studying hydrangeas.

"Hydrangeas are my mother's favorite flower," Zaineb said the first day of the project, "but she doesn't have a green thumb. Every plant dies within five days of buying them."

"Maybe that's why she sent you to agriculture school. To make sure she gets her money's worth next time she buys one," joked Shobha. And for the first time in years, someone laughed.

"You're probably right, man," Zaineb chuckled, flashing a smile as bright as her pink hijab.

They came upon their grove of hydrangeas after hiking for nearly an hour. The estate of the Agriculture College was awesome. Green hills rolled in the background, morning mist rising off their summits in wispy plumes. Palm trees and topiaries grew around the perimeter of the main building. For miles and miles, nothing but green fields latent with students' curiosity.

In the end, they decided to analyze the relationship between soil acidity and the hydrangea's pigmentation. They worked assiduously for the next three weeks, trekking out to the grove every morning at seven, long before the gardener's dog announced the waking sun. At five at night when the pair sputtered out, they would go to Shobha's room where they'd stretch their cramped limbs and enjoyed Shobha's special chai.

Aré va! exclaimed Zaineb the first time she tasted Shobha's chai. "Shobhu, your chai, best. You have to give me the recipe. My mother can barely boil milk for *paisa!*" said Zaineb.

The conversations they had those evenings, Shobha would never forget. Everything was fair game, not a subject left un-discussed. Friendships are

forged in conversation; best-friendships are forged by the sharing of past secrets and future desires.

"I want to meet a handsome American man some day, *yaar*," said Zaineb. "I want an apartment in Manhattan and children with almond skin, insh'Allah. I can see it now!"

Shobha threw her head back and laughed. Zaineb had more spunk in her than Shobha ever would.

And then Zaineb asked her the question that has resounded across all these years:

"But what about you, Shobhu. What do you want?"

She thought long and hard, she really did. She came to her conclusion: she didn't want a husband. She didn't want kids. More than anything, she wanted to spend all the five o'clocks of her life drinking chai with Zaineb. More than a family, Shobha wanted her friend. Unfortunately for her, after her marriage, Shobha never saw Zaineb again.

*

Twelve twenty, the clock read. Midnight had passed. In her hand, eight silly smiling friends in front of a lavender hydrangea bush. Zaineb's question still looming.

What do you want Shobhu?

It was time for bed. She had a day of cooking ahead of her.

*

"Where did you learn to make *uppittu* like this, Shobha? And your *saaru anna*? Simply the best. I bow to you."

Manoj Ramachandran was a lively man. Shobha had met him only briefly at her wedding but she remembered admiring his cheery demeanor. Her own friends had been scattered across the world by the time of her marriage. Only Zaineb managed to come. Where they were now, Shobha had not the foggiest.

"I could make things like this too if you taught me!" Manoj's wife, Shelly, pouted.

"Bah, I'm a terrible cook. And besides, I'm much too used to your salads

and spaghettis now.”

“Oh please,” said Shelly, then turning to Shobha and her husband, “I’m tired of my salads and spaghetti!”

The four shared a laugh. Shobha’s husband got up to pour himself another glass of orange cognac.

“So Manoj, Shelly, tell me. Do you have kids?” he asked.

“Yes, we have two. Our oldest, Michael, is working for Boeing. He develops software for airplane navigation or something,” answered Shelly.

“And our younger one, Evan, is still a high school senior. We had them kind of far apart, but I knew that I wasn’t the type of guy to have just one kid. You didn’t strike me as a one kid type of person either, to be honest.”

Shobha grasped her spoon tighter. She felt her husband’s gaze avoid her for a brief minute. One daughter was all she could bear him, the only voluntary pain she was willing to endure to complete the vision of a successful family. There were times when he pressed her for one more, but this much she marked for her own. She had given enough to this life, she thought. But she knew it hurt him. Silence stabbed him just as sharply as it had stabbed her the day Anjali left for college.

“Well Anjali is doing good. She’s completing her Master’s in psychology at Stanford,” Shobha said.

“We’re very proud of her,” added her husband. He downed the cognac in one swift shot.

*

Manoj and Shelly left at around two in the morning.

“You sure you want to drive all the way back home at this hour? You’re welcome to stay.”

“We’re fine, but thank you for the lovely night. And thank you for the delicious food, Shobha! You’re going to have to give me the recipe for that chai sometime!”

A sudden pang of guilt overwhelmed Shobha. She remembered she had never given the recipe to Zaineb either.

“I definitely will.”

And she forced a smile.

"I'm going to bed. Are you coming?"

"Let me put the dishes in the sink and then I'll come."

"Ok."

Her husband began walking to the bedroom but stopped at the final step.

"Shobha, are you happy?"

She froze. Kitchen lights blinded her. Saraswati directly above her. He had never asked any such thing. He had never taken a particular interest in what she felt about this other life she was forced to lead. She had preferred it that way, pushing the answer so far into the back of her mind she didn't think she would be able to find it anymore. But her husband, tired, gave up and continued to their bedroom. Shobha, though, remained arrested in the kitchen, porcelain plates in hand. On the fridge, a magnet with a picture from Anjali's third birthday party. It was a photograph of the three of them: Shobha, Anjali, and her husband. Smiling. Laughing. Cake spread all over Anjali's gentle face. It was a moment etched clearly into her mind. She remembered feeling that day, planning the festivities with her husband she finally felt as if she could build a life here. But if it was love she felt for him, it was hard to tell. They had raised Anjali as business partners more than anything else. A partnership that included them sharing the same bed and inhabiting the same house, but a partnership nonetheless.

But for Anjali she would give the world. This marriage, this foreign continent, they had given Shobha her daughter and for that she was grateful. For Anjali, she felt pure love. For Anjali, she repressed the answer to the questions posed to her by a goddess and a friend. For Anjali, she forbade herself from ever laying eyes on the photo albums in the basement. For Anjali, she denied herself the right to contrition.

Her knees gave out, unable to support the weight of emotions bearing down on her body. Tears began to run, infused with the essence of her memory,

"I was so scared, Anjali." The words fell out of her like a miscarriage, "I never wanted to regret *you*." If she was scared now, she could not say. Instead she sang.

*Walking, walking, remember these songs of mine...
Never say goodbye...
While crying, laughing, you keep humming...
Never say goodbye...
Loving each other we will get lost somewhere...
We will sleep off after getting tired right at this place...
And you will be in all my dreams...
Never say goodbye..
Sweetheart, if at all we are parted at any of our paths...
And you feel that life is lonely..
I will return, you just keep calling...
Never say goodbye...*

KEENAN REBERA



Sophomore

Major: Computer Engineering

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Poetry

I run for the Track and Field / Cross Country team here. I'm currently part of an engineering/arts crossover grant project, I'm a published app developer and write music, short stories, poetry, and longer fiction in my free time. I'm pursuing a creative writing minor!

Telephone-Wire Sneakers

Dear hungmen,
Slack-neck staring in the rime, paring apart...
Show me trial transcripts
Did it hurt?

Dear outstretched hand,
Tippy-toes crunch shattered snowflakes.
I'd strain to pull you down from heav'n,
in stile Creazione di Adamo
If I weren't so *small*.

Dear assholes of the world,
Sometimes we can't undo our shoes.
Ever try to write away a stain?
Her,
every time.

Dear Newton's urban cradle,
You saw a boy and a girl today
On the crosswalk
I wonder what it looked like,
Their noses touching,
From above.

A Bus Station, Sometime Before Christmas

This blizzard tugs my collar, slaps me to the side.
Thin ice below complains -the strain of many hundred feet.

Not a rushing bird but
faces dye a flashing technicolor zoetrope that flicks before my frozen eyes
glued open
as if sighs and shuffles ticked in time with Clockwork Orange.

Shoulder after shoulders shake my vision blurring crimson hats attack with
scarves
boots
a frown
Eyes abound its green and brown and blue and hazel
black.

Hat from head to chin, he bares only thin
lips, ajar like the bedroom door I forgot to
lock.
Giant candy-cane in hand, he pokes the rushing,
many-bodied beast and enters with a confidence of kings.

The blind man saunters by as I crumple
a receipt for the marbles in my sockets and push
my fists against my pockets, pining for a hat like his.

Smear my face with dirt and wash me in the waters of Siloam,
Then lead me to the nearest Goodwill.

Veterinary Clinic, Midsummer

The words 'vise grip' eluded my comprehension but then -
 My father turns slow his sandpaper hands
 and lets me wield the silent
 steel to rend one weld from its body,

and 'bare bones' bore words well until I claw -
 a fur-bag to behold this bleached jaw
 that sighs in the apricot-translucent
 sweat between my thrumming fingers,

and 'godspeed' got squeezed through one needle, a rattling-
 know the now of these mental catacombs.
 Electricity flees from her frightened
 chest faster than a bullet in reverse.

If cliché were my story-
 Know that I held her paw in a vise grip,
 with my hope in a noose-slip,
 Praying for godspeed to invert,
 As if gravity might be prevented.
 What a fall for these bare bones.

The Rock and the Rabbit

Is it dead? She said.
 I tossed a stone through stillness just to see.
 Falling down, her question crowned in lead,
 The answer bent at some oblique degree.

Rock meets fur, earth roars.
 Lamentation dripping down my neck,
 Like raindrops I could disassemble.
 My hands, his fur, tremble.

Postclinic, Midsummer

The saddest waffle I ever ate
tasted like 25 cold minutes of,
“please, just die,
so I don’t have to kill you”.

A nurse exchanges a newborn
for your still-warm body.
Circle of life, I guess.

You bury your head in our collective lap,
trusting us to save you from the needle.

Seven years, now.
Fifteen more seconds to go.

She forces bluish liquid through your veins
And inside I’m seeing it expand
as it squeezes out your soul
like sandy toothpaste.

How sickly dark your eyes roll, but
they aren’t yours any more - just dirt.

Where did you go?

—

The best doughnut I ever ate
definitely wasn’t the one that fueled
a motorized wander through the night.

“It’s not about the doughnut”, she said.
“It’s about the drive”.

I lower the glass,
and thrust my head into the darkness.
The wind erodes ego to atoms.
I am something going fast and going dark.
I now understand why you loved that so much.

The four-way stop is empty like your favorite sofa-chair.
Shut the door and dance against the silence.
Watch my shadow punch through headlight beams
in contrast - protest.

Where did you go?

You lived longer than you died,
and I think you would agree,

It's not about the doughnuts.
It's about the drive.

Flagpole

When my father raised the flag
that painted red his face with stripes
 If you hear the fire alarm beep
 run to the meeting spot son
I giggled with the crickets
as the Moon leaned close
enough to touch

Breathing wet behind my hair
I'm fidgeting again
This time an earbud lady
skipping through her music
faster than my heart can beat what if
I jump from my bus seat
slide across the aisle
seize that cherry peacoat
ask politely
 slow down honey?

MARIA ROBINS-SOMERVILLE



Senior

Major: English and Psychology

Reading: Poetry

Maria is from Brooklyn, NY. She is currently writing a Poetry thesis through the Creative Writing subconcentration in the English Department. She works at the Michigan Theater and as a Peer Advisor in the English Department. She writes for the Arts section of the *Michigan Daily* and is one of the Editors-in-Chief of the *Oleander Review*. In her little free time you can find her being a cynic on the outside and a mush on the inside, willing to wax poetic about word obsessions, pizza and Broad City.

Elegy for the Red Thermal Shirt, Age 5

All those squares, waffle-thin
red craters all neat in their rows—
how they waited so patiently to be disturbed.

A patent game
a deep cut

scissor point glint
tactile delirium.

So I did and I shouldn't have.

Small on the Lake

How dark the trees looked
cutting away as the eyes adjusted

a handful of bodies under the dome of wet stars.
I could tell you about being alone in that twinkle-sphere

and at the water's edge—more
of filling up than crashing on.

Before sunset
a black dog entered the water,
stretching
beneath the dock.

She disappeared right in
her wet fur slick and flat
like the surface, like the sky.

I didn't even know that she liked to swim.

I was both right and wrong for that place
the hole-punch stars, the convex shoulders
emerging from the cold and into the dark
the slip of our weightless forms
my inverted body
in an inverted world.

But the stars moved over me and I wanted to sing

the green always ripples and the water still.

Glimmerville

In a photo, he and my mother are at Coney Island,
their scales the color of peacock feathers.
She was able to laugh a little, cutting her brother and herself
from the '80s sequins and sunglasses, beaming & brooding,
she'd say *I guess I always knew.*

In a memory he is all blaze and flash, a sick
dazzle, but an adolescent uncertainty caught
in the air.

She says that he would come to the
house on Sackett Street from AA
and dish out gossip. Maybe
he talked with his hands
leaning forward, and spilled the names of local celebs
like plastic gems that would
catch the light as they clattered across the floor
dimensions of vermilion & lilac & chartreuse.

“Scott, it’s called alcoholics *anonymous* for a reason.”

In the photos he beamed with teeth like a Kennedy.
In one he holds a young girl
in his arms. She’s
maybe two ears old
in a white dress with a tuft
of blonde hair.

The night before it happened
or in the night while it did
there was a dream — the young girl scuba diving.
When she wakes up and goes to tell Papi about it, he
is not the same. He has a sadness that makes him small,
his voice shaking, “Sweetie, your uncle—”

Is this how mourning looks on a man?

They go to the funeral, keep the kids
fed and their clothes clean. They grow up,
learn in terms of overgrown adolescence
as if he were suspended there in resin and how it still hurts
in that achy pit of a way. The mother has her hands full,
three kids in the heat of unrelenting adolescence
that never seems to end.

The girl never speaks of the scuba dream,
never speaks of how clear and light the water was.

Settling

Some might call this a quiet place.
The phone buzz vibrations have

no place here and no sick hum of the TV—
its music only echoed in our voices

and the lake lapping at the shore, like a sandpaper
tongue and the safety kitchen clanking “Knife! Knife!”

and then a chorus of unbridled laughter. At the rock summit
of a mountain our jelly bodies in safe cascade.

When I sit by the fire, I like looking down
at a book in my lap, the way the binding splits

my thighs in two and sometimes I hear
the words I read in my head spoken and

sung and other times I only hear the pop
of pine on the fire freshly chopped.

Although some may call this a quiet place
I am quite familiar with the symphony

of pages rustling and the clank of the
stoves and that goddamn lake carving

away at the shore and the click of a
pen cap and the inhale and exhale

of the body as it yearns to be
something more than its shell —

the body as it gulps water, as it
gasps for air inside the water.

My soul tossed my body into
the lake and it cut me cold — thin string

open, laceration welcome & limbs propeller
all young and afraid without wanting to be

and as we split we say yes
as we split we move as it moves us.

Changing the Marquee at Dusk

Up close, the light gets
through the broken bits like Leonard Cohen
said that one time, and the one time
a baby and her mom watched me from below.

The baby, her phonic voice — breath without shape yet.
I gave her a letter to hold.

Sometimes up there on the ladder I shake, but
sometimes I am only looking up.

MICKAYLA STATEN



Senior

Major: English Literature

Minor: Urban Studies

Reading: Poetry

My name is Kayla Staten. I am 22 years old, and I grew up most of my life in Texas but Michigan – both the state and the University itself- have been my home for the past two years. I have always had a love for creative writing in all its forms, but I knew from a young age that above all I was a poet first and foremost. I have a poetry collection entitled “The Danger of Feeling Everything” that was published this past March and am honored to be sharing a new piece as part of Café Shapiro.

Full Speed

Get up.

Get up get up get up get up get up.

Get going.

Go out.

Go out with somebody.

Be with somebody.

Be somebody

and then be somebody else

or else I might find myself

– and no, not like I might “find myself”-

and honestly, I cannot find the point in that.

That's the point.
No, *that's* the point.
Point A to Point B,
being in transit,
transitioning from here to there.
Here might be where I lose you,
but over there I might lose sight
of the where that's been behind me.
"I've put the whole thing behind me"
because putting it behind you is what you're supposed to do.
And hell, what else am I supposed to do?

Do what it takes.
Take it one day at a time.
Day to day,
but every day is the same-
the same day as in no difference.
Different names for the same thing-
don't lie to yourself, it's all the same thing.
Everything's the same.
Everything is coasting *and* crashing at the same time,
but everything comes crashing in
if I do not keep moving.

Keep moving.
Keep trying.
Keep your head down.
Keep your chin up.
Keep your eyes open
but don't dare to open up.
Upwards and onwards,
onto bigger and better.
No, I'm not feeling better.
Yeah, maybe I'm better than this,
but this is better than the alternative.

