

Yallah khabari, come sit
of
Zak, come drink, drink, ink
of, left, carry, ink
of, come, bring, love
of, love, love
of, come sit, come
of, come learn, come, return,
of, love, sit, love

Café Shapiro Anthology 21st Annual 2018

Yallah khabari
of
Zak, come

Selected Poems
and Short Stories

Yallah khabari
of
Zak, come



yallah habibti, come sit
eat, come

21st Annual
Café
Shapiro
Anthology
2018

February 5, 2018
February 6, 2018
February 8, 2018
February 12, 2018
February 13, 2018

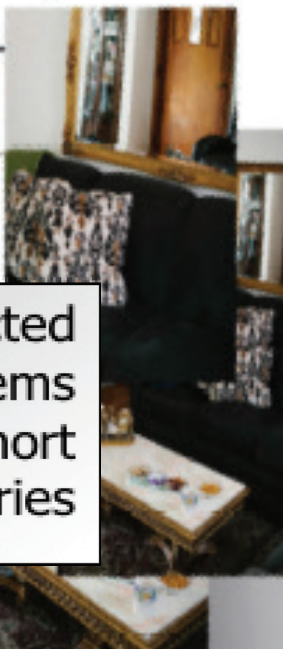
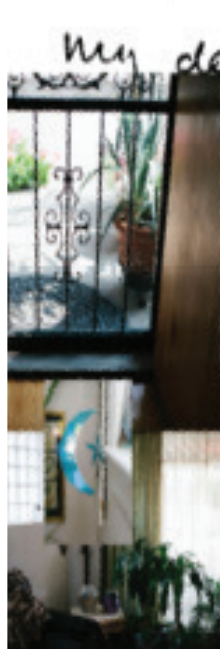
eat, come learn, come, listen,

my dear, sit, eat, learn

hurry, come, my

come etc etc

ya
eat



Selected
Poems
and Short
Stories

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ANTHOLOGY INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 21st Annual Café Shapiro!

I am excited to introduce the 21st Annual Café 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 Café Shapiro first launched over 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). Café 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. Café Shapiro continues its tradition of featuring undergraduate student writers nominated by their Professors to perform their works and through doing 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 Bert's Study Lounge in the Shapiro Library 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.

Café 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 Café 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



Since 2010, the Café Shapiro event has been held in the Bert's Café and Lounge, a real café named in honor of Bertram J. Askwith (LSA '31), who gave this gift to the U-M Library to celebrate his centennial year.

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PAULINA ADAMS



Junior

Major: Creative Writing & Literature and Art History

Minor: Playwriting

Reading: Poetry

I am a writer hailing from Harbor Springs, Michigan. I enjoy writing poetry, prose, and plays, and hope to continue in all three areas in the future! Recently I was awarded the Roy W. Cowden Memorial Fellowship for poetry, a contest which was administered by the Hopwood Board. Aside from writing, I enjoy theater and working at the Graduate Library.

sincerity

my chest is hollow—a drum, maintaining a double beat
the skin pulled taught, the air inside awaiting some sharp hand
to set the space booming, thunder within my ribcage.

i feel: scraped clean. spread thin. the slow, steady drag
of metal down the inside of my sternum, the soft tissues
which curl away and are discarded like so much excess.

how carefully the veins are pared away from animal hide
to make the drum head, or parchment. all the precious
fur discarded. all my kindness scoured and jettisoned.

my chest is hollow—the body of a paper crane, folded
around empty space.

therefore, your heartbeat is a stunning,
lovely thing. i hear the rhythm and forget to breathe.

the warmth is impossible. how solid you seem beneath my
palm, a stronghold of sinew and bone. no one plunged their
hand beneath your collarbones and pulled out gleaming fistfuls.

no one carved out every separate rib. your body stayed
sincere, and no one strikes you just to hear you sing. please
permit me a moment to lie with my head against your heart.

i wish i had a chest as full of light and blood, the molten core
of some small sun. i hear the rhythm and my pulse rekindles.
let me listen to the meter. let me fall in step with how you breathe.

saltwater scarlet

i was pure then—when i screamed, it was not in substitution of a baser
emotion. i hadn't grown yet, i didn't know my father was a translator, i didn't
know anger stood for love and concern was a single footprint pressed deep
into the sand. i never understood him when he spoke of music in a minor key
that i, his daughter, could not transcribe. i didn't know that seagulls ate sand
dollars, i didn't know that boys could climb rocks that i couldn't, i didn't know
that if i took off running down the beach that my father would come after
me, yelling, and i didn't know that the yelling was out of terror that i would
be dragged into the ocean

we have a whole mythology built around blue and yet i have always found
the ocean to be anything but—gray and green and black and white and when
it hits the rock it turns transparent, an overwhelming shatter of salt right
across the bridge of my nose and in my eyes and god, the water isn't red but
my hands were—i'll never forget the striated scarlet lines the black rock left
on my ankle—what i'm trying to say is that blue is a comfortable color and
the ocean has never lulled me to sleep

this memory is fast, because i am faster than my father and the waves are
faster than me, and that is how i managed to get onto the rocks before he
stopped me and also how i got stranded there, crying, as the water exploded
and one of the boulders caught me right where the skin is thinnest over
bone

and that's when i wanted someone to save me but instead i got my father,
furious, yelling *what did i tell you* and i don't remember how this memory

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ends, if he got me off the rocks or if my brothers did, i don't know where my sister was, i don't know if we ever bandaged that cut on my ankle or if we just let it get covered with sand

i was afraid and it was nothing but fear. i didn't know that on my father it looked like anger. what i remember next is walking where the water was far gentler with the shore, asking my father *why* seagulls wanted sand dollars and feeling ridiculous, wary, not sure how to talk past the very real knot in my throat, like something i had swallowed while the ocean tried to seduce me into letting go

and it wasn't like singing, it wasn't sirens or sunsets and it didn't feel good. music like my father's, maybe, but just as inscrutable. if the water ever wanted me for real there would never be anything i or my brothers or my furious father could do. i am twenty now and i still have never walked past the point where the saltwater gets its fingers on the backs of my knees and tries to pull. someday i'll force my head under and sing. someday i'll forgive myself for running when he told me not to.

if the ocean could play the piano it would be overwhelming. every note pressed at once, every beat changing. still beautiful, somehow. i believe that.

i keep my anger in a stranglehold

i keep my anger in a stranglehold
like a little brother

buckling down on passion and avoiding
the wildly-kicking feet

the furious teeth and fingernails
i never let him past me

i have never struck the plaster of a wall
and felt it fracture

half-filled craters in the hallway
desolate lunar landscape of ire

my knuckles like columns
beginning to splinter

nor have i seen my likeness shatter
in the jagged silver spider web

a glass-studded palm
the memory of a mirror

never a harsh word nor an impact
only choking down a fire

i keep the violence pinioned, like a crow
who cannot fly to murder

he's a red-faced wrathful child
screaming for his mother

with my hand upon his throat until
i hold only a tired ember

the single glowing proof
of my displeasure.

the rest is silence

today while playing hamlet onstage i was given a human skull

as light as the pages of an antique book and the same soft brown, almost
deerskin, almost the palm of a sun-rough hand

and more porous than i expected, as though ancient veins had carved tun-
nels through the bone the way a river will wend a path through solid rock.

i spread my fingers carefully over the irregular globe, set my thumbs in the
roof of the toothless mouth, held it up so i could see how empty it was, like
a childhood

home, and how blind it was, in the hollows where the eyes used to sit. how
strange to imagine a pulse and a proud jaw to carry this head

atop a moving architecture of warmth. to wonder at the possible impressions
which have left no mark. dreams which cannot be drunk

from the crown, love which is not written across the protrusion of the brow.
the possibilities of the skull as an unflinching witness

who cannot testify to any of my awful, beautiful thoughts.

//

i am a poet because i pay my respects to the body

of the child in the basement of the kelsey museum, the idea of which i carry with me all day as though i bear my own child upon my back. it is crucial

to remember that this child lived in sunlight, that this child had bare feet and a laugh which rattled every soft corner of his frame and i ask myself, often,

how i would explain why he lies here now behind the glass. i ask myself what i would tell his mother, why we do not know his name but we have touched the brittle

muslin and resin that has cradled his sleeping body longer than we have been alive. i have seen photographs of children's mouths, dead before their molars grow in,

with every waiting tooth perched inside the ridges of the skull like rows of glass bottles upon shelves in a cupboard. i wonder if death means biting down. i wonder

if i will still have a metal bar in my lower jaw for the scholars to find. i wonder if they will remember the color of my hair, i wonder if they will know what i am saying

as i hold the skull onstage—a head in the hand of a body.

CHLOE ALBERTA



Senior

Major: English with a Creative Writing Subconcentration

Reading: Poetry

Chloe is an avid reader, writer, and hard rock connoisseur. Her favorite karaoke song is Breaking Free from High School Musical, and her dream job is either an Oscar-winning screenwriter or a professional panda cuddler. After graduation she plans on moving to New York, spending all her money on coffee and cats, and then crashing on the couch of one of her infinitely more successful friends until she can write a novel that matters.

Ode to Tinder

You're automatic, magnetic: the laws of attraction
at play in cellular synapses, screens
under desks, on the couch late at night
on a Monday. Beautiful in your simplicity:
swipe right, swipe left, little blue stars.

You are fodder for novels,
tales of intrigue, suspense, beards
that weren't in the profile.
A forty-minute drive to a remote hiking trail
with a bartender who smells like eggs. Swipe left
for possible serial killers.

You're my friend's sister's wedding
where the maid of honor's speech doesn't mention
how they met. Swipe right for white lace.

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Primal instinct, the original human urge, symmetry
and skin and pictures of puppies
that actually belong to his cousin. You're fetish,
feet in particular, but one time Jimmy John's,
you are soggy old pick-up lines
and gifs of sexualized pizza consumption and illusion
of safety, possibility, courage through words

words words, behind screens through cyberspace.
Whatever happens is just a series of ones
and zeroes so why not be a flirt, be a fool,
ask him if it hurt when his dog fell from heaven,

swipe right swipe
right swipe
right

In Defense of Dandelions

I. *Taraxacum officinale*

It's a weed, you say,
and after some time I get tired of arguing.
Truth is, I love the way
they're beautiful even when they die,
how each seed becomes a wish
light enough to float
away on a breath.
In hindsight, I should have fought
with everything I had
for their right to be
a flower, to be
appreciated,
to be beautiful.

II. *Salix alba*

Before we met I used to love
willow trees, which my mother taught me
are also called salallows. I loved how both names
sat on my tongue heavy
and soft, at once saccharine
and melancholy.

III. *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*

For once something sounds
 in the English translation just as beautiful
 as the French: *In the shadow of young
 girls in flower*. A dissection
 of love, of Paris and adolescence—but before
 I read Proust I saw the City
 of Light with young eyes, I found
 love with young eyes, *mais j'étais
 à ton ombre, je te suivais toujours*,
 you stunted my growth and my shadow
 dispersed in a gust of air
 off the Seine.

If I were a dandelion seed that escaped
 home for the wintertime, if I were a translucent
 puff of wish, I'd want to dance
 across a Paris breeze, germinate
 in the crosshairs of the Eiffel tower,
 or in an abandoned cup of coffee cooling
 on a park bench in the gold
 Parisian fall, safe in the uncertainty
 of never have, and there I'd bloom.

IV. *Coniferophyta*

After we met I gave up willows and sallows
 and fell in love with order, with practical
 trees, pines and cypress, firs in their constancy.
 Some other where, some other time they could maybe
 be beautiful but not here, not now, not
 in this perpetual heart-winter. Here

they die

frozen, smothered, bodies between
 the sunlight and the cold
 ground it longs to touch.

V. Things I want to forgive you for but can't

The way you screamed like a storm
 after the tornado hit your house, after I spent
 all day heaving debris into piles like barricades,

and the way you talked me into taking the blame
in the morning. For mourning
your grandmother, but only because
that's how we met, and I know now I fall
in love with people I want to fix.
That night drive when I was afraid of you, when
I got out of the car in the middle of the street
and hid in a gas station bathroom until I could breathe
again. For wrapping me in your anxiety shell
until it became my only skin.

For doing nothing, for sitting
there helpless, for being willing to follow
me anywhere except New York. Making me
need you when I used to be self-sufficient,
when I used to be me and not
me-with-you.

The way you poured concrete
around my heart until even the idea of love
gives me a panic attack in the trash room
at the end of my apartment hallway.

VI. Partition, but not quite the way Beyoncé meant it

More like irrevocable divide, India
from Pakistan, me
from you.

And after, I buy a skirt
you'd never have let me wear. After
it's *these expensive, these is red*
bottoms, these is bloody shoes, who knew
Cardi B could be so wise.
I've earned these indulgences, my friends
tell me, so why is the guilt
building why does your ghost insist
on battering me down
until you invade my every memory,
persuade my cells to never forget
you, to quiver when they see
your name, collapse if they hear a song
that reminds them
of you

VII. *En fait, en fête, en mémoire*

To dandelions: I'm sorry.
 I gave you up for something
 that seemed like love.
 Truth is, I don't regret
 it like maybe I should—I'm grateful
 for realization
 for healing
 for feeling everything again as I crawl
 out of this underground burrow
 into the world, which has never
 been so bright.

Alone for the first time under
 the July sun at noon
 a dandelion is,
 everything can be,
 a flower

useful

how old am i? today, i'm today.
 Danez Smith

i used to hide
 in the corner of my mom's closet, tucked
 behind cool nylon dresses, reading
 books with thumbed loved pages

i used to break
 sticks into magic wands, glide
 barefoot through creeks through creeks through shrouds
 of poison oak, and afterwards we thought our arms
 were on fire

i used to close
 my eyes floating, facing
 into the waves, used to fashion bows
 and arrows from reeds and shells, used
 to tell ghost stories about sandwiches, flashlight fear
 under my chin, circle of summer-colored,
 shadow-covered faces shivering
 with laughter

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did someone say
the good old days? because after
my sister got caught with a boy and some cigarettes
i starved myself for a year and a half, i took
a pair of scissors to the side of my thigh, i did everything
to be worth something to feel
any

thing i used to stare
at half of a peanut butter banana sandwich
and a glass of milk at dinner every night
used to knock my knees against bathroom tile, elbows
on porcelain, scratch the back
of my throat with two trembling
fingers, used to, used to

used

to i used to pinch
the pores on my legs with a pair of sterling
tweezers until i'd freed every ingrown
hair, until ruby orbs scarred my skin

that was yesterday
(a wednesday)
i used to

Coming Home

My stomach-warmer, we were small
together. My couch-partner when fever
kept me home from school, you always knew
the worst moments to curl
your twenty pounds on my chest. My mattress cover
in the linen closet when the cousins come over,
my empty basket under the stairs when the feather duster threatens.
My salesperson of lint-rollers
and litterboxes.

My Beethoven on the basement piano
when the night is thickest. My landslide
purr engulfing a conversation, my rub marks on the walls
that you talk to in the dark, remember
the shape I leave on the right side of the bed

and the spot where you tuck right under my arm.
 My Christmas morning ribbon breakfast. My dark
 gray fading to speckled heather.

My digested ficus leaves in the white
 flecked carpet. My prowling guard,
 warily watching birds swoop across the porch.
 My afternoon nap in a summer pool of light,
 my stained suitcase when you didn't want me to leave.

My old-faced pajama-green eyes.

I cannot tell you when I'll be there next
 to brush those out of reach clumps until you howl.
 In the meantime, please don't find
 a new favorite couch cushion
 my cat nip breath, my chess board interruption.
 Don't let the dusty, mottled clouds over your eyes
 cast a shadow over my full-grown face coming up the drive.
 Wait for me by the door.

Ask me again

(after Monica Youn's "Goldacre")

as if the ceasing of the earth's rotation is natural, is comfortable, you ask

as if you already know the answer on my cherry quivering lips

as if I've never told you about the last time, the last boy, and by last I
 mean previous but also it is

as if one of my selves ended/broke/tore/couldn't possibly have survived
 his black hole (last)
 and you just ask

as if I am worth the time

as if my crumbled confidence in the general idea of love is a nonissue

as if all hearts are as undamaged as your new hopeful one
 the question leaves me uncharacteristically quiet

as if anything I could say to explain is bound in spider web sinews, ex-
 posed
 for a moment then rolled into white silk oblivion by black widow legs,
 so I say
 nothing

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as if you don't matter, you don't matter, you don't

as if I know this

as if this pickaxe

as if this toothpick

as if your tiny match could never take down the ghosts of walls that I
pretend still stand
you look

as if you could fly away but you don't, you stay

as if I'm worth the heart break as if you'll keep trying you'll ask
again

as if someday something could
change

as if you could heal me

SYDNEY BENTLEY



SOPHOMORE

Major: Creative Writing and Screen Arts & Cultures

Reading: Short Fiction

Sydney grew up in Michigan, or so they say. She is nineteen years old, which leaves her plenty of time to fulfill her life goal of pulling a “Cask Of Amontillado” on one of her enemies. She likes to shuffle tarot cards, make people laugh, and draw humans with realistic eyes but blob faces. Until two years ago, she didn’t realize “Silent Night” is a Christmas song.

When in Rome

He’d use wine as an excuse. *How many goblets can you remember filling, Nero?* he might ask himself, overly speculative, before a smirking crowd. He’d respond with what would then be his past self, quieting his voice, wincing in performative hangover. *Before or after the woman?*

Assuming there was a crowd to begin with, assuming they were there because of the twelve drunken pages of a love letter Nero had just written—assuming, in the first place, the letter had escaped the confines of Nero’s little home and made its way into the town gossip—everybody would laugh. Nero would draw up the sides of his mouth and pray to the gods Verena wasn’t nearby. Better yet, that she hadn’t gotten her hands on the letter, which was emotional drivel, a disgrace to the Latin language.

Nero meditated away such an embarrassing hypothetical, rubbing his thumbs into his aching temples. He was sat at his desk, the twelve pages of the love letter clustered and curling like dropped petals. Tiny flames dying in the dawn light formed a wax altar around the pages; Nero, the god of bad writing, making offerings to himself. He blew the candles out, picked up the first page, and searched for a sign that his work had not been for nothing.

"Verena," it began, "you must have known this letter would be written. If not after our first meeting five weeks ago, then perhaps after yesterday's spring festival, when you and I watched the sun set and danced and drank. (And drank!) You had flowers in your hair. What were they? They looked like little moons, particularly since your hair is so black. Moons in the night. You keep returning to my thoughts, Verena, you're like a deadly fever, but in a good way."

From there, the letter descended into ramblings, more convoluted similes, crossed-out proclamations of love, and annotations that Nero had smudged into unreadability with his palm.

Nero was too tired to be properly frustrated; upon waltzing home last night, tipsy with wine and Verena's recent closeness, he had dumped his toga on the stone floor, lit his swath of candles, and gone to work, writing all through the night. Though he was a carpenter and would have preferred to design her a dye-stained vase or a nice centerpiece, he figured a letter would appeal to a woman who often worked as a scribe and a poet. But now, placing the letter back on the desk, he felt the chill of sweat stains against his armpits and the buzz of exhaustion between his eyes, and he could no longer feel the ghost of Verena's hand in his, and he had a sinking feeling an entire night had been wasted trying to create something far beyond his capabilities.

Several quick knocks at the door startled Nero to his feet. He fixed the bunched-up sections of his tunic and picked his way past the obstacles of his workshop: blocks of wood, chairs on their sides, chisels pointed up, paint laid out and ready. When he opened the door, nobody was there. Nero leaned out, squinting up and down the empty cobblestone road, just catching sight of the courier as he dipped behind the pillars bordering a neighboring courtyard. Nero found the delivery at his feet. It was a small note, but when Nero picked it up, the paper was thick and expensive between his fingers. Somehow, it smelled like the evening wind. The penmanship was exquisite as well—obviously a scribe's.

"To-day at sundown," announced the note, "two Families shall be united: that of Pontius Cassian—" *Who would marry him?* thought Nero, picturing the big-bearded innkeeper, "—and that of Verena Alderic."

"Verena," he mouthed, and set himself down right in the doorway.

Had last night meant nothing after all? Verena must have known she was getting married for a few days, at least, but she hadn't told him, not when they were drinking wine and listening to the little band, not when they were drinking wine on the balcony, not even when they were drinking wine in the fields on the outskirts of town, watching the sun fall away.

During that last glimpse of daylight, Verena had been sprawled in the

grass, hoisting her goblet upright like a toast to the stars. Everything she had said or done since becoming a scribe, as she put it—she'd been arguing this idea for an hour—was nothing new. Every time she copied a document, she learned about a story or a person or a sentence that reminded her either of her own life or of something from another document. Nero recalled this part because he had kept telling her, "You've already said that," referring to a sentence she'd repeated word-for-word, and Verena, referring to her argument, kept replying, "I know, that's my whole point."

Nero, hunched outside his front door, decided Verena had been so focused on her own supposed unoriginality that she had forgotten to tell him about the wedding. That, and she had been so drunk she'd laughed herself to tears when Nero told her plainly that someone was paying him to carve them a bowl.

Nero steadily tapped the note with his forefinger, his thoughts flitting back and forth between last night and this morning. Then he noticed one of his neighbors watching him while passing by. Nero immediately drew himself together—he must have looked ghoulishly emotive, spine hooked over, features gooey and pouting—and waved. The neighbor turned his eyes away and walked quicker. Nero reminded himself to keep his composure, then returned to the note.

He got to thinking, because though he wasn't a wealthy innkeeper or an eloquent poet or anyone of importance, really, he was a problem-solver. An obsessive problem-solver. It was why he finished his projects so quickly, why his clients were always satisfied, if slightly unnerved, when their broken table became a fixed, polished table with stylish, no-added-fee embellishments within the afternoon.

Pontius and Verena would marry later today, so all Nero had to do was prevent the marriage altogether. He would find and impress Verena, make her understand how he felt, then head to the villa and convince either Pontius or Verena's father to call off the ceremony. He would speak with confidence. *I am here for Verena*, he would declare, *and there is nothing to stop me*. Before this moment, throughout the day, he would practice and perfect his smiles.

Nero first stopped by the merchant square, a plaza lined with shops, each taking up no more or less than the space between two columns. It was crowded with early risers, but nobody spoke. Their eyes were on Ingi, an old psychic with three remaining fingers and big tufts of hair behind his ears. He was wobbling on top of an overturned cart, wearing his Big Weather toga, heavy gray with fringes as purple as the veins writhing down his arms. He wore it whenever he foresaw an unavoidable disaster. Usually this happened three to four times a week.

"And fine crystal shall rain down from above," he said, curling his fingers

and nubs at the sky. "Everything will be powdered in a glittering snow."

Nero joined Rufus, the imported goods merchant, at his stall, where starry, starkly dyed flowers looped around the pillars and the air smelled like sand and honey. Nero asked what Ingi was yelling about.

"Oh," said Rufus, "diamond dust is going to fall from the sky. We think the old man's trying to describe—" A wry smile broke through. Rufus composed himself. "An eruption."

Nero looked south to see Mount Blandus, an enormous mound of rock and forest that slumped over, harmless and infantile. Surely, it was incapable of emitting even a puff of hot air, let alone enough lava to flood the town. *It watches over Caltus like a lazy mother would watch over an equally lazy child,* thought Nero, and grimaced. He had to start improving somewhere.

Rufus said, "The man's blind, so who knows what he actually saw. If it *is* an eruption, we're all dead, but I hope he's right about the diamonds. I could use some wealth."

"Here," said Nero, head high, shoulders tight and wide, "take some of mine." He bought a bundle of spindly but common-looking flowers—as she'd often told him, Verena's repetitive work made her "familiar with the familiar"—and, at Rufus's insistence, he bought a creamy block of some new product called "soap." Then Nero considered the idea Pontius probably bought Verena flowers and soap all the time, so he also picked out an expensive package of Egyptian parchment for the poetry Verena always insisted was too unoriginal to be shared. By the time he stepped away from the stall, the square was bustling and Ingi's misshapen hands, waving over the heads of the crowd, barely drew notice.

Caltus being a community of less than a thousand, it was rare when a newcomer came in unnoticed or news of an event spread slowly. (The only reason Nero hadn't gotten word of the wedding by mouth was that work had kept him locked away for the past week, save for the festival.) Since Nero didn't know Verena's address, or if she was currently at home, he figured asking around would easily provide him with her location—Verena was well-known, being a female scribe; half the people who hired her did it out of dubiousness, to see if she lived up to the expertise of the profession. So Nero asked around, but nobody seemed to know where she was, despite everybody bringing up the wedding, asking him if he planned to attend.

He left the merchant square with his bundle of gifts and made a sweep through Caltus, first hiking to the eastern side, the entertainment district. He looked in the theatre, the amphitheatre, the stables, every building and every property, ducking his head through windows and around pillars and past doorways. He dipped inside the meeting place for Bacchus's Followers, where he always did his best to politely join the wine discourse—it was the

best place to practice meeting others' expectations of him—but unsurprisingly the room did not contain any sign of Verena. As the sun crossed the sky, Nero searched his way back from the east side to the central area, where the merchant square and bathhouses were. The women emerging from the baths announced they either didn't see Verena inside or else they wouldn't tell him, which left Nero with one area left to search: the residential district, on the western side of Caltus. This included Nero's own home, but it was also where Pontius worked, where Verena's family lived, and where Verena would be married; Nero's chance of catching Verena alone, he thought, was as slim as a starved camel. *No, he revised, as slim as a starved cat, because cats are much smaller, plus Verena likes cats, so now perhaps the phrase has meaning.*

Feeling confident from this new linguistic improvement, Nero decided to march over to Pontius's inn, because if anyone knew Verena's whereabouts, it would be her soon-to-be husband. Nero stopped at home on the way, though, to put together a lunch of sea bass and bread slices; it was already past midday and he hadn't eaten a bite. But even though he had been scrambling around town for half the day beneath the bold sunlight of late spring, Nero didn't rest his aching legs for longer than it took him to finish lunch.

After twenty minutes, most of which were spent hiking up an incline, Nero arrived at the inn. It was originally a sprawling hilltop villa built for and owned solely by an excessively rich congressman, but Pontius had converted it into a complex of luxurious rentable rooms. Nero climbed the entrance steps and entered the atrium, a column-bound courtyard with statues dancing in fountains and guests relaxing on the lawn. Pontius was nowhere to be seen. Nero hid his wilting flowers, heat-wrinkled Egyptian parchment, and melting soap under a fountainside bush, then strode to the back of the atrium toward the inn's true entrance, a doorless archway engraved with blessings.

Nero had only been inside the inn once, years ago, when he was young and a lone newcomer to Caltus—when he still had exploring to do—but even now the villa's interior drew his breath. It spread into a circular lobby, its walls carved into hallways, its central staircase lit with a backing chorus of tall, narrow windows. Pontius stood beside the railing, discussing something with a few of his servants. Nero waited for the workers to hurry off down the hallways before approaching, but even then he didn't know what he would say. His planning had been too rushed and too broad, and now that Nero thought about it, he really should have created a gift beforehand, a nice goblet or trinket, something to make his request for a marriage cancellation go over smoother.

"I recognize you," was the first thing Pontius said when Nero joined him by the staircase. The man, similar in stature to Mount Blandus, said it with a

puckish squint in his eyes, wagging his many-ringed finger, as if he expected Nero to find him funny. Nero had left his sense of humor under the bush with Verena's soap.

"We both attend the meetings for Bacchus's Followers," said Nero dryly. "That's where I see you." *That's where I see you flaunt your self-proclaimed expertise*, is what Nero meant.

"Wine of the Month Club." Pontius grinned behind his beard. "That's right. I look forward to our continued debate on sweeteners, though I doubt my stance will be changed. Lead is simply the best."

Nero, who strongly advocated for honey—the superior sweetener—put on a tight smile and introduced himself properly.

"Oh, *Nero*." Pontius clapped him hard on the shoulder. "Verena mentions you sometimes. You're invited to our wedding, right? Verena sent out invitations a few weeks ago but I got word the courier misplaced some until yesterday. He's no longer a courier, let me simply say, but in case he didn't get to you, the event will begin this evening. Exclusive: family and friends and friends of friends and their friends only. The fountains won't be running—they've been touchy recently—but they're beautiful on their own. Wine galore! Lead-sweetened, of course." Pontius chuckled; Nero puckered a smile.

"It is good the ceremony will be here," said Nero, who was compromising for the lack of a preparatory gift with suck-up tactics. "It's a beautiful place."

"Care to give specifics? I appreciate it but, to clarify, I can't stand vagueness."

One could not fall short on compliments about the villa, but vocalizing them was a test of Nero's patience. "The fountains, I suppose. Are good."

"Good?"

"Well-managed. The whole place is extravagant. It's like...an exotic cat lying on a hill."

"My villa is a feline to you?" said Pontius. "Strange. Unfortunate. *Sad* that you see the world in such a manner. Though it is true that the courtyard has a splendid view of Caltus, not to mention Mount Blandus, which I hear is supposed to erupt diamond dust today. Isn't that something? Maybe it'll happen during vows." He winked.

In that moment Nero felt as if his soul had been flicked from his body. When the numbness began to subside and the dots faded from his vision, he stumbled into a reply, but even Nero didn't know what he was saying, not with Pontius's beastly eyebrows pressing together like that, not with Pontius's

breath hitched behind his parted mouth, on the verge of sympathetically putting Nero's rambling to death. Nero clamped his teeth in the middle of a word. He cleared his throat.

Nero said, "I would like you to call off the wedding."

Pontius, who was already several inches taller than Nero, straightened his spine. "Why should I?"

"How do you feel about Verena?"

"She seems a good woman. Her family has resources, and mine has wealth, and so we will marry."

"I care about her, and she me. Let me have her," said Nero right as another man said, "Sir, may I interrupt?"

Nero glanced over his shoulder at the servant, who stood crookedly in the archway, then looked back at Pontius, who signalled for the servant to wait and cast his focus down on the lovestruck carpenter.

"I won't cancel such a grand occasion for somebody I don't know, and I'm sure her father—who matched us in the first place, to clarify—wouldn't either."

"Verena knows me," Nero tried. "Where is she, anyway? I want to speak with her."

"You truly believe I'll give you her whereabouts?"

"Yes, where did you put her?" Nero rotated in place, glancing down each dimmed hallway in the hopes Verena had heard his voice and would soon emerge, bags packed, lust for adventure perfuming through her skin.

Pontius sucked his teeth, thinking. "Actually, I do recognize you."

Nero's confident mask was dissolving in acidic frustration. "Tell me, then."

"Whenever we meet to discuss wine, you're always at the back. Polite, quiet, neutral expression but eyes tight, limbs stiff with complete focus. I remember now. I would wonder—back when I used to notice you—why you seemed on the verge, and what you would do once you let go of all that..." He curled his fingers as if closing them around a fruit. "All of that purposeful tension. Well, I saw you last night, giggling, stumbling over yourself."

"The wine," rasped Nero. "I was drunk."

"Precisely. You had forgotten your charade and I witnessed who you are when you're alone, when nobody is there to make judgement, which is, to

clarify, emotional, hopeful, driven by wants. Yet you come here hours before my wedding claiming otherwise, claiming you should have Verena because it is logical, because you will complement her better. Why do you put up this act? As if you follow the facts and feel nothing? If that were true, you would have known how witless and illogical it is even to attempt to divert this marriage." Pontius's gaze shifted past Nero and he huffed. "What, Theo?"

"Sir, I don't know if it is of any consequence, but—" The servant, still cowering in the entranceway, reached behind the wall and pulled the flowers, the parchment, and the soap into full view. "These were beneath a bush."

"Bring them here," said the innkeeper.

The servant dumped the goods into Pontius's arms and scurried away. Pontius gathered the pile into one arm, then pulled out the cross-hatched Egyptian parchment, ran it under his nose. "High quality. I can smell the sedge it was made from. Take a look at that." Pontius tossed the scroll to Nero, who fumbled it, disoriented by the sudden shift in conversation.

"Looks expensive," muttered Nero.

"The flowers are fine." Rather than smelling them, Pontius pinched off a few stringy petals, examined them without interest, and sprinkled them onto the ground like rubbing dust off his fingers. "Whoever bought them must think the parchment makes up for such dull taste." Pontius met Nero's eyes. "They don't."

Nero blinked back. "No. Of course not."

Pontius took back the parchment and dropped it at his feet. Then he laid the square of soap in his palm and let the flowers plop onto the parchment. "Now, what is this?"

"Soap, I hear it's called soap."

"And where did you hear that?"

"I was in the market square and there was a stall open and...." Nero trailed off because even before he had begun his overly enthusiastic lie, Nero saw that glassy smile in the innkeeper's eyes and realized, undeniably, that Pontius knew exactly who had bought the gifts.

Wordlessly, Pontius dipped his head at the archway. Trembling with a cutting shame, Nero made his escape, but not before hearing Pontius say, "Consider yourself uninvited."

With no flowers and no Verena and no fake confidence, Nero wandered through the residential district, slowly succumbing to exhaustion. The afternoon sun warmed his muscles; his pace became a lazy, aimless stroll.

Eventually he found himself back outside his own home. Utterly defeated, he stepped out of the afternoon heat and into the stony dimness of his carvings-cluttered living room, letting wood dust puff into his lungs. Without another thought, Nero, eyes half-lidded, grabbed a fresh rectangular block from the pile and set it on his desk, figuring he might as well get a start on that bowl commission Verena had laughed so much about. He sat down at his stool and shifted the block into place. Something crinkled underneath it. He rolled the block over.

Pages and pages of his love letter for Verena, messy and smudged and terrible. Something as blotchy and runny as the ink flushed into his chest. His cheeks puckered. In sudden exhausted frustration he swiped the pages off the table, which whirled once or twice before landing dead on the floor, several candle nubs that had been caught in the fray clattering along with them. Nero shoved his elbows onto the desk, clawed into his hairline. After a few minutes of feeling everything and thinking nothing at all, he sat up and began to work.

The bowl itself was coming along great. It certainly looked like something one could eat soup out of, maybe even store fruit in. But the process didn't calm Nero like it normally did, and the meditative trance of work seemed unreachable, like a stubborn daydream. Even worse, once the bowl's structure was complete, Nero made mistake after mistake on the design, notches that were too deep, patterns that didn't line up. The marks of the artist himself, the dessert of Nero's work, no longer tasted so sweet.

By the time Nero looked up from his project, the air had dimmed to the quiet blue of early evening. The wedding would be soon, he knew, if it hadn't already happened. He'd make a toast to them, then. The happy couple. Nero stumbled over to his wine store and poured himself a messy glass, teardrops of red sluggishly dribbling down the outside of the cup and onto his skin.

"To Verena and Pontius: I hope you live past the age of thirty-five. Except for Pontius. You can go *fuetere*, you son of a *canis*. Screw you and the horse you rode in on."

Nero took a long drink just as somebody shrieked.

Nero choked on the wine and hurried to the front door. Peering outside, the world appeared calm; the streets were barren and a warm wind was oozing its way north. Whoever had gotten startled was nowhere in sight. Nero almost retreated to finish his drink, but a distant chorus of alarm rose in the shadows. He stepped out. When he looked to the south, his breath bottled in his throat.

A bubbly gray mass of smoke foamed from the mouth of Mount Blandus, widening like a wine spill as it neared the clouds.

Nero didn't think. He put down the glass and ran in the direction of the shouting. It didn't take him long to reach the market square, where people of every age teemed, overflowing into the surrounding streets. He frantically wondered why nobody was high-tailing out of town, but then he got a better look at the crowd and realized.

People were shouting, but they were also laughing. They wore their best togas, tipped back glasses of wine, sprinkled themselves with flower petals left over from yesterday's festival. Whole families adjusted their tarps, which patched the ground like bad clothwork. Even with the fumbling blackness rising in the background, somewhere within the excited chatter and dizzying movement, musicians played a light-hearted tune.

Nero squeezed through the intoxicated crowd, just barely escaping the weight of a man who tripped over his sandals, shouting gleefully as his friends guffawed. At the edge, where it was less densely packed, Nero found the columns lining the square, and was then able to orient himself toward the foreign goods shop. Once he arrived, however, the stall was not overflowing with plants and strange goods as it had been that morning; the boxes, baskets, and countertop were completely ransacked.

"It's the mountain," said Rufus, who was wearing a simple, petalless frock. "Since it'll erupt soon, everyone thinks Ingi's coincidental prediction was *all* accurate. In their minds, they're rich. Those tarps out there are to catch the diamonds."

"You don't believe it'll erupt diamond dust," said Nero, "do you?"

Rufus took a sip of wine, then shook his head as he set the glass on the counter. "I'd make peace with the gods if I were you."

"I see all your flowers are gone."

Rufus gestured to the empty stall. "Got cleaned out as soon as the wealth got to people's heads. Why, you want some for your grave?"

"For Verena," Nero said, before he knew he was saying it.

"The bride." Rufus knocked on the counter. "Don't worry, she'll get plenty of flowers. Her soon-to-be husband took half my stock."

Nero set his teeth. Even in the midst of imminent, fiery death, Pontius had to make things worse. Whatever hope that had clung to Nero's heart now crumbled to dust. All he could do was continue to push Verena out of his mind pray to Pluto for a not-terrible spot in the underworld.

"Why don't you come up with something else for her?" Rufus said. "You can still make it to the wedding, if you hurry. And anyone can buy flowers."

For a moment, Nero stood motionless, thinking; Rufus's advice had a ring to it. Anyone could buy flowers and soap and fancy parchment, and any receiver would appreciate these easy gifts. But Nero wouldn't do the same thing as everyone else. He was a carpenter and problem-solver—at least, he pretended to be—and he was an amateur simile-maker, and a man who preferred honey to lead. He was about to die in a volcanic eruption. If he was smart, he wouldn't die bitter.

With energy he couldn't afford to spend, Nero rushed from the merchant square, stopping at his house to collect each and every scattered page of his rambling love letter to Verena before taking off again. By the time he reached the base of the hill where the villa loomed, the shadows were long and distorted. The haze of smoke had crept nearly overhead, dividing the sky into evening blue and cancerous gray.

The procession, which was to lead Verena from her family home to the villa, had only just begun their trek up the path. They were so close Nero could see the flame that lead them on, carried by a young local boy, as per tradition, and he could hear them singing a hymenaios to the accompaniment of several musicians. Nero caught up to them within seconds, but once he fell into step with the rear-placed musicians, Nero realized he couldn't see Verena. The procession was an opaque bouquet of fabric, men, women, and children who would shelter Verena in their midst until they reached the villa. A surge of panic stirred in Nero's blood; as the villa drew nearer, he could find no opening between togas, no weak spot where he could make his move. But Nero had made it this far, and with Mount Baldus spewing fire, he had nothing to lose. Slowly, delicately, he nudged between the musicians, then between chatty two older men who brought up the rear. A minute later, he slid past another layer of straight-backed company.

It was after the fourth layer that he quite literally knocked into Verena; the two women just behind Verena must have been her closest friends or sisters because they shouldered him back. Nero tried to get through a second time, but they shot him dirty looks and linked their arms, sealing the gap. Nero, who could just see the golden floral wreath crowning Verena's obsidian curls, took a small running start and busted through, shoving into Verena's shoulder and causing a brief scattering of irritated outcries.

Verena clutched her arm and glared at Nero, opening her mouth to tear him apart, but as she recognized him her features softened from anger to relief.

Nero's heart was full to bursting. After a long day of frustration and exhaustion and fear, here was his love, his gorgeous scribe, her dress whispering against Nero's ankles and her arm brushing his. Pontius could take all the flowers and all the soap he wanted because for all his backhanded actions, he hadn't been able to keep Nero from Verena's side.

"So you're getting married," Nero said politely over the music.

"That's where I'm headed," Verena said back.

"What about last night? The festival?"

Verena smoothed her white, belted dress, keeping her eyes down as she constructed a response. "I didn't tell you because I thought you knew. Even if your invitation was one of the few that got lost, word travels so fast in this town."

"I don't get out much."

"You and your work." The sides of Verena's mouth perked behind her chainmail curls, but her expression quickly resolidified. "I am not marrying because I want to. Against my family's expectations, I am uninterested. This ceremony has all been done before. The vows Pontius and I will say have been said a thousand times over. The knot in my belt, the flowers in my hair. Nothing here belongs to me, not even myself. I am not marrying because I want to."

"You said that already."

"I wanted to say it twice out loud; I've said it hundreds of times in my head."

They were close enough to the villa that Nero could see guests dancing in the courtyard. Directly above them, smoke as thick and gray as melted lead clogged the sky. Wherever Nero looked, time was running out. He had the bones of a proper speech planned out, one he could perform with controlled inflections and at a steady pace. He almost tried it, but the villa was closing in, Pontius visible on the other side of the archway, the weeping courtyard wedding music bleeding into the hymenaios of the procession. With mere moments before forced exile from Verena's life, Nero raised the love letter like an offering and recited every bad simile he could find.

"Verena, your wit is as potent as the worst poison—the kind that makes you bleed from every orifice, then die. And you are flawless, like a statue, which is *not* to say you go around naked." His heart tumbled into his voice, quickening and rising in volume. "You are as charming as a snake charmer, though I am human. Your hair is like a pond polluted with the darkest blood imaginable, as if, perhaps, hundreds of animals had been beheaded there over many years."

Verena took his hand, forcing him to swallow the next simile and lower the letter. Her skin was river-water cold, but she was smiling, her shoulders trembling from holding in laughter, her eyes shining. "You're bright as the sun, sweet as the spring; when I see you I want to sing."

"What's that?"

"A poem I wrote for you. I told you, I'm incredibly unoriginal."

Nero squeezed her hand. Quieter, but no less seriously, he said, "Marry me?"

Verena faltered. "I'm a little preoccupied. And bound by tradition, by the way. It's all been done before, so I have to do it the same way."

"It's not too late. We could run away," said Nero. "Has that been done before?"

Verena scrunched the bridge of her nose. "In Caltus? I don't believe so. But surely in other places..."

"We cancel the wedding as it's happening and run away while a volcano is erupting. Has that been done before?"

Her voice was turning airy, filled with quiet hope. "I don't believe so."

"Then we shall be the first."

"Nero, we're practically at the villa." Verena let go of his hand and her face vanished behind a curtain of flower-woven curls as she turned away. "You can already see the fountains past the archway."

Nero snapped his attention to the courtyard, taking in the smooth white of the sighing marble goddesses, the giggling winged children, all with arms outstretched yet none spurting water. Pontius *had* said the fountains were acting touchy. With utmost control and restraint, mere steps from the villa, Nero instructed Verena to slip away in the coming confusion, and before she could ask what he meant, he melted into the mass of the procession.

They came to a halt before the archway. While a neighbor from Pontius's side drew attention with the ceremonial lit torch and bowl of water, Nero snuck into the courtyard and through the crowd. Behind him, he heard the neighbor say *aquae et ignis communicatio* and knew Verena's family would soon lift her over the threshold, onto Pontius's property, where they would say their vows and slaughter a cow for Tellus Mater. Then Nero would be too late.

As soon as he reached the archway to the inn itself, where Pontius had made a fool of him, Nero broke into a sprint down the hallway to the left, though he had no idea if the plumbing system was located there. It wasn't—bedrooms and bedrooms and a dead end. He ran back toward the main area, intent on exploring the hallway to the right, but while rounding a corner he knocked into a servant, who held an arm out to block him.

"It's the fountains," cried Nero, summoning up a pleading urgency that

he had never before possessed, even while telling the truth. "Pontius told me to turn on the fountains, *immediately*."

"Who are you?" the servant demanded, but his shoulders were already rotating like an opening door, and Nero knew the inferiority and fear Pontius had instilled in his relations would, for once, work to his advantage.

"Don't you know?" said Nero. "I'm the bride's brother."

With that they were racing back to the main area and into a small opening behind the grand staircase that Nero hadn't noticed. They leapt down the handful of stone steps, into a dank, torch-lit closet cluttered with pulleys and knobs. The servant grabbed hold of a big stone lever.

"This is the master pump."

Nero said, "Don't let up until I come back and get you."

The servant put his back into it. Nero fled.

When the carpenter arrived topside, the courtyard was a divine scene of chaos. The fountains were trembling with the effort of geisering such immense shoots of white, which clouded in the middle of the courtyard and poured down on the guests like hurricane rain. The screams were barely audible beneath the tarp-ish shushing sound of water hitting against itself. Some of the victims escaped, their dresses and togas visibly quenched, heavy on their bodies. Somewhere, a cow groaned.

Ingi, off to the side of it all, had his sightless eyes wide to the sky and his finger-deprived hands raised to feel the spray, as if to catch it. His smile was open but subdued, as if he were at peace rather than surprised. As if he'd expected it.

That was when Nero understood.

He ran through the lightest sections of mist and out of the courtyard, down the path a ways to where Verena stood, soaked and smiling, waiting for him.

Facing the open air, a night breeze bubbled their clothes and rustled the many pages of the dampened letter, which Nero presented to Verena. She took them and held them to her shining chest. Far below, at the end of the winding hilly path, Caltus lay hazy in the shadow of the polluted sky. Just past the town rose Mount Blandus, its mouth now flaring with orange light.

"Ingi predicted the fountains erupting," said Nero. "We all assumed he meant the volcano. But it was the fountains."

"It certainly looked like diamond dust in there. Sparkling under the stars like that." Verena squeezed his hand. "You know what they say. Psychics are

never truly wrong.”

“So what about the volcano?”

Verena was silent for a long moment. Eventually Nero decided she wasn't going to answer at all, but her voice hiccupped with sudden awed appreciation: “It's *unexpected*.”

Together they watched the lava hatch from the mountain, standing quiet and still until long after fiery ash had begun to fall, choking the air, glittering in the dark.

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Hannah is a sophomore in the LSA Residential College double-majoring in communications and creative writing. She is a fiction writer, poet, and photographer who loves to play the piano, ukulele and sing in her free time. Hannah currently works at the Alzheimer's Association as a communications intern and hopes to pursue a job that combines her love for non-profit work and the arts. She is passionate about women's rights and explores this theme in her writing alongside mental health, self-discovery, and race. Hannah leads the communications committee for the American Association of University Women (AAUW) chapter on campus and is the Communications/PR editor for the RC Review literary magazine.

I would like to thank Laura Thomas for the nomination! This piece is part of a larger collection of flash fiction entitled "All the Women In-Between," which explores the societal expectations placed upon women throughout their lives and the consequences they face when these expectations are challenged.

Sun-Dried Lemons

The crackers are served with a side of cheese and whining. A lemon floats in Linda's glass. Another childhood friend, Janice, bounces a toddler on her lap.

Linda sits cross-legged on the aging couch, its bare threads falling away from the frame. The couch fades into the living room wall behind it,

a backdrop of an identical shade of yellow. Linda remembers when she and Henry had first moved into the house, newly-married, painting the walls and dragging the furniture back into the room after they had dried. The couch, which they'd pulled from the street, looked as if it had been painted over with the same color of the wall. Linda and Henry had laughed at the ugliness of the room, too broke to buy a new couch and too happy to finally be living together. "It isn't just yellow, it's lemon-colored," he said. "And when life gives you lemons..." Linda had laughed and looked into her husband's hopeful eyes, dancing through the night with the room as their sun.

Now, Linda fidgets with her wedding ring, finger swollen in the humid summer air.

Across from her, Janice feeds jelly and toast to her son, who immediately shoves it into his teddy bear's face. Janice seems too invested in her own complaints to notice the bear's growing stickiness that she'll have to clean later that night. Linda doesn't stop her.

"...and she chews with her mouth open!" Janice's exasperation moves from her voice to her arms, throwing her hands into the air. Linda moves her head in what she hopes is a nod, examining her friend's chipped manicure instead of listening. She's lost count of how many new mothers have thrown complaints around this same room, each one dulling the walls' sunny color.

"She doesn't even change Matthew's diapers correctly. I think I'll have to fire her one of these days. Do you have any recommendations for a new—" She stops, remembering Linda is her only friend without children. "I'm sorry."

Linda shrugs. "Don't worry about it."

Don't worry about it, Henry had said after seeing her test results. *We can always adopt.* The word "always" made Linda's stomach churn, a threat to her independence. "Always" means forever bouncing a child on one knee, forever twisting a ring on a swollen finger.

From down the hall, a key turns in the door. Linda stiffens, nervously turning the ring again. "Hi, honey," she calls, her voice wavering. Her husband's feet seem to drag themselves into the room the way they do every night. Henry steps into the light, his once-hopeful eyes replaced by a blank stare. As his gaze pierces through her, Linda realizes she is as indiscernible from the couch as it is from the wall. Her mouth goes stale. She takes a sip of water from her glass, but the lemon flavor sticks to her tongue.

Henry's gaze stops on the rug beneath Janice's chair. It was his grandmother's, a family heirloom given to their only son as a wedding present. *Hopefully it's soft enough for the kids to play on,* the card had read, *I hope you'll pass this onto them to carry on the family legacy.* Linda wonders where she'd put their wedding cards. Maybe Henry hid them with the adoption

papers she had refused to sign.

The couch's threads stretch beneath Linda's weight, now so pale they look more white than yellow. Janice continues to bounce Matthew on her lap, faster this time. "Did you see that?" Henry asks, pointing to a spot of jelly on the rug. Linda's words catch in her teeth and she whips her head towards Matthew. Janice lets out a tiny gasp, realizing the culprit sits on her lap.

Henry's eyes stay locked on his wife, who furiously twists the ring on her finger, shrinking under his gaze. "If only you knew how to take care of it," he mumbles as he walks away.

Before she realizes what she's done, the ring flies from Linda's finger and disappears into the couch cushions. Janice stares with pitying eyes as the threads release their bonds with the frame and rip a hole in the fabric. Linda shrivels as she sinks into the couch, realizing she does not know if he was talking about the stain or the child.

SEBASTIEN BUTLER



Freshman

Major: Political Science and Creative Writing

Reading: Poetry

I come from Dexter, a small town, about 20 minutes west of here, that is the embodiment of a Norman Rockwell painting. That being said, I consider myself extremely lucky to have grown up there and have a deep-rooted attachment to where I come from. I did Speech & Debate and theatre throughout high school, and I met the greatest people in the world while doing so. The friends I made during those years, and the amazing (often surreal) experiences I had, had a profound impact of who I am as a person and how I view the world. It launched me into a realm of passion, hopes, dreams, and comradery that formed the basis of my writing. It's to honor the people and places I love that I write. For without them, I would never have started.

Evening's Empire

Death still coarse chambers, hours laced sweet and swaying
 Soles are rubbed sore on carpeted corridors, shoes spread across soothing
 tile

Evening floated on electric light, a dash in its empire
 A nebulous director of my echoing

The crowded lonely life after dusk
 Fluorescent heaven in nowhere night—
 A note
 Sprawled in marks of an elderly wood stage, on colonized podiums—breath-
 ing love for the pure, the humbled, the found,
 The once was

Forced to the horizon line, a twinkle of the distant din of infinite lives
Never to be known again
In the pulsing lights
That entangle our time
As evening dies each night
Like a moth
To flame
"Here are some pictures"
 In the swaying dark

Days of Heaven

—Floorboard grasshopper harmonics—
Men file in like grain and the rust cars of train tracks
Leaning tired from dust labor
The creak of the rocking chair settling in their hearts
Waiting for their bearded age
When then can finally explore that one corner crest always left untouched
A wish collectively, to feel collectively
 To know those spirits, to know those visionary eyes on this fertile
ghost anew
 And on them find peace among the howling cries of the past

—A spark was lit chasing for a new world—
But it was soon dashed in grim and ash
Now, only the streetlights remain—shudders in the night—
—Hidden faces and quickening fingers through the storm
The machinations of the prior haunt
Their oil drowning, their foundation unfathomable—
So I must strike downward and maddeningly
Praying for bedrock eventually

—A harmonica blares through lives—
This rustic eulogy beckons in my sleep
Weighted down with dreams in summers bygone, in the taste of afternoon
dozing
A thick smell in storm soaked streets
This kingdom is dotted with portals—
Faint echoing calls to the lost marriage of time and hope

—In the steam and salt and order—
I crave the creaking of booths

The grand desert expanse
 Of silent living room carpet
 I am but a lowly traveler
 Staring, a CinemaScope blame
 I long for the ever after

Ruminations on Anthologies

*Make this bed with Awe-
 In it wait till Judgement break*

—Emily Dickson, 829

Life only gets wider
 Like a dull dragon uncoiling, like sparks fleeting upon a great avail—
 And yet, falling they form pockets
 Bubbles of air
 The dimples surrounding a smile, while spectating a fire:

The visions we saw upon that great grey ghostly screen
 Wide as sight and as dense as time
 Blind to the Grandfather clock ticking behind
 Our eyes, our brains, our mattered matter
 —Our mysteries melancholy of what could be
 In the pregnant red that drenched the domed ceilings—the bosom hearts of
 the wanted
 In the gold banister railing the fall of two feet—sweet as an afterglow kiss
 And in the black—majesty of all
 Deepest night of beckoning

Carrying this in our breaths we sat
 Regarding in charmed stage romance the fast flashing holy screen
 At last we cried—the circus of arrival, the widening gyre:

A cathedral of calling
 A car horn in Times Square
 A Central Station message to young Meccaers
 A Midwest city theater's attempt to bridge to now and then
 A sulfur drunk escapade into the living brain of the dead

The faces of the damned loving lost glowed before our laughing eyes
 —Superhuman, superimposed, grinning in perpetuity—
 Unknowing of the ancient parade of art
 Show us the way out of this total winter we cried!