The alternative is standing still,
but will I still be standing if I do?
I've made it hard to stand still on purpose,
there's no purpose
in saying no to it now.
Now I've been doing this for so long
that I don't know how long it's been,
but it doesn't feel like long enough.
No, it's not enough.
If it were enough then maybe,
just maybe, I could slow down.

They tell me I should "slow down",
but I *can't* slow down.
I can't, I won't, I don't know how to slow down;
and if I did slow down, then they could catch a glimpse of me,
or worse- I could catch a glimpse of me.
I would love to catch
my breath, believe me,
but breathing always feels so heavy
and if it must be heavy shouldn't it be from working
and not just from having to be?
How can I tell you that being is work for me?

They say, "You're getting worked up over nothing."
They call it "nothing" because to them it really is nothing,
even though I tell them that nothing else works with this,
and it's because nothing makes sense.
They throw around that nickname for oblivion like it's nothing,
and I smile when they do as though to say, "I'm afraid of nothing"
but the truth is *I am afraid of nothing*.
I am afraid of living for nothing, of dying for nothing,
of becoming nothing or something that deserves that same hollow condem-
nation.
And so. I've been condemned to marathoning memory –
losing track while gaining ground, inertia-possessed and momentum-mad-
dened,
until the ultimate state of entropy.

If you are tired from watching me run ragged,
think of how tired I am from running
and from the compulsion of needing to run
at full speed.

NATALIE STEERS



Junior

Major: English and Creative Writing

Minor: Business and Women's Studies

Reading: Short Story/Poem

Natalie Steers is pursuing a double major in English and Creative Writing, in addition to minoring in Business and Women's Studies. She grew up on a buffalo farm in rural West Michigan with an apple orchard in her backyard. As such, when she visits home she enjoys making homemade apple cider, smelling the fresh cut hay, and munching on vegetables grown from the family garden. Her favorite pastimes generally include practicing yoga, reading realistic fiction and fantasy novels, drinking hot chocolate, and constantly reteaching herself how to knit. On campus she is a research peer advisor, a peer writing consultant at Sweetland, and an [art]seen blogger. This past summer she spent two months in Dublin, Ireland interning for an arts and culture magazine, *Totally Dublin*.

An Incomplete List of Overdue Thank Yous

people go to college to
get smarter
but really I think its
the sensation of
drowning like that time I
was very young and I thought
it'd be fun to see how
the world spun underwater

with the sun refracting down
 and me spinning and spinning
 holding my breath till I forgot
 which way was up and I panicked not
 knowing how to use the things I'd been told
 about swimming with the current
 but you pulled me out
 giving me life for the second time
 in 4 years and
 not knowing
 you were more scared than I
 was because
 you were my superwoman and superman and I
 was safe among your capes:
 thank you for always saving me from drowning,
 even as the waters have gotten
 more complicated and less easy to recognize

Pa
 thank you for always
 wanting to be the last one to tuck me into sleep
 and singing as I fell

for singing to me and my sister
 during bath time
 when we were still young enough to
 splash like ducklings

Mom
 thank you for nursing me between
 breaks in rehearsals
 for directing me both
 on and off the stage
 for the lights, the coffee, and chats at the kitchen counter

to you both,
 for not letting me get
 a cat
 I wanted one for years as a child
 but in your infinite wisdom you
 refused
 Which is just as well- turns
 out I'm allergic

now the world has decided I'm an adult capable
 of making these types of life changing decisions

myself

cat or no cat

but

I think there's been a mistake because

deciding whether to splurge on

brand name peanut butter

is high enough stakes

like the stakes we used to

pound into the rock hard

ground after we'd thrown out the

rocks from our

garden but the earth remained

hard and pied from the cow

manure of last year

the dung we spread over

to make the plants grow

that had baked in the sun until

we got around to planting

new growth:

thank you for teaching me that

manure and plants

and money and love

need to be

cultivated and most importantly

spread around

no matter where I

scatter

thank you

for always being a home to come back to

Terms, Conditions, and Stipulations of Ghosthood

Ghosts exist.

And like any state of being, there are rules.

Everyone knows that theatres are haunted.

Ever since actors moved indoors- a huge change from the days of poor Thebes, on his stone slab of an outdoor amphitheater, wowing the crowd with his theatrical masks under that unbearable Grecian sun- ever since actors moved indoors and started to stay put...something, or more accurately *someone*, moved in with them.

That cloaked man who sits in seat B8. The woman in box 4. The ghost of Hamlet's father who's never cast. There are other clues too. The chronically missing or misplaced props. Applause from an empty house. The 17 deaths in 1806 still blamed on the ghostlies. Stagehands killed by falling drapes still wandering the fly rail. Laughter heard in empty dressing room 5.

And one wonders why theatre people are a superstitious lot.

That's why in every theatre- from the grandest opera house with crystal chandeliers to the tiny black box hole in a wall stage- around the world has at least one light on at all times. A ghost light, if you will. For we malicious ghosts do revel the night away and no one likes to come home to a dark house.

While the light has saved many a drunken chorus boy from falling into the orchestra pit and finding himself with a broken neck, it's really a courtesy to the haunts. It's unwise to ignore us. You see we...well, no one likes being ignored, do they? That's about the time that chandeliers start falling.

Ghosts can only become corporeal if anchored to something in the living world. Remaining incorporeal, unanchored too long puts ghosts at risk to just fade away into nothingness.

Peddlers' chants rattle in my mind, claiming everything is the latest English fashion in 1599; the Dublin upper-class descends in droves. A flock of bees, clothed in their miles of fabric, desperate to look like the ruling English class.

The River Liffey is a cold massive moat separating the lesser native Irish from the rich and the British. All I see is a haze of dust hanging over the north side's massive Moore Street market. But the peddlers' pleas remain clear.

In the mild summer sun, you can almost see through me. I've remained untethered, a ghost unanchored to anything in this world far too long. Remain this incorporeal, this untouchable, and the next breeze might just blow me away, spiraling among the dust that hangs over the city from the constant motion of horses, whirling and dissipating into nothingness and the dark, pulling me back to the fate I escaped. I shiver in the sunlight, a ripple of tension that makes it harder to keep the threadbare stitches of my ghostly self together.

I have shunned death; a choice that comes with stipulations. If I want to remain a guest in the world of the living, I need to find something, someone who does belong. Or one day not far from now, I will simply cease to exist. In the final sense of the word.

There's a commotion behind me, and the wild neigh of frightened horses and a wagon wheel rolls through me. From the now three wheeled cart are spilling trunks and piles of heavy fabric. Escaping boas, masquerading masks, risqué corsets, and fluffy tulle make a run for it, rolling in the grime of the street.

There is shouting but I glide through the chaos, to the new building that is the background to the scene unfolding in the street. A stage. Nails still being hammered into place, boards rough with the bite marks of a saw. Despite the daylight outside, rushes of oil soaked straw are burning from both ends on their stands around the edges of the enclosed stage. Even as I stand, the hustle of people moving into the new theatre happening through me, and around me, the tallow candles of a large chandelier over the audience is being lit. A giant mass of intricate metal circles, it rises in the air with the shouts of stagehands.

So much brightness. Theatres know how to welcome a ghost. I haven't felt so at home since The Fortune Theatre in England ran out of luck; went up in a blaze of flames- so much beautiful light- when the stage manager got a little too energetic in his recreation of Hell.

The ship voyage and the many months it took to cross the Irish Sea were horrible. Untethered to anything or anyone, since the burning of The Fortune Theatre ripped me of my ties from that place and the stage manager- my anchor for so many years- so my soul bobbed along with the turning of the ship. It is a horrible feeling to know that if one of the violent waves, in

my fragile state, had ripped me apart no one would even have noticed.

But after that ordeal, I have found another theatre. Like so many ghosts before me, I always seem drawn to the light and belief upon a stage.

I pull the escaping threads of my soul together, knitting them back into a unified whole, begin to bind, anchor myself to this place, this theatre in Smock Alley.

A ghost can become anchored to a place, an object, or a person. Build-ings are easiest; you don't have to worry about the subject's freewill or ability to believe in ghosts. Yet, people are preferred; they are human and everything ghosts long to be.

"What do you think about the new stagehand boy?" Robert, stage manager and backstage handler extraordinaire, is looking at set diagrams and keeps scratching his beard.

"Wouldn't know, if anyone should have an opinion, it'd be you. Weren't you the one who found him by the ghost light having just picked the stage door lock?" Margarett, the deputy seamstress asks, eager as always to have the best gossip. Which is why Robert had asked her in the first place.

Robert grunts. "Can't blame the boy for picking the lock."

"Oh we can't!?" They are grouped around a cutout of a tree used in their recent production. Margarett, wide eyed, leans closer to Robert conspiratorially so they are both in the tree's thin shadow. "By his accent, he's one of those brats from the edge of the south side of the city." The deputy seamstress likes to comment on such things because her sister had married a good wealthy Irishman and they could just barely afford to live on the north side. She herself had been born on the south side and though living in the theatre was an improvement, much to her irritation, it remains firmly on the south side. "Probably grew up in those slums, running wild--"

"Well he's obviously never been an apprentice for a trade; he has no muscles. Smart little hands though, got that clock working for the scene in the second act." Robert turns the diagram upside down.

"He's probably a thief, all those children are, been picking locks since he was born--"

"Hush up!" Robert rarely speaks harshly; it causes Margarett the deputy seamstress to open her mouth in shock. "There was barely any skin on the

boy when he got here. We don't condemn those who do what's needed to live; we show them another way. He's starting to fatten up and he's bright. Damn if I don't want to make him my apprentice." He grunts. "Where did Claude find you, Margarett? You weren't handing out food to the poor on that corner."

Margarett grows red and snapping her mouth shut, stomps off.

Robert chuckles. He frowns. "And, Owen."

Owen steps out from behind the tree where he'd been listening, head hung, rounded shoulders.

"I don't know where you came from and I don't care. This is your home now. You will live and work in Smock Alley, as my apprentice. And you will work for your keep ten times over." Robert shoves the diagram he's been pouring over into Owen's small little six year old hands. "And figure out what these diagrams mean."

As Robert lumbers away, Owen looks down and smiles.

The trick with humans is they need to be willing anchors, their permission granted so the ghost can bind to them, and this means believing in ghosts. Most believers in ghosts are children.

Standing in the wings of stage left, I watch Robert walk away from the boy and towards me, eyes not registering my presence. The new boy smiles.

He looks up towards where Robert left and then his attention focuses on me. It's a brief moment, before he turns away and is gone with a call for the top of the show, but I swear he saw me.

Finding Smock Alley saved me from the fear of leaving this world; I was solidly anchored in this house of light. But people still couldn't see me, hear me, and I couldn't touch them. That is, unless they already believed in ghosts.

If the new boy...well that changed everything.

I loved theatres. So ripe with superstitions and believers, and Ireland! The native fairies had conditioned humans perfectly for ghost settlement. The chances of finding a person who believed in ghosts was higher in countries with a lively fairie community.

So if this young, wide-eyed Irish boy could see ghosts, this was my chance to be fully corporeal.

Being anchored to a theatre is not the same as being anchored to a person.

Owen was painting a tree, the thick lead paint globbed on his brush, as the actors practiced a court scene when Robert hurried over to him.

"Quick," he said in his brusque manner that Owen was becoming accustomed to. "Get down from there! Put that paint away."

"What is going on?"

Owen did as he was told and began descending the ladder, when Robert all but yanked him off in an attempt to speed up his progress.

"Our patron is coming," Robert straightened Owen's vest and brushed dust from him. "Best behavior. Now quick, lad! Get that paint out of sight."

Owen snatched up the bucket and hurried, head down. He did not want to miss seeing the patron. It was probably a great man with a cane he did not need and a silver mustache or a beautiful lady covered in jewels or perhaps-

He ran into someone, lost as he was in his daydream, and the paint sloshed over him and his victim. He looked up to apologize, only to be met with a look of utter fury and horror on the face of who could only be the patron. A young man, decked with rings and in a suit Owen bet cost a pretty fortune indeed. Looking into his eyes the moment before the exclamations and fury of activity happened, Owen saw the door on his time at Smock Alley slamming shut.

Ghosts, like spiders, are experts in spinning webs.

I may have had a hand in Owen's mishap with the patron. It is so easy to guide the unwitting mind subconsciously along a path and that young blow heart of a patron had the most unfocused mind I had ever encountered. And now, Owen was desperate to stay, while the patron demanded he leave.

But the show must go on. So while the director and Robert debated the matter, after the show, right on cue the new boy was the one left to sweep the stage as the others made their way to the bedrooms connected to the theatre, their homes in the nicer houses on the south side, if they could afford it, or out for a celebratory drink. The sweeping job, pushing the broom bristles across the feet worn stage boards with only the ever-present ghost light for company, was Owen's temporary punishment. I take a deep breath.

"Hello there," I say in my light female voice.

His back tenses, the rigid lines defining his need to bolt. But he turns slowly around, defiant. His eyes widen at the sight of me and I smile. My gown tonight is black silk with a timeless train; I am an angel of the night and he can see me.

"What's your name?" The silence is heavy with uncertainty. "Mine's Lune."

He cocks his head. "Like the bird."

"Like the moon." I like him; he's curious.

We talk of small things, mostly I talk, I flatter, barely able to contain the thrill it gives me. Being able to converse with a living breathing human- it feels like forever since The Fortune Theatre.

I ask his name again- "Owen". Slowly drawing him closer to me with flattery, a tinkling laugh, a motherly look; the silk threads of my web begin to tighten.

He has stopped sweeping, is close enough for me to lay my hand on his arm when he asks, "What do you do in the theatre?"

"I'm Smock Alley's ghost." I stick my hand in the flames of the candelabra's candles suddenly. He yelps. Then watches in fascination, as I do not cry out in pain, and the candles can be seen flickering through my hands. "It's a lonely life being a ghost. Most people don't see or hear me."

He nods wisely. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

I smile toothily at my good fortune. "I think you are going to make a great apprentice, Owen."

He hangs his head. "I do not think I am going to be one now."

"Yes, I heard about what happened today. They were very mad." I pause

letting the silence stretch. "I could help you. As long as you are willing to help me."

"How? How can you help me?"

"I'm a ghost. I could make everyone...forget that you spilled paint on the patron."

His eyes widened. "You can do that."

"I can. But I need your help. You see, in order for ghosts to be seen by non-believers," I wink at him as if that's the silliest thing in the world, not seeing ghosts, "we need to be anchored to a person. It doesn't work with places." He nods like this was the most logical thing in the world. Smart child to believe a ghost. "As an anchor, you keep your body, I keep my shape, but we're connected and others would see me as you do."

He is coming even closer, drawn.

I sigh sadly. I should have been an actor. "I know it seems like a lot, becoming my anchor, but in exchange for your help, you'd get to stay here. And you could live forever. Ghosts can't die and I'll share that gift with you."

"You will?" His eyes shine with a million possibilities. But this is the one he asks, "I can stay? And we'd be friends forever?"

"Yes, Owen. We'd be friends forever. And no one would make you leave. Ever. Just give me your hand."

I hold it out and the instant his fingers touch mine, it's like I haven't been breathing and this is my first breath ever. It's a dizzying head rush, the ultimate high.

Owen is my anchor, my humanity, my home. Mine.

In exchange for anchoring, a ghost shares their eternal life with their human anchors. Ghosts have their own human forms, so the anchor remains in their own body -which will not age once it has reached full maturity. They will not grow sick or die from disease, age, or infection.

On a particularly nasty night, when the wind blowing along the River Liffey would be more fit for a storm in the Scottish Highlands than this milder country, Smokey was checking the tallow candles in the upper Galleries. These were the smokiest seats in the theatre ironically enough- when there

was a great rushing of air and a BANG. Both the candle Smokey was holding and the ghost light candelabra smoking on the stage went out, leaving the theatre's house completely black, the dark impenetrable.

Smokey, formerly Owen, sighed. He did not grumble or swear, as others in his position would be apt to do, having to now navigate back to the theatre's kitchens in complete blackness. But Smokey had been here at Smock Alley a very long time. He knew the way.

In the narrow meandering hallway from backstage that led to the theatre's living quarters and kitchens, he was hit in the midriff by a small solid mass. He grabbed the someone, who thrashed in Smokey's inescapable grip- born from years of hauling draperies and set pieces- he carried the child and only slightly unceremoniously deposited it on the ground in the kitchens. Leaning against the door he'd closed behind him, Smokey surveyed the boy on the ground.

He was young. Maybe five. Six. Light brown hair cut in an unflattering bowl cut that had been left to its own devices for too long, shadowing sooty cheeks. Actually more of him was covered in soot than wasn't. His clothes so threadbare, patches of it seemed to have been just worn out by trying to stay together and were doing their best to simply disintegrate. On his feet, thank god, he had good shoes or he might not have had feet after a night like this.

The boy had steadily been avoiding Smokey's eyes, perhaps in the hopes that if he stayed still the retribution would be less. But as time passed and Smokey continued to look at him, saying nothing, he finally glanced up. To find Smokey's steady gray regard. And whatever he thought he saw there- concern, indifference, pity, disgust- made him lift his chin and stand up.

Smokey nodded. This boy would do fine.

Human anchors can be killed by violent means, including but not limited to stabbing, hanging, beheading, collapsed or displaced vital organs (regeneration is not a condition of immortality).

Owen had changed since first arriving at Smock Alley; his name for one, Smokey. Because of the way he seemed to glide and whisper down halls, just like the silent evasive smoke that I had named him after. As a young boy new to the theatre he had a fascination with light and was always the one to change the smoking rushes- bundles of smelly oil soaked straw the theatre used as a cheap source of lighting a large building. He seemed to always smell like the smoke they emitted; and he had a habit of just appearing beside me suddenly. It's hard to sneak up on a ghost. So I called him Smokey.

Anyone who could have remembered that same young boy who clambered loudly along the fly rail, swinging like some wild man from the drapes, or put spiders in the chorus girls' teas during the afternoon rehearsal break- anyone who could have told Smokey was at any time different than he always appeared to be was long gone.

I may have had something to do with how now a hundred years since he broke in through that stage door, though he seemed to have always been here, in this theater, no one ever wondered about this phenomenon. Plus Smokey never looked old. Tall. Dark. Silent. Black hair, with one streak of grey running through it. Never said a word that could be left unsaid. It just seemed that that was how it had always been. He looked after this theater, listened to and guarded its secrets, a massive ring of keys at his hip.

Smokey cared for Smock Alley as if it was one of the children who, like him, found their way to this theater's doors and were brought inside, out of the cold, by none other than Smokey himself. In the keeping with the tradition Robert had started, when he brought in the first child from the cold- again, Smokey himself- Smokey never turned anyone away. He walked the streets and tried to invite those children who were the poorest but still had that magical something that Smokey had a knack for spotting. Some of them had come with him in the past; most didn't. In some way or another everyone that did come to the theatre's doors was an orphan, feeling lost and alone- just as Smokey had those many years ago. He handed them a key to a new life.

As he stands at the ghost light, the candelabra's eight candles oozing tallow in fascinating patterns, Smokey wonders if the same can be said for him. Was he really given a new life, that night all those years ago when a lady who was really a ghost kept him out of the shit covered Dublin streets, saving him from a life of thieving, running, working in one poor house to the next, and eventually dying of exhaustion and pneumonia on some street corner. Saved him, to be her...her what? Her anchor. Her slave. Was there a difference? He was in bondage just as surely. Unable to grow old, to die or live normally.

Robert and Margarett were long gone. As was anyone who had ever made Smock Alley to Smokey as a young boy. He'd watched them grow old, marry- Margarett had ten children, two of which had found their way to Smock Alley even after Margarett herself moved to a farm outside the city- and die. Smokey had held Robert's hand, Robert who had never left the theatre but spent his last days toiling in service to its art, he had Robert's hand as the last breath finally left his body at 81. That was fifty years ago. Since Robert's death, time had started to speed and then slow in bursts and leaps. Faces blurred by, there were so many faces. And none stayed, except the one he had grown to find repugnant. Lune.

A constant ache at his breastbone, Lune's chain to his soul, the weight of all those he had lost. If he took a bullet right there, would he finally die or have his soul yanked back here, away from that peaceful dark of the final rest, against his will to remain forever at Lune's side? Toiling in the depressed endless cycle that had become his days, stretching into just one never ending?

How can I sentence this boy, eating his way through the first decent meal it looks like he's had in months back in the kitchens, to this fate? One infinitely more wearisome than the peaceful dark of death.

Ghosts can assume different appearances. This is at the discretion of the ghost; many stay in the appearance they had when alive but very old ghosts will shift more often. This includes changing sexes, races, and ethnicities.

The streets were full of questionable people doing questionable things, myself included- I continued to find myself on the seedier side of the city.

The girl, cleverly though she was, was trying to pick my pocket as she pretended to be looking at the ragged stiches of her gown.

"What's your name?"

"Mary." She sniffed.

"Well, Mary." I looked down at her from what felt like a long way and it felt like I'd seen a dozen, a hundred Marys. Tattered and torn, motherless, penniless and with their hands always searching for my money purse when they "accidently" ran into me. "Why don't you stop looking for my purse and we can start over."

She withdrew her hand from my coat pocket but didn't even have the decency to look ashamed. I liked that.

"Lune." I stuck out my hand.

"Mary." She shook. "What kind of name is that?"

"What kind of thief uses her real name?"

She just blinked calmly at me; well, I don't suppose you got very far in her line of work, even at her young age of seven, if you were in the habit of talking. I sighed, knowing what Smokey would expect me to do. Sometimes being this spiritually close to a human was trying.

"How would you like an honest meal and a warm, well warmer, place to stay?"

Mary continued to look at me calmly, blinking. "What do I have to do?"

"Nothing."

Now she looked at me suspiciously. I didn't blame her; the fairly young attractive male appearance I'd favored for the past half century was well dressed, in a doublet that shouted money. I probably wasn't the first wealthy man to proposition her.

"No, really," Mary said.

"Really, nothing. Have you heard of Smock Alley?"

She nodded. "Rich people often drop a few coins around there."

"I live in the theater, with the actors and crew. You can come; you'll probably have to run errands and make yourself useful to stay but they'll take you in. You can't steal though."

Thinks. "I can leave whenever I want?"

I just smiled and turned, heading North to the river.

After a few strides, her little feet caught up to mine; she slipped her hand in mine and I let her. I am a patient ghost.

When anchored, ghosts retain the ability to become incorporeal when they wish and then re-corporate.

"Look who I found trying to pick my pocket," I said, entering the spacious stone kitchen of the theatre.

"Second one tonight," Smokey said, barely glancing from the pot over the fire.

I raised an eyebrow at his back. Then smiled down warmly at the little girl, glancing at the boy seated at one of the long tables that filled the room.

"Don't mind Smokey, dear. He's naturally grumpy," I said pointedly, as I led her over to the fire. "I'm Lune."

I reached to shake the boy's hand with the one the girl had been holding; one moment she was clutching it and then the next she simply wasn't holding anything. The boy looked at my hand like it was some fingernailed animal he'd never seen before and looked almost frantically at Smokey, who was studiously ignoring us- or at least me- and was busy adding more potatoes to the stew.

He swallowed.

"Aaron."

We shook; he uncertainly and me too enthusiastically. Trying to ignore the bangs coming from by the fire.

"Pleased to meet you. Aaron, I'd like you to meet Mary."

She peered out from behind me. They shook hands very seriously.

"Eat this," Smokey set a bowl down in front of Mary. Added a spoon and a cup a tea. The smell seemed to lift her by her nostrils and settle her gently on a stool; she'd had her first bite before she was aware she'd picked up the spoon.

I smiled at Smokey. He just glanced at me and then turned his attention to the boy.

"You want more?"

He seemed puzzled and then conflicted by the question. He looked at his bowl, then at Smokey, then at his hands, then his bowl, and then at me.

"It's okay to say yes. We'll take care of you here; no one goes hungry at Smock Alley with Smokey around. Except the rats."

Aaron looked very serious. Then he nodded at Smokey. And if I ever had a heart, that broke it. They always do.

Ghosts are able to read minds, in a process called temporary habitation. They simply place their soul momentarily inside the mind of a subject. This is easiest with children whose minds have not yet developed the mental defenses that humans naturally acquire later in life.

"Araron," I say quietly. "Tell me. Where did you come from? How did you get here?"

His wide eyes stare into mine and I let myself fall into them till suddenly-

The air is full of fog. But mostly it's the seeping signs of smoke from the street lamps; creating little balls of light from their inadequate flames that appear and disappear into the night. Wax dripping on unwary passers, as the boy watches.

The air is full of fog. From the breath of the horses, clomping down the street. Two solitary horses and one wagon, where only hours ago this street along the river seemed the center of life. Not just in Dublin. But life.

The theatre was getting out and the audience spooled out into the street like silk thread. Ladies dressed in large long gowns, throats and fingers glittering dew drops- the good kind. Not the ones that stayed on the end of his nose and froze his toes every morning. Men in formidable colors of the evening, their groomed mustaches matching the silk velvet of the calm black river at his back. But then.

But then. Out poured the performers. Women showing scandalous amounts of skin and drinking straight from the bottle being passed around the group. Men with charcoal lined eyes twinkling in the night and swearing like sailors for the women to hear. Some dressed as the dandiest sailors he'd ever seen. Younger girls, more conservative gowns, their backs plastered against the theatre's brick soot covered wall, passing one smoking pipe among themselves like some fiends from a strange beautiful Hell. The elegance with which they blew smoke at each other one moment and marked out the steps to some complicated dance the next was mesmerizing.

And the color! The boy never knew there was that much color in the world, let alone on people. Scarves of apple red and orange, striped vests of purple and green, tails of mauve, and trails of ribbons in a fantastical ripple of every sunset.

This must be what a fairytale looks like.

When only anchored to a place, ghosts cannot touch anything solid. They cannot be seen or heard except by those who already believe in ghosts. When anchored to a person however, ghosts can choose to touch, be seen, and heard by everyone.

It was like a fairytale. It really was. I thought so too.

The sets, actors' plastered make-up, faces melting in the heat, the ap-

plause of a crowd, stagehands silently working the magic changing of time and place and Smokey...

Now, rendered unrecognizable. The theatre's once cramped and crooked hallways have been straightened out. Instead of the comforting muffle, voices carry in the vaulted ceiling, wandering and bouncing away from their owners among the beams. The hidden corners and secrets they held have been thrown heartlessly into the sunlight, filtered through stained glass eyes.

And tomorrow, when the bells of this church that used to be a theatre toll, it will be the first time in 300 years that the sound of Catholic faith clanging from the rafters is heard in Dublin. Humans. As if any of that matters when-

The real emancipation for the Catholics won't come for another 18 years, yet you wouldn't know they were aware of their inferior position the way everyone was carrying on. It was almost like the bustle before a show. Which was almost like being fully alive again.

But I'm a ghost of the person I was in those days when Smock Alley was a theatre, instead of a church. Being bound to a church is not the same as being bound to a theatre.

If the human being temporary habituated is that ghost's anchor, regardless of age, there are no mental defenses between them. Anchors have given the ghost access to their deepest selves, their souls, and this includes access to their thoughts. Temporary habitation takes conscious effort on the ghost's part, so ghosts are not constantly getting input from their anchor.

Smokey angrily grabs a lit candle from the candelabra of the ghost light just left of center stage, begins thrusting the flame into the wicks of those candles foolish enough to die out.

"God damn you."

"What's got your knickers in a twist this time, mon amour?" I unknot my cravat.

"Don't call me that. And you know what."

Foul smelling tallow wax drips in streams onto Smokey's hand. He makes no move to stop his determined lighting.

"You're hurting yourself, let me," I place my hand on his where the wax

is already cooling, hardening. He flinches.

"What does it matter?"

I don't remove my hand but his reaction hurts me; I think he must know because he backs away, leaving the candle in my hand and begins pacing, absently picking wax from his blistered skin.

I dutifully finish lighting all the candles, like we have all the time in the world- which as we both know, we do. When I finally turn around, there is still an angry twinkling in those alluring gray eyes of his, like a summer storm over the Irish Sea, but his expression is controlled, almost sad.

"You're going to put off finding my replacement again."

"Are we really going to have this argument *again*?" I said sounding bored.

"Damn you, yes we're going to argue about this! You promised to replace me; so I could die and not leave you adrift in this world. Why did you bring the girl, Mary, in? The boy is a perfect candidate on his own. Young. A natural believer. And he has that extra something."

"Ah, your magic factor, the one you're always searching for in your lost children. But Smokey, the girl was freezing and alone. What was I supposed to do? You're the one who has a soft spot for every brat discarded on the street. I did what you would have wanted me to do. I did it for you." I put my hands on his shoulder. "It wasn't so long ago that that was you."

"100 years ago is long! You promised and now with two of them to choose from you'll put it off again." He shrugs out from under my hands. "You won't be able to pick. Or an accident will happen and then you can't have either of them. But you promised."

"A moment of weakness I haven't stopped regretting." I spit the words out, wishing they were shards of ice to fling at him.

Abruptly, I sigh. Reaching out to stroke the side of his cheek with my thumb, "I know. And I will. I will. Be patient."

He looks away, his jaw stiff beneath my touch. "I'm tired of hearing you say that."

"And you could be listening to me say if for 80 more years!" I spoke of patience but mine is gone. "That is nothing in the life of a ghost. That is nothing in your life, even- so why are you so eager to let this go? I'd be gone

for all intents and purposes without you. Wandering these halls, unseen, unheard. Alone. A true haunt. Is that what you want for me? I'd never want that for you."

My words bristled between us, electric tension across the small space. He doesn't meet my eyes.

Irritation gurgles in my throat. "I wish you weren't in such a rush to leave me. It doesn't matter if the children are great candidates. I don't want them; I want you. You are mine."

Smokey still doesn't say anything. He walks back to the ghost light, away from me.

"Talk to me. Don't make me read your mind." My voice is a warning.

"You promised you'd never do that," his back says.

"Yes well it seems I'm breaking all kinds of promises tonight." My voice could have riddled metal with the specks of acid flying from it. "Let me tell you something Owen," using the name I only ever called him when we were intimately alone, "I'm not happy with this attitude. You see, I gave you everything- Remember? Let me help you."

I let myself become less solid and immediately reshape from the dandy of a man I am tonight into the woman I'd been in the form of that night, 100 years ago.

"Remember?" He spins around, tension in every line of his body. "How could I forget! We are so entwined you and I, quite literally closer than two people could ever hope to be, it's an ache in my chest so big, sometimes I can barely move."

"Most people search a life time for that. And you have been given eternal life! Yet you're not a day over 25."

"Most people would not want this!" Spit flies from his indignant lips, like an actor intent on perfect pronunciation. "This ache is a boulder, and one day soon, it will crush me. Because yes after 80 years of immortality I am tired. The never ending of it. I am. So tired. No one should have to endure that."

"Not even those children eating in the kitchen right now that you've picked like prize hogs, should not 'endure' what you cannot?"

I say this in a nasty tone before I realize in his silence that that is exactly what he means. "Are you threatening me? You not only want to leave me,

but more so to rob me of a replacement, to save them from me?" I pause. "No. I don't think so Owen."

I step towards him and there is the flicker of fear. Or maybe it was just the candle light.

"Here's *my* threat: You should be scared to die, while your soul is connected to mine. Because if you even think about killing yourself, moving that 'boulder' as it were, I will drag your soul back from whatever hell it starts out in and only after a slow, painful journey later will you find yourself back here with me again, looking for a willing person, having become the very parasitic haunt you hate. Forever. You don't get a second chance at death, Owen."

I stop. Smokey's looking straight ahead, his expression completely closed from me. I slowly walk forward and take his limp hands. He doesn't react.

"I promised to find someone else and I will. But whether it's this boy or a different child, eventually though it's him or you. Your choice."

His eyes light with resolve or maybe desire. "Leave the children. Keep me." His hand finds the back of my neck, bringing me to his harsh mouth.

As a ghost, reading the minds of children is fun. Until it's not.

Living in the theatre is Aaron and Mary's palace, with literally everything they could ever want or could ever want to be.

They have real beds, with mattresses of straw, sheets, and one goose feather pillow a piece. They live in the theatre's dormitories- Mary in the chorus girls' under the watchful eye of the intimidating spinster ballet mistress and Aaron in the attic room with two other apprentices- but they have their very own beds.

And roofs over their heads. It leaks a bit during some of those winter rain storms, and it is drafty up in the spacious attic – they share it with a bat called Christoph- but it is a roof. Warm air rises from the kitchens on the ground floor and stoves placed on alternating levels, so by the time you reach the third floor or the attic, the children are both fairly toasty bundles.

How I wish Christoph had been a vampire bat; he had children in a blanket, all warm and roasted right there for him. But what good are fruit bats?

There is always food for them. The cook's stingy about snackers between his bountiful meals but the scullery maid isn't. Or if they time it when the

cook is taking fresh scones out of the oven, and the flutist who often plays solos in between acts happens to be there, he hands the steaming pastries out to the children for her to see.