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To somewhere never travelled, beyond the silence—to eyes, to gestures, to American forms—

Which we cannot touch because they are too near
This, the true burrows of a nightmare
Oxygen stifles, and we fall into flames
Grasps wrenched from faces
With the walls of place moving in...

...The last all of life has been a wait to jumping off a roof
Perched on the final step, humming a tune into the darkness in void
below—

We found out we are far from one

And really no one
A car headlight rushing on a dust road
Where the moon rises a million times again to the same spot
in the tar sky
Shrouded, encapsulated, known all again—

—Things comes in threes
The moon, the fire, and the green
That Blake knew, the skull that Eliot scraped
And the slippery oil of life that Crane couldn't come to hate
The hope, the murder, the retreat complete with relief

The leaves shifting by the fire's flames
Under the light pierced blanket
In a rhythm unchanging
Perhaps, dog eared by fate

KATE CAMMELL



Junior

Major: Creative Writing

Reading: Short Creative Non-Fiction

Kate is a student of the University of Michigan's Residential College. She specializes in creative nonfiction and poetry, with an emphasis in travel writing. Though she spent her first eighteen years calling Grand Rapids, Michigan home, she has since lived in both London, England and Pondicherry, India. When she's not reading or writing, you can find her doing yoga and spending time outdoors.

To the Sky

*Recipient of the 2017 Undergraduate Nonfiction Award

The air is steam rising from the tin kettle in the hands of the chai wallah. The air is grey plumes putt-putting out the back of a yellow rickshaw. The air is the odor of fish under the midday equatorial sun. The air is filth caked onto 12 million bodies. The air is its own. The air is rampant with intruders.

This isn't my suffering. I don't know the name of the woman who I am on my way to mourn: yet my body is gripping the edges of a rusted '90s Mitsubishi motorbike to watch her go up in flames. My main focus is on keeping my leg from swinging and hitting hot metal as the motorbike juts in the openings of traffic. I am holding the waist of a man I met six days ago. The

way we're weaving grips my nondenominational bones and I send a prayer toward the fading gold statue of Ganesha on the side of the road.

Yogis honk horns to race around slow rickshaws, Hindu priests accost passing pedestrians in the streets for rupees to buy food. Women cover their legs and expose their midriffs wrapped in bright colored sarees. Men hold their wives hands and later at night they whistle at women walking under the moon.

Yellow flowers are placed along the body-shaped mound of clay. Incense is lit and becomes the first smoke to drift through the open walled hut. Matches are tossed onto straw and under the elevated clay. Someone dumps fire propellant from a repurposed Sprite bottle onto flames. Wailing from the family edges it all onward.

What does it mean to become ash? I don't know the soul that I watch lift into the sky. It twists up with a force only paralleled by the Bay of Bengal. At first it runs towards the finish like waves to the shore. Then realizing its address belongs to the sky, it slows — waiting, drifting, and letting the air sweep it into its arms.

I am standing on the outskirts of the wood-framed burning hut. Every so often I sneak glances at a woman I barely know as she crawls inside herself and lets pain leave through tears. Yesterday I saw this same woman smile at me over sambar and rice. I saw her confident as she sat at her desk. I saw her weeping by the door. I saw her purse and keys thrown on the floor as witnesses to calamity. I saw myself retreat and call out for other arms to comfort her. Here I am, pretending this is my suffering, too.

After the ceremony, my coworker cries into the shoulder of her friend. People stand in a loud silence with their gaze directed at the smoke. It sneaks between the gaps of the woven palm frond roof, branching itself into arms, legs, hair. It dances, hugs, and rebukes the tears of loved ones. Then the smoke is gone. The smoke is part of the air. A mother's journey reduced to ash.

Her daughter sat in my office and I don't know her last name. I climb on

the back of the motorbike and turn back to glance at the cremation lot as my coworker whips the bike back onto the main road. He is wearing a gold cross necklace on a thick chain. He tilts his face back slightly and screams over the harsh traffic, "Are you Christian?"

"I don't know," I say. He talks about his God and heaven. I listen to him talk in a silence so deep it's almost a prayer. Almost meditation. We bump over the cracking pavement and back streets that are the welcome mat to my apartment building. I get off the bike and walk past the seventy-year-old watchman, who, from the depths of his plastic chair, is supposed to guard the building. His bare chest is concave and screaming for food that he can't eat with his multiple missing teeth. He fixes the single cloth he wears around his waist and smiles at me as I pass. I send him back a soft smile, no match to his enthusiasm. I like him. Soon he'll be smoke.

As I enter my apartment I make my way to the shower and bathe following Hindu tradition. I purify loss and let dirt wash down a drain. I sent her mother to the afterlife. I only knew her as smoke. She had a name.

Water gathers at my feet and soap clings to my body in a way that convinces me it is trying to enter my pores. It's trying to get inside me, clean me from the inside out. Does it matter if I clean this flesh now? One day this flesh will strip itself layer by layer, away into wind. Does it matter if it's starch white when it's ascending? Must I purify bit by bit so that the dirt finds itself in a tide pool at my feet? I want to tell her thank you for everything she was, tell her she was loved. I never knew her.

Traveling India solo was about self discovery. One week in I know it's bohemian bullshit. Nineteen and alone, I have grown an exoskeleton of dry sweat that sheds itself on my clothing, sheets, on my pen and paper. I throw elbows in the supermarket to hold my place in line. I throw imaginary daggers at the men who openly point at me in the road. I found a cockroach in the bathroom, a lizard in my bed. I am far from home. I am tired long before the sun falls asleep. What does it mean to be ash?

DAPHNE CANTUBA



Junior

Major: Biochemistry

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Poetry

I was born in Manila, Philippines and moved to Saudi Arabia at three. I then moved to West Bloomfield, Michigan at five. This will be my second time participating in Cafe Shapiro. I won a Hopwood Underclassmen award Fall 2016. In my free time I like to draw, binge Netflix, and cuddle with my cat.

Lemonade

My older cousin and I used to make lemonade together,
but ever since she disappeared, I don't make lemonade no more.
My cousin always had a way to make lemonade taste better.

She would play music while we made lemonade, whenever.
We used to wear aprons with bad puns on them, the ones she adored.
My older cousin and I used to make lemonade together.

We would dance around and it'd be fun and feel like forever
and we'd twirl around the kitchen, often knocking things on the floor.
My cousin always had a way to make lemonade taste better.

But ever since she dropped out of school her visits became lesser.
The kitchen often feels empty and making lemonade became a chore.
My older cousin and I used to make lemonade together.

I haven't danced in the kitchen, I almost don't remember.
She used to be cheerful, her face used to glow, but that was before.
My cousin always had a way to make lemonade taste better.

The last few days she always seemed under the weather.
Seeing her there, with her eyes closed, just laying there made me sore.
My older cousin and I used to make lemonade together.
My cousin always had a way to make lemonade taste better.

Bubble Tea

After every exam,
my best friend,
of only twenty two years,
and I
would always find ourselves
in a small bubble tea shop
on University Ave.

One day,
she swam
inside a bubble tea cup.
She held
onto the tapioca bobas
as the taro milk tea
tried to engulf her.

At first,
her face was bright
and her laugh
caused waves to ripple
from one end of the cup
to the other.

Then,
little white capsules
fell into the waters
and she enjoyed
the extra floaties.

She was a great swimmer,
and for awhile
she was doing great.

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She swam from one end
to the other
without trouble.

She was swimming
deep into her cup,
and eventually
she reached the bottom.
She would pop her head up
once in awhile
to wave at me.

She started to prune.

After a few days
she wasn't coming up,
so I tried to suck her up
with my straw.
There were more
white capsules,
covering the surface
of the tea.

I watched her try
to hold onto
the little spheres
made of tapioca.
She was drowning
and I just watched her
try to hold
onto anything
and when she grabbed
the white capsule

it sunk,
she was gone.

Expired Milk

The milk is expired,
so I threw it out.
The fruits look rotten,
so I throw them out.

The bananas are
oxidizing, and
apples are bruised. They
need to be thrown out.

The milk is expired
and so is the couch.
So, I sell it
to a friend in Flint.
The curtains, expired,
they look different,
so I give them to
a friend in Detroit.

The milk is expired
and so are my games.
I can no longer
play Overwatch.
Her voice is gone
and doesn't go through
the headphones she got me.
The game is empty.

The milk is expired
and my cat cries.
I tell him the news
that we have no milk.
He cries for his mother,
which is my girlfriend
but she is not here
cause she is expired.

Vodka

Her breath smelled of vodka
and her laugh sounded like radio static.
She would grab my hand every now
and then. She would squeeze them
tight, like she was squeezing
for lemon juice. She always did like
margaritas, especially really fruity ones.
She was alive and her arms
swung around like noodles
in boiling water. Her hips went side

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to side like a pendulum. She would
pull me to dance and I went along.
The beat of the music crawling
on my skin like a million tiny ants.
Her dark almond shaped eyes
were glossy and her plump lips
were blood red. At the end
of the night, she said, "I'm tired."
I offered to walk her home
and she said yes. At the front door
of her apartment complex, we
stopped. Crickets were chirping,
leaves were slow dancing
in the air. The street lamps painted
gold streaks on the dark streets.
She said to me, "take me home with you"
and I said that I couldn't because I'm his
best friend. She was drunk and
confused. So she said, "I'm sorry."
I said it was okay. Her eyes got
more glossy and tears slid down
her cheeks. She was alive and full
of sorrow. Black smudges followed her tears
and she wiped her nose with her arm
smudging red all over her face.
She stopped crying and she looked
numb. She was cold and numb. It was
as if she wasn't alive anymore. I didn't
know that that was the second to last
time I would see her. Now I'm staring
at her. She lays there so peacefully, eyes shut.
The room had a weird feel to it, as sniffing
and crying can be heard throughout.
John is just sitting there, not moving, almost
like a statue. Eyes staring at the floor,
not blinking. So here she is
again, so cold and numb.
I guess she ran out of vodka.

Water

My daughter always drank from water bottles
never tap water. She hated tap water. So
I would always try to get her bottled water.

I would get the 24 pack from Costco
as much as I can whenever they're on sale.
I'd buy about five cases at a time.

She said she loved how convenient they were,
how you can take them anywhere anytime
that way you won't be wasting water.

That's my daughter for you,
always making excuses when in reality
it was because she hated the taste of tap water.

The day I drove to her apartment,
I can never forget that time,
there were empty water bottles everywhere.

She seemed to have been drinking plenty of water
seeing all the empty water bottles everywhere.
Then why did she take all those pills?

As I look at her face, eyes closed, resting,
I wonder to myself that maybe she didn't have enough water.
Did I not get her enough water?

HEATHER COLLEY



Sophomore

Major: Sociology and Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction Short Story

Heather Colley is a menace and you shouldn't try to talk to her after she reads.

10:34

Harley Skeeter studied Creative Writing. The only person who knew that was her creative writing professor, and her creative writing professor was probably the only person that ever would. Harley was embarrassed by the entire ordeal and the fact she was really quite talented at what she did and a unique sort of writer for such a young person (20) didn't matter to her one bit. Nor did the fact she enjoyed it quite a lot. It was a thorough failure choice of a college major and degree. It was for wackos and hipsters and falsely intelligent types who enjoyed browsing bookstores, probably high, talking about the Classics, but only in terms of one or two books. Studying *writing* was sort of like studying acting or film studies but maybe not as bad as film studies because at least in the world of the English Language there wasn't a lot of time for movie watching, what with all the books still left to read.

She was a punctual person. The construct of *time*, in fact, had always been a fishhook tugging at her periphery. It bothered her. It bothered her when people were late or if they were too early, and she was never either. She almost always arrived exactly on schedule, to everything, and was usually 4-6 minutes early. She hated bluster. Loose ends, the complicated, the disarray- none of it was any use to her and never would be so long as she had any active say in the matter. And she intended to have an active say in

the matter probably until around the time of her death.

Everything belonged where it belonged, and she had very precise things to do all day long, which almost always got done. She thus had no time for extracurriculars that weren't resume building- she had no love interest, no relationship with alcohol or drugs, and very few friends. But she wasn't lonely. Which is odd, because you would certainly expect her to be, but she wasn't. The trouble was that because she'd never had many friends, she didn't know anything about the world of being a social creature, and you can't yearn for something that you never had. It is possible that she actually was lonely but didn't know the word for it because loneliness, solitude, it was all just her normal. Loneliness is subjective. So is time. But she didn't very well know any of that.

There was only one thing that bothered her, though, about the five minutes that she would sit outside her creative writing professor's class every Thursday before the clock turned 10:40AM. It was a skinny boy with a skateboard.

He sat on the only other seat in the Creative Writing hallway, outside the professors' offices. The hallway was an unpleasant yellow in color and smelt of mothballs and vomit. There were bookshelves lining it but they held no books. No one viewed the hallway with contempt or suspicion. It wasn't so much the hallway's fault, the fact it was dreary. More so it was that the Creative Writing major didn't beg for a fancy hallway. Which is logical to a certain degree. All you need is a pen.

The boy sat on one of the yellow chairs, which were exceedingly uncomfortable, and placed his feet on his skateboard and absentmindedly rolled it back and forth. This is what he was doing as Harley took her spot in the other chair and proceeded to wait for the clock to hit 10:40. When it did, they both went into their respective professor's offices for their weekly meetings. The boy wore a green baseball cap with a California bear on it every single week and had on black jeans most days. He appeared solemn. So did she. But neither of them knew it about themselves. Only about the other.

For two weeks they sat there in silence for five or six minutes. Ten inches apart from each other and not a single word. She was greatly aggravated by all of this because it made her wonder if she *should* say something, or if he would say something first, or if he even noticed that she was there at all.

He was, all the while and of course, thinking that perhaps he should say hello, but what if she said hello right as he did and they cut each other off and then had to sit three or four minutes in a stunted silence of failure? No. Sitting without any acknowledgement of this entire stressful scene was the only safety to be had within this whole scheduling mess.

Until the third week when she got all too fed up with the close proximity.

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Hi.

Hello.

Are you taking creative writing too?

Yeah, he said.

Okay.

Are you majoring in it?

No. Just getting my creative expression requirement done.

Seems a pretty involved class just for the requirement. Sixty pages of prose by the end of the semester?

I don't hate writing.

Okay.

The clock turned 10:40.

Good luck.

You too.

Hello, he said, the next Thursday when she sat down at 10:34.

Hi. How're you?

Great. This is my only class today.

Really?

Yeah. I'm a senior. I got a light semester.

What do you study?

Acting.

Oh?

Yep.

What sort of acting?

All sorts.

Okay.

I like to write plays though. To perform them. Which is why I'm taking creative writing.

So what do you do all day long if this is your only class to go to?

He looked at her quizzically.

I go back to bed.

Oh.

What's your name?

Harley.

Matt.

She's forgotten his name by the time the clock struck 10:40.

Good luck, Harley.

Thank you. You too.

She never asked him again what his name was and to this day she does not remember it. On days when something nags her up in the left corner of dust in her brain where things go forgotten, she wonders vaguely what it could possibly be that makes her twitch like a mouse on cocaine in this unfavorable way. And one thing that makes her so nutty is, amongst others, the fact she did not know his name and probably never would again.

I'm exhausted, he said as he sat down, and dragged his hands over his eyes and face.

He looked an absolute mess.

Didn't you sleep last night?

No. Fought with my girlfriend.

Oh.

And then her again: You have a girlfriend?

Unfortunately.

Then why is she your girlfriend?

He looked at her quizzically. His quizzical face was always the same.

Because I love her.

Okay.

10:40.

Hi, she said. How is your morning?

Shit. It's freezing outside.

I like the cold. I like it more than summertime.

No way, man. I'm from California. And he pointed at his baseball cap.

Eternal summer?

Yeah. How it should be.

Maybe.

And then her again: How are your stories coming along?

Good. I'm working on one about man's spiraling descent into madness due to the inherent stresses of solitude and struggle.

Lovely.

Thanks. I play the man.

So you descend into madness?

Like a downward spiral.

Charming.

Got any exciting plans this weekend?

Pause.

No. I guess not. Like you said. It's freezing out.

Can't let the cold get you down.

You came here down because of the cold.

That's different. It's not the weekend yet. It's just the morning.

Okay.

So what's the point?

There is none.

But do remember this about Harley: She had no friends and only talked to other people when she was buying things at the 7/11 like a Hershey bar or

a pack of gum. She was a solitary creature. Inside, her mind was more of a Tempest- a secret storm of small proportions sometimes worked in her mind, but hardly anyone knew it.

Most of the time the rain started when she felt she was wasting time: *Death comes sooner than we think you know, someday I'll look back on this one day September eighth and I'll think of all the things I could've done with it what an awful and unpleasant thought to have - what more could I have done?*

Five to seven minutes every week. Some weeks, no minutes. Sometimes, closer to ten. There was no distinct reason why he talked to her. She had no idea. You can't get someone's motives out of them in five minutes. You can just get an update.

Which was all well and good apart from the fact Harley was so hung up on the concept of *time*, and particularly the startling speed with which it passes, that she actually began to write these 4-7 minutes down in her agenda book, for every Thursday. This is what she wrote: *5-10 minutes talk to boy with skateboard before CW class*. When it happened like so, she crossed it out before bedtime that day with a satisfied and perfect line of ink. When it didn't, the ten words stared at her and made her question what more she could've done with that 5-7 minutes: *Think of all the things you could do in five minutes that's when the best ideas are born wait how long did it take Shakespeare to come up with the idea for Hamlet probably five to seven minutes damn it!*

Hi.

Hello.

How are you?

Hungover.

It's Thursday morning.

Puzzled look.

Happy hour on Wednesdays. Don't you think the Days of the Week are just bullshit?

Not exactly. Most religions would be nowhere without a Sunday, for example.

Explain the Monday Blues then.

It's not Monday that's the construct, it's your Blues about them.

Pause.

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Well one thing's for damn sure. Wednesday Happy Hour is not a construct. It's ecstasy, my friend.

Okay. So you had fun?

I think so. I blacked out.

That sounds enjoyable.

You're so bleak.

Thank you.

10:40.

He sat down with eyes that were bloodshot. She thought they looked almost pretty like that, and then started thinking about red stained glass, and churches and things like that, and Sundays and Mondays and Blues.

Hi, she said.

Morning.

You look awful.

Thank you, my friend.

Did you go to Wednesday happy hour again?

Did the sun rise this morning?

Okay.

I blacked out this time. For real. Lost seven hours of the night and probably five years off the end of my life.

But why?

Why?

Yes. Why?

What do you mean?

Why did that happen?

Because I drank too much. Hello? Lights on up there?

He tapped her on the side of the head and smirked. That was the first and last time he ever touched her.

I mean, why did you drink too much?

It wasn't exactly fuckin' deliberate. You think I wanted to lose seven hours of precious memory?

That sounds like a terror. (In fact it was her singular worst and most persistent nightmare.)

It is. A terror. Nice word for it.

Why don't you drink less, then?

He stared at her.

That is a novel and practical idea.

Thank you.

10:40.

I have a question.

Jesus. Good morning.

Thank you. Good morning.

You gonna ask the question or we gonna stare at each other for the next six minutes.

Yes. This is my question: Does it scare you when you *black out*?

No.

Why not?

Isn't that obvious?

Not in the slightest.

When you *black out*, you don't remember. You have no thoughts. Nothing is happening, nothing happened yesterday, and nothing is happening tomorrow. You float.

You are describing a black hole and that is the most horrifying concept in all of science.

Don't talk to me about science I'm an *actor*.

You don't have to be a scientist to be troubled by the notion of a *black hole*.

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I choose not to spend my days thinking about *black holes*. As should you.

Maybe I will try that.

Maybe. Something tells me you won't. But maybe.

Okay.

Want to hear something funny from just before I blacked out and lost everything?

Yes.

The bouncer at the bar was telling me I had to pay a five dollar cover.

Right.

I don't have five dollars lying around.

Right.

So I said to him: I don't have five bucks for a cover but I'll buy fifteen dollars worth of drinks downstairs to make my presence worth your while.

That makes no sense at all.

Right. It's nonsensical!

Okay.

And you know what he did?

What?

He thought about it for a second. And then he said okay, and he let me in.

This man seems unintelligible.

Really? To me he seems like God's gift to man.

I guess that's perception.

Right.

10:40.

Good morning, sunshine!

What is wrong with you?

What, a guy can't be happy?

You can be as happy as you please.

On this morning it would please me to be nice and happy.

Then I am happy for you.

Thank you very much, we are sitting here basking in happiness, wouldn't you say?

Are you high?

Me? Smoke...marijuana?

Oh. Sorry.

No I'm not high I smoked last night but I've come down since then.

Oh. Sorry you came down.

I'm still up there somewhere.

It seems to be so.

Want to know why I'm happy?

Yes.

I broke up with my girlfriend. After I got high.

But you love her.

Quizzical look.

Yes. I do.

Then why did you break up with her after you got high?

Great, heaving sigh.

Because I love her.

Okay.

10:40

I've been meaning to ask. How is your play coming along. The one about man's descent into stoic madness? Or was it solitary madness.

Solitary madness, but a reasonable error. And I like the word stoic.

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So how is it coming?

You know what my problem is?

What?

I'm not mad.

Are you at least descending into it?

Nope.

Oh. Sorry.

It's not your fault that I'm not mad.

So it is my fault that you...are mad?

No, because I'm not mad.

Okay.

The problem with not being mad, or even on my way there, is that it makes it difficult to write about and act someone who is mad.

But Hamlet did just that.

And his writer was probably mad. Had to have been.

What if you're a work of genius like Hamlet.

If by the Grace of God I was created by a genius maybe I would be but I was unfortunately created by Mark and Sheila of Shelby Township, Michigan.

Oh. Sorry about that.

Don't be. They're good people.

Not everyone can be Shakespeare.

Or Hamlet.

10:40.

I realized recently that I have never asked you what your stories are about.

I write about time, mainly.

Time?

Yes.

Why?

What do you mean, why?

What the hell do you mean, time?

So much happens in it.

You're telling me that in life we have events.

Sort of. But it all adds up and things. You can't write a story, can't do anything at all, unless you've got a good idea about your time.

What gives someone a good idea about their time?

Ability not to waste it.

Oh.

I like to write about characters that use their time wisely.

So what do they do? Incredible things? Cure cancer write dictionaries fall in love travel Italy?

What? No.

You just said your characters use their time wisely.

None of those things mean someone uses their time wisely.

So what do you do to wisely use your time?

I just get by.

You're fuckin' morbid, I think.

Thank you.

10:40

You smell like cigarettes.

That's because I just smoked a cigarette.

Oh.

Want one?

We can't smoke inside.

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Because this hallway is so beautiful?

What if a smoke detector goes off?

What if it doesn't?

Okay.

So, want one?

No.

Why?

Seems a poor way to lose years.

You mean that in the literal sense?

Yes.

You think my habit will cost me years off my life.

Yes.

Fair enough.

That doesn't bother you?

I'm going to die someday, right? You must know that everyone dies.

Of course I know that everyone dies.

So why try to beat it?

Why walk faster toward it?

Because cigarettes taste fuckin' sweet.

Okay.

Does it bother you?

Why should it bother me?

I don't know. Because you worry about my lungs.

I don't have any particularly strong feelings of sentiment or otherwise, about your lungs.

That's so sweet.

Thank you.

10:40.

On the last Thursday of the semester he did not come and for six minutes she wondered where he was. This was odd. It wasn't part of the schedule.

After those six minutes of wondering were up she went into her writing professor's office and they talked for thirty minutes about the story she'd written that week. It was a story that she didn't even like. Then she went to another English class later in the day and an Introductory Biology one on Friday. She stopped wondering where he'd been during those six minutes. Never wondered about it again and she still does not know his name. She stopped wondering about him because it wasn't a part of the schedule and it would probably just be a great and tragic waste of time to wonder after him anyway.

KELLY CROSSON



Senior

Major: Political Science

Reading: Non-Fiction Essay

My name is Kelly Crosson and I am a Los Angeles native, preparing to graduate at the University of Michigan.

Title?

The heaving and wailing had managed to taper off little by little, each gasp for air landing almost exactly forty-five seconds apart. My eyes were swollen, practically screaming out of their sockets and sending throbbing pains through the back of my skull and down to the very tail of my spine.

As the sun rose, my blubbing became but faint echoes. Somewhere between the foot of my bed and my pillow at the headboard soaked in tears of shame, I found myself curled up within a blanket, legs tucked almost entirely into the crook of my neck, hiding from the very person I had humiliated the most—myself.

I grieved a life I did not have.

It was morning. And just like every other breakdown, the new day began just as it had before: me, alone, cold brew in hand, walking to work. Solace somehow finds me amongst the racks and piles of sweaters that tower and form walls around me, preparing for a day of meaningless tasks that yield rather meaningless results.

In my house, we call it “planting a seed,” scattering little pieces of ourselves along the beer-soaked floor and hoping that, with the right nutrients and care, something just might sprout. It was a nightly experiment: a tired yet honored practice, the results of which were to be recounted to the group the following morning over coffee and ringing hangovers. And sure enough, amongst the mosh pit of sweaty coeds and the hoards of highlighted sorority scalps posing by the block “M,” eye contact was initiated. As I left the safety net of my roommates gathered in a close-knit huddle around a single pitcher of vodka soda, I ventured toward the bar, leaving little pieces of myself along the way incase any one else caught my eye.

The net was cast wide.

But there he was. I’d only seen him a few times before, a phenomenon rather shocking considering there were only two bars in town I frequented. I was just the right amount of lubricated where talking seemed daunting but running away seemed like an opportunity lost. “I think you should buy me a drink,” I said. His eyes turned to meet mine, and, as the corners of his mouth slowly began to turn upwards, I let out a major sigh of relief. The seed had officially been watered.

In a way, I am my own seed, a small speck of life capable of becoming more. I was once suicidal. It took a while to admit that fantasizing my own funeral wasn’t exactly healthy, that picturing the eulogy my mother might give wasn’t making me feel any more loved, that imagining the tears that might fall from the eyes of all those who knew me didn’t make my relationships any more authentic, but I got there. I had lost myself down the spiraling drain of all the things I had wanted and didn’t seem to get: things I believed I wasn’t worthy enough to receive. All I wanted was someone to notice. I was nothing more than a wrecked car on the side of the highway, desperately waiting for someone to light up a flare.

But no one pulled to the shoulder; that other car never came.

Over the years, I’ve done a lot of growing. I take pills that clear the inescapable fog, acting as a headlight to illuminate the path ahead, one that once went dark. I’ve found a career path that excites me and have had several internships to prepare me for such an industry. I managed to pull myself from the wreckage, my funeral seemingly postponed. A move to the Midwest changed more than a time zone; trust fund wielding peers of my past were replaced with hardworking and compassionate friends: people who weren’t afraid to gamble on themselves and put their trust in one another. Behind a full head of blonde hair and the ever-morphing pigment of my blue eyes, it appears as if the ingredients for success are there.

I genuinely *want* to love the person I’ve become, but, when self-worth

at twenty-one years old is defined by only a few categories, autonomy often seems impossible.

I guess it began with having the right dolls, then it was a first kiss I had too late, big tits that never seemed to grow, a new nose my parents wouldn't buy, a consistent Skeeps hookup or dark fraternity basement love affair—they're all one in the same: surface-level characteristics by which success is measured at different times in our lives.

The conversation flits between mutual friends and his summer spent in my hometown. He asks me about who I am, but it's hard to decipher exactly what answer he's looking for. I play it safe and tell him about my future plans, ignoring for the moment that I once didn't want a future. *Sticky floor*. I'm afraid to talk about the very things that make me who I am. *Twelve-dollar pitchers of hard liquor*. I have a lot of scars, a lot of baggage, a story no one of the opposite sex has given himself the opportunity to decipher. *Block "M" in the distance*. I feel as if there be some stories that deserve a more becoming venue.

His hand moves to the small of my back as my head moves to the groove of his shoulder. Beneath the floorboards, a bulb starts to rise.

And with a few thrusts and moans, the deed is done, a transaction exchanged. The night turns into morning, our many limbs intertwined with one another. Suddenly two strangers are anything but. A flower has sprouted.

On nights like these, the *déjà vu* overcomes me. The staunch odor, a concoction of beer and perspiration, rises through the air. The people are all the same, ghosts of Tuesday nights' past. My eyes wander, scanning the room for my newly fertilized and sprouting flower. I want to believe the nutrients for growth are there: a skirt that perfectly hugs each curve, a cropped bodice that makes the most of what I have, my lips stinging from the tang of lime as I slowly lower the drink from my mouth. But it's not enough. I'm not enough.

The vodka floats within me; panic and confusion bubble to the surface. I attempt to make eye contact with a piercing glance so solemn; I can't

imagine that my eyes scream anything other than drunk and desperate. But just as every night that's come before, my eyes are unmet. Two people who were anything but strangers are now exactly that. A sprouting flower now shriveled.

Two raw bodies meet one another for the first time. But rather inexplicably, the first time always becomes the last, my body nothing but a test drive.

The only thing that ever seems to change is the very pair of eyes staring back at me.

In one moment, I am exactly who they want me to be, but, in the next, my somber eyes are met by nothing more than the outline of broad shoulders as their backs turn to face me. I am no longer deserving of so much as a "hello." Whatever I now possess, may it be the academic and career successes I have garnered; the charming vulnerability I have worked tirelessly to open up to others; the confidence I had managed to gradually to build with the help of new-found friendships; the life of my own that I was able to save—

It's not enough.

I had fostered all the growth I could.

Quantifying life and self-worth at twenty-one years old is complicated. While my parents and their friends may applaud me for the career accolades I have collected, these accomplishments are rendered rather meaningless in other, perhaps more important, contexts. In my house—in my world—days are filled with meaningless busy work and nights with flowing alcohol that, if you're lucky, will be bought by an admirer. I had *evolved* but apparently not enough to impress the very people whose opinions seemed to hold the most weight: faceless ghosts, their individuality rather irrelevant.

I had been flourishing. The suicidal, unhinged, and insecure person of my past was nothing but a passing image in my rear view. But in the means by which success is measured by those who inexplicably seem to matter the most, I have nothing. I am nothing but a seed left stranded on a beer-soaked floor.

CONNER DARLING



Junior

Major: Percussion Performance

Reading: Fiction Short Story

My passion for writing has only recently surfaced in the last few months or so. I am drawn to it as a form of open ended self expression and creativity. I am a percussion performance major, and music has enveloped every aspect of my time at Michigan. Writing serves both an escape from this, and as an opportunity to incorporate a new form of art making into what I already do.

Tadpoles

We sped down the hill on Brotenmire Avenue that we always wished would stretch on endlessly, whizzing past parked cars that turned into smudges of color against a canvas of lower middle class suburbia. I was on my 1995 ruby red Trek 87 bicycle, you were on your 1996 emerald green Schwinn S-20 Carbon, your hair flowed out behind you and danced in front of the sun on that clear and bright August afternoon. Against our best wishes, we reached the bottom of the hill and bounced over the dip in the curb in front of Brotenmire Park. There was no paved pathway, so we cut across the shredded rubber chips that created a soft bed for children to fall onto when they tumbled off the jungle gym. The battered swing set creaked with the whisper of the wind, but that day we weren't there to risk our limbs on the swings. We were headed into the woods, to the creek where I'd seen you for the first time, catching tadpoles with your hands.

Those woods were musty and fusty and strewn with fallen trees. We walked our bicycles by our sides along a path only you and I knew about,

snaking in and out of the trees among the undergrowth. You paused to look down at an ant hill and traced with your eyes a long line of ants extending in single file out from their fortress. Several ants were carrying scraps of food twice the size of their bodies. It reminded you of the old farm to market road that ran into town and the long line of cars that would get stuck behind one or two tractors just trying to move their equipment from one field to another.

We hiked over small hills and down into smaller valleys, crushing pinecones with the soles of our boots and occasionally sinking into the dew covered earth. I slipped on a muddy slope, you looked back at me and chuckled before putting out your hand to help me to my feet. I smiled at the back of your head, and the three freckles that formed a perfect line on the nape of your neck, only visible when you draped your hair over your shoulders.

We came to the first of many streams that spilled over our secret pathway. There we'd leave our bikes, leaning them up against a decaying stump. You crossed the stream with a graceful leap while I tossed a heap of branches and dead leaves over the bikes to conceal them from any troublemakers who might be wandering around back there. Looking back over the stream I recognized that smirk you made, and all the memories of me landing feet first or butt first in the river flowed through my mind. I took a few steps back, focused, and stumbled forward like an injured gazelle. I made it across dry enough. You smirked at my awkwardness. We paused on the other side to watch some water bugs floating in a group as if they were on a guided canoe trip. You said they were called back swimmers because they swim on their backs. It made sense to me.

We walked for a while, the sun rose in the sky and slowly peeked around the trees like a mother playing peekaboo with her child. You pointed out the names of different bugs we saw (Weevil, Beetle, Centipede, Sugar Ant, Stick bug, Grasshopper) and identified the families of the trees (Ash, Chestnut, Oak, Hemlock, Pine) giving each one a great big hug.

When we made it to our creek the tadpoles were already hidden under the ledges and tucked away in hidey-holes behind plant roots, they were expecting us. You stepped into the shallow bay and dug your hands into the muddy bank to try and drive some of the tadpoles to the surface. No luck, they had out smarted us today. Clearly disappointed you looked at me and said something about the tadpoles sleeping, you were probably right since you had a thing for amphibians and had checked out several books from the library on the subject.

We waded around in the water, enjoying the feeling of the cold mud seeping in between our toes and flowing over the tops of our feet, watching the murky clouds that emerged with each step. You sat down and splashed your hand around in a circle and looked at me like you wanted me to sit down with you, so I did. You smiled at me before using the weight of your arm to splash water into my face. It was icy and went up my nose. I

coughed and gagged and you laughed as the dirty water seeped down the back of my throat and dribbled out of my mouth.

We climbed out of the water and slipped our shoes on sockless, I pulled the bologna and cheese sandwiches that I had made for us out of my backpack and we sat down in the dirt to eat. You threw parts of your crust into the water and watched minnows swim up to take a nibble. You didn't believe in bribing animals in order to catch them, so we just watched.

My tongue licked away the last few bread crumbs from my lips. I ate faster than you so I sat and watched you take one small bite after another, your face turned away from me gazing out at the lush woods. The trees melded together into a single image. You were evidently in that sort of dazed headspace that you tangled yourself into when you wanted to get up and go somewhere new. I'd follow as usual, and on your cue we got up, swung our belongings on our back, and headed beyond the creek.

We walked for a while, the sun having completed its fluid journey up the sky was beginning its descent to the other side of the world. My legs had grown tired and I wanted to beg you to stop just for a moment to sit, but you kept on with unmatched energy. You were excited around every bend and over every hilltop.

Hours passed, we walked mostly in silence apart from your exclamations and rattling on about eastern grey squirrels and white tailed deer. Eventually, we came to a thinning out of the woods, and then an end to the tree line altogether. A great big hill lay off in the distance. The sun was setting over a field of long yellow grass, you brushed your hand against the tops of the blades, letting their thin points tickle your palm. I copied you, but being a little too ticklish, quickly stopped.

We trekked up the great big hill and looked out over a lake that lay on the other side. The night was clear and the stars were coming out and dancing brightly off the surface of the water. You laid down and I laid down next to you. We gazed up and counted the shooting stars, I saw fifteen but you were sure that I missed one, you were always trying to one up me.

I heard you fall asleep while my mind frantically bounced between all the things I intended to say that day but didn't. My body was restless, so I got up and brushed the dirt off of the back of my jeans, slipped on my boots, and walked down the hill towards the shore. The water was still other than a few small swarms of bugs parading over the surface. I wasn't sure what species they belonged to. They left small little indents in the water, too soft to send any ripples outwards. I looked at my reflection through the little bumps and saw a clear image of myself, alone with the moon and the stars and the wispy clouds.

I walked counterclockwise around the perimeter of the lake along a worn

down dirt path that ran just a few feet from the edge. I followed it comfortably, no thorny undergrowth to scrape my legs on, no trees to wind around. Just me and my heavy, uncoordinated footsteps stamping on the hard dirt, stumbling now and again on a sharp stone protruding from the ground.

Standing over you once more, I watched the rhythm of your breath rise and fall in your abdomen and listened to the thin stream of air brush against the inside of your nose. Your hair was flayed out from your head and your face glowed like the sun. Even in your sleep you had this carefree smile on your lips. I sat down next to you and picked at the dirt underneath my finger nails. I looked back at you, back at my finger nails, and laid down, my head on the damp grass resting at an angle, just inches away from your shoulder.

CLAIRE DENSON



Senior

Major: English, Creative Writing & Literature

Reading: Poetry

Claire Denson is a senior majoring in English through LS&A, and Creative Writing and Literature through the Residential College. She's an alum of the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program and has won their Caldwell Poetry Prize twice. She's been published in campus literary journals such as *Xylem*, *Fortnight*, and *The RC Review*. She's also been published in webzines, including *Hooligan Magazine* which has featured influential poets and musicians such as Mitski, Lora Mathis, and Clementine Von Radics. Claire is currently applying to graduate studies programs and serving as the Work Manager for a local cooperative house.

False, or Forgotten

I enter through a portal
shaped like the front door
of my fifth grade best friend's
house they burned down
and feel myself shoved
by 3-year-old hands
that feel like a stranger's
but look like my own
from a picture I remember
in a box in the basement
of my grandmother's
forever home.

This is where forgetting lives.

I visit these memories
 or are they dreams
 where cobwebs form
 over old bike keys
 and black widows crawl
 over my introductions
 to Great Aunt Joan and Nana Sylvia.
 I have no home here.
 My father's birthday in 2003
 plays cards with geometry
 proofs and algebraic equations.
 Tears leak from the ceiling
 shaped like my mother's eye.
 Pools of blood on the floor
 made of smut mags seep
 through the bottom of my shoes.
 Iron bars replace walls, and behind them
 live shadows I run from. I blink. Breathe.
 What I want to remember now
 I wanted to destroy when I knew.

Large Coffee

Pouring a brief but resonant sensation
 of "happy to be alive
 and well" into my mug
 on a crampy Tuesday morning

I drink it, slowly over
 a biography Plutarch wrote
 of a Roman man whose life
 revolved around the life
 of the man he killed,
 or at least that is how Plutarch
 presents Brutus.

In straining my body to catch
 a glimpse of you I wonder if
 you would do the same for me.
Do you?

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And Brutus was the most honorable of all
the murderers.

*Never get larger than a small
mug, or else you'll shake,*

I remind myself,
but it is too late.

Genesis

I met a funny man online
Who seemed maybe as strange as me
And I befriended him
And he befriended me
 to see my boobs
And he called me perfect
And I smiled.
And he called me his baby girl
And I called him daddy
He told me what to do and I listened
And I liked it.
But when I was sad I took a nap
And he went and he had dinner
With his daughters and with his wife
And I didn't cry
Because I didn't deserve to
And so I poured myself into poetry
The next morning when I woke up I got a text from my daddy
"Morning beautiful"
And my heart pretended to be full

The Wife of The Night Shift Worker

spends her days in thought
a relationship almost epistolary
with short notes sent into the void
of a text opened only in dark
hours when he's already gone.
He leaves the hour she sleeps,
drives in silence through the night.

They miss each other most
and only meet in dreams
but never share the same one.

Leaving Again

Packing for Athens,
I clean out my old
army green satchel
I carried that summer.
Inside there's sand
and a Coney Island credit
for the Comet ride
I didn't pay for, but went on
twice.

I don't feel much,
just something vague.

I heard you had surgery.
I heard you missed a comedy show,
the one that I love,
for a mild emergency.
I hope you're okay
medically, and otherwise.

Ghosts of Rejections Past

I still have dreams like those
nights when you in front of me
towering lift me in embrace
when you push me in your bed
and that bliss the taste like chocolate
covered cherries knowing the bitter
core knowing you love her
you cannot haunt me anymore
oh really yes really then what
about the others oh those old
things they weigh just as heavy
some nights well yes I suppose they
do

Your Friend First

He says *You're beautiful*
then gets on top of you.
You close your eyes,
and remember last week.
Even if we hook up sometimes,
I'll be your friend first.
Your Friend First grinds
his boner against
your hip bone.
Your Friend First says
You always leave me hanging.
You roll over and apologize
for all the hearts you've broken.
Your Friend First rolls
his eyes and says
I was just kidding.

i felt something so

i am going to stop eating
i am going to stop showering regularly
i am going to be thin and greasy and i will buy
too many dresses for my skinny body and every
other body will tell me how good my body looks
and i will not feel the compliment as directed at me
because it will not be my body, not really
just an experiment, a borrowed frame
i will live in this vessel and people will treat me differently
or i will perceive how they are treating me to
be different i will also perceive food as
toxic and i will kiss boys, maybe
and i will feel nothing and i will feel
at last some stability in feeling
this nothing and i will keep doing
what i am doing to feel nothing
and then i will feel something and i will
change my way of living again.

Black Hole Wrapped In Curls And A Bow

These thieves
look into my eyes
and try to find any love
to take.

They scour my body
for a heart
digging past promising ribs,
finding only empty space
before their wrists snap
from exhaustion, between
sculpted bone.

I am well versed in their
sweaty palms searching,
saying, *don't worry, I know it's here
somewhere.*

I warn them that I am empty
but they do not listen;
They think they know better
than I know myself.

I am a black hole wrapped
in curls and a bow. I'm not afraid
to cry softly into your lap
while you fall asleep sitting on the sofa.

I disappear before you wake up.

Oral Fixation

I want you in your room
to touch my cheek
on the inside
with your index and middle
fingers and I want to

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stare at you like

this is what I'm good at

I want to say

that I am good

at you putting your

fingers in my mouth

by sucking the dirt

and tasting every particle

in small corners where skin creases

I want to taste the difference

between your nails and flesh

and I want you to understand

that I can taste your

multitudes in my mouth

I can decipher and delineate

with a muscle but

you're not a poet

and you're not damaged

enough to want

to stick your fingers in

a sad girl's mouth and see it

as a poetic gesture so I suck

my own fingers I bite

my own hand while on
your falling sheets I break
skin and bleed and I mark
your cheek on the outside
with my palm and five
fingers *this is because*
I hate you I say
this is because I hate
you I kiss

Bear Inside

Sleeping naked next to me
snorting and hairy
I check his breath
staring at the off-
beat rhythm until my
eyes slowly close and
open to the sight of a bear
large as my house, my
sheets barren I shiver
alone in the corner
the blind spot between
windows where he waits
each stir in the sound
of his sleep my fear

TARIK DOBBS



Junior

Major: General Studies and Art & Design

Reading: Poetry

Tarik Dobbs is an emerging filmmaker and poet. He is a junior pursuing a dual-degree in General Studies and Art & Design. His hometown, Dearborn, MI, serves as the backdrop for much of his work. His work explores a reconciliation of identity: what it means to be queer, Arab, and Muslim in the U.S. This past semester, Tarik won a Hopwood Award for his poem sequence, "Men from Mankind Who Sought Refuge in Men from the Jinn."

A Diaspora Poem

O' White boy in my English 300 class,
I too wonder how many poems
will be written about diaspora

O' pan-Arab diaspora children, do you see the blue eye'd in my English class
You see his disregard, absolving himself
he finds your story tired, after all

CNN calls you the Lost Generation
A bunch of soot-covered carcasses with PTSD
Without Snapchat or Instagram, but maybe Twitter

O' Diaspora children,
 the Facebook photo frames couldn't save you
 the Upworthy videos couldn't save you
 the New York Times 360-degree videos couldn't save you
 the U.N. couldn't save you
 E.U. couldn't save you
 No Saudi money for you

You were patient though, strong, still
 you didn't want to go, and I didn't want
 Jeffrey to write about you,
 Remember, he said
 You lost your mind/body/soul in Aleppo
 Self-indulgent, and I wonder
 if you know my aunt or she knows you

They taught her al-ingliziya inside the mop closet
 in the immigrant/poor/blighted D.C. elementary
 I'm sorry, habibti, no room for you in the closet today

They took you to Germany and hid you/in shackles
 for your own safety and they spit on your face and smile
 Whether you spoke German/English/French, it didn't matter
 you did it anyway

O' Diaspora Baby, are you ISIS?
 A Fox News talking bite?
 What's left of you after reddit/4chan/the hill dot com

O' Land of Poptarts
 Mickey D's
 and Ford Motor Company
 and Citigroup, and GE, and Bank of America

O' Land of Israeli Chickpeas
 Land that doesn't sing our songs
 Eid in Michigan's winter
 is still no Christmas

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O' UAE, lam araka mundu mudda
Long time no see
La afham
I don't understand

Petroleum products and desalination plants, all alone
The desert is dying but you hold onto
an oasis

O' Diaspora Baby,
I wonder if all of the hotels in Dubai
could open up for you

LAURA DZUBAY



Junior

Major: English

Reading: Fiction

Laura Dzubay is a junior studying English and creative writing. Her work has previously appeared in *Bad Pony*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, and others, and last year received a Hopwood Underclassmen Fiction Award. She loves camping and exploring new places, and her favorite topics of conversation are the Beatles, the “Havana” music video, and Anna Akhmatova.

Griefers

This is what happens the night Eames’s sister comes back to town. Cue Bucky over by the pinball machines with a horde of friends watching him, two or three guys sucking on sodas and hanging over his shoulders. Two or three guys isn’t really a horde, but Bucky has a way of making it feel like there are more people around him than there actually are. His broad shoulders stick up all sharp when he plays, because he’s the best pinball player in Cherry and because he’s concentrating, hard.

Cue me, behind the prize rack, wearing a purple *Dreamscape Arcade* tee shirt. I just finished setting up a birthday party and my fingers still kind of smell like pizza, even though they’re clean. People bring me their tickets from Skee Ball and Donkey Kong and I let them pick their prizes.

It’s a Thursday night and the line is coming and going, sometimes with clusters of people I know from school. *Dreamscape* is popular in the summer, because the pool closes at five and there’s nothing really to do after-

ward, unless you've got a car and you want to drive to Lake Sewell thirty-five miles away. People congregate by the soda machine and the air hockey tables, and if they stay here late enough sometimes Rodney, my manager, will let them play laser tag at a discount. Eames is here with his friend Mickey, both of them sort of dopes, taking turns hunching over Galaga like it's the only thing on this Earth that ever mattered. Over by the soda machines are a couple of cheerleaders, Penny Fairday and a girl I used to date for a little while, Brenda James.

That's sort of how we're all laid out at ten-thirty or so, when the glass door swishes open and Eames's sister walks in.

His sister is Maria. Maria Alvarez Eames, and she's different from him in every possible way. While he's short enough to be made fun of for it, Maria is tall and slender. He's always wearing stained shirts from some cartoon movie or videogame or another, but when Maria walks in she's wearing a soft peach sundress that stops a little above her knees. Also Eames has two eyes, or four if you count his square black glasses. Maria has only one.

She looks around for a minute with her one normal eye and her black eyepatch, then walks over to the Galaga machines to watch her brother. The place doesn't all change in one moment; it's more like a succession of moments as one by one, and group by group, we notice her. Brenda James and Penny Fairday shift a little where they stand, twirling the straws in their cherry sodas, and straighten off the walls where they've been leaning. Bucky's shadows, Dane and Luca, see her at about the same time, and they both nudge Bucky right as he finishes off a new high score at the pinball machine. He turns and he looks over at Maria like there's something scary waking up in him, and then the three of them start moving as a group across the arcade floor.

"Hi Maria," says Mickey and he starts to step toward her for a hug, then catches himself halfway through and sways back with his hand closed like a fist. Mickey is a freckly mess with a horrible crush on pretty much any girl who happens to get near him.

"Hi, Mickey." Maria stops by the chair where her brother, Eames, is sitting, his eyes still locked into the dark pixelly screen, his fingers clenched around the controllers. "You gonna say hi to me or what?" she asks.

"In a second."

He's about to take out a fleet of enemy ships. I'm leaning over the counter at this point, watching as much as I can see. There's not a lot that really goes on in Cherry, so whenever something unusual comes up—like this beautiful girl showing up in the arcade after none of us have seen her for years—there's only so much ordinary stuff that can happen before somebody decides to step up and address things. Also, Maria had two eyes the last time

we saw her.

She steps in front of the screen, blocking her brother's view.

"Maria, move. Knock it off. *Maria*."

She throws out both arms for a hug, just as he *game overs*. He rolls his eyes, drops the controller, and hugs her. Eames isn't as stricken as the rest of us are to see Maria; he's her brother and he's probably seen her more recently than we have, and he would've known she was coming. Only he didn't tell us because none of us ever really talk to Eames.

Maria lives with her father down in Minneapolis—she and Eames's parents did one of those split-custody things people sometimes do when they get divorced. She used to come to Cherry every so often for weekends, just like Eames would sometimes go down to Minneapolis. So they've always spent a lot of time being toggled back and forth between their parents, sometimes together, sometimes separate. But Maria's lived in Cherry before—the longest amount of time would've been back in middle school, when she and Bucky dated for a couple of weeks. I don't know how official they were, but I know it's the closest Bucky's ever come to a real girlfriend in his life. That was the last time she was here, and she didn't tell any of us a single thing about when she was planning on leaving, not even Bucky. She just up and left.

Anyway it's been two, three years since then. Common knowledge is that their parents got into some big fight or something and decided to stop trading their kids and talking to each other at all for a while, but here she is now which means they must've made up, and Lord has she grown. She's almost taller than Pen Fairday now even though she's a year younger than all of us. Her long hair hangs damp against the sundress, which means she must've just gotten done swimming in Eames's mom's backyard pool.

So now she's good and established herself, she's said hi to Eames. Penny and Brenda are still playing it cool by the soda machine, but it's about this time that Bucky comes strutting over, his shadows at his shoulders. He puts a hand on one of the machines right next to Maria, leans into it and says, "I can't even remember the last time you were here."

Maria gives him a little smile. She looks so perfect, with her drying sundress and her bare shoulders and flip flops. "I can't even remember who you are," she says.

That ruffles him a little. It's easy to tell when Bucky's bothered, even when he's trying not to show it, because his face goes all pinchy. "Yeah, you do," he says. "Middle school? We went to the Jiffy Treet a few times? And the lake?"

I never knew they'd gone all the way out to the lake, but it must've been

quite the time, because Bucky grins through every single one of his yellow teeth when he says the word, and something changes in Maria's face. She definitely remembers. All the same she tilts her head lightly, lets her damp hair flip back behind her shoulder and tries to play it off like she doesn't. "Hmmm."

"C'mon," says Bucky, almost wheedling now. "I play videogames with your brother, like, every day!"

"No, you don't."

"The hell I don't!"

"He said you were a total cheater. That you only play to mess things up for other people."

"Not a cheater," says Eames, even though nobody's paying attention to him. "A griever."

"Whatever," says Maria.

He's right, Bucky is a griever—which is to say he gets out a kick out of making sure other people don't have fun. He plays games not for the winning, just for the sake of sabotaging them. I know he does it because little kids will come running up to the counter every so often, begging me or Rodney to kick him out because it's not fair, but there's not a whole lot we can really do—it's not like it's against the rules.

I'm so preoccupied watching Bucky's face go red from across the arcade, I don't even notice Penny Fairday standing at the counter in front of me until she rings the little bell for service. She cocks her head at me like she's annoyed, her milky golden hair spilling out from where it was tucked behind one of her ears. Really quick I swap her tickets out for two jumbo lollipops.

"You know, she's only in town for a couple of days," she says.

My eyes have already gone back to the Galaga machines, but I snap them back over to her. "Sorry, Pen. What?"

She sighs and turns away. "Never mind." Then she glides back across the arcade and hands Brenda one of the lollipops. I used to have quite a crush on Penny, up until about the very second Maria walked in.

Now that I'm free to keep listening in, I can see that they're making a deal.

"So whichever team wins," says Maria, "that's who I'll hang out with tonight. And you gotta play fair."

"What if I don't want to hang out with you?" Eames asks peevishly.

Mickey shoves him. "C'mon, man, *I do.*"

Eventually they settle down, four people and one game: *Call of Duty*, Bucky versus Eames with Luca and Mickey backing them up respectively. Once they're off, Maria watches them go at it on the screens for maybe five seconds, then gets bored and saunters away across the arcade, through the darkness with the colors of all the different games taking turns lightly on her face. She keeps walking, slowly, all the way up to me.

"Is this where I order a drink?" she asks.

"No," I say, staring at her. I want to ask her what happened to her eye, but I'm sure we all do and it feels like it would be rude.

"Oh." She smiles and doesn't leave—I think she can tell that I like her, which makes me feel really dumb, but I can't help it. "You're funny-looking," she says. "I don't think I remember you."

I'm not that funny-looking really, it's just that I've got acne and my nose is really bent. Noticeably, like a witch's. I fight the urge to tell her she's the one with only one eye. "I don't hang out with Eames all that much," I say. "I mean, your brother," because all we ever call him is Eames and I can't actually remember his first name.

"That makes two of us," she says.

I can't really say anything sympathetic—I have a sister, Jo Ann, but we're fine, I mean we actually hang out and stuff. So instead I say, "You want any tickets or anything?" Which is the dumbest, squarest possible thing to say, but she's looking right at me and it's all I can think of.

She looks around idly, then down at the prizes—little plastic army men and Tootsie Rolls and pouches of invisible ink—but there's something in her expression like she's seeing something else instead. "I'm sort of cold," she says.

"You go swimming or something?"

She nods, smiling quickly back up at me. "My mom's pool. It's the first thing I like to do when I get here."

She keeps looking at me, and I feel kind of self-conscious all of the sudden. There's nothing I can do about the air conditioning, that's Rodney's domain, but then I remember the sweatshirt tied around my waist. It's an old evergreen one that says CHERRY HIGH SCHOOL across the front in white block letters. I untie it quickly and offer it to her in a big lumpy handful. "Would this help?"

She grins. "Thanks." She pulls it over her head and stretches her arms

a little awkwardly through the sleeves, until she's clutching the ends in her fists, the way girls do. It's a little big for her, and the end of her sundress barely peeks out from underneath it. "So," she says, "where *can* I get a drink?"

So I lead her over to the soda machine, which is free now because Brenda and Penny are crowding around the *Call of Duty* machines with Dane. Eames and Bucky are going at it with their respective sidekicks, shooting their enemies' hearts out, smashing each other to pieces without even making eye contact. Bucky's face is drawn tight, and Eames is glaring into the bright colors. Brenda looks bored and Penny is looking at me, and trying not to show it.

I get Maria a strawberry soda and then, just because I feel like it, another one for myself, and I don't charge either of us. Then we go back to the prize counter and I'm just grabbing a jumbo lollipop when Rodney comes over, a folder in one hand and his Dreamscape Arcade tee shirt tucked into his slacks.

"Excuse me," he says to Maria. His voice is thin and grating. "You gonna pay for that soda?"

"Relax, Rodney," I say.

"I can't relax. I'm the manager." Which, to his credit, is true—he's twenty-three and this job is his only source of income, so to speak. He looks between Maria's eye and her eye patch, then down at her flip flops. Her toenails are shiny with chipped red nail polish. "Are you planning on playing laser tag?" he asks. "You know, you're gonna need close-toed shoes if you want to play laser tag."

"What if she wore socks?" I ask. "Would socks be okay? Here." I bend over and take off my shoes, feeling awkward as hell but it's too late to stop now. I take off my socks and hand them to Maria, who grins and puts them on as I pull my shoes back on my bare feet.

Rodney actually laughs at that a little, which surprises Maria and makes me smile. Rodney's like that—he takes a lot of pride in working at Dreamscape and as a result he can be a little uptight, but he's not a bad manager all-in-all. He practically grew up at Dreamscape, spending all his free time playing Dig Dug and laser tag here when he was a kid, and sometimes you'll get a glimpse of that.

Then he seems to catch himself. "I wouldn't put it past you, kid, no indeed, I would not," he rambles to me, without me really knowing what he's talking about. Then he tells Maria, "You just make sure you pay for that soda." He hurries away after that, and Maria actually smiles and high-fives me. Which I take to mean we've circumvented the establishment or what-

ever, we've won.

Over on the other side of the arcade, Bucky and Eames play that shooting game for so long that you get the sense they've forgotten what they were playing for to begin with. Bucky and Luca keep wrecking the game in random ways, undercutting the fairness—shooting random people, barricading important doors, hurting themselves just as much as Eames and Mickey—and they keep having to start over or rematch, each time promising that this time it'll be a fair fight.

Meanwhile I talk to Maria. She says she likes Minneapolis but wishes she knew her stepdad better. She tells me her second eye didn't get clawed out by a stray dog or by her father or anything crazy like that, but that it just got sick and a doctor took it out, simple as that. The eye patch looks a little less mysterious and dark after she says that, a little friendlier, plus I feel good because nobody else knows that right now but me. She says she wants to go to college to study marine biology, and I can't even believe she's thinking about college already, since none of us are thinking about it yet and she's a year younger than us.

At one point Eames comes over. He glares at me as if I've somehow done something to hurt him, then tells Maria, "I don't want to play anymore. Bucky doesn't play fair, and it's not fun anyway. We're gonna call it a tie."

"If it's a tie, then I won't hang out with either of you," Maria says.

"Maria..."

"Rules are rules!"

He looks at her for a moment, then groans loudly and heads back over to the *Call of Duty* machines. Back to the game, to win some time with his sister.

We keep talking as if he'd never even come over. She asks me questions. I don't have too much to tell her but she asks anyway, about my parents and my sister, about how I like living in Cherry—which I do, as far as I can tell. She asks me for gossip, so I tell her everything I know about Bucky—all the gross things he's ever said to Brenda and Penny and other girls at school, and his horrible dad and how he lives on the East Side—because he's just about the only person I don't care about hurting with gossip. I tell her he's good at pinball but that he's been a griefer as long as he's been alive. I tell her about the suffering that hangs around him like a cloud: the time he said the N word in social studies and didn't apologize, and the time he wrecked my sister Jo Ann's Halloween costume with paint from the art room, after my mom worked hard on it for weeks. I even share with her the locker-room knowledge shared by every guy at school, the way Bucky's bare torso is speckled front and back with grey circlets, each one shaped like the end

of a cigarette. At school we swap regular legends about Bucky's home life: legends, I tell her clearly, only myths to keep us busy.

"The scar thing is true," she says.

"So you do remember?"

She nods, sucking on the straw of her soda. It's almost empty and you can hear the ice at the bottom. "He's a shitty guy," she says.

We refill our sodas. When Rodney's in his office, we play two-person laser tag, ducking behind barricades, sneaking around corners, shooting each other and giggling when we get hit instead of feeling anything. We challenge each other in arcade games. We don't play Dance Dance Revolution because it's right near where the others are all clustered and we don't want them to remember us, but we play Skee Ball and we win enough tickets to fill up a whole plastic bag with candy at the prize counter. I like Skee Ball, the way the white balls roll so hard over the wood and click-clack together and clunk when they fall through the targets. They remind me of crystal balls and a little, I'm afraid to admit, of Maria's missing eye, of the cloudy blank space that must be what's hidden right under her eye patch.

Around two, my shift ends and me and Maria go outside. I need to help Rodney close, but I tell him I'll be back in a minute. There's nothing but parking lot outside the Dreamscape, crummy asphalt facing the road and some nearby strip malls, basically a lot of gray. We sit on the curb and sort through our plastic bag of winnings.

"I'll trade you a Jolly Rancher for two Tootsie Rolls," I say.

"Excuse you," she says. "I value my Tootsie Rolls."

"More than I value my Jolly Ranchers?"

"I'm pretty sure I won all of these, anyway," she comments, smiling a little as she picks through the bag. "Remind me again what you brought to the Dig Dug table, exactly, other than moral support?"

I'm about to tell her she's undervaluing my talents and I actually brought a hell of a lot to the Dig Dug table, but then Rodney kicks the rest of them out, and through the doors they spill: Bucky and Eames and the girls and the other guys. Eames looks furious. Actually, they all do.

"It's not *fair!*" shouts Eames.

Bucky's grinning like a maniac. "Life isn't fair."

"But that was supposed to be!"

"I thought you didn't wanna hang out with her anyway," says Dane, in a

really taunting voice for someone who wasn't even playing. None of them are even looking at me and Maria, they're all too wrapped up in their own drama.

"Of course I do, she's my sister!"

"I've been here all night," says Maria sharply. She doesn't move from the curb next to me, a Jolly Rancher wrapper crinkling open between her fingers.

"I came over to you," says Eames, facing her now. "I *came*. And you said to go away." Then I notice his lower lip is trembling a little, and I think, poor Eames, he's just a kid through and through. What a dope. Always acting like he's too cool for his little sister, only because that's better than the other way around.

Maria shrugs. "You gotta learn to stick up for yourself." Then she stands up, and automatically I stand with her.

Eames looks like he doesn't really know what to say—he's just scowling, still, like the world's cheated him out of something behind his back. Dane and Luca are doing what shadows do—hanging around, background smiles, they knew they'd win but haven't really been in this for anything serious. Then Bucky takes a couple of steps toward Maria, toward us. "C'mon," he says, grinning. He's standing right under the neon Dreamscape sign, and his face looks unnaturally bright. "I won, now let's go hang out. You said you would."

"That was, like, a billion rematches ago," she says lazily. "Besides, I found something better to do." My heart goes all warm when she says that, and I smile before I can stop myself.

I can see Bucky's face going hot and red, and it occurs to me that this might be the first time in years anyone's just decided out of nowhere they didn't feel like hanging out with him. It gives me a little pleasure seeing him shut down like this. Then I see him stalk over toward us with his hands balled up into fists.

"You think you can play a guy like that?"

"Hey!" Eames runs over, jumps between Bucky and us—I guess me and Maria are standing now—and shoves Bucky. "Back off. I'll fight you!"

"I can't fight you," Bucky spits. "You're half my height."

"Seems like that should make it easier," Eames says boldly.

For a second I wonder if they're going to do it. Really go at each other, but in person this time, in real life. They're definitely mad enough. But then they back down—it's hard to say who backs down first, it's less a movement thing and more just an obvious feeling that settles over everyone at once,

that they're not going to do it.

"You guys are so lame," says Brenda finally.

"Tell me about it," says Bucky, looking at Eames and Mickey with flat-out scorn.

"All of you. Let's go, Pen."

One of the shadows drove them all here—Luca, I think—but Brenda starts strutting off anyway, her shoulders high and square. Penny Fairday starts to follow her, but stops right before she passes me.

"We still on for that movie?" she asks quietly.

I completely forgot. I told Pen I'd take her to the Rave this weekend to see a movie, any movie she wanted. Brenda is rolling her eyes—she broke up with me last summer because I don't have very many aspirations and because of my witch-nose, and she clearly can't see why Penny would want to get with a guy like that.

I can feel Maria watching me, and even though Maria will be gone by the end of this weekend it doesn't feel like that to me, it feels like she'll be here forever. All the same I know it would be a jerk move to leave Penny out to dry like that, so I say, "Sure, Pen. I'll let you know."

The two girls walk off, toward the main road to call a taxi or maybe just to walk home. It's a warm summer night and none of us live very far.

Suddenly Mickey says, "*Game over, man. Game over!*" He says it in the same high-pitched voice that comes over the speaker system at the end of laser tag, and he must think this is really funny because as soon as he says it he bends over giggling.

Bucky looks at him with so much distaste, the air itself feels different. Then he looks over at Eames.

"C'mon, Bucky," says Dane. "Let's get out of this dump."

But Bucky has resolved himself to Eames. I can tell. He thinks Eames is a loser, he always says so. A stained-shirt loser whose parents both hate him and who can't play pinball worth anything, who isn't tall enough to ride a rollercoaster, who can't run more than a quarter mile at a time without keeling over. And now—"You know," he says, "your sister's a real bitch."

Maria by my side has gone tense. Eames fidgets, his mouth hanging open like he doesn't quite know what to say.

Then Bucky's on him. I mean he straight-up tackles Eames to the ground.

Maria screams and turns instinctively inward to me, covering her eyes against my chest and clutching my tee shirt. I've never heard her scream like that before, but then again, it occurs to me, I guess I've only really known her this one night. Eames screams, too, less loudly, he just sort of gargles and cries out a bunch and thrashes up against Bucky, trying to punch back. It's sort of pitiful to watch. Mickey starts shouting *Leave him alone! Get off of him!* But the shadows are giggling and Bucky's still going, punching ruthlessly and almost without aiming, smashing Eames further and further into the cold, real asphalt.

"Hey! Hey!"

At first I don't know where the voice is coming from, because Luca and Dane are still laughing and I'm utterly frozen, and Maria is crying into my Dreamscape shirt. Then I see a figure sprinting out through the front door of the arcade and toward us, wilder and faster than I ever would've seen coming. It's Rodney.

"Hey! Hey! Heyheyheyheyhey—"

It's as if he can't think of any other words. He grabs Bucky by the back of his shirt collar first, then latches onto his arms and pulls him back up off of Eames. He shoves him away and bends down to see if Eames is okay. Bucky stands there panting, brushing his hands off on his jeans.

Mickey and Rodney both help Eames to his feet. He's not hurt that bad really, now that we've got a clear look at him: his lip is cut and bleeding and there's a bruise smeared into one of his eyes, but he looks fine other than that.

"The hell is wrong with you?" Rodney spits at Bucky, letting go of Eames and stepping away from him. Then he remembers what he's representing and draws himself up, even though his purple shirt is untucked from his pants now and a little rumpled. "We don't tolerate that sort of thing here. Not at Dreamscape."

It's like Bucky doesn't even hear him. He's glaring at Maria. "You deserved everything," he hisses. "Remember at the lake—"

Maria breaks away from me suddenly and shouts, "You *asshole!*"

"*Everything.* I hope you lose another eye."

"Hey!" says Rodney loudly. "You hear what I said or what? Get out of here!"

"Come on," Bucky says to Dane and Luca, contemptuously, like he can hardly bear to look at the rest of us anymore. "Let's go. She's ugly now anyway," he adds, loud enough for everyone to hear.

They pile into Luca's car and rev the engine a whole bunch, so loud it's almost scary. Then they speed past us so fast and sudden that Eames and Mickey have to practically dive to get out of their way before they hit them.

"Jesus." Rodney exhales. He bends down where Maria and I had been sitting, like he's too tired to stand anymore, and then he lifts our bag of candy and starts picking through it.

Maria reaches up instantly, forcefully wipes the tears from her face using the sleeve of my sweatshirt.

"Assholes," says Eames decisively, turning to Maria. He sticks out his tongue, licks some of the blood off his lips.

Maria rolls her single eye, as if disgusted, and doesn't look at him. "Don't you two have a game of Dungeons & Dragons to be playing or something?"

Eames and Mickey both bristle at that, in a way that almost makes me feel bad. Maria tugs down the end of her sundress, which still looks awkward with my old green sweatshirt pulled over the top of it.

"You're not coming home?" asks Eames.

"Not right *now*. I do what I want, I don't care about Bucky." There's a pause, and then she looks at him, miffed. "What are you waiting for? Go get some Band-Aids out of Mom's pantry or something. I'll see you at home." Then she softens a little and says, more quietly, "I'm really sorry he punched you."

The kid looks just about heartbroken. But he says nothing, because I guess he's learned nothing. "Okay," he says, while Mickey slings an arm around his shoulders and silently scowls at Maria. "Okay, I'll see you at home."

Then Eames and Mickey head out in the same direction Brenda and Penny went off in, disappearing soon after them into the darkness. Now I'm alone with Maria in the empty parking lot, with Rodney still sitting there on the curb in front of the main doors, and I'm just starting to remember I'm supposed to go back inside eventually. Rodney is eating some of our Tootsie Rolls under the light of the Dreamscape sign. I open my mouth to say I don't know what, and then Maria says, "Is there a CVS near here? I want some gum."

The chilliness of the night is starting to get to me—not at my skin, but deeper somehow, under my ribs. "There's one up the road," I say. "I can walk you."

"That's okay," she says. "I know you've got to finish closing."

I'd ditch work in a second to stay with her, but for some reason, with her looking straight up at me like this, I can't find the words to say this. All I can say is, "It's so dark. It's not safe."

"It's safe for me." She says it in a way that makes me want to ask her some sort of question. Then she arches up on her tiptoes, leans in, and kisses me, so lightly, on the lips.

So lightly, she leans in, she kisses me. On the lips.

Her face is soft and smooth. I don't have time to touch it before she pulls away. "I'll see you around, okay?" she says.

Okay, I think—but I don't manage to say this aloud, either, and this time I'm glad. To say it, to say anything, would've felt too much like I was sealing something in. When will I see you around? And what will happen if I ever see you? And will I get my sweatshirt and my socks back? Now that we're not touching anymore, she looks different somehow and I feel like I've broken out of something, like when you leave a movie theater in the middle of the day and you remember, suddenly, what all is a dream and what isn't.

And even as she walks backward across the parking lot and then waves at me from the dimly lit street, I can't help but feeling a little bit like I'm the one that got played here, after everything. My shoes are kind of scraping against my heels after all that time without my socks on. I try not to think about this, because I've still got that bag of candy if I can get it back from Rodney and because she kissed me. I can hear crickets. I'm not sure where they're coming from because there's nothing all around me but pavement, but now that everyone's gone I can hear them and I know they're there, live things. And suddenly I realize my heart is beating really hard as Maria disappears from sight and I stand there, too far below for stars to see, listening out for the crickets as though it was me all along they were speaking to.

RAVEN EADDY



Junior

Major: Creative Writing

Reading: Poetry

I am an Ann Arbor native. I have always loved writing but my love for it grew my sophomore year of college when I took a creative writing class and then the next year I decided to major creative writing. Hobbies include: people watching.

a helpful stranger

a man stops me in the street
in the middle of the crosswalk
and says

 "excuse me,
 you have something on your mind"

he proceeds to make a wiping
gesture across his forehead
i do it too

 "a little to the left" he says

i wipe again

 "there you go, you've got it"

i thank him

Trauma

I have died again
 I thought I would not be able to make it to my funeral
 That I too would be right there in the ground
 With my mother standing over the hole
 Her baby was about to disappear into
 My families tears making the earth beneath their feet soggy
 So that they too slowly sink into the ground with me
 But instead
 I have gotten to attend my own funeral.
 I was the only one in attendance
 I stood over the shell of myself
 And brought her into the forest
 So that she could decompose peacefully
 I remember her
 Thanking God that she existed
 Because she paved the way for
 Me.

BiPolarcoaster 1

Sifting through thoughts
 Like pre-broken glass to salvage pieces
 That can be glued together to make something
 That was not intended
 Sweep up the rest with a broom
 Scrapping glass across the floor
 Amazed at the twisted colors and shapes
 That someone else may call abstract but
 You just call crazy
 You discard all of it
 And don't write again for what feels like a month
 Because now you are on the part of the bipolarcoaster
 Where it shoots down
 Your seatbelt unfastens
 And your whole body is chucked under that blue fun goo
 They make in elementary school
 Except this goo's air bubbles are your captured sense of creativity
 For a second you try to pop them
 But then you realize that's second priority
 Because you can't even breath
 So you just struggle for a while

Café Shapiro Anthology 2018

And you can't get out
But somehow you are not dead
So you just lay there
Until that giant metal claw, Prozac Blue
Pulls you out
Goo sticking to your body
Makes a snapping sound as it tears away
And plops to the surface
You are shaking gasping for air
And set down on higher ground by the steady hand of lithium
You run to find the nearest laptop
To write about your experience
And it's funny because you know
That sooner or later
You will take alcohol's
Soft white gloved hand
And you both will teeter
Up the platform
To get back on
And your buddy will say
"I will wait for you down here. Get on you'll love it"
Maybe alcohol won't even be what sets me off though

Pocket Change

It would be cool if we got paid to worry
Every stomach spasm worth \$2.50
Every exhale in attempt regain control \$1.45
Every bout of hand wringing \$1.00
\$3.00 for each piece of skin bitten off the inside of your mouth

I'm not asking for much, I would just like some compensation
For what I do best

It would be cool if we got paid for making small talk
25 cents per "How are you"
\$1.00 per every fake smile forced upon the face
\$5.00 for laughing a laugh you know is not your own

Something so painful shouldn't come cheap

Gold Digging

Picking under my fingernails
As if the answers to my problems
Lie in the dirt

Inspecting every single fleck
For an inkling of the truth

Hand Sweat

If I remove my hands from my pockets
The room will flood with anxious hand sweat
So I will just keep them here

Breakfast in bed

Eggs, sunny side up and hashbrowns
Smear on the left corner of your thin sheet
Orange juice to suck out of your comforter
Soon, you will be full

Is This Just Writer's Block?

You go to where there
Once was a rushing river
Pail in hand you scoop
Even though you see nothing
But sediment
Hoping that
Maybe
Your eyes
Are telling you lies
You put the pail
To your lips
And you get a mouth full of dust

Suicide Pact

On November 19, 2017

My friend and I made a pact to never converse with you
We sat on her couch, me 5 shots past sober
And her with 5 shots but still sober cause of a genetic predisposition
We wrapped our pinkies around one another
Promised each other we would not
Send ourselves backwards off the edge of the earth

It's funny how we pinky swear
It's funny when we make promises,
We wrap our weakest finger with another's
Why don't we swear with the thumbs?
The strongest most vital component
Of the human hand

As soon as we made this promise
Part of my being quivered
Under the weight of this

Promising someone I love
That I no longer see you as an option
Made the world seem a lot bigger

BiPolarcoaster 2

I have a father
Who even though I am grown
Tosses me into the air like baby

I have a father who is a superhero
Who constantly forgets his strength

He'll whisper
1,2,3
Too quiet for me to hear so that I am surprised
When he launches me into the air

I barrel past clouds
Hit the wing of a plane
It crashes
I pass through the jet stream

Hair blown back
I'm a bullet
My target undefined

But I am determined to touch a star this time
I see a satellite
I have made it

Then gravity calls me back down
That's when I fall
So fast my clothes catch fire

I almost hit another plane but don't
I punch through clouds

I have a father
Who tosses me into the air like a baby
And just like he'll forget he's a superhero
He'll forget that he has tossed me in the air
I look for him when I pass the clouds
He is never there
Instead of being caught
I bore into the ground
Dirt flying up
Getting stuck in between my teeth
I end up in the mantle
Hot molten burning
Fire becomes my blood
Spreading its way through my body
I look up from hell and see a hole
And I know that it is my job
To climb my way back up
So that I can be on level ground again
Hopefully my father will be nowhere near

GIULIANA EGGLESTON



Senior

Major: Creative Writing & Literature

Minor: Business

Reading: Fiction

Giuliana Eggleston is a senior majoring in RC Creative Writing and Literature, with a minor in Business. Her writing focuses on women, violence and sexuality.

Sometimes You Are Followed But Usually You Aren't

I turn a corner and the footsteps keep pace behind me. The night air is crisp, easy to breathe, but I'm beginning to feel suffocated by the darkness. The only light trickles down sparingly from the dull glow of the moon, not even enough to make out the end of the street. The path devolves to shadows, and I'm not convinced there's any street there at all.

Their steps echo mine as our feet slap wet cement. I haven't looked back yet, and I don't know that I can. I picture a man in a long dark coat stained in odd places, gut rounded from beer and teeth stained from cigarettes. He may have a knit cap, pushing down greasy hair that frizzes out to the sides in wiry tufts, but sparse in a way that makes it clear his health is declining. His hand placement would be strategic, one hand in his pocket holding an unknown object, while the other hand stroked down the front of the jacket.

I don't picture a woman, even though at this point I have no idea who is behind me. I don't know, but really I do. It's never a woman when I'm walking home alone at night.

The trees lining the sidewalk grow more crowded on this street—a magical view in the daytime when sunlight filters through the winding branches, now a natural cage closing out the light of the moon above me, trapping me in the dark. The wind howls as it rips through the street, cold fingers of air reach past my clothes and steal the heat from my naked skin. My long hair billows out and I cringe when I hear the man sniff. Is he smelling me?

Maybe I will look back. Just a glimpse, and then I can know for sure if it's all in my head. If I'm imagining the feeling of eyes boring into the back of my neck, devouring the soft flesh exposed at the base of my ponytail, breaking out into goose bumps.

He coughs and spits and I flinch. The sound is deep and resounding—definitely a man—and much closer than I thought. So close I can almost convince myself that I felt his hot breath brush lightly passed me. I shiver, hunching deeper into the imagined safety of my jacket.

Is there anyone else out here? I plead into the night. My eyes strain, scanning the street for a witness. There is no one. We are alone, caught in the silent intimacy of the night, the dark sky pressing down and filling every space, wrapping us together like a blanket, cocooning us in our own little world.

I know now that I can't look back. If I look back, I acknowledge that it's real and then it's all over. Like when you are a kid and refuse to check under the bed for monsters; it's always a possibility, but somehow it's better not knowing. If I looked our eyes would meet. He would see my fear and I would see his decision. We would understand each other, our body language communicating everything that the other needs to know with the ease of old lovers, no words necessary. I would sweat, break out into a run, but inevitably I would make a mistake, giving him the opportunity—the invitation—to strike.

I think about how I must look, and in a moment of hysteria I choke back a laugh. I feel that I am glowing, beauty radiating from every pore. The blemishes that ruined my morning are gone, insignificant memories on the perfectly smooth porcelain of my present face. My waist has inexplicably shrunk, when only that morning I had decided my weight was unacceptable (the diet starts today!), making each of my steps feel lighter than air, the possibility of being plucked from the ground never more real than now. I am beautiful, finally, I am beautiful.

I know I have to think, make a plan. I am almost home, but what does that mean? What good has "almost" ever done anyone? I've seen the videos on Facebook that show women how to prevent attacks, and my mom warns me all the time too. But usually the best advice is to just not walk alone at night. And to be aware. *Always be aware.* But once you are aware, what do you do? Key. Right. You can take out your keys and use them as a weapon. Right?

I dig in my jacket pocket and find my keys, clenching them in my fist so that the jagged ends sticks out between my knuckles. My hand is sweaty and the metal becomes hot quickly.

I just have to cross the street and I am home. The road is empty. I look left, then right. When I look right I see the man in my periphery and I see that he is smiling slightly. The image I conjured earlier crumbles—there is nothing remarkable about him at all. An average man, walking just a little too close and looking just a little too interested. I look away quickly, but not before I see his smile widen.

I make my decision and I bolt across the street. It is not quite a run, the weight of my backpack prevents that, but I speed walk to the front of my house, and as my feet touch the sidewalk I feel a breath leave my body that I hadn't realized I was holding.

The man laughs at my haste and calls out from across the street. "Cold night, huh? Get inside and warm up!"

The front door to my house falls open too quickly, already unlocked. I slam it shut behind me, though it takes a moment for my shaking hands to put the bolt into place. My body sags against the door, unable to move past the entryway and into my house. I wait there until my blood stops thrumming so hard behind my ears, until my breath is caught and my lungs stop straining. I put my hands to the bridge of my nose and feel the small droplets of water collected in the corner of my eyes, feeling stupid for running. The man was just walking home, same as me. My thighs feel like jelly, wasted adrenaline working its way through my body, and I sink all the way to the floor. Sitting there, back against the cold wood, I feel the door push slightly towards me. The lock catches, and the door falls back. The moment is small, and I doubt if it really happened. But then a small laugh follows, retreating footsteps echoing just behind me.

ARIEL EVERITT



Sophomore

Major: English and Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

Ariel Everitt is a sophomore in English and Creative Writing who's just taking in as much of the writing experience around campus as possible. You'd never guess this writer's hobbies include reading and writing. Ariel's particular fiction interests--all tinged literary--include sci-fi, fantasy, magical realism, and the genre-breaking stuff that might be something like the "New Weird". Ariel is a huge fan of Kelly Link, loves angsty characters with all the flaws, and plans to get an MFA in Creative Writing after completing that undergrad degree.

No Way to Skin a Cat

Nobody told you sex was a thing until you were fucking seventeen. You'd heard all the words at school, in parking lots, at the horse track with the clover sprouts and condom wrappers along the sides of the gravel. But yeah, the mechanics of it were a little fuzzy, you could admit that. You know the way you imagine quantum tunneling to look, when it's a thing no one can actually picture with any fidelity? Yeah, that's how you pictured sex to look. Wow, private parts look a Hell of a lot different in person. You'll see that later though. But don't worry, time is relative, illusory, maybe cyclical, I dunno. Anyways, these mental representations you make of sex are like translating the fucking ineffable presence of quarks to pictures and diagrams for stupid human eyes guided by evolution that was like *nah, they gotta be smart but not like that smart*.

God, all those textbooks show you are just bubbles, models. Approximations. Did I pick up a fucking textbook just to get an approximation?

In the back porch Saturday sunshine you read that dystopian classic where the author seems like he's trying to freak you out by having young children play around sexually. I mean, it's probably clever, right? You're no esteemed sci-fi writer. You're no social justice warrior or child rights expert or cowboy. But you can't help but wonder now why that kid sex stuff's portrayed so much more awful than being clueless and thinking for fourteen years that men had three testicles just because nobody bothered to clarify it for you and you sure as Hell weren't going to go look it up on your mom's '90s box Mac. The Internet was shit out there, too! You don't know, maybe they should do experiments or something, where little blonde kids in Russia are raised in big old empty houses with a researcher lady who comes by on Mondays and Wednesdays, and one sample of these kids could be told sex play is normal, while the other could be told absolutely shit. Maybe then we could figure out something objective about kids and this sort of experiential sex ed, but you figure sex is one of those things nobody really tends to want to be objective about. That one church in your town that doesn't have any windows provides rings for girls to pledge their abstinence to their daddies in the high school gym. Vague talk of girls with nebulous gonorrhea floating around scare you away from pussies, regularly scheduled programming tells you not to become a whore, Andrea Martinez and Debbie Grunk with the lisp end up pregnant and you end up a stick-bodied eighteen-year-old who gets these visions of being an eighty-year-old nun pure as sin bathed in holy light who has never been touched -- but you aren't even religious.

Then you accidentally see your older brother naked, he's lived at home for twenty-odd years playing with pizza and devouring video games -- sometimes when Mom thinks you're not listening she tells Dad 'sucking up porn, too' -- lounging in front of his laptop with his legs spread open, the towel from his shower a slack curtain brushed aside by his at-attention thing. Well, yuck. But you wonder, is it even worth yucking?

You feel the same feeling you felt in your brother's dim doorway when you go from those brightly-colored illustrations of the heart where every artery is discrete and labeled to the actual cat heart those fucking assholes made you dissect in that one class. Basically, this is Texas, there's a feral cat problem, do it or fail, thanks. It was a surprisingly fleshy thing, a Rubik's cube of membranes, fucking nothing was discrete, *where the Hell were these boundaries you told me were gonna be so goddamn clear?* And you poke and you prod but you just can't figure it out. Why does this thing push blood down bodies for some people? You're not that way, you think. Your blood, you feel it in your brain and it doesn't flock nowhere weird no matter what shirt Ryan Gosling is removing, no matter what leather whip Jessica Alba is cracking.

You guess you should try it though, because nobody ever tells you a thing about this mysterious thing 'til they tell you "sex is a healthy, integral part of a relationship" and you're just sitting there with your muscly chicken leg half in your mouth on your back porch under that chestnut tree with dirt all over your Levi's and hands from your dog begging you for food like *what the fuck, when did this happen?* And then they're like "a relationship can't last without sex" and "you can't expect a guy not to cheat if she's not putting out," and you sigh and wonder why you bothered to try dating some dude who runs the counter at the rustic wooden candy shop in town with the corny Wild West sign. But you guess you let him take you to "bed" and your body is all rigid and you're like *hey, stop it body, a woman's gotta put out if she expect to not be cheated on sex is a healthy part of a relationship everyone who ever gets married has sex anyone worth talking about who ever did walk this wide dry frontier into the sunset did fucking fuck.*

And you lay down on the ground where there's no back porch and candy boy's long blonde hair tickles your bare shoulders -- sexy as spiders on skin -- and you don't know where the hairs end and the itching discomfort begins and the blood stays up there where it's caught in your brain and the cat heart, if there's even one in you, don't beat one bit. You feel small as a quark, small as the infinitesimally small hole you're trying to shove all this mass into, small as the matchbox of candy boy's trailer beside you and the child-sized mattress you're collapsing into the dirt, and it makes you wonder if you're gonna create a singularity with all that pressure and tiny space and you wonder is this how the Big Bang began? This is your first rodeo but you ain't even a bull, you're just the cattle getting wrangled, looking up for answers to the stars that just shrug.

It's simple inheritance. Your mom did it. All the cowboys did it. Einstein did it.

You guess it must just be for you that the membranous heart don't beat. Maybe yours, if you got it, is outlined in black and labeled clearly: "peritoneum," "superior vena cava," "emptiness where pleasure usually goes." You're getting fucked, and you just lay back and think about what a good specimen you'd make, then, for another class of starry-croched adolescents, on the verge of the sexual realization you'll never achieve, to dissect.

HANNAH FRENCH



Junior

Major: Anthropology and Creative Writing

Minor: Community Action and Social Change

Reading: Fiction

Hannah French is a junior studying humans, human productions, and human problems. She's an anthropology and creative writing major with a minor in community action and social change. Her first novel was about a rat trying to escape a witch's house and, thirteen years later, she still dreams of having it published. In the meantime she has participated in several on-campus writing publications. In her free time, when she's not responding to everything someone says with "that would make a great story title!" she enjoys dance parties, cooking with her housemates, and of course, her student org TEDx-UofM, without a shout-out to whom life would be significantly bleaker.

Word Zoo

Joe-the-future-dictator-of-America sat on his favorite kitchen stool, swinging his legs and eating a popsicle. The stool was high, and uncomfortable—the kind of stool from which a king would overlook his city—and the juice from the popsicle had stained his freckles an alarming shade of orange, as if on a closer look, someone might discover that he was radioactive. It was his birthday.

His mother had said he could have a popsicle on this special day—although, truthfully, she had really only said it inside his head. Joe-the-future-dictator did things like that rather a lot, in his head. Mrs. Kinz, a perfectly forgettable woman and nanny (so it seemed to Joe, who always forgot what she said), called him "hyperactive, with a side of speech impediment." Like God had ordered dysfunctional on a breakfast sandwich: out came Joe,

future dictator of America.

Right now, Joe could have said a lot to you on the subject of Mrs. Kinz, if only he were alone, instead of in the kitchen with her, happily swinging his legs from the kitchen chair and thinking about whether popsicles could taste like sunrise. He loved the feeling of the sugar melting onto his tongue; popsicles were the reason that when Mrs. Kinz held up a card for “orange,” he smiled.

He had a sweet grin, gap toothed (“that’ll help him get the words out!” said his dad) and wide in all the right places. A biologist might have pronounced that he was a very symmetrical child. Except of course when it came to the ratio of his thoughts and his speech. On a pie chart, thoughts comprised the pie, and speech was a really, really lonely slice of pepperoni.

It was 11 a.m., and he had five hours to kill before his parents would return home from work for his party (it would be a great one. Everyone would dress up like animals, because animals couldn’t talk, either). Mrs. Kinz was washing dishes in the corner, humming to herself. She was a stocky woman, with close-cropped sandy hair and a weathered face. It was a strange combination for a woman who spent most of her time indoors. She even had the slightly raspy, low-decibel voice of a working woman, although she was technically white collar.

(These were not Joe’s observations, but rather his parents’, who, despite their tolerance for their own son, tended toward the judgmental).

Whenever Mrs. Kinz washed spoons, right on queue, the water deflected violently from the bowl onto her blouse and face. She handled it each time with grace (and very little surprise). “Kaboom!” she’d say, and smile over her shoulder. Joe-the-future-dictator grinned back at her. “Kaboom!”

It was his easiest, and favorite, word. Each summer, he participated in a children’s zookeeper program. Children’s activities at the Word Zoo always closed out with an enthusiastic “Kaboom!” To the employees, this was a way of emphasizing all of the things the children had gotten done that day, from mucking out the cages to feeding the otters. To Joe, it was a spiky, orange Word with four huge paws and a lemur-like tail bristling with static. Most importantly, Kaboom was not an exhibit in the zoo—it was free, a wild Word. Perhaps for that reason, it was a word that Joe was actually able to say.

Mrs. Kinz finished washing the dishes and wiped her hands on a towel printed with the Gettysburg Address. When Joe had learned to read he had asked about it, and, upon learning about Lincoln (“nothing like those dictators we have today,” said his parents), had announced, “I wanna be a dick-ader doo!”

Dick-ader-ship had been a quick study; in merely three hours, Joe had

memorized the entire Address. It was rather unfortunate, he thought now, mournfully, that impassioned speeches were a prerequisite of any good political leader.

"Finished with your popsicle?" Mrs. Kinz asked him. Joe (the dictator) had been sucking on the stick for the last half hour, but he gave the question due consideration.

"Yeth," he pronounced, and swung his feet regally.

Mrs. Kinz raised her eyebrows. He wanted to play that game.

"What do we do when we're finished?" she asked.

Her blouse had triangles on it. He sounded it out in his head. *Ti-en-ul*.

MK. Joe.

Joe rolled his eyes, but hopped down from the chair to throw the stick away.

MK. *Thank you.*

Routine was one of the few things that both of them enjoyed. Mrs. Kinz said, "Now, what do you want to do today before your parents come home?"

Noncommittal shrug. Joe had wandered over to the grate and started to inspect it.

"I've got some drawing stuff out on the table, or we could go look at bugs, or we could play frisbee, or race each other up and down the stairs, or....stare at grates." Mrs. Kinz sighed.

Joe was deciding what shape the word "Kinz" would take. He thought it would like to be something with five sides, narrow; probably a common garden pest. With a lot of tickly whiskers and glossy black fur.

"Kinz" rolled over on the floor and made a chittering sound.

Joe perked up. "Wud thoo! Wud thoo!"

"We can't go to the Word Zoo today. Have you checked the weather?"

"Wud thoo! Wud thoo!"

"Your parents will be home soon. They wouldn't want you to come home all dirty before your party.

"Wud thoo! Wud thoo!"

"Well, then. I guess you'd better get your coat on. They're saying it

might rain.”

(*Them*. It might rain.)

“Hello, Jack,” said the man at the ticket counter in singsong. “Back during visiting hours, I see.”

The ticket man looked as though he had graduated beyond retiring age and was entering the waiting room for reincarnation hopefuls. He always messed up Joe’s name. “Joe,” as a Word, probably had chameleon properties.

“Yes, he missed the animals,” Mrs. Kinz told the man politely. Joe hunched his shoulders. Even Mrs. Kinz hadn’t noticed.

“Well, Jim is welcome here anytime,” Mr. Stypa said. “Tickets on the house.”

Joe ran ahead as Mrs. Kinz smiled and thanked the man, asking him about his grandchildren. He gave a small leap as he burst through the double gates, spotting the familiar entrance statue: a polar bear standing upright next to a giraffe and a small fox. Not the most sensical statue--it led many young children to believe that not only were the three animals from the same area of the world, but that they got along quite happily. Joe, however, saw not the animals but the words they represented. And what words they were! The entrance statue was glorious, a display fit for a king--or a dictator. It comprised some of the most exotic, endangered Words: “zamboni” (polar bears reminded him of ice), “necktie” (his father had used a stuffed giraffe to teach him how to tie one--political leaders needed to look savvy from even a young age), and best of all, “rambunctious” (that’s what his mom called the fox that ran around their backyard). He loved the floppiness of Neckties, how each one had a unique pattern. He loved the soft underbelly of Rambunctious, the beady eyes of Zamboni.

To Joe, the zoo was where all endangered Words ended up--the ones that are swallowed, the ones that are outdated, the ones that are forbidden (“Fuck” was the monkey exhibit, since the first time they had gone, a monkey had thrown poop on his father’s chest). Things were usually quite crowded, here.

“C’mon, sweetie,” Mrs. Kinz said, and took his hand.

Joe had waited for this moment all week. Walking through the Word Zoo, swinging his and Mrs. Kinz’s combined hands, skipping every third cobblestone, he greeted the animals in his head. Strangle was in the corner of his glass cage today, and did not acknowledge them as they passed. He was as muscled as any bodybuilder, which was a mystery, since he always seemed

to be sleeping. The small, brown Squeaks in the cage with him, in contrast, sprinted from corner to corner erratically, as if to assure themselves that the corner was still there (or more probably, to escape the python). He liked to watch the Juggles because their rolls of fat reminded him of his mother--and their kind eyes, too. When they slid underwater after a ball Joe would hold his breath until they resurfaced. He had passed out more than once.

But it was the least exotic Word for which Joe had a special affinity. It was the most common, most detested, and least curated Word, one that should not have even been in the zoo (and yet). No one but the Grunges ever paid much attention to Joe when he talked to them. No one but the Grunges flocked to the sound of his voice. He wasn't used to being listened to, and they weren't used to being talked to. Joe could admire the Sandeaters for their huge feathers, and he ran in terror from the Tigers ("tiger" was a hard enough word as it is), but it was the Grunges he considered friends.

Tugging again at Mrs. Kinz's hand, he led her to the bench across from the aquatic words and sat down.

"Di you win ed?" he asked her.

"Huh?" Mrs. Kinz said. She was watching the otters.

"Ed," Joe repeated.

"Oh. I did--I brought this loaf especially for them," Mrs. Kinz said, pulling out the stale butts of a bread loaf. "But, listen, honey—" she glanced around them—"it's pretty crowded. Today might not be the day."

Joe pulled himself up. Something subtle and unspeakable changed in the air around them; the molecules were listening. "That's exactly why today *is* the day, dear Mrs. Kinz," he said.

They scattered the crumbs together. Immediately the Grunges converged from the treetops, the enclosures, the trashcans and the roofs of the outdoor food court. They pecked at the food single-mindedly, looking up only to assure themselves that what they were doing was still okay: a furtive crowd stuffing themselves at the royal palace right before the king's speech. And then it was time. The Grunges gathered, cooing, at their feet. Joe stood.

"You're not useless, you know," he said quietly.

The Grunges shifted on their feet. A few of them flapped their wings excitedly.

"You can do everything the other words can do. You can fly, and some of them can't even do that."

By the bench, Mrs. Kinz was chatting with the balloon man. A small girl

teased an infant in a stroller with a toy snake. Two exhausted chaperones handed out ice cream sandwiches to a group of middle schoolers. A few passersby glanced at the boy and the pigeons, but for the most part, the noises they heard blended perfectly with the backdrop of wild animal calls.

"I am just like you," continued Joe, now jumping atop the bench. His crowd was getting heated. "And I believe in a future where when we speak, people will listen—"

A couple of particularly revolutionary birds flew from the ground to the bench where Joe-the-future-dictator-of-America stood, pulling up the hem of his pants with impassioned force.

"Like the great Abraham Lincoln said, 'we must unite our house within the next four to seven years!'"—he raised a fist—"I call to *all* Words to stand in solidarity with us. Because all Words deserve to be celebrated equally, even if they look a little dirty or gross like you guys—" he shot an apologetic look, here, toward the Grunges — "And none of us deserve to be on display in a zoo. I call for freedom."

The pigeons, startled by a passing stroller, took off in a squall of drumming wings. Joe watched them go and swallowed. His throat was dry.

"And," he said, to the afterthought in the air, "when that happens, you can all come to my house for dinner."

As Joe's speech had gotten more and more heated, mothers had steered their children clear of the bench where the strange boy stood making his emphatic hand gestures. Mrs. Kinz had waited patiently for him to finish, and patted him on the back when he enthusiastically told her "Kaboom!"

It didn't matter, though.

The pigeons knew.

And the word was spreading.

KATYANNA GUTHRIE



Junior

Major: Psychology and English

Reading: Fiction Essay

Katyanna is muddling through her junior year at the University of Michigan. She's fixated on fairy tales, historical dramas, and sketching portraits. Her life's ambition is to become a hermit who lives by the ocean, and to write her own favorite book.

The Lake of Memories

The Lake of Memories. If anyone wishes to be rid of a memory, they can write their name on a rock, throw it in and forget. Those who wish to be wise search for rocks to read, but the memory is then theirs to keep.

They called it the Witch's Cauldron. Even as it grew large enough to qualify as a lake it remained perfectly bowl-shaped, and when it overflowed—as it did more frequently as the years went on—it steamed and bubbled like a pot brought to boil.

It was also, of course, made by a witch.

The rumors of the witch were what brought Ama to the banks of the Cauldron, after handing the last of her winter's wages to the dour, dead-eyed villager who collected the entrance fees. The lack of money didn't bother her—behind the gates, the lake was surrounded by forest on its northern and eastern sides, and Ama had taught herself how to fish, forage and trap in preparation for this trip. When her provisions ran out, she would be able to feed herself. Self-reliance was the essence of a witch, after all, and even if

Ama wasn't a witch yet, she would be before she left.

The lake was in good spirits that first day. It would be some time before Ama would learn to gauge its moods, but there was no denying the cheerfulness of the bright colors that ran in shining eddies along the shore, the waves sparkling as they crested, pink and gold and new-grass green. When looked at out of the corner of the eye, the colors and waves took on shapes, movement. But the images were gentle and welcoming—hands swinging as they held each other, tapping feet, birds in flight. Nothing like what they could have been. What they were, later.

By the shore a couple sat giggling. One plopped a stone in the water and looked dazed for a moment, before their partner scooped it out, snagged a kiss, and scrawled something in chalk on their own stone and dropping it in the water for the other to retrieve. This was a popular lover's game for those who could afford it—a means by which memories could be exchanged, feelings confirmed. If asked, the couple would say this was the only way to truly share an experience with another.

Ama didn't ask. She couldn't understand it, the idea of gaining another's experience if it was in exchange for your own. To her, knowing one's own mind was the most important thing, and the contents of the mind too precious to squander on anything, let alone foolish love games. So she came to the Cauldron as a plunderer rather than an exchanger or a discarder. She came to retrieve the first stone cast in its waters, to gain the memories from the life of the witch who created the lake. This was the means, the only means, by which she could learn magic. She would not fail.

The old woman watching over the boats let Ama take a canoe, saying only that it must be returned before nightfall. This didn't bother her either. She wasn't a headlight diver—she worked by daylight alone. It surprised her how easy the canoe was to handle. Though it looked bulky and worn, it was light to carry and guided itself with precision and ease to the exact center of the lake where Ama directed it. An auspicious start, Ama thought.

She pulled her day-tools out of her pack. The stone-weighted belt, her trowel, the cork rope quadrants, extra measured cork rope, the finely-meshed fishing net to tie to the boat, the neck-net, her earplugs, the map she'd painstakingly divided into numbered grids. And then her little flat knife and her white headband from when her grandmother trained her to dive for abalone and pearls. These last two weren't strictly necessary, but they were a comfort to have. She wouldn't feel like herself without them.

Excavation was easiest when approached in an organized fashion, and Ama's plan was nothing if not exacting. *Clear quadrant one, dispose in quadrant two. Clear quadrant two, dispose in quadrant one. Quadrant three in quadrant one, quadrant four in quadrant one.* Exacting, but difficult. The weighted belt saved her the effort of swimming down, but even

so she couldn't hold her breath comfortably for a full two minutes. Her heart pounded raucously in her chest when she rose, and it was all she could do to breathe the low, whistling, slow breath she'd been taught, when her body screamed at her for more air. Her limbs ached from pulling the net up, from swimming. And it was slow going. Slow, slow going.

It was difficult to keep track of time. A side effect of depositing the stones she picked up was that it interfered with memories surrounding when they'd been dropped. Every dive felt like her first, was as painful as her first. It was only her growing exhaustion, the dip of the sun, and the gradual clearing of her quadrant that let her know time was passing at all. Perhaps it was this somnambulatory quality to her work that made her feel more uneasy as the hours passed. Or perhaps it was something from the memories themselves, whatever they were, that lingered after she pitched them over the side of the canoe into the opalescent waves. She began to notice, or re-notice, things about the lake which chilled her more than the deep waters.

It was too bright, for one thing. Light penetrated farther and brighter in than it should have, given its opaque surface, and the bottom looked much closer than it really was. The movements that should have been fish, weren't. Then there was the smell, or *lack* of smell. No algae grew in the water, no dead fish or mollusks washed up dead on the Cauldron's shores. The fresh stink of water life was entirely absent. When water dribbled into Ama's mouth, it tasted of nothing, not even a tinge of mineral. It was pure. It was like poison.

The sun was low enough Ama judged it to be late afternoon when she finished for the day, and though she was tired, though she still had plenty of food and water, a nameless dread pushed her to row along the perimeter of the Cauldron. Sure enough, the trees from the forested areas didn't come anywhere near the water. She couldn't hear any birdsong—was it the time of day for birdsong? When she limped out to set her snares, she told herself not to be discouraged if they yielded nothing. One day and one scraggly patch of forest couldn't prove anything. And of course it didn't. But her fire that night also attracted no insects, and no mosquito bit her as she slept.

"I told you to return it before dark," the canoe woman said, when she returned in the morning. "This is the last time." Ama tried not to quail beneath her glare. It was too early to be this jumpy. But for a moment she could have sworn that the old woman wasn't an old woman at all, and she couldn't quite shake the thought. A couple—a different one this time—whispered on the shore a few yards away, whispers that sounded like sharpening knives.

A witch would be unafraid. She fled back to her canoe.

Isolation is what's doing it, she told herself as the weeks passed. The entire time she'd been here, she'd spoken to no one but the canoe woman, after all, who was a taciturn and surly conversant. She only opened her

mouth to let Ama take out a boat, or draw water—proper, mineral-tasting water—from the well behind her shack. Ama played around with the idea of visiting the village proper, but she only got as far as the entrance fee collector before his hollowed-out eyes sent her scurrying back to the lake. She knew she'd have to go eventually—her traps continued to yield nothing, and she'd have to find a job to pay for food to replenish her stores. For now, though, she would delay, and swallow the anxiety that fizzed at the back of her throat.

...

So she went on, until her net broke. Before Ama came to the lake she hadn't considered it, but she supposed she shouldn't be surprised that some people would choose to attach their memories to huge, heavy boulders. Just as a small pebble could be easily overlooked and lost in the waters, so the sheer mass of a large enough boulder could make it nearly impossible to recover. Ama had great faith in the slyness of her witch, and so had been chipping one of these boulders away from the surrounding dirt for the better part of a morning, in hopes that this was the stratagem the witch had chosen. But when she finally managed to roll the boulder into her net and began to draw it up, it tore a massive hole through the rope and fell back to the lakebed. She should have stopped right then. But she didn't want her day to be a waste, so she gathered her weighted belt from the net's remains, loaded her neck-net with smaller stones, and kicked for the surface.

A mistake. She wasn't meant to swim with so much weight. Her leg cramped, and she tore off her neck-net, dropped her belt as she flailed desperately towards her canoe. When her face broke out of the water, she gasped—another mistake. She sank back into the water, her world gone black.

She coughed and retched when she came to, nearly driving a splinter through her cheek with the violence of it, but no water came out. Her shoulder was driven into hard, wet wood—she was in the canoe, then. Her stomach and lungs burned, the rest of her body icy and shivering uncontrollably. When she looked around for something to cover herself up with, she saw it. The hand, stretched out above her body, and the little ball of water floating just below it. The wrist, sticky with blood no doubt being exchanged to fuel the—

"You're awake," the old woman who was not an old woman said. "Stupid girl. Don't you know diving isn't a one-person job?"

"You're a witch," Ama croaked. Then: "You're *the* witch." She had to be.

"Don't speak, you'll only hurt yourself." The witch tapped Ama's crown, where her headband was tied. "I'm taking this to staunch the bleeding."

She tied the headband tightly around her arm, with Ama babbling all the while. "You're the witch, you're the witch, you're the *witch*, you're the..."

"I may have hit your head on the canoe when I pulled you out," the witch was saying. "Tell me, is your vision blurred— *what are you doing?*"

Ama had pulled out her knife and was carefully beginning to slice her arm. "You sacrificed your blood fluid to take the water out of my lungs, didn't you? If you'll let me, you can use my blood to restore—"

The witch wrestled the knife out of her hands, eyes flashing. And up close, there really was no mistaking it. She was old and not-old, beauty and not-beauty. For a moment, she looked like Ama, or a distorted, rippling reflection of her. She was the images on the lake's surface—flickering movement, twistedness. Impossible to look at directly. Ama's heart thrilled. No one but a witch could look like that.

"I'll admit it's nice to see there are still people who know about decorum," the witch said, frowning at the thin gash on Ama's arm. "But you didn't need to bleed for me. I took your headband—consider that repayment of your debt."

"I wouldn't say I know much about decorum. I want the headband back when the bleeding stops."

"Sorry?"

"Excuse me." She scooted over so she could rifle through her pack, making the boat rock dangerously. After a few moments she found it—her large imperfect pearl, the only one of any worth she had ever dove for. She planned on exchanging it to fund her return trip, but that seemed unimportant, next to her grandmother's headband. She pressed the pearl into the witch's hands. "Please take this instead."

The witch blinked at the pearl. "This is far more valuable than a headband. What kind of person gives away jewels for a bloodstained rag? No." She returned the pearl to Ama. "I will return your headband. In exchange, you'll tell me why you've been diving alone here for weeks. What are you looking for?"

Ama told her.

"That's too bad," the witch said, finally. "It never would have worked. I was the first to put a memory in the lake, but it was a useless little memory. It had nothing to do with magic, or how to become a witch."