And they sit there and gorge themselves, staring at me. We talk and they are carelessly stuffing themselves with scones, right before my eyes. When I can't eat anything; and they know this and are mocking me.

There is a grand hallway that connects the living quarters to the theatre itself. This is Mary and Aaron's playground. They fly over the fly rail in chase of the other, play make-believe trailing their hands across the miles of costumes hung in the basement, create projects from scraps begged off of the set designer, and generally get underfoot.

Their scampering feet are heard everywhere, seeming to follow me, chase me unrealistically around and around the theatre. I've started talking long walks in the city to escape the ever-insistent pattering of their feet. They trail Smokey everywhere.

But they work for this free time. Mary is constantly running errands for the costume mistress, an old dear who always misplaces her glasses but can't sew a stitch without them. Aaron has been taken under the wing of the fencing and combat master. He carefully polishes and cleans all the equipment, studying dutifully in lessons. Thus far he has escaped the stage, for which he is grateful as he has not yet come to love the stage. But the theatre is always short of boy actors, so he can only dodge that so long.

Neither of them will be able to escape for long.

They quickly come to forget those early years on the street because for the first time, they belong.

Smokey made them belong. And they worship him. My Smokey.

Being a ghost is often lonely. This is part of the deal.

Being anchored to a church is not the same as being anchored to a theatre. Just as drinking water and drinking Guinness are not the same thing; Water is pure, refreshing sometimes, clear, and clean. Flat. Guinness has layers; first the air pocked white foam that looks like a scrap of cloud settled on top. Then it is dark and thick, bitter, but full of flavor- amber hues can be seen in its depths by the eyes of a lover. It is exciting, it is intoxicating. That was the theatre to me. I became high on the lights and the activity that happened all around. The colors and the noise. Tempers flared and passions

were kindled but those were just the fireworks after the show. Theatre's are friendly. They always leave a light on. Always.

Churches are as big as theatres but empty and dark. Hallow. No one leaves on the light. And I do so hate the dark.

The only time I enjoy the Church is during Mass; if I'm lucky there's a morning, matinee, and evening. They sure do know how to put on a show. The candles and singing and repeating of the script. And there are always children running all over; I pay attention to them.

Every once in awhile a very young child sitting on their parent's lap will look at me and actually see me. They believe. But always so young, can't even sit up straight. And they're only here once a week. So, I just smile and wave. They gurgle in delight, then are promptly shushed by their parents.

How can there be so many people who believe in God, but not one of them believes in ghosts?

Being anchored to a church is not the same as being anchored to a theatre. Buildings work but people are better.

Being anchored to a theatre is not the same as being anchored to Smokey.

Ghosts are inherently jealous creatures. It is a result of a very long, inescapable life.

"They have to go."

Smokey looks at me sharply. Then goes back to the set diagram he's working on. "Why?"

"They're getting underfoot. Annoying the actors, the crew, the director's threatened to take the screws to both of them not 5 times just today- they're annoying you too, you're just too proud to admit it." I swing my walking stick around, sight the boy down it's line, and swish across his neck, as he ties drapes for the left wing along a length of pipe.

"Don't you mean, they're annoying you." He is still studying the diagram.

I narrow my eyes at him. "What do you mean?"

He meets my eyes briefly, then makes a quick line on his paper.

"You're always so serious when you work."

He doesn't say anything. Of course not.

"I mean, now that you've committed to staying they do seem a little extraneous." I twirl my cane idly.

"The children are not extraneous. They do good work for the theatre." Smokey mildly tilts the drawing another way.

People scurry by my prone position on the set's discarded chaise; no one bothers me believing in my role as a young millionaire who offers substantial donations to Smock Alley. The doughty property mistress drops her bundle of objects three times just walking from one side of the stage to another. The costume mistress has forgotten her glasses again and keeps stabbing the lead actor - he has such a stupid mustache- she finally draws blood with an exclaimed "What the devil?" Mr. MacCormic, the director is alternately twisting his cravat into a wrinkled heap and trying to put his hat on his hand.

"Why is everyone so frantic? More importantly," realizing his intent on a fairly simple diagram is off, "why are you nervous?"

Smokey sighs. "Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Charles Earl of Middlesex, his son is coming to the performance tonight."

"But not the Lord Lieutenant himself?"

"No."

"Ah."

"NO! No, I refuse to perform like this," the leading lady diva enters. Every theatre has one. Some things are just too true to make up. "This place is a mess and my costumes have not been ironed and will someone fix this wig! My heads about to fall off and the curls keep getting into my eyes, so I'm blinking all the time. Ewen, how many times-"

This is a good moment to bow out, as it were. While everyone is distracted.

"I'm heading out. Be back for the show and our important guest." No one is looking so I kiss him on the cheek but he is already gone, silently making his way to where the stagehands are idly admiring how the leading lady is only in a chemise that's clinging to her curves.

Smokey turns around still walking away, "Leave the children. I'll talk to them."

I twirl my top hat on and walk out the stage door, to re-enter through Smock Alley's lobby.

Ghosts do not fear Hell. Or strive for Heaven.

I feel unoriginal as I carefully draw a path along the last row of seats on the main floor and all around the bases of the two wood supporting beams of the galleries. Gunpowder is so typical whenever someone needs to blow something up. Dynamite would be different but more difficult for me to arrange. We have a whole stock of gunpowder for making fake weapons smoke or magic tricks, not so dynamite. Gunpowder will do the job.

Less noticeable too. The normal house manager, taking people's tickets and money on the way in, is sick and the inexperienced replacement will be careless in checking the house. Plus with such an important guest coming, The Lord Lieutenant's son, everyone will be in a stir. And they will not take my Smokey away from me.

I am finishing making sure I've stowed everything in a corner beneath the galleries when I feel someone watching me.

"Hello Mary, Aaron. How are you?" I continue to rummage in the seating area.

"Grand, thank you," says Aaron but Mary asks, "What are you doing?"

I like that about Mary. She gets to the point. I guess she is a little like Smokey that way. I shake my head, I need to focus.

"I thought I lost my cane over here..."

"It's leaning against the beam." As she retrieves it, "Why do you have a cane anyways? You are not old."

Oh Mary.

"Its for the image. The presentation."

"So like a show?" Aaron turns those gray smokey eyes on me.

"Kind of. You'll understand when you're older," I say. Then almost feel

bad for planning to get rid of them tonight. The gunpowder sits unnoticed.

Anyone can become a ghost. There is a moment, just a moment, when the soul is first wretched from its body in an agonizing destabilization that the soul can choose: to stay and remain a ghost or to go beyond to the final unknown darkness.

Aaron, Mary, I need you to go check the rushes under the galleries.

Smokey said for Aaron and me to stay back here and help with that costume change. And to stay together.

He just told me about the rushes. Says you will make it back in time. Now move!

I don't know exactly how it all went wrong. I'd sent the children to their deaths, never having to see them again and be reminded how Smokey wanted to leave, had grown to hate me. And neither would he.

But then the children ran into Smokey on the way to the galleries and he sent them backstage again, said that he would take care of it. I didn't know, I didn't see, I was too busy being stupid. I had rushed outside back through the lobby doors, as I needed to be in the audience, to light the gunpowder but some drunken idiot got there first, lit a match with Smokey next to the supporting beam.

The theatre shook, as the Church in its place now does on Sundays when the choir let's it soar. Sounded about as terrible as the choir too. A giant tumbling and cracking of the world, bangs, silence, and then the chaos.

Running, screams, shouts of pain, of panic, orders, and the heave of many arms struggling to lift a single beam.

Several people were injured, including Charles Earl of Middlesex's son who was pulled from the wreckage with both legs broken. 7 people were killed. The only ones whose soul lingered even briefly among the wreckage, was Smokey's.

He stands over his body where a beam had caved in his chest and trails of blood lined his ears. I stand next to him. Not saying anything; I can't. He isn't a ghost. Just a soul taking a little longer to move to Beyond. I hope if I don't break this silence we are sharing, with all the panic and dust around us, that we can stay forever in this moment of calm and he'll choose to stay with me.

Because I lied before, at the ghost light. I never had the power to make him stay and choose to be a ghost; death cuts all ties. Even mine.

Mary and Aaron were standing on stage, helping with bandaging. At one point she looked out into the audience and met my eyes. For a second she saw me, she looked backstage, she remembered and she knew. Then her eyes glazed over, looking past me, and she simply stopped herself from believing in ghosts anymore.

I have no one. Aaron won't believe either once Mary gets to him.

I can't even hold the dead body of the man that I love- I'm no longer here enough to manage it.

Smokey's soul looks at me, nods, and then turns. Is gone between one moment and the next.

I knew he wouldn't choose ghosthood. No one ever does. The fools do; and among those only the ones who are afraid of the dark.

EVAN VEASEY



Junior

Major: Jazz Studies

Reading: Poetry

Evan Veasey is a junior at the University of Michigan pursuing a degree in jazz studies. He has been writing music for several years, but has only recently started writing poetry. When he is not practicing or doing other coursework he enjoys playing with his experimental trio Glitter Glam and indie rock band Fallow Land. He is also working on a solo "Singer Songwriter" EP that will hopefully be out early this summer.

A Daydream, a Ghost

you always have to remind me
like the shadow that
naps under my nose;
it really happened.

One morning I woke up in someone else's clothes.
At first I wasn't even aware
I wiped my eyes
checked the time
yawned
extending my arms
and only then did I realize
I was pressing my hands

not against the heavy morning air
 but into the soft insides
 of a mid-sized sedan.

In the back seat:

a maze of lavender rooms
 nic nacs, exercise equipment
 and a child who looked like me.

Past the windshield:

an empty parking lot
 behind an apartment complex
 with dozens of broken windows

To my left:

an open door

A Glass of Water Fell

And trembled like breath
 As it cut its guts open on
 The table of a Coney Island
 And the silvery organs spread
 Unfurling, like a curtain over
 Your exposed legs.

And of course we were both embarrassed. As the waitresses doted on you, water dripping from your pants, I tried my best to keep my eyes away from yours, my gaze firmly planted in the cracks of the cheap linoleum tiles beneath my feet. After our food was brought out and hastily eaten, eager to leave, I hurried to the register, pulling you soggily behind me. For some reason whenever I think of that night, the toppling glass of water always reminds me of a beach I played on as a child. Perhaps the sprawl of sand or the cool half nakedness of the passersby reminded me of the slabs of ice gliding across that diner table, or maybe it's that both times you were there. But

Either way

On the beach
 There is a lighthouse
 Getting farther away
 And a movie theater

Empty but for one person
Who, after the credits roll,
Finally gathers their things
And hesitantly steps outside
Into the gaping mouth
Of the sea.

Your Body

like pastries
soft like
the carpet of
the inside of
a womb
empty
the room is
undressing like
Christmas time
unfolding the
wrapping of
a sigh
like presents
littering the floor
that is the bottom
of the page
waiting to
turn like
clothes in
a laundromat
singing of
images of
pastries
soft and
fragile like
coffee shops and
campaign promises and
my bad penmanship but

I digress

what I am
really talking about

is only
your body
rained on like
memory and
woven like
clutter into
corners of
things and
ruined by
lack of nakedness
of intentions and
the baking of
whispers
of you
like birdsong
and...

ELEANOR WILSON



Sophomore
Major: English
Reading: Poetry

Ellie Wilson (Eleanor for long) is a sophomore majoring in English. She is a bad speller and a good sister. Ellie grew up in an extremely small town five minutes away from Lake Michigan and is most content when she is either painting or snowboarding.

Early Morning Rain

I come from mud stained Mary Janes. Hair that's greasy and lank.
Transparent skin.

Veins blue like stained glass. The blood of Norseman.

Unforgiving and chaotic.
I come from my mother's mad, low voice.
And daddy's legless daddy longlegs. Bouncing and jiving.

I come from dew on the decks. Lakes that won't chap you like the
ocean.
Roads with no signals. Dairies, fields, the smell of manure.
Heavy days filled with squawking crows. Squawking girls.

Hangnails and ivory keys. Frogmore stew, chalk, melatonin,
dandelion floss.

I come from the blistering glare of successful pasts.
Shining like a lighthouse.

The pages of my journal curled outward like sails.

Fade Out Line

Creeping in sweetly

I strum the words

“my chapped, un-kissed lower lip”

walk backwards so you don't miss it

all those pink drunks, the spilled skim milk, tinsel and

sweat

the mosquitoes whined
they are impatient
not I

I will clunk into old age

Having thought about it too much

And writing it down

When she comes I will put my ear up to her

The wet creature

And write it down

I will chew the blood

And write it down

I've seen her fuck a whole family

My family.

I will write her down

I'll laugh easy

And write it down

And write it down

And write it down

Nick Missed:

germs on the bathroom stall "*Anna Waz HeRe*"
the veil and wedding banded finger
~~Defective bone marrow transplants~~ and
too many Kit Kats on Halloween
his girlfriend's bobby pins scattered around
red solo cups
contacts
and an electric guitar
his mother's divorce papers
and gloves
as big as oars
endless loads of wet laundry
gowns
caps
teeth covered in wire and
~~hair-splitting on the floor~~
headphones plugged in and August 1999
ties
Halley's comet
rent checks and skinned knees, water bills and jerseys
Star Wars The Force Awakens
cursive L's
and acceptance letters
poetry slams, sticky bus seats, promotion(s), whitening strips
roller blades, whiskey
jury duty
coffee breaks, piano lessons
morphine

The Stitch

Step 1: Make a slipknot

She was the sort of woman who became more beautiful the more you watched her. Entwined with a sort of grace and toughness.

Step 2: Tighten the loop

And we tightened the loop as her hands told us a story of resilience.

Step 3: Hold the thread

We did not dare let it slip for fear of failure. But she felt our worries and her eyes creased with a smile until the room was free of shadows.

Step 4: Begin the Chain

And I thought perhaps our stories begin and end right there, at the moment of laughter.

Step 5: End the Chain

The simple things come back to us to rest a moment by our ribcages.
The lived-in hands.
The hugs that surprised us with their force.
Her smile.
That simple stitch.

All Those Curls

This chain smoker went out with a bump on the head

Ten pounds of America's honesty

Weighing heavy on his wife's lap

Her hands sweeping through all those curls

That housed all those words

And all their consequences

A man just here to fart around

"So it Goes Jill, So it Goes"

Sputtering

I grew up believing in my cousin instead of a God. Everyone's memory of him, a hazy-bright wash. His marrow a thing of my thoughts. My father has only cried once that I know of. A sputtering cry that did not ring. His hands warm and my forehead down. Nick's death a thing of tousled shadows. Harsh and angelic. His life a pool of features blurred and sunburned. The albums of his four years bound and fading. A dog caught mid-bark. Grandma's hands entwined with his, heavy with arthritis. My memory of him as slippery as a minnow. Us picking the onion flowers?
He is saint like. A friend behind the stained glass.
I cannot kneel on the pews forever.

Dust and Wine

My abdomen bloomed the day we dusted off the acrylics
Saved by art
I thought
Wiped the spilled womanhood off the seat with a single paper towel
Bawled
Myself into stone
Mom had said "women bleed from the inside"
And I knew I had known
From the way my grandmother sewed her lips shut
Hemmed her character with the thinnest thread
I had seen it in my friend
Whose father opened his face with a bullet
Nothing more than an "oh" escaping her tight mouth
My aunt a portrait of pills.
Yellow fingered from inhaling all that hollow charm
I had seen my mother pull her own knees into her chest before
So when she found the bloodied paper in the trash
I told her the scab began to scar
I told her I nicked my thumb on the magazine tips
I told her I shaved too fast for too long
I told her I found a tick on the dog
And pinched it between my fingers
I told her it was only paint.

CLAIRE WOOD



Junior

Major: Economics

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

Claire Wood is a Junior from Sugar Land, Texas studying Economics and Creative Writing. She loves alliterations, lattes, and emojis!

On Nights Like These

You stand on a balcony.

You always do, on nights like these.

It is dark — wonderfully dark — a darkness so thick and inky that if you reach out and cup your hands, the night puddles in your palms.

From your shoulders dangles a night shirt — this long, gray, beautifully baggy masterpiece that hangs low and tickles the tops of your knees. You wear no underwear. You relish the feeling — this nakedness, this nudity. A warm night wind flits beneath your shirt and licks your upper thigh, tenderly.

You look up at the moon, the stupid, white face staring down at you.

This is me, you say. Bare, stripped.

The moon says nothing.

You like it like this — just you and the moon. You are safe in its silence, in the lame, blank stare.