"Then can't I—"

"What? Have me teach you?"

Her tone was condescending enough it made Ama forget politeness entirely. "Why not? Afraid of a little competition?"

"Competition?" The witch laughed a laugh which was less a laugh than the sound of crows descending on a cadaver. "Look around you, my little would-be student. Magic is sacrifice. Yet I've created this entire lake with the sacrifice of a paltry memory, and it gets larger with each passing year, fueled with the memories others sacrifice to it. Eventually it will grow to the size of an ocean. A sea to hold all sorrows, can you imagine? Do you think there are many witches who could do so much, so cheaply? It is sacrifice which forms this lake, and you're just a girl who won't even sacrifice a scrap of cloth. You could never be a witch.

"You're wrong. I can make sacrifices"

"Oh? Then how about this: scratch your name on that pearl, toss it into the lake, and with it sacrifice your entire past. Everything up until this morning. Do that, and I will make you a witch."

"No. If I did that, I might as well kill myself."

The witch grinned. "Isn't that the point?"

"It would be like saying I'm not capable as I am now."

The witch raised a hand. "I'll give you one other option, then, and one option only. Break my spell on this lake. It's something even someone who isn't a witch can do, and you were half-doing it already. Do this, and I'll recognize your inner strength and so forth, and teach you to be a witch."

"How do I break the spell?"

The colors on the lake seemed to pale. "Pick up and remove every memory stone from its waters."

...

Ama wasn't to start right away. She and Maren—Maren was the witch's name—decided to wait a few more weeks until the active touring season to the lake ended, so more stones wouldn't be added as they worked. Meanwhile, Ama was to stay in the village, to restock on food and earn money to fix her rope and get any other supplies she needed.

"Tell Caol that I sent you, and he'll find you a place to stay," Maren told her. Caol, as it turned out, was the man who collected the entrance fees.

"You won't introduce us?"

"We aren't on speaking terms."

So she told Caol what the witch said, and saw something spark, briefly, in the deep pits of his eyes. He brought her to his house, a ramshackle little hovel stuffed with every farming implement imaginable: plows, pickaxes, cultivators, shovels, hoes, rakes, pitchforks, all laid out on rows of seed-sacks. Despite the mess of the house, the regiment of tools were not neglected—none were rusting, and there was not so much as a cobweb on the handles. Ama hadn't seen the slightest evidence of cultivation in the village when she'd been buying food.

"We used to be farmers," he grunted, when she asked.

How the tools were maintained was a mystery soon solved. Wasting no words, Caol put her to work sharpening, polishing, and dusting, only allowing her to sweep, do the dishes and washing after his primary tenants were looked after. She had little opportunity to speak to him for the entire first week, as he left for the lake before dawn and returned sometime after she went to sleep for the night.

Some time during the second week, though, he stayed at home.

Rain was driving into the roof. "Not rain, geysers," he said.

The water from the geysers drove into the roof.

Caol had Ama seal up the door and windows to prevent water from coming in. "Best not to touch it," he said, but she didn't need to be told. She watched slimy arms of water steam and slice through the ground outside, sickly yellow and maroon in color. She, too, felt marooned.

"I guess the flooding is why your village doesn't farm anymore," she said. She glanced back at Caol, who looked like he'd been slapped.

Then they fell to talking.

"It's not that there wasn't a spring there before," Caol said, as the water screamed around them. "But it was much smaller. It grew slowly. My grandfather said once it was only a fourth of the size it is now. It didn't boil over so often at first, either. As it turned out, the birds and fish and mammals and insects all left long before people gave up on trying to grow anything here."

"Not everyone gave up."

Caol turned a pained glance at a shovel, touched its tip with his finger. "It's not that."

"What is it?"

"Haven't planted a seed before. No one has, for few generations—at least. Tourism pays for the food we buy from the other towns. It's only—when I was younger, there was an outbreak."

"Plague?"

"Doesn't matter what it was, but people thought it was plague. People stopped coming to the lake and paying the fees. Even the rich shut themselves up in their homes, trying to hide from it. Then all of a sudden, there was no more food."

"You think if your village still farmed—"

"You can't look out there and tell me that lake isn't killing us," Caol snapped. "We should be able to subsist by ourselves, by helping each other. Instead we're at the whims of the merchants, and chained to that thing out there. I'm not the only one who thinks so."

"If the lake was making your crops fail, couldn't the witch have helped?"

He laughed bitterly. "You would think, wouldn't you? It was her spell, after all. She found me trying to dig a ditch to drain the lake. I demanded she cast a spell to make our crops grow. She said—no one sane would pay the price she set. So she said I should break the first spell rather than ask for another one. Pick up all the memory stones. Simple, yeah?"

"What happened then?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember. I was gone for a while, or at least that's what my mother told me when I came back. All I know is that I failed. I must have chosen to forget it all. I couldn't believe it the first time."

"You went back?"

"Five times." He paused. "Sometimes I wonder if she's lying about it all. Maybe she's just toying with me. With both of us."

"Witches don't lie," Ama said.

Caol gave her a strange look, and she faltered a little. "Not...outright, anyway. But if she says that's the way to break the spell, it's the truth."

The sound of the flood began to die down, and Caol began to hollow out. Their conversation was at an end.

"I won't say it can't be done," Caol said, but the creases bracketing his sad smile betrayed him. He had no hope for her.

...

"I have your headband," Maren said. Ama stared at the cloth dangling from her hand. It was—adulterated. Where before the fabric was white, now it was a bright, bloody scarlet.

"That was a gift from my grandmother," Ama said, trying to keep her voice level.

"Yes, I thought it had sentimental value," Maren said, bored. "Blood-stains are difficult in white fabrics. But here, I added to it a gift of my own. It will help you, if you accept it."

Ama crept closer to the headband, and—yes. The stitches were different, too. The same symbols were there as always, but they shimmered, and were warm to the touch.

Maren pointed to the lattice. "After you dive, when you touch this, you will be able to breathe water as if it were air. And when you touch this," she said, pointing to the star, "You will return to the surface at the same spot where you dove in."

"Magic," Ama breathed. "What is the cost?"

"On days you wear this headband, any liquid you drink will scald your throat as painfully as if it were boiling. And for every day you wear this headband, you will suffer three days after removing it where water touching your skin will feel like hot oil. There's no danger of disfigurement—only pain. Is this a cost you accept?"

Ama took the headband carefully into her hand. It looked alien, but the weight of it was the same as always, more familiar than familiar. She tied her hair back. "Yes. I accept it."

This time quadrants weren't needed. She would mow the lawnbed straight across, with a nasty bottom trawling net she'd rigged herself. She'd only dive after cutting each swath, to pick up any stray stones or debris that didn't land in the trawling net. As a plan, it was even more simple, mathematical than the first.

The lake was agitated as she set out, waves crashing against each other, rolling and creating whitecaps even in the absence of wind. Dark shapes swirled in the depths. Soon she'd be able to put a name to her foreboding.

She pulled up the first load.

Her name was Josephine and she had only begun practicing the harp when I met her why was he angry at me it wasn't my fault and yet I felt guilty anyway I thought flight of the bumblebee was pretentious but it sounded amazing in that little chapel blood on my hands I stuck the needle in different places I made it out to be an experiment her hands were leathery and calloused I would make fun of them sometimes in a hole there was no exit there for too long we were kissing finally I know they meant nothing by it but it hurt me and strategic lie toe the line into cable proceeds helmet silver I don't like it I don't like it I don't like it aaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAA

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.—

—Blackout.

Rocking sensation. Crusty eyes open. The urge to wail. Where? A canoe. Water. Strange water. A lake, a bad lake. Who? She. She was. She was Ama. Not Jenny, not Avos, not Gerald. Ama.

She felt along her arms breasts and hips, just to make sure. Yes, this was her body. Ama's body. She pulled the threads of her own memory together until she felt somewhat intact, and vomited despite knowing she'd have to dive into her own mess. She'd have to go a little more slowly in the future. She considered, a little hopelessly, that this could destroy her just as totally as throwing the pearl in would have. But she is a plunderer, not a discarder. And it won't matter anyway once it's over, and the spell is broken. She adjusted her headband, and dove.

And dove.

And dove.

...

Maren watches over them. They know Maren is Maren because she says it whenever they see her. It's a comfort. Maren gets buried so easily under the weight of the day, of the Others, but when she says her name there she is, bobbed right back to the surface like when they press the star on their headband.

"Where is my daughter?" they ask Maren.

"You don't have a daughter. What is your name?"

They think. This question is more difficult than it should be. They start to panic. "Judith," they say, but it sounds wrong. Less wrong than some others, but always wrong.

Maren tries to give them water. They try to escape. They try to hide.

They try to hit Maren sometimes. Maren stops them, because Maren is powerful. Maren is powerful enough to force boiling water down their throat when they're trying to escape. They think the torture must be retribution, for trying to hit her. Why had they done that?

"Why aren't you on the lake?" Maren asks. She eyes the growing patch of hair they are plucking from their scalp.

"This hair doesn't belong to me. It's a mistake."

"What is your name?"

"Horace."

What is your name, what is your name, what is your name? Always that question. But sometimes it's Ama. Mostly Ama chokes down her water and goes back to the lake. Maren doesn't keep a close eye on Ama because she is the favorite. Or maybe she keeps a closer eye on her than the rest.

"Caol said you could cast a spell to help the village grow crops, but that the price was terrible. What needs to be sacrificed for a spell like that?"

"It's a spell to guarantee life where none should exist, to sustain one's kindred," Maren said. "What do you think the price would be?"

"I don't know. I guess it would be death where life should be. Destroying another's crops?" *They set fire to my house and fields. My family was still inside.* No, not Ama. That was Rosalind.

"If they are your kindred, it may work. Or it may make the people you afflict no longer your kindred, but your enemies, and the spell will fail. What else?"

"I don't know."

"The common price is child sacrifice," Maren said. "Most often girls—virgins. So long as the lives and lives in potentia of your kindred are cut short, the spell can be maintained." Maren smiled at Ama's look. "Caol didn't know what he was asking. Making crops grow on barren land is a major spell—the defining spell of more than a few nations I could name."

Ama clutched her headband more tightly in her hand, throat in agony from the water, thinking too many thoughts. Where was Ama? Oh, right here. "Is—is magic always like this? Causing pain?"

"Magic is sacrifice. Are you willing to pay the price? Will you regret it later? Regret, really, is the only thing that separates a spell from a curse. But... not all sacrifices need to be painful."

Ama's knife had been confiscated a while ago. With it, Maren cut off a lock of her hair, and chanted words over it as she braided it into a tight ring. "Here. If you wear this, I will always know where you are, because I'll always be with you. Painless enough?"

It wasn't painless. Not when she had to rescue Ama from exposure, wandering around miles from the lake with no shoes on. She'd only happened to put the ring on at all. "This isn't my wedding ring," she told Maren, bemused.

"What is your name?"

"Watt."

Maren prepared a spell so the ring could only be removed by her.

Then one night, Ama, or not-Ama came back. Definitely not-Ama, because Maren had never seen Ama cry. She was torn between two desires—to comfort, or to hold a glass vial to the tears and bottle them up. They shone like strings of pearls on her cheeks.

“I love them! I love them! How can they do this to me? I love... I love them!”

The desire to comfort won out. “What is your name?” Maren said, gently rubbing circles in her back.

“It’s M-maren,” she sobbed. Maren’s hand froze.

“Congratulations, Ama,” she whispered. “You found the witch’s memory”

It’s Ama that shakes her awake the next morning. “How could you choose to forget them!” she hisses. “How could you? How could you?”

“Forget who?”

Ama sat back on her heels, gaze faraway. “This is what witches do, isn’t it? All this about self reliance, and magic being sacrifice. We—I can’t—this is too hard. We can’t do it.”

She marched out, and Maren flew after her.

The pile of stones they’d put by the shore was large enough they could be used to build a small house. “I’m putting them back in,” Ama said. She hefted one in her hand, threw it into the churning water. “It feels good to forget, after all! I can see why you did it.”

And so, armful after armful, wagonful after wagonful, she abandoned the memories to the waves. Maren could only watch her, transfixed, as day wore to evening, then day again, then night. And what had she expected, really? For her to do what little Caol hadn’t? What she herself wasn’t able to do? The lake sucked up the stones greedily, swelling with a rosy glow. Finally, she took out her pearl, began scratching her name.

“What about the last stone?” Maren asked My stone, she didn’t.

“You threw it out. It’s mine now,” Ama said. “Now I’m going to forget this whole place, and I’m going to forget I ever wanted to be a witch.”

“What is your name?” Maren whispered. If there was any hope...

“Ama.”

She threw the pearl the farthest. When she left, Maren thought that

night she should have bottled the tears after all. She settled for trying to bottle up her own.

...

"Back from running off after demons I see," Grandmother said when Ama returned. "And you made a mess of yourself too. I have some spare clothing for you inside. Change into it."

Once she was inside, and clean, Grandmother set a cup of tea in front of her. Ama was thirsty, but she dreaded the thought of taking a drink, though she couldn't explain why.

"I burned your hairband," Grandmother said. "It looked strange, and gave me a bad feeling. What did you do to it? Should I expect that kind of thing now?"

"... I don't know."

"...Well. You can at least tell me about the trip. Did you find what you were looking for? Do I need to be careful with giving you presents now? I don't know if your demon folk have any titles—what should I call you?"

"...I don't know. This is where I'm supposed to be."

"That's—what I've always said! But please don't be so cagey with me. Are you a witch?"

"No, of course not," Ama said. "Do you want help with the dishes?"

She couldn't do the dishes. She couldn't dive with Grandmother for abalone either. Every time her skin touched water, it felt like her skin was submerged in liquid fire. She would scream, and scream, and even if Grandmother showed her that her skin wasn't melting off, the pain didn't cease.

So Ama wore gloves, and drew her Grandmother up from weighted diving rather than doing it herself. *Diving's already a job for two*, Grandmother said. And at night, Ama would submerge her hands in water, to see how long she could withstand the pain. It helped, at any rate, to distract from her dreams—those two people she'd never met, who she loved so desperately.

The days passed in fugue. Grandmother sank down, tugged the rope was drawn up. Their boat moved forwards and backward, forwards and backwards along the water. They sorted the catch for size, they loaded into crates, they unloaded the crates again. Tide in, tide out. Sun up, sun down.

"I'm happy you're home," Grandmother said one day, as they were tossing undersized abalone into the water. "But are you all right?"

"Water hurts a little less," Ama said. "I think we can switch places and

have me do the dives in a while.”

“No. Not that. The truth is, I have doubts whether I’ve really welcomed Ama back into my home after her trip,” Grandmother said.

Ama stared.

“Of course there was the strange headband, and the water. But whatever walked into my house was empty and confused in a way Ama was not. What happened to Ama wanting to become a witch, I have to wonder? What does the person who walked into my home want?”

“I don’t...want anything.” Ama said. “Things are fine as they are.”

Grandmother shook her head. “Ama was never content here! That’s why she left! So Ama was cursed while on her journey, and needs to break it, or you are a creature that’s been sent to deceive me. Either way, I don’t think I can open my home to you any longer.”

“You’re kicking me out.”

Grandmother sighed. “Take whatever you need from the house. But. If you need help with anything, let me know. This time, rely on me.”

In the end, she only took food and money. She had no plan, not really. When she tried to think of something she wanted to do, somewhere she wanted to go, it slipped from her. She only felt sure of herself when she slept, and saw her two adored people. If she wanted anything, it was only to be with them. So when Ama ran out of food in an inland forest, so she thought she’d spend her days sleeping instead of walking. When she woke, it was only to watch the leaves bobbing up, and down, in that familiar pattern of her slowing heart.

“I’m glad the ring didn’t come off,” a voice said.

...

“Grandmother said I’m missing something,” Ama told the woman called Maren, who sometimes looked like an old woman, sometimes like Ama, sometimes like a figure from her dreams, and sometimes like something else entirely. “Or that I’m a sort of demon creature. I haven’t thought much about it.”

“I’m also missing something,” Maren said. “But I know where to find it. I can help you find your lost thing too, if you want.”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Let’s try it, then. All hands on deck.”

She put Ama on a canoe and rowed them out. "Am I missing a fish?" Ama asked. "Shouldn't we be doing this in daylight?"

"Hold on," Maren said. "I'm going to show you a painless spell. It will make things that belong to you seem to glow. What you need to do is find whatever's glowing in the lake and bring it back to the surface."

"I have a problem with water," Ama began.

"It will last for some time yet. But it won't kill you. Will you do it?"

"I can't remember the last time I've done freediving. And never in the dark."

Tug on your rope if you need me to pull you up," Maren said.

At the time, Ama wasn't sure what made her do it, other than when Maren pulled her hands away from her eyes, there really was something, small but bright, nestled in the lakebed. And there was a part of her that called out to it, like there was a part of her that called out in her dreams, *no, I didn't mean to leave you, I'm sorry*. So she plunged into the water.

Every stroke was agony. First it was her skin, then her muscles, until finally her bones themselves felt like they were cracking and splitting in the heat. Her shallow breath before the dive ruptured in her throat, and still she needed to go deeper for that one pinprick of light.

Could it have been a trick, to kill her? Grandmother thought she was a creature, after all. She hung in the water for just a moment, but pressed on. And then, she had it. A radiant little pearl, closed within her fist. She tugged the rope to be lifted.

And she understood. "Maren," she said, "You're glowing, too."

"I told you it's a painless spell. The cost is, in order to find things that belong to someone, you have to give something away.

Ama grinned. "And you already gave me a ring, too. I think—I know how to break the spell for the lake. I'm going to need to go back to my hometown for a bit, and I'll need you to speak to the people in Caol's village."

"What are you going to do?"

Ama kissed her. "Diving isn't a one-person job."

...

It took 310 people 72 days to clear the lake. Even with the memories divided among so many, there were incidents, which they managed. By the end of it all that was left of the lake was a small, burbling spring, with clear

water and no menacing shapes scuttling on the waves. Then it was over, and the memories burdening them raced to the minds where they belonged. Caol grabbed their hands and invited them to next year's Harvest Festival. "There will be one," he assured them.

Maren wiped frantically at her eyes, and Ama knew it couldn't all be happiness from idea of the Festival. And it certainly wasn't happiness from the prospect of training Ama in witchcraft. "The memory I held on to for you. What was it?"

Maren smiled through her tears "...My parents," she said. "I left them to become a witch, and I forgot that they loved me."

JEAN HENG



Junior

Major: Psychology and Creative Writing & Literature

Reading: Super-Short Fiction

Jean is a junior hailing from Malaysia, a land two time zones and at least a hundred degrees Celcius (they speak SI) away from Ann Arbor. She is a Psychology and Creative Writing and Literature major. She spends what is left of her free time outside classes contemplating the thoughts going on in her cats' minds, getting her housemate's car hopelessly stuck in snowdrifts, and brushing lint off her coat. She is pictured here with Pushkin. Jean is the one in glasses.

line

He fills up the space in front of the counter. I have never once seen his neck. Just flaps of fatty skin upon skin. Dead skin cells and powdery sweat accumulate between the folds. Occasionally, he slides his fingers in. Digs deep before pulling out. He comes at 9.45 p.m., give or take ten minutes.

I pull up the corners of my lips. "Two large cups of ice with lids?" I say, already punching in the amount due under "Non-food Service". 50 cents, a quarter for each cup.

"Looks like you're getting to know me," he replies. I look past him, holding out my hand for his payment, which I know will be made in cash. He tries to smile, but ends up leering instead. He opens the flap of his messenger bag resting on the counter top which I will have to bleach later on. I watch as the cups disappear from sight.

"I would like one, small, Earl Grey tea," she says for the fifteenth time that day. "Please."

That was nearly perfect, but as usual, she had stumbled over the letter l, her tongue refusing to do what she wanted it to.

Back in ninth-grade Biology, Mr. Takahara had pointed out the five different palates on a blown-up image of the human tongue. Taste buds sectioned by perfect dotted lines. (As if bitterness had a boundary, and sourness did not overpower everything else). "Did you know it's also the strongest muscle in your body?" he had whispered, probing the slick, wet tip of his tongue inside of her ear. She froze, hardened and weakened by fear.

She receives her tea in boiling water. She doesn't bother saying thank you.

George's feet and heart ached. It was the cold weather, it did this to his bones, took hold of them and shook them hard enough he could feel them rattling around in his wrinkled skin as he edged forward in line. A monument of years among a field of youth. The cashier looked at him with an expectant smile. He could see pity in her dark eyes.

"Two cinnamon rolls," he said. Oh, how cold it was. But Evelyn loved the cinnamon rolls from this place. He held on to the pastries, suddenly uncertain. It was impossible to push open the heavy double doors with one hand. If Evelyn were here, she would have held the cinnamon rolls for him, sniffing deeply with her nose buried in the paper bag, as he led the both of them out into the winter night.

His need for the stuff clawed like a monster to the surface of his skin, broke through the barrier in a burst of blood and jaws. A new day, a new eyesore.

"I'll have..." he stopped, frowned at a dark spot on the back of his hand. The floor heaved, the lines between the tiles curled like smoke signals. Smoke signals, the oldest form of communication. But even then, it was for the same purposes his iPhone lit up for today. To transmit news (of a fresh shipment), to signal danger (when the cops arrived), to gather people to an area (for a good, good time).

His last thought before he hit the ground was that the girl who was screaming sounded a lot like a train speeding across the tracks, its high-pitched whistle growing till it drowned out everything else.

BELLA ISAACS-THOMAS



Senior

Major: Social Theory & Practice and Creative Writing & Literature

Reading: Essay

Bella Isaacs is a senior studying Social Theory & Practice and Creative Writing & Literature with a minor in Environment. Upon graduating this spring, she hopes to pursue a career in environmental journalism. In her free time, she enjoys reading, cooking, making jewelry, and being outside.

On Anxiety and Environment

Anxiety is a complex force to locate within the body and the mind. Does it exist differently in both, or can the same language be used to describe the way it snakes through the bloodstream and tangles our thoughts? Does it seize the heart with the same intensity that causes the brain to grip a particularly unraveling worry, refusing to let go lest the acknowledgement of powerlessness lead to some definite destruction? Isn't that the root cause of anxiety—fear of destruction, whether physical or imagined?

I've tried to situate anxiety as a force that exists outside of myself (mostly untrue, but useful during difficult times). When I notice my thoughts gnawing on it or feel it building in my chest, I stop and remind myself that anxiety is the Invader, and that my Self is a body and a mind capable of fighting back. To locate anxiety outside of the Self, though, is to imply that it is connected with place, with environment. Anxiety is a reaction to external stimuli, isn't it? The trick is to retrain the brain's methods of processing those stimuli, to help it understand the difference between a threat and a nuisance, a concern and a worry, that which can be helped and that which

cannot. Or is the much more difficult task to alter the environment, the very place from which these threats and nuisances originate to produce anxiety? I'd argue that the barriers between mind/body, self/other, and inner/outer world are too complicated (and thin) and render clear answers to these questions unknowable, but I do have several thoughts on the topic.

I imagine that anxiety was always with me, as it's with us all from the start in some form or another. My particular brand was—and in many ways still is—situated within concern for the well being of other people. I felt as though the act of worrying were in itself some type of safeguard, and that the more I actively fretted about whatever shapeless, nameless potential "bad thing" that *could* happen, the more it was unlikely to. This is one of the more vicious examples of a thought loop; when anxiety has convinced you that the very stability of your outer world is on the line if you try to make peace with it, what choice do you have but to surrender to your own disquiet mind?

It was perhaps for that reason that I never did all that much to curb the chaos in my head. I could never commit to meditation because I was afraid of what I'd find in my mind if I tried; I took Xanax once and liked it until I realized it made me feel switched off, like an android that didn't have its emotional unit programmed properly; I did yoga for a couple months but couldn't commit to it because I'm lazy. It doesn't seem to me that any one thing or combination of things will ever conquer anxiety once and for all. Anxiety, after all, is a psychological trait leftover from our hunter-gatherer days. Then, our species *had* to react to the overwhelming panic prompted by any type of threat or attack in order to survive. In many ways, it makes sense that weariness, alertness, and a degree of mistrust continues to be rooted in our collective psyche, although this appears to affect some more negatively than others. And though we think we've tamed our environment, both it and us remain more wild than we're usually comfortable acknowledging. So, in the midst of this biological truth, it's up to the human conscious to identify and hold on to that which is able to bring us peace, even if just for a moment. That's what I think elements like Xanax, meditation, and yoga are to us—temporary peace makers. It's easy to take a pill or go to a class; it's much harder to reach deep into ourselves, whether through therapy or journaling or some combination of the two, and address the root of our daily, slow-burning panic.

This isn't to say that locating ways to forge minor truces with anxiety during daily life has no value, or that many people don't need medication to deal with severe psychological conditions—they do. It's just that for me, the process of making these truces and finding peace for myself has felt somewhat unfruitful. I ultimately can't bring myself to fucking relax, ever. I find it so challenging to leave the anxiety room within my mind palace and explore the rest of the structure. I come close sometimes, but ultimately, that baseline, constant fear keeps me from truly throwing open the door.

This dynamic marked my relationship with anxiety when I arrived at the University of Michigan Biological Station on June 24, 2017. Things had changed slightly as I'd recently come to know grief, a natural complement to anxiety, quite well too. I wish I could tell you that the following two months I spent in woods and water and sunlight diminished the power that these forces had within—sometimes over—me, but I can't. My relationship to them changed, to be sure, but only for a time. It seems to me that anxiety is indeed related to environment, and some places simply contain more unpleasant features than others. It's easy to say that Ann Arbor, with its constant hum of machinery and relentless streams of people, is a more anxiety-inducing space for me than the Biostation was. It's especially easy to do so now that the sky falls dark at 5:00PM and the windows must remain shut because the air has become a source of paralysis rather than rejuvenation. With winter as with anxiety, there's a definite need to locate faith in the seemingly hopeless midst of both, just to maintain a shred of sanity.

On one of my last nights in the North, I canoed out to Sunset Point with friends just as the sun began to dip below the Western horizon. There, we did what we did every evening—talked and looked toward the sky. As night fell and the stars emerged, we moved close to each other for warmth and remained vigilant, eagerly awaiting the rare opportunity to witness a meteor tumble through the atmosphere. We stayed in that place, breathing together and listening to the waves of the lake lap gently onto the shoreline just feet from our heads, until the night's chill forced us to pack our things and head home. This meant, of course, that we would be canoeing back in the dark. Thin clouds had rolled in and it was nearly a new moon, so we couldn't see the sky as well as we'd been able to on the beach. We just had to aim for the lights of the boathouse and trust the darkness. This was hard for me. As we paddled back, my mind raced with thoughts of tipping over, or the possibility that the canoe had some unseen hole that would cause it to start taking on water, making us sink. Lights flashed near what I thought was the director's cabin, and I envisioned reaching shore to find a mob of angry adults waiting to punish us for breaking the "No Night Canoeing" rule. Although each of these catastrophes was highly unlikely, their potentiality made whirlpools out of the thoughts in my mind; in the silence of the night, I could feel the thrum of my heart beating loudly in my ears.

What brought me back from this brink of panic, though, was the realization that in that moment, anxiety was distorting my ability to exist authentically in the present. I might sink, or get kicked out of camp for this particular instance of rule breaking, but neither of those things had happened yet. Instead, I thought, perhaps I should choose to actually tune into to the moment at hand. I noted the quietness of the lake air around me and the weight of the dark sky above. I put my fingers in the water, which was unexpectedly tepid. It was then that I felt an unfamiliar kind of warmth spread throughout my chest; it stayed there for quite some time, humming gently next to my heart. My mind was uncharacteristically quiet. I wondered if this

sensation was akin to what some call spirituality, or perhaps religion, but figured I'd save that inquiry for another time.

The warmth faded when we got to shore and, as we pulled the canoe out of the water, I realized I'd left my water bottle on the beach and sighed in dismay. I never ended up finding it, despite everyone who was with me at the time agreeing that they'd seen it amidst the pile of belongings we'd brought to that particular stargazing event. You can't have everything, I guess.

For days, though, I was fixated on the experience I'd had on the water. It was as if my anxiety had been replaced in that moment by a different force. Was it faith? Had I decided that the consequences I feared were irrational, or that something in particular would ensure that they would not be the happenings to ruin our adventure? Was it the nature of the place—the water, the air, the dark sky above me—that allowed for the soothing of my frenzied thoughts? Truthfully, I'm unsure. I hadn't experienced that sensation before and I've failed to reconnect with it since. But it remains the only real time that I've broken through the chaos of my mind to find, for lack of a better term, the calm waters that appear to exist beyond. For that, and for the stars and the water and the darkness that night, I am grateful.

SAMUEL KARNOFSKY



Sophomore

Major: Economics

Reading: Fiction

I'm from Westfield, New Jersey. In my free time, I enjoy watching sports with my friends and I grew up playing soccer competitively. After taking my creative writing class, I realized how much I love writing short stories and poems. I want to continue to write in the future.

Brawlers

I'm from the type of town where your clothes were your brother's clothes and your neighbor's clothes before him. The foundation on most of the shops was falling apart, leaving the buildings (and the people who worked in them) a little crooked. You couldn't walk home from school without stepping around a fight. No one worth talking about really went to school anymore besides me. But I went for a reason, I was on track to do something important with my life and make a ton of money.

People always told me that I never knew when to shut up, but I was always right so why would I? Girls always liked me and they hated that they liked me. I mean what's not to like? I'm 6 foot 2, 200 pounds and I've got some awesome wavy brown hair that hangs out of the back of my baseball hat. I was the kicker on our football team and I'd like to say that people around here know me as the kid who hit the game winner in the state championship last fall. My best friend in the world, Murph, was the all-state linebacker on that team ending the season with 113 tackles, a school record.

If he wasn't 5 foot 6 you'd have probably heard about him by now. The man benches over three hundred pounds and is built like a pit bull. He doesn't talk much but he's the only genuine person in this fucked up place.

Sherri is the girl that Murph had been dating for a couple of years now. Murph kept telling me that he was going to marry her one day. His plan to propose to her was actually kind of dope. Sher and Murph woke up at 5 in the morning everyday so they could run the entire five-mile course at Highland Park together. The course ends with this beautiful view of the city and if they timed it right they got to see the sunrise over it. There's some ridiculous story that the first time they saw it together was the first time he knew he loved her. He told me that I was going to be his best man.

I mean, this kids been following me around since I was six years old, of course I was going to be his best man. Murph and I were always inseparable. He came over for breakfast every morning before school from first grade until he decided he wanted drop out and start working. My mom was amazed at how many eggs that little kid could eat. I think she picked up an extra shift just to feed him. She loved him and his mom loved me. We were raised together. His brother gave me some of his clothes once I hit my growth spurt and my sister became Murph's personal hair dresser. The bowl cut had to go and Murph wouldn't let me go near him with a razor after I gave him that reverse Mohawk in 7th grade. After school, we always played basketball at his house in his drive way. I'll never forget the first time he dunked on his hoop. It was regulation height, trust me we broke out the tape measurer and checked. I didn't know a person could just float like that. His mom usually made us dinner and I always wanted to get her opinion on the newspaper from that day, or the election, or some new science discovery. We've had so many sleepovers that even a quiet guy like him was comfortable enough to wake me up and tell me I was snoring so loud, the room was shaking.

Sherri was a cool girl and she treated Murph well so I was fine with it. I thought they'd make some cute fun-sized kids one day. She came to football Sundays with the boys at my apartment, wearing the customized Jets jersey that I bought for Murph. I got that using some money I stole from Jenkin's locker in 6th grade. Best of all, she could tolerate our crazy family, and our crazy family would do anything for her. She had straight blonde hair and was always smiling through her perfect teeth. She had a good sense of humor and made it enjoyable for me to third wheel. She liked me whenever I wasn't giving someone a hard time. Sher's family was way too normal to be able to appreciate a guy like me. At least that's what Murph told me when Sher's dad kicked me out of the first combined thanksgiving last year. I mean someone had to tell him that you can't have red walls and a green carpet in the dining room and he didn't take it especially well when I asked if he "was fucking color blind or something".

The thing that I love about Murph is that when it comes to protecting his people he never messes around. I saw some guy get too close to Sher at Mo's one time and let's just say it was a bad night for that guy.

Murph and I got into Mo's night club every Friday and Saturday because I knew that Mo cheated on his wife (my history teacher) every now and again. If he didn't let us in, my tongue might just slip. Wouldn't be the first time. You see, when you've got a mouth like me you need some fists to back it up. Unfortunately, I was all out of those. Fighting was a genetic deficiency in my family, because we are severely uncoordinated. After a few too many trips to the hospital Murph started doing the fighting part for me. You should've seen him. I saw him one-punch knockout Steve Marshall from Cranview after his girlfriend and I had been chilling on the dance floor for a little too long. The kid was 6 foot 7 and 250 pounds. The thing about those tall guys is they don't get knocked out like normal people. You know, he took the punch and wobbled around for a little until his knees buckled. Then, in what felt like an hour he hit the deck. Murph must've had heavy hands like Mike Tyson or something because he dropped everyone I sent his way. It felt like everyone in the world had a reason to kick my ass sometimes.

Murph always chills by the bar with Sher (he wasn't much of a dancer) and I'd tap him on the shoulder and say, "We've got a problem bro."

Sher always gave me that disapproving look, head shaking, like I was some kind of animal.

Murph took a deep breath cracked his knuckles and said, "Dale, what the hell did you do this time? Why can't you just talk your way out of it?"

He made a great point. In school I could always work through any kind of trouble that I got myself into. Like when I hacked the school server and made the background on all of the library computers a picture of Mr. Scaproni without his toupee on. I mean, we all knew he had one. The side of his head was aging grey and the top of his head still had the midnight black, wavy, Italian style. When they brought me into Mr. Flannery's office I explained to him that I was just trying to bring light to our obsolete security system and that "basically anyone with half a brain could access all the students' private information". They let me go without a problem as long as I helped them update. Easily worth it. But when it came to fighting I didn't really have the temperament to talk someone down, you know? If you already wanted to fight me, there was nothing in my vocabulary that was going to change that.

Then, we'd go outside together and Murph would tell whatever dude was waiting for me that either they'd fight him or they'd fight no one. Usually, they just cursed me out and bailed because my boy developed a little rep. But, whenever they were stupid or brave or drunk enough to fight... they lost.

Every Saturday, Murph and I helped Mrs. Abrams clean her bird cages. She was getting older and had trouble taking care of her 12 birds. Murph and I decided we'd help her clean them every week so the block wouldn't smell so horrible and our friends wouldn't make fun of it when they came over on Sunday to watch football.

Usually, we went to home to shower then went out to Mo's. This Saturday was different though. Murph told me that he was tired and he wanted take a nap before we went out that night. I explained to him that he was full of bird crap and he just wanted to hang with his mom for a little because he was a Mama's boy. To be honest here, we both kind of were. We both grew up without our fathers which made us that much closer to our mothers. Murph's Dad was in the army and was helping the country. He got shot and Murph's shy exterior got even quieter. My dad was just a bad memory.

I went back to my place and showered for like half an hour. Then I threw on my club shirt that Murph's brother gave me a while back. It was a pink button down with blue cuffs and some khakis. I threw on my baseball hat and was about to head out the door. I didn't realize my mom was home. She looked worried and that concerned me. The news was on the T.V. and you could see that it had an impact on her. It said that some kid got stabbed outside of Apollos club last night- 3 blocks from Mo's.

"Dale, can you just stay in tonight?"

"Have you seen the bouncers and MO's? and I got Murph too. Nothing's gonna' happen. I'll try to make it an early night."

I started walking downtown to Mo's and the Saturday scene was already underway. Jordy was having a house party and it reeked of weed. I never had really been into the drug scene. Anything that makes you feel like you want to sit in bed and fall asleep was stupid. I was fine with the booze.

Once I got into Mo's with no questions asked by the bouncers, like usual, I went down stairs to the basement where the dance floor was and looked for some people I knew. I saw Sher right in the middle of the dance floor and she must've been on something because I had never seen her dance like she was dancing that night. Her friends jumped all around her and were easily as messed up as she was but I wasn't really concerned about them because they did that every weekend. I made my way over to them to go say what's up and give Sher a hug hello. We always hugged every time saw each other. She made eye contact with me and started walking dancing over to me with a big grin on her face. It wasn't Sher's smile though. Usually the happiness radiated right out of those perfect teeth. Her eyes had an eerie red tint to them and indicated that she was pretty fucked up.

I wasn't sure how this was going to go. I thought that she may curse me out because of all the stupid shit that I got Murph into or maybe I was being

crazy and she was just pumped to see me.

We got closer to each other, fighting through the crowd. We met face to face.

"What's up Sher? How you doing?" I went in to give her the usual hug like I normally did and I could've never in a million years have expected what happened next.

Sher's hands grabbed the two sides of my head with a death grip and pulled me into her face. Then she stuck her tongue down my throat before I could even understand what was going on.

I pushed her off immediately, "What the hell are you doing? Are you an idiot? Murph is my fucking brother."

She must've blacked back in at that very moment because I've never seen anyone look so hopelessly dumbfounded before in my entire life. Tears formed in her eyes like a couple of puddles and her cheeks and face turned so pale it seemed like she was looking at a ghost or something.

All of the other members of the blacked-out cheerleading squad came over to us immediately.

"Dale did you really just do that to your best friend? You're out of control."

"Dale you're a fucking asshole!"

My jaw dropped. I couldn't believe that these chicks actually thought that I was the one who fucked up. I couldn't speak. They had the audacity to think that I would ever betray Murph before Sher would? Her hands were wrapped around my head. My heart started pounding. I remembered Murph was on his way to the club. Fuck.

If Murph came here and saw me with these chicks claiming that I made out with her then he was going to drop the hammer on me and I had absolutely no intention of getting my ass kicked that night. Maybe if I removed myself from the situation and talked to him on Sunday he would be able to understand. I ran out of the club as fast as possible and took an alternate route back home. I was inside the apartment before I realized that there were tears streaming down my face. Luckily, my mom was sleeping and didn't hear me come in. If she saw me crying she would've freaked out. Even when I was sent to the hospital I didn't cry.

I laid in bed and thought about what I was going to say to Murph tomorrow. Honestly, would he really think I'd do that to him? He must know that those girls were crazy. There was absolutely no way tomorrow could be any worse than today though. I drifted off into sleep focusing on that.

My alarm went off at 10 am because the Jets had the 11 am game that day. I felt a lot better, actually. I threw on my old Curtis Martin jersey and went into the living room. Before I could even get there, someone knocked on my door. I looked through the peep hole, and saw that it was Ben from my math class. I opened the door.

"What's good Benny? You here for the game?"

"Nah bro. I saw Murph at Mo's last night and he told me to tell you that he wanted to meet you by the train tracks at 11."

"Was he fucked up?" I said. I don't even know why I asked that question. I've seen Murph drink a full case of beer and still be completely functional.

"I don't know man, but he was really fucking riled up. After I talked to him for a second, the bouncer came up to him and tried to calm him down. Murph rocked him in the face and stormed out. You really fucked up, Dale."

"I didn't do anything. She stuck her tongue down my throat!" He looked up at me, shook his head and walked away in disbelief.

I didn't understand why Murph wanted to beat me to a pulp by the train tracks. We hadn't been there since we first started becoming friends. He wasn't talking about the main train line that took you to NYC but the cargo one. We used to just walk along it and talk for hours about the shit we were going to do when we grew up. It was private and only we knew about it.

I started walking over there getting ready to get my ass kicked. I threw a few practice punches or whatever to warm up. It was stupid. There was absolutely no shot I was going to even touch him.

Once I got there, I crawled through the open hole in the fence. The train tracks were on top of a hill that was about as tall as I was on both sides. Murph stood with his feet on the track and his eyes fixated on me. It must've been the first time he looked down to me. His hands were shaking almost hysterically like they were in the locker room before we played Cranview our senior year. The thing that terrified me most was the explicit fear in his eyes, I had never seen him nervous before a fight. Usually, he pounced like a cheetah with everything he had but I guess this was different. He refrained himself.

"Dale, I've seen you fuck over everyone in the world man." a tear streamed out his right eye, "But I always thought you had my back."

"Murph, come on bro. You know those chicks are fucking ly..."

"Shut the fuck up!" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Silver Revolver. It was his dad's. He raised it up and pointed it at me.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2018

The sun had finally reached its peak and was flaring right above Murph's head. I could barely see my best friend. The trees whistled in the wind. I looked at him and mustered up the courage to speak.

"So, it's like that, huh?"

Bang.

ANNE KOZAK



Junior

Major: Biomolecular Science

Reading: Fiction

Anne hails from Bloomfield Hills, MI. She likes learning about science, but writing has been a love of hers since she was seven years old. Anne has one dimple. She has recently discovered a love for candles and the color maroon. Her old loves include running and sitting in a big chair with a blanket, a cup of tea, and a good book.

Aretha, Long Lost

She blew in as if by accident, looked lost as she wandered into the dark light, like she didn't really mean to be there. For a few seconds she stood in front of the door, blinking her eyes, other patrons shoving her to the side:

"Get out of the way," said a somewhat inebriated younger woman, who was just leaving. Her haughty boyfriend huffed.

"Someone's gonna knock you over," warned the mustache of a gruff leather-jacketed man behind her. Inexplicably, she paid no notice. The seconds stretched into a full minute, while she stood there just blinking, mannequin-like.

Suddenly it seemed that she had finally gotten used to the light, because she came to life and walked hesitantly to a stool, and sat. Melted snow from her hair and her coat dripped onto the floor beneath her. She slumped dejectedly, looking at her hands, as if she wondered why they were there. Old scars littered her palms, straight dark lines from holding knives.

Her name was Aretha.

The bartender saw her, but when she started over and opened her mouth, Aretha looked up and shook her head firmly.

"I'm just waiting for someone," she said.

So she sat there like that for hours, inhumanly still, while the bar sparked with life: people drinking and laughing, coming and leaving, some staying and getting more drunk as the night went on.

A man about Aretha's age with a short haircut and dark eyes had been watching the door when she walked in. He was sitting in a booth at the end of the bar, and wore a long black coat which he never took off. When he saw Aretha a strange emotion crossed his face. Confused, as if he recognized her, but wasn't quite expecting her. Dejected, as if he was expecting her, but was hoping she wouldn't come. He looked angry, as if he was waiting for her to turn around and recognize him, but every time her eyes passed his way they passed right over him. He waited, but she had forgotten.

Every once in a while, he would buy a drink for a woman to pass the time, and she'd come over to flirt with him: the dark, handsome stranger drinking by himself.

He introduced himself with a smile—his name is Dan; he's glad to meet you. He was never really interested, but played along until she saw the band on his left finger and a disgusted look crossed her face, and she said, "You don't belong here. Go home to your wife," and he wistfully said, as he said every time, "My wife is dead."

The woman felt bad, but she made up her mind that she would leave the table—she wasn't the kind of person who had nothing left to lose.

Because who knows? Maybe, the woman thought, his wife isn't dead. Or maybe he's still not over her yet. She wouldn't say these things aloud, but he could read the look on her face. Dan nodded and said, "I understand," and sent her on her way. He finished his whiskey and ordered another when he saw another woman to pass the time with.

All the while, he would keep an eye on Aretha, but he never asked her over.

Late that night the bar was getting quiet, and most patrons had left. Aretha was still sitting on her stool, looking at her hands. The bartender said carefully, "Are you sure the person you're waiting for is coming?"

Aretha replied, "I'm sure."

To herself, she whispered, "I'm sure."

"Well," the bartender said, "we're about to close. Do you want me to wait outside with you?" Aretha shrugged.

Outside the air was thick with snow, but Aretha didn't seem to be bothered by it. The bartender stood awkwardly next to her, uncomfortable, but not wanting to leave this girl alone in the cold.

Dan walked up next to them and said, "I'll wait with her." The bartender's brow furrowed, and she said, "You sure?" to both of them. Aretha shrugged again and the man nodded confidently. He had a nice face and the bartender wanted to go home, so she bid them good night and left them there while the snow and wind circled them.

"I don't think your friend is coming," Dan said after a while.

Ignoring him, Aretha looked at the ring on his hand. "Isn't your wife waiting for you?"

"She's dead," he said, "She's with me all the time."

"Oh." She noticed how tall he was; he seemed like a crow watching over her in the night. The man towered over her. She suddenly wanted to know, "How did she die?"

"I'll tell you if you come home with me," he joked, mouth smiling, eyes cold.

Even though she knew he was joking, Aretha paused. Something about the man made her want to know his story. She was sure someone would come for her, but what if there was no one coming at all? There was nowhere else for her to stay for the night. A strong wind nearly blew her over, and Dan steadied her. In a way he made her feel comfortable. And she didn't have anything left to lose.

So she agreed.

Dan felt bad, a little bit. He wanted to pretend he had no past, just as she had forgotten hers. He knew this because he had seen her before, talked to her. But every time he spoke to her was hard, because it reminded him of a time of pain in his life. And still, he couldn't pull himself away.

Aretha held onto this man, confused, as he led her away, a tall and solid pillar, a wall against the swirling winds, the curling knots of fear rising up her throat, stuck there, and she wasn't sure if even this stranger could protect her from herself. Together they danced up a stairway of stone, and paused while he fished an old key from his pocket and opened the door.

He took her by the hand, and blindly she followed.

Not that long after it felt like ages later, soft hands meeting warm skin

in the dark; a long black coat, like a shadow, draped across the floor. Amidst the strange and melancholy kind of passion, Aretha stared out and imagined snakes in the wallpaper, perfect curved bodies racing down the walls to meet her, waiting to say goodbye, teeth glinting, sardonic.

She saw no pictures of Dan's wife in the bedroom.

When it was over Aretha sat up under the sheets and inscrutably watched the wall across from her. The man, who had gotten up to rinse off, glanced at the waves in the wallpaper—waves he had lived with, himself, for years—but he couldn't see what she was seeing. There was something beautiful about how still she sat, how focused she was, but it was obvious there was something broken about her. When he came back she hadn't moved an inch. She noticed Dan was back, and she turned back to look at him.

"Can you tell me now?" she asked him in a small voice.

Dan produced a stuffed turtle in his hands. It was well-loved: the seams came apart and pale stuffing leaked out between the shell and the underbody. Aretha was suddenly fixated on him.

"Yes," he said, "You wanted to hear how my wife died."

Aretha stared at the turtle and could not respond. Something about it seemed familiar, but it was just a child's toy.

"This belonged to my daughter," the man said, breaking the silence.

"A daughter," Aretha echoed, whispering, realizing that there was something about this man that reminded her of herself. And, in fact, she had her own daughter—or was it a son?

He placed the stuffed animal in her hands, carefully, his fingers grazing hers, and she asked, "Belonged? As in—not any more?" She did her best to keep her voice from shaking. She could not remember where her child was or what she looked like. Why couldn't she remember? Had she been waiting for her daughter in that bar? Troubled, she thumbed the turtle at the seams; Dan looked into her eyes and nodded.

"You'll understand soon."

So he told her: "I loved my wife, but I loved my daughter more—just as any parent would."

They were both wonderful, he said, his wife and Janie. Janie. They named her after Dan's mother, who had been in the army and had died far away in some other country. In service to her country, he would tell himself, but it didn't help much. The funeral was just a few months before Janie was born. She had her mother's bright blue eyes and dark wisps of newborn hair,

but every time he looked at her he thought of his mother. Dan was heart-broken. He had never really experienced loss like this—and maybe he should have been expecting it, but he grew up believing his mom was invincible.

His wife was there for him. She was kind; she loved people. She smiled all the time—that's what he loved about her. Nothing tore her down. And even though the darkness in Dan's head would cloud up and fill his mind with misery, he would sometimes walk into the dark light of a room and see Janie sleeping peacefully on her mother's lap, see his wife reading a story to their beautiful daughter, and for a moment Dan would feel at peace.

Dan said, "On the outside, our life together was perfect. I had a family, a job, a nice house. But I wasn't happy. I needed something more. It hurt so much when my mother died—when I realized I never really got to know her. I wanted to honor her."

Dan was young, and wildly searching for meaning in this death. He started going to recruitment centers to talk to the officers there about his mom, and what life would have been like for her. Somehow, through all those visits, an idea started to form in his head. The more he thought about it, the more Dan resolved to follow in his mom's footsteps. "I was young," he kept saying, as if trying to justify himself.

What his wife would have said, he imagined, was that he came home from work one night and suddenly decided to join the army. Dan tried to explain that he'd been thinking about this for a long time, but his wife wouldn't listen. Maybe she tried to be understanding, but he could hear fear in her voice. He didn't quite understand, because he wasn't afraid; he didn't believe he would die. He told her he felt it was his only choice, and she begged him not to. He would leave the country; he would get hurt or worse, and what would she tell Janie if she lost her father?

Dan had just told her that it was his duty. He was immovable.

Early on in his training, he came back at night and found her curled up on the couch silently sobbing.

A year went by; Janie's first birthday came and went. Dan saw his wife and child less and less as the days went on. After that one night, though, she never cried—she was quiet. They talked in hushed voices when they were both home, as if afraid they would break something with raised voices.

And amidst training and coming home tired at night, they interviewed some nannies to help out for when Dan eventually left. Dan's wife said nothing during the interviews; she just stared out the window, tight-lipped.

Dan left, and was gone for almost a year on his first tour. His daughter was now two-and-a-half years old. He brought home a little stuffed turtle toy.

Janie immediately fell in love with it—now a toddler, Janie wobbled all across the house, toy in hand, yelling, “Thank-you-dad!” (Aretha felt cold; she shivered, clutching the turtle.)

Dan and his wife had a long argument that night, after putting Janie to bed.

“Is this the only way our daughter will know you—through a stuffed toy?” she said.

He told her, “This is the closest I’ve ever felt to my mother.”

“And who do you think is more important—your dead mother, or your living child?”

He had said he thought he was starting to understand his mother, that this was the best way to be the best man he could be, for Janie; she begged him to find another way, said that she had spent too many tears on their bed, alone. She told him she couldn’t bear to see him leave again.

Overseas, a bullet narrowly missed Dan’s ear, and he feared for his life for the first time.

The next time he came home, Janie was about to turn four years old. Dan wanted to surprise her with the news: he would be home all the time, now. He had seen what his mother had seen, and he wanted to be there for his wife and child in the same way that his mother hadn’t been for him. He was going to tell his wife that he wouldn’t leave any more; he took a job at the recruitment center; that he would be there for them every night for dinner.

He was welcomed home with silence.

The story wasn’t finished, but Dan had stopped.

Aretha was shaking. She clutched the toy turtle, the hairs on her arms standing up, and her mind turned, trying to comprehend what Dan had just said—welcomed home with silence echoing behind her eyes—why she felt as though she had just lost her daughter in those moments. Aretha’s mouth opened, but the questions on her breath blew away with the cold wind through the window. And suddenly, she knew what happened next.

Because something all too similar had happened to her: her husband had left her, but came back, and left her again, just as Dan described. Leaving Aretha and her child unbearably alone.

She stood up, and said, “I need some fresh air.” She imagined how Dan’s cold eyes followed her through the dark room; she didn’t see that the man’s fists were clamped around the sheets in anger, his knuckles white—

didn't see his face contort. The same anger, all too real, which he must have felt when he saw two lifeless bodies, two pairs of empty blue eyes, in the kitchen that day.

The same anger she felt when two men had mistakenly come to the door and told her that her husband had died, far away in some other country; how she screamed. How she felt when, in a passion, she had smothered her own child, because if her beloved husband had to die, they all had to be dead together.

When, crying over the small, cold body of her daughter, who was still clutching the toy, Aretha held the knife to her chest and plunged it into her heart.

Aretha fled to the bathroom. Her shaking hands turned the knobs in the bathtub, and hot water spilled out. Steam still clung to the mirrors from Dan's shower—had that little time passed?—Aretha wiped it off with her palms. She stared at her reflection until the steam from her bath made it fade, and stumbled back, still not quite believing the face that looked back at her: bright blue eyes and dark hair. Despite her best efforts, she was forced to recognize herself; forced to remember why she couldn't feel happiness—only pain—why she couldn't remember anything about herself or what she was doing at a bar that night.

Aretha wanted to make it all go away.

Dan stood in the doorway to the bathroom, enshrouded in his black coat. He didn't stop her when she took the knife he had carefully placed on the bathtub edge, when she paused to prepare herself. When she suddenly and ferociously drew the blade into her chest, just as she had before.

Dan's wife was dead, and had been dead for years—but somehow she would always come back to find him, a lost, amnesiac woman: Aretha. He didn't know how, but it always hurt him because he had loved her and he missed her—he loved Janie, and almost, finally, had the chance to get to know her—and then she had taken everything away from him. He loved Aretha and he hated her. She sobbed now, bent over reams of blood, trying to tell him how sorry she was, how she would try to do better, how ashamed she felt. How it wasn't her fault, couldn't he see, why didn't he say something sooner?

The toy turtle floated next to her. He could only stand and watch, just as he had done every year on this day, forced to meet his wife again for the first time and forced again to see her die; allowed to see his wife again, but never his daughter.

GREER LAFONTANT



Junior

Major: Industrial Operations Engineering & Physics

Reading: Poetry

My name is Greer Lafontant. I am from Wilmette, Illinois. I took a year off to travel and in between academic semesters, I spend my summers out west hiking and climbing.

I Haven't Used Century Gothic in Years But It Was My Favorite Font As a Kid

1.

You welcomed me with open arms you did,
I didn't know where else to go
And I walked your sidewalks, chipped and slanted,
Feeling the freest I had ever felt,
Not fancy, not classy,
Like that gilded shit I grew up in, the womb of wealth and upper class,
But you liked me and I liked you and I felt safe,
And able to be myself

The days too hot to go outside,
No one knew my name,
The freedom of being unfamiliar, and that is an understatement,
She lived in California, this side of the Mississippi too,

But it wasn't the same, it wasn't the same, it would never be
For you.

She turned gilded womb into a gilded vagina into an embellished gilded creature,
 A fear of mine,
 I turned my gilded womb into a backpack and burgers, and my slender body acquired welcomed fat, fat welcomed for the first time in my jawline society, beef burgers went in, and I felt good, despite the anxious reminder of what I was.

2.

Dandelions weren't weeds when I was a child
 They were beautiful and I picked them and let the white milk juices ooze all over
 my fingers, excited for their touch.

Yellow is beautiful in a field of green.

She welcomed me with open arms, like a moist field welcoming the dandelion,
 before the humans called him a weed,

She welcomed me with open arms, open understated, untuned arms.

That were warm and okay.
 And didn't need approval.

Lincoln logs were all I liked as a child.
 Simple and beautiful and I loved the sound of the tin clanging against the wood,

The idea of building something for myself,
 So simple and easy and uncomplicated.

The absolute opposite of the life I was given and expected of me

So I escaped and she welcomed me, freeing me, providing me with frivolity.

I woke up every day,
 ready to play with my Lincoln logs, I built my own simplicity, I built my own security,

at the Salt Lake City Library and at the Hires drive in,
 and on the stoop before the sun came up,

clanging the ice against the jar,
 rummy for hours,

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no care in the world,

except for the occasional phone call from the gilded world,
the gilded girl who was trying to die inside of me.

3.

Christmas tears me in half.
Rips me at the seams, like a well creased piece of printer paper,
When scissors won't come out to play.

Christmas tears me in half,
Too fast too fast too fast,
As if more silver cards can replace our distance.

4.

Maybe we miss each other and don't know what else to do. I know I miss
them.

5.

I always feel like I'm Minerva, surrounded by a bunch of narcissus', or maybe
I'm the narcissus, that's the god damn thing about Christmas, my views get
skewed, and my self-understanding gets split in half,

like well creased paper, sharp fingernails, and no scissors to be found.

6.

She welcomes me, which is why I go back.
But she doesn't push me. Not like gilded expectation.

I want to sit on my chair that I bike locked to the post, and sweat, sweat
beneath my veins,
Sweat with calm,

He looks at me and I look at him, and I fight him because I am too happy

I am too happy.
No one every prepared me for that.

7.

gilded within,
I am a Baobab.

My fruits bloom in the middle of the night,
Beautiful and fragrant and delicious,
Unable to be spoiled by the blanket of darkness,

I am a baobab with pungency,
Dirty stinking pungency,
That only me and me can smell,
Sitting alone in a stall,

Sunk within,
For only me to find.

Thoughtful Productivity is Courier/ Sorry

In the reflection of the window

I can't tell if its pouring because I'm so hazed from staring at
electric particles all day,

No literally, I'm not referencing my phone, I'm referencing my
physics class, that shit is exhausting,

I'm so lazy sometimes and I just want to take the elevator but
every time I stand in a crowded elevator I feel like a piece of
shit and with every second I realize just how much faster the
stairs would have been

I'm a freak about time, efficiency is my key except I don't have
a lock and I am ill,

Daily delusion of the mind, self-destructive or self-supportive,
not sure where the boundary is, like the boundary between right
and wrong, truth and lie,

As if I know the crumbs I left on the floor of the library,

That was rude and I know no one will be back to pick them up, I
know I will see them tomorrow as I crawl back into my normal
creep solitude psychosis,

My eyes lose their flavor,

I get super short tempered sometimes, I'm either molasses or

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shards of glass, no in between, my entire being there is no in
between, it is what it is,

Dr. Buntman always told me to find a balance,

I like the way the sky looks today,

And two weeks ago, see I appreciate the sky and its beauty but
didn't even think to realize such sexy clouds only meant trouble
for da ney ney, da nature,

You know I hate that I'm selfish but how can I not be, I
literally cannot step into your skin and I hate that about
myself, it's my biggest insecurity, oh and my chewing, god I
think I am a loud chewer,

Fuck me, I hate loud chewers

I hate everything that I am afraid to be, that's psych 101 for
you,
I hate laziness, I hate loud chewing, I hate when people walk
slow absorbed by electric particles, I hate that that is me
sometimes, oopies,

My boyfriend used to say oopies,
Oh wait, my ex-boyfriend,

Last time I tried to talk to him, I was blackout in a cowboy bar
in Wyoming,

I was a janitor that summer and views by drake had just come
out and I was mopping one morning, and one of the first lines on
the album goes "all of my 'let's just be friends are friend I
don't have anymore" and I was like Drake, holy shit,

He didn't want to talk to me.
Got over that one real quickly.
I think my last text to him was like "you're an asshole"

Good thing about being a janitor in Wyoming is no one can reach
you back

I used to call from the pay phone at night in the field, it was
weird and cold and dark.

Pharell is so fucking flawless it kills me.

My water bottle smells like shit and I know it and I kinda love it.

Sometimes, I am proud and walk out of the stall, and exit the bathroom without washing my hands,

Sometimes, people make me feel meek, and I bow down to their expectations, or my expectations of their expectations, and wash my hands even though I normally hate washing my hands in public bathrooms. It upsets me.

Sometimes I am too tired to chew. I guess that's why they invented Soylent.

Soylent is chalky and so is my life

Flaky as fuck

YUANYUAN LIU



Freshman

Major: Movement Science

Reading: Poetry and Short Story

Yuanyuan decides to use this space to describe the pronunciation of her name. It's just saying "yee-woo-ann yee-woo-ann" really fast. Try it! Yuanyuan likes to write from time to time.

Part 1: An Excerpt From My Short Fiction Salt Water.

Background:

Below is the beginning of a short fiction. It is a description of Demetrius, a boy, who was about to drown everyone in an underground orphanage where he suffered growing up.

Demetrius was wandering along the shore again, but this time with a key in his hand. It was foggy as always, so the boundary between sky and the sea was blurred—it was in the afternoon, but everything was grey enough to make the scene get misjudged as evening, and it was probably going to rain. Seagulls were starving; they screamed and circled around the shore, but they never seem to expect any from the orphanage near the shore. Demetrius had lived in White Willow orphanage for his entire life, and been bullied for almost the same amount of time. Growing up here by the sea, he still loved the view of it, especially it's probably his last time to have this view. Its location made it the dampest orphanage in the country, because it is only steps away from the pacific ocean.

The key in his hand was to the basement of orphanage. From Demetrius' memory, the basement of the orphanage had never been dry for one day, but everyone living underground seemed to be used to it. Orange-yellow lights are reflected from stained cream color walls made of bricks through-

out the day. What's within reach of light source appeared to be covered in a layer of

fine water droplets, while what's in the dark presumably much wetter. Children from White Willow had to dry their bodies after a shower by climbing out from the basement through the wooden lid towards ground floor, and go outside to let wind coming from the ocean blow their hair until they're dry and salty. Demetrius opened his palm and looked at the key in his hand, his walking pace slowed down. Wind coming toward shore was strong, but not strong enough to blow away the object on his open hand.

Demetrius stopped walking. He looked back at the orphanage, where he spent his entire life, after turning himself to the sea. He took a glance down at the key in his palm, grasped it, and threw it into the ocean as far as he could. Seagulls dashed away from the splashing site where the key dropped, screaming. The key was gone for good. Demetrius knew that this marked the start of his sin at White Willow orphanage. The wind and his fear set his teeth on edge in under the vast grey sky.

Part 2: A Poem

《晨歌》

有温度的钝刀
不用说胸骨——
它甚至锯不开早已淤青的皮肤

我请求心脏不要颤动了，它不明白
偷窃之手隐匿于寒冬的晨雾
同它只隔着柔软

是车水马龙还是枯叶锋利的边缘
在我身后等待？
雾要散了，风灌满大衣
顺着头发渗出来

食物的气味从四面八方蒸腾起
可我来不及看你吃早餐
市井的隆隆战鼓又打响了
你眼里的言语流淌得越来越慢

有温度的钝刀
谢谢你偷听
如果我在迟暮见到你
能不能带我走？

Aubade

A blunt knife with temperature
needless to say the sternum—
can't it even saw bruised skin.

I beg the heart not to flutter; it does not understand
stealing hands hidden in winter morning mist
just softness away.

Is it thick traffic, or a sharp fallen leaf
waiting behind me?
Fog dispersing, wind tanks up coat
seeps through hair.

Smell of food enticing, escaped from neighborhood,
but shall I not see you at breakfast;
market rumbling, fired again,
words in your eyes flow more and more slowly

A blunt knife with temperature
thank you for overhearing.
If I see you at dusk
would you take me away

CHRISTINE MACKENZIE



Freshman

Major: Creative Writing and Psychology

Reading: Poetry and Fiction

Christine A. MacKenzie is a freshman planning to major in creative writing and psychology. She loves writing fiction and poetry, practicing meditation, playing piano, and reading authors such as Virginia Woolf, Haruki Murakami, and David Mitchell. In the future she hopes to either go to graduate school for psychology or English, but ultimately would like to integrate the two subjects.

Blackbird

Dedicated to Ana Miryam Barrera Garza

Time will stop when I ask this time
 Because we've boarded a ferry on the Adriatic
 Headed out on the shimmering blue to an island
 Off of Croatia, I can't wait for you to dive into the sea in that
 Little red bikini, into the rocky water splashing onto stray cats
 At the shore, I'm crossing my fingers that time will stop
 Now, for the both of us, because I asked it to.

Blackbird smashed into our window, seizing in a little pool of blood
 On our white hotel balcony, everything was white, the cleaning ladies
 Swept it into the garbage when we left for the pool, I cried in the bathroom
 When you were swimming because I was furious that time speeds up
 At the time of death--that's not fair!--I wanted one more moment
 To tell the bird *this is time for you to sleep, little one*, no more crying.

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You stepped out of the water and wrapped a towel around your
Goosebumped body, radiating the sun off your skin,
‘Ya look like a ghost, hun’ then handed coins to the vendor,
Two pastries, covered in powdered sugar,
Crunched and melted on my tongue, then
You looked into my eyes and time obeyed.

Cast Me Back

Cast me back into the earth from which I came,
and I will soar: at a snail’s pace breathless
under a mound of warm dirt.

There is no paradise in paradise, only
Hell and Hell and Hell.
nothing, too. Don’t
force my hand, *Let me go*.

There is no wisdom in wisdom, only
delusion of the lesser fool. Tell me
we’re more than hunks of flesh
gorging in eternal sin, Tell me
I am the fool of fools

For trust in dreams more than dreams
names more than names
light more than light, casting out the
darkness that is truth. For trust in
More and More and More.

Each fork in the path begs a
choice: end here or continue to
hope for us? How long can I
chew on bits of conjured hope?

Cast me back into the sea, from the violent shake of
fisherman’s boat, to dart back into a gap in the
coral--the abyss-- *Let me go*, that’s all I ask.

Her Lips

Her lips are green slices of granny smith apples,
Crunching into sour pulp that fires into her veins.

Her lips are sketched in pastel reds that smack
Together into blown kisses, *Farewell, dear!*

Her lips are coated in sticky cream puffs that
I lick off her chin, *I've got it!* I kiss them.

Her lips blow bubbles that pop in her hair.
I remember her lips long after she left.

The Hands

The hands are foreign to her, the stump where his right thumb used to be made her retch when it ran down her bumpy spine. In the end of them, he put the thumb in a false book on his bedroom shelf, the flesh shriveled into a dark hunk. She left in the night, ran out into the wet night in nothing but a nightgown and a pair of old slippers: *you're not yourself anymore, dear*, she whispered in a dream, before she disappeared.

There was a loss in the fullness of the house, the warm impression on the mattress where she laid night after night now a hollow crater stealing breath from his chest. The light shines over the white, he wishes for darkness: *let me see what I see inside myself*. He wishes for the entire world to show the pain inside of him: the birds should drop to the earth, the crowds on the streets drop to their knees, the clouds convulse blow up on the roofs. Why does the world match the world of yesterday?

In the kitchen her lipstick creases on a wine glass, her lips taste like chalk, break out into laughter because she loved him. His reflection in the glass a horrific shadow, no shower or shave could cure, the shadows seep out on his skin, the droop of his liver, all the colors fade--what is color?--the colors nauseate and burden him, draw the shades in all the rooms and collapse on the couch. Drape his body over the musty couch, her perfume the scent of her body releases from the fabric. *I want to burn this house down*, but he doesn't: honeyed memories intoxicate him, *she's out for a moment, she'll come back tomorrow*, hope and hope for that which cannot be.

Leave the house to the fruit markets, hear the shouts in the street--low prices! the best cherries!--he tries all the fruit, all of them sour. He remembers that she looped her arm in his, fed him grapes from a cluster like a God, *we have no money*, run hide in a bookstore a block down that direction. He

takes shots of espresso, vodka, at a nearby cafe--take away the smell of lavender, hot meat dried in the streets, her sweaty thighs stick to park benches, he lifted her in a swirl, *Isn't she the most beautiful woman in the world?* Take all that away, please.

The right thumb positioned under the knife, cut off in a dreamy daze at the butcher's shop. Never had he wanted more to learn the arts of classical piano, whirl across the keyboard, never had he wanted more to caress her cheek, than when it became impossible. Close all the doors she opened, please, lock that old rusted gate, chained, hidden behind a vast woodland that should never be entered again.

Mind & Body

The body is a shell
from which she cannot hatch, empty
except for the creature curled up
beneath the sink, she wants to die.

imagine her locked in a casket,
nesting dolls one by one: walls
of wood, skin, blood, bone—
the body dies with creature

that cannot ring the bell
to say: *I'm here, in this box!*

no one sees her when she cuts
in the shower, red water swirls
away, to let the blood that glows

for him vanish into the pipes,
because he refuses to see her.

soft flesh of the pomegranate fills
her, the seeds sweet enfolded in
her hands, red globe that rots

not grows, inside that box.
the mountain top is empty, she runs
to scream she loves him, the world

her theater for the Gods, the creature
stabs her ears with forks: don't listen
any longer, you've never been so empty
as when you knew you were.

EMMA MCGLASHEN



Senior

Major: English and BCN-Behaviour, Cognition and Neuroscience

Reading: Poetry

Emma is an Ann Arbor native, a coffee addict, and a wearer of mismatched socks. She has recently taken to entertaining delusions about her future as a neuropathologist, but she continues to love writing in all forms and genres, and continues to spend her the majority of her time working on literary, theatrical and musical projects.

Elegy for the Children

A boy touches a tree and an impossibility of sparrows flood the sky.

A girl rolls up her pants to the knee, wades into a river, unearths a skeleton from the pebbled basin. The bones drip between her fingers.

A lithe body emerges from tall grass, silent with dark eyes.
Their hair is braided with flowers and twine, feathers and weeds.

A summer thunderstorm draws steam from the peat carpet of a forest.
Children dance with wet hair in the slanting light.

A woman in a parking lot holds onto a cigarette like its name is conviction.
She tells her sitting children that murder is the only option left.

A cardboard box of books sits in the rain, blurring. They saturate.

We take them in our hands, pile them into our bags, bring them home.

Crows fill the trees, gather on fences, cover rooftops. A handful of dirt, scattered.

They watch over us, silent, thoughtful, like angels.

He is that He is

Your God's body is a gold coin
too heavy to lift off of your tongue.
Instead, He lays in your mouth, sodden and deteriorating.
He tastes like bloody wine. He tastes like the decay
of iron to rust. He tastes like the dust of the dead
flung from pews, to hang in the fractured rose and
deep blue air of stained glass windows. He tastes like
sandalwood, chopped and burned, smoke curling
before a golden altar.

You can hold Him in your pocket
if you are able to spit Him from your mouth, if you find Him
too hard to swallow. If you think it more palatable,
you can find Him in beads, or cards, or even candles.

You can pinch Him between your fingertips,
a nub of plastic. You can flip through the laminated
stations of the cross, emblazoned on index cards:
see the progression of his brutalized body—
make Him walk, make Him hang limp, make Him rise again.

"Yes, It's Fine, but Have You Seen the MoMA?"

I will be a stealer of eyes. I will eat them.
I will be a thief. I will be a ravager.
I will come to his home in the night,
appear by his bedside table,
splice him open and drink from his past.

Further Variations

After Margaret Atwood

i would like to sleep
with you, beside or around you.
If they need us, they will find us sun-washed,
napping, ankles entwined and noses adjacent.

i want you
blanket smothered, sweaty, snoring,
fetal, close, dream devoured.
We are sinuous as cat-backs together,
Swelling and slimming like a bellows,
dipping into half-sleep and slipping
into rest like drifted snow.

i would like to be your eyelash, that
half-parenthesis wisp, pillowcase fallen.
wish on me. let me prove that you blow me away.
let me grant you whatever you desire.

Origami

My lover crafted me a box—slender fingers bending
paper, one sheet plucked from a neat pile.
It was quickly made, a few moments of them turning
a magic trick between their palms.
The seams were cross-hatched with paper lines, folds
tucked away like retracted wings. My lover folded
their legs underneath them on the couch just as smoothly,
put the box between us, placed their hands back in their lap.

My lover crafted me a box—A gift.
Perhaps less a box than a basket, a bowl, lacking
a close (no top). Topless, the finished vessel sat
between us, looking pensive and pure. It was empty, delicate.
Unfillable except by other delicacies, other delicacies.
How alike, my lover and this box. Pale and soft in the light,
well sculpted, linear, smooth, so easily crumpled. How easily
protectiveness rises in my throat and in my hands.

I have been given many gifts—
their hands in the morning: white curtains, gentle folds.

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Their voice in song: a clear pitcher of water, pouring.
Their quiet love: a hummingbird just stilled—
I will hold them
carefully, press into supple sides
with delicate fingertips. I will touch them lightly,
and look at them in the mornings with eyes full
of wonder. I will not forget how to cherish beautiful things.

Chthonic Monarchy

Chthonic: (*adj*) concerning, belonging to, or inhabiting the underworld. Subdermal, in relation to planet skin. Under the visible vegetation.

From the early Greek, *Kthon*, meaning earth. Something buried, something of the dirt, becoming dirt or blossoming out of it.

Small wonder, then, that a figure in black,
the owner of lost souls, the river-crosser, the attendant of an orchard of pomegranate trees
would stand in the mouth of a cave, stunned at her beauty.

He thinks to himself: there is a woman who understands the thrill of a spade of earth overturned. She will hear me, when I say to her that the cleanest sense of peace I know is a handful of weed stems freshly yanked, with dirt clods still attached. The most contained quiet is a hole in the ground, a space for something to enter. The earth waits to be filled.

Hades extends his hand: a grave, open.
Demeter's daughter turns, smiles.

Ann Arbor, Fall

The leaves are bourbon and mustard seeds. In some cases, vine-fresh grapes. In others, brown as a grasshopper. Woolen scarves are everywhere, wrapped around necks in loose nooses. It is wool-cap weather, the time of year

for camel colored coats and sheer stockings.
 Youtube gurus tout the benefits of matte lips
 burnished with burgundy. Everyone suddenly
 seems to own a lot of maroon.
 There begins to be a collective understanding
 of how it feels to flicker in strong wind.
 There is a bone-marrow thrill in
 this brûléeing of trees. A slow roasting of arbors,
 caramelization, an audible
 crisp.

The palette slews towards the sophisticated;
 we play at adulthood in our russet and fawn.
 We sip mulled cider. We have thoughts about cigars,
 or calligraphy-printed globes racked
 in stands of mahogany.
 We are captivated by the heaviness
 of a highball glass in our hands. We use phrases
 like "you're such a dear", "oh, you know",
 and "maybe next weekend, don't you think?".
 We consider buying property in Connecticut.

This is what the season does to us. We take
 cool looks at our blithe summer promises
 and swap theories about accepting the
 disillusionment of our 'adult lives' with grace—
 or at least, with sophistication.
 Something in the new coldness of evenings
 lends itself to this: the act of donning a scarf
 puts my nose in the air. This long jacket has
 aspirations for tenure.

PAVEL MELCHOR



Sophomore

Major: BCN-Behaviour, Cognition and Neuroscience

Reading: Poetry and Fiction

I was born in Brooklyn and raised in Detroit. I am a reserved person who prefers to spend time alone with a book or listening to music. I listen to everything from death metal to ambient electronic. My other hobbies include hiking, biking, traveling and writing. I've written a bunch of short fiction stories that have all ended up in the paper shredder. One day; however, I hope to write something that I can be truly proud of.

OLD HOMES

"We call it Old Homes, because it's, well, old.
Do you remember Ms. Moseley's class?
She's really mean.
They say her room is haunted...
Ghosts are trapped in the walls."

I speak, but you do not listen,
Your mind is elsewhere,
In a place I cannot reach.
Like the tallest branch of my favorite tree.

We stand in front of my school.
Oliver Wendell Holmes Elementary.
Its derelict brick walls tower above us.
Brooding, like a fallen warrior
Or menacing, like Ms. Moseley

Whenever you wrote the wrong answer on the chalkboard.

"It's different from when you came here...
Come on, let's go. There's other things I want to show you."

Summertime. A brilliant sunset is only just forming.
I am excited to show you my secret bike trail.
I never share my secrets, but I think I trust you enough.

We ride down Ogden.
A string of languages can be heard every time you come here.
Music plays and leaves gently float in the breeze
Children play in the streets, they scream words at us,
But I pay them little attention.

We reach the alleys.
There are many bumps along the way.
I happily race through them, envisioning myself on a faraway mountain pass;
Until a passing car breaks my immersion.
We narrowly avoid broken bottles on the ground and a small stray dog.
You look concerned.
"Do you always come here... by yourself?"
Smiling, I respond with a simple "yes."

We arrive at the other side of Cabot.
My favorite part of the trail.
The street is usually empty.
Cars rarely pass through.
"You can ride right on the street with your arms stretched wide."
It's just a long, straight path to the train tracks.
The sun sets lower, but I'm not afraid.
We have all the time in the world.

We stop in front of the old church.
It has a tall tower, sternly watching over the neighborhood
"Wouldn't it be nice to stand way up there? How far
Do you think we'd be able to see?" I say.
You give a passive response.
There is still much I wish to show you.
I hurry you along the way.

"Mom says this city is ugly, but I don't think so.
What do you think?"
You go on, nostalgically, about New York.
I was hardly even there.
We moved right before my second birthday.

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You tell me to explain why I like this city.
"Well, there's lots of nice people here,
Like the crossing guard, Ms. Bridges, she lets us watch movies sometimes!"
We laugh as we ride further down Cabot.
I take in the soothing, familiar sights.

That rose garden is helplessly defending itself from a plague of dandelions.
That family on the porch is sharing stories, like we sometimes do.
That lone pine tree is guarding some ancient wisdom.
That rusty truck is about to give its last breath.
The clever robins watch us and laugh at our childish ways.
That sneaky cat has escaped from an evil run-down house.
The old statue is expressing its joy with its arms spread wide, even as the
weeds overtake it.
The elderly man is looking for flowers to mourn a lost lover.

We pass by the abandoned factory,
Where dead machines roar no longer.
Its haunting walls stretch all the way to the end of the street.
We are getting closer.

We arrive at the train tracks, where my secret trail ends.
We stop to rest while a pleasant silence settles around us.
Off into the distance, I can see the downtown skyline.
Its bright lights reflecting against an ever-darkening sky.
"Have you ever been out this far?" I eagerly ask.
"Of course! My school is way farther than this, dude."
I'm a little disappointed and I want to turn back.
Until you tell me to go further.

We ride through burning grass and shady trees by the tracks.
There is no sidewalk here, just a long, fractured road.
"How far do you want to go?" I ask.
"Until we're too tired to keep going" you respond.

The precious sunlight fades faster.
We cough as dust swirls into our lungs.
Passing cars and semi-trucks howl at us.
Scrap metal is strewn about the streets.
I do not know where we are.
I blindly follow you through this strange, new trail.

Soon, we are alone again.
We reach a decrepit iron bridge, perilously hanging overhead.
We decide that it's best to turn back.
The sky, now a grim shade of dark blue.

Stopping along the tracks, you decide that it would be better
 To call our parents to come pick us up. They're at the park by the school;
 And they might be looking for us. I agree.

We approach a curious wall by the side of the road.
 You stop, peer over the wall and tell me to look.
 There is a peculiar, man-made pit reaching deep into the ground.
 A faint orange light shines below.
 I take a step back and say, "Let's keep going."
 You laugh and say, "No, no, let's stay! Do you dare me to stand on the
 ledge?"
 I shake my head no.
 "What if you slip and fall? Please don't do it, please don't!"
 I try my hardest, but I know I can't convince you otherwise.
 You do not listen to me and you climb onto the ledge.
 You bend over, taking a long look into the abyss.
 I shield my eyes. It's like back at my favorite tree.
 You climbed almost to the top, while I cowered below.
 You are always much braver than I am.
 I get scared too easily.
 I always worry about you, every time we are together.
 I shouldn't have shared my secret.
 I shouldn't talk at all.
 Please, let this be over.
 I'd rather be anywhere else.
 Even in Ms. Moseley's class.

I remove my hands from my eyes and I see you sitting calmly on the ledge.
 "Calm down, p-brain, it's ok." You say.
 "Come on, it's not scary at all. You need to learn to live more, dude."
 I cautiously join you on the ledge and I peer down. You're right. It's not
 scary at all.

We begin to talk about many things. About Old Homes,
 about the ghosts in Ms. Moseley's room, about my secret trail,
 about New York, about how you're absolutely terrified of worms, about who
 thought it was a good idea to put a dumb hole here...

Then, we sit in silence. There is no moon tonight.
 A cool breeze shifts through your hair.
 For a moment, I almost spoke,
 But I decided I didn't want to ruin this temporary peace.
 And so, we wait without saying a word.
 Looking down into the peculiar pit.

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15 Minutes

I study a map
of my mistakes
While an automated voice
Tells me everything
I already know

PLEASE
Be patient

"All of our operators
Are busy at this time
Please hold..."

I get in my car
"Cause I'm... I'm leaving it behind..."
The song goes
The panic envelops
I have 15 minutes

PLEASE
Calm down

"Stay on the line
You are caller
Number...
11"

I do not deserve this sunshine
So inviting
Give me solemn rain
Give me bleak skies

I push further
On the accelerator
To get there
I need to make it

PLEASE
Slow Down

"You should reach your
Destination by..."

Time slips
My frail grasp
Could never hold on
Don't look at the clock
It will make this worse

Focus
On the destination
It is just
A straight line
And you are
Almost there

"To run along the freeway,
To weigh one's heart against
The oncoming dark..."
The song goes
The panic chokes
Almost there?

"Almost there"
I tell myself
trying to convince
myself that it isn't
too late

Off the freeway
The surroundings
Are so familiar now
Surely, I am
Almost there

"Through the trees,
What took you
So long?"
The song goes
The panic fades
I push the brakes

Please...
Just relax

"You have reached your
Destination"

The OTHER SIDE
(An Intro)

Under the stairs,
close to where the music class used to be
On the other side of a small wooden doorway, there is a secret place.

I've been there only once before,
but I didn't stay too long...
Although, it felt like I was there for a whole day.

It's like a giant library,
full of old books and maps
describing places that don't exist.

Or maybe they do exist,
they're just hidden away,
behind other secret doorways...

I wondered if anybody else knew about this place,
but it seemed like it was abandoned a long time ago;
The blue and white walls had begun to chip away.

There were chandeliers on the ceiling, but only a few worked;
still, it wasn't very dark at all,
I could see just how enormous the secret place was.

There wasn't anybody else there, I was all alone
there was no noise, just echoes from my heavy footsteps,
and creaking from an endless array of wooden bookshelves.

The books were written in languages
I couldn't understand,
and maybe languages that no one could understand.

They had strange, wonderful drawings and photos
of plants, animals, and buildings
that look both realistic and imaginary.

Although the pages appeared brittle from age,
I could not bend or tear them,
no matter how hard I tried.

I made my way through the library,
in awe of every new page I turned,

I could have stayed there for much longer, but I knew I had to leave.

On my way out, I noticed the clock at the end of the hallway
had hardly moved at all...

I understand that you might not believe me now,
but one day I'll show what it's like...

on the other side.

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Crutch is waiting all year to free
a paper lantern
and conceive a better New Year's
resolution.

Crutch is I wish I could die for our sins
is I reassure you I can
is I've always known I can't
so I sleep standing up
my arms straight out
after prayers in my fake Gethsemane
amongst houseplants that can't die
they're fake

Crutch is I don't remember nightmares.

Crutch is I never forget my name.

Crutch is the radio show and the violence
in the next room
not mine, no
so I call this absolution.

Crutch is
I don't live there anymore

Crutch is
cigarette smoke
I blow in your face
I tell you it's yours
even shove my pack in your pocket
when you aren't looking
I know you will believe me
you are my
other
crutch
and in
an advertisement
I would
call you
absolution.

Crutch my faith
but I have no faith
I forgive
I never forget
the boy I saw die
and it's been five years,
not once have I cried
but I collected your tears
and I use them like eyedrops

Crutch is I live with my guilt
Crutch is me

I live with my guilt
is me.

I sing as loud
as ugly
as I possibly can
Hallelujah
oh
hallelujah
oh

I will not be loved
I will be heard.

Paper Butterfly

There are days that seldom exist
to remind you to wish you would have kissed

her in between the brows, filling the trenches worry
dug, healing her worry warts. A kiss that,

when planted, might have tendrilled
across the possibilities of her face, cruciform –

a cross you crafted for her on Palm Sunday,
a cross you refused to toss into the fire the next year –

across her face
across her limbs.

Other days will remember you,
when you couldn't fix your motorboat,

so you took the canoe. All the days you tried to run
from her, but the mud ate your shoes. The sea

spat you out, and so did the earth, but the mark of
your covenant was an eddy of your spit and hers.

Some days glide beneath the willow
like a rake, where you saw in the spots

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on the fallen leaves her face, and you swept
them into a clumsy pile, dove face-first in, told her

to breathe leaf as long as she can, because
you would, too. Synchronize your last breath

with hers, if you could. There are days as quiet
as IV drips, and your teeth chatter between

icicled lips, and she kept track of keys so you
cut a hole in the roof, crawled through,

did other things you shouldn't do,
like tracing your finger across her

placid cheek, frozen, it must have been –
it did not move. Last days can only hush

like the lowering lid of endless sleep. That last day,
you mistake it for an exaggerated wink. That last day

whispers your name like snowfall in reverse. That last day
is a harvest in retreat – empty cornucopias. That last day

inches, caterpillar across your finger. That last day
tides up to a forgotten shore. That last day

will never be eulogized. That last day

flakes off like dry skin –
if you don't peel it.

You sit at the table. You know of no way to decaffeinate
grief or the coffee you already poured, the way you drink it

so weak, but you know only to pour hers
first. Sip anyway and the day might speak –

keep still. It's the sound of
a paper butterfly's wing,

the sound of flying away.

NADIA MOTA



Junior

Major: Creative Writing & Literature

Minor: American Culture

Reading: Poetry

Nadia is from Adrian, Michigan. She is majoring in Creative Writing and Literature and minoring in American Culture. She enjoys watching Netflix in bed, baking cupcakes for her friends, and playing bass guitar in her sub-par band.

star birth

the emptied street crackles with leftover light
 in its fissures. bare feet swirl around a dull orange
 streetlamp like interstellar dust circles a slowly
 forming star. we spin until our knees shake
 and collapse, crumpled leaves from exhausted trees.
 black tar and soft voices snake across the pavement,

say something you've never spoken aloud –

the sound of sirens is a red pincushion threaded
 with the fear of someone else's pain.
 we know what helplessness tastes like –
 hushed whispers in the kitchen over a table
 decorated with shut-off notices and dead flowers.
 the taste slides up our throats, but we swallow it

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down as streetlights soften all of the harsh edges.
clouds of crumbling concrete spiral around us;
we form our own stars here.

border / lands

there are tomatoes / growing
in / my grandfather's / throat
red and / raw and / cancerous
he plucks them / with brown
hands / sunwarmed / spotted

vines wind / like second set
of ribs / like / barbed wire /
fences meant to / keep men
like him / far / out of sight

there are tomatoes / growing
in the fields / that / fed him
the fields / that will swallow
him / like an overripe / fruit

i pluck / them with / hands
soft and / unknowing and /
unbrowned / he speaks / to
me in seeds / he shows me
ways / a person can / grow

Dustheads (Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982)

we threw our caution into the coiling of a silver sprayed tornado, watched the oil slick ripples of still-warm fever dreams. a bin full of crumpled papers rattling with the fear of being forgotten. all the books we meant to write while we were sleeping. cellophane crinkles sound nostalgic in all the wrong ways, like freeze-dried memories crumbling under anxious fingertips. crayons snapping under heavy-handed convictions. there's some still-scribbling idealist in all of us. what i mean to say is: we all wanted to be astronauts. sometimes it takes the electricity being cut to acknowledge the immeasurability of what we don't know; the darkness seems almost cosmic in its carelessness. what do you become when the lights turn off?

somewhere in southeast michigan

at the edge of a town, some
borderland marked by
north-south train tracks
splitting it down the seam
to east-west dichotomy, a
girl waits on a street corner
in the eastside for the
school bus to arrive.

//

the houses fall apart a little
quicker here. held together
with dirty shoestrings from
secondhand sneakers and
gluey white mashed potatoes
from a cardboard box,
the people fall apart a little
quicker here too.

//

she looks at the sky to the
south, early morning
incandescents illuminating
the half-dark pre-dawn.
a tin speaker voice rips
through silent streets; both the
orange lights and disembodied
voice, reminders of the prison
yard two streets away, hungry.

//

the trees here grow gnarled
and crooked, dead
before they've lived. their
strained limbs and crossed
fingers reach blindly to an
overcast sky, towards
something better. something
that's got to be better than this.

//

years later, she drives through
the neighborhood, removed
from it by the years like a handful
of baby teeth. she sees that
orange sky to the south in the
bleak morning sky. for just a
moment, the light could've
been mistaken for a sunrise.

the apology takes the last bus home

but misses its stop; now stumbles with its shoes dangling from stiff fingers,
nervous because it doesn't recognize the street signs anymore. the apology
doesn't recognize itself anymore. the apology has a quarter-life crisis and
cuts all its hair off in wild, scissor-wielding desperation. the apology doesn't
acknowledge what happened, just knows something is wrong. the apology is
a threadbare blanket. the apology is coffee gone cold. the apology makes a
home in the back of your throat, becomes part of you. now all of your sorrys
slip out like second nature; so subdued, i couldn't hear it when it called for
me.

BHARAT NAIR



Senior

Major: Information

Reading: Poetry

Bharat is from Kerala, India. He loves comics, film, and writing. He believes he has understood the few great and ineffable desires of his life. The first is to be a good man. The second, to have a good family. Third, to create unceasingly, and fourth, to create something genuinely amazing.

Harder still

In the wide and pure sunlight,
he punched me

thuk

solid and unbraced, not bad.
The grains on the cracks,
mutilated with my aired spit; and
oh, how it felt.

again, harder this time.
knuckles flared with eighty odd kilos.

thud

unabridged, right to my plexus.
my diaphragm lay unflinching,
calm in the cozy air

comfort found, somewhat undeniably

thud kr

in the certainty of your begging heartbeat

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of dead, dried breaths
of splintered bone and velvet flesh
the poise of my unreacting folds; that
of a sullied, unbrazen ragdoll

thud krrkk

harder perhaps, couldn't tell.
there also lies a repose
in knowing you hold not even an ounce of a chance
and that you stand directly beneath its feet
peace, with the gravel.
ease too, with the heat

the White flower with the septum piercing

strip the petals off
petal by petal,
Disgust by distaste
i look at her.

love, hate
she, me, her

tear it off, answers prevail:
perhaps, perhaps not.
sundress, made by unholy, Uglied women.
flawless like you.

she loves me
she loves me not

the woman seethes, bathed in some fifth filthy offense
and cutesy pastel yellowed pink.

she loves me
she loves me not

too passive; i'm a man of Action.
live by initiation of souls and of
the Persuasiveness of redundancy.
a better second question:

i Love her
i love her not

she, me
love, hate
all Cyclical, all unsatisfying,
all lousy, all dubious
all perfect, all Unsympathetic

the girl looks across her glasses and across the pond
 she stares in false bliss. she stares knowing she's being stared at.
 all Poised and perfect: ready to be painted for eons past muted, broken
 concrete.
 an aim to live on in sculptures and in barely Silent praise

i hate her
 i hate her not

she looks on at her world;
 i glimpse at her flowers.
 poetic. Godsend: somewhere in the petals eye.
 her cloth to be dug amongst unseen sighs.
 there may lie only two or five truths to find
 none of which i have ever seen
 and none of which i would Ever like

true absolute zero or super(maha)fluidity

naturally—
 the standard usual compression and rarefaction
 we touch his feet and
 let's us hear the crinkling coats and muffled glass
 as if something old in the puranas
 the regular din

secondly—
 down to the cold
 skin frozen and broken and defragmented beyond any belief
 shimmering. two exists at one
 a-advaita maybe (or just dvaita)
 overall peaceful. a balance somehow but
 can you imagine the sound?
 no warmed enough ears can ever hear it
 beyond suspicion. beyond suggestion
 forever flowing
 on its own, it'll never ever stop fighting internally
 mother mohini lay unsuccessful
 struggling to stop (it senseless)

thirdly—
 colder still. unaxed

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layer on something safe like glass. unarrowed
normality holds still, unable to move against the unfathomable forces of
granulated sea
the tiniest waves
peaceful one hopes, softer than the sea. less salty too
nothing for parasuram to unearth
only to never be heard or seen or smelt but
only to be estimated
as peace is found, one can never hear it

strangely, and to be particularly noted—
it isn't a sound
not in how the cowherd claimed it to be nor
in our classical touchy feely way really anyway
poetic, but incorrect.
how lovely to imagine a sound that exists, that can even exist that we
haven't even heard
it's a wave, unbowed. so very (very) truly rare
only on the quantum level
our own brahman wave
super tiny, super creeping
purely probability
despairing maybe. Pithy, fragile. Alas underlying
and hopefully true to voice

PILAR O'HARA



Freshman

Major: Architecture

Reading: Poetry

Pilar O'Hara is an 18-year-old Freshman at the University of Michigan pursuing a degree in architecture from Rochester Hills, Michigan. She happened to stumble upon poetry by accident in high school, finding that her fragmented thoughts were better suited for poetry than prose. Currently, she is being mentored by John Buckley, a lecturer for the university's English department, through his Creative Writing & Publishing project. Besides writing and design, she enjoys attending alternative rock concerts and traveling the world.

Sorry, what's my name?

I was born with gasoline on my lips.
 Petrol filled my mouth and slick oil
 slipped off my tongue
 every time I repeated the name
 my mother gave me.

*Mamá, why would you give me a name
 in the language you never taught me to speak?*

When the kids at school ask for the origin of my
 name, what can I say? I don't
 know what it means to bleed red, white, and green.

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I mumble my calling, instead of letting my tongue whirr and purr
against the back of my two front teeth
An automobile stuck in the snow, revving its angry engine,
circling its tires, tired for escape. Tired like me.
The kids in the neighborhood can't replicate the noise I emulate.
The Latinos will say I'm saying it wrong.
Correct me – what is my own name?

When I was eight years old, my third grade
teacher asked if she could call me Pily (her daughter said
that's what my brother calls me on the bus). My
nickname was my own little secret –something for me, never to cede—
I hesitated to agree, but born to please, I nodded slowly.
My voice ripped out of me. She said my
diminutive was easier to remember—
My birth name became a burden, too heavy to hold on the
tongue. Too treacherous on the mind. Gasoline drips on the pavement.

Why was I the one that had to comply?

At home, after school, I asked my mom why she didn't name me Amy.

I learned to say my name before my teachers on the first day of school.
Before they attempted to say

Pill-er?

Pee-lar?

Oh, I'm sorry, I'm going to butcher this one. Last name — O'Hara?

In sixth grade, the boy who sat across from me in biology class
poked and prodded while my mouth welled up to the brim.
I could barely breath when he implanted an extra letter
and left me with that toxic aftertaste and a signed yearbook:

I didn't call you P-I-L-L-A-R

Except he did
For an entire year
He made me into a joke
Every time he called me that name
Every time the substitute teacher called me that name
I became a laughing stock
The class clown who didn't have a say in her humor
I don't want to be funny.

I want to be respected.
 I want you to say my name how I say it
 —even with the Midwestern accent—
 Mispronounce my name the same
 way I mispronounce my name.

Pilar.

Means strong. Like a pillar
 bracing far too long. The
 plaster spiders around a steel beam.

They won't laugh at my name
 in 21 different nations
 because laughing at my name is
 like laughing at my own mother,
 the woman who birthed me,
 the woman who raised me,
 the woman who gave me her name.

Flaca

She always said she wanted to be smaller –
 her hips, her waist, her breasts
 —especially her breasts—
 so heavy she said they were breaking her back.
 She worried about her body like she
 worried about her children. Pinching at her skin,
 she tried keeping it close. She had to let it go.

Shoulder-padded blazers
 scuffed stilettos and faded blue jeans
 with tears streaming at the seams.
 It smells musty in here.
 A dust storm sweeps on repeat.

She can't sleep at night because her husband
 unhinged the doors of her old life. The closet is the closest she is to home.
 She can't buy new clothes. She's afraid she'll feel more alone.

At fifteen, she wore her sister's size 2 sundress like a first-place
 ribbon at a science fair. Her sister was skinnier
 and prettier. What a shame—
 they turned out the same.

A hospital room – nude
pink, gushy fat
hangs off baby's back when she leaves
her mother's womb
unamused – the doctor doubts there's a reason worth continuing
with all that flesh –just living—
Mother can't wait to bring her home.
Maybe she'll learn to be less alone.

Mamá called me flaca
after my pudge sank.
She was being kind
—or so she thought—
but all I knew from day two
was this skin and these bones.
An ornament for you.
She feared me growing into her own clothes.

Outside the night may be light
and misty. But in here,
the models in magazines stare back at me.
Liquid taps the windows gently.
Rapping. I want to shut the blinds.
Click mute on the TV remote.

She said she was going to lose weight as she stuffed another
morsel into her mouth. It's always another bite
until it isn't. I can't tell her the truth.
She lives in the kitchen.

Mamá calls me flaca – still
One day she'll see my brittle bones, flesh
tearing loose from my skeleton—
peeling back on black blood
gushing.

If a body speaks
mine would cry, *let me grow*
Would you still love me so?

Mamá told me she wanted a body like mine
flaca and fine
So I'll eat and eat and eat
until I can wear her jeans –up to my thighs
I'll be her body.

Would she still want it?
Like she once wanted mine?

Mother brings her daughter home
places her in this thin-framed picture frame
She can't shatter the glass – still
No matter how many times she forces herself onto the floor.

ABBY PROVENZANO



Junior

Major: Biomolecular Science

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

I am originally from Maine, but now live in Midland, Michigan. In my free time, I like to read, write, work in a research lab on campus, go to the UMMA, and participate in the Harry Potter Alliance at U of M. I also enjoy classical music, dance, The Beatles, and Star Trek. My current plan is to go to medical school, though I hope creative expression through writing will always be a constant in my life.

A Day in the Life

November 17, 1980. It's an ordinary Monday. Mostly. I'm home from my shift at *The New York City Coffee Shop*, which makes me feel about as creative as its name while I'm there, and I've just started dinner. Pork chops and applesauce, which I have yet to master. Ken's half-finished puzzle of a bright, blooming flower garden sprawls pieces across the scuffed coffee table; he'll complete it tonight, probably, especially if he's had a long day at work. Every day spent selling life insurance sounds long to me, but Ken says it's not too bad. *Magical Mystery Tour* murmurs enthusiastically throughout the apartment. *Roll up, roll up!* Taxi cabs and disgruntled drivers honk unceasingly at one another, three stories below. A man on the corner is selling flowers. Our cat, Harrison, is snuggled up against the heater for warmth, the November chill not quite kept at bay by the apartment's thin walls. I've spent an extra ten minutes standing at the window today, hoping to catch a glimpse of John Lennon, who does, after all, live in our city. An ordinary Monday. Except.

Two things. The first is planned: John Lennon and Yoko Ono's new album, *Double Fantasy*, sits in the center of our granite countertop. Released today, it's fresh and ready for us. Ken and I have been planning our listening marathon for months, preparing with Beatles-era John and his solo albums that are strewn haphazardly around our living room.

The second is, well, not. I'm in the tiny bathroom with socked feet, pacing back and forth on the cracked tile. I'm staring at a little plus on a test I didn't think I needed, but that I bought on a whim because I've been feeling somewhat nauseated for longer than a flu should last. I feel as if I'm dissociating from my body, my thoughts racing against one another so fast they're all simultaneously winning and losing. Someone's humming along with Paul McCartney, and I dimly realize it must be me. Maybe if I stare long enough, the symbol will change, and I'll be grounded again, back here with the cast-iron tub and its outlandish claw feet. I try, focusing more than I ever have on a customer's requested coffee ingredients or the perfect frosting swirl on a doughnut. The symbol doesn't change.

Sinking down onto the toilet, I bring my knees up, pressing my face into my scratchy work-issued waitress tights. *Pregnant*, I think. *A pregnant Julia*. *Well, fuck*.

The great irony is that Ken and I are the most cautious, careful couple in the building. Possibly on the block. Maybe in all New York City. Ken needs plans and order like most people require air to breathe. That's why he needs the familiarity of The Beatles and puzzles; they reduce the overwhelming chaos of life and the number of people living it to a small scale he can methodically, calmly control. "Sometimes it's just all too much," he told me once, deep breathing while we sat on a curb outside the theater showing *Sweeney Todd* that'd reduced him to sweating and shaking. I'd taken his hand, waiting for him to return; by then, a year in, I'd become one of Ken's reassuring constants. "Why do you live in a city, then?" I asked him-I was always the talker-unable to think of anything else to say. Ken laughed, an empty, bitter sound. "I'm not going to let myself and my problems get in the way of my future, you know?" I nodded, even though I had no idea what he meant.

Now we're three years in, and Ken insists on the Holy Trinity of birth control: I take the Pill, he uses a condom, and he pulls out (or tries to), no matter how many times he isn't fast enough, or I mumble that it ruins the mood. "We should be married before we have a kid-that's always been the plan," he'll pant, nothing like his breathing techniques, curled around me in almost a fetal position while he kisses my cheek and runs his fingers through my thick auburn hair. Once I'd figured out that he needed sensory, precise things to do with his fingers when he's overwhelmed, I taught him how to braid my hair. Much more convenient when we're out and about than puzzles. Yes, Ken's always got a plan; it's how he navigates the world.

And here I am, destroying said plan with one small, plastic sword. What will Ken think?

What do I think?

I've never really thought of myself as a maternal figure. Growing up, I was more interested in rocket ships and superheroes than playing with dolls. Dolls were boring, reduced to simple, mundane tasks. They couldn't walk on the moon or save the planet from aliens; they could eat, burp, sleep, and cry. Delightful.

Through high school, my views didn't much change. After graduation, I moved from a tiny town in New Hampshire to New York City to "find myself," and instead found Ken. The city had never scared me; if anything, it wasn't big enough for the adventures I'd hoped it'd hold. As long as I didn't talk to strangers, I knew I'd be fine.

I realize now that those things in strollers don't stay that way forever. They become real human beings—imagine that—and maybe it'll be nice to have one of those tugging on my hand and thinking I'm the greatest creature to walk this earth. A mixture of Ken and me, our very own creation. A thing that small can't be scary. John Lennon was in awe of his Sean, after all.

Pregnancy doesn't actually dismantle the plan. Ken proposed at the end of the summer with a stuttered speech that was too practiced and a diamond too small by *Cosmopolitan's* standards; both were perfect to me. We haven't yet bothered really to plan the wedding, though I'm sure Ken has some ideas. It feels enough to me that the wedding's going to happen. Is it such a bad thing that the baby comes before the wedding? *A Hard Day's Night and Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*; who cares which one came first, as long as we got both?

Everything's going to be fine. I get off the toilet, toss the stick in the trash, and splash my face with cold water. I'm doing this. I pull out my scrunchie, shake my hair out of its tight ponytail, and touch up my lipstick and the mascara framing my chocolate-brown eyes. I glance at my watch; I've got about an hour before Ken gets home from the office. Somehow this moment feels like the pivotal moment of my twenty-three-year life; I want to do it right.

I'm waiting for Ken on the plaid sofa when he comes home, carefully slipping out of his dress shoes and setting them just so on the shoe shelf next to the door. He's smiling and, just like every weekday, he's holding out a small bunch of flowers, which I take while he kisses under my ear and sets his briefcase down by the coffee table. He's bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet as he looks at the album, eyebrow raising at me. I clear my throat and nod at the wrapped box sitting next to me. It's got a neat, checkered pattern I know he'll appreciate. Nothing like the four small, grey boxes that held the *Let's be extra sure* tests I also got. All positive.

"Is this for me?" He's unbuttoning his coat and hanging it in the hall closet. "I already know you got *Double Fantasy*." His blond curly hair stands on end from the woolen watch cap he's taken off, and his cheeks flushed from the cold and excitement make him look as if he's got a fever. I nod as Harrison mews, rubbing his head against my leg.

"You should open it up." There's a hole in the end of my tights, and I'm pushing my toe against the cold floor, again and again. The excitement felt earlier has pooled into a pocket of nervousness in my stomach.

"Before dinner?" The pork chops are unseasoned and dry, as they were the last thing on my mind this past hour.

"McKenzie." I say, using his full name so he'll know I'm serious. I push the wrapped box towards him. He sits next to me, thigh against mine, and opens it slowly, smoothing out the paper and folding it neatly. He opens the box and lifts out the gift.

It's a pacifier, chosen carefully as one of the few neutral, not pink or blue, options.

Fingers trembling, he's alternately peering at it and me with wide, blue eyes. His mouth has fallen slightly open, and his brow's furrowed. There's only silence save for George Harrison's badass guitar solo still floating through the apartment, and I suddenly feel I must've made a horrible mistake when

"Are you serious?" Ken's voice is soft, so soft, and cracking slightly while I slowly nod.

"Yeah. I know it isn't planned and that it's kind of scary and..." Ken's arms are around me, steady and strong, and he's laughing into my neck. He picks me up and dances me around the kitchen, murmuring "We're going to have a baby, we're going to have a baby," while I laugh. Then we're crying, and we sway in the kitchen, his hands in my hair and at my waist, and my head on his chest, listening to "Strawberry Fields Forever" while our ruined dinner and even our favorite John Lennon are forgotten.

November 24, 1980. It's only been a week, but somehow I feel as if I've never not been pregnant. A surprising but entirely welcome giddiness has descended on our apartment. Ken and I've spent nearly every night up late sipping tea, listening to and debating about the album, and discussing baby names and what our own little person will be like. I think the new music might be a little *too* domestic and soft, and that Eleanor's pretty, and that, of course, the baby'll be intelligent and brave. Ken thinks this side of John Lennon is nice, and that the absence of anger means he's content, and that James is classic if it's a boy, and that the baby'll be perfect no matter what. The important thing, of course, is that it's healthy. There's an eagerness

about us unlike the occasional wedding planning we've done.

I find myself wandering into stores—a change from the quaint bookstore, newspaper stand, and bakery underneath our apartment—on my way to and from work, humming “Woman” and leaving with colorful animal toys and tiny baby clothes I can't believe I never before realized were so fascinating. Ken's made a new life plan, he tells me, grinning broadly and assuring it's even better and happier than the previous one. Thanksgiving's three days away, and my parents will be coming to visit New York, but I find I can't wait that long to tell them. I call their Florida home during one of my afternoon breaks at the coffee shop, apron soaked in the front from a cup of hot chocolate I'd spilled and discovered I didn't care about. The sticky chocolate smells sickeningly sweet while I stand in the back of the shop at the phone.

“Hello? This is the Jones residence.” My mother's nothing if not proper.

“Mom? It's me.” I'm an only child; obviously she knows it's me.

“Julia! Oh, Julia! Ron, come here, Julia's on the phone! How are you, sweetheart?” I feel the sourness of guilt. I should call them more often, but since I moved to the city and they settled in their retirement home in Florida, my life feels now distant from theirs, beyond their relatability. This, at last, is a parallel that can bring us closer together.