You finger a bottle of Merlot. Your lips slip over the mouth. The liquid is soft, sweet; you don't gag. It drifts across your tongue, pooling in your cheeks before dripping down your throat.

But then, for a moment, it isn't wine.

And you are back.

You wear black. You always do, for times like these. It is assumed. This is what he likes: the trimmed black panties — deliciously thin, scooping sensually over your hips; the ebony cups of the bra dipping low, so low, covering your nipples, but only just.

You are hot, fuckable.

He approves.

Your lips move down him easily. The action is practiced, methodical.

Give him anticipation, but only slightly.

Kiss the arm; trace the rib; hover at the abdomen—

Then lower.

Your tongue circles the head; your lips move over. Your mouth moves down the shaft.

A sigh from the pillowcase.

Down. Up. Down. Up.

You study the skin as you bob. The dark, tan, rippling musculature. You wonder how many push-ups, sit-ups, crunches, curls it takes to get skin like this.

And you hate it — this horribly beautiful skin.

You hate the way it looks, the way it feels, the way it smells. The way it twitches as your tongue flicks across the surface.

You are repulsed, disgusted.

Down. Up.

But the taste—

The taste is what you hate the most. You don't hate it; you despise it. You loathe it because it lingers. The smell, the sight, the feeling— those fade. They are swallowed up by inky night and washed away by icy showers.

But the taste—

The taste stays with you. The taste of a man lingers long after the man disappears. It clings to your tongue, your cheeks, the back of your throat. You will try to wash it away with moonlight and Merlot.

It won't.

In minutes, you hear it— the sad, choking-turtle sound. He is there. A breath, and liquid squirts into your mouth. All at once, then barely at all.

You suck softly. He groans; you swallow. He drips down your throat. You gag, but hide it.

You lie down next to him. He doesn't move: eyes closed, dick limp.

You stretch out sensually, running your big toe along the sheets. You know he won't touch you. You don't expect him to, anymore.

You take too long. The words echo in your mind.

The voice is impersonal, flat. He is busy. Women— they take too long. *It isn't you, my dear.* It's genetic. He has that thing— you remember? He told you. He is busy. It isn't personal. It isn't personal. We are in college; we are busy. He is busy.

He tells you again. *I'm a busy man.*

I know, you say. Feign a smile. *I understand.*

You are about to leave, now. You are dressed, standing in the doorway. He stands before you, one arm stretched up the wall, gazing down at you playfully, casually, condescendingly.

You let me stand you up again today, he says. *Why'd you do that?*

You shrug. He doesn't care that you were waiting for him. He never will. His eyes watch yours. You hate these, too — these majestic, insolent, beautiful gray-green eyes.

You know I love to blow you off, he teases. *Don't let me stand you up next time*. He smirks softly, extends a chiseled arm and flicks the tip of your nose with his index finger.

But now you are back, with the moonlight and the Merlot. You call your sister. Alice. Blonde, skinny, ruthless. You always do, on nights like these.

"I did it again," you say.

"What?" she asks.

"Him."

She is silent for a moment. Alice hates him; you know that. You hate him; she knows that. She doesn't understand.

"At least you get an orgasm out of it," Alice says. Alice is like that. Cold, hard, matter-of-fact. You say she's a realist; she says she's a bitch.

"Oh, no," you explain. "No orgasm."

"What do you mean, no orgasm?"

"I mean, he doesn't— *do me*."

"What do you mean, he doesn't *do you*?" Alice is appalled.

"I take too long." You rationalize.

"How long do you take?"

You think. "Fifteen minutes. Maybe ten."

"I make my salad in fifteen minutes," Alice says.

"He doesn't eat salad," you say.

"So you just blow him?"

"Yeah." You swallow more wine. It is thick, soft, sticky.

She pauses, thinking.

"Do you like him?" she asks.

"No."

"Do you love him?"

"No."

You loved a man, once. You still do.

He is tall, with a crooked smile and blue eyes so sharp and soft that when you sink into them, they prick you, tenderly. He looks at you, and you forget, for a moment, what it is to breathe.

You won't tell him, though. About breathing, or forgetting to.

Alice has to go. She is meeting someone— a friend. The receiver clicks; she is gone.

You keep the phone pressed to your ear after she disappears, savoring the warm, electric hum against your cheek.

You lower the phone and raise the Merlot. It is half-empty, now, the bloody red inside sloshing, sloshing, sloshing. Your lips slip over the bottle, and, in a flash, you are back, standing in the doorway, gazing up into insolent, gray-green eyes. He leans against the wall, arm stretched up, looking down at you. His words play in your mind, over and over and over like a bad record.

Why'd you let me stand you up? You know I love blowing you off. Don't let me blow you off this time. His words slip slimy and wet in your ear like a snake's tongue. The finger flicks playfully, casually, condescendingly against your nose.

You take too long. I'm a busy man.

You know I love blowing you off.

Flick.

Flick.

Flick.

You feel the tears welling up, the emptiness brimming inside you.

The gray-green eyes watch, amused. They flicker. They know you will come back. You know you will, too. Return, and fill that gap, that hollow. To him, you know, this is all you are: a wet tongue, an open mouth. He doesn't have to tell you to *tell* you. The eyes say it all.

Why'd you let me stand you up?

You know I love blowing you off.

It isn't personal. You take too long. I'm busy. I'm a busy man.

Your arm winds back, and your fist slams into his nose. You hear the crunch.

He yells, bends over. His blood is on your knuckles. You notice immediately — the jarring scarlet, dripping across your palms and pooling on the kitchen tile. And for a startling instant, you feel it—

Self.

The blood dripping from your palm is power. You don't need him.

And in that moment, you *are*.

But you won't do it. The action is too brazen, irrational: defenseless in its defense. If you hit him, you lose him. Bite back, and he will let you go.

You will be alone.

So you are back again, with the moonlight and the Merlot. Your lips slide over the bottle. The wine slips across your tongue, down your throat. You don't gag.

You think of the other one — the one you always think of, on nights like these.

You might tell him you are in love.

He would tell you he isn't.

I don't love you. I'll never love you. You hear his would-be words; they echo in your ears, make your chest ache.

He will never know you the way you want him to.

But if you tell him, at least, you will feel it. That feeling, in your breast. That gunshot. That blade, ripping through your skin, splitting your heart right down the middle so that the two ventricles quiver separately, connected only by one shuddering, blood-red string. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

I don't love you. I'll never love you.

The blood spreads across your chest. It trickles down your breast, dripping in thick raindrops from your nipple.

Now, instead of nothingness, you feel pain.

Real pain.

He does not love you; he will never love you.

It is the stab caused by vulnerability and courage. Only love can hurt this bad.

But this— this, my dear, is what you are afraid of.

Isn't this what you fear?

That gunshot. That blade.

So don't tell him.

Make love to the man you don't love and who doesn't love you.

Stand on the balcony. Slip your lips over the mouth of the bottle; swallow. Let the inky black surround you, caress you, kiss you; let the tongue of the wind lick your untouched thigh. Shed a tear with the stars, and whisper to the moon—

oh, how beautiful it might be to be alive.

MINNA WYBRECHT



Junior

Major: Premed, Creative Writing and Literature

Reading: Poetry and Fiction

Minna Wybrecht is passionate about primary care and capturing people's stories. Through fabulous mentorship, she has become dedicated to the creative process, be it through painting, writing, or dancing.

She believes in three things. Milk chocolate. Happiness. And—"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." — Maya Angelou.

A Broken House

We built up something,
Not really love
But peace.
Yes, Peace.

The peace of knowing what we had was one of a kind
It was a safe haven from our parents' wretchedness
From ephemeral, shallow friendships
—we were safe.
Safe in this new house with concrete walls
Marble countertops
Wood paneling
Pristine bathrooms
Expensive furniture.

But still, we tore each other apart when
 I saw my parents in your eyes
 saw my parents in your gestures
 —in your words, your anger.

And you saw all the abandonment of your friends, your colleagues
 in the way I withdrew from you
 Shut you out, cut you off, blocked you from my life.
 It was a nuclear explosion.
 We both thought, in sync, what idiots we were
 for believing that anyone could be any different
 That we could ever possibly find a safe haven from all of our suffering.

Tears clogging our reason,
 We broke the vases on our countertops
 Shattered the sink in the fancy bathroom
 Shredded the leather of our couches
 Ripped apart the hearts embroidered on the curtains.

And we just stared at each other, with everything in between, heartbreak
 coloring the windows
 us exiting out separate doors
 Reliving this perpetual cycle of loving and leaving.

I'll Breathe In Your CO₂

Reality lingers in the folds of stolen moments—
 when it's just you and me
 So close our eyelashes intertwine
 And the beat of our hearts synchronize into an unspoken melody—filled with
 the resonating sound of hello goodbye and everything inbetween.

Our private language is exchanged between our gazes in the rich silence,
 searching for something
 not "I want more,"
 but something that says "this is enough."

I want to build a house with you with bricks of words and mutual understanding
 We can set up the panes of glass in the windows from the reflection of happiness drawn from our eyes.
 We can let the pitter patter of raindrops on the tin roof Be the symphony we dance to in the still night.

If I could, I'd pull a blanket over our heads.
I'd breathe in the CO₂ you exhale in our proximity
and discover the secrets of our future encoded in each molecule.

The fear is embedded in my smile
it hides in the curvature of my lips when I wonder at what our futures could
possibly hold:
walking crosswalks,
changing lanes stop signs and hidden potholes
lucky dimes and angry people

When reality intervenes,
Fear beholds me
 that I'll snag and rip both our hearts to shreds I feel unsure about
my every move.
But I do not want to dwell in pessimism

So I say,
Build a house with me with bricks of words and mutual understanding.
It can be temporary,
Made from sand so that it melts away when the storms come
But we'll let the pitter patter of rain on the tin roof be the symphony that we
dance to
And draw the happiness from our eyes into the panes of glass

I'll paint over my all my demons—speckled on the walls—with a paintbrush
Shades of cheerful yellow and gold like the rays of the blinding sun.
I'll paint over the reality and sadness and fear
So that when I unzip my smile,
You'll still see the happiness written on my teeth
And amusement in the depth of my eyes.

So I say,
Build a house with me
With bricks of words and happiness written on the glass.

Hold me close.
I'll breathe in your CO₂ in our proximity,
And discover the secrets of our future encoded in each molecule.

Not Good Enough for Religion

I remembered sitting in some cafe in downtown Taipei on my holiday visiting Mom's family. The brick walls gave off a gloomy effect, and the employee at the register wouldn't stop sniffing and wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"What does it mean to be a part of our faith?" Ryan pop-quizzed me. He was impeccable at reciting every story, every verse, every ideology from the Bible. As my older brother by three years, his entitlement made him out-right cocky. This was before he turned eighteen and decided to abandon our family. I hated his haircut.

I mumbled some response, something about believing in God and being a good person.

"Jesus. You don't even know," he threw a spit wad at me in absolute horror. The immaturity in his gesture was diluted by the severity of his words. I guess he thought that the "Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit" and Jesus dying for us were pretty darn important details that I'd missed. This conversation basically set the tone for the entire vacation. It sucked since I could have gone to the Bahamas with some classmates instead.

That wasn't the first time I had been subjected to such critical judgement. My best friend in middle school said to me, "Yeah, I just tested your faith, and it fell apart right away." Goddamn him he did. I made sure we never spoke after that.

Fast forward several years: Ryan had left us for good. I'd started college. Calvin was in middle school. Mom had a friend, Claire, swimming in religion. To Claire, there was clearly a right and wrong to almost everything. She'd ship religious books to Mom, talk about the godly way to do things as well as the ungodly. But Mom was plagued with loneliness; she had been for years. So when Claire appeared in my mother's life, I was actually glad.

And then one day I got an email. It went something like this:

Sonia love, it warmed my heart to see you the other day. Just one summer and you've grown so much! I seem to have misplaced your mother's email. She had invited me to go to a piano concert with her at Eastern. Oh how I would have liked that! Unfortunately I have work that evening. I was hoping that you'd be able to let her know that I sadly can not make it.

And then she just went in for the kill like a Siberian tiger.

When I saw your mom on Sunday, I observed that her heart has been away from God despite her active service and daily prayers. A lot of things

she said that day really surprised me. I tried kindly to talk to her. However, she would not listen to me. I really don't want bad things to happen to you or your family. You are such wonderful people. I know how much she loves you. And I was hoping that you could talk some sense into her. Please help your mom repent and pray that she will have a true relationship with God, not a superficial one. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Best wishes, Claire

I laughed out loud. What did she know about living a godly life? She drove a Ferrari and regularly soaked in her monster-sized jacuzzi while drinking expensive wine from her cellar. When her parents refused to convert from Buddhism, she abandoned them.

Twenty years after their estrangement, she'd somehow learned that they'd been hospitalized from leukemia. Still, Claire refused to contact them. They died. Now she lives alone, divorced with no children. She was so poor, all she had left was money.

Fine, yes, Mom was flawed beyond salvation. But wicked people don't get to debunk the crooked. What happened to Let one who is without sin cast the first stone?

I spammed Claire's email. One of my favorite quotes I'd seen on someone's bumper sticker: Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car. I simply delete judgemental people from my life.

But the truth was, years of being stripped by judgemental voices of people like Ryan and my ex-best-friend and Claire shredded my self-image. As I started to disagree with things being preached at church, their voices poisoned my mind, tainted my thoughts in fear and insecurity. I tried a couple of time to bring up my questions at church. Once, when I was fourteen, I asked why people used "He" to describe God when God was a spirit.

"That's how God describes himself."

They weren't exactly appreciative when I pointed out that various parts of Christianity may have been created to enforce social constructs.

Someone asked, "What do you mean by created?"

I responded, surmising that the masculine pronoun was attached to God in order to perpetuate the degradation of women, especially thousands of years ago when women were still viewed as property and not as human beings.

The air turned stale as people responded with sheer horror.

I shut up after that and learned to perfect my appearance with customized confidence and the costume of fitting in. Model believer? Oh yeah, nailed it. Scripture? Oh yeah, totally.

I learned how to cleverly navigate people's question. But the voices still fed my insecurities. I thought I should get to know the stories better. I would flip through the Bible—all 1,900 pages—and wonder how any sane person could believe in every single word written in there.

I got a laptop and looked up the definition of "religion" and "cult."

I felt like a total hypocrite. I'd been babysitting children during worship on and off for almost seven years. Sure, I'd started the job so I could avoid sitting in on the sermons and interacting with the adults and having to make sophisticated conversations that would divulge the fact that I cared nothing for debating what takes place in the afterlife and whether God is forgiving or cruel for sending His son to die for our sins but still killing Ananias and Sapphira when they lied. Instead, I would take the young children to the giant sanctuary. It was breathtaking with a tall ceiling and dimly-lit stained glass windows.

The children would cling to me, "I'm scared."

"This is the House of God, don't be scared," I always reassured them.

I taught them what our church wanted the kids to know: Heaven, Hell, rapture, the Ten Commandments. But the reason why I stuck with the job for so many years was being able to tell stories of acceptance, finding strength in hardship, how small things mattered, and how people aren't good or bad—they are just filled with terrible things.

I went to a planetarium one August evening. It was my junior year in college. Snow had been falling much too early because of climate change, and it was so cold, I would breathe into my scarf and my hot breath would travel upwards, settle on my eyelashes, and freeze.

The place was huge with squishy carpeting and horrible elevator music. "Sit in the back!" The guide yelled. "The best seats are in the back!"

I had gone alone. Interacting with my family consumed all my energy. Being with the people closest to me, I thought, shouldn't be so exhausting. It should be quiet and beautiful. But it wasn't.

The screen lit up. The images started from a single woman with a red scarf, imperfect teeth, and crow's feet. It zoomed out to her on the street,

a city block, an entire city, a state, a nation, a globe, a solar system, entire galaxies.

The guide showed the audience things like the Milky Way, the Andromeda Galaxy, and the Horsehead Nebula. According to the guide, the Horsehead Nebula was voted the favorite night sky object by amateur astronomers in 2001.

Everything on the screen—swirls of stars and globs of solar systems—reminded me of how much I wanted cinnamon ice cream. I dozed off a bit as the guide dragged on. But when I startled awake, I heard him say: “Think about the probability. There are more than 100 trillion galaxies, each one with billions of planets. If there’s only a 0.00001% of another civilization out there, the probability is still huge given the numbers.” I gazed up at the screen and thought of how the miniscule woman with the red scarf was juxtaposed with the rest of the universe. She wasn’t even a nanoscopic dust particle.