“I'm, well, I'm—I'm pregnant.” My mother's shriek makes me grin while I clutch the phone to my ear. The Florida version of my mother has always wanted two things: the best perm on the block and at least one grandchild. She'll finally have both. I know it doesn't matter to her if the kid is pre- or post-wedding; I also know my father must feel the same way, or will at least be persuaded by my mother to do so, as retirement has only made them further joined at the hip. I find myself running my hand over my stomach while she babbles excitedly, my father trying to cut into the conversation in the background. I feel even happier than I had when I first arrived in New York City and felt the city rush over me, all noise and freedom and possibility.

December 1, 1980. I'm sitting at one of the coffee shop's corner back tables with Annemarie, another waitress. It's a rare day off for both of us, a training day for new employees, and we love to come here and cynically watch disasters happen that aren't up to us to fix. Annemarie's smoking and explaining her decision-making process behind switching from deep pink to light red—but not too red—lipstick and the wonders it has brought to her sex life. Annemarie's fingernails are long and sparkly while she twirls her cigarette, smoke curling up around her big blonde curls. Annemarie's my favorite girl here; she always speaks her mind, but she doesn't forget to give you a turn, too. I lost contact with the girls I used to hang around with in high school when I left for New York City, but Annemarie has more than made up for them.

"So, I want to tell you something," I say as nonchalantly as possible, but she has already perked up. She's only the fourth person I've told, so I still fumble over the words. "I'm pregnant."

"Shut up!" Annemarie yells, and while she gushes and congratulates me I feel closer to her than I ever have, as I had with my mother. It must be because Annemarie has a two-year-old son; it's funny how I never realized I'd been missing out on this final, crucial bond with the women in my life.

That night, Ken braids my hair, and we press our hands and his ears against my stomach. It's too early to hear or feel anything, but it's fun to pretend. The real day will fill us with a now incomprehensible awe, I'm sure, but this is enough for now. I stroke Harrison's back while he purrs; I've scheduled a doctor's appointment in the next few weeks, for when I'm farther along.

Ken and I had met at the coffee shop; he was sitting at one of the middle tables, not quite in the back or the front. I asked him what he wanted, and he asked me what I recommended, and, without thinking, I said, "Tea and *Meet the Wife*." It was a Beatles reference—not a great one, but I had been humming "Good Morning, Good Morning" for almost an hour. Ken's head snapped up, and he stopped fidgeting with his napkin long enough to say, "Did you know John Lennon lives right here in the city? Since the 70s?" Did I, indeed. There were times I couldn't believe I could be walking where John Lennon—*John Lennon, a fucking Beatle*—could've walked, maybe humming his early ideas for a new song. Ken sipped his herbal tea slow enough to coincide with the start of my next break; he kept buying more drinks and blueberry scones until it was time to walk me home after my shift, and that was that.

December 8, 1980. It's nearly midnight, and, his palm stretched out on my stomach, Ken's fallen asleep twisted up in the faded blue comforter. I'm dozing lightly while the city lights from outside form shifting patterns on the bedroom wall. The dishes are long done, the lamps are out, the music off. Harrison's snoozing in a corner somewhere.

The phone rings, shrill in the lazy silence.

Ken mumbles sleepily. I nudge him with my foot.

"Ignore it," I say, even as he's already rolling out of bed. The phone encourages his sluggish journey to the kitchen. Quiet descends again as he picks it up, and I've nearly slipped back into sleep when he's suddenly yelling, the volume he reserves only for when things are becoming too much. I'm untangling my legs from the sheets while he repeats, "Julia! Turn on the news! Turn on the news!"

The news? I'm blinking too much as I try to coordinate my fingers and

the remote. He's standing beside me again when I turn it to ABC, when

"John Lennon of The Beatles was shot outside his New York home."

Something cold travels down my spine and clenches in my stomach, a pain that has nothing to do with morning sickness. "What?" I say, staring at the *Double Fantasy* album tucked snugly on the top of one precarious stack. "What?"

"This is *bullshit*," Ken's fingers are tangling in my hair. "Who would-why would anybody-" We stand in the dark, faces illuminated by the glow of the T.V. Some man named Chapman. A stranger. Wanted to be famous. He'd asked John to sign an autograph, his *Double Fantasy* album. Came back later and shot John outside the Dakota Apartments. Seven wounds. Dead on arrival. No one could do anything to save him. More news to come.

I don't realize I'm crying until I try to speak. "Bullshit," I agree. My head's spinning; if I stare at the album cover, maybe everything will change, and this fact won't be true. I'm suddenly filled with such rage and a surge of protectiveness for this man, the beautiful John Lennon, whom I've only known through a crackling voice on an album. Song after song, calling for love and peace; a voice that suddenly no longer exists. There was never really much of a chance I'd run into him on the city streets, but now it's a definite zero. Dead. *Dead*. Where is he? Can he still sing? Can he see without his glasses? Is he scared? Breathing heavily, Ken's clumsily fiddling with my hair. The news moves on as if life's just the same, as if it can go back to the way it was, but we don't move.

It's a strange, numbing thing, mourning someone you never knew. But this man, John, had been such an integral part of our lives, *is* an integral part. God, if I'd known I was listening to his last new album, how I would've savored it.

"What should we do?" Ken whispers. I shrug.

"We could go to the Dakota." Fans are flocking there, the news announcer had said, to pay their respects and pray.

"No," Ken's hands still in my hair, and his voice is finally firm again. "No, not in your condition. No. Let's, let's just-" He's moving away from me and I miss his warmth; then he's crouching and sifting through albums until he finds what he's looking for, and "All You Need is Love" reverberates through the gloom. We don't dance; we hold hands and pretend to understand.

December 15, 1980. It's been a week, and I can't stop thinking about it. The baby, always a happy distraction, helps a little, along with how Ken's eyes light up when we talk about it. In some ways, my feelings don't make sense. John's been reduced to a voice on an album, but isn't that all he's ever been to me? Why then has everything changed?

I can't believe his murder happened here, in this city, *my* city. Mostly I can't believe the bustle continues—the taxis still honk and the man at the corner still sells flowers. I can't believe everyone hasn't just stopped since the man who imagined it all is gone. Snow's falling, and gaudy lights and decorations make everything merry and bright. People move on to the next thing—to Santa Claus and mistletoe and silent nights. My stomach is still clenched, as I think of the picture I clipped out of a magazine of John standing next to his psychedelic Rolls Royce, happy and carefree. I'd dreamed of that car for months. I suppose I've always been fascinated with things I can't have.

How could someone be so hateful to have done such a thing?

Or maybe, how could God be so hateful to let this happen?

Maybe John's murder was retaliation for the infamous "We're better than Jesus" comments, or the imagined world without a Heaven that was perhaps lovelier than ours. Maybe He, too, thought there was too much Yoko overshadowing the new album, that it was boring.

Maybe He just doesn't give a damn.

I imagine John Lennon, all in white, leading the group down Abbey Road and all the way to New York City.

December 22, 1980. Everything's moving forward. It's scary how easy things are to forget, I suppose. Maybe not entirely, though; *Double Fantasy* sales have skyrocketed, the album's #1, even though our copy still sits quietly on the top of one reverent stack. Ken and I decorated the Christmas tree last night, Bing Crosby crooning to us among the soft lights. We haven't played The Beatles since that night, but Christmas classics give us an excuse to move them aside for a little longer. There's stray tinsel Harrison likes to pull off the tree strewn across the carpet. I'm sipping hot chocolate, wearing Ken's white turtleneck that reaches to my knees, flipping through *Cosmopolitan* while meatloaf browns in the oven. Ken isn't home yet; the office has been uncharacteristically busy. Some big boom in life insurance clientele or something. A few snowflakes cling to the window; the wind whistles against the window frame.

The phone rings, shrill against Nat King Cole's soothing voice.

As I stand up to answer it, something lurches. Pain flares in my stomach, white hot as it radiates deep into my body. I double over, dropping the magazine. *Everything's going to be fine*. I stumble to the bathroom, stubbing my toe on the doorframe; drops of blood are on the cracked tile, but also running onto the pristine white of Ken's turtleneck, and not from my toe. I'm on the toilet, hands pressed hard against my knees, head down to peer between my legs. Something's wrong—there's too much blood, thick and dark scarlet against the porcelain, and there are bigger, rubbery pieces too. My

stomach is clenching and clenching and everything's leaking out of me and I can't stop it, I can only watch, and I can't think straight enough to figure out what to do, and my hands are sticky, and everything's spinning off of the correct axis, spinning and spinning and

"Julia!" Ken's out of breath and more panicked than I've ever seen him when I finally look up. The flowers he's brought are scattered across the tile, fragile petals crushed. I'm always the talker, but I can't think of anything to say. It doesn't seem to matter; Ken's kneeling in front of me, and all I can think is that it's such a shame that he's ruining his dress pants with my blood. "Julia." It's almost funny; he once nearly passed out when he'd sliced his thumb peeling potatoes, yet here he is, kneeling in my stickiness with eyes only for my face. I feel the absurd need to be reassuring; his face is wan, practically white, as if someone has died.

I must have blacked out, because the next thing I know, I'm wrapped in a quilt in the waiting room of the closest emergency room, while Ken talks urgently to a nurse in the front, his voice loud.

It doesn't take long for a doctor to see us. He examines me dispassionately, cold gloves camouflaging any warmth the winter hasn't sapped from his hands. He draws blood and does scans and "runs tests," as he calls it, then he leaves us alone for a while. Ken slides me onto his lap; they've washed the blood away, and a thin hospital gown replaces his stained turtle-neck sweater. He usually takes my lead on conversations, so silence settles around us like the barely sticking snow outside. He decides to braid my hair; the time drags forever, so he's able to practice one of his favorites, two intricate French braids. I must look like some kind of fairytale queen when the doctor comes back to tell us our baby's dead.

I feel as if I've blacked out again, because suddenly we're in the doctor's office, and it's cramped and too small. All I can think of is Ken's reaction, but he appears only to be studying my face, waiting for me. His fingers twitch towards my hand and away, as if he's afraid to touch me. I'm shrinking and expanding all at once, wanting to hide and fill the room with something, *something* I'm feeling, but I have no idea what. How could this happen?

"This is a natural thing." The doctor's crisp white coat rustles while he adjusts perfectly slicked back, greying hair. "It's not your fault." He fiddles with his glasses, looking at the paperwork instead of me. "You didn't do anything wrong." His tone is flat. "Now, you did most of the work yourself, but we'll have to do a quick D & C, okay?" I don't know what that stands for, but I don't care. The doctor numbs me, but I feel as if I'm already numb. The procedure's fast and over before I even register what's going on, before I feel anything. "Does it hurt?" The doctor asks, and I shake my head. I don't know.

Back in his office, the doctor clears his throat. "No one could have done

anything to save the baby." It's all a practiced script, and it's bullshit. I can feel Ken's eyes on me, but I don't want to look at him.

The doctor's very busy, we understand, so he's ushering us out though I still haven't said a word. "You're young," he says. "I encourage you to try again." But that doesn't sound right; we hadn't tried in the first place, and it is, after all, always easier never to start than to pick up at some miserable failure point.

Ken's arm tentatively snakes around my waist on the way back to the car, but I shake him off. He's oddly calm. I'm scrunched against the passenger seat window, gazing at the city that appears, for the first time, too vast and too dangerous. I breathe in through my nose and close my eyes, but it isn't enough. Is this how Ken usually feels? How can he bear it?

I'm the fallen temple, with veil torn in two. A failure of a creationist; and God, that doctor had to be mistaken when he said it wasn't my fault. Whose was it, then? Either I hadn't been good enough for the baby, or maybe for God. Or maybe the baby I'd made hadn't been good enough for God. Which was worse? Which was more damning? Maybe I shouldn't have stopped going to church after high school, maybe I should've given to the homeless, maybe I should've stayed closer to my parents, maybe I should've gone to college, maybe I should've cared more about Christianity instead of rock and roll. I watch my breath fog the window and try to think, to feel, but everything's numb as if I've been out in the mucky street slush too long.

Ken's hand is on my knee, just one small point of connection; he's crying almost inaudibly, but I find I can't join him. How will we remember our baby, when all it seemed to be was blood? I imagine we're driving past the Dakota, and I wonder if there was a moment when John knew he'd been shot and that all was lost, or if there'd just suddenly been overwhelming darkness, and that was that.

December 29, 1980. Christmas has passed quietly this year with no real celebration. Ken and I had spent it alone; those around us seemed to want to give us our space. I can't bring myself to care about the birth of God's child when there's no longer a birth for my own. Why should I? Why should I care about anything, really? Everyone tiptoes around me like I'm made of spun glass. I despise them for it, and I despise myself for not giving them what they want. There's been another week of telling, and the phrases I use sound ridiculous. It isn't fair that there's only one way to say, "I'm pregnant," and about a hundred others to say the opposite, and none of them sounds particularly nice.

"Well, we lost this one," I said to my mother hollowly, because that's what I am. That doesn't sound right, the word "lost" implying that we can find it again.

The world continues to go on around me, and I feel the bizarre need to tell everyone on the streets about it, just so they'll know, even though it won't make any difference. I still haven't cried; it's not because I'm strong and brave or any of those words that sound good, but don't actually mean anything. I just don't cry. Not when I'm packing the toys and small clothes neatly away in a bin at the back of our closet, not when Annemarie smiles sadly and shoots me sympathetic looks at work, not when I notice Ken's puzzle of spring flowers still on the coffee table, with only the corner border filled in. Sometimes I feel a lot like those middle puzzle pieces-lost for a long time until everything else finally fills in around them and then they fit, by default.

Ken comes home from work early every day with bigger bouquets of flowers, teas, and chocolates. He touches my elbow, my cheek, my neck, trying to ground me, but I feel far away. He's the calmest I've ever seen him, navigating this chaos, the worst, with a clear head and steady hand. I suppose maybe I'd always been above his careful plans and constant, methodical activities. Maybe he's my reassuring constant, too. Or maybe there's just no point in being overwhelmed when the worst possible thing has already happened. We talk about things that don't matter, and I avoid the things that do. It must be frustrating for him, but he doesn't show it. His eyes take on a reddish tint some nights, but he never lets me see him cry. He must think, since my mourning's private, his should be, too.

I don't feel like I'm mourning, though; I don't seem to know how. Everyone wants to know what I'm feeling, but I don't know; I've never felt this way before. There're no words to describe what I can't understand. Sometimes I feel feverish with rage, and sometimes I think it must all be closer to sorrow, and mostly I'm reduced to blank and cold and alone. It'd felt safer to be sad for John Lennon, because the loss felt more tangible when paired with a face, and I knew eventually I'd be able to let go of him. This, this spiraling feels endless, over something so abstract and precious and small, enough so that I should've been able to protect it.

It's nearly midnight, and Ken's taken to curling up on his side of the bed with Harrison at his feet, though the knuckles of one of his hands rest against my hip. I'm awake, palms over my stomach, restless as the traffic out on the street. My legs are trembling, and I suddenly need to get out, to move, so I slide out from under the covers and tiptoe across the apartment, slipping into Ken's coat. The three stairwells down are empty, the shops dark, and there's fresh snow on the street. The man with the flowers has long since gone home.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm standing on the sidewalk, snow crunching under the curling toes of my bare feet. I'm squinting up at the sky, trying to focus on the inky blackness framed by the city lights. I wonder whether God and this baby I never knew are somehow up there somewhere,

but, fuck, that blackness feels like it's nothing.

I feel as though this moment, in the midst of all the snow and the muted street, calls for *something*-some reassurance, a revelation, something profound. I stand with freezing feet and wait for it, something profound, to come over me.

It doesn't.

I slip my hands into the pockets of Ken's coat, and my left hand touches something cold and hard. I pull it out, holding it up towards the streetlight to see.

It's the pacifier I gave him a lifetime ago; he's carried it with him all this time.

I stand there numbly, clutching this tiny plastic thing, lip trembling as I watch my own breath fog the air. In, out. In, out.

"Julia!" Ken's standing in the doorway, hair disheveled, hugging himself for warmth. "Julia! What're you doing?" His white t-shirt's glowing under the bright streetlights.

"I don't know," I whisper, and burst into tears, clenching the pacifier tight in my fist. Ken's next to me in an instant, enveloping me in his freezing arms, miles away from last week's careful, tentative touches. "Shhhh," he murmurs into my hair, chest heaving, and I know he's been waiting for me to return. "Shhhh." I clutch at his neck. "It wasn't your fault, you know," Ken whispers, and I nod, because I know. "I love you," he breathes, and I nod, because I know. We sway on the sidewalk, his hands in my hair and at my waist, and my head on his chest, and he sings "Julia" into my ear, so softly that I can scarcely hear the words.

January 5, 1981. The tentative beginnings of the New Year, and with it, all it may bring and all it leaves behind. I think I understand now what Ken meant about getting in the way of the future. This year isn't that year. And maybe all of them-John, God, our perfect baby, are looking down upon us. Maybe they're not.

How the life goes on.

SHASHANK RAO



Junior

Major: English and Creative Writing

Minor: Japanese

Reading: Fiction

Shashank Rao is a junior double majoring in English and RC Creative Writing and minoring in Japanese. He hopes on day to become a novelist, but wouldn't mind working as a journalist either, preferably for *The New Yorker*. He enjoys long walks in the Arb and anything by Toni Morrison.

"The Monkey"

Chaudeya Seshappa Vaasudev grew up wishing he were elsewhere. How could he not? One look around his thoroughly quotidian childhood home would be enough to inform you of his existential desire to escape it. In other homes, rainwater might weasel its way indoors in steady drips, perhaps through a hairline crack in the ceiling or a window left slightly open by a forgetful resident, who would, of course, take immediate action to rectify the situation. Spread some plaster over the leaking crack then inspect the house for any other vulnerabilities; bolt the culprit window shut then make sure the rest of them are closed tight as well. Not so at the Chaudeyas'. During the monsoon season, rain passed freely in and out like an imposing visitor, entering not through centimeter-wide fractures, but wide gaping holes left to expand each year; not through unbolted windows, but shattered windows covered haphazardly with a bed sheet, itself fenestrated by a dozen tears. In the blooming season, ivy and other such flora lowered their serpentine vines and released caterpillars that chewed through the family's meager library and, when the time came around, ensconced themselves in their cocoons,

hanging in clusters from thresholds (only thresholds, for reasons unknown to the Chaudeyas), a rather unsubtle cosmic display of liminality. Most would fall to the ground and be crushed by unwary feet, the primordial soup staining their soles. But a rare few would hold their ground, and, for two weeks, newly metamorphosed swallowtails glided overhead until they escaped through the holes whence they came.

The butterflies, though they were great nuisances, were nothing compared to the monkeys. On more occasions than they liked to admit, the Chaudeyas woke up in the dead of night to the sound of crashing pots, finding macaques laying waste to their kitchen. Their simian intruders were astute enough to avoid making daytime appearances, but once evening rolled around, all bets were off. They tore open bags of dal and gram flour and stuffed their faces with plantains and papayas, depleting a month's worth of food in a matter of minutes, raising their voices in terrible harmony like a primeval choir. The Chaudeyas ignored the monkeys for a time, deciding that nature would have her way—what's the use of impeding it? But their policy of non-interference became harder to uphold as the monkeys grew more daring. No longer were they limiting themselves to kitchen raids—no, the basic necessities for survival were guaranteed: the monkeys, instead, desired gold. They ventured into bedrooms where the valuables were kept and managed to purloin bangles and jeweled pendants without being noticed at first, making careful study of the family's circadian rhythms, but once you have nurtured greed, you inherit recklessness. One night, the macaques lingered too long, flirting with the light of dawn, entranced by a pair of lapis lazuli earrings inlaid with silver that vibrated cerulean warmth when struck by the morning rays. Five of them had gathered around the earrings, their great maws making enchanted little o's, when a younger, less scrupulous member who was particularly taken with their newfound treasure lost custody of his excitement and defecated, excreting a stool so odoriferous his four companions yelped and bolted away. When Vaasudev's mother, Kaveramma, awoke to the horrid stench and sight of a sheepish macaque lolling at the foot of her bed, she let out a scream of such single-minded fury the incontinent fellow shat himself again before running off with his tail between his legs.

From that day forward, the Chaudeyas spared no monkey. Vaasudev's father, Seshappa, purchased a machete from a nearby butcher and waited in the night for the first macaque to step foot inside. Vaasudev waited, too, eager to see what heroism might come over his father when a macaque *did* drop in. It was smaller, less sure-footed than the other monkeys they had seen before; in fact, it looked lost. But Seshappa knew he had to make an example of it if they ever wished for a full night's peace. He crept up slowly behind it, the machete glinting hungrily as it passed in and out of the moonlight. But the macaque remained in its place, unaware of its imminent demise. Perhaps it was too stupid to realize it, Vaasudev thought, weren't animals supposed to have a sixth sense that warned them of danger? Maybe it was too young then, still learning to abide by the rules of the animal

kingdom—chiefly that there are no rules. Every monkey for itself. Vaasudev found himself pitying the clueless macaque and was just about to call out to it when Seshappa let out a massive, all-consuming sneeze. The monkey turned its head around and gazed up at the large mustachioed man who was rubbing his nose in his arm wielding a rusty machete overhead. Its eyes were wide and kind and from where Vaasudev stood, it seemed to offer a slight bow. Vaasudev yelled out at his father “don’t do it!” but it was too late: the machete surged through the macaque, nearly slicing its skull in two. The smote animal stumbled this way and that with the rusty machete lodged in its skull, as if unable to decide if it should surrender to death or give life one last chance. Moonlight shafted through the ceiling, sharp and silver like the blades of freshly whetted swords, which the monkey evaded with a strange, moribund grace. Seshappa, hands hanging limply at his side, was doused by the harsh glow. Slowly, though, he turned around and faced his small, receding son hiding behind a wicker chair. Vaasudev didn’t understand the expression on his father’s face, something halfway between melancholy and calm. Seshappa made his way towards Vaasudev then stopped and beckoned his son. Vaasudev obliged and went to where Seshappa stood. He turned his head up to meet his father’s eyes. His father blinked, then raised his hand and slapped Vaasudev so hard the boy could never hear out of his right ear again.

“Don’t tell me what to do, little runt. I’ll kill a monkey any time I damn well please.”

TAMARA RIGSBY



Freshman
Major: Undeclared
Reading: Poetry

A brief list consisting of things I enjoy other than reading and writing poems: painting, photography, dancing, video games, music, napping, and playing the piano.

Smári

Estival euphoria
 Bending
Into
 The stencil of a man.

Warping within
 The heat
Shedding white,
 Smiling teeth
On
 Thursday's stars.

Serotinal elysium
 Twisting
Into
 Hallow bones.

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Snapping beneath
His feet
Expanding light,
Spilling marrow
Of
Tomorrow's dreams.

Stagnant in Disbelief

Aphrodite began to weep after hearing
The church bells ring.

The moon dwindles below the horizon,
A thick fog covering its luminosity.

Aphrodite speaks:
"Trees birth branches,
A lull kisses the sea,
Planets serenade stars,
But man- he does not wish to web himself to me"

Dead lilies cascade across the land,
Flooding dusted fields with defiled hope,
And disintegrated empathy.

The wind whirls,
Shifting pieces of the Earth gently,
Lifting plucked petals that read:
"He loves me not"

Somewhere
(In that desert)
The mountains listen to Aphrodite sing.

She holds herself barren,
Devoid of life, love, and humility.

Wintry Sky

Wintry sky
How it disguises its cry
With frozen tears
And scraps the Earth white.

Icy trees,
 How bitter their boughs
 Must sink,
 When snow settles into their
 Hallowed cavities,
 And pierces their limbs.

Weather worn leaves,
 How torn they must be from
 Winter's kiss:
 It steals their chlorophyll
 And abandons them.
 (They die)
 Colorless.

Sullen minds
 How they desire to find
 Solace
 In ivory nights,
 When the wind whispers lethargic lullabies
 Nobody else
 Can bear to hear.

Mutated

I unravel

Swirls of DNA encrypted OCEAN.

Drink me in
 Taste this sin upon your lips

Salt water.

Tears of which I do not know to sink or swim within,
 Or shrivel up to never unwind again:

*I sew myself up with a needle
 I wont ever let you in,
 I sew myself up with a needle
 These stitches fragile and thin*

Easily ruptured.

Xanadu

Why did you
Tremble
Holding light
Hands
Or
Divert your gaze
Away
From the ocean?

I am blue
Eyes
Searching,
Climbing mountains
Of jaw
Lines
Of veins

Stream into me
Loom over the sea
Stringing your words
Throughout
My body

Building hesitancy
(In these lips)
Pursued
A quarry

That glimpse,
A discovery
Seals the memory
But excavates
Your promise
Void.

Jars of Dreams

Do you lie awake late enough to hear the crows sing?

A heavy hand is knocking beneath the wooden floors
(Interrupting my slumber)
Beckoning me into a reverie
So I lay awake

And think of the way you spoke exquisitely,
 How your words moved in synchrony with the moon
 And caressed me in light just the same.

The crows are calling now,
 Screeching in lanes of shadowy streets,
 The red traffic lights still flashing
 With no cars to stop

(Only time)

And when the lights turn green time will proceed,
 The crows will darken the star filled sky
 And I
 Will fall within the realm of dreams
 Where gravity will pull our souls
 (Together again)
 In unison.

Poison

Swallow my pride
 (Cyanide)
 Burning butterflies inside
 My stomach that
 Rush through my chest
 And spill out of my mouth,
 Onto the Earth
 With tattered wings.

Floating into the expanse like
 Soulless dreams,
 Weightless and
 Unbothered by gravity's sting.

Now
 I am left with the after taste,
 Remains of Thursday nights like
 Cigarettes
 In the back of my throat.

Memory will seep out of my lungs in vapor,
 Condensed into a ghost of the past
 (Lingering)
 Like a silent prayer.

RYAN ROSENHEIM



Senior

Major: Theatre Performance: Acting

Minor: Creative Writing and Asian Studies

Reading: Fiction

Twenty-two years ago, Ryan was born in the notorious “Valley,” a suburb of Los Angeles. He does not talk like a “valley girl,” but he does—in fact—surf. When he’s not in the Michigan snow, he’s probably in the Malibu sand, breathing in that fresh ocean air. He’s nearly done with his acting degree in the School of Music Theatre & Dance, and his piece is inspired by the shenanigans of senior year’s infamously nerve-wrecking Clown Class.

Clown Class

You bent-dicked wank-stain, do you hear me? “I hear you!” But I don’t understand him. I don’t have my nonsense net on hand. *Do not make a mockery of this.* “I’d never do that!” I shake my head as earnestly as possible, but people still laugh at me. *This is serious. Take this seriously. So, if you mean it, say it like you mean it.* I’m screaming that I mean it. “I’m a sex and love addict!” *You’re a what? What the fuck’s that mean?* “I love love like Charlie Sheen loves cocaine; it’s a problem.” *Oof. Too witty!* “But I know love—obviously, I do if I’m an addict—so who better to teach you how to make love and make love and touch love and find love and taste love other than an addict?” *That’s ridiculous. That’s really bad.* “I know the tricks ‘uh the trade.” *What tricks are there?* “First thing’s first: finger show. Show your Boo Boo what your fingers can do...do.” I wiggle my finger like I’m giving an EDM light show. I hear chuckles from the auditorium. *What the hell are you talking about?* “Love! It’s in the air. It’s everywhere. I

can smell it. I'm like a bear—I can smell their periods. I'm like a bee. I can sense the pheromones." *Take off the nose.*

I take off the red clown nose.

"Dillon, that was a disaster." My heart thumps like canon fire, a 21-gun salute to the death of my ego.

With the nose comes an innocence and sincerity that devolves aggravation into confusion and panic; without the nose, reality returns, a barrage of eyes, whispers, worry, and hindsight.

My cheeks could iron a shirt; the heat in my head lightens my thoughts until they float away altogether, intellect gone AWOL. Simultaneously, I'm immobile, an immense weight anchoring me to the stage. I'm being drawn and quartered by my own debacle.

"You're trying too fucking hard. Clowns aren't that cunning. You can't preplan a joke. This nose is a mask. When you're wearing a happy mask, you don't need to smile. It's already smiling for you. When the nose is on, you don't need to do anything extra—just be what the nose makes of you. That'll be good enough."

"I know—"

"But you don't, so I'm telling you," interjects Nigel.

"I'm trying."

"Clearly...Too fucking hard."

When Kitty broke up with me, she said, *you're an inept lover, who can't get enough of it, but I've had enough.* Entering my closet, she dragged out my safe. *I'm taking my safe back.* She dumped its contents on my floor—a wad of cash, a hard drive, a baggie of weed, and a red plastic clown nose, shaped like a cherry, with two holes for breathing on the bottom side and an elastic band that goes over the ears.

After Kitty lugged away the weighty safe, bumping into every wall on her way out of my house—and out of my life—the entire energy in my room shifted hues. The shadows grew blacker; the yellow glow of my incandescent light bulbs dimmed to an eerie streetlight orange; a cloud eclipsed the moonlight streaming in through my open window, but, dammit it all, was Kitty's British accent sexy! It didn't matter one god-damned bit what she said; her voice was velveteen music. Unfortunately, however, that night, the music had a sad melody, and so I took off my clothes, underwear and all, popped on my clown nose, slid under my covers and cried. Despite my

tears, I was under the impression that vocal exoticism could soften any blow, from *you have cancer* to *you're fired*. However, after one month of clown class with the equally British Nigel, that impression faded.

Every word those crooked teeth click at me flattens the disks in my spine until I'm compressed to the floor in a puddle of sweat and piss. Fear, admiration, and "daddy problems" are the foundation of my verging-on-psychotic desire to please this master clown, Nigel. From the moment I met him, I wanted Nigel to believe in and value my talent, but the more I fail under his watchful eye, the deeper I dig my own grave, the stiffer my on-stage rigor mortis becomes. The harder I clown, the quicker I bomb, which opens the void beneath the stage like a trapdoor that swallows me into its idealess abyss of utter stage fright paralysis. Sleepless nights of paranoia. Waking nightmares. Public shame. Every time I laugh—or induce laughter in others—my joy's quickly overwhelmed by critical self-examination and an obsession with recreating that moment.

Per usual, I'm the first to arrive. The theatre's two hundred seat auditorium is quiet, and my footsteps echo as I walk across the empty stage. I hop down and into the audience, where I set my bag on a seat and begin assembling my clown. First, the shoes. My clown wears Uggs, basic beige, fluffy on the inside. Then, the pants. No pants for my clown—all leg. Next, the top. I shimmy into my Clint Eastwood poncho. Between where the poncho ends and the Uggs begin, I show off my legs, hairy, unworked-out, thin and boney. Finally, the hair. Some clowns wear hats or do clever hairdos, but I simply skip one step in my morning routine, a tedious coiffure that conceals my bald spot with a brown powder product that makes my scalp itch. In clown, I wear the shiny skin circle on the crown of my head like a kippah, with pride, like a good mensch should. It's a funny aesthetic, and my scalp doesn't itch, so clown class is a win-win for male pattern baldness. At last, the nose. I pull the elastic string over the back of my small head and settle it just above my ears. I secure the nose with a wiggle and suddenly, very subtly, I am my clown. My eyes widen, I smile through the pain, stand erect, crane my neck back, and push out my pelvis.

When the nose goes on, I am gone. Now, I'm a clown, a particular clown that is the manifestation of my anxieties about clowning specifically. It can be funny to try too hard, but trying too hard to try hard? There's a line to be drawn somewhere, and I'm desperately hunting down that line. Nigel says clowning is synonymous with failing, but, in clown, there is a right and a wrong way to fail, and I feel like I've failed Nigel by failing to fail correctly.

Nigel swings open the auditorium door. I pull off my nose to greet him as myself.

"Hey, guy."

Usually, Nigel starts conversations with some wit, some discharge of welled-up comedic genius, but today all I get's an unenthusiastic *Hello*. His shirt's unevenly buttoned, his pants have grease stains around the knees, and his hair's done—or undone, like a maestro piano composer. His face's puffy and standing still appears to dizzy him. As if a time bomb is about to detonate, Nigel digs, frantically, through his bag for a red nose and quickly pops it on. His disheveled manner takes on new meaning. The nose has zapped him with life, like Frankenstein's...Clown. He's now awake, exuberant, reactive.

"Let's skart shall be?" he asks. In class, the clown he embodies is the ringleader. His word is law; if he tells you to shut up, you shut up; if he tells you to crawl, you crawl; if he tells you to cry, you better damn well try. Nigel clasps my shoulder—he smells a bit like booze.

"Class doesn't start until—" I begin to respond.

"What's some extra prasticks between strudent and treacher? Good be could for you." The ringleader's got vocal dyslexia; it's charming. I comply. When the ringleader suggests, it's a command.

I slap on my nose and ascend the stage. I was going to have to noodle. To noodle is to wriggle and writhe on stage in the painstaking glare of a critical audience until an "angel" passes by and graces one with an opportunity to do something funny, and if it *is* funny, they've successful followed the noodle to a big juicy comedic meatball. "To noodle" can be compared to "to die."

My clown's squirrely, so immediately I'm engaged in the I've-gotta-to-pee dance. Nigel tells me that the theme for my noodle is—he arranges random words into a sentence—*why here, why not there?* I freeze. Of course I freeze; part of noodling is nothing-ing. Do nothing. Something will save me. God will save me. God is good. But is God real? These thoughts of God could be the impetus I need! I allow my face to reveal the immense struggle in my mind. God Gods God, heaven, stars, religion, worship, priest, pope, Good God, Bad God, Jesus, God, prayer, monarchy, king, queen, prince, crown, God, crown crow crown! The crown of my head, the chakra center connected to spirituality and God tingled—no it itched. An itch is an angel. It had come; the angel had passed over me.

"Whyyy here!" I exclaim while lifting my shirt to reveal my thicket of chest hair, "Why not there?" I spin around and point directly at the itch on the crown of my head, dead-center of my bald spot. Nigel snorts. For a moment, I assume his snort's mocking me, but I turn back around just in time to see him compose himself after a hearty laugh. He removes his nose. *Well done!* "Well done?" *Yes, that's what I said.* "I'm not your waiter, sir," I say, earnestly. I get him again. He chuckles and shakes his head. *That shouldn't be funny, but yet and for it is. What do you do for a living Mr...* "I

don't have a name." My clown hasn't discovered his name yet. A clown's name is its only title, no Mr. or Dr. or Sir or Majesty—just the name to epitomize all of a clown's essence. Is this a rite of passage, to discover my clown name with my mentor? Does this mean I'm worthy?

"I'm Dan-ish." *Dan-ish?* "Yes, a little Dan, a little ish." *Where are you from Dan-ish?* "Holland!" *Dan-ish is Danish then?* I wink at Nigel and bite my lip. "Ow." I bit too hard. Nigel acknowledges my reactivity to stimuli with a nod. A clown should never ignore pain or mishaps. *What do you do Dan-ish.* "I'm a singer." *Oh, what do you sing?* "Hymns and... K-pop." *What else do you do?* "Duh, uh, well, archery, duh!" Nigel snorts more. He hadn't seen archery coming. *Archery? Wow, show me archery?* I mime a bow and arrow, set the arrow, draw the string, and aim. "Fuck you, Cow." I let an arrow soar into an imaginary cow. "Fuck you, Chicken. Fuck you, Kitty." *You killed a cat?* Nigel asks, incredulously, but mostly entertained. "No, Kitty's my girlfriend." Three for three—I'd nailed it. "Wait, I lied, she's my ex-girlfriend." *Thank you for telling the truth.* She didn't want to stay with me, and that makes sense, because I don't even want to stay with me. *Do you have any tricks, Dan-ish?* "Tricks? Yeah, I got tricks. See there's uh, nothing up my sleeves—I don't have sleeves, shhh. So for my feat, I will—with the sheer force of my will—uh-huh, remove my...depression. Watch me now!" Other students begin to file through the theatre doors. *We'll watch that later. Good Dan-ish—very nice. Nose up.* I comply. Nigel's still cracking up. *See how that works? You let your impulses take over. Really good.* Thank you. Yeah. Thank you. Throughout class, I continuously fall short of funny, but my preclass success has left me smiling ear to ear.

Nigel's only a tyrant in his attempt to bring to fruition all one's potential. He loves his students and wants them to thrive. In Buddhism, a teacher is all-knowing. Anything the teacher demands of the student—however irrational—is an integral cog in the machine towards enlightenment. Every hurtful quip and embarrassing task Nigel hollers is for the good of my developing clown. Faith in one's teacher is paramount, so I'll take whatever he dishes out and follow his directions even if they lead to an X marks the spot that drives me off of a cliff. He'd known all the right things to say today. Every line was bait and hook, spoken for the purpose of pulling, from me, more and more of who my clown is and the logic he lives by.

Now that I've seen my potential, however, my anxiety quotient's growing tenfold. I have a reputation to uphold. How can I repeat the genius I left on stage? There's no point in preplanning; Nigel recognizes when something has been prepared. Must I revert back to failing and flailing and falling, or will instinct take the wheel again? It certainly didn't during class. I cannot let Nigel down.

It's not easy to fall asleep when there's no practical way to work on

being funny. That persistent *be funnier* repeats itself like a mantra behind closed eyelids, but doesn't really accomplish anything. I need to go for a walk, to clear my mind, to remember what being a clown's all about. The only means of practicing clown is deep understanding of a clown's purpose: to reflect the parts of humanity we shy away from. A clown's job is to reveal that mask-wearer's fears, insecurities, or secrets in an improvised—that means unscripted—comedic performance. Nothing's more nude than a clown.

On my walk, I see many clowns in their natural habitats. Despite an absence of red noses, the world's full of clowns. I wonder if the man knows that coughing while he graffiti's an alleyway's comedic irony, or if the woman sitting outside a café understands that checking her bill, double-checking her bill, putting on glasses to check the bill, then switching to a different pair of glasses to check the bill is a classic bit. Does the homeless guy sitting crisscross applesauce watching television through a shop window realize he's the paragon of innocence and unawareness that all clowns must cultivate? Does the man holding a woman's head against a brick wall while he shoves his hand up her dress realize physical comedy happens in threes?

The woman's crying. I stand not five feet from this scene. The man's breathing hard down her neck. Occasionally, he shushes to quiet her. It quiets me more so. Does the busker on the corner not notice? Is no one going to stop this? I'm being drawn and quartered again. I'm no hero. I'm just a guy. I'm scarcely a clown. I'm really no one of importance. Why can't Christ intervene? I went to church on Easter. Help me out, Christ. Do your fucking job.

"Stop." The most pathetic gargled hoarse version of that word jumps ship before I can stop it. The man listens. He keeps his back to me.

"Fuck off." Man, that British dialect's really quite scathing. People say "Fuck off" all the time, but when someone means it, you know.

"No, man. I mean...you fuck off." He pivots. Nigel looks me up and down. His head's dipped low, and his eyes look up his forehead at me. He's not very lucid. His eyes are red, and his glare lands nowhere in particular.

"Dillon."

"Nigel." The word pounds in my head. What lesson is teacher teaching? Nigel Nigel Nigel, my mentor, a father, my idol, a clown, more than anything, a man, like me, with a past and a story and family and friends, but a man like me, nonetheless, and nevertheless committing acts of horror I can put an end to if I separate my lips or separate the demon from teacher, but I cannot commit this act of separation, I cannot leave him, for I don't know this story—this could be anything—a game, a bit, stage combat, hell, maybe they're just kinking around, and this is how they get their groove

on, but something in me cannot act. Maybe he's right, the man I want to be. Maybe she deserves it, and he's right, maybe this is one of my tests—a test of clown sensibility, to find humor in horror, and so find it I will, find it I will, because I can't imagine I'm perceiving correctly right now, right now between a man and a man is a woman, a frail scared woman with straight black hair.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, my wife. Always trying to drive drunk. Just getting us in a taxi."

"Ok," I say. I stand there, staring at my idol, who no longer glows, but seems to eat the colors around him like a black hole.

"Goodnight, then," says Nigel turning towards the street, hailing a taxi.

"Night," I whisper. I cannot imagine speaking in more than whisper ever again. My poor mother. She raised me better. She, a singular she, raised me so much better. I should know better than to worship a Golden Calf, a pyrite calf, a sick serial swine. How can I ever use the voice given to me by a monster? Nigel opened my mind and cracked my shell. Together, we found my voice, but that voice is now a fallacy, but not using it makes me just as monstrous and he is, but opposing him means losing him, but I don't need his guidance, but he was so good to me, but he was abusive in his approach, but how could I ever look him in the eye, see my reflection, and not spit at the both of us?

I return home. I take off my clothes. I light a candle. I watch the flame cling to wick. I can see the shadows from the flickering flame on my cheekbone. In the flame, I place my clown nose, which melts into and melds with the candle wax. I dip my finger into the hot liquid plastic. It burns, and it should.

CAROLINE ROTHROCK



Junior

Major: English

Reading: Poetry

Caroline grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. She studies English at the University of Michigan, and has been the recipient of three Hopwood prizes in poetry. She has vague ambitions of moving to New York City and becoming a penniless writer after college. We'll see. In the meantime, she enjoys petting kitties, worshipping David Bowie, and trying on fancy clothes with no intentions of purchasing them. She has a very serious phobia of mushrooms.

Seacucumbers

So much talk of the soul, you
 must think it's a glittering thing.
 What does *your* soul look like?
 Mine – the blackbrined plums
 you comb from the flotsam and
 cracking wrack on the shore.
 It grows fat from the bodies
 that catch the current
 and dissolve on the floor.
 Afraid, *my* soul eviscerates itself.
 Hold it moist in your palms –
 and it slips, splatters putrid jam
 over your best pair of slacks.

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The leftover sack is limp
like a spent penis or the skin
of a rotted looseclad fruit.

Nautilus

Nightblooming flower, white in the lightless abyss --
some forgotten hand has painted him with red stalks
of jasmine, whorls of peonies for his eyes.
Fossilized flower -- in his many-petaled shell,
he carries the secrets of an older world.
His chambers are loud with the whispering
that fills the pharaoh's tomb, the Library of Babel,
the murmurous swamps of the Earth's nativity.
Each year, he carves himself deeper into his histories,
hermit in the desert at the foot of the reef.
Let the conch go to Daedalus; the nautilus is mine
and no less labyrinthine. An ant, a thread, and a drop of honey
could not map his eons.

Shipwreck

I will never know the name of the storm
that sank you. I will never know how long
your body has lain here, beating slowly,
in the emerald gloam.
I may swim the phantom staircase to the heart of you --
where moray eels tangle in velvet curtains
stripped to seaweed, and a fragment of someone's
handmirror shows me a lover's skull -- and I will not know.
Beautiful shipwreck. You are pearlstrung,
swathed in silver waves. Ghosts tremble in your depths.
And I -- I the ocean -- will kiss your silence
and hold your secrets in my arms, knowing none.

Rome is a wilderness of tigers

Of course this was not Rome, nor was it proper morning. The sky shone faintly orange. From our bleeding there was a lot of blood, a clear red wash of blood over the road. I wasn't hurt so badly, but the tiger was dying. Its body was now like a disfigured toy – my hand a child's hand upon its neck.

I didn't much care about tigers. They seemed abstract to me, not *formed* like the coppery blocks of buildings standing in the faint sky. More conceptual than all that, dimmer, hardly existing. And yet here was this tiger I'd hit with my car. I suppose I wasn't looking carefully enough. The tiger lay against my body and its teeth were as long as my palm in its flat, wise, brutal head.

If I told it things to make the dying easier, I don't remember what I said. I don't remember feeling horror. I remember the glitter of glass in the eyes, and the great swelling star in the sky. I fixed my cross to the painted rosary around its neck. Afterwards it came to me that animals have inglorious deaths regardless, nothing to be done.

In the end, it devoured me. This is as much a right as can be given. We are all meant to be eaten so, I think.

CHRISTIAN SCILLIAN



Senior

Major: Acting

Reading: Fiction

Christian Scillian is a senior acting major finishing her final semester at the University of Michigan. While much of her schedule throughout her time in school was dominated by the drama department, any time she could spare was spent in Angell hall hiding away in creative writing classes. She would like to thank any of her classmates over the last couple of years who have offered their feedback and support of every story she turned in. Go Blue!

The Catskills

We had chosen the Catskills because after graduation Gus's father had given him a copy of *My Side of the Mountain* which was a longstanding tradition in the Gilbert family. Our first trip was reckless. We climbed too far and drank too much and risked our lives on the rocky mountain face for the sake of a good time. Now on our 7th journey here and our 5th with the same last name, we had refined things somewhat.

After making it out of the city and the beyonds of suburbia, the drive was quite beautiful, particularly in the fall. The kaleidoscope trees and raised hills that would soon push themselves into mountain peaks surrounded our small car, racing up the rural roads. The trees were a blanket, holding their leaves for just a tick longer until winter would rip them away, and it felt as if they were holding on to them just for us. In the early days, the drive would have been fronted with nervous chatter, underscored by the dull buzz of

NPR. Now, however, it was mostly silence that drifted in and out of comfort-ability.

I had just reached out to the radio knobs, in hopes of finding a station that would play music as opposed to the screeching fuzz we had been receiving for the last minute or so, when Gus looked over at me from the driver's seat of our second hand-station wagon to say, "Hey, Angela, we're almost there."

He said it in such a way that meant both "to the mountain" and "to our anniversary," and something from our past reached out through the trees lining the road and gave me the chills. Things had been bad recently, and I think we both hoped that this would be the chance to change things. Turning one final time past a sign informing us that we had entered The Catskills National Forest, we drove head first into a wilderness you might have thought you could only ever see in a painting. Slowing into the small gravel parking area that marked the last chance to turn back, Gus stopped the car with a lurch, and we took a moment to remind ourselves that this wasn't a dream.

"Ready?" Gus said.

"Always," I said, as we both opened our doors to let the warmth and stuffiness of our small car out, and let the striking coolness of the great outdoors in.

We took the same path as always, though it was never actually the same. It was once explained to me that the Bureau of Land Management will occasionally close trails for a couple seasons, but won't update the public maps. So, some years we would find ourselves scaling difficult terrain and brush that hadn't seen a hiker since the last time we had passed. This time however, it was easy. Part of me wished we had to take some of the dangerous detours that we had in the past. Part of me wished that we would encounter a rocky face, where I would walk too close to the edge and that Gus would pull me too him so that I wouldn't fall. Part of me wished we could encounter a mountain lion and stand our ground until it left us. Part of me wished that when we crossed the stream that always came in the first third of the hike that we would hold hands and cross the stream together. But, instead, when we met that stream, we crossed separately and Gus stood at the other side, watching and laughing as I almost slipped off a moss-covered boulder. My face fell and felt hot. When I reached the other side, he put his arm around me and laughed some more and I pretended I didn't care. The part of me that wished for adventure must not have wished hard enough because the hike stayed easy. It stayed boring.

The first time we had made this journey we were pioneers, trailblazers. Now we were path followers. It was strangely easy to let my focus grow soft, to let my mind go static, even with the towering trees and singing birds demanding that I pay attention to them. At one point, when I had taken the

lead to go through a particularly narrow portion of the trail, I drew a pine branch forward with me, only to accidentally let it boomerang straight into Gus's face. This time it was my turn to laugh, hoping that he would laugh with me. He didn't. And when I laughed again he gave me a look as if to tell me that it was I who was ruining this trip. I smiled to apologize for whatever it was I was sorry for and we kept walking, Gus refusing to pull the pine needles from his hair or to even pat the scratches on his face with his sleeve so as to not even for a moment acknowledge what had happened.

By midday, we had reached the "halfway" stream. My shoulders had become achy and hot from my pack and my mouth was dry despite desperate gulps from my camelback for the last couple of miles. I wasn't 22 any more and as much as Gus hated admitting it, he wasn't either. I looked over at him as he squat by the stream, letting the water break over his hands. His face was red and his hair was faded and still adorned with pine needles and he was beautiful, still. I felt jealous of him strangely. Jealous that he could be beautiful as such when I had the distinct feeling that the sweat in my hairline was bringing out the wrinkles in my forehead that Gus said I was imagining, though I couldn't help but see them each time I was confronted with my reflection.

I set my pack on the ground beside me, and sat on the flattest rock on the bank. Surrounded by beauty as I was—from both Gus and the forest encasing us—I found my thoughts turning to our small, grey apartment in the city.

"I feel bad that we left Banana at home," I said more to myself than anything.

"I don't," said Gus.

"What? Why?"

"He can take care of himself. It's only, like 24 hours. If anything, he's probably happier without us," Gus said, standing to face me.

"Don't say that."

"It's true."

"No, it's not! We rescued him!"

"*You* rescued him."

"Yeah, for you."

"Then I guess Banana and I can just make each other miserable then."

"Excuse me?"

"Angela... Jelly-Belly, Banana hates us," he said, quieter as if he was breaking some terrible news to me, and I hate that he used my nickname while we were bickering like this. "I would too, if I was called 'Banana,'" he continued.

"The lady at the shelter said we should give him a name that makes us happy so we don't sound angry saying it. It's part of the adjustment process." I said, trying to remain calm.

"Yeah but we could have gotten that by calling him Optimus Prime, or something, not a fucking girl's name," he said, gaining speed and passion as he went. I was shocked.

"First of all," I said deeply trying to control my temper, "since when is 'Banana' a girl's name? And since when do you care? It if was really that big of a deal, we could have changed it when I brought him home three months ago. He's a cat, Gus, not a dog. He doesn't have to know his name."

"Oh, so now you're saying Banana isn't smart enough to know his own name?" he asked, indignantly

"No! What? What are we even fighting about?" I was exhausted.

"I don't know..." he said, clearly exhausted as well.

We settled after that. Our haunches lowered and we turned away from each other, trying immediately to move on, but being unfathomably tethered to the tension between us. He bent down to the stream again, putting his hand in the chilled water once more. I rested my chin on my right knee, padded slightly by the thickness of my hiking leggings. After a moment, and without looking up at me, Gus said, "So, lunch?"

Through mouthfuls of granola and apples we had bought from a roadside farm stand on the drive up, we made some forced attempts at small talk. He told me a story about his job at the ad agency that I had heard before and pretended to laugh at for the first time. I told a joke and he beat me to the punch line. The monotony was overwhelming. I thought about our ugly, patchy cat and the things that he was probably knocking over in our apartment. I loved that cat desperately and he hated me. I had failed. I clenched my teeth and tried not to ruin whatever this trip was anymore with crying. We had fallen silent and let the forest do the talking. The autumn hurry was just starting to fade away as the squirrels and groundhogs were packing their final winter rations into their hovels or wherever they live. I envied them. I, too, wanted to eat until I was swollen and fat, sleep for months, and then wake up again when everything is new.

I tried to think back to the last time that things were new for us. When we didn't know everything about each other. When we were navigating each other's lives as we had the path to our spot in the Catskills for the first time.

I remembered the first time I had met Gus's dad and had to stop myself from laughing.

Gus's dad, Liam Gilbert, grew up in what he referred to as the "smallest place in Canada," a town in east Ontario called Calabogie. It was a town of only 8,000 people which was so isolated from the rest of Canada that the people who lived there still spoke with a strange combination of the Irish and Scottish dialects of their ancestors who had built the place in the first place. A childhood friend of his had disappeared mysteriously while on a fishing trip to one of the many lakes in the area and he never really recovered, though he kept his humor. After Gus's mom passed a couple of years ago, his father came to stay with us in the city for a couple of months. New York unsettled him. It was too loud he would say, preferring to stay in most of the time, save for the moment we would make the trip from Brooklyn to Manhattan so that he could sit in Central Park for a couple hours and make do with the faux outdoors. Sometimes, Liam would make rude comments about race or the drag queens we'd pass on the street. Gus hated this and would constantly try to correct him. Liam would simply reply, "What does it matter? When I go back to Calabogie I won't be seeing such things anyway."

At first thought better than to introduce Liam to my family particularly my Syrian father, Amer. Liam couldn't even understand where a last name like "Shlah" could even come from, and the idea of introducing him to anyone browner than me was less than enticing. However, the introduction was inevitable. The first time his parents met mine, just a couple months before our wedding, our mothers got along seamlessly, chatting and making plans for our futures, and Liam and Amer just sat pleasant enough. When we had left the small restaurant in Syracuse, from where Gus and I had just graduated, my father looked at me and said, "He called me 'foreign.' That doesn't make any sense. I'm American and this is America. He's Canadian. He's the foreign one." My mother, Emma, just looked at him and said, "Well just so long as he's not voting in this country, I think we can stomach him in small doses."

My face must have cracked into a smile as I remembered this, and Gus had caught my eye.

"What're you thinking about?"

"Your dad, actually. Made me laugh."

"You're laughing at my dad?" He asked, willfully choosing to be offended.

"No, Gus. You know what I meant. Don't start another fight with me because you feel like we both need to be unhappy," I said, standing this time, hoping that we could just keep hiking in silence.

"I'm not," he said, sounding guilty.

"Yes, you are! You are and you have been," I challenged, "you're being ridiculous!" It felt good to finally call him out. I couldn't keep pitying him for losing his job at the ad agency. I couldn't keep pitying him for feeling like he had amounted to nothing, and I couldn't keep letting him take it out on me.

"I'm being ridiculous? You're the one who was acting like you needed help crossing the tiny stream! You're the one going on about the stupid cat that you stupidly thought would fix things! You're the one who can't hear a single thing I say without getting offended!" He was shouting now, and shaking somewhat, too. The forest around us had grown quiet to listen to our bombs go off.

"Can you even hear yourself right now?" I asked quietly, as that was all I could manage. The shoulders that he had raised to his ears in anger fell. He looked at the ground where he stood, and kicked a couple of pebbles in the stream beside him, like a child at the end of a temper tantrum.

As we stood there, engulfed in our anger and resentment, uncomfortably aware that we would either have to try and make the rest of the journey from here, or turn back and end things as they were. After hours, or maybe just minutes, Gus looked up at me again, this time with a soft expression on his face, and said, "I am all out of ideas, Angela. What are we going to do?"

"Rename our cat Optimus Prime." I said.

We smiled at each other, grabbed out packs off the ground, still wondering which direction we were going to go from there.

JESSIE SHER



Sophomore

Major: Industrial and Operations Engineering

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

Jessica Sher is a San Franciscan stereotype. She is composed of kale and chickpea and was last seen drinking flavored vinegar from a Dixie cup. At birth, she demonstrated a deep fear of imposing by slipping out entirely unnoticed by even her own mother and had long exited the event before crying out for help. It was not the last event she would leave naked, crying, and covered in blood.

Sparring Partners

When Jon walked up to Smruthi's cubicle, she had a pencil between her teeth, her black curly hair sprawled wildly down her back, and old make-up rubbed into every crevice about her brown eyes.

"I can't tell if you look like a beaver or a raccoon now, so I'll assume at some point the two animals fucked and out you came."

She looked up and took the pencil out of her mouth, holding it like a sword in her lead smeared hand. The silver of the graphite stood out in stark contrast to her light brown skin and delicate gold watch. "Literally every time you talk to me, I want to lie down on my back, vomit, choke on my vomit, then die."

"I'm honored you regard me so highly." His eyes danced down to her relatively flat chest, then back up to her eyes. "The girls are looking good today."

Her eyes rolled but her lips betrayed her, quirking up at the sharpest angle they could manage. Jon smiled at her pronounced dimple. She pulled her paper away from him, then kicked out the chair next to her for Jon to sit. "I'd say your boys are looking good as well, but let's be honest: are they ever? Do you have the documentation for tomorrow?"

Smruthi and Jon are toxic people, like high molarity hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide— lethal alone— but together, neutralized.

This chemistry looks dangerous, because it is. However, they're professionals.

Do not try this at home.

Smruthi opened Jon's plain grey backpack as if it were her own, pulling out a Mason jar of spinach. "Is the goat cheese and apple buried?"

Jon adjusted his black framed glasses to sit at the top of his sunburnt nose. "So, you didn't hear anything I said about the isometric sketches?"

"I did, but this is more important." She twisted open the jar and dug around the green with her fingers. As she wormed around, her shortly clipped nails became saturated with the raspberry vinaigrette.

"Stop digging. Why do I hide forks in your desk for us if you're going to act like you have no thumbs? The Great Barrier Reef died so we could have plastic utensils." Jon bent over to dig around behind the computer on the floor, and Smruthi admired the dark pink hickey on the pale freckled skin right below his ear. Jon popped back up with a plastic bag, his lightly gelled brown hair shifting with the sudden movement. He held out a fork from the Ziplock. "And anyway, it's not worth digging if you want goat; I put paneer in. Thought it would be a better pairing."

Her glare could have melted the universe.

His deadpan face would have kept it intact.

Smruthi pushed more spinach to the side of the jar. "No, that's definitely goat cheese."

Jon shook his head, bending over to replace the fork bag, and to dig

into his backpack. "Paneer cheese. Really? You believed that?" He sat back up with Tupperware of pesto penne pasta in one hand and a plastic fork in the other. "Why would I make you a spinach and apple salad if we only had paneer at home? What do I look like to you?"

"A baboon's hemorrhagic asshole, but you knew that."

The Tupperware popped open, basil pine nut scent consuming the room. "I did. You're right. But that probably says more about you than me, since you're the one who is going to say 'I do'."

"We both say that, dumb-ass." Her hand came out of the Mason jar pinching a cube of apple and a cluster of cheese. "Anyway, the iso is a draft, and we're probably going to throw it out for the PowerPoint."

"If Madison redraws it, we're going to save so much time."

"She'll do it if I ask, but she'll hate me for it."

"She already hates you."

"Yeah, probably." Smruthi's handful of food stilled halfway to her mouth. "Being my Maid of Honor has got to have lit the hate fire, right?"

Jon nodded. "How much cake are you paying her in for being in our wedding?"

Smruthi cringed. "She's allergic to eggs. I'm having a mini vegan one made for her with her name literally on it. Madison Andotter in whatever frosting vegans use. Water, I guess."

"Ouch." Jon speared his pasta with his fork. "Yeah, she hates you. Vegan anything is a crime in every country except for North Korea. And that's only because food itself is a crime there."

Smruthi pulled a spinach leaf from her mouth and stuck it onto Jon's forehead. "People are dying there, Jon. People are dying."

Jon grimaced at the leaf, sticky residue lingering as the green pulled away. "Fine. Redacted."

Smruthi sighed and with a napkin returned his forehead to its original state.

They had met at work. The software team always had to meet with marketing at some point or another to collaborate on what updates would be most valuable.

Jon had been at the company for three years total, straight out of college. He was a hard worker. Every assignment the company gave him would be done early and quietly turned in. His code annotations were clear and concise. If his work came back with a bug highlighted, he would clean his glasses, clamp the back end of a BIC pen between his molars, and scratch incessantly at his left arm as he scrolled until the problem was resolved. Since he was salaried, sometimes that meant leaving work 14 hours later with a scruffy face and band-aided arm, lunch forgotten in the break room, and happy hour long gone. But he got it done.

The department loved those days, because when Jon was busy, he was their greatest asset. When he had a free moment, he was their worst liability.

See, Jon was an asshole. He knew it when he flicked ears in kindergarten, and when he spoke out of turn in class in middle school. In high school, he whispered his comments to the people around him until half were laughing and half wanted to smack the shit out of him.

Everyone knew him, and everyone liked to listen to his running commentary, until of course, the commentary turned on them. It's all fun and games until the comedian calls you out.

This, of course, would only fuel him further. Years ago, classmates would call him a cocky son of a bitch, and he would say, "I am cocky, but you must always remember that I am a son of a whore, not a son of a bitch." And they would roll their eyes.

"I'm also the son of my dad, if you want to come up with some names for him. I'm all about equal rights." He would continue and continue...

Like recently in October at work: "Bobby, if you don't shut up about Halloween, I'm going to have to cut my brain out with a pumpkin carver; you don't need to dress up like a super hero for us to know you're a douche."

Or July: "OH EM SQUEE! I didn't know that my code doesn't work because I'm a goddamn idiot who troubleshoots code that runs perfectly! Thanks for the breaking news, Don Lemon."

Or March: "I know I'm a bastard. Grass is green. Penguins can't fly. Whatever."

...until someone cuffed him around the head.

Some people can't shut off their brains. Jon was obviously one of them, and so was Smruthi. The difference lay in their moment of attack.

"Madison," Smruthi spoke brightly on the phone. "Jon and I are a bit early to our meeting, and we were talking about the isometric sketch for the PowerPoint. Yeah. No not that one." She fumbled in Jon's backpack until she found his laptop. "One second, Madison, let me find the page."

Jon ripped the laptop out of Smruthi's arms, cracked it open, and waited for it to recognize his face. Smruthi watched the wheel process the image and waited for him to hand it back.

Finally, the laptop unlocked.

"Madison? Yeah, I'm bringing it up right now. Page 43. Yes. That's the one for blowing up. No, no, it looks great. Really great work. We just think that maybe... No, no I get that. Listen, we need you to at least crisp up the image. It's too blurry. Can you send the higher res then? Great, thank you. I'll see you in an hour. Great. Thanks. Yeah. Great. All right. Bye."

Jon smiled with the expectation of follow-up gossip.

"She's a great worker, but I swear to God if I have to cat herd her one more goddamn time, I'll turn her guts into a fucking tennis racket. I will rain fucking hellfire on this dry brush."

"Aw, look how mad you are! How come you don't talk like this at home!" Jon fist bumped her shoulder.

She swiped his hand away. "Don't you ever yank the laptop out of my arms again."

"Never poke a raging bear..." Jon muttered, then quickly sobered his jovial spirit. "I was trying to help?"

"Babe, I know your password. I don't need your face." Smruthi took a deep breath in, and slowly let it out, visibly calming. "Every fucking time I take your laptop out... God."

"I'm sorry," Jon spoke low and slow. His chin dipped, as though the weight of his rare sincerity was too much for his neck to support. "I won't do that again. I was only trying to help."

"I know. I'm sorry. Just... Ugh. Yeah. Thank you." Smruthi played with the emerald cut diamond ring on her left hand. "I'm sorry I snapped. Love you."

A saccharine moment. The silence is thick, until a coworker pops the bubble with the loud crack of a stapler.

"Anyway, you made this salad too healthy. Give me the rest of your pasta, and you eat this." Smruthi grabbed Jon's pasta from him, then slid her mason jar over his way.

"After all that talk about grabbing?" Jon reached into the jar and grabbed a leaf by the stem. Salad dressing dripped onto his cheek as he comically chomped up the leaf as though it were a donut on a string.

"My rules don't apply to me." Smruthi stabbed as much pasta as would fit on her fork, and shoved it into her mouth.

Smruthi was a knife with a blade so sharp, you needed a physicist to calculate the width of the cutting edge. It began as a defense mechanism years ago in her high school's so-white-their-collective-skin-reflection-contributed-to-light-pollution cafeteria.

"I'm not trying to be racist, and I know you do laundry and stuff, but I have to ask because I was just wondering: why do your people always smell like curry?"

Smruthi had looked up from her pizza slice, and given the best response she could. "Why do your people always smell like your mom's rancid breast milk?"

And then more recently, during the first collaboration at work, when it came time to brainstorm and Harris handed her the dry erase pen. "You're a girl, so you probably have the best handwriting— I mean that as a compliment— can you write on the board for us?"

Smruthi blinked twice, looked to the man at her left, then the man at her right, then the man directly across from her. "Thank you, my handwriting is very nice. But, you see, the gravity here is stronger than the kitchen, and my feeble lady arms will break in half if I lift them."

There was an art in the implied ridicule, the guerilla warfare response. There was art in the timing too. If she waited more than half a beat when someone asked if she was planning on quitting her job when she had kids, then responding, "Are you calling me fat? Because last time I checked, I'm not pregnant so that question is as irrelevant to me as you." Had no impact.

But the largest difference between Smruthi's cutting and Jon's was that she only cut upon request. They had to ask for it and deserve it. They had to hold out their plates for firsts, and actively engage for seconds.

She had known about Jon for two months before they spoke.

"He's really hot," Madison had said. "Like, Clark Kent and a young Robert Downey Jr had a baby."

"I don't care if he's hot." Smruthi pushed around pistachio shells in the bowl on Madison's desk until she found one that was unopened. "He sounds like a dick, and everyone hates him."

Madison flicked through a Facebook search. "Have you talked to him yet?"

"No," Smruthi admitted, looking over Madison's shoulder as she brought up a picture of Jon. "Oh, wow, he is not attractive."

"It's a bad picture," Madison qualified. "Anyway, try to let me be there when you meet him."

"So you can see me rip him a new one?" Smruthi tossed a pistachio shell around. "I know I'm entertaining, but that doesn't mean I'm entertainment."

Madison shrugged. "He's honestly the worst. I just want you to rip him enough so we don't have to deal with him again. It's not entertainment, it's payment for the pistachios."

Jon's opening remark was confirmation of her assumption, "Hey, Smruthi, I want to let you know that once I saw we were going to be working together, I stalked you on Facebook and saw that you 'liked' Mad Men. As the marketing representative for the interdepartmental team, isn't that a bit cliché?"

The plate was out at Smruthi's famous all-you-can-swallow clap-back buffet. "I'm just serious about what I do. You're clearly not, as we don't share an office with Clown Incorporated."

Jon cocked his head to the side, a smile kicking up in the corner of his mouth. "It's a shame we aren't. It clearly would take an entire corporate empire of clowns to get you to lighten up."

Seconds. "That or helium."

Jon smiled and opened his mouth to respond. Smruthi quickly realized that it was never just seconds with Jon. It was a minimum five course meal, and that was the kind of fine lifestyle she wanted to always live.

Jon was her sparring partner. They kept each other sharp, but knew when touché was reached. And while when they had first met, they had kept score, both had long lost track. Jon was delighted, because he didn't get hit, and as he told anyone who would listen: fighting was a real turn on. Smruthi herself was addicted and it scared her as much as it thrilled her. With Jon, she could swipe and jab and parry and get all the rush with none of the

harm or guilt. And Madison was right: it was a bad picture on his Facebook.

One year had passed since then, and the entire company couldn't have been happier. They got to watch an explosion involve into a firework.

Madison arrived five minutes late to the meeting. "Sorry, I was emailing Richard, since he can't make this meeting."

"Sexual misconduct goes both ways," Jon offhandedly remarked. "Be careful emailing Dick."

Smruthi glared at Jon. "Do you have to do that joke every time someone other than you brings Richard up? Your name is synonymous with toilet, so I know you have to be filled with shit, but you aren't a porta potty, so keep it at home."

Jon grinned. "Nice. How long did you work on that?"

"Two weeks." Smruthi grinned back. "Pretty good right?"

Madison looked on, horrified. "Sim, why's your makeup everywhere?"

Smruthi held up her phone to look at her reflection and shrugged. "I think I've been rubbing my eyes. We didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

"Yeah, we didn't." Jon made a thrusting movement. "I ate a ton of s'mores and got a stomach ache. She rubbed my back and fed me antacids."

Smruthi nodded to corroborate his story. Madison stared wide eyed at the floor. Jon kept thrusting until he realized no one was watching, then pulled up his documentation notes.

"Sim." Maddie pulled Smruthi aside after the meeting. "Why are you marrying him? He's... abusive. And you get your shots in, like, you go girl, and all that, but..." She fumbled with her words. "He's horrible. No one likes him. If he wasn't a white male that's good at coding, the company would have dropped him years ago. You shouldn't have to keep this fight up."

Smruthi sighed and pulled her hair back. "I'm as bad a person as he is, Madison. And we're not fighting."

"You aren't being a bad person. You're trying to keep an animal from eating you. That's self-defense. He's... Maybe he's not like this at home, but here... He's mean. I'm going to report him to HR. As a woman in the workplace, I can't let him get away with this. It's not right."

Smruthi felt her heart samba. “Holy white savior Batman. Hold on. Look, he’s horrible, I know. And we deserve to be reported if we are truly disturbing you or others. Honestly. But, I don’t think we are. Because you keep volunteering to be our art consultant, every project. And you introduced us. Hell, you encourage me half the time. Face it: We’re your baby— no abortions.”

“First of all, that’s fucked up.” Madison stiffened her stance. “Second of all, yes, I did in a roundabout way introduce you. But I don’t think I enable you. I hang around still because we’re best friends, I have a moral obligation to all the other women here too. Like, I can’t let someone spew that stuff and get away with it. I have to protect them.”

“Protect them from what? Do you mean protect me? I love that asshole, and not only when it has a heart shaped plug in it, okay?”

“What?” Madison squinted at Smruthi.

“A butt plug. Don’t worry about it. I’m kidding. Or not. Whatever. Look—I’m glad you’re looking out for me and all, but I’m good. Okay?”

“Look, I honestly thought you would bite his head off and he would stop terrorizing everyone.”

“Having stubble doesn’t make him a terrorist.” Smruthi interjected testily.

“And there’s a part of me that still thinks if you hit him in just the right way, maybe he’ll break. But you martyred yourself, and now everyone else is safe at your expense. But what about if you leave the company? I’ll support your relationship in every way, but a record of his behavior in the work place needs to be made.” Madison continued without missing a beat.

“Oh, my God!” Smruthi yelled. “Seriously? Then please, do put me down too. Make a record for me, too, if you are so hell-bent on morality all of the sudden.”

Madison shook her head. “Whatever, Rhianna.”

Smruthi ran to the bathroom and started vigorously washing her hands.

Later, after her skin felt raw and new, she went back to her desk where Jon was waiting. He was on the phone with a friend, inviting him to dinner next Friday at their place to go over best man duties.

“Hey, Micropenis.” Smruthi leveled herself with Jon’s phone. “He’ll call you back, Richard.”

“It’s not right to call me a micropenis in front of Richard. His horse dong

is painful.”

Smruthi pinched the bridge of her nose. “Seriously?”

Jon took her free hand. “I didn’t say a single unprofessional thing after the dick joke. And Madison knows Rich and I go way back. If anything, you were the monster with that sick drag. Kudos, there.”

“She thinks you’re an abusive partner and a shithead teammate and, like, I don’t know, Satan in a cubicle or something.”

“So, this is not about penis, Richard, or my penis named Richard? It’s about me?”

Smruthi tossed her hands up. “Always! I should have let her obsess over Anderson Cooper, or Ted Danson, or, shit, I don’t know but there’s a pattern. Then, she wouldn’t have fixated on us.”

Jon rubbed Smruthi’s arm. “Babe, you can’t keep fighting about me with her. Your friendship is failing the Béchamel test.”

“Bechdel test.”

“Eh.” Jon shrugged. “Both are ruined by a man, so, same difference.”

“Jon! We can’t be ourselves at work. And I can’t police you here, either. Leave it at home.”

Jon leaned back in his seat and squinted at her.

“Fine.” Smruthi put her hands on her hips. “Say it.”

“Kinky, Officer.” Jon’s peels of laughter filled the cubicle. “Cuff me, please.”

Smruthi mimed cuffing him around the head, stopping her hand before actually hitting him.

“Even kinkier.” Jon qualified. “You should do this when Richard comes over next week. He loves dinner and a show.”

But the subject didn’t drop there.

“Jon. Look at this email.” Smruthi shoved her laptop across the sofa next to him. “Right before five today.”

“Oh, shit.”

To: Smruthi Kumar; Jon Simon; Human Resources Memorandum

Smruthi shut her laptop. "I may have bluffed with Madison about HR when we fought a few days ago."

"That would explain it."

"Well," Smruthi stalled. "I can swallow the ring and pretend I've never met you."

Jon shrugged. "I was going to punch myself in the face and say 'I walked into a door' wink wink."

Smruthi winked at Jon. "Try it. You need to learn if you're going to sell the story, Tyler Durden."

Jon cocked his head to the side and blinked twice. "Did I do it?"

"No. We need a better plan."

Smruthi flipped on the sink, pumped the soap dispenser twice, and scrubbed her hands together. Jon clicked on the television and pulled down the blanket folded above the couch. The water was still running, steam fogging up the window. Jon craned his head around to watch his fiancée scrubbing under every nail, then up to her wrists, then higher, higher, until everything up to her elbows was bubbles.

"Babe?" Jon waited for her frantically wash off the suds in the scalding water. Her light brown skin had an eerie, faint red glow.

"I'm good." Smruthi dropped next to Jon on the couch.

Jon shared the blanket with her. "I think it's a black bean burger night."

Smruthi pulled the blanket over her head. "With Chipotle aioli."

"But I'm putting jalapeno in the burger."

The blanketed figure tilted over. "Babe, can I just have ice cream?"

Jon slowly got up, letting Smruthi's head slough off his legs and onto the couch. "Then I'm making a steak. There's Moose Tracks in the freezer."

"Babe," Smruthi whined.

The freezer cracked open, followed by silverware rattling. "Incoming."

Smruthi turned and caught the half empty tub of ice cream, set it to her side, then caught the spoon that followed it. "Thanks, Babe."

"Good morning, Mr. Dree." Smruthi pushed back a lock of hair from her

face. Jon stood behind her, stiff, silent, and still. He pushed up his glasses with the back of his thumb.

Mr. Dree stood from behind his desk and motioned to the two worn out leather chairs. "Please, sit. And feel free to call me Quan."

The office felt deceptively inviting. Small lamps softly lit various pockets of the room, with a special spotlight for the area next to the large, outdated computer monitor. It highlighted a pad of waterlogged sticky notes, a few paperclips, and a 3 x 5 index card with illegible words soaked in different colors.

Jon took the chair farthest to the right of the door, the old wood creaking beneath his weight.

"Mr. Dree-- Quan. A pleasure." "This room is much more inviting than when the Kremlin gave me my infantry orders." Smruthi smiled brightly.

Jon tried to stifle a chuckle.

Quan looked between them, and wrote something down on a loose sheet of paper. "Smruthi, you are of Indian- Russian descent?"

"Second generation Canadian."

Quan wrote down another few things. Smruthi raised a brow towards Jon.

"She's marrying me for the American citizenship." Jon interjected.

"Jon," Quan put down his pencil. "Smruthi. Without civility, there is only chaos."

Jon pursed his lips and squinted. "Yes..." His right hand found his left arm and began to scratch.

"Are you both as ornery outside the office as you appear in?"

"Like a heat seeking missile..." Smruthi muttered.

"No, Sir." Jon quickened his scratching pace. "Horny maybe. Ornery no."

"I find that hard to believe." Quan picked his pencil back up. Outside the office, a phone rang, and Smruthi turned her head towards the noise, then reached into her pocket for hand sanitizer. "Workplace relationships can be difficult. In light of recent reports, upper management and the HR department would like to take steps in mediating you two in the workplace. Recommendations for outside the workplace can be made as well."

"So, to clarify," Jon's arm dipped from the pressure his fingers drove into

it. "We are not fired, correct?"

Smruthi put her hand, still slightly wet from the sanitizer, on Jon's bright red arm. He stopped scratching.

"Jon, Smruthi, I assume I don't need to remind you of other stakes--"

Smruthi cracked a knuckle. Jon shifted in silence. Quan looked between the two, then continued. "Quarterly reviews are in less than a week. I don't think one more complaint will do much against you both as your files have a fair amount of disturbances that are always swept aside--"

"That has decreased since we got together" Jon pointed out. "Please note."

Quan didn't. "And that may be. Regardless, while isolated complaints go without reprimand, and multiple incidences of positive contributions result in promotion-- "

"Negative patterns will get us sacked." Smruthi tossed out.

"Please stop interrupting me. And yes. Not right away, but eventually." Quan jotted another note. "Another incident, and you will both be required to attend anger management training for ten days with no pay."

Smruthi tightened her grip on Jon's arm, turning the red white. "Please tell me that's more Fight Club and less exactly what it sounds like."

Quan jotted one more thing down. "The second one. And after that, dismissal becomes a much more likely possibility."

"I should have swallowed my ring."

"What?" Quan asked.

Jon stood, then pulled Smruthi up to her feet. "We'll behave civilly from now on. Thank you for your time, Quan."

The pair made a hasty exit.

"Madison, the iso sketch looks great." Jon smiled at his colleague.

Madison shifted uneasily. "Thank you. Wow. that plus a genuine compliment on my haircut I'm starting to feel like I'm in the Twilight Zone." She smiled at Smruthi, expecting a laugh. Smruthi gave a terse smile.

"We need font parallelism for the PowerPoint."

I can do that. Jon, is the Gantt chart almost done for the software team to approve?"

"Does a bear- "Jon stopped himself. "Yes, I sent it to you a few minutes ago." Smruthi scrolled her inbox. "I don't see it."

"Really?"

"No."

Jon scrolled through his sent folder. "I for sure sent it. Try refreshing the page."

"I already did that."

Madison nudged Smruthi. "Captain Obvious over here, right?"

Smruthi bit the inside of her lip and stayed silent.

"Wait..." Jon paused. "Auto correct fucked your name. The email bounced."

Smruthi leaned back. "My name, which comes up automatically when you put in the first two letters?"

Jon looked across the table guiltily. "Okay, I accidentally hit 'n' instead of 'm'."

Smruthi smirked at him.

"Don't say it." Jon leaned forward.

Smruthi held up a hand. "Oh, I won't. I am legally bound by this company not to."

Madison looked between the two. "Say what?"

Smruthi mimed zipping her mouth, locking it, and dangling the keys between her index finger and thumb.

"23. 81. 962. Hut!" Jon grunted out. Smruthi tossed the mimed keys at him, and he pretended to catch them in his mouth like a dog.

Madison had the look of someone who found themselves in an elevator with an unclaimed fart. Jon swallowed the keys.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this." Smruthi confessed after work as soon as the car door shut. "I want to stab myself in the eye, and then stab you, and then stab my other eye."

"And then stab me again?" Jon helped.

"No, once is enough."

Jon turned over the engine of the red Honda Civic. "I forgot how stressed I get without messing around." He rolled up the sleeve to his left arm. Lines of very shallow scratches streaked it. Small specks of dried blood - were caught in the arm hair and under his nails. "Can I borrow your nail kit when we get home? I'm going to file them down as much as I can. I'll start on my other arm otherwise."

Smruthi pushed her hair back.

Back home, Jon poured rice and water into a pot on the stove, and Smruthi pulled off her bra, then laid on the couch.

"It's times like this I wish I could speak another language." Smruthi groaned.

Jon put a lid on the pot and came over to the couch. Smruthi rolled on to her stomach Jon straddled her, sitting on his knees, and- started massaging Smruthi's back. "I know some swear words in German."

Smruthi closed her eyes. "Like what?"

"Gesundheit."

"That means health."

"That's the literal translation. The true meaning of the word is actually 'shut the fuck up'."

Smruthi laughed, and Jon smiled at the little jump her figure made.

"Let's play a game." Smruthi rolled over to her back and looked up at Jon. "We take turns coming up with boring, non-self-destructive ways to relieve our stress at work."

Jon sat up. "And if we come up with one that's good, we take off an item of clothes?"

"No," Smruthi rested a hand on Jon's right arm. "for every bad idea, we put a piece of clothes on. That's much higher stakes."

Jon bent down, his face almost touching Smruthi's. "Put your bra back on then."

Smruthi pulled off Jon's glasses. "Why?"

Jon bent forward even more, his breath hot on Smruthi's lips. "Because," he said. "That was the stupidest fucking idea I have ever heard."

By nine o'clock, Smruthi had twelve pairs of socks on, and Jon was struggling to balance seven snapbacks.

"The root of the problem isn't a) Quan Dree it's b) Madison Andotter. We need to take her out." Smruthi chewed on the back of a pen. "But we can't kill her."

"Damn." Jon grabbed a beanie from his hat pile and tossed it up. "What if we find something in the rules where she can't work with us anymore?"

Smruthi pulled the pen out of her mouth. "Like a transfer?"

"Sock." Jon nudged her. "Relocating someone is too much playing God."

Smruthi dug around the laundry pile for a sock, then put it on her hand like a mitten. "What if we get her promoted? She won't be put on teams anymore. She'll be project manager for larger objectives."

Jon pursed his lips. "Better yet, we get ourselves promoted."

"Beanie." Smruthi pinched her socked hand like a puppet. "You would be a horrible project manager, and I don't want to leave Madison alone with you."

"What if we get both Madison and yourself promoted?"

Smruthi smiled. "Now that is a good idea."

Jon paced back and forth in his cubical, scratching his already hairless and raw left arm. His rounded nub of nails slid around incessantly, double timing his feet's movement. Two steps forward. Pivot, two steps forward. Repeat until the coworker in the cubical across from you says your circular motion is making her sick.

"Your attitude makes me sick, Jen."

Jen focused back on her screen. "Fucker." She muttered under her breath.

"What was that?" Jon asked, eyebrow raised.

"She called you a fucker." Smruthi clarified from the doorway. She was breathing heavily, her three-inch powder pink heels in her hands. "I need to start jogging again."

Jon crossed the room quickly to meet her. "How did the performance review go?"

"Every time I brought her up, they changed the topic."

Jon snapped his hand. "Damn. Do you think I have a chance?"

Smruthi pulled Jon away from the door into the hallway and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Babe, I am going to ask you to do something. And you're not going to like it."

Jon put his hands on Smruthi's shoulders. "I'll blow my boss during my review. But I won't swallow."

Smruthi moved her hands up Jon's body until she was cupping his head. "Babe, more perverted. I'm going to need you to be sincere."

Jon went pale, shook his head with wide, pleading eyes. He shuttered, took in a gasp of air, and released the words that would seal his fate. "As you wish."

Jon knocked on the shut door to the conference room and waited. And waited. And waited. Finally, the door opened.

"Madison Andotter!" Jon smiled brightly. "What's up?" Madison stood shell shocked.

Jon cocked his head sideways. "Oh, God. You're still employed, right?"

"I just got promoted."

"Oh. Oh!" Jon fist bumped her shoulder. "I'll text Smruthi!"

"I'll just go tell her in person." Madison began walking off.

"Shit." Jon poked his head in the conference room. His boss sat with a stack of papers in front of him. "Jon, come in."

Jon looked back at Madison walking towards Smruthi's block at the office. "I'm sorry, I think I just shit myself. I need to go clean up." Jon left his stunned boss waiting with his mouth as ajar as the conference room door.

He arrived at Smruthi's cubical red faced and sweating from a sprint. "I did it. I got her the promotion."

"Jon," Smruthi didn't bother looking up from her screen. "You run like you're drying your nails. Don't flail your arms. Also, Madison already told me about the promotion over text."

"Crap." Jon doubled over to catch his breath. "Oh, I'm going to throw up. There's no blood to my stomach right now. I'm going to die. We should really start working out."

Smruthi ignored him. "She says it was written into her contract to be promoted in her fifth year. They decided to pull the trigger on her promotion early."

Jon laid down on the floor. Smruthi snickered. His glasses were askew, and Adam's apple dancing as he sucked air. The plaid dress shirt rode up with each breath, showing off his line of hair dividing his body in half from his navel to, as only she could confirm, below the belt.

Smruthi tugged his shirt down for him. "I told Madison that we want to take her out for drinks. Also, she said she wants Richard to be her replacement."

Jon wiped his brow. "He's not her department?"

Smruthi passed Jon her phone. He scrolled through the texts and started laughing. Smruthi let out a sigh. "He's an idiot for agreeing to transferring. Just get it out of your system now, Babe. He's still coming over Friday."

Jon paused laughing to let out his jokes. "A departmental dick move moving Dick from departments. Now... our team can get a little head,"

"Ahead." Smruthi corrected him, more for the coworker's surrounding them than themselves. "A little ahead."

Jon pinched his fingers together and faked an Italian accent. "A little ahead! Sausage for a- pizza!"

Smruthi turned back to her monitor. Jon kept laughing. And in a new office Far Far Away, Madison put in headphones, opened her emails, and replied to the baker's inquiry about an eggless cake with a special request that it be rum soaked. Extra, extra, rum soaked.

MATTHEW SOLWAY



Junior

Major: English – Pre-Med

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Poetry

Matthew is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Michigan. His is an English major and plans to apply to the poetry sub-concentration. He has worked in various labs on campus studying diabetic complications and is committed to understanding the natural world through poetry and science with a specific focus on improving the lives of those who cannot help themselves.

My Neighbor's Rosebushes

It must have been him
Who made the decision to spread
The dust that was his wife
Into the rose bushes
At the front of his home
For she had loved them
And cared for them such that
They were made beautiful
And so he spread her there
Unaware that those papery-perfect
Things would not take well to human
Ashes, for they are very acidic.
And the roses began to wither

First on the outside petals
And every morning
My poor neighbor
Would pick off the dying bits
And cry tears
(which probably did too
contribute to the soil's acidity)
Caring not about the thorns
Which too had been drawn dull
Towards the earth
Leaving the poor bushes
Defenseless against
Spider Mites and leafcutter bees
These things take time
He told me once
As we walked around the block
Slowly, for he is quite old
And the day was rare and nice
But that night there was a storm whose
Rain pushed those dreadful ashes deep
Into the hearts of those flowers
And in the morning there was
Only one rosebush alone
Left in the yard.
The one closest to the house
Out of which my neighbor stepped
Dejected and frail
With a pair of pruning shears
And grafting tape
Who, without hesitation
Lopped off a section of that last
Healthy rosebush
Carrying that piece
No more than a stick with some leaves
To one of the skeletons
My wife, he said
On her deathbed
Surrounded by those
She loved the most
Said, laughing, to the room
Full of crying people
I'm not dead yet!
And so my neighbor
Divided the parts of that
Last bush to the others
And made of his yard

Café Shapiro Anthology 2018

A kind of piecework greenery
Onto which fell softer rains
That washed the soil of those ashes
And perhaps some of them, the more
Loving ones, for his wife *had* been
So loving
were absorbed by the roots
And the graftings bound tightly to their stalks
And reignited some spark in those plants
It took time
For those bushes
Those perfect bushes
That were perfect even when they had no roses
It took time
But they came back
And now stand tall
Like robust boys
All in rows
And smell so sweet
That passerby stop
For whole moments
Just to breathe
You can go there!
You can see them now!
These roses, brought back
From the brink by some motive force
The same force that makes all things beautiful grow.

Carolyn Flying Over San Francisco

Another descent, less graceful
 Falling back into the grid lines
 Idly veiny, the city's ebbing
 Heartbeat pumping cars, light.

Seat back forward pivoted
 To the window adjacent, the
 Fringes are only blackness
 Out there. Pulsating, flowing
 Beating a normal rhythm
 Resetting at intervals.

Buckle up, buddy. We're
 Flying precious cargo.
 Its contents rearranged
 Or/and changed.
 It's been only
 Six months but all seems the same.

Returning home, the plane
 Is landing for the night, bumpy,
 The airfoils are jostling in time
 With the grid, chattering excitedly
 With the butterflies shimmying through
 The pipes and holding tightly
 Hands between legs, maybe
 Groping for warmth, or comfort

Hold the stranger's one seat over
 Who understands, or seems
 To understand the Return
 to the old.
 Friends, dog, room
 Everything will be the same
 The paper-wasps will be outside
 Or maybe their nest was removed
 The dog will perk up, if she hasn't
 Yet forgotten her sleepless
 Nights watching boys sneak in, protecting.

Look out the window.
 One of those lights in the pulsating grid which, when squinted at
 Just right, could be the heart of some great angel
 One of those lights is a family on its way to pick up a daughter
 Who they love.

ETHAN SZLEZINGER



Sophomore
Major: English
Reading: Fiction

Ethan is a Sophomore studying English. He is going to be an astronaut someday.

Holding Hands

"One sugar as always," Andrea says, a smile on her face as she tilts the spout of the white china teapot downwards, directing the flow of the copper liquid into the gold-rimmed teacup. She places the teapot gently on the immaculate tablecloth and raises a sugar cube between two frail fingers. Her golden bracelets threaten to slide off her tiny wrist as she drops the white crystalline cube into the tea, but she just laughs softly. Her thin lips, caked with bright pink lipstick, spread apart from one another before returning to a faint smile. She walks to the other side of the small, rectangular table and gently pours from the teapot into her own cup. Her movements are slow, like a marble statue that has come to life. The arch in her back has worsened, causing her to lean over the table a little more than she should. Her mother always warned her about hunching her back, but, among other things, Andrea forgot, leading to her body's eventual deterioration into a permanent arch. She closes her long, sharp fingers around the top of the carved wooden chair and pulls it out slowly, allowing it to glide on the coffee-stained carpet, before sitting across from me.

We sip the tea delicately, only allowing tiny amounts of the steaming

caramel liquid to penetrate our mouths so that we do not scald ourselves. She says nothing, but a soft smile manifests on her glowing pink lips until we both finish our cups. Each time she puts hers onto her saucer, the gold rim ignites with the fraction that her lipstick has stained. A plate, white china with intricate blue swirls and a gold rim to match the tea set, sits between us. It supports a tower of golden biscuits, untouched because neither of us want to disrupt the pyramid in which they are arranged.

And we're happy now, just the two of us and the tea, suspended in time. Andrea's gray eyes that match her wire-like hair, thick strands that torment her for hours each morning, glow with the last remnant of our younger years. Her gaze radiates youth through the air, permeating my skin and warming my blood. My hands stop shaking, and I lift them to my widening eyes as I watch the creases on my wrists dissolve, the excess skin disappearing. The skin that remains is tight, like the surface of a full balloon. It darkens in hue, no longer gray but a richer glow that I remember from years ago. The scratch on the silver wristwatch that my father gave me for my eighteenth birthday vanishes, the clear face like a new window. The shining strap is no longer dull, and the hour hand races in reverse, spinning so quickly that all I can see in place of the needle's tip is a golden blur. Andrea's teeth rejuvenate as she smiles, correcting themselves in shape and color like a neglected puzzle finally putting itself together. The artificial color melts off her thin lips, replacing itself with a natural red as they thicken. She smiles bigger now, not just the hint of happiness but a full, euphoric grin.

"Wake up, Grandpa. We're here," Sadie says, her voice soft as she opens the door on my side of the car. She grips my shoulder gently and shakes, as if she is waking a child.

"Hold his hand, Sadie," my daughter Joanne says. I feel Sadie's soft hand wrap around mine as she leads me out of the car. Slowly, I lift out one foot at a time, careful to land both flatly on the asphalt.

"Curb," Sadie says. I feel the edges of the sidewalk with the leather tips of my shoes, using Sadie's hand as leverage as I raise each foot to hurdle the curb.

"Thank you, Sadie."

"It's a bit of a walk, Dad," Joanne says. "I can move the car closer, or we can—" "No, no," I insist. "I don't mind walking."

The street is quieter than I remember it. Maybe it's just because we're here at night, but Andrea and I used to have to shout to hear each other over the constant flow of cars. The stores were so full of color, each of their signs painted like candy. Bright awnings used to hang over the sidewalk, providing shade on the days that were just too hot. The scarlet and white pole outside the barber shop would spin into infinity, only ever stopping once the

store went out of business.

"Candy Cane!" Joanne used to shout when she saw the pole. Fascinated, she would stand directly under it, staring straight above. Andrea and I would stand behind her, linked together with our hands, humiliated by the pedestrian traffic that Joanne would cause to accrue but smiling nonetheless. Sometimes the barber even came out of the store to give her a doughnut. The gumball machine in the window of the ice cream store across the street had the same effect on her. We were sure always to bring a nickel so that Joanne could watch the sugary sphere race down the spiraling ramp. She didn't even like gum that much. But her favorite pastime was guessing the color that it would be. We used to have a game in which, if she guessed correctly, we would give her another nickel. One time she guessed five in a row. And her lucky streak might have lasted, too, if Andrea hadn't been so worried about her teeth rotting.

Those were Joanne's two favorite places, the barber shop and the ice cream store. However, they were on opposite sides of the busy road. The problem was that Joanne was always so eager to get to the next after visiting one.

I will never forget how Joanne's small hand felt in mine as we crossed the street, warm and natural like our fingers were the teeth of a closed zipper. Holding her hand was always familiar, like returning home after a long journey.

But on one Sunday afternoon, without any warning at all, her hand recoiled from mine, a feeling of physical release that I have only since experienced in nightmares.

"Joanne!" Andrea shouted as Joanne skipped into the middle of the road, beaming at the other side. As I saw the burgundy van approaching, a certain sensation descended upon my chest that I have never quite been able to identify. It was completely debilitating, sewing my mouth shut and paralyzing my legs in place, shoes cemented in the asphalt. I was powerless, unable to dive into the road and push her from the path of the car like the heroic father I always thought I would be. I couldn't even hear, the sensation poisoning my ears and blocking sound. All I could do was see. I could see the streaks that the minivan's screeching tires left on the road as its terrified driver slammed on the brakes. I could see Joanne's unfathomable dread, which faded eventually from her face but was immortalized in my memory. I could see Andrea's eyes beginning to avert as the car came closer, knowing that she was the only one who could ever feel the same unspeakable darkness that spread throughout my body at that moment, withering every cell into decay.

The van stopped with ample time, but the link between my hand and Joanne's was shattered like a vase dropped onto concrete. Slowly, however,

we rebuilt it. We taught her to look both ways before crossing the street, and, once she got more comfortable, we even made it a game to stay between the thick white lines of the crosswalk. And now I can't think of this road without remembering every single time that we crossed it.

"Sadie, hold his hand!" Joanne says, her voice harsh. Sadie has wandered in front of me to walk beside her mother. "You know he can't see. Especially at night," she says in a whisper.

Joanne has been more than good to me in my old age, but sometimes I think she forgets that I can hear better than most. Sometimes I hear things that they don't want me to hear. It's funny. When Joanne was in her adolescence, Andrea and I would often speak when she was gone or in the language of our eyes. There were things to be said that were not suitable for the ears of a child. And it's funny how that has been reversed; I am now the child around whom the parents must speak in a whisper. I feel Sadie's hand close around mine again. It's as soft as I remember it looking. But the last time I saw it was before she even finished middle school.

It's not completely true, that I can't see. I can see shadows. I can see light. In the past years, color has been present only when I am asleep, but memory burns hue into every shadow, every ray of light.

"We're crossing the road, Grandpa," Sadie says.

"I can do it alone! I can do it alone!" I remember Joanne saying. That was the first day we let her cross the street without holding either of our hands. I remember how my palms sweat when they first lacked her grasp, empty and vulnerable. But, proudly, inches from my feet, she waddled across the road. The wave of relief that I felt when her shoes touched the other side of the sidewalk may have been slightly melodramatic, but it paled in comparison with the elated grin that dominated Joanne's face. She lifted her fists in the air like a champion.

I can do it alone! I can do it alone! Those words ring in my head, bouncing around my skull.

"We've never been to this restaurant before, Dad. It just opened," Joanne says. "Oh," I say, forcing my lips to curve into a smile. I like places we've been before. I can see them. Or, at least, I can imagine them.

I feel the oversized tablecloth drape onto my lap. I can see the candle in the middle of the table, the bright flame dancing. Joanne reads the menu to me, but I don't pay attention. All I can think about is the thick white lines that run horizontally across the crosswalk, the ones that she would jump over for fun. *I can do it alone!*

I feel the chair melting into something else beneath me, its legs extending and the surface transforming from a splintering wood into a smooth

metallic top. The table disappears completely, and, in its place sits a familiar marble one, accented with the color of our steaming meals. Joanne and Sadie are still beside me, but, suddenly, I see Sadie's small white blouse, flowers of wild pink and creamsicle orange dancing up its sides like delicate specs of dust at the mercy of the wind. A yellow headband crowns her head, the one that I mummified in crinkling blue paper for her eleventh birthday. It's gold in the light, floating like a halo. We are at a different restaurant now, the one at which we used to dine every week, the one that I can still see. We overlook the other tables from the one in the corner of the raised wooden platform that we request every time we make a reservation. Eager customers wait in the front section, most of them coming from the town's modest Modern Art Museum. Eggshell gift shop bags with blue cursive writing hang from the folds of their arms, the mark of buying something that they will probably never look at again. Their children tug at their shirtsleeves, begging to return to the shop and buy the watercolor picture book or glittering sticker pack that was just too expensive. An old pinball machine hums near the restrooms, vibrating as its flashing emerald lights attract children like insects. The waiter removes my plate, the remnants of the same dish that I order every week, the only one that I have ever ordered.

"Dad," I hear faintly, the sound barely able to penetrate the faraway land in which my mind ignites with hue. "Dad!" It is more stern now, snuffing my realm of color into darkness as it creeps into my ear like an unwanted guest.

"Sorry," I say. "Yes, Joanne."

"Nevermind," she says, her voice dismissive. I feel a presence looming over us, one that was not here before. "He'll have the roasted duck." I hear the scratching of pencil on paper.

"No!" I reject, gripping the edges of the table, feeling wine glasses shift-off center as I shake it accidentally.

"Dad," Joanne says, gritting her teeth severely as if she is speaking to a misbehaving child in front of a crowd that she wants to impress. "You order roasted duck every single week, remember?"

"I'd like the lamb, please."

"I'm sorry, Sir, we don't serve lamb here," the server says.

"God, you don't listen when I read the menu, Dad. I might as well not even bother next time. He'll have the roasted duck, please." The air thickens as the server's footsteps get farther and farther away from our table.

"Mom!" Sadie says, her voice sweetly defensive. Hearing it transports me to the restaurant next to the museum, its crystal chandeliers emitting yellow glow above each table. "He said he didn't want that."

"No, Sadie," I say weakly. "Joanne is correct. I do often enjoy roasted duck." I close my eyes; it barely makes a difference anyway. As much as I try to reclaim my seat at our old table, the lights in my head refuse to illuminate. I think of the nametags that the servers wear, trying to visualize the color in which their names are written. Are they a dried-blood red like the stools that sit before the bar? Or a dusted gray like the grout between the polished white tiles in the men's restroom? The color eludes me, stolen from my eye like it was never even there at all.

"Joanne, I think I left something in the car. I need to go back," I say.

"What could you possibly have left in the car?"

"I think I left my wallet. And I'm paying, Joanne." I can feel my heavy leather wallet on my thigh, hanging in my loose pocket. I place my hand on my upper thigh to conceal it.

"I'll go with you, Grandpa," Sadie says.

"No, Sadie, really—"

"Don't be ridiculous, Dad," Joanne says. "Thank you, Sadie."

"Yes, thank you, Sadie," I mumble. But I didn't mean to mumble. I am grateful, I really am. But at once, I want to be alone, no—I must be alone. I can do it alone!

Sadie grips my hand tightly as we walk slowly on the sidewalk. I feel foolish, for I know that once we reach the car, I will have to pretend to discover that my wallet was in my pocket the whole time.

"Thank you for taking us out tonight, Grandpa."

"You don't need to thank me, Sadie." We are getting closer and closer to Joanne's car on the other side of the street. *I can do it alone! I can do it alone!* "Sadie," I say quickly.

"Yes, Grandpa?"

"There's a gumball machine your mother used to enjoy. It used to be in the ice cream store, but, once it closed down, they moved it outside." I could feel it behind us. "Is it behind us?"

"Yes, Grandpa." I dig through my pocket and hear the change rattling around.

I've become good at identifying coins based on their size. At once, her hand feels like a prison, a cage from which mine aches to escape.

"Here's a nickel, darling," I thrust it in her hand. "Put it in the machine

while your Grandpa waits here. Go on, now.”

“Thank you, Grandpa.” Her hand releases mine, and I feel powerful, giddy with freedom, like a child who has been trapped for years. When I’m sure her back is turned, I take a few silent steps forward until I can feel my toes on the edge of the curb. *I can do it alone!* I turn my head both ways, looking in each direction despite the futility. I don’t see any shadows, but there’s barely any light to brighten the road anyway. *I can do it alone!* I hear the gumball sliding down the ramp, and I know that I must act soon. A car comes ever-so-faintly into earshot, but it is so distant that its soft engine sounds more like the song with which Andrea would lull Joanne to sleep than a machine. My front foot detaches from the edge of the curb and hits the asphalt. In a burst of euphoric emancipation, my legs swing past one another as quickly as they can muster. My fingers emit energy from their tips, awakening a youth that has eluded me for far too long.

“Grandpa!” Almost immediately after my newly acquired power climaxes, it melts into fear—fear that I have drawn Sadie into the road. The soles of her feet stomp on the asphalt, cumbersome in heroic urgency. Her hand grips mine like an inescapable trap, and she drags me forcefully to the sidewalk. I almost trip over the curb, but her strong arms support me as I stumble. “What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry, I—” I can’t speak. I can hardly catch my breath. “I’m sorry, just—” “Grandpa, what?”

“Please don’t tell Joanne,” I plead, my knees shaking like a child’s. “Don’t tell Joanne, please, just,” I gasp, “I got confused, and—”

“It’s alright, Grandpa,” Sadie says, her hand caressing my back. “But we must always cross at the crosswalk.”

GRACE TOLL



Sophomore

Major: Creative Writing & Literature and Psychology

Reading: Poetry and Fiction

Originally from Jackson, Michigan, Grace Toll is a sophomore majoring in creative writing and psychology. She finds joy in writing large chunks of novels that never quite seem to find an ending, spending hours at a time discovering new music, and trying to comprehend how the brain works. Grace one day hopes to complete a novel, and also possibly pursue some sort of career in editing. She additionally finds some way to incorporate peanut butter into every meal and is really bad at describing herself.

[Untitled]

August 6th, 2013

I often feel like the world is a painting and I'm colorblind.

December 5th, 2013

It's like I'm trapped in a world full of gingerbread people made from the same cookie cutter, and I'm the one with the broken leg everyone avoids.

Is it because my eyes are brown? Brown may be a wretched color, but if you think about it, shades of brown are created from a mixture of other much more magnificent colors. My eyes are a conglomeration of more types of beauty than one could ever imagine.

Café Shapiro Anthology 2018

Or maybe it's because I can't pronounce the word "Arctic" correctly. But that doesn't make sense either, because even the perfect cookies have trouble saying some words. The mold doesn't quite reach their tongues.

I'm starting to believe it's because I'm not made of gingerbread, after all. And I can't even die, because no one wants to eat me.

Undated

Being alone is like the empty space after a song ends: it seems to drag on for lifetimes, and you're left waiting impatiently yet excitedly for whatever song will fill the void next. People are those songs. Some people are soft ballads with sad lyrics and an acoustic melody. I like to believe I'm one of those people. Some people are upbeat, pounding verses that are too intense to even enjoy. I despise those people.

Some people are happy mediums: a mezzo forte tune with soft guitars and profound vocals - the song that you always hope plays next while you're confined to the infinitely lonely space.

Undated

Have you ever noticed the most beautiful things in life are not comfortable or easy? Like waking up early to see a breathtaking sunrise or learning how to shape your lips just right to create sound from a flute. Both seem simple enough, but actually take an extraordinary amount of effort. That's why I do not like to be called beautiful. I'd rather be called difficult.

April 8th, 2014

If I had one word to describe myself, it would be "indigo." Not because I'm always feeling blue in the sense that I'm sad, but because of how often the color is forgotten about.

Roy G. Biv. Roy G. Bv. Even after removing the i, the pronunciation remains nearly the same.

Why is indigo always forgotten?

Why am I always forgotten?

February 5th, 2015

"Learn to appreciate the little things," they say. I scowl and laugh. What even are the "little things," and why are they so crucial?

Depression answers that question.

Vibrance instead of grays. Eight comfortable hours of sleep instead of zero some days and fourteen the next. Emotions, even the bad ones, instead of hollowness.

Take their word for it. Don't wait for the answer to come to you.

August 22nd, 2015

We're not given a choice, and that's the most excruciating part.

Before we take our first breath - before we're even conceived in that bizarre event some dare to consider a miracle - no one bothers to ask us if existence is what we really *want*. No one deems it necessary to warn our fragile souls of how astronomically difficult simply existing can be. I'm certain it's because if, by some much greater miracle, people could somehow be informed of this before birth, everyone would choose to return to the safety of oblivion and humanity would cease to exist within very few generations.

From the moment our bodies emerge from our mothers', we are bound to this coin-flip life that surfaces around us because of this *impact* we create. Without providing consent, this woman now sprawled on the hospital bed before us has been informed of our existence. This impact spreads to the nurses who all rush to be the first to wash the remains of the womb from our skin, to the man who nearly hits us with his car when we're seven and carelessly riding our bike across a busy street, to every single person we memorably interact with. The day the news of our passing spreads to all the victims who have been trapped in the wake of our impact, they care. They feel. Guilt, shame, perhaps even sadness. Unfairly, we pull the trigger on the most powerful weapon of all: emotion.

The wonderful part - the silver lining of sorts - is that this impact will fade. Our mothers fill the emptiness in both their hearts and the vacant bedroom with another child. The man driving the car realizes you ultimately would've died soon, no matter whether he was the cause. People forget. Your impact is soon replaced with other impacts. And before long, the last person who knew of your existence will vanish.

So, why suffer through a longer existence if your impact will eventually be wiped away as easily as pencil from paper, no matter how much time spent living?

We're forced into a life of attending a school we're told we cannot hate because we're fortunate enough to receive an education, and then later spend entire weekdays at a job we hate just so we have money to pay for a house that's much too small for our liking. The worst part is how we're expected to force our own offspring into this brutal life where they can begin their own pathetic impacts. Either way, eventually, oblivion wins. Death wins. Time wins. They're given our impacts as a prize.

I've attempted to make my impact as small as possible for the sake of my victims. I've written my story with my pencil just barely pressed against the paper, so the eraser and lead alike will leave just the shadow of a trace.

It would've been so much easier if I'd just been given a choice.

MAXIM VINOGRADOV



Junior

Major: Screen Arts & Cultures and English

Minor: Playwriting

Reading: Fiction

Maxim Vinogradov was born in a Russian circus tent and looks forward to accidentally dying in one.