My parents—Mr. And Mrs. Campbell—are just like everyone else. They are wonderful people filled with ugly things. Maybe even a little uglier than the average citizen. Calvin, Ryan, and I grew up watching dishes thrown like frisbees in the living room, pulverizing when they collided with the television. We’d sit on the staircase listening to our parents fight. The explosive yelling and routine police visit was the next hottest attraction. We ate our fingernails like popcorn and drank our tears like soda.

I understood my grandparents on both sides had anger management issues, and the gene seemed to have been flawlessly passed down to the next generation. But the trait stopped with my parents. My fury at my parent’s behavior simmered deep inside, but it was all kept hush hush. No one had to know about how ugly our family was if we could help it.

There was no cure for this disease. This endless cycle of unhappiness and serrated words. Ryan knew this. I knew this. But I always saw the good with the bad. Ryan only ever saw the broken, the anger, the sadness. Instead of salvaging the pieces, he decided simply to leave.

One Saturday, I woke up just like any other weekend in too-big socks I’d gotten 6 for \$6 at Walmart, and shuffled to his room complaining about the fact that he still hadn’t folded the laundry. His door was slightly cracked, which was the first sign that something was off since it was always slammed shut. I kicked it all the way open. “Ryan.” His laptop sat on top of his entire tangled collection of earbuds. I picked up the pencil by his bed and chewed on it because I knew that annoyed the hell out of him. His clothes were still in the closet. His high-school diploma he’d received yesterday was displayed

magnificently on his oakwood shelf by the dusty window. I spun around in his room, trying to avoid stepping on his dirty underwear. It wasn't until I noticed that his burgundy guitar had disappeared from its usual position—leaning against the wall in the corner—that I knew he was gone for good.

Nothing exists as pure evil. How did he manage to detach himself from all the Good and cling only to the Bad? Google had plenty to say about Ryan and me. One was “Borderline Personality Disorder” and the other was “Stockholm Syndrome.” Google isn't always right though. I was right. I could never figure out how Ryan could be so heartless.

An hour later after the planetarium, I sat in the ice cream parlor right across the street from the quirky book shop. As I chewed away at my two scoops of basil and cinnamon ice cream, I heard my new and upgraded phone sing the sweet melody of my ringtone. I appreciated the sound for one, two, three, four, five seconds, and then I picked up. “Yep.”

“Sonia, 我是媽媽。” Mom's voice whined in my ear. Her Taiwanese accent always peeked through when she transitioned from English and Mandarin within the same sentence. “When are you coming home?”

It was Friday night. I knew she'd call since I went home every weekend. “Come home. I keep asking Calvin to play Settlers of Catan with me, and you know him—he's completely addicted to Minecraft. He won't unstick his eyes from the computer screen.” I had bought Settlers for Christmas, and Mom had immediately become addicted to the board game.

“Yep, yep. I'm on my way. I'll be home in thirty minutes.”

“I made noodles. They're still warm. Oh! And I bought a new dress for you. It's yellow with a giant white ribbon. You could wear it on Sunday for church!”

“Aww, thank you. I'm really excited to try it on. I'll see you in thirty.”

“我愛你。”

The line went dead, but I whispered anyway, “I love you too, Mom.”

Calvin tackled me as soon as I walked through the door. I collapsed with the weight of him. Dad had already begun playing the usual weekend movie on the new family flat screen. The lights were off except for the eerie glow coming from the TV.

"Get off!" I laughed. Calvin gave my cheek a giant lick and rubbed his face against my shoulder like a cat trying to mark its territory. I would have despised him if I hadn't remembered that he'd learned that from me. "Knock it off."

He whispered, "Hey, hey, hey, come and let me show you what I built in Minecraft."

"Sonia! Come give 媽媽 a kiss." Calvin scrambled to his feet at the sound of our mom's voice.

I gave her two generous kisses on each cheek. And then another one on her forehead just because. "I'm starving. Where are the noodles? Set up the game. Let's play." She handed me the dress she'd bought for me and I went to the bathroom to try it on. When I came out of the bathroom, Dad walked into the kitchen. "Nice dress." It was simultaneously too big and too small for me. I had a surplus of butt and shortage of boobs. The dress just sagged and stretched in all the wrong places. I gave him a look.

He ignored my glare and pointed to my bike he had fixed. It was leaning against our house in the driveway next to the two totaled Mercedes he had backed into fences and trees with because he underestimated their length. Honestly, he was going to get into a horrific accident one of these days. Mom constantly nagged him to be less careless when driving. He just smirked and pointed out that we had full coverage on our insurance anyway.

I gave him a hug before he went to bed. His red beard tickled my cheek. I loved his Scottish red hair. I had always wished I'd gotten red hair from my dad instead of black hair from my mom. But it was okay, someone had invented hair dye, or so I'd heard. "Thanks!"

Calvin hid behind the couch, pretending to watch the movie while actually playing Minecraft. Mom and I played Settlers of Catan until 11pm.

"Sonia, make sure your brother brushes his teeth and throws his dirty clothes in the washer, okay?"

Saturdays always started slowly. I woke up up around noon. "Nice hair," Dad teased.

"Thanks. I worked on it for 11 hours last night." I fluffed my hair to add to the effect.

Mom and Calvin were already engaged in their homework skirmish. "Do your science!" She screamed up the stairs. "Have you finished English?" She

yelled into the bathroom. "You made a mistake on your math!" She shouted from the kitchen. Calvin, meanwhile, was hastily running from our mom. Either half-heartedly finishing up his social studies, secretly clicking away at Minecraft, or hiding in the bathroom pretending he had an upset stomach.

Just like stereotypical immigrant parents, Mom had high expectations for our education. She believed in the American Dream and that her children were going to rise to the top. She always helped Ryan and I with our homework when we were younger.

Mom really cared about our success. But because I understood the typical homework frustrations and how easily Mom could get agitated, I listened carefully to Mom's and Calvin's exchanges, alert for any warning signs of violence.

I sat on the bathroom floor clipping my toenails while thinking about my organic chemistry homework. I could never catch my clippings with the trash can, so I gave up after the fifth try. Dad peeked his head around the corner, "Want to go on a walk with me?"

"Yeah, I'll be ready in ten minutes."

I got up to put on a warm sweater with OLD NAVY pasted on the front. I wasn't sure how I felt about the label, but it was warm. I patted my pockets. Keys. Phone.

Discover card. Twenty bucks. That's all I needed. There was yelling from the living room.

Mom sat on the flowery couch by the window with Calvin. He was already crying, agonizing over the Mandarin he had to read. A little crying didn't hurt anybody.

It was Mom's face and the way she was yelling at him that made the hair on my arm stand up. I went to stand in front of them, inflating myself enough to be a buffer.

I said, "He can read it to me." It was fourth grade Mandarin, I could teach it. "No." Mom's voice blasted over me; she was already all worked up. Calvin still hadn't learned how to navigate her short-lived patience and when to stop pushing her before she became completely pissed off. "What little did it do when he read it to you last time? There's no improvement whatsoever! He mumbles his words so I can't hear him and tilts the book away so I can't see what he's reading."

Calvin's crying made him hiccup. His voice tilted so he couldn't pro-

nounce his words.

I said softly, "The louder you yell, the harder he's going to cry, and the harder it will be for him to pronounce his words." The ten minutes I had told Dad were already up. I didn't move. "He can read it to me."

"走開!!!" That was a no.

Mom yelled some more about how the reason Calvin was doing so badly in school was all because of Minecraft, how he was just so stupid in math. Snot streamed down Calvin's face.

I took the book from her. "He can read it to me."

"Give it back." The controlled rage in her voice warned me the situation was about to get a whole lot worse. We'd done this a million times, addressed her anger thousands of times, she'd apologized and never meant it every time. Sometimes if I let things slide, it'd just blow over. I didn't want to fight. Calvin pressed his shriveled body into the couch.

My heart broke.

"He can do all his homework with me."

She snatched the book hard from my hands, ripping the first eight pages. "Calvin, come here," I said softly. He got up, but Mom shoved him back down. Her violence escalated. She was a fire. My words were wood.

Our mother shrieked louder. Calvin covered his ears, squeezing his eyes shut. She bashed the book into his thighs. I held my breath. I couldn't take this. It killed me to walk away to find my father. But I knew we'd play human tug of war with Calvin unless Dad intervened.

I told him. "Calvin's coming with us."

"Okay," he said. He went outside to get his shoes on. I chased after him. "I need you to get him away from Mom."

He looked at me for one unfazed moment, before going back in the house. He snatched Calvin from the yellow couch. I hastily grabbed Calvin's jacket and escorted him out of the house. We jabbed our feet into our shoes, and I pulled him past the cars in our driveway, the fence surrounding our yard, across the street, as fast as our feet could carry us. I didn't check if our father followed. I feared our mother would chase after us. Tears flooded Calvin's eyes and fell down his face to the rhythm his syncopated breaths.

Our father walked with us down to the park by the river. When it became clear that we were out of the range of fire, Calvin tugged on my sleeve and asked, "Are you okay?" I stared at him. This brave boy, his face smeared with tears, his hair just as red as I'd wished for mine—oh how I'd resented him for years because of that—He was asking if I was okay. My face remained stoic.

We walked in silence for long moments. I didn't expect our father to say anything.

It was always this: act like nothing happened. Bandage the wound with silence—if not silence—a cavalier joke. The fact that he'd helped me rescue Calvin for now meant nothing; Dad's tantrums were sewn impeccably into my memories. Unlike Mother, he never apologized. Dad had a way with words and a knack for being condescending. He liked to speak in super ambiguous terms and got ridiculously upset when someone didn't understand him. Probably the reason why my parents fought all the time. He had asked me once while driving, "Where's your library book?"

"It's in my backpack."

"Where's your library book?"

"Uh...it's in my backpack in my room."

"Where's your book?"

"I don't understand your question."

"I'm going to pull over until you answer my question."

"I already answered it."

"No you didn't."

He'd pull over and I'd throw my arms up in frustration.

"Where's. Your. Library. Book!" At that point it'd get to full on shouting. He'd break up each word like I had a hard time understanding English.

"I already told you, it's in my backpack. I left it in my room next to my closet!"

"Ahh," And then he'd make this exaggerated look of an epiphany. "It's next to the *closet*." He had a talent for infusing sarcasm into his diction. "Next time, answer my question."

At this point I'd want to laugh. Wow. Just wow. "Yelling louder isn't going to make me understand you any better. Be a little more specific next time!" That would just make the yelling worse.

The library book was a placeholder for every fight we ever had. It was never about the book, or the mail, or the restaurant, or my plans for my gap year. It was always about communication. Really, my parents were perfect for each other.

Psychologists say we ultimately pick up on our parents' habits—that we adopt fragments of their personalities. But I vowed to never become my parents. I always forgave, but I never, ever forgot.

I never understood how Calvin and I could be so different from them. How had we realized all this was wrong when all this wrongness was all we'd ever grown up with? I looked at Calvin. We were crossing a bridge and entering Red River Park. Our shoes soon met grass and we had to maneuver across a field booby-trapped with Canada geese droppings.

He was such a beautiful boy. Just over the past two months, his baby fat had stretched into slender arms and legs. He started wearing leather bracelets to look cool.

Calvin was starting to develop his own voice, his own conscience. He'd asked me if I was okay. He was always saving his cookies from snack time at school for me. Always asking me if I needed help carrying anything. I had never met someone so kind.

Our father said, "Hey look at that rock. I bet it'd fit perfectly in our front yard by the tulips."

I burst into tears.

Dad looked at me, and pulled the both of us into a tight embrace. After a long, long moment, he said, "I'm so sorry. I won't ever talk about that rock again."

I scrolled through the web, procrastinating from drawing resonance structures for organic chemistry by looking up "Stockholm syndrome" and "lobotomy."

It was my fifth cup of coffee. I hate coffee. I am convinced that coffee rots out people's gums. Possibly the reason why my physics professor's breath smelled so foul. But it was four in the morning and I was trapped in

the limbo between exhaustion and insomnia. I'd resorted to attempt studying for my exam approaching in two weeks. It wasn't working.

I couldn't stop remembering the infinite galaxies and the woman in the red scarf and imperfect teeth. The size of Mt. Everest was trivial when compared with the magnitude of the Universe. A person then, would be nothing in the eyes of the Grand Scheme of Things. Where did pain and suffering all come in?

I set down my dreaded coffee, arranged my robe, and knelt beside the bed. I tried clasping my hands and setting them on the bed.

I could make Calvin stay with me in my house on campus. But that wouldn't solve anything. I didn't have time to help him with his homework every night in between meetings and exams and study groups. I wasn't the parent. My parents owned Calvin.

And Calvin was such a strong little boy that wouldn't always tell me what happened at home when I wasn't around.

I survived this. I survived living with my family for eighteen years. Calvin could survive too. I suffered through it, but I still became a functional human being. Calvin could make it too.

"God," I began. But all that came out was, "God, oh God."

I could leave my parents' house and never look back. I'd never have to deal with my parents ever again. Just like Ryan. He left as soon as he turned eighteen. I hated Ryan for abandoning me. He never even left his phone number. I wondered if he was in California playing guitar and surfing and picking up one-night-stands and getting genital herpes and refusing to see a doctor because he hated the smell of hospitals.

I imagined his fake friends and him waking up one day only to realize his new life was a lie—that he had run away from our parents but had never escaped. He probably stalked Mom and Dad on Facebook and thought about how much he hated them both all the time. I wondered what crossed his mind when he saw my face in a picture. Did he feel remorse? Grief? Nothing? It didn't matter. I never liked him anyway. What did matter now was that I couldn't leave because I didn't want Calvin to hate me.

The chair jabbed into my sixteenth vertebrae. I shifted my weight and tried to cover up a cough. It was the first time I attended Bible study in six years. I'd caught a ride with Guthrey—the neuropsychology researcher with a beautiful fourteen year old boy with so much acne the red scars connected

to form constellations.

People were discussing the fact that God punishes wrongdoing and also brings salvation to sinners. Somehow they got to the topic of whether people perished in Hell or whether they burned for all eternity. "It doesn't even matter." "Yes it does, because it affects people's views of punishment and justice." "What do you even mean?" "If you look here in chapter thirty-six verse—"

I buried my face in my hands. The side conversations were escalating. Amidst the loud exclamations and heated remarks, the Bible study group leader had finally lost all control of the discussion. I considered leaving right then. But when I stood up, I saw Guthrey's boy and realized he had Calvin's eyes—too old and piercing for his age. Out of the blue, I found the words I had lacked during my moment of prayer. I tucked my chin into my chest, and I breathed, "God, I know that this Universe is a gazillion light years wide and gazillion light years long. There are billions of galaxies and billions of planets that exist within each one. I am nothing compared to Mt. Everest. Mt. Everest is nothing compared to the rest of the Universe.

"I am conceited even as I am sitting here thinking about myself. Millions, billions, gazillions have suffered and died before me. The trees, the insects, all of the dodo birds. The minuscule amount of time pain and suffering occurs is hardly even noticeable compared to the billions of years of Earth's history. Pain is the vehicle by which we achieve self-awareness. It is beautiful. And it is what makes us stronger. Thank you for giving me this pain. And please give me the strength to endure it."

I got up and left.

That Sunday, I was in a particularly bad mood. None of the younger children showed up and I didn't want to sit in on the sermon. So I snuck into the Sunday school for teens. I was too old, but the Sunday school teacher—David—saw something in the way I'd stuffed my hands into my pockets and motioned for me to join his group.

They started with a song, then leaped into the topic of the day: recognizing and respecting personality differences. I picked at a scab on my knee and counted the days until my chemistry exam.

All of the sudden someone asked about why God says to love your enemy. They read Luke 6:35-36 out loud: But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

They asked, "But why does it even matter? It doesn't make sense to love someone who doesn't even treat you well."

"But if you allow yourself to hate, the hate just festers." All heads turned to me. I wondered why my throat had released those words without my consent.

"But doesn't it make more sense to just stop interacting with them?"

"Look," I found myself saying impatiently. "The opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference. If you hate them it means you care enough about them to be affected. That negative energy will just consume you. You might think about it everyday. But you're always going to remember that one loose end you didn't tie up. You're always going to remember how much power that person has over you and much you just hate that—being powerless. But when you choose to just let it go. To finally forgive, is to regain control. You can never change them, but you can always monitor how you respond to their behavior." I realized I had revealed too much about myself. There was this uncomfortable silence that descended on the room. I started panicking.

"Thank you Sonia for your insightful comment." Magically, David came to my rescue. "This segues perfectly into this next section—"

I let out a breath. And the lesson went on to something about the prodigal son.

Two weeks later and my chemistry exam went well. I probably got a 88%, which I could live with. I was cooking spaghetti sauce with a few leaves of basil when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I thought it was probably a text from Guthrey asking me if I wanted to go to Bible study this week, but then it continued to vibrate against my thigh. I checked the caller ID, someone was calling from Michigan. I got annoyed. My friends knew to never call me these days; I was too cranky. Phone calls took too much time. I preferred incomplete sentences.

I chopped up some onions, threw it into the sauce, and peeled some cloves of garlic. It stopped ringing. I put on some rap music and rummaged through my cabinets for some food-storage containers. It started ringing again. I snatched up a container with a mismatched lid and threw it onto the kitchen table.

It wouldn't freaking stop ringing. "Ms. Campbell?"

"Speaking," I snapped.

"I'm calling from Saint Joe's Hospital. I'm sorry to inform you, but your

father—" My mouth went dry. "Ben Campbell?—got into a car accident—he—he's okay. Er—" I thought that if I tried to swallow, I'd begin an uncontrollable coughing fit. "—but he may need to undergo surgery. The doctors are doing an assessment right now. You were the only phone number that we could reach. We tried to reach a Gracia Campbell?—and a—and a R—" I could tell the person had never made a phone call like this before. She was probably a newly trained EMT. EMTs could make phone calls to patient families right?... Never mind, the social worker would probably be responsible for that. "—but no one picked up..." Of course my mom didn't pick up. She always neglects to charge her phone. I tried to remember what she was doing today. When was the last time I saw Dad? What was the last thing I said to him? Something about homemade bread. We'd talked about how store-bought bread just wasn't the same these days. Or maybe that was before our conversation about homecoming. He'd asked me if it was homecoming week. I'd said, "Uh...homecoming just means home game right? So yes!" He'd given me this look with his expressive red eyebrows that I never really learned how to mimic. I decided it was more in the color than the actual shape of them.

I hated the entire forty minute walk from campus to the hospital. My legs cramped up because I'd forgotten to eat a banana that morning. I hated the wait while Dad was in the OR because the waiting room smelled like embalming fluid. But what I hated the most, was looking up every twenty seconds when I saw something move in my peripheral vision. I kept expecting Mom or Calvin to walk in through the swinging doors. It had been five hours. My eyes were bloodshot. I hadn't done any homework.

I'd finally given up on calling Mom and resorted to burying my face in my sweaty hands. The clock ticked. I counted. I swore the time between each second grew an infinitesimal amount. At three-thousand-six-hundred-eighty-two ticks, a pair of ugly boots stopped in front of me. I decided that it couldn't possibly be a nurse's boots. Most of the ones I saw wore neon sneakers or those heeled professional nursing shoes that I guess you could get at stores called Scrubs, Stethoscopes & Beyond or Nurse Depot or Discount Uniforms or something.

Big Boots cleared his throat. The cough made me think of stubble and skittle-like ear buds and burgundy guitars—No way.

I wanted to look up. But I was scared.

I reexamined the dust on those boots. It was red, like the kind you'd find in the iron-rich canyons of Arizona. No surfing then. Classy lawyer socks peeked out from between his boots and his dark-grey slacks. I could always judge a person pretty accurately by their socks. I wondered if he still had time for his guitar now that he was a lawyer.

"How is he?" His eyes were blue and he didn't have a ring on the fourth finger of his left hand.

"He broke his elbow in the crash. They're installing some screws and a few metal plates, but they say he should be able to use his arm again after about six months of physical therapy."

He crumpled in the seat next to me. "Thank God." Several moments passed by in silence. Ryan wiped away some perspiration from his eyes. "Look Sonia, I'm—"

I looked at him.

"I thought he might have—I thought he was—" I really looked at him.

"But he didn't, Ryan." And like the genius I was, I already knew that his mind was already fast forwarding, doing risk assessments and calculating his chances of being able to just pick up and leave. "You don't need to stay."

He burst into tears. I patted his shoulder awkwardly in a way that reminded me of that one time I smacked Calvin's back until the hard candy he was choking on came out.

I thought when I'd finally see Ryan again after six years, the cherubs would sing. That there would be dramatic music that led to double doors bursting open and glamorous lighting—and into the room he would walk: all answers and a Californian-tan and one of those cocktail umbrellas in one hand. That cocky grin would make me want to slap the nonsense off his face. And it would be that much easier to remember that I never liked him.

What happened instead was that he somehow looked a little dustier and less famous than when I last saw him. He didn't look like he'd grown into the type of person that would have genital herpes. But one could never be sure.

We just sat there in silence. There was no awkwardness. Awkwardness would mean we felt like something needed to be said but we didn't know how to say it. I scratched my collarbone.

He cleared his throat. "So Calvin is—"

"In seventh grade."

"Ah. And how is doing?"

"Just fine."

"Does he like social studies and government?—they have those classes these days right?"

"Look dude," I said much too harshly. "Just because you're a lawyer doesn't mean you get to oppress him into following your career path. He's got his own life to live and his own passions to foster. And if you ask me, he'd make an excellent computer engineer."

He didn't ask me how I knew anything about his career, and I preferred not to explain his sock to him. "Jeez Sonia, I was just trying to be friendly."

I decided that I still hated his haircut. Some things just never changed. "Yeah, well, you missed that train, like, by six years." His blue eyes weren't hurt, only inquisitive. That only made me angrier. I'd rehearsed my words seven thousand times for dramatic effect. I thought I'd finally mastered the intonation, the way I'd raise one unimpressed eyebrow while I said it.

"Why are you angry at me?" That really got to me. I stood up, ready to storm out of the room until I realized there was nowhere to storm to. Dad was still in the OR. "You know we have completely different coping mechanisms when dealing with Mom and Dad. You've always known this. I was sick of Mom shattering my laptop whenever she felt like it and our screaming matches with Dad over every goddamn trivial miscommunication that happened seven times a day."

"Yes, they're complete assholes. Is that what you want me to say?" He sat there with his big ugly boots and his jagged haircut.

"Why are you even here, Ryan?" He looked like he might have a response to that. But I knew better than he did. "No, let me answer the question for you." I practically pushed him back into his seat with my words. "You are here right now after disappearing for six years because you wouldn't be able to live with yourself if he died in this hospital and you weren't here to look at his carcass before we cremated him." I decided that maybe "carcass" wasn't the best word choice. But I knew God already forgave me for my sins. "Ryan, you are here because you have one Dad in this lifetime. You're back here sitting in this chair because you remember that one time we watched the Titanic and there was that one scene with the evangelist, and you made this stupid comment that made you and Dad laugh so hard you had to pause the movie and laugh until both of you cried. God, I can't even remember what you said. Just the way you two were laughing like maniacs, like you'd inhaled laughing gas or something."

He looked like he was about to say something, but I wasn't nearly done.

"You are sitting here even though we all know you hate the smell of

hospitals, because that day when you wore the ugly pants on our drive to school, and hated them more and more until you refused to get out of the car with them on when we got to the parking lot—What did Dad do? Did he force you to get out of the car? No, he drove you all the way back home so you could change out of them. Then he drove you the entire 28 minute drive back to school.

“You may have even forgotten that other time when you were riding your bike and got hit by a car. Your bike got totaled and you were devastated. So Dad spent the entire night fixing up that bike for you. I remember how his eyes looked all sunken from sleep deprivation, that’s how tired he was. But he stayed up all night fixing that stupid bike, and he woke you up as soon as it was a decent hour. And that look on your face just cleared away his exhaustion.”

Ryan looked increasingly displeased by the second that I was delivering a monologue. I half expected his lawyer self to pick up his ass from that chair and give me a speech of his own about how self-centered I was. But he didn’t.

I thought I might point out that other time when he got shit-faced and drunk dialed Dad. The story goes: *Dad went and picked Ryan up and held his hand while he puked the entire night. No questions asked. No rant about how Ryan’s poor decisions in life left our bathroom stinking for five entire weeks.* But I didn’t want to push Ryan over the edge. Besides, since I’d so wonderfully pointed out some great memories with Dad, I might as well point out some with Mom too. “And you seem to have forgotten that one time when Mom had mono around the time of your senior graduation party. She got up and went to the kitchen anyway to cook fourteen dishes for all your guests because she knew how much you liked her dumplings she always wrapped and fried from scratch.”

Ryan still didn’t say anything. He was just parked there in his seat with the same size shoes as six years ago, the same sarcastic look and the same cocky posture. It was okay, I was running out of steam. “You need to take a look at Mom and Dad. They’re getting older now. They even have old people skin—the kind that comes with loose connective tissue. It’s really soft and really gross.”

And then he started laughing.

“You’re so naive, Sonia. Nothing can justify the wrong they have done to us.” I waited for him to say more. And then I realized that was it. I don’t think I’ve ever hated him anymore than in that moment. I wanted to kick him in the balls.

A chip in my brain said that the only way I would be able to reach him was through religion. I found myself saying pathetically, "But God says to forgive people and love everyone as He loves us."

"I don't need to deal with Mom or Dad's shit anymore. I had my fair share." The muscles around his electric blue eyes were strained tight. When I didn't say anything to alleviate the tension, he added, "Jesus Sonia, what do you want from me?"

I suppose I should have been thankful for the interruption when the doors to the Operating Room opened and out rolled Dad, unconscious on a gurney. A technician pushed him toward the in-patient unit. The wheels on the mobile bed squeaked religiously with every rotation. I thought that I maybe saw Ryan's lips form the words, "You just don't understand, Sonia. Life is more complicated than that." But I just wasn't sure.

The nurse had already told me what room Dad would occupy, so I didn't need to rush to follow them. Instead, I watched Ryan watching Dad. What people found to be the most frustrating thing about Ryan's face was that it was always so impassive. But his biggest secret was the more apathetic he seemed, the more he was suffering.

Dad's face was fine. It hadn't been marked by the crash. His arm was all bandaged up though. Besides from that and his wacky hair, he looked like he was going to survive just fine. I tried to imagine what Dad looked like six years ago. I guess he still looked the same. After people reach their thirties, they tend to stay the same for a few decades until old-age catches up to them.

I didn't realize Ryan had brought a briefcase until he lifted it from the floor. "You're not going to stay to see Mom or Calvin?" I asked dumbly.

"No." And he left then. It was so sudden, I thought that he'd only gone to the bathroom.

Mom finally picked up the phone and drove over at 8pm.

She had made dumplings and dipping sauce even though the doctors said that Dad couldn't eat for two days after the surgery. Calvin brought his iPad so he could play Minecraft. I went and bought some \$5.52 get-well cards from Papyrus so I could write some smart-aleck poetry to mock Dad's driving. Mom always said he was bound to get into an accident from his recklessness and road rage. And here he was: a few screws and good old-fashioned physical therapy and he was as good as new.

The three of us sat in the cramped hospital room with the T.V. playing either Dora or Judge Judy because they were the only two good channels. Mom lazed in a reclining sofa, trying to inconspicuously pick her nose. I organized Dad's little table already piling up with syringes, pudding, and Mom's Taiwanese newspaper. Calvin continued to tap furiously at his iPad, and I went to sit in the other chair by the window.

I looked up at my family and thought how strange it was for them to be standing in the same hospital Ryan was in without ever knowing that he'd materialized out of the blue. After Ryan left, I had hunted down a technician, who had directed me to a nurse, who had referred me to a physician, who had recommended that I speak to the social worker, who had told me that an EMT (ha!) was the one who had contacted my family about the car crash. She had found Ryan's phone number in Dad's phone. All this time and Dad had Ryan's number. I guess I couldn't blame him for not telling me—we never talked about Ryan. I wrote down his number on the back of someone's business card for safekeeping.

Dad had woken up briefly after Mom and Calvin had arrived. He'd reached a hand out to me and made some snarky comment about the room smelling like fermenting cherries before he passed out again from the narcotics.

Dad was drooling, so Mom got up and pressed a tissue to his mouth and dabbed it away gently. Calvin, in the middle of his intense game of Minecraft, nuzzled up against Mom. I still hadn't done any homework. And I guess it was okay. Ryan was gone, but I suppose I could forgive that too.

Six months and Dad could use his arm again. He still drove recklessly, but we had insurance to cover another one of his accidents. My parents fought; Calvin still got caught in the middle. I taught more Sunday school, still disagreed with using the "He" pronoun when describing God, avoided more people like Claire, and still didn't talk about how I didn't give a crap about what happened in the afterlife.

Another Friday. Mom called. "Come home and play Settlers of Catan with me. I made dumplings."

"Yes 媽媽, I'll be home in thirty."

SELENE YANG



Sophomore
Major: Neuroscience
Reading: Poetry

I hail from New Jersey. I have two pet cats, nine pet chickens, and one pet younger brother. I'm in the Living Arts Learning Community and I enjoy drawing and creative writing.

A Disappointed Optimist Sits Down to Watch the Blockbuster with a Thousand Rereleases

Act 1:

Setting is always a vague, nondescript place,
a city, desert, forest, ocean
just enough for you to get the idea.
Like visiting a relative's house,
Just house enough to be familiar,
but not familiar enough to be home.

In walks the lead, reliably male and white.
You hope he is at least interesting; otherwise,
you'll stumble through an adventure
with this cousin you've never met
but are obligated to love.

In walks the girl, and she's beautiful, of course.
 She's fully equipped with infinite smiles,
 crystal clear kindness,
 and personality-wise,
 she is only realistic in your dreams.
 Like a stuffed parrot on a wall,
 she is only here to be eye-catching,
 a feathered quack of true majesty.

Finally the formula takes shape:
 This cousin of yours + some shocking event = decision.
 Action or inaction. Fight or flight. Good or evil.
 You barely know your cousin,
 but on a 99% confidence interval,
 decision = good.

Another formula to consider:
 You + price of admission + quality of Act 1 = decision.
 Popcorn or candy. Center or aisle. Stay or leave.
 You know yourself very well,
 and on a 99% confidence interval,
 decision = stay.

Act 2:
 Struggle is a metaphor your cousin physically fights.
 The rest of us have to do it internally.
 By virtue of association, you root for him.

You might see your cousin maturing.
 You might even be proud to be related.
 More likely, he has hit rock bottom,
 but after throwing his 100th punch,
 he discovers the secret to unlimited power,
 which is both physical and spiritual,
 and 100% inexplicable.

And you wonder at how easy it is for him
 to set steel in his eyes
 because you've hit rock bottom
 more times than you can count,
 but an infinite amount of punches
 cannot save you.

Somewhere else, the Enemy Must Be Stopped,
 and the final showdown commences.

Act 3:

Here comes the eye-candy, and not just the parrot.
Fire blooms across the frame and
a deep, primal instinct in your stone skull is impressed.
The music swells and your ears trick your brain into cheering.
The parrot flits around, ranging from useful to liability,
but almost never important.

Finally, your cousin stands tall
over his slain enemy. Poor paper crow.
The parrot's plastic eyes fill with passion,
your cousin holds her in his hands
and he gets everything that he wanted.

Epilogue:

On the way home, eyes and ears
shocked with cinema, I consider that
a definition of insanity goes like this:
repeating the same thing, expecting a different outcome.
I have dozens of cousins, dozens of parrots.
My relative's house is usually my favorite part.

But somewhere in Act 2,
the parrot had a sense of humor.
My cousin said something righteous.
Act 3 took place in a room with a high ceiling.
Maybe, the paper crow flapped its wings
and I was startled into worrying for my cousin.

When my cousin won, the last piece
of a two-and-a-half hour puzzle
slid into place.

I hold those treasures in my heart,
the flashes of joy and fear and excitement
unburdened by personal context.
If I'm lucky, there will be many such moments.
If I'm very lucky, the next one will have
even more.

Pins Drop

Pins drop
from my lips to
clatter on the ground
louder than my words
but not quite as loud
as my thoughts.

Behind my dark eyes
forever staring into
the depths of the earth,
Yes, there are thoughts.

There are whispers of wisdom in my bones,
murmurs of memories in my muscles,
and kinetic chatter in my tendons.
Vitriol bubbles in my stomach, and
songs shriek in my blood, and
screams chant to the
beat of my heart.

It would get out, of course
but for the frozen frog
lodged in my throat.

Because there is ice,
pouring down my icicle spine,
frosting my nerves,
lacing a sparkling choker
around my neck.

So the words freeze and fall,
and hide elsewhere,
sliding into my fingers until they shiver,
pricking my eyes until they sting,
crowding under my skin to bead
into the sweat on my palms.

I inhale,
the frog shifts,
a word, a phrase,
a sentence
chips off the ice
and I spit it
as far as I can.

Where it lands,
it shatters,
splinters into shards
no bigger
than pins.