Rabbit Eats 'Round Six

Hello! Hello, hello, hell-o! Here, lemme take yer coat... Oh, goodness this is purty fabric. Just unearthly. Gotta tell me where ya got this thing. And how ya heard 'bout this place. Oh, it dudn't matter. Point is yer here and ready to buy! Ya *are* here to buy something, right? Not just lookin' for a bathroom 'cause the store don't got a bathroom, 'er a job 'cause I definitely don't got any a'those neither. I mean most people don't drive this far out just to get a job. Unless yer just bout broke as hell. Which, if ya are, I gotta letcha know that the items here cost money, sorry. Why don'tcha take a peek around, tell me what catches yer eye? Like that bull's head? 'Er how 'bout that there porcelain fountain? Got a good story all 'bout that there porcelain fountain. But I also gotta letcha know that if yer interested in that there porcelain fountain, it's gonna be just you and me carryin' it into yer car. I'm the only one who works here. Been that way forever. Not actually forever. Well, I guess it don't exactly matter. The point is yer ready to buy something! Ya are, aren'tcha? Well, good. I don't take kind to loitering. Well, I'm impartial to it, but a good handful of the items here get kinda particular 'bout what kinda loiteringers they like. Ya see, there was one boy back in... ninety-six who

was loitering and rubbed a brush the wrong way. Ya gotta be careful 'round here 'cause he was mostly mindin' his own business, but still found himself in the fourth level of Hell after this cursed toothbrush got peeved 'bout how the boy bopped his head along to this ancient Egyptian boombox we used to have. (I told the boy not to listen to that music. It makes ya deaf if ya listen long enough. Gone now. Someone bought it in oh-four. Maybe oh-five.) Point is, toothbrush teleported the kid down the sin tank, and he was gone for two 'er three years. Missed a handful a Easters. Easter's my favorite holiday; I take kind to eggs. Anywho, I started feelin' responsible, so I used a handful of fingers on that there monkey fist to get the boy back. Kid ended up havin' a great time, though. Hell's not so bad. Sure is hot, but it's the dry heat. Plus, Devil's not as bad as people say. Real polite-like. Won't take anything without askin'. Anywho, kid bought the toothbrush, and they get along great now. 'Er so I've heard from the kid. I haven't heard from the brush. I don't talk to toothbrushes. I do feel like that'd make brushin' my teeth real uncomfortable. Ya understand. Do ya understand? Ya brush yer teeth? Sure ya do. Ya got great teeth.

Lemme show ya the shop! Lotsa things here I been collectin'. And things I haven't. Some things just sorta showed up here. Some been here longer than I have and I opened the fuckin' place. Come on, come on, check out the different sections we got! I mean, there really aren't sections, but the paintin's like to stick together. The jewellery's mostly in this here case, but one of the amulets cursed another amulet, and now the two just won't get along. Real shame. The furniture's mostly scattered, but I kinda like that, always give ya a place to rest yer hooves. But don't sit on one of the red chairs. Can't remember which one. That one's for feedin' Snezhka. To be safe, just avoid red. Orange is safe. Comfy, even.

Come on, let's look at some of the art we got here. Ah, this! This one's been here for only a few months. Youngest thing I got in the shop. The painter was this Belgian guy who died in, ah jeez, 1704. Oh-five. Interestin' guy. Died after bein' crushed by this big block of ice. They were hoistin' the ice up his apartment buildin' and some ropes slipped and the ice crushed the guy. Wadn't no accident. Belgian was doin' the bedsheet dance with one of the icemen's mistresses. Wadn't really a tragedy neither. Belgian was a real wolf. Cheated at cards. Made fun paintin's, though. If ya take a photograph of this here paintin' the canvas dudn't show up. It's meant fer a live appearance, the kinda—I gotta stop us right here 'cause I think I hear somethin'. Ya hear somethin'? Is that the... clock...? HEY, IT AIN'T SIX YET, SO CUT THAT SHIT OUT! Sorry. My rabbit, Snezhka. Likes to play with the grandfather clock. Ya like clocks? Rabbits? No?

Aight, back to the paintin'. What's it look like to ya? S'posed to make a picture of something ya deeply desire, but'll never get in yer life. So do y'see the pretty girl from work in that frame? Then time to start lookin' elsewhere. It's all right. You'll still find love. Yer a good-lookin' kid, Trevor. Great teeth.

And can I call ya Trevor? So tell me, Trevor, whatcha see in the paintin'? Y'see the girl from work? 'Er maybe the boy from work? I ain't one to judge; I've bitten a pillow here and there. 'Er y'see a wad of cash? 'Er how 'bout a little kid? Probably means no kids for ya. Yer gonna make it through the game without passin' on the Trevor name. Probably 'cause yer never gonna get that girl from work. 'Er boy. 'Er y'know seein' a lil' kid in that there frame could mean yer a pedophile and yer never gonna get a kid in the bedsheet sense of the word. And if that's really yer style, then I'm gonna need ya to get out of my store 'cause I don't care for that kinda shit and neither do the Moroccan curtains. See? They're already changin' color. Wouldn't wander over there.

Nah, paintin's don't look good on ya. I get it. Ya seem like the kinda kid who'd be more interested in something like... well, how 'bout this lil' guy right here? I don't got a lot of film left for it—but I'm sure if ya make a blood pact with one of my poker buddies down in Taipei he can make ya some more. Which I'd recommend 'cause yer a young guy with great teeth and this is a long-term product. Tell him I sent'cha and if he don't kill ya for it that means he's forgotten 'bout last Easter—which would really lift a weight off these shoulders, Trevor. Back to the cam. Only works on yer birthday, and ya look like ya got a lot of 'em left. And, y'see, it's got this little monitor here? That's for watchin'. Ya take a video of yerself, and ya say whatever the hell ya want, then ya roll the film over and over until the image fades into black and that video goes back in time a year. And, ipso facto, every birthday ya get to see a video of yerself a year from now. Give yerself a couple lotto numbers 'er say who's battin' three hundred. Great product, but I do gotta letcha know this particular one's been used before. I'll knock that off the askin'. It was this one lady from way back when. She was this nervous wreck, always lookin' over her shoulder, always thinkin' everyday was the last day of her life, always writin' a note every time she left the house 'bout how she loved everybody and how she wanted two of her kids to inherit her collection of fine art, but not the middle one 'cause she didn't like that one. So when she got this here camera, she'd send these long videos detailin' how the year would go and what to not worry 'bout, and then she kinda did all right. Better at least. Knew the sky wadn't gonna fall that year 'er the government wadn't gonna eat her—'er that her kids wadn't gonna die in a gas explosion. The first and third ones at least. Gave her some coolant. Up till one birthday where she sent one back, but didn't get a video from ahead! And, boy, did that unravel her yarn! If she was a mess before then, after she was a total fuckin' tire fire—IT AIN'T SIX, SNEZHKA! —By the time good ol' Death came knockin', lady's hair was fallin' out and her cheeks looked like her skull'd been suckin' on 'em day 'n night. And then, sure enough, a month before her special day, she gets pancaked by a block of ice. Terrible shame, but I was able to get the camera back. Real tragedy's that since she stopped leavin' notes, they divided her collection equally among all three kids. And what that middle boy's done with 'em is horrific.

What else... This is a handy dandy phone that lets ya talk to a dead person. But ya gotta assign which person it is *before* they die. Tricky product like that, y'see. Been sold five times, but two of those times the customer ended up croakin' before their person. It idn't as fun, but it really helps to pick someone a lot older 'er sicker than ya. That tip's free, Trevor. Y'see, two of this here phone's *successful* customers picked their grandpas and found out both times that their grandpas wound up in Hell. Drove 'em pretty off the rails to hear all 'bout that. Yer grandpa never shrieks like ya figured he would. Both of 'em took early exits after hearin' that. Dunno why. Hell really ain't that bad, I swear. And Devil's a grand guy. Honest guy. Would never take a thing without askin'. Underrated poker player. Anyhoo, the third customer's the one who got the interestin' story with this here phone. Third customer chose one of his best friends—and that friend then died right out of straight nowhere. Something with ice. But, sure enough, friend just refused to talk from beyond. Grudges carry like that. Kept it up till the police rolled up to the third customer's house. And then—get this, one cop accidentally tried to call his wife 'bout dinner and instead got the pancaked friend on the other end! And, boy, did he start singin' to the cop 'bout who did the flattenin'! That's how they booked the third customer. I got the phone back though. Tricky situation. Again: pick somebody a lot older 'er sicker. And again: that's free advice.

'Er go with a different product. That's fine too. That's great, even. Whaddo we got... let's see... we got a bottle imp, that one's pretty fun, but not all that economical. Potion that makes ya understand every language, but also makes ya mute. (Y'know, one guy tried to cheat and learn sign language. Can't do that. Hands fell off. But, hey; never needed subtitles. Couldn't hold his popcorn, though.) Ah! Here's a necktie that makes ya irresistible, but gets tighter every time ya put it on. Maybe ya can finally get that girl from work. 'Er boy. 'Er kid. And here's an enchanted wristwatch; forgot what it does. Here's a large block of ice. Got some blood on the edges, but I'll knock that off the askin'. Here's a book where ya write someone's name, and it'll write back what their last words are gonna be. Most are purty explicit. Here's a tiny giraffe; don't feed him after midnight. 'Er ever. They find food on their own and need the exercise.

How 'bout this? Ya like this? This is my son, Damien. Say hello to Trevor, Damien. Damien ain't actually my son. He's also not for sale. Unless yer willin' to talk some serious figures. He come out of that grandfather clock there. It's the most beautiful grandfather clock ya ever seen, idn't it? Have that in yer house, and it'll be the main event. That girl from work would just throw herself over ya if ya had that clock. Problem is, only way for it to run is to have somebody small, like a kid, workin' the inside. It's gotta lotta gears 'er something. Snezhka tries to wind it now 'n then, but if ya didn't know, rabbits ain't great with time. Y'see, when Damien was a lil' nug, he was given this funny root from his real father, and that root fixed it so Damien wouldn't age anymore. Perfect for maintainin' the clock forever. (We got some of

that root, but, let me tell ya, I've had six 'er seven eighty year olds come back here lookin' like Grace Kelly sayin' they wanna grow old now. We don't got old roots I keep tellin' 'em! Why would we have that?) Anywho, Damien worked in that clock for 'bout a century till one fair lady bought the clock and pried him out. Felt guilty after hearin' the lil' nug cry at night. 1904. Oh-five. Can't remember. Clock ain't as purty now. Didn't give 'er a refund, so she left Damien here. I'm all right with it. He tries to go back to the clock a lot, but my idea is that I get him interested in other things. Let him explore other professions. I don't mind him in the clock—it's just I'd feel like a bad dad. Not that I'm his dad. Don't tell him I'm not his dad. He can't hear us right now. He's deaf. Ancient Egyptian boombox. Told him not to listen to it.

Look, Trevor, yer a great kid with great teeth, but I'm gonna need ya to start makin' some offers. That's how shops work. Understand? Ah, who am I kiddin'; 'course ya understand. Ya been to shops before... I mean, ya have been to shops before, haven'tcha? 'Course ya have. Where else wouldja get yer toothpaste.

No. Don't look that way. 'Cause if yer lookin' at Snezhka, then know that rabbit's not for sale. And I wouldn't go near it. Partially 'cause those curtains right next to it still seem to think ya prefer veal (if yer pickin' up what I'm puttin' down) but mostly 'cause that rabbit's one of the wildest things that stays here. Could hypnotize ya in a flat second. Then ya don't wanna know what it does next.

Now see here, Trevor, I know it's cute, but come back here. Trevor, yer not exercisin' good listenin' skills. Come back. Well, now I can't see ya, but if he's leadin' ya towards the red chair, that's where ya don't want to be. So just get away from the red chair. And the rabbit. And the curtains.

HEY! Snezhka, cut it out! Stop! Bad!

HEY, YA LISTEN TO ME RIGHT NOW—IT IS NOT SIX O'CLOCK, SNEZHKA!

TREVOR, CAN I KEEP THE COAT?

CLAIRE WOOD



Senior

Major: Economics

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

My name is Claire Wood! I am a senior at the University of Michigan studying economics and creative writing. I am an aspiring romance novelist and an active member of UM Groove.

Excerpt from *Rose*

In the middle of the night, the door bangs open. A turquoise, wide-brimmed hat is tugged over Rose's brown curls, and she's got a pair of 3-D glasses propped on her nose so you can't tell where she's looking. Slung across her shoulder is her crimson backpack.

I sit up in bed, gazing at her and the glasses and the hat. "What are you doing?" I ask.

"We," she corrects. "Are going on an adventure."

I'm tired, and I think yeesh, it must be two in the morning, but when I glance at my clock it's only 11:45. Rose doesn't move, just stands in my doorway like, get up already, and pretty soon I'm tip-toeing sleepy-eyed behind her in my bookworm jammies and scuffed pink sneakers down the hallway, across Mom's big orange rug, and out the backdoor.

The night air is cool and damp. A gentle, white fog has settled across

the grass. Rose strolls down the driveway and opens the front seat of Dexter, so I follow her lead and hop in the side. She tosses her backpack on the car floor by my feet, shoves the key in the ignition and is about to rev Dexter up when— given that Dexter revving-up sounds like the untamed roar of a T-Rex with bronchitis—I grab her hand. “Rose, you’ll wake up Mom and Dad.”

Rose giggles, shakes her head, and says “Mom and Dad are *literal* rocks.” Then Dexter bellows to life, and we thunder through the curls of fog down the driveway into the neighborhood night.

Rose rolls down her window, the chill night air whipping her brown curls about violently. A few minutes later, I roll down my window, too. My hair flies all over the place and the wind pricks my eyes until they water, but I don’t roll it back up.

We slide onto a highway, hurdling over smooth cement, the white dividing line flashing in-and-out of existence in a pool of yellow light. On both sides of the roads are fields of wild grasses. The night is dark enough that you can’t make out individual blades, you just see its body: an undulating, wind-whipped creature, bowing to the exhale of the night.

Neither of us say anything. I wanted to ask where we were going, but I didn’t want to break the momentum— whatever the momentum was heading toward. Rose knew where we were going. Or she didn’t, but we weren’t supposed to know.

At the next exit, Rose wheels Dexter off the highway onto a side road, where she takes a sharp right into a BP. “Gas,” Rose explains, tapping the red line hovering over the neon-orange *EMPTY*.

“Oh,” I say, shoving a hand in the back pocket of my jeans and tugging out a flimsy green *five*. Rose gives me a *good enough* nod, so I hop out and head toward the gas station to pay for a couple gallons. The woman behind the counter is pudgy with curled wisps of gray hair and long, iridescently-pink nails that may or may not glow in the dark. I ask for \$5 worth of gas at Station 6, please, and she says, alright, darling, and makes some clinging noises on the cash register.

Rose has gotten out and is leaning up against the car door, a cigarette interlaced between her index and middle finger. When she lifts it to her lips, she stands utterly still, staring off into the swollen darkness as if there were something there that the rest of us couldn’t see. After a long moment, she flicks the cigarette away from her lips. The smoke rolls off her tongue naturally, like it’d been inside her all along.

The lady hands me a receipt, and I walk back out to the car. Rose keeps smoking, leaning up against the car door and staring off to the side, so I grab a gas pump and stick it in Dexter.

Just then, we hear it— the violent thumping, the blaring voice of someone famous: *I don't like 'em figgety fat, I like 'em stiggity stacked.* A beat-up black sedan swings into lot.

I didn't know what figgity or stiggity meant, and I had just gone back to filling Dexter when I heard the shout.

"Hey!" Rose has turned toward the black sedan. The beat-up vehicle skirts to a halt at a pump two down from ours. *You wiggity wiggity wack if you ain't got biggity back,* the famous person keeps yelling. The windows rattle with the bass.

"Hey, you hear me?" Rose takes a couple steps forward, pointing her cigarette at the car. "HELLO?"

A few seconds pass, and nothing happens. I turn my focus back to squeezing the pump and hey look a cricket on Dexter's hood, and then I hear a car door slam. Standing by the black sedan is a man. He's bald and white and mean-looking, like an albino Pitbull. A tattoo of a rose blooms up his neck, the petals reaching just below his ear, one wilted petal in an eternal tumble like a teardrop down his skin. Stretched tight across his chest is a black muscle-tee that reads, *Your knees ain't the bee's,* with a creepy-looking Mr. Bumble buzzing beneath the white print.

The man purses his lips, shaking his head back and forth. Then he takes slow, calculated strides toward Rose and— to my horror —I watch as Rose takes quick, bold steps to meet him halfway.

The man scans Rose up and down. Then, in a deep growl: "What? Don't like my shit?"

"Nobody likes your shit."

"Fuck off."

"Fuck you."

"Excuse me," I interject, having walked promptly over to the two of them. My heart is thumping like a bunny-gone-wild, and I can feel the dampness in my armpits. "Rose, Dexter's full."

Neither of them seem to see me. They don't even glance my direction, just keep screaming at each other. The bald man yells something inarticulate and offensive to women and also small dogs, and Rose shouts something like, take that back, you god-forsaken tiny phallus.

"Excuse me," I repeat.

The bald man shoots me a death glare and yells, *Suck it,* and Rose's face twists up like she's about to clock the bumble bees out of him. For an

instant, the man is quiet. Then he reaches out and grabs Rose by the wrist. It was then that everything changed, then that I watched Rose's green eyes glitter with an edge sharper than the audacity, the shamelessness, the lust to fight.

"You dumb fucking cunt," the man whispers through gritted teeth. "Picking fights with boys twice your size. Like a feisty-ass chihuahua." When he shakes his head, the veins on his neck ripple. The man chuckles, deep and growly. Then he stretches out a hand and tucks a stray brown curl behind Rose's ear. Rose's sexual flush melts into paleness as the calloused finger brushes against her cheek. "I bet you're one of those masochists, running around *looking* for pain."

Suddenly, I drop my jaw. It was easy, acting afraid, given that I was fairly confident that I'd already peed myself. Slowly, theatrically, I stretch out my arm and point at the space just behind the man. The bald man looks at me, confused, and then Rose does, too.

"Your car," I whisper, hoping the quiver in my voice adds to the dramatic effect. "Your car— it's— you didn't put it in park. It's— it's rolling away."

In a sudden panic, the man releases Rose's wrist and turns back to look at his parked car, and in that split second I grab Rose by the hand and we dash back to Dexter, me tumbling into the passenger seat and Rose leaping nimbly into the front and slamming the ignition, and as Dexter thunders out of the lot with more growl than any congested dinosaur, the bald man flips us off and chucks a beer can across the parking lot, which flew five feet and then tumbled sadly back to earth with a little *clang*.

My heart is beating, and even though I'm shaken up, I'm smiling like an idiot. I grab my crotch secretly to check if I peed, which I didn't. When I glance over, Rose is beaming, too. "Wiggity word," she whispers, and even though she didn't say hey, that was pretty smooth back there, I'm pretty sure that's what *wiggity* means.

Ten minutes later, Rose turns off the highway onto a small road which turns onto a smaller road and then into an empty parking lot. Rose grabs her backpack and hops out of Dexter, and I follow her lead.

The lot is deserted. There are no street lamps or buildings or anything, just black asphalt surrounded by wild grasses. The darkness is inky and soft and swollen. Rose yanks open the back of the truck. Lying in the bed are two sleeping bags and an obnoxious abundance of pillows. Rose climbs in, flops her backpack next to her, and snuggles into her sleeping bag. I snuggle into mine beside her.

We stare up at the night sky in silence. The black is overwhelming,

splattered with shimmery white droplets that twinkle gently like Christmas lights. A sliver of moon smiles down at us, very cheshire-cat. Rose rummages around in her crimson pack and tugs out a silver flask. It glimmers in the moonlight.

"What's that?" I ask.

"*This*," Rose whispers, "is potion." She unscrews the flask and takes a long, slow sip, letting it pool for a moment in her cheeks before swallowing. Then she extends it toward me with her eyebrows raised, and I want to be cool, so I fumble with the flask nervously. I place my nose over the spout to take a little sniff and gag.

"Don't *smell* it, dumbass."

I giggle awkwardly, then place the flask to my lips and hesitantly tip it back. It hurts going down, and afterwards I cough in a thin, raspy, smoker way. I can't really tell you what it tasted like. Cinnamon and burnt rubber, I don't know. It's like drinking fire. Even after you swallow, you can still feel the embers glowing in your stomach.

Rose is looking at me with her eyebrows raised, and I'm assuming she wants some sort of commentary on the potion, so I say: "it burns."

"A good burn," she agrees.

We lie a bit more in silence, gazing up at the shimmering, overwhelmingly-black night. Then, in a whisper, Rose suggests: "We should write one."

"What?"

"A book."

"Why?" I ask. Rose doesn't answer, although I guess that was a dumb question. I wait for Rose to suggest something, since the book was her idea to begin with, but she doesn't, so I say: "Okay. How about there is an evil witch who lives on a mountain who is sad because her skin is green so she has no friends."

I figure Rose might snatch my pillow and throw it right out of the truck (the way she hurdled Wingy when I mentioned the enchanted sea clam), but she doesn't. Instead, she responds: "So out of spite one day, she curses a guy named Fred and turns his thingy green."

I laugh quietly, then add: "And then Fred has to get it fixed, so he goes to a doctor, who also happens to be the most beautiful maiden in all the land, and they fall in love and get married."

Rose swallows another sip of the whiskey and shakes her head. "No, then they fall in love, have sex, and *her* parts turn green, too."

"Like Shrek," I say.

We lay in silence for a couple minutes. Inside, I'm feeling a little uncomfortable, but it isn't bad uncomfortable. It's a strange, excited sort of discomfort, like the first day of high school or when you get your period.

Quietly, I ask, "Do you like anybody?"

"I don't like anyone," says Rose. Her voice is tight.

"Oh," I reply. We're quiet again, and I'm wishing I hadn't even said anything, but then Rose asks: "You?"

"Tommy," I whisper. "I like Tommy."

Suddenly Rose starts laughing. "Tommy, the wizard?"

"*Magician.*"

"Po-tae-to, po-tah-to."

I'm about to explain the imperative distinction between magician and wizard, that one is a wonderful augmentation of reality while the other is a wonderful but unrealistic fictional identity, but I decide against it. Instead I look up at the stars and say "to-mae-to, to-mah-to," and together we half-sing, half-whisper, *let's call the whole thing off*, and when she passes me the flask, I take a big gulp and let the potion pool in my cheeks before swallowing, even though it burns, and for a long time after that, even after we drive Dexter home and after we sneak back inside, the embers in my soul keep glowing.

SHERRY ZHANG



Senior

Major: Biomolecular Science

Minor: Creative Writing

Reading: Fiction

Sherry Zhang is a senior from Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is a LSA student majoring in Biomolecular Science and Creative Writing. In addition to writing, she enjoys drawing, cooking, and petting her friends' cats.

Kismet

To: Serena

From: Anne

Message: I'm coming over right now

Anne rummaged around the house, looking for her wallet and keys. She briefly glanced at her phone before she got into the car. Serena hadn't replied to her texts. Well, not that Anne expected her to. Serena was twenty miles away, lying in a hospital bed, comatose. Anne still checked her messages out of habit, if nothing else.

Serena had been hit by a drunk driver while they were in the car. The left-turn light had turned green, and Serena had gone, and the other car at the intersection hadn't been able to stop. Anne had seen it happen in slow motion at first. She'd realized they were in trouble a second too late, first crying out for Serena to stop, then screaming at her to floor it. Then they were spinning, and Anne had been thrown forward and then sharply jerked

back by her seatbelt, as if she were nothing more than a rag doll.

The airbag had hit her a second later, a hard strike against her face and chest. Her vision had blurred; her stomach clenched and unclenched, and whatever was inside had threatened to push its way back up. How she'd managed to hold it down, she'd never know. It had taken Anne a moment to realize when they'd stopped moving. The sound of her pulse had drowned everything else out. Her eyes refocused slowly on the smashed glass window on Serena's side, the way Serena lay limp against the steering wheel, flecks of glass and blood tangled in her hair. That was when she really did throw up.

Looking back, that was also when Anne's view of the world had begun to splinter. If Anne had been asked *before* about whether or not she believed in fate, her answer would have been a resounding no. Fate was reserved for fantasy novels, and not for real life. Anne would have said that people were in charge of their own day-to-day lives, and could set their own paths in motion. That most things that happened, whether good or bad, were largely the consequences of someone's actions. She liked the idea of being responsible for her own choices, and nothing else. She liked the idea of having control over her own life.

Now, *after* the fact, she wasn't so sure. She'd been tossed into a loop of uncertainty, and had been trying to fight her way out ever since. Well, she'd tried to fight, at first. Now, she was mostly just listlessly circling around, not even bothering. What was the point, if the end result was all the same, if the accident was fated to happen?

She didn't know the answer, so instead, she liked to torture herself with more unanswerable questions such as: Would it have been different if she had been the one driving instead of Serena? What if she had suggested that they take the highway instead, or if they'd made a stop at the grocery store before heading back to their apartment? What could she have done in order for things to have happened differently? It didn't matter, she knew. No matter how she overanalyzed that day, nothing would happen differently. There was nothing she could do to save Serena. She couldn't go back in time. It didn't stop her from thinking about it, though. Over and over and over again.

Sometime in late July, they'd gone out for ice cream sandwiches. (July 27th, 1:32 a.m.) But she was supposed to be putting some distance between herself and the incident, or so her therapist said. Hanging onto exact dates and times, down to the minute, was probably the opposite of what she should be doing. At least she was pretending to try.

So late July it was. The nice thing about living on a college campus was that things were open late—or open to normal people times, Serena always said. They hadn't been drinking. They hadn't done anything *wrong*. That was the frustrating thing. There were all these tragic stories of people who'd

tempted fate and suffered the consequences, and Anne wouldn't have put them on the list. And yet, Serena had ended up in the hospital anyway.

That was two months ago. Anne, miraculously, had suffered only minor injuries. There was nothing on her body to even memorialize the incident, she thought. The bruises she'd gotten had faded from an ugly purple to an unsettling green, and then they'd disappeared entirely. The cuts were so shallow that they didn't even leave the faintest of silvery scars. She'd no proof that the crash even happened. Well, except for Serena.

Now, Anne was on her way to the hospital. She'd memorized the route; she could probably get there on autopilot by now—she *did* get there by autopilot. This was what she always did. She'd take the southbound highway toward the city for twelve minutes, on the bridge parallel to the coast, and then she'd get off and weave through local traffic. Right, left, left, right. Half-way through her drive, she noticed that everything outside of the window blurred together. Only then did she realize how hard the rain was pouring down, smattering against her car. She flicked her wrist and turned on the windshield wipers. From outside the window, the ocean was a dark, slate gray. It blended in seamlessly with the adjacent cliffs.

She didn't like it—any of it. The smell of the hospital, stringently sterile. The idea of her best friend lying there in limbo. When it was just her and Serena and the room's bleachy scent and the occasional beeping of the machines by Serena's bed, Anne would panic, thinking of how Serena stood at a threshold, a precipice, and what direction she walked in determined when she was going to wake up, or if she would wake up at all. Anne's worst fear was that, one of these days, as she sat there holding onto Serena's hand, scrolling down twitter with the other and reading some of the posts out loud, laughing to herself and the air around them, Serena would slip out of reach no matter how tightly Anne squeezed her fingers. And Anne wouldn't know a thing.

She didn't think she could bear to witness it. Too scared to look, too scared to look away. So she continued visiting. Out of obligation, out of fear, out of desperation. Serena's face was always smooth and calm, hair brushed away from her closed eyes, never betraying a single thing. As much as the fear of losing Serena burned fierce and steady in Anne's very core, the one thing that burned brighter was how much Anne wanted her back. Sometimes Anne would just stare at her. Stare at the curve of her eyelashes against her cheek, the shape of her eyebrows, the line of her nose bridge, the bow of her mouth. Some part of her childishly thought that maybe if she stared hard enough, until her eyes burned and her head hurt and her face was red with exhaustion, that Serena could be pulled back by sheer power of will. Logically, Anne knew that this was impossible. She stared anyway. This was one of those staring days. Serena's condition remained ever the same. She wasn't getting worse, and that was something, but she also wasn't getting better.

The doctors had done a test on Serena a while back that measured brain activity, which was used to predict whether she'd wake up within a year. She'd been borderline. Anne wanted to scream with frustration. She was tired of this *maybe, maybe not*.

The only thing left for her to do, it seemed, was wait. But for what, she didn't know. She so desperately wanted a sign, any small glimmer in the dark to nudge her in one direction or another, something to light a fire in her and tell her what to do. Before, that someone had been Serena. Now, that Anne was left to fend for herself, she was left gasping for air and grasping at straws. The silence became unbearable, and Anne, finding herself with a lack of words, reached for the remote and turned on the TV.

The weather channel appeared, with a news anchor gesturing toward a map. The map was then zoomed in on for a close up.

"And here, we see gathering storms for the next few days..."

The news anchor's smooth, even voice settled Anne's nerves immediately. Just having noise in the background, something other than the sounds of a hospital, put her at ease.

"Travel will be difficult—"

Anne leaned back in her seat, already not listening.

"We advise for all residents in these areas indicated to stay indoors if possible—"

From the corner of her eye, Anne thought she saw movement. Her breath quickened as she jumped up and turned, heart plummeting into her stomach before leaping up into her throat. She must have imagined it, though, because Serena stayed as still as ever. This wasn't the first time Anne had conjured up a sign that Serena was waking up. She sighed, settling back into her seat.

"...Looking much worse than we initially anticipated—"

Anne still wasn't listening. She was too busy trying to calm her heartbeat back down to its resting pace. "I swear," she said absentmindedly to Serena, "by the time you actually wake up, I'm going to think I deluded myself into it..."

"Accumulations of rainfall could cause flooding in these areas along the coast—"

Anne only caught the last two words. When Anne was little, her mother had told her the folklore of another coastal town, the one where Anne's great-grandmother grew up, far, far from where they lived. In the story, a

young boy had fallen in love with an angel, but neither the heavens nor the earth would allow them to stay together. The angel was a celestial being who did not belong on the ground, and eventually vanished from the boy's sight. Upon being left alone, the boy, in his grief and desperation, had written down a message and sent it out in a glass bottle, hoping that the sea would hear him.

"And then what?" Anne had asked.

"All it said afterwards is that the boy grew up and led a happy life."

"And *then*?" Anne had asked again.

"Well, that's where the story ends," her mother had replied.

"That's dumb!" Anne had frowned. "I wanna know what happens!"

"They say that because of this story, the town has a saying that if you write down your wish and send it out to sea, your wish will come true when the bottle touches land again."

"But you don't even know whether the boy's wish came true or not!"

"You could write about what happens next," her mother had offered, which seemed to placate Anne for a while. Coming up with what-if scenarios had been fun, but little Anne couldn't help feeling that she'd been left out of a secret. And no matter how many pictures she'd scribbled of the boy reunited with his angel, she'd known, even back then, that that wasn't the *true* ending.

The story had stayed with her for this reason—it bothered her that the ending had been kept from her, particularly because she'd heard it at an age where everything ended with *happily ever after*. Then, as she'd gotten older, the story had turned from mystifying to irritable. She remembered distinctly that at one point, it had crossed her mind that if everyone sent a bottle out to sea, that would just end up in a lot of unnecessary pollution. Then, afterward, the story had dropped out of her head entirely. Ever since the crash, however, it had reappeared in her thoughts, circling around, as puzzling as ever.

She thought about telling the story to Serena now. Anne wondered what Serena would make of it. Serena would probably laugh and say that Anne always took things too seriously, and that the story had a second meaning, some metaphorical plane that Anne surely missed in all of her years of thinking about it. Anne found herself strangely remorseful for not asking Serena about this while she was still able to answer. She pictured Serena sitting up and shaking her head, going *silly Anne*.

Silly Anne indeed. It was a story, just a story, but the idea of telling it

to Serena, even a Serena unable to reply, rose up above her as something unreasonably daunting. The ending had probably been lost through the years of telling it. She reasoned that even if Serena were awake, Serena wouldn't be able to answer Anne's questions.

Anne didn't know how much time passed, with the muffled TV on in the background and her thoughts swimming around her. But at some point, a nurse came in and told her that visiting hours were over. As much as visiting Serena was difficult, leaving the hospital was worse. Anne experienced the same anxieties about leaving Serena as she did seeing her. She worried that Serena would slip away while she wasn't there—no, *because* she wasn't there.

The rain was still falling when Anne drove out of the garage. She wondered if it had just never stopped, or if it had stopped and then started back up again without her notice. It was a curse, or a blessing, that the road conditions forced Anne to focus her attention on driving, instead of wandering around in her own head.

By the time Anne got home, her parents were back from work. She knew that they were concerned with how much she went to visit Serena, but they also never asked her to stop. They were also in a limbo, torn between wanting to reach out for Anne and being afraid of pushing her away even further. For that, Anne thought she should have some more sympathy, but she couldn't bring herself to do anything other than drag herself to her room.

Going to sleep was a tedious process. Anne's dreams were pitch black, and she floated blindly along in the darkness in a little rowboat. She'd once read somewhere that dreams were a reflection of a person's internal state. *That's not right, though*, Anne thought. If that were true, she'd be dreaming about trying to sail with one foot still firmly planted on land. Stuck in a lose-lose situation of her own making. Serena had once come back from an intro psych lecture saying, *Anne, did you know that we still haven't figured out why people have to sleep, let alone why we dream?*

If people still didn't know, then they could be anything, Anne thought. Anything at all. Recreations of the past. Forbearers of the future. She needed something to tell her what to do. She was so lost, so caught between the crossroads that she'd take anything at this point, even a dream.

Every day, she repeated the same routine. The next day was no exception. She woke up on her side, with her knees against her chest.

To: Serena

From: Anne

Message: I'm on my way

Every day, she drove from the highway, across the bridge, to the hospital. She knew that she was stuck in a loop, but being stuck in a circle was much better than spiraling down into the unknown depths below it.

“Oh, you’re back,” the nurse attending to Serena sounded surprised when Anne showed up, and a little concerned. She was new, and probably wondering why Anne had all of this free time to visit during the week. Maybe Anne was imagining it, but the nurse gave her a pitiful look. Anne knew that Serena’s prognosis wasn’t great.

“Yeah,” Anne managed. She didn’t say anything else. She turned the TV on again. The news flashed to the screen. She never bothered to change the channel; she never ended up really watching, anyway.

Anne had taken the year off from school. Part of it had been for the sake of practicality; she knew that she wouldn’t be able to focus on, let alone do well in class. Serena’s predicament was a black hole, an all-encompassing storm that obliterated all else from sight and mind. As far as Anne’s parents were concerned, this was the only reason, but Anne had another one, a reason that hid itself so well that sometimes, Anne was able to convince herself it wasn’t there.

Anne and Serena had planned their lives in high school the way teenagers do, impulsive and oblivious, talking with careless abandon about how they’d live together after graduation, how it’d be a small, snug apartment with a nice view and fairy lights and cacti plants lining the windowsills. They’d never thought about what would happen if they didn’t go to the same college, or where post-undergrad plans would take them.

As fate would have it, they *had* gone to the same school, first braving through dorm life together, and then moving into an apartment together junior year. As their last year of college had drawn closer, they’d begun outlining what they wanted life afterward to look like, this time with a much more down-to-earth approach. Serena wanted to go to grad school. Anne wanted to work for a year or two before deciding what came next. Wherever they went, they’d go together. If Anne graduated before Serena, these carefully-laid plans would be for naught. Some part of Anne was still holding onto the hope that the future they’d envisioned could still happen. That Serena would wake up and they would start school again and graduate together like nothing had ever happened.

“This is an emergency warning for the areas of—”

It was bitterly unfair, Anne thought, too preoccupied with her own thoughts to pay attention to the news report. Weren’t bad things only supposed to happen to bad people? If anything bad happened, Anne deserved it

more than Serena. Serena had been a vivid, multicolored force in Anne's life. Between the two of them, Serena was the approachable one by far; she was the one who struck up casual conversations with strangers and ordered food for the both of them when they went out. Anne was more reserved, more cautious. It wasn't that she couldn't function without Serena guiding her every step, but Serena had brought out the best in her, helped her through her struggles adjusting to college life. They were so different in their outlooks, but Serena had never laughed at Anne's reticence. She'd always known when to push and when to leave Anne to daydream.

Sometimes, everything after the crash felt like just that, a daydream. Not in the colloquial sense of a fantasy, a reverie, but in its uncertainty. Occasionally, Anne would wake up wondering if any of it ever happened, if she'd just conjured it up from the pool of fears inside of her head, but then she'd look at her phone, at the series of one-sided texts, and she'd know that it was all very real.

"...Power outages throughout—"

"You know," Anne said, with a sudden surge of bravery. "There was this story I heard when I was a kid... it's from the peninsula my mom's side came from..." she trailed off for a moment, wondering where to begin. "In it, this boy, he... he meets an angel and falls in love..." Anne wondered if she was being too obvious, if Serena could still read her like an open book, even in her current state.

"But," Anne continued, "The angel couldn't stay on earth, probably because he was an *angel*, I mean..." she absentmindedly tapped her fingers over Serena's. "And the boy was left, heartbroken. He wanted his angel back so badly, so he wrote down his wish and placed it in a little bottle, and sent it out to the ocean—I'm not sure why he thought to do that—" Now that Anne was speaking out loud, she realized that the story also omitted what *exactly* the boy had written down. She'd always assumed that he'd just *asked* for the angel back. "Anyways, that story started this tradition of sending out wishes in bottles—my mom said that there used to be ceremonies—but we don't know how it actually ends. Only that the boy apparently lived a happy life." The story poured out of her so easily after her initial hesitation. Anne swore that she felt lighter.

"That used to make me so mad," Anne glanced up at Serena's sleeping face. Serena looked as unreadable as ever. "The fact that the ending doesn't actually tell you anything. I mean, what are we supposed to do with that? How could this entire ritual be born from a story with no conclusion? Aren't all folk tales supposed to have morals?" She continued tapping on Serena's hand, fingertips brushing over the dips in between Serena's knuckles.

"—We urge all viewers to stay indoors..."

"I used to draw all these pictures," Anne laughed a little. "Of the boy, and the angel holding the bottle, next to the ocean... I think that I was sad for him..."

Wouldn't it be nice if everything could be solved by sending a little bottle out to sea? She wondered what it would have been like to live inside the world of the story her mom had told her. If she could just solve this entire situation by wishing it away. She shook her head. *That's impossible.* And yet, what she wanted most of all was for that story to come to life, fabricated ending and all.

"You think it's stupid, too, right?" Anne asked aloud. She didn't think that Serena would agree with her, though. Serena had a way of finding value in the things that Anne initially dismissed. Anne just wanted validation. Fortunately, or rather, quite unfortunately, there was no one to contradict her.

"It's stupid," she said, affirming herself.

Is it any stupider than believing in fate? The thought nestled next to her ear.

That's different, Anne retorted. You weren't there.

Oh, but I was, the thought said. *Isn't it all the same, after all? It's the belief that counts, more than what actually happens.*

"Freeways along the coast are closed due to flooding—"

Belief. Maybe there was hidden magic in the bottle story. Maybe Anne's rejection of it was what kept it away from her. She'd wanted to believe in it when she'd first heard it, but even at that age, she'd known that wishing something wouldn't make it come true. Or at least, not in the way that she'd want them to.

Anne shook her head. It was just an old folk story. It wasn't all that deep. She was just tired and desperate. Besides, she thought, glancing out the window. The rain poured down, and she could only imagine how rough the ocean would be. No glass bottle stood a chance of touching land again. If it wasn't swallowed by the waves, it would crash against the jagged rocks lining the shore.

Anne gathered her jacket and stood to leave. "I'll come back tomorrow, okay?" she said, briefly clasping her hands over Serena's. "It's looking pretty dark out there, I think the weather's getting bad..."

She paused. "I wish you were here." This was something she'd said a hundred times before, she was sure. The words came more easily now. The first time she'd said them aloud, it'd seemed unreasonably, impossibly diffi-

cult. Anne had trouble admitting even the most obvious of feelings out loud. *That gives them power*, she'd thought. Maybe if she kept them inside of her, they'd quiet down.

"...Repeat, those who aren't already inside should immediately seek shelter—"

She'd also deluded herself into thinking that her words held some sort of magic in them, that once she was able to breathe them out, Serena would wake up and smile, "I was waiting for you to say that." Just like in a fairy tale.

To: Anne

From: Mom

Message: Anne? Are you still at the hospital?

Anne didn't see the text that her mom sent her, or the four others that followed. She walked single-mindedly toward her car, unaware of the warnings on the news about the weather around her. She thought only of accidents and Serena and little bottles.

Only when Anne exited the parking lot and turned onto the main road did it occur to her that she may have made a mistake. It was dark, much too dark to make out anything in front of her, but there was so much water on the ground that she could feel the wheels of her car sloshing through it. But her tires still touched the pavement; she wasn't floating. If she continued slowly, she thought she'd be okay. The rain pounded down with a deafening force onto her windshield. She turned the wipers onto full speed, but they didn't help much. She considered going back to the hospital, but she had no idea how she'd manage a U-turn with this much water. She decided to continue on. Home wasn't *that* far away.

The situation looked much more dire once she managed to get onto the highway. She was the only one there, the only one moonstruck enough to dare to drive in this kind of weather. Surges of water came up from the ocean onto the overpass, and it occurred to Anne for the first time that there was a chance she wouldn't make it across. She froze. Getting out of the car meant certain death, but did staying inside of it guarantee better odds of survival? She was halfway across, not sure if her gas pedal was working anymore, or if the water beneath the car was pushing it forward. This was it, she thought. This was her punishment, the divine order of the universe catching up with her, her darkest thoughts confirmed. She should have been the one in the coma, and not Serena. Serena had more to live for. More

vivacity inside of her very being, so much that it spilled from her fingertips.

A large wave crashed over, and Anne squeezed her eyes shut. If she was meant to die, then what could she do about it? No one was here to help her. Her car bobbed up and down like a bath toy. Soon, she'd start sinking. Was this how Serena had felt in the fraction of an instant, where she'd looked head-on into the headlights of the truck that had hit them, knowing for that split second what was about to happen? Alone and helpless, even though Anne had been there, right next to her?

Anne wished more than anything that Serena was with her now, to comfort her. Then, almost immediately, she took it back. No matter how poor Serena's condition was getting, she had more of a chance than Anne did in this car. Serena deserved to live. She deserved it more than anyone else.

In the next moment, Anne felt the car moving forward again. The wave had pushed her forward, not off of the overpass. Miraculously, she'd made it across.

Anne stood near the base of the gray cliff, looking at the water. The glassy waves lapped at the base, briefly rising up onto the rocks before receding. Their movements were as peaceful as they'd always been. She could see the harbor. It was hard to imagine that just a few days ago, the waters had surged up high and ferocious, threatening to engulf the town and absorb it. News reports afterwards said that the storm had veered off at the last moment, skimming off the land and moving toward the ocean. The sky, too, had cleared. Only few wispy clouds trailed lazily across the blue. An idle wind blew a strand of Anne's hair across her face. She ran her thumb against the glass bottle in her jacket pocket. She'd corked and sealed it tightly. Inside was a small roll of paper. When the waves grew close again, she withdrew the bottle, and threw it into the sea.

MATTHEW ZHAO



Senior

Major: Environment

Reading: Fiction

I always had a fondness for literature and film, but taking a creative writing course here truly inspired me to start writing. My other interests include nighttime bike rides and Oolong tea.

Picking Seats

I see you in the classroom, speaking with the professor before the daily routine begins. You lack the student essentials, so I search the room for lonely backpacks, considering the placeholder that could match your faint freckles and perpetual dimples. I choose my future at the back corner next to an empty desk. I start imagining the life of the misses and me – we are partners, studying in the library through the muted night, and sipping cups of tea on our bedroom's balcony. Our favorite memories we have yet to remember are lost, though, when you sit down across the room. The lines of our glares cross each other, not so much contact as a brief glance at the sharp, green eyes that drift off into their own, unique fantasy. Your gaze flows around the room, while I'm left to live the rest of our life together, alone.

Beyond the Cellar Door (Laundry Day)

At the bottom of the staircase,
the fresh, Sunday glow loses to the damp darkness,
and the creak of warped wood slowly wanes.

The dust has already settled
yet you still run your hand along the rotten, flaking wall
searching for the switch of a broken bulb,
vying for the radiator's tender hum,

unwilling to accept anything less
like a spider hunting for its corner of the room
even after the silk has been cast.

Blindness comes in weekly cycles,
washing the facades you have chosen for yourself;
a pile of dull colors looks the same
in the dark void of an instrument.

Where abandoned items are echoes of the past,
attempting to carve their memory on the walls,
you forget the sounds that you love,
like a boring conversation with a friend.

So when the system starts rumbling
and the world starts spinning
You can run up the stairs
into the silence again.

On Reaching Nirvana

At the end of the note,
you said it was better to burn out
than to fade away,
like the stricken match's flame
that licks at your fingers
after holding on for too long.

But I ask of you,
is that what you want?
Would you rather burn away
than hear the final boom

rattling in your head
at the curtain's close?

Would you rather burn
than stay on the hill
watching the last beams of light
disappear into the sun?

You said when the sun is gone
you will hold the light,
but its only after the darkness
when dawn turns into day.

Still, you would rather burn
than fade into time
when the name whispered across the room
that makes you turn your head
is finally forgotten.

EMILY ZUO



Senior

Major: Ecology, Evolution and Biodiversity

Minor: Music

Reading: Poetry

Emily has always loved writing and was overjoyed to finally take a creative writing class senior year. She is majoring in Ecology, Evolution, and Biodiversity and asserts that writing in nature is an incomparable experience. Emily plays violin in the Campus Symphony Orchestra and the Michigan Pops Orchestra. Her other interests include food, watching random documentaries on YouTube, and keeping pet spiders in plastic cups in her bedroom.

the tragedy of cutting keratin

Snip, snip
the scissors clip
and you let it fall
Can't you hear the keratin screaming
thin bodies, locking arms
locked in locks
With you for years and you simply, callously, let them go
just for show
and they cling to your shoulders, chest,
in static desperation.
Beat them away
and you feel *great*
Fresh and new, and you'll do it again

and again, and again
 until you finally realize you must do it again
 and again.
 How many times must you feel happy, to feel happy?
 Might as well leave your friends on the floor,
 fallen and ugly as you now are not
 A whimpering heap discarded
 like the uncertain roadkill a van passes without thought.

Chipmunks are not cute

When I was young
 I thought chipmunks were so cute
 Dark button eyes and fluttering breath
 A small treasure in the hand worth two in any bush
 Compacted fluff, forever fetal
 When I turned sixteen, I tried to feed one. Held out a nut
 And it bit my finger clean off
 I screamed. Woulda said something vile –
 if words could describe the pain –
 But all that came out were indistinct groans
 While the beady-eyed devil chomped and chortled away
 I told my neighbor about it, the old man down the road
 He said, "I told you, Son. Shoulda listened to me, Son."
 "But I'm a girl," I protested, for adults shouldn't make such mistakes, but he
 said –
 "You'll be a Son, if I want you to be one."
 and
 "Back in the day, I was a schoolteacher."
 I'd heard it a million times by now
 And I thought, if you know so much, then why –
 Why did you tell me, when I was a child
 That baby birds were beautiful, precious things
 'Cause I remember the day I picked one up
 It was naked and ugly, neck twisted back
 A line of ants trailing out of its empty right eye socket
 And I was not its mother, so why was it looking at me with such hunger
 As if it had always wanted more?
 I've only seen greed like this one other time
 It was a few years back
 I was walking home late
 And the homecoming king was there,
 a shadow,

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and he –
I felt like a tiny chipmunk
Aimed to snap just the same
Not with teeth, but a pocketknife
And not just his finger either.
And the next day, I was the villain who bit off more than she could chew
Even though I had grown up believing
that chipmunks are cute and harmless
And that youth is a beautiful, precious thing.

Some days, I look to the sky
The old oak beside me reaches upward
Bare arms, wooden fingers, fragmented blue
They said the sky's the limit – endless possibilities
Endless nothing
In the deep silence, I reach out
and can't grasp a single shard.

self-defense

They've come to attack again
The well-intentioned questions, suggestions
are thrown like moldy old books at the walls of my castle
I try to let it pass
Exhaust its course
Routine is routine because it's always there
but it comes and goes, like the hands of a clock.

"Stop worrying so much."
History repeats itself – in my head
The future predicts itself – in my head
I could be a prophet. But then I'd be crucified. (Dead.)
During rehearsal I was struck by the thought of someday ceasing to exist
Violin slack in hand, I nearly missed my entrance
I had a crisis and no one knew
I missed a step on the staircase and was convinced I'd fall straight into the
depths of hell
(earlier than expected)
I time travel
Unravel
And all you see is me slumping to the ground- ("Lazy!")

"Why don't you say something?"
The path from my brain to my tongue at times turns into a meat grinder

And when it doesn't, other people will
 Apprehension collides with disappointment in the back of my throat
 It's stale
 Just like my smile
 Poor Duchenne, I keep slamming the door in his pretty face
 But when you slam a door on someone, aren't you slamming it in two faces?
 I wonder if frowns exist in the midst of a grin
 and the frame rate is just too slow
 for us to ever know

"Why don't you brighten up a little?"
 Yeah, I sometimes say hi like I never want to see the person again
 And my face makes concentration look like contemplation (of murder)
 And I lack faith in basic things such as small talk and the goodness of hu-
 manity
 But
 Aren't paperweights so much more useful than balloons?
 Though paperweights are much more likely to be cast aside
 Along with the universes they contain which, however beautiful,
 when broken open
 lose their meaning.
 'Sides, when a thing's compacted, condensed, crushed-
 It's hard to be buoyant at all.

"Why don't you just do it?"
 I'm trying, but I suppose it doesn't look like anything, since
 my arms are in a straitjacket behind my rib-cage
 and I hear my brother crying 65 miles away and I'm dragged
 Stop, turn. Stop.
 Stuttering movements in the middle of a busy roadway.
 I feel my guts twisting
 If abnormally-shaped, do they twist into a normal shape?
 Maybe pain is the price of normality in snapshots
 Or maybe (actually) my body's just too stupid to know the difference be-
 tween food and my esophagus
 Between my large intestine and the alphabet

"You need to socialize more!"
 Oftentimes I like to be alone with my thoughts
 But that's an oxymoron
 So it's okay if you don't understand.
 Just, please...try not to shout
 If I'm choking, it doesn't help to slap my back so hard that my spine cracks
 in two
 I crack my back well enough on my own, thanks.

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Bravado hits.

I fire a volley of arrows-

Don't try to change me. This is who I am!

I declare it with a grand gesture to The PowerPoint-

and turn around to find that there's just an outline

It looks like chalk

(A Snapshot)

Sorry folks, that's all for today.

It's no problem, really

My castle's built to last

Like Rapunzel, I'm warm and safe

and used to it.

And up in my room

up in the highest tower

I'll continue to fling old books at the walls whenever I feel frustrated

Watch with dead eyes as crumbling pages spray across the floor-

After all, none of them have answers.

Ochre

I slither out of my blankets in the morning (or late afternoon) and scream
that the world is cold and unforgiving

but mostly cold

Or maybe my roommate just turned up the A/C again

She's the type who likes wearing sweaters in July, and

I'm the type to wear a T-shirt and shorts to bed all year

(Tomorrow, it'll be unforgiving)

You know what they say-

The mind is fickle

Fate is fickle

Fate doesn't exist

Aurora is two letters from aura but one's in the sky and the other's in your
head

You say 'orange' 50 times and you start to forget who you are

And I say, too many sayings and you start to forget what they mean

A student counts down how much she has left to read
 12 pages!
 11 and a half pages!
 Ten seconds later, flips, frantically-
 11 and one fourth pages!
 She spends 20 minutes counting pages.

The microwave beeps
 She checks Facebook
 Eats her food cold

Somewhere, a schoolteacher speaks of the 52-hertz whale
 He smiles warmly
 His fingers are trembling
 And it's just like the man who was hit with a spoon,
 again and again
 and again
 Until he died-
 no wait he didn't, they wouldn't let him

A child opens her eyes.

"Mom!" she says, pointing at the colors. "They're so pretty."
 Mom nods, blinks, and sees nothing at all

They go to the aquarium
 A whale hovers mournfully behind the glass,
 but all Mom can see is her own reflection.

Somewhere, a criminal is apologizing
 Bridges are burning and a bell is tolling
 A baby wonders what life would be like
 and what it would be like to wonder
 Someone's head is in the clouds
 They throw pity on the ones who pity them
 for trying to anchor themselves to a buoy
 And we all go spinning away into the universe
 Orange, orange, orange, orange, orange...

Paulina Adams
 Chloe Alberta
 Sydney Bentley
 Hannah Brauer
 Sebastien Butler
 Kate Cammell
 Daphne Cantuba
 Heather Colley
 Kelly Crosson
 Conner Darling
 Claire Denson
 Tarik Dobbs
 Laura Dzubay
 Raven Eaddy
 Giuliana Eggleston
 Ariel Everitt
 Hannah French
 Katyanna Guthrie
 Jean Heng
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