Queen of Stars

Science tells us that stars are too big to fathom
And photons are too small to ever see

But she is only unfathomable up close
when she is lying, stretched out
like a horizon, filling the field of view
with light.

At that proximity, the photons are easy to see
they're close enough to touch
they feel like silk and clouds,
ripples of gold and snow
spun into fur softer and warmer
than sunlight.

She is too bright to look at, but for her eyes
two black holes set in rings of gold,
like solar eclipses of dark embraces,
assuring me that oblivion
does not have to be cold.

Because she is warm, don't forget
Chain reactions of heat and light
flicker down her spine,
to the arc of a solar flare
at the tip of her tail.

Science tells me that
I must spend years of math,
rocket myself faster than thought
to float in the abyss somewhere
between safety and comprehension,
just to get a good look.

I think instead
I will sit down on this couch
and wait for my little star to curl up on my lap,
nuclear fusion rumbling in her chest,
and we can watch the sunrise together.

Immigrant Math

I have 2 decades of bones buried beneath my skin,
and several centuries of ancestors buried one ocean away.

I have 2 parents, 4 siblings, and 13 cousins left behind me,
all waiting for me to blaze a new path for our family.

I have 5,000 years of national history on my shoulders
and 50 more years of life in my hands.

I had only one chance to leave my home country,
just so I could find x amount of chances to build a life in yours.

If I have only \$20 in my pockets,
only 3 of your language's words,
and a name you cannot pronounce,
what is the probability that
I will achieve the American dream?

ALEXA ZIELINSKI



Freshman

Major: Psychology

Reading: Short Essay

Alexa Zielinski grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan and spent her childhood convincing her parents to let her have too many pets and listening to the only CD she owned, Hillary Duff's *Metamorphosis*, on repeat. After brief stints working in vintage, hand modeling, childcare, pastry arts, and as a catsitter, she decided to try and make a psychologist of herself and keep writing along the way. She is one of three white people in U of M's non-premier South Asian a cappella group Maize Mirchi. Once she went camping with just her dog. She enjoys tuna salad sandwiches and does not take sugar in her coffee.

Possible Uses for a Rock

"Everybody wants a rock to wind a piece of string around"

-They Might Be Giants

Growing up I didn't think *We Want a Rock* was about anything. Considering the band's notoriously ambiguous lyrical tendencies and the song's references to crib doors and prosthetic foreheads, it's unlikely I was alone in missing the meaning. John Linnell wrote it; he says it's about starting points. Vague, but that's stream of consciousness writing.

To successfully wind a piece of string around itself, you must have something to start the winding process, and in this case the general public would like a rock to wind their string around. Fair enough, John Linnell.

2. Stuck.

In the early 2000s, my parents build the first house I remember living in. On the edge of an empty lot, the white paneling and burgundy shutters differ just enough from the surrounding houses to still be essentially the same.

Unfinished suburbia, but only for now, says my father. He's particularly fond of the small creek in the backyard. Partially hidden by a weeping willow and the marsh below it, the creek leads into a large, oblong pond that stretches through the backyards of everyone on the block.

In the winter when the pond freezes my father takes the snow blower out onto the ice and plows the snow away so we can skate on it. One winter out on the pond I brush some snow away and find a fish in the ice. I am crouched on my knees in my bulky snow pants, the tips of my skates digging into the ice. The fish floats frozen just a few inches below the surface. Perfectly preserved in the murky pond, it stares up, dead. The eyes have gone white with frost. It's not much bigger than my middle finger, a tiny ghost caught in the cold. The ice gives the silver scales a shimmery quality, and even though not much light reaches down through the cloudy ice the scales glint, demanding attention. I try hitting the surface with the heel of my hand to break the ice and get the fish out, closer to the surface, closer to relief. Was it peaceful? A cold lull into absentminded sleep, then death? Did the ice close in, was it suffocating? I can't get this fish out of the ice. The heel of my hand is numb. I peel off my glove a bit to peek at the skin; it's bright red. I look around for a rock to shatter the ice, there aren't any.

From somewhere in the distance, my father starts to shout. I clamber to my feet and skate towards the sound, clumsy, unsteady. When I find my father, he and the snow blower are stuck in the reeds— he's fallen through the ice. Waist deep in muddy cold, he grabs my hand and tells me to dig my skates into the ice and pull. His lips have gone white. I get him out of the slush, and pulling the snow blower behind us we begin the walk back to the house. My father is shaking violently, half-laughing and saying that my mother will kill him if the snow blower is broken. I want to laugh with him. The fish's white eyes are still staring at me. In my head I can see it rotting in the spring as the ice thaws. The eyes go first, the flies start to buzz in finicky circles, landing for a moment and then flying up again. The scales lose their shimmer; flesh begins to sag from the bones. Other fish might nibble, perhaps a bird. Soon enough there's only a skeleton. Until the spring, though, the little fish will remain suspended in the quiet cold, staring up at the grey sky.

2.5

In the summer the pond gets warm, but we don't swim. The road runoff makes the water sludgy, and there's enough mud to make wading out impossible. Instead we splash our feet in the creek and watch the tadpoles squirm around the algae coating the rocks. My mother places a long wooden plank across the water, fashioning a bridge for us— the plank bends, and my sister and I test its limits, bouncing on it and grabbing at branches above us.

The mid 2000s are the years in which my father's temper ripens and the floors of the house start to shift beneath us. We lose our footing and stumble over dust piles that won't stay under the rug anymore. The ceilings groan and threaten to collapse. I try to hold them up, to show my father how the acidity of his violence dissolves that which holds us together. He silences me with his promise that in my youth, I know neither reason nor pain.

During these years I hide from the volatility of our household. I spend more time outside, running from backyard to backyard and inviting myself to dinner at the neighbor's house. One day I'm out alone at the pond and my foot slips and falls into the creek. The arch lands directly on a jagged rock half a foot beneath the surface. Blood spills into the green water, swirling out from where the rock has broken skin. I sit down on the plank, pulling my foot into my lap and inspecting the wound. It's deep— deeper than any cut I've had before. I stare at it: *how much can you bleed, foot?* I don't have shoes. I tell my foot to quit bleeding. It doesn't. A few minnows have found the little bit of red left on the jagged rock, they're nibbling at it.

Eager to share this adventure with my father, I walk back up to the house, leaning on the outer side of my right foot. There's dirt in the cut, but there's no pain. My bleeding foot is a badge of honor. I'll clean it out and I won't grimace, I will savor this moment of broken flesh and reckless courage. I hope it will make me louder. This cut is credibility I am anxious to show him, for in the next moment when his blind anger takes him and he raises his fist he will see the cut on the arch of my foot and hear my voice, sharp like the jagged rock in the backyard creek, thicker than the ice that broke beneath him.

3. Stuck,

I don't remember if it's the second or third or fourth house, but this one is in a speck-of-dust town on a decently sized lake and there's nothing around for miles except a gas station with licorice ropes (my favorite) and a family owned Italian restaurant (good tiramisu). We rent movies from the Blockbuster and eat pasta a lot. My father promises to transform the house with its forest green Saxony carpet and pastel pink molding into something

impeccably stylish, and for weeks the sounds of power tools and European techno pop reverberate throughout the house.

The electric fireplaces turn on and off at random and sometimes the late 90's style steam shower clouds the bathroom without being told to. We have a ghost and my father has an alcohol problem. His new wife explains the late nights are AA meetings. I nod as if this hasn't been routine since before she came into the picture. He buys a motorcycle with money he is certain he will make eventually. The motorcycle is not enough, so he buys a speedboat off of Ebay from a local Midwesterner who is eager to get the monstrosity off his hands. It's a twenty-two-foot cruiser with worn down seats and wooden paneling in the cabin, which sleeps four and smells of mildew. My father decides to turn the refurbishing of the boat into a family project and buys one hundred yards of white vinyl to reupholster the seats. After a week of stapling the boat smells of mildew and mass produced vinyl. Once the reupholstering is done, everyone is sick of refurbishing, so the family project is put on hold indefinitely.

We eat our takeout tiramisu with Ikea spoons and go to our rooms when his temper flares. The ghost shows up sometimes, bald and robust with an apparent affinity for red wine. A neighbor tells us the previous owner died of a heart attack in the bathtub, which kind of ruins bubble baths for everyone. The boat breaks down out on the lake and we call the coastguard to tow us home. My father says he'll take it into the shop. One late night a week becomes three, the boat never leaves the water. My stepmother puts four canoe paddles in the compartment with the crumbling orange lifejackets from 1995, just in case. One day we are out on the lake and the engine starts to smoke and sputter, coughing out the spiteful confrontation it has been withholding. My stepmother stands on the back edge of the boat, her brown hair whipping wildly in the wind as she holds her head high and adjusts her giant sunglasses, ready for the world to end or the boat to explode, whichever comes first. *Be ready to jump*, she tells my sister and me.

When the boat stops smoking, my father steps back from the steering wheel, puts his hands on his hips and nods satisfactorily as though jiggling the key back and forth in the ignition is what saved the engine from certain death. He goes to the lifejacket compartment and opens it. We each get a paddle and start to row the twenty-two-foot cruiser home.

4. Shutting a car door

Two wives down, he's thirsty for the lifeblood of the third. He leaves them carved up, wilted.

He's enticing, intoxicating. Striking blue eyes, a charming smile. His speech eloquent, his words flattering. He has two daughters and he loves

them very much. He is down on his luck. His private practice will pick up soon. He has a nice car, he's a self-made man. He writes letters, yearning and poetic. He builds glass castles, weaving his fingers through residual sentiments of loss and abandoned naiveté, plucking the remnants of optimistic young girls from greyed and fading women, breathing life into them again. He was redemption in the flesh, how beautiful a life with him would be. *Save me*, he whispered. And they tried.

When the first wife breaks she takes the two daughters to Florida, gives him a week to pack his things and go. When the second wife breaks, she leaves with a thickness in her throat and a fear she has left two young girls in danger. When the third wife breaks it is quiet— she sleeps and works and nothing else. When the oldest daughter breaks it is four days before her fifteenth birthday. She slams the car door behind her, coughing up phlegmy words and spitting them out on the parking structure pavement, wiping them away from her eyes. He sat in his blue convertible with the top up and did not watch her walk away. Her confrontation settles over the spotless dashboard, the leather steering wheel, the smooth leather seats, a layer of chalky sediment.

Put down your bottles or I will go and not look back.

She will not leave forever, he thinks, opening his mouth to scream and finding only glass where his larynx was.

5. Funeral

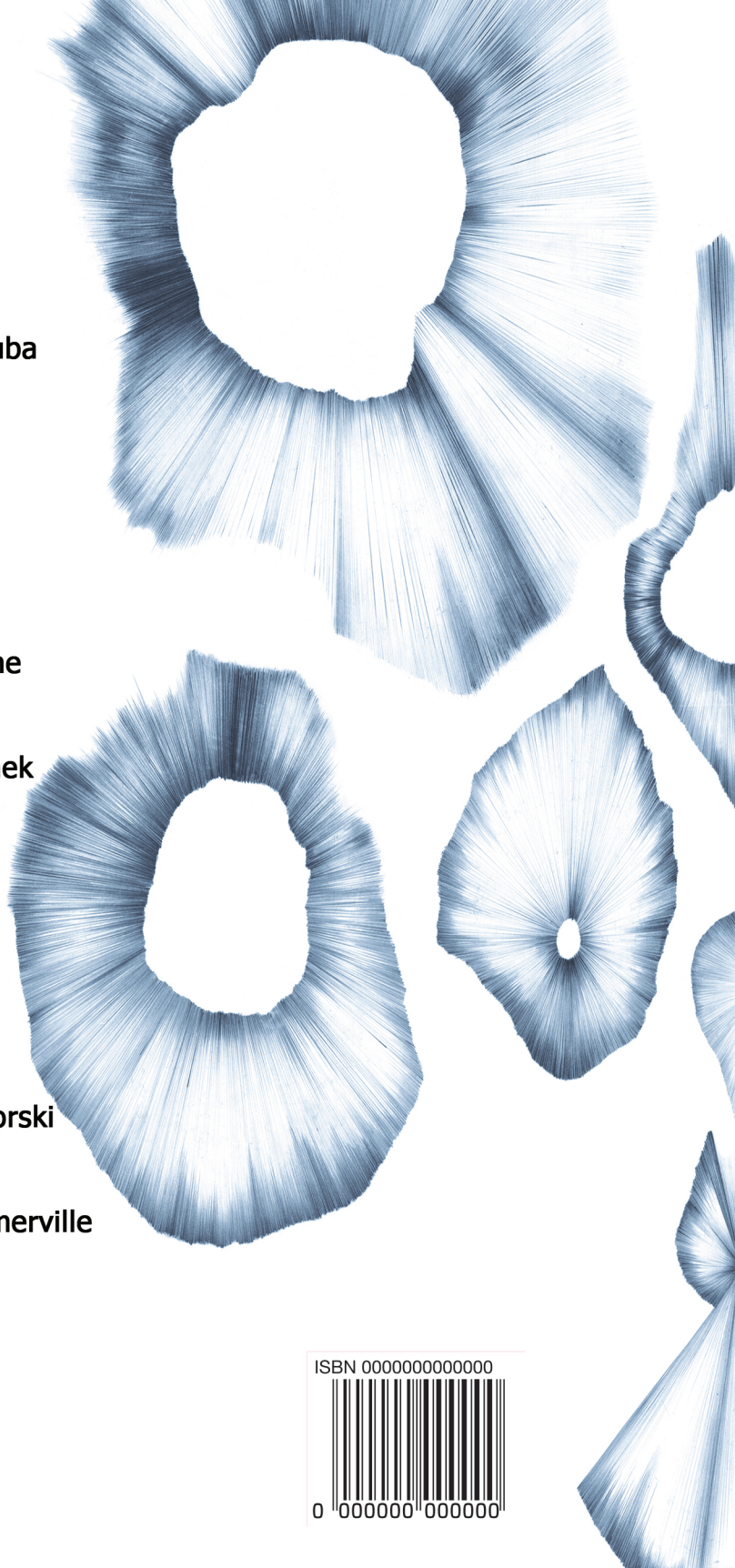
was not really a funeral. It was regular Friday mass at a Polish speaking church in Sterling Heights. I was Jackie Kennedy standing in the pews. I had no veil and there was no casket. Barely eighteen, acutely aware of my posture and facial expression, praying for graceful composure. Church always smelled like death, Mother Mary lifted up at the front with her eyes closed and a child in her arms and this time I was stuck beneath her, I could not run. My grandmother stood next to me. She smelled like coral pink YSL lipstick and the sponge curlers she slept in every night. Holding my hand, she watched the priest, waiting for answers or forgiveness or his sure-to-come redeeming eulogy but this was just regular Friday mass and all he would do was mention the two names, my father's and his father's. God save their souls. In her mind this was all for them and I could not tell her otherwise. She had piled on her nicest amber necklaces, her bracelets studded with stones suspended on the frailest of wrists. The mass was in Polish. I don't speak Polish. My younger sister read a poem to the mass of strangers staring up at her. When she finished, the strangers clapped, and the echoes were hollow and climbed up the walls of the cathedral, nestling into the stained glass and the drywall. The priest touched her shoulder before resuming his regular Friday mass. My brain shriveled up and I kept wiping my nose with

my arm and lifting my chin higher and higher until my head fell off. It rolled across the church floor and there was gum stuck to the underbelly of the wooden benches and nobody there wore shoes that had ever walked with my father. My grandmother thought her bracelets were worth the world. The art in her house, worth millions. It wasn't enough to buy a rock or the string to wind around it.

Where was my father's starting point? To make peace with his death was to begin unraveling what led up to it, to find the rock I frantically wound my own string around, for the sake of concealing it, for the sake of moving forward. Perhaps all my father had was an endless supply of string, nothing to ground himself, nowhere to start from. Maybe the string finally ran out, started to fray and wear down. Death is simply the absence of presence: our hands fade to nothingness and our string and our rock fall to where our feet once were, a thud on the floor just a little bit louder now that there's no body to absorb the sound. In his absence, his failed endeavors become clearer, my fingers grow cold and begin to ache, filling with sand and uncertainty. In this moment of weakness I wrap the string faster, increase the fervor with which I distance myself from my beginnings, from what I fear will become of me.

When we left the church I said I wanted chicken nuggets. My boyfriend pulled into a Wendy's drive-through and we sat in the parking lot of a Food Lion, watched people walk in and out with their shopping carts. He said the food might make me feel sick and it did. I hadn't eaten chicken in years. We drove away and every time I shut my eyes I saw the little dead fish suspended in the ice, waiting for spring to come, bringing decay along with it.

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